Penmanship

by NightmareWalker

Summary

Caught between two worlds - that of her clan, and that of the order that needs her help - the Herald of Andraste, one of the People, searches for familiarity and acceptance amongst the people of the Inquisition. She finds unlikely friends with her Advisors; each bringing something with them she didn't realize she was missing. When the Anchor pains her, Cassandra steps up to care for her and they grow closer. Eventually, the line between camaraderie and intimacy blurs as they race to save Thedas from Corypheus.

Notes

Giftshot for Schnarf because they are awesome, originally intended to be a three shot, but it has warped into something like an epic. Dammit, I went and let the plot bunnies get away from me again. Fem!Quizzy/Cassandra pairing, M for language and violence.

I can't guarantee I will update frequently, as summer is my busy time of year, but I will update as often as I can, and besides, I like to think you guys prefer quality over quantity and would like me to write better, longer chapters than shorter, crappy ones.
Inquisitive

Cassandra found her attention lacking as she swung her weapon at the practice dummy in the training yard at Haven. She growled under her breath when her blow failed to remove the straw stuffed arm that hung precariously from a few threads and fought to focus herself again before swinging once more. A slight smirk pulled at her lips when she decapitated the dummy and she straightened, sheathing her weapon in satisfaction. She turned on her heel and froze when confronted by wide blue-grey eyes, half hidden beneath a deep cowl that protected her spectator from the chill of the early winter breeze.

“Your Grace, I did not realize you were here. Did you need something?”

“I apologize if I disturbed you, Seeker. I was curious about your craft.” The heavy lilt in Brynn Lavellan’s voice was indicative of her heritage, and as the wind blew across the training yard, Cassandra got a better look at the upturned features and vallaslin that was tattooed on the elf’s face; the color of charcoal, it travelled up the length of her nose and webbed out over her forehead like branches, winding around to nestle in the corners of her eyes. Another narrow stripe was tattooed on her lower lip and wound over her chin and down her throat, disappearing into the confines of her tunic and warm cloak.

“Did you want a lesson, Lavellan? You are small, but fast; you may be able to learn swordplay and use it to your advantage,” Cassandra ventured hesitantly, unsure about the Herald’s reason for appearing suddenly. The slight woman shook her head as she took a couple steps closer until she stood well within the Seeker’s personal space, comfortable with the nearness even if she was still somewhat stiff inside Cassandra’s immediate range. Her nose only just reached Cassandra’s chin, and as she tilted her head back to find her eyes, her cowl fell back. Auburn hair, clipped tight on the sides and longer on top so it was tousled and just brushed her eyebrows, fluttered in the wind and showcased her long, pointed ears.

Her fingers twisted nervously around a woven bracelet on her wrist and her brow furrowed, distorting the hunter’s tattoo that marked her face. “Leliana wanted to see us in the War Room; she said something about a mission, and asked for me to find you.” Without another word, the Herald turned on her heel and walked away, gracefully avoiding passing soldiers and workers alike and disappearing into the throng of people effortlessly.

Cassandra frowned curiously, following in the Herald’s wake. She walked through the gates and was accosted by Varric, who waved enthusiastically from his perch by the fire outside his tent.

“Seeker! Come, sit, I have a tale that even you will get a kick out of!”

“Not now, Varric.”

“What got into your smalls?” The dwarf cocked his eyebrow and Cassandra snorted, crossing her arms over her breastplate.

“Nothing.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” Varric cut in, smirking when the Seeker glared.

“I have no time for your foolish stories, Varric.”

He shook his head and took a seat, picking up Bianca and beginning to clean the crossbow again. “Suit yourself, Seeker. I just thought you might appreciate being able to remove that Qunari sized
Cassandra’s temper flared as he shrugged insouciantly, grip tightening on her pommel until she felt the ridged grip bite into her palm through her thin gloves. “Varric…”

He held up his hand innocently, eyes twinkling with mirth. “I didn’t mean anything by it, Seeker. You’d better get going if you want to get to the big meeting on time.”

“How did you – nevermind, I do not want to know.” Cassandra stalked away, gritting her teeth as his throaty chuckle trailed after her, and took a deep breath before opening the doors to the Chantry. The building was blessedly warm, keeping the bitter breeze out, and the walls were lit with warm, crackling flames dancing in braziers. She strode past Mother Giselle as she conferred with a timid looking initiate and knocked twice on the door at the back before pushing it open.

Josephine and Cullen were talking quietly on the far side of the table covered with a map of Thedas and scattered with markers showing their troops, various missions, and the enemy’s strongholds scattered across Orlais and Ferelden. Their heads were bent together, Josephine tapping her quill against the ever-present clipboard, and Cullen’s hand was flat on the table as he looked at something she had written. To the side, leaning lackadaisically against the wall, Leliana caught her eye and smiled faintly. Her chin jutted across the room and Cassandra’s head swiveled to see the Herald standing on the other side, raptly studying the map. Her lips moved soundlessly as a long finger traced the length of a river that wound across Northern Ferelden and emptied into the Waking Sea.

“Brynn, Cassandra has arrived. We can begin now.”

The elf looked up sharply, keen blue-grey eyes finding Leliana’s gaze. The spymaster nodded and she relaxed marginally, standing straight up and meeting Cassandra’s eyes. “Leliana has a mission for us, Seeker. I need your input to figure out whom to bring.”

“What is the mission, Leliana?” Cassandra addressed the spymaster, who clasped her hands behind her back.

“There are resources we desperately need in the Forbidden Oasis. Normally, I would send some of my scouts and a handful of soldiers to get them, but there have also been reports of rifts opening there. I thought that we could kill two birds with one stone; the Herald would close the rifts, we could get the ores and herbs we need, and I would feel better sending my scouts out with her party, especially if you went with her.” There was a glint in Leliana’s eyes that Cassandra didn’t trust, one that too often spelled trouble for the Seeker.

She sighed, seeing the logic in the redhead’s plan, but frowned as she faced the war table. Her finger rested on the marker denoting the Forbidden Oasis, rocking it back and forth gently. “What are the risks out there? It is nothing but a desert, there is nothing of import that far away from the cities.”

“On the contrary, Cassandra, the amount of demonic activity around the rifts should keep your party busy for quite a while, especially if not taken care of expeditiously.” Leliana tilted her head to one side, pursing her lips thoughtfully. “I have also heard rumors of a temple in the heart of the oasis, one my spies cannot access. You need to be prepared for what may be inside there, as well.”

Cassandra chewed on the inside of her cheek pensively. She looked over at Brynn, whose inscrutable gaze seemed to burn into her, and twisted the marker in her hands around. “Fine,” she said, “I will go with you to the oasis. I think you should also bring The Iron Bull and Solas, they
will both be useful fighting demons. Besides,” she added wryly, “Bull would never forgive me if I left him out of a battle beneath a rift.”

The dry remark prompted a small smile from Brynn, quickly hidden behind her hand as she feigned a cough. Leliana smiled widely, nodding in approval. “Good decision, Cassandra. I will send a scout to inform them you will leave on the morrow, then.” She walked to the door and stuck her head out, speaking briefly with one of her people outside before shutting it again. “Now that we’ve got that out of the way, there is something else we need to address.”

She pulled a letter from some hidden pocket, seal broken and hanging from the end of the paper. “I received this a few days ago, I was only waiting for everyone to be free to address it.” She looked at Brynn meaningfully. “A letter came from the Free Marches, one addressed to you, Brynn. Your Keeper asks after your health; news of the Conclave has reached even there, it seems.”

“Keeper Istimaethoriel? She is well?” Brynn’s brow furrowed in worry, eyes simultaneously lightening as Leliana read the letter aloud.

“She is well, she asks after you and cautions you to be safe in your travels. She says she is proud of you and what you have become, Brynn.” The elf’s eyes softened and a watery smile crossed her face. Cassandra watched her carefully, gauging her expression as Leliana continued to read. “She says you will always have a place in the clan, but you have a larger purpose now, a duty to fulfill before you can decide where to go.”

Brynn’s eyes watered, but she only nodded and took a deep breath. “So,” she breathed, meeting each of her advisors’ eyes, “what do we need to do to prepare?”

Cassandra watched the Herald ride at the front of the party, slightly separated from the others as she urged her mount faster. Her Barded Charger soon caught up to Brynn’s Green Dales Feral, a spirited gray spotted mare that tossed her head as the Seeker drew up next to the elf. “It is not safe for you to ride by yourself, Herald.”

“I’m not alone, Seeker.” The simple reply was delivered bluntly, although not unkindly. Brynna met her eyes briefly and nudged her mount ahead, widening the gap between herself and their boisterous party.

Cassandra heard the tail end of one of Bull’s bawdy jokes and the laughter of his Chargers behind her and rolled her eyes as she urged her stallion into a trot. “Please, Your Grace, do not stray too far from the rest of the party. If something were to happen on the road-”

“Then I would find myself suddenly surrounded by my companions, yes?” Cassandra watched with interest as Brynn’s jaw clenched and she tightened her grip on the reins of her mare. “I would not fear for my life because I would find it guarded like a child jealously guards their toy.”

“You are the Herald of Andraste, you carry the only power able to close the rifts wreaking havoc across Thedas,” Cassandra began, to be cut off by Brynn when she suddenly twisted in the saddle, eyes glinting in the sunlight.

“A power I did not ask for, to protect a people to whom I do not belong, to bring peace to a country I do not live in.”

“This does not only affect the people of Orlais or Ferelden, Your Grace-”
“I have a name!” The sudden exclamation made Cassandra stiffen, and her Charger shifted uneasily beneath her. Brynn’s mount hopped to the side excitedly, prancing and tossing her head as the elf fought to regain control. “Easy, lethallin. Ne hamin.” She continued to murmur to the mare in elvish as Cassandra watched curiously, studying the way Brynn stroked the Feral’s neck. The horse’s ears flicked back, listening to the quiet, soothing voice, and eventually, she calmed, resuming her easy walk on the dirt track. They rode in silence for several minutes, listening to the banter at their backs and feeling the warmth of the sun on their shoulders. “Ir abelas, Seeker. I’m on edge from travelling, that’s all. I haven’t been this far from home…ever.”

Cassandra heard the unease hidden beneath Brynn’s words and, despite not understanding what she first said, she thought it was an apology just by the way the elf’s shoulders slumped and she refused to meet her eyes. She nudged her horse closer, their knees brushing, and set her hand on Brynn’s arm. “You are far from home, I understand feeling weary of travel. Once we are back in Haven, you can write your clan and tell them of your exploits.” Cassandra’s curiosity rose when Brynn only shrugged, tugging her cowl up to hide her face and riding ahead again. Cassandra let her go, although she stayed close behind, listening to the steady clip-clop of her stallion’s steps and the laughter at her back, and staring at the dejected slump of the Herald’s back.

“Na din’an sahlin!”

Cassandra heard the cry and, a few seconds later, an arrow sailed over her head and was embedded deep in the rage demon’s mouth. It roared in pain, yanking ineffectually at the arrow, and Bull stepped up behind it, swinging his massive two handed weapon at its back. It screamed once more before being absorbed into the rift again and, as one, the party turned their attention to the final demon. The creature slung a cone of freezing snow at them but was quickly disarmed – literally – by Bull. Solas ripped it apart handily and Brynn jogged up to the rift, bow in hand.

“Close the rift, Herald, before more demons come out,” the mage said. She held up her left hand and a sick green glow surrounded it, solidifying and seeming to reach out toward the rift eagerly. Cassandra watched Brynn’s face, the way her expression contorted in pain as a teeth gritting hum filled the air, the sound rising in intensity until it broke, along with the rift. The tear sealed itself with a rush of warm air that flowed over them and buffeted their clothes. The already stifling heat became unbearable for a moment until it dissipated and the party cheered. The Iron Bull clapped Solas on the back, smiling unapologetically when the mage glared up at him, and Cassandra took a step toward Brynn.

“You did good, Yo – Herald?” Cassandra watched in alarm as Brynn swayed on her feet, eyes unfocused, and dropped her bow from numb fingers. “Lavellan!” The warrior leapt at Brynn when her knees suddenly gave out, barely managing to catch her before she hit the stone beneath their feet. The elf was limp in her arms, sweat pouring down her face, but there was no obvious reason for her collapse. “Solas!” The mage appeared at her side a moment later, kneeling and pressing his fingers to the fluttering pulse at Brynn’s throat. “What is wrong with her?”

“I…don’t know.” His brow furrowed in frustration, he gave a cursory glance at the rogue’s prone form. “There are no obvious wounds, but…perhaps she overworked herself. Come, let us return to camp.”

Cassandra stood and lifted Brynn into her arms, surprised and a little worried at how light she felt. They walked briskly back to camp and Cassandra immediately ducked into a tent, laying the elf on the cot inside. She efficiently divested Brynn of her armor and sweat-soaked clothes under Solas’ watchful eyes, but neither found any outward signs of trauma. Cassandra caught the faint glow
beneath the skin of the archer’s left hand and turned her attention to Solas. “Could the mark in her hand have done this?”

He hummed pensively. “Perhaps. It is a part of her and closing the rifts would, theoretically, need a source of power to be done. As there aren’t any immediate concerns, I would merely watch over her, perhaps try to coax some water down her throat. I’ll be back later, Seeker.”

With a terse nod, the mage exited the tent, and Cassandra found herself alone with the steady breaths of Brynn on the cot at her side. She sighed heavily as she slowly stood, feeling the sweat trickle down her back and soak her tunic further. She reached for her belt and slid the buckle apart, setting it aside, and began stripping off her armor piece by piece. Soon, she had a pile of leather and iron at her feet and she plucked at her damp tunic with a disgusted look on her face. She whipped it over her head and immediately felt better as the air brushed against her skin. She gingerly tossed the tunic aside, digging through her pack for a clean one and pulling it over her head. When she was clean and dry once more, she resumed her place next to Brynn’s cot and pulled a whetstone from within her pack. She set her sword in her lap and ran the stone over the edge, starting the task of honing the blade as she kept vigil over the Herald.
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“Ugh, fenedhis…” The quiet oath ripped Cassandra from her musings as she sat in the open doorway of the tent, watching the sun set over the sand dunes in the distant and turn the sand to shades of red and gold. She turned her head, watching long fingers cover Brynn’s face and rub weakly.

“You are awake.” Blue-grey eyes, dull with fatigue, met hers, and widened slightly. The archer tried to sit up and nearly fell into the pile of armor as her arm gave out. Cassandra rolled her eyes as she watched the elf flail briefly, then slid over with a canteen of water in hand. “Here.” Brynn took it and sniffed at the open top, then took a long draw from the canteen with a smile in her eyes. “How do you feel?”

“Like I fell out of a tree,” came the quiet response. Cassandra blinked at Brynn, who silently returned the canteen. The warrior found her eyes drawn to the varaslín that wound over the lean arm extended toward her, vine-like markings wandering over skin from the knuckles of Brynn’s hand up to her shoulder, where it disappeared over the muscle where shoulder met neck. “Seeker?”

“Why do you call me that?” Cassandra questioned as she took the proffered canteen, taking a drink before setting it aside.

Brynn studied her inscrutably for a few moments, drawing invisible lines over her breeches as she carefully propped herself up on her other elbow. “That is your title, yes?”

“Yes…”

“Then I either call you Seeker, or shem.”

Cassandra’s eyes narrowed; she knew the meaning of that particular word and, even though it was delivered without malice, she felt her hackles rise. “I would not take well to being called that.”
“I know,” Brynn nodded, “that is why I call you Seeker.”

“I have a name.”

A rueful smile ghosted across Brynn’s lips. “As do I.”

They watched each other silently, neither willing to break eye contact first. Finally, Cassandra conceded with a snort and rolled her eyes as she got to her feet. “I will continue to call you by your title in public, but if it will make you feel better…I will call you by your name in private, or when we are among our companions. Deal?”

“Deal. Ma serannas, Cassandra.”

The Seeker felt a thrill run down her spine as the elf’s accent wrapped around her name sinuously, departing quickly with her cheeks aflush. She stepped into the dusky landscape and made a beeline for the campfire nearby, picking up a dented metal bowl and ladling some stew into it. She grabbed a couple pieces of heavy bread and ducked back into the tent before any of their companions could remark on her appearance, setting the meal at her side as she sat by Brynn’s cot again.

“You should eat.” Breaking the bread apart, she dipped the edge into the stew and bit into the bread, pushing the bowl toward Brynn and raising her brow when the rogue stared at the food blankly. “Eat. You need to regain your strength.” Once she had taken a small bite of the bread, Cassandra took her eyes off Brynn and they lapsed into silence.

“Does it hurt?”

The question, sudden after so long eating quietly together, wrenched Brynn from her thoughts, and Cassandra fought back the smirk when she fumbled the bit of bread left in her hand.

“Does what hurt?”

“The mark,” the warrior clarified, nodding at her left hand. As if on cue, it sparked and a flicker of pain ghosted across her face. “I will take that as a yes.”

The rogue clenched her hand reflexively, holding her breath until the pain eased, and met Cassandra’s eyes after a moment. “It’s not all the time, only when I interact with one of those tears, or if I am stressed.”

“What happens when you close a rift?” Even though she knew she was treading on shaky ground, Cassandra indulged her curiosity, watching Brynn’s face closely. Blue-grey eyes stared into the distance, likely recreating the feeling that occurred as she repaired the tears in the Fade.

“It is…hard to describe. It is like a growing, like it is too large for my skin, and it moves up my arm to find more space. My bones feel like they will break apart, my muscles like they will tear, and when I do close it, my arm will not work properly afterward; my fingers tingle and the muscles ache.”

Cassandra sat quietly, listening to the musical voice describe the feeling. It was the most Brynn had ever said to her in one sitting, and even though it was a grim subject, the warrior was glad she was speaking about it, at least. “Does it hurt now?”

“It aches, but it’s manageable.” Brynn shrugged and flexed her fingers experimentally. “It drains me to close the rifts, but usually not like this. I think the heat doesn’t agree with me; the Free Marches is not usually nearly so warm.”
Cassandra felt her ears perk and sat up, taking the opening offered. “What is your home like?” A faraway look came into Brynn’s eyes and her lips tilted up slightly. Cassandra found herself enraptured by the sight, relaxing back onto her hands as the elf slowly began to speak, voice lilting in the dim light provided by the sparkling campfire visible through the open tent flap.

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Finally on their way back from the Forbidden Oasis, Cassandra again rode beside Brynn, albeit at the tail end of the party. They lagged some distance behind the bulk of the soldiers, Cassandra making a conscious effort not to say anything although Brynn was clearly still somewhat weak from her earlier exertion. The elf’s riding was less fluid than usual and her eyes dim in the bright sunlight, shoulders still hunched as though in pain. After several long minutes of hearing nothing but the steady gait of their horses’ steps, their companions’ boisterous laughter ahead of them, and the faint warble of some animal in the distant plains, dotted with the odd, twisted tree, the Seeker gathered her breath. “Are you alright?”

“Hmmm?”

Vague blue-grey eyes lit upon Cassandra, who fought not to squirm. “You have been quiet since we left the Oasis. Do you need to stop? Are you feeling unwell still?”

“Oh, no, I’m fine, Se – Cassandra. I am a little tired, but it’s nothing serious.” Brynn flashed a wan smile at the Seeker, who cocked her eyebrow, unimpressed. “Really, I’m well.”

“I do not believe you.” Brynn blinked at Cassandra, who had ridden closer. “You nearly fell out of the saddle when we first mounted this morning, you did not break your fast with the rest of your companions-”

“You didn’t either,” Brynn broke in, cringing when Cassandra eyed her balefully.

“You have not spoken with anyone today, and your skin is pale – well, paler than normal. You are not well.” Cassandra spoke with certainty, eyes laced with concern that she hid beneath ire at the Herald for not saying anything.

Brynn looked away, shuffling the reins in her hands. “I am…the mark.” She held up her left hand and Cassandra stared at the digits, finding the calloused skin was lit from beneath with a sick glow.

“I thought it was dormant whenever you are not near a rift?”

“It was…until a couple weeks ago.” Brynn pressed her palm against her stomach protectively, lip twitching and a shudder running down her body. Her mare shied sideways, nickering anxiously, and Brynn murmured to her. “This is difficult for me to say aloud, ir abelas.”

“What does that mean?” Cassandra latched onto the elven words, hiding her concern beneath curiosity which, though genuine, was overshadowed by the emotion that tightened her jaw when she saw Brynn wince minutely again. “Ir abelas,” she said slowly.

“It’s an apology.”

“Why would you apologize?”

“You should not be concerned with my well-being; I’m sure you have more important things to think of than one of the People.”
“You are not just an elf.” When the Herald only shook her head, Cassandra urged her stallion closer and set her hand on Brynn’s forearm, pulling on it to slow her and draw her eyes. “You are more than an elf, more than the Herald. You are Brynn, one of the People, an archer and hunter, recognized as mature by your clan by your vallaslin.”

Cassandra smiled faintly as Brynn’s expression brightened, although traces of pain and uncertainty lingered at the edge of her smile. Her eyes creased, distorting the tattoo that curled around her brow, and she laid her hand over Cassandra’s. They smiled at each other until Brynn’s face tightened and she gasped, clenching her left hand into a fist suddenly. “Levallan? What is wrong?”

Brynn gritted her teeth, jaw jumping and arm trembling. Cassandra noticed the sickly color that spread beneath her skin up to her elbow, casting a green pallor on otherwise tan skin. “It…fenedhis, tu venavis!”

Cassandra panicked as the woman hunched over her arm, pain twisting her features into a snarl, and cursed loudly again. Up ahead, Bull’s and Solas’ ears pricked and they turned in their saddles, urging their mounts around to ride back to the duo.

Cassandra yanked her stallion to a halt and dismounted hastily, dragging Brynn off her mare and catching her as her legs buckled. The rogue cried out as her left arm jostled against the Seeker’s armor, tears pooling in her eyes. Solas approached them and knelt by their side as Bull loomed overhead. “What happened?”

“She was complaining of a pain in her hand, and something – I do not know, it just occurred.” Looking around, Cassandra saw the rest of the party had paused nearby and were lingering uncertainly. She looked up at the Iron Bull with fire flashing in her eyes. “Get them on their way, they do not need to stare as though she is some display to admire!”

With a quirk of his brow, the mercenary conceded. “Got it, Seeker.” He hopped back onto his massive mount, urging it into a trot, and his booming voice ordered the remaining troops to continue on their way.

Cassandra returned her attention to Solas and his ministrations to Brynn, who had curled into Cassandra’s hold with her left arm trembling. Solas carefully picked it up, watching Brynn’s face as she cried out again, fingers of her right hand digging into Cassandra’s thigh through her breeches. “Pain to this extent does not occur so fast.”

“She just told me it has been happening for the past fortnight.”

“So long?” The mage’s eyebrow crawled up his forehead and an expression like grudging respect flitted across his features. “She is resilient. At a glance, I would hazard to say it is infected, although that would make no sense since it is pure magic beneath her skin. More likely, the power is not compatible with her body and she is rejecting it.”

“But, we cannot-” Cassandra’s mind raced; there were still so many rifts to close, still the Elder One to defeat. If they didn’t have the power that flowed beneath Brynn’s hand, how would they complete their task? If they continued to let the mark persist, how long until it destroyed the Herald? What was the correct choice?

“If we can get to Haven quickly, I remember reading of a remedy in one of my books. It will not completely fix this, but it should quell its debilitating effects.” Cassandra nodded, crouching to pick up Brynn in her arms. She whimpered as her arm was jostled and Cassandra’s chest constricted tightly. The Seeker clenched her jaw as she and Solas clumsily maneuvered Brynn onto
Cassandra’s stallion. She mounted behind the Herald, arm wrapped securely around the elf’s middle and her mare’s reins tied to her saddlebags. Digging her heels into the stallion’s sides, Cassandra set off at a canter, Solas and Brynn’s mare fast on her heels, the rogue making quiet hurting sounds against her chest with every rocking motion beneath her.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Ma serannas - Thank you

Fenedhis, tu venavis! - Shit, make it stop!
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They finally entered the gates of Haven mid-morning two days later, having ridden their horses as hard as they dared whenever they had light. Cassandra didn’t stop for the guards, merely pushing her mount through their ranks toward Brynn’s cabin. She dismounted outside the door and barely caught the slight woman as she half climbed, half fell out of the saddle. Brynn stumbled into her door before Cassandra caught her around the waist and, together, they staggered into the small space. Cassandra led the Herald toward the bed and sat her on it, twisting away with a frown on her lips as Solas peeked inside the door.

“Have you settled her?”

“We shall be ready when you return, Solas,” Cassandra returned tersely. He nodded and disappeared, closing the door behind him, and left them in the quiet with Brynn’s rasping breaths and the faint sound of the Inquisition’s people going about their business.

“Let’s get a fire going; it feels like the first snow will fall here tonight.” Cassandra spoke more to herself, aware of eyes on her back as she started a fire in the grate, growing increasingly angry as she listened to Brynn stop breathing, likely in an attempt to avoid making any pained noises. “Why did you not tell us sooner that you were in pain?”

“It was not serious then.”

“It should have been addressed then so you were not like this now!” Cassandra rounded on her, nostrils flaring angrily as her hand cut through the air. “If you had considered how it might escalate, you would not be like this! Do you realize how important you are to the Inquisition?”

Brynn, previously reclined on the bed, suddenly sat up straight with coldly appraising eyes. She pushed herself onto her feet and swayed dangerously. When Cassandra moved to go to her, the
Herald held up her palm. “This…this curse under my skin is why you keep me; if I didn’t have this, I would not be treated so! Ir banal; ir u, shem! Just another dirty forest heathen to be used and discarded when my usefulness has ended!”

Cassandra stood in frozen disbelief as Brynn continued to shout at her until she was sweating and her hands shook. When she gracelessly sat on the bed, Cassandra took a hesitant step forward. Brynn fixed her eyes on the Seeker and her profile glowed sickly green as she roughly swiped her hand across her eyes. “Ir u sahlin;” she said softly.

Cassandra hazarded a step, then another, until she stood by the bed. She knelt before Brynn with her hands on her knees, and found blue-grey eyes as she looked up at the rogue. “You are not some thing to be used and discarded,” she said emphatically. “You are more than your title, more than your mark. You are our hope, true, but you are also a remarkable young woman, a woman who has faced immeasurable odds and triumphed over them.” Cassandra pressed her hand under Brynn’s chin as her head tilted down and waited for their eyes to meet again.

“I am sorry I yelled at you,” she said quietly, “but I was – I remain – worried. Your health is important, not just as the Herald, but as...as a friend.” She flushed under Brynn’s silent scrutiny but soldiered on, feeling the press of words in her throat. “I know our initial meeting was...less than auspicious, but on every outing we have taken, we have gotten closer. I wish you would have told me of this before, but I can understand your reticence as well. I do not like to share my pain either; it is private to me,” Cassandra admitted ruefully.

Brynn studied her another long, uncomfortable moment, then her lips quirked upward. Her clammy hand covered Cassandra’s on her knee and squeezed weakly as she exhaled on a long breath. “Ir abelas, Cassandra, truly.”

“You seem to apologize a lot to me,” Cassandra teased gently.

“I have many reasons, I think. I should not have yelled at you.”

“I think...you were justified. We have been pushing you more recently, and demanding things of you that any other person would balk at. Yet you do them without complaint.”

“No one else can,” Brynn said simply.

Cassandra stared at her, amber eyes lit with curiosity, and her scarred cheek creased as she smiled lopsidedly and shook her head. “You are a mystery, Lavellan.”

“I have to keep you interested somehow, don’t I, seeker?” Brynn smiled playfully, then winced as her hand sparked from within.

Cassandra rocked back on her heels as she fought down a blush. “I will find Solas, he has been absent long enough.” She fled the cabin and had barely shut the door before she was accosted by Solas, yanking her aside with an impassive expression on his face. “Where have you been?”

“Listening, as is my way. She is quite upset, Seeker.”

Solas’ pinched expression made Cassandra suspicious and she hissed, “What did she say, at the beginning?”

“She thinks she does not matter, that she is alone here, in this human village among those who call her ‘knife ear’ and ‘heathen’ behind her back. Your faith is not hers, Seeker, your customs are not hers, do not expect her to behave as you do.” Solas released her wrist and turned away from Cassandra, who growled lowly. “I must tend to her, you are welcome to watch, or you may go. I
will not keep you.” He pushed through the door and left Cassandra standing uncertainly on the stone step, listening to the quiet, musical lilt of Elven words on the air.

Cassandra paced the small, shadowed alcove in the dusty wing of the Chantry, leaving faint boots marks as she turned on her heel time and again. Her hair, already disheveled, became more unkempt as she carded her fingers through it again, and her brow furrowed in frustration.

“What vexes you so, my friend?” The Seeker paused midstep, watching as a shadow detached from a pillar and materialized into their seneschal, swaying silently toward her. Leliana’s gaze was attentive, smile enigmatic and half-hearted as always as she approached. “Is it to do with our Herald’s condition?”

Cassandra didn’t bother wondering how Leliana had already heard about Brynn’s illness when they had barely arrived and seen no one but the guards. “She did not tell anyone about it until she was incapacitated. What if this had occurred while we were fighting demons beneath a rift? We may not have been able to get to her in time.” Cassandra crossed her arms and huffed in frustration, her ire rising as Leliana’s smile broadened into something more coy. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“No reason,” the redhead returned evenly, although her eyes glinted playfully. “I merely find it interesting that you take such a…personal stance on our Herald’s health.”

“Is the only one who can close the rifts, why would I not be concerned with her health?” Cassandra’s hand cut through the air as she glared at Leliana, eyebrows lowered thunderously over her eyes.

Leliana leaned lackadaisically against a pillar and crossed her arms, staring Cassandra down with a brow raised mockingly. “I was merely commenting, now you are getting defensive. What are you hiding, my dear Seeker?”

“Nothing!”

“Are you certain?” Leliana pushed off the pillar and moved toward Cassandra, hips swaying provocatively. Cassandra took a few steps back but quickly found herself cornered with the redhead still bearing down on her, sloe eyed and hypnotizing. “You seem rather defensive for merely being concerned about the health of our de facto leader, mon amie. We’ve been colleagues for longer than I care to think; do recall we know much about each other.”

She pressed herself against Cassandra’s front, her hand flat against her breastplate and nose brushing the Seeker’s cheek. She grinned against Cassandra’s scarred skin as she stuttered and stammered incomprehensibly, hands fluttering uncertainly at Leliana’s waist as though she couldn’t decide whether to chance pushing her away or not. “You are not usually this inarticulate, Cassandra. Did I hit the mark?” She brushed her lips across the Seeker’s cheek and grinned when gauntleted hands landed on her shoulder and pushed her away.

Cassandra’s cheeks were afame, her eyes gleaming with ire and confusion, and she could see the fast pulse beating at her throat. Leliana grinned and chuckled. “I think you should go back and check on her, Cassandra. She will need help until she is healed. Take her the correspondence she has missed on her last mission.” Leliana melted back into the shadows and silently disappeared before Cassandra could get control of her tongue, leaving her feeling flustered and disheveled. She paced a few more moments, then cursed quietly and took off toward the cabins near the walls of Haven, unaware of the keen blue eyes watching from the shadows with a satisfied gleam in them.
Cassandra paused uncertainly outside Brynn’s cabin, hands raised to knock on the door, when she heard a faint call to enter from within. She walked in and saw Brynn sitting up in bed, lips pursed as she stared at a vial she rolled between her hands. “How are you feeling?” Cassandra stopped halfway across the room, aware Brynn might explode at her again and wanting to avoid aggravating her. “Did Solas help you?”

“He gave me a potion to dull the pain,” she said quietly, holding up the bottle in her hands. “He also gave me a salve to rub into my skin, but otherwise…” Brynn shrugged and winced minutely. Cassandra slowly approached the bed, pulling a stool up by it and sitting down. She set the letters she’d carried out of the chantry on the bed and Brynn’s blue-grey eyes followed the motion. “What are those?”

“Letters from various people that arrived while we were gone. Leliana kept track of them for you. I believe most of them are from nobles hoping to gain recognition by siding with you, but I did see a couple that look as though they are from your clan.” Cassandra watched Brynn reach out hesitantly and run her finger along the vellum, an indecipherable look in her tired eyes.

“Cassandra-”

“I must go, Herald. I will talk with you later.” Cassandra abruptly stood and left the bedside. She looked over at the doorway, finding furrowed brows and a faintly hurt expression on Brynn’s face. “I am…I am very busy.”

She stumbled out the door and away from the cabin, making a beeline for the training grounds outside Haven. Falling into her usual position, Cassandra hit the training dummy hard with her blade, growling as the edge glanced off the wooden torso and took a chip out of the abused post. She hacked at the dummy until sweat ran in rivulets down her face and her muscles shook from fatigue. By then, the sun was nearly set and everything was shaded in shades of grey, campfires sprung up across the hillside like sparks.

She sheathed her sword, slung her shield onto her back, and let the last bit of tension leave her shoulders on a sigh. Running her fingers through her damp hair, she eyed the much abused dummy, which was rather lopsided from one too many shield bashes. She wandered toward her tent and finally removed her armor, setting it neatly aside as she dug through her sparse belongings for clean clothes.

After she had bathed and freshened up, she found herself by Varric’s campfire, idly eating a hearty stew and listening to him weave a convoluted tail, surely exaggerated by her reckoning, and enthralling his captivated audience. She half listened to his gravelly voice and the gathered companions’ murmurs as he reached the pinnacle of the story, the other half of her mind caught on the memory of Brynn’s expression as she walked out the door earlier that day. She handed her half eaten stew off to a soldier and dusted off the seat of her breeches, leaving the warmth and light of the campfire and striding toward the cabins a ways away.

As she approached Brynn’s she noticed the light that normally shone in the window was dimmed but still visible and hesitated only a moment before knocking. A long moment passed, and she thought that perhaps the Herald had fallen asleep while reading her correspondence, but then she heard a quiet call to enter, and turned the knob. The first thing she noticed as she shut the door behind herself was the scent of herbs burning in a small dish, a pleasant mixture of something earthy and spicy. The light she had spied through the window was the smoldering fire and a set of small candles on the floor across from her, and kneeling before it was Brynn. The candlelight cast a glow behind her and set her tousled hair alight, her pointed ears cast in sharp relief against her
otherwise soft looking face. Eyes gleamed at her, cat-reflective and somehow more dangerous looking in the dim light, and she took a half step back.

“Seeker, what can I do for you?”

Cassandra didn’t miss the formal title, nor the carefully neutral expression, and took a breath. “I… wanted to ask how you were feeling.”

“I am well.”

“Your hand no longer pains you?”

“It is manageable.”

“I…” Brynn turned away from her, back toward the candles, and Cassandra felt the sting of rejection in her stomach at the increasingly terse replies. She shrugged off the ache and took a step closer toward Brynn and, therefore, the enticing scent as well as the candles. “What are you doing?”

“Why are you asking?” Even in the dim light, Cassandra noticed the way Brynn’s shoulders drew up defensively.

“I…am curious. I apologize if I overstepped.” Cassandra carefully worded her answer, aware she was treading on thin ice with the woman kneeling before her. Brynn half turned toward her, her profile cast in candlelight and seeming ethereal. She looked away and her eyes found the letters sitting, unopened, on the bed. “You have not read the letters yet?”

“I…became otherwise engaged.” Cassandra’s brow furrowed but she let the comment pass, brushing a hand over the thick furs.

She glanced at Brynn out of the corner of her eye and watched the woman turn back toward the candles, waving her hand over the candles and inclining her head at them. She slowly stood, staring out the window the bowl with the herbs sat on, and made another gesture – index and middle fingers pressed to her forehead and extended toward the night sky – before dipping her finger into the ashes of the herbs and rubbing them on the glass. The streaked symbol, an eye with wide pupil and shadowed beneath, stood out against the otherwise pristine glass.

“What does that mean?” Cassandra blurted without forethought. She immediately cursed herself as Brynn turned toward her with a frown. “I did not mean to say that alou-”

“Then what did you mean? You ask a lot of questions for someone who isn’t interested in listening to what I have to say, Seeker.” Brynn crossed her arms and cocked her hip to one side.

Cassandra clenched her fist against her thigh, feeling her nails bite into her skin through the leather breeches. “I did not mean to cut you off earlier. I was…distracted, and I hurt you. I am sorry.” She saw Brynn relax marginally, shoulders lowering as Cassandra’s apologetic tone caught her ear, and felt a faint flutter of hope in her ribcage. “Please, will you tell me what that means?” She gestured again at the window and Brynn glanced back at it.

“It is something our Keeper would etch into the ashes of our campfire the night before we would disassemble our camp. It is for protection against predators, wisdom in our dealings with others, sight where others are blind. I…I always used to think it was meant to give us luck where we next settled, but now…” Her eyes took on a faraway cast, glowing eerily in the guttering candlelight. “Now I think it is meant to keep us on a true path, lest we lose ourselves.”
Translations:

Ir banal; ir u, shem! - I am nothing; I am alone, human!

Ir u sahlin - I am alone now
“You ask a lot of questions for someone who isn’t interested in listening to what I have to say, Seeker.” Brynn crossed her arms and cocked her hip to one side.

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Cassandra walked through the camp outside Haven toward Leliana’s tent with a rolled scroll in her hand and a frown heavy on her lips. She pushed past the heavy canvas brusquely, pausing in the arch as her eyes adjusted to the dim, smoky interior. Leliana was facing her, cowl down and red hair unbound, hanging just past her shoulders. To her side, Brynn leaned against the center support beam, looking pale and wan even a week after returning to Haven. “Your Grace-”

“Please, Cassandra,” she interrupted quietly. “I don’t want to hear that name right now.”

“What is going on?” Cassandra looked at them both closely again and watched the minute facial tic in Leliana’s jaw that only occurred when she was exceptionally irritated, the way Brynn was staring resolutely at the boots and pressing a fist against her breeches. “What is the matter,” she pushed, taking a step closer. Eyes nearly grey in the dim lantern light of the tent met her briefly before turning aside again and Cassandra gritted her teeth. “Leliana?”

“There has been a...situation. Something even I did not realize the Herald would have to attend to. Although, how I could have missed it, in hindsight...” Leliana’s voice dissolved into disgruntled muttering in Orlesian, her bow knitted and lips thin.

“There is a ball being held in Val Royeaux several months from now; the Herald has been asked to attend because of our growth in recent weeks. I suppose the rise of demonic activity is good for something after all,” she said wryly.

“Be that as it may, we have a more important problem to discuss. The trivialities of bored Orlesian nobles can wait until we have addressed this.” Cassandra offered the scroll to Brynn like a weapon and watched her handle it just as gingerly, holding it limply in her fingers.

“Read it, Your Grace, so we may decide upon a course of action.” Brynn’s gaze bounced between Cassandra’s eyes and the scroll in her hands, but she didn’t unroll the paper. Leliana reached for
the scroll, gently easing it from the elf’s fingers, and silently read the words scrawled on paper while Cassandra stared at Brynn in consternation.

“Your Grace?”

“Please don’t call me that, Cassandra.”

“What is-”

“This is a writ demanding that we come and treat with these…Avvar. They say…” Leliana’s voice trailed off as she read further, a deep crease appearing between her brows. “They have a small squad of our soldiers…but where…” She strode over to a small map laid across the scarred table at the back of the tent and scanned it, then jabbed a gloved finger at a marker near the bottom of the map. “There. The Fallow Mire, I sent some of our men there nearly three weeks ago to scout the area before we arrived there. I didn’t expect them to return for another week at least, so I wasn’t concerned.”

“We need to go to them, Leliana.”

“Yes, Cassandra, but we can’t just run in headlong. I’ve heard of these Avvar, they aren’t to be trifled with.”

“We cannot leave our men there!”

“I’m not saying we will, but we need to have a plan.”

Both women squared off, staring hard at each other until Brynn shifted subtly on her feet. Cassandra turned her eyes on the slight woman, narrowing her gaze contemplatively. “What is your take on the letter?” Brynn looked briefly panicked, grey-blue gaze flicking over to Leliana for a moment. “Do not look to her for help, Your Grace; I want to know your stance on the contents of the letter.”

Brynn’s panicked expression intensified and she stuttered. “I don’t – I can’t-”

Cassandra felt a bolt of realization strike her and a simultaneous expression of dread flitted across Brynn’s face. “You cannot read.” Her mind replayed all the instances since their arrival in Haven that Brynn had evaded a question regarding the contents of some missive. “When I brought those papers to your room, after we returned, every time Leliana read some report to you in the Warm Room-”

“The Dalish have no need for the written word, Cassandra,” Leliana interrupted her. “Unless they are the clan’s Keeper or their First, what need has a hunter or weaver or herbalist for writing? All of their lore is passed down by word of mouth and their secrets kept well away from shemlen ears.”

“But she is!-”

“A hunter of the Lavellan clan, not a First or even a Hahren; what need would she have to write?” Cassandra scoffed and turned to Brynn. “Your Grace?”

“I’m not!-” Brynn threw her hands up and stalked to the other side of the war table, muttering under her breath.

“Cassandra, perhaps you should-”
“No, I want to hear this from her own lips, Leliana. You can speak for yourself, can you not, Your Grace?”

Brynn met her eyes, stormy grey with anger, and pursed her lips. Leliana looked between them both with concern bright in her gaze, and sighed when Cassandra crossed her arms defensively. She rubbed her temples tiredly, then exhaled loudly. “Okay, since you two cannot seem to work together, I will make the decision.

“Although the ball in Val Royeaux is important, regardless of how frivolous you deem it, Cassandra, I do agree that the matter in the Fallow Mire needs to be addressed immediately. You two will take a group of Inquisition soldiers along with a couple of other companions and go there to assess the situation and see if these Avvar are as dangerous as they seem.”

Cassandra nodded tersely and her eyes slid over to Brynn, whose shoulders sagged after a couple tense moments. “We need to help them if we can, Seeker. When do we leave?”

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Cassandra watched as Brynn rode in the midst of the group of men and women leaving Haven the following morning. The sun was barely over the peak of the mountains and cast the frozen dew in dazzling colors that bounced off the metal of the arms and armor covering everyone. Brynn stood out amongst the warriors with her thick leather jerkin and faded, green woolen cloak draped over her horse’s spotted hindquarters.

Cassandra felt the previous day’s irritation rise up again and forced it away, focusing on the mission at hand. It would be nearly two weeks to travel out of the mountains, onto the King’s Highway, and south past Redcliffe to the Fallow Mire. That much time without any constructive interaction between her and the Herald would be unthinkable. She huffed to herself and urged her horse onward through the throng of soldiers, slowing hesitantly next to Brynn’s small, dappled horse.

“Seeker,” she said perfunctorily, eyes sliding over toward Cassandra for an instant, steely with ill disguised ire.

Cassandra felt her lips twitch and forced the smirk beneath her usual unflappable façade. “Good morning…Brynn.” She felt more than saw Brynn’s surprised gaze heat the side of her head and looked out of the corner of her eye as the woman jerked her head around again, sending her short, unkempt hair into further disarray. “Are you ready for the mission?”

“I am…yes, I think so.”

“Good, because if what Leliana said is true, then these Avvar will prove to be capable adversaries.” Cassandra lapsed into silence after that, riding somewhat comfortably next to Brynn as Haven disappeared behind them. They descended the mountain with the raucousness of an excited group of children, the soldiers laughing and telling stories as Dorian regaled them with some bawdy tale and Blackwall nodded next to him on his massive charger.

As they traveled into the lower elevations, the temperature gradually climbed and Brynn shed her cloak part way through the day, laying it over her mare’s withers. Cassandra watched her absentely rub her left wrist and forearm as a frown played across her lips, distorting the vallaslin on her face. “Does it still pain you? Did you ask Solas for some help?”

“It is a little stiff right now,” Brynn admitted reluctantly, flexing her fingers slowly. “Hahren Solas gave me a tonic to use whenever the pain grew to be too much, but…”
“You do not want to seem weak,” Cassandra surmised. She watched Brynn purse her lips and nod, barely noticeable with the movement of her mount beneath her. “You think that by taking something someone has offered you, you will be seen as...what exactly?” Brynn didn’t answer immediately, and the silence between them was filled with dozens of words from the surrounding soldiers.

“It makes me feel...I don’t wish to feel indebted to anyone. I have the tonic he gave me, but I will not use it unless I must,” she swore adamantly. “I don’t like feeling like I owe anyone anything.”

“But if it is freely given, then you do not owe them anything,” Cassandra argued. She urged her mouth closer to Brynn until their knees brushed and set her hand on her leg. “If something is offered to you without wishing anything in return, then why should you not take it?” When Brynn looked away, Cassandra squeezed her leg gently. “If I offered something to you, would you take it?”

Blue-grey eyes appraised her intently. “What is your offer?”

“Let me teach you to write and read. It is a useful skill for all and now, necessary for you. I am not the best teacher, but I can help with the basics, at least.” Cassandra watched as Brynn cautiously laid her hand over Cassandra’s, barely feeling the pressure of her fingers against her knuckles through the leather of her riding gloves.

“If I agree to this,” Brynn asked, “what do you expect in return?”

“Only your willing ear to listen to me, and your mind to remember what I teach you.” Cassandra felt hope suffuse her chest as Brynn’s gaze softened somewhat and her stance relaxed on her horse.

“Ma nuvenin, Seeker. Ma serannas.”

Cassandra stiffened in surprise, although she didn’t move her hand from under Brynn’s. “You are welcome.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Ma nuvenin, Seeker. Ma serannas - As you say, Seeker. Thank you.
“Let me teach you to write and read. It is a useful skill for all and now, necessary for you. I am not the best teacher, but I can help with the basics, at least.” Cassandra watched as Brynn cautiously laid her hand over Cassandra’s, barely feeling the pressure of her fingers against her knuckles through the leather of her riding gloves.

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“Only your willing ear to listen to me, and your mind to remember what I teach you.” Cassandra felt hope suffuse her chest as Brynn’s gaze softened somewhat and her stance relaxed on her horse.

“Ma nuvenin, Seeker. Ma serannas…thank you.”

Cassandra stiffened in surprise, although she didn’t move her hand from under Brynn’s. “You are welcome.”

Cassandra watched Brynn sit stiffly on her cot in their shared tent, plate of food untouched by her feet and a frown heavy upon her face. “If you do not wish to do this…”

“No, I need to be able to write and read. As the Herald…”

Spoken bitterly, Cassandra felt Brynn’s massive dislike for the title and all the weight that came with the responsibility of that name. She gathered the quill and paper she had taken from one of their scouts and sat across from the woman, pushing the full plate toward her. “Eat, and then we will begin the lesson.”

Brynn reluctantly dug into her meal, picking past the bread and cheese and popping a piece of meat into her mouth. As she ate, Cassandra meticulously drew out the letters on the paper, leaving ample room between each letter for practice. She felt inquisitive eyes on her as she scratched away at the paper but didn’t look up until the still partially full plate was pushed into her sight.

“You have not finished your meal.”

“I can’t eat those foods, they upset my stomach. I’ve tried before, with my clan.”

Cassandra nodded and set the plate aside, laying the paper between them with the letters facing Brynn. “Okay then. I don’t know how good a teacher I will be, but if you can learn even just the basics, that will be fine for now. These letters comprise the alphabet; they each make a different sound and, when put together, spell different words.” Cassandra quickly ran through the letters, then took quill in hand and spelled Brynn’s name. “These letters spell your name.”

She watched as the woman traced Cassandra’s elegant scrawl with the tip of her index finger and glanced up at her through her bangs. “Can I try?” Cassandra offered the quill to Brynn and watched her clumsily take it in her right hand, awkwardly manipulating the quill and shakily mirroring the letters beneath Cassandra’s writing.
She looked so hesitantly proud of her first attempt that Cassandra felt a smile creep along her lips, even when looking at the nearly illegible letters that were blocked out on paper. “Try it with your other hand, too.” Brynn switched to her left hand and repeated the letters, lower lip caught between her teeth as she concentrated. She looked up at Cassandra after laboriously tracing the letters again and the Seeker felt warmth course through her as she realized the woman was looking for her approval.

“That’s very good for your first time,” she praised. “I think we should focus first on learning the letters, then everything else will come after.” Brynn nodded, excitement clear in her gaze, and Cassandra felt an answering thrum heat her chest as the elf slid up next to her so they could look at the paper together.

“Again.”

“Cassandra…”

The Seeker glanced to her side at the petulant tone and snorted when she saw the mulish expression on Brynn’s face, slumped shoulders and the faint glare in her eyes expressing her clear disinterest in following her order. Against her will, Cassandra felt a chuckle bubble up in her chest and couldn’t smother it before it broke free.

Brynn whipped her head around, affront and shock warring for dominance on her face, and the Seeker laughed outright. “It’s not funny,” Brynn muttered, the frustration thickening her accent and bringing another round of chuckles from Cassandra. “I can’t get this!”

“They are only letters, the world will not end if you do not understand them immediately,” Cassandra rebutted gently, finally in control of her mirth once more.

Brynn looked at her askance before roughly carding her fingers through her hair in frustration. “Fenedhis,” she cursed quietly.

Cassandra grabbed her hand before she could pull at her tousled hair again and set the quill in her palm. “Again,” she urged, “it only takes practice. You already know the letters, more or less. Now it is only fitting them together into words. You already can sound out words with speech; you only have to put them on paper.” She pointedly tapped the parchment that was littered with her own script and Brynn’s shaky scrawl.

With a last scowl, blue-grey eyes set themselves to the paper with a resigned determination. Cassandra made Brynn work until the last of the quickly fading sunlight was behind the mountains and then let her put her work away, nodding as she scanned the letters scrawled on the paper. “You are doing well.”

“My writing looks like something a drunken dwarf would do.”

“Actually, Varric’s script is quite elegant even when inebriated,” Cassandra said, fighting back a smirk when Brynn scowled at her and muttered under her breath. “We are nearly out of the Frostbacks, we will reach Redcliffe Castle in two days and restock before continuing south. For beginning only a week ago, you have caught on remarkably fast.”

Brynn looked faintly reassured by the praise, although traces of uncertainty lingered in her eyes. “It doesn’t feel like it. I feel like a child again, waiting for my grandmother to scold me because I haven’t picked up a skill fast enough. Da’len,” she mimicked in a scratchy voice, her brogue even
thicker, “you must learn faster, we need as many capable hunters as we can have. The clan will not feed itself.” Cassandra snorted in amusement and Brynn looked through her lashes, eyes bright as she smiled a little.

“Of course, she didn’t realize that I simply didn’t want to learn some of the skills she deemed fit to teach me. I am glad she did though, they have kept me alive this long.” Voice suddenly wistful, Brynn looked through the canvas that billowed in the chill breeze, shadows dancing on the walls as their soldiers moved through the camp.

Cassandra set the quill and paper aside and sat gingerly beside Brynn, pulling her sword into her lap and removing it from its scabbard. She reached to her side and retrieved the oil and rag she used to clean her arms and armor and began her nightly ritual of inspecting first her weapon, then her plate mail, for scratches and dents. As she rubbed the rag across the surface of the blade, she felt eyes on her profile and spoke without looking up. “What is on your mind tonight? You have been more distant today than usual.”

A brief silence settled over them, interspersed with faint sounds of speech and the jangle of mail as the men outside moved around, then she felt warmth against her side. Brynn settled close by, arms nearly brushing as she set her bow and daggers in front of herself and set about unlacing her leather tunic. “I was just…remembering, I suppose. Being here, with you, it reminded me of…arla ma,” she breathed quietly. Cassandra was entranced by the soft lilt as she slipped into elvish and made concentric circles on the flat of her blade as she listened to Brynn speak. “I miss home. Mir mahvae, mir falen, adahlen, na banal theneras sahlin.

Brynn lapsed into silence once more and Cassandra noticed she had stopped moving at all. Brynn picked up her bow, carefully unstrung it, and began scanning the polished, carved wood with a pensive expression on her face. Cassandra exhaled quietly as she continued cleaning her blade again and subtly leaned closer to the welcoming heat Brynn seemed to always exude.

“Will you teach me?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your language. It is…beautiful to listen to.” Cassandra felt a blush heat her cheeks and didn’t dare look over at the woman whose gaze she felt searing into the side of her face. “If it is not presumptuous of me to ask…” She startled when a calloused hand settled in the crook of her elbow and turned her head toward soft eyes above a gentle smile.

“I would like nothing more.”

The caravan of soldiers perked up when the peaks of Redcliffe Castle came into view over the horizon the evening of the next day, jostling their mounts a little faster to get just a bit further before they lost the last of the light falling over the mountains at their backs. On their horses near the back of the caravan, Brynn and Cassandra lagged without noticing the landmark rising in the distance.

“No, it has more of a…curl, I suppose?”

“Aneth…ara,” Cassandra said slowly, almost tasting the words on her tongue and their foreign buzz behind her lips. Brynn cocked her head to the side.

“Say it faster, more confidently. Aneth ara.”
Cassandra pursed her lips and sounded the phrase out in her head for a moment. “Aneth ara.”

“Again, but loosen your tongue. You sound like you have a cold.” Brynn smiled and chuckled when Cassandra eyed her skeptically.

“Aneth ara.”

Brynn’s ears perked and she jerked her head around to stare fully at the Seeker, a bright smile on her lips. “That was perfect! Na hanin!”

Cassandra smiled a little and felt it fade quickly. “But that was only one phrase, and the day is nearly ended.”

“But you have learned two hands’ worth of words and phrases since yesterday, Cassandra. Be proud of that.” Brynn guided her mount closer and reached across the gap to press her palm against the Seeker’s leg. “We will practice more once we’ve made camp, you and I both.”

Cassandra nodded and called a halt to the caravan, only then noticing the peaks of Redcliffe Castle in the distance. “Set up camp, we move at first light for the castle.” A weary round of cheers went up as everyone dismounted and began efficiently setting up their tents and pots and fires. She dismounted on the fringe of the rapidly set up site and unsaddled her horse, finding Brynn at her back when she turned around.

“I can hear water in the distance, beyond the trees,” the elf said, gesturing toward the wooded area to their right, a ways away from the camp. “We can water our horses there, and perhaps wash later tonight?”

“That sounds wonderful, I would enjoy the chance to wash the days’ dirt and grime from my skin.”

Brynn grinned in agreement and they walked their mounts through the trees to the bank of a wide river. They removed their boots and Cassandra hesitated at the edge and watched Brynn confidently wade into the water until she stood calf deep, several yards away. “It’s still a little warm, Cassandra.” She turned an unguarded smile on the Seeker as her horse drank from the rushing water and Cassandra ventured a couple steps in, pausing as the current began buffeting her feet.

“You should not venture so far, the current-”

“Is no stronger than where my clan dwells. I have swam rivers like this my entire life, they hold no danger if you are respectful.”

Cassandra remained wary and carefully watched Brynn until she began walking back toward her, the bottom of her breeches soaked and clinging to her skin. “We should return to camp, Brynn. We can come back to bathe after we have had dinner and practiced.”

They tied their mounts beside their tent and walked to the large, central fire where their small company had gathered for the evening meal. Most of the soldiers were huddled around Dorian as he regaled them with a bawdy tale and waved his spoon around. On the other side, half shadowed by the flickering flames, Blackwall sat with his armor in pieces around himself, meticulously cleaning the metal. Cassandra grabbed two bowls and ladled out the hearty stew for them both, handing one to Brynn who was carrying several slices of bread in her hand. They ate quietly, watching Dorian and sitting close to each other as the shadows deepened.

After they retreated into their tent, Brynn shuffled over to the small satchel she carried and pulled
out the papers and charcoal she used to practice. She sat on the cot under Cassandra’s watchful
gaze and began tracing the letters of the alphabet as she did every night. Between her painstaking
writing, she taught Cassandra how to properly form different words and their meanings.

“The trees we walked through, what are they called?”

“A single tree or shrub is called *adahl*, the forest as a whole is referred to as *adahlen*.”

*Adahlen.*

Brynn nodded in approval as she slowly traced her name, looking up at the Seeker for assurance.
“That is nearly correct. Your ‘n’ are both backwards.”

Brynn cocked her head to the side as she studied her letters and nodded, sending her lengthening
bangs flopping over her eyes. “It makes a difference?”

“No really,” Cassandra admitted, “but it is not considered proper to write them backwards,
nonetheless.” Brynn grumbled as she rewrote her name and Cassandra nodded approvingly.

“I’m glad it meets your demands.”

Cassandra nearly took offense until she noticed the teasing gleam lurking in grey-blue eyes and she
scowled, standing and brushing off her breeches. “Come, let us bathe and wash the day’s wear
off.”

They walked down to the river in the quickly fading twilight, the bare branches and detritus
highlighted beneath the full moon rising overhead. Brynn strode silently through the trees,
appearing to Cassandra’s weak eyes to disappear like a wraith. “Brynn?” She heard no answer and
quickened her pace, following the sounds of water to the riverside. Brynn’s clothes were discarded
on the bank, boots laying where she kicked them off, and the Seeker’s gaze searched the water
fruitlessly for several long moments. She felt panic rising in her chest to strangle her just as a head
broke the water near the middle of the river and began swimming toward her.

Brynn’s eyes appeared cat like under the moonlight, reflecting oddly as she stared and swam
strongly toward the bank. Cassandra stood frozen on the pebbled shore as Brynn rose out of the
water, water dripping down her skin and a smile on her lips. The Seeker’s eyes roved the expanse
of bare skin before her, tracing along the whirling, meandering lines of *vallaslin* that wound across
Brynn’s shoulders and down her arms to the backs of her hands. More tattooed lines appeared on
her hips and wrapped like vines down the length of her legs before tapering off at her ankles, and
Cassandra felt inexplicably out of breath. She averted her eyes as the elf approached, mechanically
removing her tabard and unlacing her undershirt with jerky movements. She pulled the rough spun
over her head and had loosened her braid when Brynn caught her arm and she stilled.

“Let me?”

Cassandra felt her pulse race and silently berated herself when her eyes wandered again, nodding
tersely and stepping around Brynn so she could unwind the braid from the crown of her head. She
felt fingers card through her hair, gently unbraiding and scraping at her scalp until her head lollled
back. She bit her tongue as Brynn continued to scratch her scalp long after her braid was loose,
feeling a content groan build in her throat, and shivered when the fingers disappeared and lightly
touched between her shoulders.

“May I remove your breastband, *ma falon*?”
Cassandra blinked as the soft elven words washed over her and nodded, feeling calloused fingertips brush her skin as Brynn slowly unwound her breastband. She gasped when she felt Brynn press her palm between her shoulder blades and slowly trail down the dip of her spine to the waistband of her breeches. “I can do the rest,” she stammered, severing all points of contact as she lurched forward. She yanked her breeches and smalls down her legs and waded into the water silently until she stood waist deep in the smooth current and counted to ten before turning around.

Brynn lingered on the riverbank with an unreadable expression on her face; the moonlight turning the ends of her hair nearly white and casting her eyes in shadows. She bent over to pick up the bar of soap they had taken from camp and waded into the water until they stood close together again. “Do you want to wash first? I wish to swim a little longer.”

Cassandra nodded and began lathering her skin as Brynn disappeared beneath the water once more. By the time she began scrubbing her hair, she had calmed herself and was humming quietly. She heard Brynn break the water’s surface behind her and submerged herself to wash the suds out of her hair. When she resurfaced, Brynn was nearly upon her and she offered the soap silently. Brynn played with the bar, glancing up at the Seeker through her bangs, and squared her shoulders resolutely after a silent debate. “Cassandra, would you wash my hair?”

Cassandra blinked and blurted, “Why?”

Brynn seemed taken aback, flushing under the Seeker’s eyes, and looked away. “It is…ir abelas.”

“So do not apologize, but please, explain yourself. I do not mean to come across as brusque, but I am afraid I do not understand.”

“It is…fenedhis, why is this so hard to say?...in our clan, among those we trust, var lin, it is…a symbol of how close certain elvhen are that they will let someone wash their hair.”

“Why hair though? Why not skin?”

“We see each others’ bodies all the time; there is no room for modesty in an aravel you share with several other women,” Brynn said. “Our hair,” she continued, ruffling hers with a hand, “is more, somehow. We show our age, status, what our calling is with it; if someone’s loved one dies, they cut their hair off in mourning, elaborate braids are done for celebrations if they are able…it is important, and personal to us.”

Cassandra watched Brynn toy with the ends of her hair and realized the elf was nervous, of all things. “Of course,” she said, startling them both with her answer. Brynn blinked with wide eyed amazement and turned around after offering the bar of soap. Cassandra waded toward her, eyes locked on the tattooed expanse of skin bared to her and tempted to run the flat of her hand across the lean muscles that pulled and corded across Brynn’s shoulders. She lathered her hands with the soap and handed the bar back to Brynn, slowly threading her fingers through the thick hair at the crown of the elf’s head.

Brynn made a content sound at the back of her throat and her shoulders dropped; her body weaved, disturbing the water flowing around them, and Cassandra felt an electric thrill run down her spine as skin brushed her abdomen. “Are you okay?” To her own ears, her voice was breathless, and Brynn’s delicately pointed ears twitched as they caught the subtle intonations.

“It feels good,” she said simply.

Cassandra continued lathering Brynn’s hair, taking her time as the slight woman seemed more relaxed than she had been since they found her, and she hated the thought of taking that peace
away. It wasn’t until Brynn leaned fully back into her that Cassandra realized the suds had long since dissipated and she was only massaging her scalp. Brynn’s back was warm against her breasts and stomach, sending curls of heat across her skin that she didn’t quite understand. She shook her head as she pressed down on Brynn’s shoulders and watched the woman sink into the water briefly.

When she came back up, she was facing the Seeker, blue-grey eyes lit with contentment and a small smile playing about her lips. Cassandra felt another tickle at the base of her spine and cleared her throat as she scrambled for something to say. “Your tattoos, I did not realize they were so expansive.”

“I received them when I came of age and completed my *aval annar*; I earned them through the rites my kith and kin completed before me. When I came back to camp with the skins of the animals I killed, the *hahrens* felt me worthy of the *vallaslin*.”

She turned around and Cassandra got another look at the intricate vines that flowed down her spine. “They must have hurt,” she mused quietly, giving in to her want to touch. As her hand ghosted across Brynn’s shoulders, she watched goosebumps race across her skin and felt a smile quirk her lips.

“It was not unbearable. The week after was worse; my skin *itched*.” Brynn scratched absently as the memory slipped into her mind and Cassandra snorted. She took the bar of soap and began running it across Brynn’s back, washing away the remnants of the grime that her swim missed. “Cassandra?”

“Will you let me do this? Among humans, it is a sign of trust; Nevarrans…allow each other this liberty, sometimes.” Cassandra felt foolish as she explained one of the customs of her people; slowing the circular motions of her hands until her palms were just laying flat against Brynn’s back, feeling her ribs move as she breathed. “Brynn?”

She felt muscles contract, then slowly release. Brynn rolled her shoulders and her head fell forward, baring her neck to Cassandra. “I would like that, *ma falon*.”

“*Ma serannas*, my friend.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

*arla ma* - my home

*Mir mahvae, mir falen, adahlen, na banal theneras sahlin* - My mother, my friends, the forest, is nothing but a dream now.

*Na hanin!* - Your glory!

*Ma falon* - my friend

*Var lin* - our blood

*Aval annar* - Journey Year
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“Ma serannas, my friend.”

They rode through the gates of Redcliffe at midday the following day, listening to the village bells toll the hour. Brynn sat atop her horse in her leathers, warm woolen cloak taking the worst of the wind coming off the lake behind the castle. Cassandra, sitting astride her mount beside her, watched the ends of her cloak ripple in the breeze as Arl Teagan welcomed them into the courtyard.

“Welcome, welcome! My scouts mentioned you were approaching, so I took the liberty of preparing a meal. You must stay for the midday meal; tell me of your efforts in the mountains. Your soldiers can stable their animals out here; my servants will bring out hay and meal for them.” The elderly man approached Cassandra, reaching his hand up as though to assist her off her horse. Cassandra hesitated and the Arl smiled genially, although a sharp gleam in his eyes as she set her gloved palm in his warned her of a deeper intent.

“You must tell me of your travels, my dear. I’ve heard tales of your exploits; the fantastic creatures you’ve slain and how you’ve healed the horrible rifts scarring the land. Can you give me a demonstration? I’ve never seen that kind of-"

“I think you are mistaken, ser; I am not the one who bears the Anchor.”

Arl Teagan looked confused as the contingency of soldiers dismounted and led their animals into the courtyard proper so the castle guards could close the gates. “I’m afraid I don’t understand, my lady. I was informed that the Herald of Andraste was a woman…” His head swiveled as he looked at the other members of their party, glancing over the more battered looking soldiers and ghosting over Brynn’s features without a second glance. “I only assumed because of your servant, although I must admit I’ve never seen an elf ride half as well as this one.”
Cassandra felt the dull heat of annoyance permeate her skin and fought to keep the deep frown off her face. She jammed her fist against her thigh and ground her teeth together, eyes flicking over to Brynn whose expression remained closed. Brynn silently dismounted and walked up to Teagan, who seemed surprised at the movement, then offered her hand to the elderly man.

“Greetings, Arl Teagan.”

Her rich brogue hid the disdain Cassandra heard laced through her words, and she struggled to hide her smirk as she walked up beside Brynn. “This is the Herald of Andraste, my lord. Hunter Brynn of the Lavellan clan, out of the Free Marches in the Planasene Forest, to the south of the Vimmark Mountains. She has been closing the rifts throughout Ferelden with the help of the soldiers of the Inquisition and her companions.” She felt smug as Teagan’s jaw slackened and he eyed the slight woman next to Cassandra with a disbelieving eye. Brynn squirmed under the scrutiny, straightening as Cassandra squeezed her shoulder in comfort.

Arl Teagan pulled at the hem of his silk shirt and nodded stiffly. “You are welcome here, Herald. Come, you must be tired after riding so long.” He offered his arm after a moment’s hesitation and Brynn took it, barely ghosting her hand over his arm as they proceeded up the wide staircase into the main hall.

“So, I must inquire, how did you come to bear that incredible mark in your hand?”

The midday meal was tense, although everyone present strived to pretend otherwise. Arl Teagan sat at the head of the heavy wooden table, Lady Isolde picking daintily at her meal to his left and his seneschal at his right, staring steadfastly at his plate. Next to Isolde, Cassandra hid a smirk behind her cup of mead and watched Brynn barely hide her confusion at the menagerie of food laid out before her. She stealthily kicked the woman beneath the table and eyed the plate of roast pork hard, smiling with her eyes as Brynn flashed her a grateful look and took a forkful of meat.

“It was…a series of unfortunate events, ser. If I had the choice though, I would do it again.” Cassandra’s head jerked up at the revelation. Brynn cut a piece of pork and studied it before sticking it in her mouth. “I wouldn’t have seen anything but the forest and Waking Sea if I hadn’t been sent by my Keeper; I wouldn’t have so many stories to tell of our adventures and the wonderful, strange people I’ve met.” Beneath the table, Brynn’s foot nudged Cassandra’s shin and the Seeker felt her heart flutter.

At the head of the table, Teagan nodded and cut a piece of meat for himself. “Quite right. I apologize for our initial meeting, Herald. I wasn’t aware of your race; I meant no disrespect.” As he spoke, his servants came out to clear away the meal. All elven faces, they kept their heads lowered as they worked silently and the castle’s occupants ignored their presence as if they didn’t exist. “I, of course, am aware of the hardship you must face in the Inquisition. Not many people are so accepting of elves as they should be.”

“Of course,” Brynn said tightly as she watched a servant lean in for his plate. The elderly man dismissed the servant without a glance and held up his cup for a drink, still addressing Brynn as his mead was poured.

“It is a shame, of course, that elves are treated so dismally in the cities; but one can only do so much to improve their status without a certain amount of power.”

“I understand perfectly. If you would excuse me, I’m afraid I have something to attend to.” Brynn pushed back her seat and bowed stiffly at Teagan, stalking from the room and leaving everyone left...
with varied expressions of confusion on their faces. Cassandra wiped her mouth with her napkin and stood, bowing at the Arl and Arlessa before silently taking her leave.

She caught up to Brynn on her way out of the castle and strode quietly alongside the elf toward the stable, where the gentle whickering of the horses drew them closer. Brynn’s head swiveled as she listened for any other sounds and, apparently satisfied with their privacy, she pivoted on her heel, fire raging in her eyes and a snarl on her lips. “That…that…utter arse! How ignorant does he think I am? Acting like he knows the elvhen, like he’s one of us!”

Brynn’s words devolved into irate muttering in elvish, leaving Cassandra catching a word here and there and with a baffled expression on her face. She reached out as the woman stalked past her and grasped her elbow. “I understand your irritation, but you would do well to curb your tongue lest unwanted ears hear your words.”

“What are you-” Brynn’s eyes widened and her head whipped to the side as a stable boy came around the corner, whistling to himself as he carried a bucket full of feed and mooched affectionately at a horse as its head came over the stall door.

Cassandra felt herself yanked forcefully into an empty stall and was suddenly pressed against the wall at the back with Brynn’s small, compact body flush against hers in the shadows. Outside the stall, the stable boy spoke in low tones to the horse in the next stall over, his voice accompanied by the sound of feed being dumped. Cassandra’s hands clenched as Brynn’s hair tickled her lips and nose; the subtle scent of woodsmoke and leather clinging to the elf’s skin. Brynn’s ears twitched faintly as she listened to the sounds outside their hiding spot and her fingers flexed against Cassandra’s ribs with each loud noise. Without her armor, Cassandra felt each breath Brynn took; felt the exact shape of her body against hers, the way her hips slotted just off center against her breeches and they rested flush together from thigh to shoulder.

“Wha-”

“Sshhhhhh.”

Brynn’s hand migrated from Cassandra’s waist to her mouth, palm pressing lightly against her lips to quiet her. Cassandra froze and they listened as the stable boy moved around for several interminable minutes. As his jovial whistling faded, Cassandra tried to shift and Brynn pressed more heavily against her, rucking up her shirt tucked into her breeches as she stood on her tiptoes. “Just another minute, please. I want to make sure no one else comes by. Hamin, ma falon.” They breathed against each other for a long minute until Brynn seemed satisfied and, when she pulled back, Cassandra had to fight back the disappointed frown that tried to settle on her face. She watched Brynn check the aisle and beckon Cassandra out, slowly following and pursing her lips.

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With Redcliffe rapidly disappearing behind them, Cassandra found her attention captured by the way the sunlight glinted off Brynn’s auburn hair, turning it a fiery red as the wind played around them. She jerked herself out of her musing as Blackwall rode up beside her on his massive destrier, its feathered hooves dusty from travel. The bearded warrior cleared his throat, palming his two handed blade slung over the pommel by his leg and skidding his eyes across Cassandra’s profile briefly.

“Yes, Ser Blackwall?”

“How are you keeping, Lady Pentaghast?” The Seeker regarded him with a raised brow and watched his cheeks flush beneath his weathered skin and dark beard. “I only ask because you
seem distant this afternoon. Did something happen at the meal?”

“Nothing serious, ser. Thank you for your concern, but there is nothing to worry about.” Cassandra nudged her mount into an easy lope and rode toward the scout at the head of the column, feeling two sets of inquisitive eyes burning into the back of her head. “We should try and to reach the edge of the Korcari Wilds this evening before setting up camp, we lost half the day in Redcliffe.”

“Of course, Seeker. There’s a path off the King’s Road that should take us near enough to there.” The scout urged her mare into a fast trot and the caravan of soldiers followed suit, falling mostly quiet but for the steady sound of hooves on packed earth and the jangle of metal.

They set up camp that night just outside the Wilds, nearly everyone on edge from the proximity of the trees and the unusual sounds that came from within the forest. The soldiers were abnormally subdued as they ate their dinner, eyeing the encroaching with fear. More than a few hands strayed toward hilts as the nighttime sounds got closer and Cassandra caught own grip tensing on her sword.

Brynn alone seemed perfectly at ease amongst the night noises, honing the edge of her hunting knife with a whet stone and meaningfuly eyeing Cassandra and a full bowl of hearty stew she had set at her side. Cassandra forced herself to relax and sat beside the Herald after taking the proffered meal, stiffening as a loud howl broke the otherwise quiet night. “How can you stand this?” She asked as she dipped the bread into the thick broth.

Brynn’s eyes slid over to Cassandra slowly and she tilted her head toward the wavering sound to better hear it. “I know these sounds in my soul; they speak to the camaraderie and sense of pack tonight. It is more peaceful than their song of mourning or loneliness, although those do have their own beautifully haunting sound.”

A wistful smile creased Brynn’s lips and Cassandra felt herself drawn to it as she slid closer on the felled log they sat on. “You miss them?”

“Them?”

“Your clan. I know what homesickness looks like, Lavellan,” Cassandra said in a hushed voice. Brynn’s ear twitched at the sound of her clan name spoken in the Seeker’s smooth accent and she found her line of thought derailed as her eyes began tracing the delicate slope of it. Only when eyes slate grey in the darkening night met hers did Cassandra shake herself free of her wandering thoughts. “Ahm, yes, as I was saying…I am well familiar with missing one’s home. I have not been back to Nevarra in…too long.”

She shook her head as she finished her meal and set the bowl aside. Sidestepping Brynn’s outstretched legs, she strode toward the shadows that encroached on the fire blazing in the middle of camp and idle palmed her sword still hanging at her hip. “Sometimes, I still think I can feel the sand shifting under my feet and hear the water lapping at the riverbank in the springtime, before it runs over into the fields and fertilizes the land.”

Eyes far away, Cassandra jolted when a small hand touched her elbow. Brynn squeezed gently and smiled up at her. “I didn’t know you were such a wordsmith, lethallan.” Her smile widened impishly as Cassandra flushed and her other hand lifted, calloused thumb ghosting over a heated cheek. “I like seeing you flustered, Seeker. It is a treasured sight that I keep with myself during my trials.” Eyes glinting cat-like in the flickering firelight, Brynn smiled enigmatically and slipped out of the circle of light into the shadows of the trees.
Cassandra stared stupidly after her long after her outline disappeared, until Blackwall tapped her on the shoulder hesitantly. “Uh, Seeker, aren’t you going to sleep? We have to move early tomorrow to get any distance in the Fallow Mire, and we all need the rest.” Cassandra nodded mutely and turned to go to their tent with a last look at the reaching shadows of tree limbs before pushing aside the flap and disappearing within.

Chapter End Notes

I really wish the elhven language for DA was more easily accessible because I would love to write Brynn speaking it more often. Unfortunately, as there is only a fragmented fraction available and I’m an impatient fuck, I opted to go with the easy phrases I could remember and/or look up quickly over the more tedious and time consuming task of trying to parse out the actual words using the, frankly, confusing as fuck and contradicting language rules that appear to apply to the language. *sighs* If only it were as straightforward as Spanish…
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Cassandra awoke with the greasy, grey dawn; the lack of sunlight she had grown used to in Haven disorienting her as she peeled her eyes open. Blinking repeatedly to urge the cross-eyed bleariness away, she peered muzzily across the small expanse of the tent at the untouched cot at her side.

“Brynn?”

She sat up, suddenly alert as she realized the elf had never come in after her, and scrambled into her tabard and breeches, nearly taking tearing the tent flap off in her haste to get outside. She stumbled into the dreary light with her sword half drawn and shield left abandoned by her cot, making her way to the edge of camp under the confused gazes of the men on watch. They said nothing as she disappeared into the heavy underbrush and she ignored the heat of their gazes on her back in favor of searching the thick brush for signs of Brynn’s passing.

“Herald,” she hissed quietly, muttering crossly in Nevarran as her tabard snagged on a broken branch. “Lavellan, where are you?” The further from camp she wandered, the louder her voice became and, several minutes later, she was growling irately as she tramped through the woods. “Brynn, I swear, if you got yourself injured somehow, I will hurt you-”

“I didn’t know you cared, Seeker.”

The gently teasing voice from above caught Cassandra off guard and she flailed wildly for a moment before looking up. Perched comfortably in the vee of a dying tree, Brynn studied her with amusement plain on her features, bow unstrung and laid across her lap and cowl of her cloak.
tugged up to ward off the morning chill. “Careful, one could be led to believe you felt some amount of affection for me with all the muttering you’ve been doing these past minutes, and we wouldn’t want that.”

Her eyes danced merrily and Cassandra scowled as she stomped over, sheathing her weapon as she went. She stopped at the base of the tree, hands on hips and head tilted back, hair mussed with her rattail loose down her back as she frowned heavily. “Where have you been?”

“Here, trying to shoot a deer before we leave, but I think your irate yelling has scared off any game in the area. I don’t think the critters heard you in the Mire though, you may want to be a little louder.”

Brynn slung her bow over her shoulder and nimbly climbed down as Cassandra worked her jaw and her frown deepened. “I have not yelled, I did not want to arouse any suspicion with the men we brought. You did not come in to the tent last night; where did you go,” she grit out tersely, biting off her last words so they were more a demand for answers than an actual question. Brynn lowered her cowl and Cassandra jerked in surprise at the sight of matching, shallow cuts on the arches of her cheeks.

“What did you do?”

In lieu of an answer, Brynn held out her hand and waited with patient eyes for Cassandra to take it, leading her deeper into the trees once the Seeker had hesitantly laid her palm over the hunter’s. They walked silently through the forest and Cassandra felt her ire slowly bleed away as the normal morning sounds filtered in around them. Several minutes after her shoulders had dropped completely, Brynn paused beside a massive tree and released her hand. Cassandra flexed her fingers, missing the connection and warmth given but unwilling to say so, and crossed her arms.

“What are we doing out here?”

“I’m going to show you what I was doing.”

The elf gestured to the side and drew the Seeker’s gaze downward, toward a crude shrine built of twigs that was laden with fruits and several small animals that had been expertly slain with arrows through their eyes. Carved with painstaking care into a piece of bark was a symbol Cassandra recognized from before they left Haven; an eye with wide pupil, shadowed beneath and half obscured by a bloody streak that originated in the corner like a macabre tear and had dripped onto a cluster of berries laid beneath the etching. Brynn’s hunting knife, edge unusually tarnished with crusted blood, rested at the base of the shrine, blade glinting in the weak light.

“It is a ritual the elhven have long observed; meant to protect warriors in battle or during a hunt, we offer our blood up in exchange for guidance and pray for quick thoughts and faster steps. I have fasted since the noon meal at Redcliffe Castle and planned to break it this morning as we entered the Mire, but I don’t know how well that will go now that you’ve disturbed the creatures, lethallan,” Brynn jibed gently.

Cassandra stood with furrowed brow and studied the shrine quietly for a long moment until she felt gentle fingers at her elbow slowly guiding her to sit on a massive root that butted out of the ground. “Dirthera mala taren, mir falon.”

“Why do you do this to yourself? What purpose does it serve? These are only superstitions, nothing based in truth,” Cassandra said quietly, meeting Brynn’s eyes with insistence burning through hers. The elf shook her head and took Cassandra’s hand, tracing the calloused whorls of the pads of her fingers idly as she spoke.
“Is it so unlike your own faith?” She glanced up through her lashes to find Cassandra’s wide eyed look of disbelief and smiled a little. “Can you prove your Maker exists any more than I can prove our gods do? Do you not pray for guidance and have your own rituals to safeguard yourself before battle? How is this any different?”

“I do not harm myself, Lavellan, to try and gain some mystical being’s favor,” Cassandra insisted, jerking her hand away only for it to be caught and dragged back again for Brynn to continue playing with. “What are you doing?”

“You have such lovely hands,” Brynn murmured, almost to herself. “Calloused and firm and strong, but soft and gentle, too. Differences exist everywhere, Cassandra Pentaghast, Princess of Nevarra, Seeker of Truth, warrior, poet…beautiful, scarred, strong, romantic. Do you understand?” Her thumb stroked along Cassandra’s knuckles and blue-grey eyes met hers again. “Is different such a bad thing? Does not believing the same way you do make mine any less than yours?”

“No,” the Seeker breathed on a whisper, mind whirling madly. She searched Brynn’s eyes silently until she found the edge of worry hiding behind the woman’s faint smile and roused herself from her thoughts completely. “No,” she repeated more strongly, “it does not affect it at all, I think. But, I would ask you to have these healed by Solas once we return to camp, lest the soldiers think I accosted you out here and took out my frustrations on your skin.” She tapped the scabbed over cuts lightly and stood, offering her hand for Brynn. “Come, the morning is already half over, and we have yet to reach the Mire. Let us return and break our fast on the trail.”

Cassandra smiled beneath her cloak as she half walked, half slid down the trail on the rim of the Fallow Mire. Behind her, she could just hear Brynn muttering to herself crossly over the steady thrum of rain seeping through her oiled cloak and rumble of thunder overhead. “Stinking, bloody bog. What good is this to anyone; what in Mythal’s name would possess anyone to live here?!” She turned around just in time to see Brynn flail as a boot stuck in a particularly thick patch of muck, apparently unwilling to surrender the sturdy leather easily.

Cassandra chuckled under her breath as she walked back and took Brynn’s arm, smirking as her irate gaze turned upon her. “Come, Your Grace, we have yet to truly traverse the Mire; surely you have not given up because of a little rain?”

“I can stand rain, Seeker, it’s the thrice forsaken mud that is going to do me in! I can’t…bloody, urgh…walk, you accursed legs! move in this cursed stuff!”

“Now you know how we humans feel,” Cassandra teased, keeping a steadying arm around Brynn’s shoulder as they navigated the treacherous path toward a run-down barn nearby. “Always wading through mud and snow, while you tiny creatures prance atop it like it is nothing.”

She yanked on the rusted ring to pull the door open and followed Brynn inside, staring out the broken window as the rest of their bedraggled group filed in thankfully and their horses chewed morosely on the hay that wasn’t moldy. “It is quite a dismal sight though, is it not?”

Beside her, Brynn’s head bobbed in agreement and beads of water rolled down her cowl which was still over her head. “It isn’t natural; it smells of decay and death and metal, I don’t like it.”

“There have been reports filtering in recently of…disturbing behavior. Dead warriors rising from the murky water and attacking any who pass, unexplained lights in the darkness at night…” A loud clap of thunder made everyone jump and Brynn unexpectedly tucked herself into Cassandra’s
side, stiff as a board and wide eyed as she stared out at the deluge now raining on the landscape. “Scared, Lavellan?” Cassandra ribbed quietly, unsuccessfully fighting back a smirk. She slowly sobered as the elf didn’t answer and watched her head swivel urgently, ears flicking minutely as her eyes narrowed.

“Something isn’t right.”

“What do you mean?” The Seeker felt her hair stand on end and she impulsively reached for her sword, gazing out over the rain soaked earth uselessly as her nerves lit up. “Brynn?”

“I think we’ve got company, Cassandra. It looks like the reports were true.” Pointing silently, Cassandra followed the extended finger and squinted through the rain.

 Appearing out of the rising mist was a small hoard of shuffling, rotting corpses, each gripping a rusted weapon with a dark, malevolent gleam in their empty eye sockets. The lead creature apparently caught sight of them, as it raised its broken sword and screeched inhumanly and, as one, the group lurched into a jerky sprint. Their collective cry for blood was chilling and the Seeker cursed as their mounts began to panic, eyes rolling and legs shifting nervously.

“You three, stay with the horses! Everyone else, to arms! Herald, stay with me; we will destroy these foul creatures!” Cassandra led everyone out into the rain, lifting her shield in time to feel a skeleton break against the strong iron and shouted her war cry, a snarl on her lips as the battle commenced with a fury rivaled by the pounding rain.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Dirthera mala taren, mir falon-Speak your mind, my friend.
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Cassandra slid through the mud and muck wildly, nearly losing her footing in the thick mire and wind milling beneath a pike’s jab. The rain dripped beneath the cracks in her armor and soaked her clothes in moments and she wiped away the cold streams of water irritably as she dove into the chaotic skirmish. To her right, a handful of skeletons were charging with weapons raised and jaw open in macabre screams. Lifting her shield to defend against the ones at her left, she swung her sword in an arc and cut one down, efficiently moving through her stances to disarm another. It shrieked madly and charged her with its remaining arm raised to gouge at her exposed skin, but jerked back as an arrow seemed to explode through its forehead. It swayed momentarily before collapsing in a brittle pile of bones and Cassandra glanced over her shoulder at one of the soldiers on the fringe of the battle, nodding thankfully.

A small blur raced past her, weapons gleaming in the rainfall, and Cassandra watched Brynn take down a skeletal swordsman with her hunting knife, removing its arm and then its head with a hard swing of her blade. Her short hair was plastered to her head and water dripped down the column of her neck in steady rivulets. Her cloak billowed on the chill wind and she smiled breathlessly at Cassandra before twirling and nimbly dashing toward the next group of enemies. Cassandra followed her as fast as she could, putting her shoulder behind her shield and ramming into a trio of undead pike wielders. She felt a warm satisfaction course through her as they were shoved backwards and she stumbled over an unattached leg that was disappearing in the churned up mud. Around her, the screams of the undead and their soldiers formed a discordant soundtrack against the repetitive drum of rain on the earth and she missed the sound of rattling footsteps until something bounced off her shoulder pauldron and sent her reeling.

“Cassandra!”

As she righted herself, the Seeker saw a skeleton raising its massive two handed blade with something akin to victory gleaming in its dead sockets. She struggled to swing her shield around in time and watched with surprise as the skeleton was abruptly arrested in lean arms and a packet was shoved into its gaping maw. It struggled valiantly until it was shoved toward a large group of undead and tattooed hands brusquely yanked Cassandra to her feet. Brynn’s worried face came into sight as she urgently pulled the Seeker away and Cassandra stumbled behind her until she
heard the unmistakable sound of something exploding.

Looking over her shoulder she saw a small crater in the earth where they had been, surrounded by fragments of bones and wobbling skeletons being efficiently dispatched by Blackwall and their soldiers. To the side, Dorian was chanting and his staff glowed brilliantly in the gloomy atmosphere, casting away the shadows and setting each undead alight where the light touched them. Their piercing screams filled the air as they lurched and shook apart until, finally, only a large scattering of bones remained in the immediate area.

Cassandra slowly eased herself out of her fighting stance and took a deep, cleansing breath to alleviate the battle lust coursing through her, and surveyed their soldiers. “Is everyone alright?” A ragged chorus of confirmations reassured her and she turned her eyes upon the bulky form of Blackwall as he strode toward them.

“How did we fare, Ser Blackwall?”

“Only minor wounds, Seeker, although we could all use a dry place and some time to recoup. Those undead bastards shook us up pretty badly.”

She glanced around at the shaking hands and nervously pivoting heads and nodded in agreement. “We will return to the barn; I saw stalls for the horses and we can cook a meal beneath the eaves on the far side, away from the wind and rain.” Blackwall nodded and told the soldiers to move out, grasping Dorian’s shoulder briefly as he passed and urging the mage to return to shelter. Cassandra searched the dreary landscape once more as she began walking back to the barn, feeling Brynn slide up next to her as the outline of the structure appeared through the mist and rain. “Are you injured, Brynn?”

“A few nicks and bruises, but I am fine. You took a hard hit, are you alright?”

Cassandra looked over at the elf’s concerned expression and smiled a little. “I have had much worse in training, it will merely bruise. As you said, I am fine.” Her foot slipped in the mud and a sharp lance of pain in her leg made her inhale sharply.

“Forgive me, but that didn’t sound like you are fine to me.”

Cassandra cursed as she looked down her body, although a cursory glance failed to reveal anything. Her boots, though covered in mud, were otherwise unmarked, and her chain skirt appeared to be intact. “I do not see anything wrong,” she insisted, although she hissed when she put pressure on her leg and hot pain shot up into her hip.

Brynn looked at her balefully and slid closer, tucking an arm around her waist and fingers seeking purchase in the tightly knit links of her chainmail. “Humor me,” she murmured. Cassandra grit her teeth and allowed the smaller woman to help her to the barn, silently glad for the weight taken off her leg that had begun throbbing with the acknowledgment of pain. They were the last ones in and the Seeker felt Blackwall’s inquisitive gaze on her as they limped through the door toward a secluded corner stall that wasn’t being used.

Dorian leaned against the frame of the door as Brynn let Cassandra go and crossed his arms lackadaisically. “Dare I ask what happened to our illustrious Seeker?” He arched his brow and twirled his limp mustache good naturedly, smiling widely when Cassandra eyed him darkly as she removed her sword belt and shield.

Brynn efficiently pushed all the hay into a pile and addressed the mage as she took off her sodden cloak. “Will you get a couple horse blankets and bring them here?”
“Of course, my dear.”

Dorian disappeared and Brynn unbuckled the sheaths that crossed at the small of her back, removing her weapons with a happy little sigh and setting the rest of her gear in a neat pile in the corner. She stacked Cassandra’s next to her own and watched the Seeker slowly remove her armor piece by piece, wincing occasionally as something stretched uncomfortably.

“Here, Herald, for your enjoyment, two wonderful smelling horse blankets.” She took the heavy blankets with a nod and Dorian left them alone, speaking loudly to the soldiers in the main area of the barn about getting a meal prepared. Brynn laid one blanket on the pile of hay and directed Cassandra to sit upon it. The warrior stretched out thankfully and rolled her sore shoulder with a quiet groan.

“We need to take off your chainmail.”

“I beg your pardon?” Cassandra stiffened as cold fingers slipped beneath the collar of her chain shirt and began pulling it over her head, clasping Brynn’s wrist in her grip as she stared incredulously up at the elf. “What in Andraste’s name do you think you are doing?”

“Looking at your wounds?” Brynn asked with a tilt of her head. Water dripped down her forehead onto the hard packed floor as she stared at Cassandra, who stubbornly refused to release her wrist.

“And why does that include removing my clothes?”

“But it isn’t your clothes, although your breeches will have to come off so I can see what’s wrong with your leg. Are you afraid of showing a little skin, mir falon?” Words turned teasing, Brynn slipped her wrist free of Cassandra’s grip and took hold of her chain shirt once more.

The Seeker grudgingly let her remove it, although she balked again when nimble fingers began untwisting the laces of her breeches. “I can do that!” She batted away Brynn’s hand and fumbled with the laces, refusing to meet the inquisitive eyes she could feel boring into the top of her head.

“Why do you shy away? We bathed together the other night and you weren’t this reticent.”

“That was different.” Cassandra said forcefully, yanking the last ties apart and trying to lift her hips to shimmy out of her breeches. Her leg twitched painfully as she put weight on it and she sat back down with an irritated huff. “This is more…intimate.” She felt her cheeks heat up as she plucked at the laces and glanced up through her lashes.

Brynn wore a bemused expression, her vallaslin twisting as she arched an eyebrow curiously. “Is it? In my clan, it isn’t unusual to undress in front of others or have them help if you need it.” She grasped Cassandra’s forearms and helped her lean against the wall at her back, then slowly reached for her hips. “May I?” Blue-grey eyes searched amber for a long moment, and then creased with happiness as Cassandra nodded jerkily.

The Seeker held her breath when calloused fingers slipped beneath the edge of her breeches and clenched her jaw when blunt nails tripped over her skin, taking her soggy, muddy pants with them. She convinced herself to look down when she heard nothing for a long moment, and immediately regretted it. Brynn knelt before her, head turned up to watch Cassandra’s expression, her wide eyes unreadable and dark in the dim corner they occupied. Her hand curled around Cassandra’s calf, coaxing her to lift her leg so she could remove the damp clothing from one, then the other leg. Cassandra breathed deeply, noticing the elf had yet to remove the hand curled around her leg, now behind the bend of her knee and tickling the sensitive skin as she shifted closer, eyes closely studying the bare skin before her.
“I see.”

“Pardon?” Cassandra cleared her throat and shook her head to dispel the fog that had settled over her.

“I see why you’re limping. It looks like a blade cut you during the fight.” Brynn’s other hand slid up her muscled thigh to a point on the outside partway up, thumb pressing lightly against her tense quadriceps. “It is rather deep and a little torn; how did you get it?”

“I do not remember, it must have been when I rushed the group of undead near the middle of the battle. That is the only time I was not paying close attention to my surroundings.”

“Well, Dorian isn’t well versed in the healing arts, so I’ll grab my bag and be right back. You may want to sit down.” Brynn finally released Cassandra and walked out of the stall, leaving Cassandra to exhale deeply and shake some of the tension out of her limbs before gingerly lowering herself onto the horse blanket with a grateful sigh. She listened to the men and women in the main area bickering and laughing amongst themselves, watched the light from the small fire they had started flicker on the mildewed walls of their temporary shelter, and closed her eyes as the last vestiges of her battle lust wore off, suddenly feeling all the small injuries she had incurred and shivering with cold.

“Cassandra?” Eyes snapping open, the Seeker found Brynn kneeling in front of her with a worried expression and a small bag held in her hand. “Are you alright?”

“I am fine, merely feeling a little cold now that I have stopped moving. Please, let us finish this.”

The elf nodded uncertainly and took out a needle and catgut, along with a small, corked bottle that was filled with a dark liquid and a short, fat jar with a wax seal. She unstoppered the bottle and tipped the neck onto a small rag, catching Cassandra’s eyes. “This will hurt a little; it will prevent infection and clean the wound so I can better see what I’m doing.”

“What is in it?”

“It’s alcohol we buy from the villages we pass by,” she said as she gently rubbed over the wound. Cassandra tensed and hissed in discomfort at the strong sting. Brynn pressed her free hand against the Seeker’s skin, rubbing reassuring circles with her thumb as she continued speaking. “The other jar is a remedy we make at camp. It’s mostly elfroot, dried and ground into a powder, along with comfrey and yarrow to speed healing, all mixed with honey to make a paste.” Brynn finished cleaning the wound and threaded the catgut through the eye of the needle. She paused before pushing the needle through torn skin. “This won’t be comfortable.”

“I have had worse,” Cassandra assured her, brushing her fingers over Brynn’s hand resting on her thigh and smiling a little. Her lips thinned as she set needle to skin and pushed through quickly, looking up when Cassandra inhaled harshly through her nose. “I am fine, continue.”

Brynn efficiently pulled the needle and thread through her skin and slowly, the ragged edges came together with the neat stitches on her thigh. Cassandra watched the progress silently, occasionally clenching the blanket beneath her whenever Brynn pulled a little too hard on the thread but offering no other complaint. After tying off the thread, Brynn broke the seal on the jar and dabbed her index finger into the sweet smelling ointment to spread it over the length of the wound. Cassandra watched as the elf grabbed a roll of bandages from beside her and bade her to bend her knee. “Tell me if it’s too tight, please.” She began wrapping the cloth around Cassandra’s thigh and each pass by her inner thigh made the Seeker tense and hold her breath. “Does it hurt?”
“No.”

Brynn glanced up at Cassandra’s tight face and screwed her eyebrows together, tying off the end of the bandage and kneeling before the Seeker silently. Her hands settled against Cassandra’s legs and kneaded the stiff muscles gently. “Na inan dirthera na taren. What is wrong, my friend?”

Blue-grey eyes entreated Cassandra to speak the truth, but the warrior barely knew where to begin. She acknowledged to herself that the touches Brynn provided without prompting made her heart race and her stomach tighten in anticipation, but so had Regalyan during their trysts over the years; surely she couldn’t feel romantic attachment toward a woman when she had gone her whole life without? Someone else, perhaps; she knew Leliana had once dallied with the Warden Mahariel during the Blight, but she had never felt attraction to the same sex. Why would that change now?

“I do not – I am-”

She clenched her fist in frustration as her tongue tripped over itself and Brynn leaned in more closely, hands sliding up over her thighs and kneading deeply. “What causes you such worry? The eloquent woman I know has suddenly disappeared.” Brynn’s expressive eyes searched Cassandra’s pensively and the Seeker felt heat race across her skin as the distance between them closed. She leaned back until her head met the damp wood at her back and then scrambled to her feet, sliding out from beneath Brynn’s grip like water in her panic.

“I am hungry, I will get something from the pot,” she stuttered as she struggled into her breeches. She nearly tripped out of the stall on her way to the voices and firelight, aware of the baffled gaze heating her back and the way her heart was still racing from the small distance between them before she panicked.

Chapter End Notes

I hope I’m doing this right; I’m trying to get across not just cultural differences like their religious beliefs and superstitions, but also personal and mental differences, such as Brynn’s tendency to touch and get close while Cassandra prefers a large amount of personal space. Let me know if I’m writing them correctly?
Blue-grey eyes entreated Cassandra to speak the truth, but the warrior barely knew where to begin. She acknowledged to herself that the touches Brynn provided without prompting made her heart race and her stomach tighten in anticipation, but so had Regalyan during their trysts over the years; surely she couldn’t feel romantic attachment toward a woman when she had gone her whole life without? Someone else, perhaps; she knew Leliana had once dallied with the Warden Mahariel during the Blight, but she had never felt attraction to the same sex. Why would that change now?

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Cassandra struggled through the thick bog that made a mockery of a path, muttering crossly to herself as her boots squelched thickly when she pulled one from the muck. They had left their horses at the camp near the edge of the Mire, the mounts being too shy and nervy of the near-constant lightning and the corpses that dogged their trail stubbornly. To her side, Brynn struggled similarly, even her slight weight too much for the mud they were wading through. The cowl of her cloak was soaked through and the rain that leaked though had plastered her hair to her skull; even the oil used to seal the skin couldn’t hold up against the torrent of water.

For the moment, the rain had lightened to a light drizzle that seemed to hang in the air and burrow beneath their clothes to chill them all to the bone. Cassandra felt a shiver roll down her spine like rainwater and shook herself, taking more slow steps through the muck as her eyes landed on a nearby patch of high ground that was blessedly dry. She nudged Brynn and pointed to the small knoll, then waved their small company onward. Any talking had mostly ceased since their arrival in the Mire several hours prior since any loud sounds disturbed the undead that were otherwise mostly sedentary, outside of the occasional hushed conversation between the soldiers behind them.

“We can regroup and try to dry off for a while there,” she said quietly, leaning closer to Brynn so she could keep her voice quieter. The woman nodded silently and took the lead, keen eyes scouting for the dark shapes that lurked beneath the fetid, stagnant waters and ears twitching with each minute sound.

As they drew closer to the knoll, the fog lingering around them dissolved to reveal a larger hill behind the high ground that was partially barricaded with rotting pieces of logs. Everyone’s steps
quickened as they drew to the top of the hillock and found the long dead remnants of a fire in a ring of stone, along with several bags of what had at one point been grain and other vegetables. Cassandra wrinkled her nose when she opened one and immediately closed it again. To her side, Brynn laughed lowly and patted the Seeker on the shoulder in passing, unaware of how Cassandra had frozen at the brief contact. She approached the monolith that stood proudly in the middle of the hill, resting a couple fingers on the slick, moss covered surface as her sharp eyes found the edge of symbols engraved into the stone.

“Dorian? There’s something over here; can you take a look at it?”

Dorian straightened from his place over the fire pit, half of his face lit with the beginnings of a sputtering flame that the other soldiers were hurriedly trying to make larger so it wouldn’t go out. As they quickly raised a tarp over the flickering flames, he strode over to where Brynn was tracing the symbols and testing the letters on her tongue.

“And the – the-se…these fo-…foul cre-ah-tu-rehs?...Fenedhis-”

“Creatures, my dear,” Dorian said as he stopped at Brynn’s side, the point of his staff lit dimly so he could peer at the engraved words on the monolith. “‘And these foul creatures be summoned by mage light; they also be defeated and the light within lit to ward away and provide safety.’ Quite a pretty way to write, wouldn’t you say?” He smiled over at her, rain steadily dripping off his nose and the tips of his mustache which had long since lost its shape. He shook his head and sent water spraying through the air, joining the mist that was gradually lightening a little more. Brynn looked mildly panicked, blue-grey eyes wide, and Dorian held up a hand reassuringly. “It’s fine, my dear, I won’t tell if you won’t.”

He winked and Brynn relaxed marginally, scuffing her toe as she turned her head down in an uncharacteristic show of embarrassment. “I’m learning though; Cassandra is teaching me.”

“Our fair Seeker? I find that hard to believe, but I shall endeavor to put it from my mind, lest I tease her about her patience with our innocent, guileless Herald.” Brynn flushed when Dorian wagged his brows and the mage laughed, drawing a curious look from Blackwall and a scornful one from said Seeker. “I think we should leave this be until we’ve had some food and thawed out a bit, what say you?”

Brynn nodded and Dorian led her underneath the tarp slung over the fire, now blazing merrily amidst their dreary surroundings. Blackwall silently handed her a handful of jerked meat and Brynn walked over to where Cassandra sat on an overturned crate beneath another tarp behind the surprisingly solid shelter of some rotting logs and sacks of moldy food. “May I sit here?”

“Be my guest,” Cassandra said quietly, gesturing at the empty space around her. Brynn sat on the ground at Cassandra’s feet and leaned into her as she chewed on a piece of the dried meat, humming contently as Cassandra’s warmth seeped through her soaked garments. Cassandra tensed as the elf’s weight leaned more heavily into her leg and forced herself to stay in place instead of standing and stalking toward the fire as she suddenly wished to do. “What are you doing?” She asked sternly.

“You’re warm.” Brynn somehow managed to get closer to Cassandra until the Seeker, uncomfortable and uncertain how to explain her conflicting feelings, pulled her leg away abruptly and sent the Herald sprawling. “Cassandra, what-”

“Alright, let’s get this started!” Dorian interrupted Brynn’s question as he stood and rubbed his hands together to get the blood moving better and twirled his staff behind his back. “Our lovely Herald found a rather interesting inscription over there which seems to indicate that, when
activated, some ‘foul creatures’ will be summoned and have to be defeated.”

“Why in the world would we do that, Vint?” Blackwall asked coarsely, scratching at his beard.

“A wonderful question, Ser Blackwall! The answer; once vanquished, this bit of dry…ish, dry-ish, ground will become a safe area. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’d like to know I have somewhere safe to sleep at night and, as I don’t know how long we’re going to be in this blighted Mire, this seems as good a place as any to make secure, yes?” There was a quiet murmur of agreement from the soldiers and Dorian nodded as he walked over to the monolith. “Good then. Everyone, stand back and ready yourselves, I’m not entirely certain what will happen once I’ve lit the torch.”

The soldiers drew their weapons and took up positions on the edge of the hillock, just behind the makeshift barricades. Cassandra stood and offered a brief glance at Brynn, still staring up at her with confusion and hurt in her eyes, before drawing her sword and setting her shield on her arm. She heard the elf scramble to her feet as she walked into the light mist, pausing at Dorian’s back as the mage muttered under his breath and a flicker of light appeared in his palm. In several seconds, the light had become an eerily glowing green flame that hovered over his open hand and the Seeker watched him heave a sigh.

“Brace yourselves.” He set the flame in the brazier that was anchored to the monolith and a low hum immediately filled the air, barely audible but somehow managing to set everyone’s teeth on edge. “That’s different,” she heard muttered from the mage.

Cassandra’s gaze swept out across the bog around them and, when she didn’t immediately see anything, she scoffed. “I think you misread the words, Pavus.”

“I assure you, Seeker, I did not,” he replied in a mildly affronted tone. “I can feel the power on the air.”

Behind her, Cassandra heard a quiet hiss and looked over her shoulder. Brynn’s face was pinched and her eyes narrowed as she snarled and stared out over the top of the barricade. “Your Grace, wh-”

“Demon!”

A scuffle broke out opposite the Seeker, several soldiers rushing a terror demon that had emerged from the ground and was curling its long, clawed fingers in preparation to strike. It swept its tail around and knocked them to the ground, then leapt atop the nearest and began tearing at the soldier’s armor in a frenzy. Cassandra rushed to help as a flash of light appeared in her periphery and she spotted another terror demon quickly leaping toward the barricades. As she hacked at the spindly arm of the enemy crouched over the now unresponsive soldier, Cassandra heard the telltale sounds of battle behind her and fought the urge to see what was happening.

Once she and the three remaining soldiers had dispatched their foe, she bade one to help their comrade beneath the tarp on the edge of the hillock while the others attacked the handful of corpses shuffling up the mound and turned her attention to the other side. Blackwall was engaged with the other terror she had spied, looking around wildly as it dove beneath the ground and then crying out when it appeared beneath him and yanked his ankle out from beneath him. He rolled as he hit the ground and barely avoided its lethal strike with its claws, then leapt up and swung mightily at the creature’s torso. It reared back and screeched in anger, slashing at the Warden’s plate armor before slipping beneath the ground again with a flash of sickly green light.

Dorian stood off to the side, spinning his staff and hurling spells at the skeletons that raced toward
him and the other soldiers, setting a couple ablaze as several of their company hacked away at another group. “Seeker,” he called out over the clamor of battle, “the Herald has fallen! Go to her!” He jerked his head down the hill, out of the safety of the barricade and Cassandra felt her blood run cold. Without a word, she raced toward the small gap between logs and immediately locked on to the dully glowing light that issued forth from Brynn’s hand. The elf was laid out on the ground, curling into herself and cupping her hands over her ears with a pained expression twisting her face.

“Brynn!”

Cassandra ran toward her and raised her shield just in time to deflect an arrow, turning to find an empty eyed corpse running at her, mouth opened wide as it hissed. She shoved her shield at it and promptly severed its head from its neck, pivoting in time to watch the terror demon rise behind her and screech. The otherworldly sound set her teeth on edge and brought tears to her eyes, but she battled past the headache the noise had summoned and thrust the point of her sword at the creature’s abdomen. It slid aside and Cassandra evaded the powerful sweep of its tail with a quick leap over the dangerous appendage. She smirked as she set her shield in front of her body, staring boldly into its frenzied eyes.

“Come on, you stupid beast! Come to me!”

It shrieked again and charged at her and Cassandra nimbly dodged, but what she saw as she pivoted made her blanch. Brynn had stumbled to her feet but was still disoriented, weaving in place and cradling her head in her hands. The terror demon was making a beeline for her, leaping from place to place and, at one point, using a soldier’s back as a step to propel itself further. Cassandra began sprinting, calling out as she went, “Lavellan, come to your senses! Ne din’eth!”

She watched in horror as Brynn’s head jerked up in time for the terror demon to tackle her and disappear beneath a flurry of limbs and snapping teeth. Cassandra bellowed furiously and set her shoulder behind her shield, ramming into the haunches of the demon and sending it sprawling. Cassandra stood protectively over the Herald’s prone form as the armored creature screamed in fury and ran at her, claws extended to rake and tear. Cassandra braced herself and staggered as the weight of the demon hit her shield but didn’t move from her position over Bynn’s body.

She heard Dorian hurriedly cast a spell behind her as she shoved the creature away and a bolt of lightning hit its chest. It spasmed and croaked as the smell of burning meat filled the misty air but the Seeker didn’t relax until it had collapsed on the ground and eventually faded away. Dorian trotted up next to her with sweat collecting on his brow even in the cool air, the tip of his staff zipping with remnants of electricity. “Well, that was fun. How did thin – oh.” He spied Brynn beneath Cassandra’s legs, still unconscious and unmoving, and immediately fell to his knees. Cassandra hurriedly sheathed her sword as she stepped back from the Herald and knelt next to her.

“Dorian, can you help her?”

“I believe so, but we should get her back behind the barricades. It is at least dry up there; there is a fire, and a place to rest.” Dorian took Cassandra’s shield as she carefully hefted Brynn’s dead weight in her arms and they laboriously made their way up the hillock. The mage caught Cassandra several times as she slipped in the churned up earth and laid the Seeker’s shield on the ground when Brynn was deposited beneath the tarp on a pile of sacks that had been emptied of their contents. He examined her as Cassandra clenched her fists uselessly and ground her teeth, chilled to the bone as the rain began to come down once more. The last of their soldiers filtered in, surrounding the fire and bandaging their wounds as they snuck furtive glances at the trio a ways
away from the burning logs.

“I could use your help here, Seeker.” Once seated, Cassandra waited instructions, amber eyes sweeping the length of Brynn’s body. The Herald seemed smaller than usual, sodden and unconscious as she was. Even insensate, she shivered and shook in her damp clothes, short hair plastered against her skull and *vallaslin* gleaming in the weak light. “She seems fine, outside of some bruising and minor wounds, likely from the fight with the terror demon. There are a couple more serious wounds,” he indicated at several parallel tears in Brynn’s leathers where the demon had clawed at her side and blood had crusted in the ragged edges, “as well as a nasty looking cut behind her ear. I can heal these well enough; not pretty like Solas, but they will be serviceable even though there will likely be scarring.”

“That is the least of my concerns, Dorian; do it.” He nodded and bowed his head, chanting under his breath. A calming green light appeared beneath his skin and, as he laid them over the wounds on Brynn’s side, spread under the elf’s torn leathers. The effects were immediate as Brynn’s expression smoothed out somewhat and her breathing deepened. He laid his palm over the back of her head and pulled back shortly after, blood streaking on his palm. “I dare not heal it completely, as head wounds are rather tricky and magic can sometimes have negative side effects. As it stands, she will probably have a nasty headache once she wakes.”

“There is nothing else you can do? Do you know why she was on the ground during the battle?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have all the answers as I was busy taking care of those horrid corpses that seem to populate this bog, but I did see her collapse after the terror demon shrieked the first time. I would ask her once she wakes, but I would wager that her sensitive ears were hurt by the sound of its screaming.”

He smiled over at her and patted her hand which had come to rest on Brynn’s arm which lay on her abdomen, then brushed off the front of his robes and meandered over to the monolith. After peering closely at the inscriptions with the head of his staff lit and held close to the slick surface, he summoned more veilfire and pressed it against a blank space. Flickers of green flame spread like blood through veins across the surface of the monolith and a comforting hum filled the air, bringing with it a comfortable increase in temperature that everyone welcomed.

Cassandra felt her tense shoulders relax as she turned her attention back to the unconscious woman lying before her and she sighed. “Lavellan, what happened to you?” She watched the woman shiver and rummaged through her pack, pulling out a heavy shirt with a satisfied hum. She glanced over at the fire where the soldiers more serious wounds were being tended to by Dorian. Blackwall stirred a pot hanging over the flames and everyone seemed cold and weary, paying little attention to the duo sheltered by the canvas overhead and the crates and logs that formed a mostly dry and windless corner nearby. Cassandra efficiently removed the torn leathers and soaked homespun beneath; after taking a bare moment to scan the light scarring that decorated Brynn’s torso and arms she maneuvered the elf’s limbs into the heavy, coarse shirt, and covered her with her spare cloak. She watched over Brynn until her shivering had eased before getting to her feet and walking into the firelight.

“A bowl, Seeker?”

“Aye, Ser Blackwell.” Cassandra picked at the thick stew made with roots scavenged on the outskirts of the Mire and the remains of the venison from a deer killed the day before, eyes continuously wandering over to the Herald’s yet-to-wake form as the elf occasionally stirred but refused to wake.
Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Ne din'eth!- You [are] not safe!
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Cassandra stirred from her light sleep as the sacks she had bedded in rustled and shifted. Lifting her head to peer over her shoulder, she saw blue-grey eyes blinking owlishly at her and jerked upright. “Brynn!” She hissed, wary of waking any of the soldiers sleeping nearby. They had opted to let everyone rest for the night, as the wards that had been activated with the veilfire seemed to ward off the copious amount of undead that wandered at the base of the hillock. Their unnerving moans and chattering became so much background noise as the rain picked up again and the company of men and women bunked down beneath the canvas, speaking in hushed voices until they fell asleep.

“Cassandra, what…what happened? By the Dread Wolf, my head aches.” She pressed her palm to her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut in pain. Cassandra rolled over completely and only hesitated briefly before placing a thumb against her temple and beginning to rub a firm, soothing circle. The elf’s eyes snapped open at the first touch but slowly drifted half shut as the ache faded, relaxing back against the makeshift mattress they laid upon.

Cassandra wet her lips nervously as Brynn scooted closer, inhaling the omnipresent scent of pine and leather that always clung to her skin. Eventually, her tousled hair was tickling Cassandra’s nose and her warm breath puffed gently against the Seeker’s throat, fingertips dancing across her waist and pushing against her tunic as Cassandra continued massaging her temples. “Brynn, what are…”

“Ma melava halani; ma serannas, ma falon.” Brynn quietly interrupted the Seeker, pulling back just enough so she stopped touching her. Dark eyes glowed in the dim light of the veilfire that
flickered in the brazier of the monolith and stared at Cassandra with piercing intensity. “Why are you helping me so?”

“It is my duty,” Cassandra said immediately.

Brynn shook her head minutely and frowned. “True, but that doesn’t mean you have to… do this. You don’t have to tend to me like I am…sa’lath.” She looked away with a frown on her lips as Cassandra struggled to decipher the unfamiliar word. She opened her mouth to ask Brynn to define what she had said just as the Herald scooted closer again and pressed her forehead against Cassandra’s chest. Her shoulders heaved with a heavy sigh, warm breath tickling the Seeker’s skin through her tunic, and she threw an arm over Cassandra’s waist. “We should go back to sleep, Cassandra,” she said lowly, “we have a ways to go before we’re away from this cursed bog.”

Cassandra laid stiffly as Brynn slowly relaxed, her overlong hair tickling against her chin and mouth as her fingers lazily flexed in her sleep. She slept fitfully until the vague light that passed as dawn drew her eyes open and gently disentangled herself from Brynn’s still-close form. She was loathe to leave the warmth of her body but did so regardless, sitting on a crate to pull her boots on and listening to the rain pelt the canvas overhead as she yanked her chain shirt over her head and belted the skirt around her waist.

She nudged Blackwall’s foot with her booted toe as she walked to the smoldering fire and poked it to coax it back to life. “Awaken, Ser Blackwall. We leave soon.”

The Warden’s hoarse snoring ceased and he groaned as awareness overtook him, scrubbing at his face. “I’m up, I’m up.” He looked up at the tarp overhead and sighed in resignation. “Still raining.”

“Indeed, as it has since we entered this blighted place. These Avvar will pay for dragging us all here.” Cassandra set a mostly dry log on the sputtering flames and watched the fire catch before walking back to her neatly stacked armor. As she cinched her bracers around her forearms, she watched Brynn sleep, ears occasionally flicking and nose twitching as her fingers clenched at the fabric she lay on. She pulled her breastplate over her head and adjusted the straps so her shoulder pauldrons were placed correctly, then twisted awkwardly to catch the leather straps at her sides. She cursed quietly when the buckle slipped from her grasp again and froze as a hand settled lightly on her waist suddenly.

“What-”

“Be at peace, my friend, it’s only me.” Brynn’s voice was hoarse with sleep and her accent thick as she squeezed Cassandra’s waist once more before catching the buckles and cinching them together. She moved to the other side and lifted Cassandra’s arm as she buckled the straps there, then gently pulled on the plating of the Seeker’s back to make sure it was secure. “We have some ground to cover before we reach this Avvar person; you’d better make sure you eat, as I don’t think we’ll have much time to stop later.” Brynn’s eyes, grey in the morning gloom and unreadable, caught hers briefly before the Herald turned to her small pile of leathers and arms.

Cassandra felt guilt and concern pull low in her gut but turned back to the fire where their soldiers were slowly stirring and walked over to help Blackwall reheat the remainder of the stew. She made sure their company was fed and properly armed before they broke camp, leaving the warmer, dry sanctuary with more than a few lingering, longing glances. The company spent the morning maneuvering along the muddy trails and avoiding the murky waters that surrounded them. Conversations remained hushed and terse as the rain continued to pelt them past midday when they stopped for a fast meal.
The corpses dogged them relentlessly, forcing them into combat a handful of times throughout the morning. The rattling of damaged armor from the skeletons that lurked on the edges of the fetid waters was barely audible over the steady pound of rain to human ears, but Brynn was constantly swiveling her head and staring pensively through the mist. Her hands never strayed far from the hilts of her daggers that were strapped at her hips, fingers twitching against the comforting familiarity of the grips of her weapons. Everyone startled when she abruptly drew a small throwing knife from its sheath on her waist and it disappeared into the murky fog with a whistle. A couple seconds later, a badly damaged corpse stumbled into sight and hissed weakly at them before falling upon its face and became still. Brynn let out a breath Cassandra just barely caught and jogged over to the corpse, kicking it onto its back so she could retrieve her throwing knife. She plugged her nose until she was well away from the corpse and everyone began walking again, hands lingering on sword hilts as they eyed the distant path warily.

Cassandra fell back to walk with Brynn, who was straggling at the back of the group, and carefully set her hand upon her arm. “Are you well? You seem on edge.”

“You would be, too, if you could hear everything I can right now.” Brynn briefly met her eyes before her head whipped to the side and she bared her teeth aggressively, pointed eyeteeth gleaming dangerously. “Ready yourselves, we’ve enemies incoming.” she said just loudly enough for the soldiers ahead of them to hear. Cassandra drew her sword and lifted her shield as the first skeleton raced toward them, rusted weapon raised high as it hissed maliciously. The half score of enemies was efficiently dealt with and soon after, they were on the move again.

Cassandra walked once more in the rear of the troop with Brynn while Blackwall scouted ahead and Dorian sent the occasional spell hurtling into the water on the edge of the trail. “This is uncomfortable for you,” the Seeker observed, watching the tight lines around Brynn’s eyes stand out further as her lips pursed. “There is no way for you to ignore the sounds; I am sure Dorian could-”

“I have to be able to hear, Cassandra. My eyesight is already compromised by this thrice forsaken fog; I have to use my ears to ferret out our enemies now.”

The elf scowled at the mist that hovered stubbornly around them and Cassandra felt a smile pull at the edge of her lips. “Be that as it may, you cannot continue this way. You will exhaust yourself before we reach the Avvar and be of no use to us, and I will not carry you through the battle.” Cassandra made sure Brynn was looking at her when she spoke so the Herald could see the teasing smile on her face. She counted it as a victory when the woman smiled wearily and her shoulders relaxed marginally, hands dropping away from her weapons to dangle at her sides.

“I suppose I shouldn’t over-extend myself then, lest you be stuck defending me with the next attack. Although,” she continued with a thoughtful glance at the Seeker, “I think you could manage to carry me quite easily. All your arms and armor can’t be light, lethallan.”

Cassandra felt her cheeks heat as Brynn casted an appreciative look at her body and fought the urge to fidget nervously. She cleared her throat and casually took a half step away from her companion, staring over the heads of the soldiers ahead of them. “Yes, well…you see – according to the maps Leliana’s scouts gave us, we should reach another hillock soon. We should stop there for the night and continue in the morning; the Avvar camp should be only a half day’s walk beyond there.”

“That means more demons tonight.” Brynn sighed and deflated, rubbing the base of her ears with a couple fingers.

Cassandra frowned as she remembered how incapacitated the Herald was the last time they went against the terror demon. “You could avoid the battle; the men would understand,” she offered
hesitantly, unsurprised when Brynn immediately shook her head.

“I refuse to act like a scared rabbit, running in the face of a large predator. I’ll simply have to push through it.”

“Will you be able to, though? Your ears are so much more sensitive than ours; I remember the headache I had from that creature last night. Are you sure—”

“Unless you can figure out a way to protect my ears without completely disabling my hearing, I’ve got no other choice.” Brynn shrugged and walked ahead as Cassandra stewed in thought, shaking her head to dislodge the rain slipping down her cowl.

They reached the hillock in mid-afternoon and had barely set down their packs before the skies opened up and it started raining heavily. There were a handful of large canvases that shielded everyone from the rain and the barricades were higher than the previous one, allowing the small company to stay dry and mostly out of the wind that was slowly picking up. A sizeable fire under the largest canvas was lit and any useable fuel for the flames set aside for later. The monolith that stood in the center of the barricades gleamed wetly in the firelight and seemed foreboding set against the dark sky that was heavy with stormclouds.

Cassandra eyed it distrustfully as she took off her cloak and laid it out on the ground by the fire, watching Dorian and Brynn stand near it to read the inscriptions engraved in the stone. They conferred quietly, Dorian pointing out various spots on the stone while Brynn gestured and shook her head vehemently. Cassandra sighed as the apparent argument reached a head when Brynn viciously cut a hand through the air and stalked away, eyes glinting angrily and expression dark. She stopped and leaned against a sturdy post that was buried in a crack between the stone ground, staring at her boots with her arms crossed over her chest and shoulders tense.

Cassandra walked over, taking a seat against the post and patting the ground beside her. “Do you wish to talk?”

Brynn sat down with a huff and stared sightlessly at the fire as Cassandra pulled her blade from its sheath, drying it carefully with a cloth taken from her pack. “He wants to take my hearing. ‘Just for the fight,’ he says, but I don’t trust his magic.”

Cassandra didn’t stop but hummed in answer as she wiped the condensation and rain from her sword. “I don’t distrust magic, Keeper Istimaethoriel has it, as does her First, but there’s a difference between performing magic to heal a wound and using it to…to take away part of myself.”

“It scares you.”

“It does no…well, yes, I suppose so.” Brynn sighed, leaning in so her shoulder brushed against Cassandra’s plate. Cassandra turned her head and stared at Brynn’s profile, watching strands of hair play in the wind that made it through the barrier. “I don’t like the thought of someone being able to obstruct my senses at will. It makes me feel…”

“Powerless.”

“Yes.” Blue-grey eyes looked up at Cassandra, searching her amber gaze for something that she apparently found, as the lines that distorted her vallaslin disappeared and she smiled faintly. “You understand.”

“I do.”
Cassandra allowed herself to reach out and take Brynn’s hand that lay on her leg, squeezing it momentarily. Brynn caught her fingers before she could pull away and played with them, thumb brushing across her knuckles as she kept eye contact. “Not many others have; especially not in this shem infested place I have found myself calling home.”

“Probably more humans would understand than you believe, but they are cowed by your position and put off by your appearance. Not many elves the people of the Inquisition have ever interacted with have acted as you do; most elves do not have your vallaslin, nor do they speak so forthrightly and carry arms and armor as you do.”

“But you don’t find it odd?”

“Not anymore; I have grown used to the sight, and your mannerisms have never been a deterrent to me. I find it rather refreshing that you are so honest, actually.”

Brynn smiled, eyes creasing happily as her fingers found the spaces between Cassandra’s. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Cassandra relaxed and took the handful of food Brynn shyly offered to her from within her pack, chewing thoughtfully until Dorian announced that he would activate the monolith if everyone was refreshed.

“Just a moment, Pavus.” Cassandra dug through her pack and pulled out a wad of wool, setting it in Brynn’s palm with a smile. “This may help a little. It will not completely block your hearing, but perhaps it will make the shrieking easier to manage.”

Brynn looked up at her with thanks in her eyes and carefully blocked her ear canals, shaking her head wildly to see if the wads would dislodge. She gave a thumbs up to the Seeker who then nodded at Dorian. The mage lit the veilfire and the disconcerting hum was barely audible over the hard rain that thrummed on the canvas overhead. Everyone stared anxiously over the barricades, waiting for the first enemies to appear. Within seconds, a shambling corpse materialized out of the rain, bow extended as its red eyes stared up the hillock. One of their archers took it out with a well placed arrow between its sockets and it dropped soundlessly into the mud underfoot.

Soon after, the battle was properly joined as more and more skeletons appeared and their soldiers left the safety of the barricades. Several lesser demons joined the fight, comprising several despair demons and one lesser terror demon that leapt from soldier to soldier in an effort to weaken them. As Dorian hit a group of corpses with a fireball that incinerated them, Cassandra dealt a blow to one of the despair demons. It shrieked and whizzed away, to be met by Blackwall’s massive two handed weapon that cleaved it in two. The creature dissipated with uplifted arms, ragged nails reaching for the sky and the Seeker nodded toward the Warden.

Brynn danced by Cassandra, blades gleaming with water and the dark ichor of demonic blood as she wove around the terror demon. It screamed and Cassandra watched the Herald sway briefly before shaking her head and barely managing to evade before a powerful tail swiped through the place she had been standing. Brynn came up from her dodge roll with mud plastered against her clothes and part of her face, eyes glinting dangerously as she closed with the demon. Cassandra rushed to help her, slipping in the muck that was churned up underfoot from the rain and battle, watching the small woman dance around the increasingly irate demon as she scored hit after hit on its scaled skin. The demon flew into a rage and light glinted off its claws as they swiped through the air.

The Seeker watched Brynn spin to the side as they clipped her and go down in the mud, scrabbling for purchase as the creature leaned over her. She put on a burst of speed and prayed to the Maker
for her footing to be secure as she raised her shield and yelled to get its attention. Somehow, she managed to reach it without slipping and her blade dug viciously into its side; the demon hissing in pain as it reared back. Brynn clambered to her feet and stuck her dagger through its stomach, burying the blade to the hilt in its soft belly with a snarl on her lips and features half obscured by the thick mud coating her skin. She pulled her weapon back as the terror demon began to fade from existence and Cassandra turned away to find the remaining enemies being handily dispatched by the company of soldiers.

After the last corpse was laying still half in, half out of the water, they went back behind the barricades and Dorian wasted no time pressing more veilfire into the grooves of the monolith. As the area slowly warmed and everyone began removing their soaked and muddy armor, Cassandra stepped behind a stack of crates and piled sacks that created a dry, hidden nook between the log barrier and the rest of the campsite. She gratefully took off her bracers, breastplate and weapon belt, then her chainmail, setting them at her feet and sitting so she could take off her boots.

As she made a face at her soaked socks, Brynn came around the corner, still covered in mud and rainwater. She lowered the hood of her cloak and unfastened the ties that held it together at her throat, letting it puddle with a wet squelch at her feet. Cassandra watched silently as the elf shook out her hair and carelessly unfastened her leather armor, leaving it where it fell. She yanked her soaked undershirt over her head at wiped at the mud streaking her face, leaving her in her equally soaked breeches and breastband. Cassandra completely stilled, eyes arrested by the water that slid down Brynn’s skin and deviated with the slight definition of her abdominals that flexed with every breath she took. She traced the ladder of the woman’s ribs with her eyes and blinked as they met the barrier of her breastband, tearing her gaze away while her cheeks flamed hotly in embarrassment.

“Cassandra?”

The Seeker’s eyes widened comically, pupils blown wide and trained resolutely on the ground. Two bare feet came into view and then a cold hand was coaxing her head up so her eyes met Brynn’s. The elf’s steady gaze searched hers for a long moment, their staggered breathing accompanied by the heavy rain that still beat on the canvas above them. “Why do you turn your eyes from me?”

“I do not know what you-”

“Please don’t lie to me.” Brynn’s thumb gently stroked along the bottom of Cassandra’s scar and she knelt before the Seeker. “Ma inan dirthera, Cassandra. You look at me so oddly recently; why is that?” There was a gentle reassurance in the blue-grey gaze that promised understanding, but Cassandra felt a surge of fear rush through her. She closed her eyes and felt her breath hitch when Brynn’s fingers scratched lightly along her jaw, tempting her to open them again. She resolutely, stubbornly kept them shut, feeling her panic increase with each passing moment that Brynn’s hand touched her. “What is wrong, Cassandra? What have I done to so disturb you? Please talk to me.”

“It is not you!” The words exploded from her in a rush of air, the Seeker unable to hold her tongue when a self-derogatory tone slipped into Brynn’s voice. “You have done nothing, nothing. I am the one who has – who has wronged. I have done something wrong, been remiss in my duty and – and-”

“Cassandra, what are you talking about?” The confusion lacing Brynn’s voice caught Cassandra off guard and her eyes popped open. The elf was still sitting before her, hand still beneath her chin, eyes still trained on her face. Worry danced in her gaze and a frown played on her lips; shame roiled in Cassandra’s gut as she placed the emotions that had taken up residence on Brynn’s face.
“Feelings.” She nearly spit the word out and tore her chin out of Brynn’s grasp, backpedaling out of her reach until she could stand and begin pacing in the private alcove they occupied. “I cannot suitably perform my duty to you with these emotions clouding my eyes and making me lose focus of anything but you!”

The rain drumming on the canvas acted as a blanket for their conversation, hiding the vehemence of her words from the soldiers on the other side of the crates. Brynn watched, wide eyed, from the ground as Cassandra worked herself into a frenzy, expression thunderous and self-deprecating. “These blighted feelings keep me from a restful sleep, they distract me from my work; and I cannot do anything because I cannot get away from you!”

“I… I’m sorry, I didn’t…”

“Why do I feel this way,” Cassandra overrode Brynn’s stuttered words, stopping before her and sitting heavily on a nearby crate, “why can I not get you out of my thoughts? I have never experienced this confluence of emotions, this fluttering and swooping that plagues me… whenever I… see…”

Cassandra slowly trailed off as Brynn stood and padded over to her, a tiny smile curling her lips as understanding dawned in her eyes. She stopped in front of the Seeker and knelt once more, hands finding purchase on her knees and kneading the muscles soothingly. “Me.” Cassandra wordlessly nodded, leaning back as Brynn moved closer until her shoulders met the logs at her back. “I put you so out of sorts?”

“Yes.” Cassandra breathed. Brynn’s eyes bored into hers as they inched closer. Their noses gently bumped, breath mingling in the scant space between them as her fingers flexed on Cassandra’s knees. “You make me feel at odds with myself; like I could run forever if I was not so out of breath all the time.”

“Good.”

Brynn closed the space between them, lips brushing against Cassandra’s carefully, then not so carefully when the Seeker inhaled sharply. Brynn’s lips were slightly chapped as they slid over hers, her nose bumped against the side of Cassandra’s as she tilted her head to the side, and the flutter of her lashes tickled the Seeker’s cheek. She moaned quietly when Brynn’s tongue slipped into her mouth and pulled away when she realized the sound had come from her, but didn’t get far as her head smacked against the logs behind her. Her breathing sounded ragged beneath the rain surrounding them and her eyes swept over Brynn’s face, finding the delicate point of her ear, the vallaslin that crinkled at the corners of her eyes as she smiled, and the pulse that beat erratically in her throat.

“You… you-”

“Yes, me.” The confident expression melted off Brynn’s face, replaced with trepidation uncertainty. “I… Cassandra, I don’t know what this is. In my clan – in any clan I’ve visited,” she looked away and swallowed nervously, “things like this, two women kissing… it doesn’t happen; not romantically, anyway. Can it happen? We always find a man to bond with; we have children to help the clans grow and they have children when they’ve grown. I… always thought that would be my future, too. But then I went to Haven and… eventually, I met you.”

Her eyes pleaded with Cassandra to explain what she was feeling, hands still resting on her legs as her fingers scratched nervously at her breeches. Cassandra, desperate to move but unwilling to dislodge Brynn despite her anxiety, settled for drumming her fingers on the crate she sat on. “It is… not unheard of for humans, for men and women to be in a relationship with the same gender.
Leliana had a tryst with the Hero of Ferelden – a Dalish from the Mahariel clan – throughout their campaign against the darkspawn, until she disappeared a year ago. I’ve seen Dorian flirting with the male soldiers on patrol before, too. But, Brynn…I’ve never had these feelings for a woman before. I’ve never had these feelings for anyone before. It…confounds me.”

“But you do?”

“Have feelings? Of that, I am certain, yes.”

Brynn chewed on her lip and blinked up at Cassandra. “I don’t…do you think – fenedhis – would you be willing to explore this with me, Cassandra? I…I would very much like to see what happens between us.” Brynn spoke slowly, almost seeming to taste the words on her tongue before releasing them. “I understand if you don’t wish to, but I think…I think we could find a balance between duty and – us, if you’re willing. But only if you’re willing.”

Cassandra watched Brynn rock back and forth on her knees almost imperceptibly but for the shifting of her weight against the warrior’s knees. Cassandra’s eyes traced along the line of her nose until they reached her lips, pausing on the ink that split her lower lip. She cupped Brynn’s chin in her palm and dipped her head, pausing when the elf’s breath puffed against her lips.

“I think I would like that.”

Brynn’s eyes lit up and she surged forward to claim Cassandra’s lips again, smiling as they kissed. “Brynn,” Cassandra pulled back and met hers seriously, “I do not know how this will end, but I am willing – more than willing – to explore it with you. But…I will probably be reticent at times. I do not deal very well with change, or things I am not familiar with, and this,” she gestured between the two of them, “is both. I can promise I will try not to shut you out, but I cannot guarantee I will not.”

“That’s okay; I’m stubborn, I’m sure I can break through your walls.”

Brynn offered a toothy grin and Cassandra returned it, albeit rather shyly. She reached out to cup Brynn’s cheek in her palm, marveling when the woman leaned into her touch and shut her eyes. “We are truly going to try this?”

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

Quick note, all of this chapter’s translations were done using, as always, Dragon Age’s wiki page. However, I used the knowledge I have of general grammar structure to make my own sentences and words by putting several parts together in a (hopefully) similar way that the Elvhen do in-game.

Translations:

Ma melava halani; ma serannas, ma falon. - You helped me; thank you, my friend. Literally, ‘Your time helps; my thanks, my friend.’

sa’lath - beloved. Literally, ‘one love,’ however, Elvhen grammar structure indicates that the words used (in this case, one and love, respectively) become one word and...
take on new meaning.

Ma inan dirthera - Your eyes give you away. Literally, 'Your eyes tell.'
I'm horrid, I know *hides behind box* Suffice to say, work got in the way, then Life, and then I hit a spot of writer's block, and then when I had time to write, the Gods be damned plot bunnies went on vacation... *sighs* Anyway, I'm back, and to make up for my horrible-ness (horridness, horribility? Meh.), I present you lovely people with a double update!

I have zero ideas how long this is going to go on for, as my only plot point was literally 'Inquisitor can't write, Cassandra helps and they get together,' so...yep. That's a thing. I don't think it will be too much longer, as I have other stories I want to devote my time to, and for some reason enjoy leaving my DA stories somewhere in the middle of the actual plot line for the game because everyone knows what happens and how it ends, and I like exploring the beginning of their stories and how they get together and how different people react in different situations, especially when brought up in different places.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“*I think I would like that.*”

*Brynn’s eyes lit up and she surged forward to claim Cassandra’s lips again, smiling as they kissed. “Brynn,” Cassandra pulled back and met hers seriously, “I do not know how this will end, but I am willing – more than willing – to explore it with you. But…I will probably be reticent at times. I do not deal very well with change, or things I am not familiar with, and this,” she gestured between the two of them, “is both. I can promise I will try not to shut you out, but I cannot guarantee I will not.”

“That’s okay; I’m stubborn, I’m sure I can break through your walls.”

*Brynn offered a toothy grin and Cassandra returned it, albeit rather shyly. She reached out to cup Brynn’s cheek in her palm, marveling when the woman leaned into her touch and shut her eyes. “We are truly going to try this?”

“Yes.”

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The following morning, Cassandra woke feeling unusually warm, considering their surroundings and the fact there were no dry blankets to wrap themselves in. She tried to lift her arm to wipe away the sleep in her eyes and the line of drool she could feel on her cheek but found her arm trapped and looked down to find a head of overgrown auburn hair laying against her shoulder. Brynn’s face was relaxed in sleep, nosing wrinkling occasionally as she slept on in the slowly brightening light that passed for morning in the Mire. Cassandra felt panic stir in her chest and beat it back with a deep breath, shutting her eyes against the murky light overhead that barely permeated the omnipresent clouds and drizzle coming down on the tarp. She listened to the rain drumming overhead and the snores of the soldiers nearby, Brynn’s rhythmic breaths nearly drowned out but for her proximity.
Cassandra hesitantly wiggled her fingers to get the blood moving in her arm again and laid there until she heard someone moving and Brynn stirred beside her. She blearily lifted her head toward the sounds on the other side of the fire and then turned her gaze on Cassandra, dark grey eyes widening in realization. She skittered back from Cassandra and fell over her discarded pile of leathers with a yelp, drawing the eyes of the few soldiers awake. She flushed scarlet and hopped to her feet, hastily donning her leathers without regard for their damp state. Cassandra rose somewhat more slowly, consciously measuring her time as she stretched and reached for her mail, nonchalantly tugging it over her head as the others in their company slowly stirred.

The Herald slid past Cassandra with a muttered greeting and crouched by the smoldering coals of their fire, coaxing it back to life with small, deft motions and adding kindling as tiny flames flickered at the edge of the wood. By the time Cassandra had managed to wrestle herself into her armor, a cheery blaze was burning in the stone ring and Blackwall was serving their meager meal of trail bread and the leftover stew from the night before.

“Morning, Ser Blackwall.”

“Seeker. Have to get more food soon; we’re nearly out.”

His characteristic gruff and blunt manners were a balm to the Seeker after the previous night. She nodded, slowly chewing on her food as she stared out over the barriers of the hillock at the drizzle coming down. “I have yet to see any animals though.”

“Aye, that’s the problem.”

“We will need to range outside of the Mire for hunting, and I do not think we have the time for that.”

“We’re near the encampment,” Brynn interrupted their musing, adjusting her leather jerkin and pulling archer’s gloves over her hands.

“Are you certain?”

“I’ve seen signs of their passing this past day,” she said assuredly. Her eyes briefly met Cassandra’s and skittered away again. “I’d wager no more than a half day’s walk from here, if the rain hasn’t completely washed away their tracks.”

“Well, that sounds delightful,” Dorian ambled over with an amiable grin, moustache dripping with moisture as he plucked at his robes. “I would love to get out of these wet clothes sooner than later, and if we’re that close to the Avvar, I say we press on.”

“Seems sound to me; I agree with the Vint.”

Cassandra nodded as she checked her weapons belt and shield strapped to her back. “Alright, we will find their trail and, Maker willing, be done with this endeavor today.”

They left the safety of the hillock not long after, carefully making their way along the muddy path that headed southwest toward some large ruins. Brynn led them, cloak drawn over her head to keep the worst of the drizzle off her as she tracked the fading trail. Their soldiers walked in loose formation, eyes warily watching the murky waters that surrounded them and occasionally one of the scouts would send an arrow into the dark depths preemptively. Cassandra followed closely behind Brynn, hand at the hilt of her weapon as she watched her surroundings with a sharp eye. She casually glanced around as she lengthened her stride to walk beside the Herald and stepped close to her side. “How are you doing?”
Brynn gave her an odd look, brow cocked curiously. “I’m fine,” she said slowly. “Why do you ask?”

“You were jumpy at camp, and you have not said two words to me since we left. What is going on in your head, lethallan?” Cassandra watched Brynn flinch at the familiar term and her mouth twitched down into a frown. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“No, no, of course not, I just…I don’t really know how to act around you now.” Brynn, although hasty to reassure the Seeker, only briefly made eye contact before her gaze fell back to the faint prints in the muck. “I know you said you wanted to try – this, with me, but I don’t want to…overstep? Yes?”

Cassandra glanced behind them at the soldiers walking slowly at their rear and surreptitiously ghosted her fingertips across Brynn’s knuckles. “You are drawing more attention acting like a skittish horse than you otherwise would. Just…be yourself.”

Brynn glanced at her and smiled lopsidedly, then hugged her from the side, careful of her weapons strapped at her waist. “Thank you.” She let go and darted ahead of the group to study some particularly deep tracks in the dirt ahead. She waved them on as they approached and pointed through the ruins, past a small, half collapsed alcove that was apparently standing by sheer will alone, and through what had once been an entrance hall, made of large, heavy blocks and blown out windows with shattered glass littering the stone floor.

“Must’ve been a helluva place, when it was occupied,” Blackwall said lowly. He studied the ruins with a practiced eye and shifted his helm in the crook of his elbow. “Wonder who built it in the first place…”

“I would wager someone who was much more better equipped to handle these blighted undead than we are,” Dorian quipped as he walked past with his staff leading the way, mud spattered across the hem of his robes. The bright light that illuminated the tip of his staff speared several yards in every direction and lit up the ruts that were leading further south. “Looks like we found their trail,” the mage said excitedly.

The company of soldiers picked up the pace, anxiously fingerling their hilts and attentively looking at their surroundings as they walked on with Brynn just behind Dorian as Cassandra and Blackwall strode amongst the soldiers. Cassandra felt the hairs at her nape prickle uncomfortably as the dreary landscape seemed to grow darker and more foreboding, drawing her sword a hands width out of its scabbard. Around her, the soldiers murmured under their breath and jumped nervously at every sound made. She hissed in irritation when one young man jolted to a stop just ahead of her and she nearly ran into him, putting her arm out to push him out of the way.

“What is the meaning o-”

“Skeletons,” he yelled suddenly, jerking his short sword out of its sheath and breaking ranks to run toward the fetid waters to the side of the path. Cassandra and the company could only stare as he ran into the shallow waters and plunged his weapon into the murky bog several times, eyes wild as he wheeled about. “Look out, they’re everywh!”

With a startled cry, his foot was yanked out from underneath him and he fell into the water; Cassandra’s eyes rounded as a half dozen undead rose from the muck with unearthly screams and fell upon the floundering young man, his terrified and pained screams abruptly cut off with a disturbing gurgle as the churning water around the group turned darker with his blood.

“Weapons!” Cassandra smoothly slid her sword out of its sheath and pushed toward Brynn, shield
held defensively in front of her as she scanned the waters. “We are too vulnerable,” she hissed at Dorian. The mage nodded, smacking the butt of his staff against the ground to light it again and pushing on quickly as rotting corpses slowly rose around them.

“Everyone, protect the Herald! We have to get to safety!” The company closed ranks around Brynn and bared their weapons in shaking grips as they followed Dorian down the trail, fighting off more and more of the undead the further they went. An older soldier broke ranks to cut down an undead archer and found himself overrun by several spearmen, blood seeping from the corners of his mouth as the weapons slid between the joints of his armor and skewered him. A nervous scout tried to run to him, but he shook his head at her and lifted his sword, bringing it down on their heads as his legs gave out and more attacked him in a ravenous group. Brynn threw several throwing knives into the fray, piercing glowing eye sockets with each attack and ending the soldier’s misery with a well placed blade. Cassandra shoulder checked a corpse that got too close and put her weight behind her shield as she brought it down upon its neck, smiling grimly as its malevolent hissing was suddenly cut off.

“Seeker, we have a problem…”

“What now?” Dorian pointed ahead of the group and Cassandra felt her breath leave her body as she saw the horde of undead that were blocking the way; several score strong, the restless skeletons were between the Inquisition’s men and their safety, an open drop gate that, at a glance, seemed to still work. “How will we get past them?”

“I’d figure it out soon, Seeker. We’ve got more at our flanks.” Blackwall strode up to them with his massive blade out, chips decorating the edge where metal had bit into bone. “We won’t last much longer, and I don’t know if it’ll be the mens’ spirit, or their bodies, that break first,” he muttered quietly.

Cassandra nodded tersely and studied the restless horde at their front for a moment, then turned to address Dorian. “Pavus.” He straightened and looked at her attentively. “Light them up.”

“That big a group?” He frowned as he glanced at them and then back at her. “I can do it, of course, but it’ll wipe me out for a while. I just took a lyrium potion and can’t chance the backlash of having another so close.”

“Just do it, we will manage.”

He nodded and took a deep breath as he took his staff in hand and raised it slightly off the ground. With a muttered phrase, he spun the bladed staff intricately and the air around them heated up. A ball of light grew in front of him as he twirled and he released it with a shout, sending the orb into the midst of the skeletons. The ball seemed to shrink on itself before expanding rapidly and incinerated every corpse within a ten foot radius, leaving behind the smell of burnt peat and something dry that the Seeker didn’t want to entertain the thought of. The explosion knocked every other skeleton in the immediate area off its feet and she charged through the gap with everyone the others on her heels. A couple soldiers ran to the crank that powered the pulleys to close the portcullis just as a handful of skeletons reached it and stretched their bony fingers through the gaps in the gate, hissing and spitting in impotent rage. Cassandra warily watched the corpses stretch their limbs and scream until she felt Brynn’s hand on her arm, squeezing reassuringly.

“It’s alright, lethallan, we’re safe here.”

“I think you may be overestimating the stability of the gate,” Cassandra said darkly, watching the rusted iron with a sharp eye. “We should go further in; it looks like there are tracks going that way.” She pointed toward an arch, under which were deep ruts and what looked like hoof prints.
“Stay on your guard.”

They took only a handful of steps under the arch when Brynn froze and her head swiveled suddenly. She peered up into the shadowed upper walkway and her eyes widened beneath her cowl. “Scatter!” She leapt aside as an arrow whistled through the air, embedding itself in the saturated earth at her feet, and the soldiers threw themselves behind cover as more projectiles filled the air.

Cassandra raised her shield in time to block an arrow and slid behind a couple crates where Blackwall had sequestered himself. She growled at the shadowed shapes that flitted on the walkway and muttered crossly under her breath. “Ser Blackwall, we need to find a way up those stairs without being torn apart by those thrice damned archers!”

“Aye, Seeker.” A grim smile etched on his face, Blackwall bellowed, “Pavus! Do you feel up to some more fun yet?”

From behind a support post, Cassandra heard his voice, still slightly breathless but determined. “For you, Ser Warden, I’m always ready for fun!”

Blackwall chuckled hoarsely and grinned through his beard at the Seeker. “Then I think we should introduce these louts to your specialty!”

“As you say!”

Cassandra chanced leaning out a little to watch light gather behind the post, then Dorian stepped out from behind cover and confidently set the butt of his staff in the marshy earth. A couple arrows flew toward him and bounced harmlessly off his barrier, behind which the head of his staff was glowing ominously. “Better get ready, I won’t be of any use after this,” he said, lips pursed tightly as his eyes tracked the shapeless shadows that were flitting in and out of sight. “Here goes!” He swung his staff in a wide arc and a blue, pulsing light left its shimmering after-image hanging in midair amidst the omnipresent rain. Before her eyes, the streak of light separated into spear-like projectiles and hovered motionlessly for a moment. “On three,” the mage called out over the patter of rain and confused cries of their assailants. “Three!”

The spears of light flew toward the upper battlements and Cassandra broke cover with Blackwall at her side, dashing for the stairs as fast as their legs would carry them. Several other soldiers had already reached the stone steps and were rushing up them with weapons drawn, engaging the enemies that seemed to appear from nowhere in the gloomy atmosphere. Cassandra swept past them and reached the top step just as several more armed men charged at her. She let her shield take the brunt of the punishment and neatly sidestepped an overeager opponent who quickly found himself gurgling on the wrong end of Blackwall’s massive blade.

As she pushed back the men on the stairs, a shadow darted past her and a spurt of arterial blood from one of the men before the Seeker hit her shield and armor. He collapsed, grasping at his torn throat, and Cassandra looked up the stairs. Brynn stood on the top step, cloak billowing in the wind and rain and cowl slipped down so the water slid down her face in rivulets. She looked fearsome with the lightning cracking sporadically at her back and her eyes glinting eerily in the torchlight that sputtered and flickered rapidly; blood coating part of her face and dripping off her chin and teeth bared in a snarl. Blue-grey eyes flicked over Cassandra’s shoulder and, in one smooth motion, Brynn sheathed her daggers and drew her bow and lined up an arrow. The Seeker felt the fletching brush by her cheek and turned on her heel to see a man fall over the stairs with the Herald’s arrow sticking out of his eye socket. She raised her blade in thanks and rejoined the battle, helping a couple soldiers beat back some of the men that threatened to overwhelm them.
After they dispatched the last enemy from the ambush, Cassandra cautiously straightened, shield and sword held firmly before her in case any stragglers thought to capitalize on their dropped defenses. “Is everyone alright? Roll call!”

“Aye, Seeker.” Blackwall wiped his brow, taking a smear of blood with it, and turned his face to the rain still coming down on them.

From behind her, she heard Dorian call out and listened to the mage gripe about his robes getting blood all over them on his way to them. He appeared no worse for wear, although his robes were coated liberally in mud and rent in several places. His staff glowed weakly as the trio stood amidst the corpses in the lower courtyard near the gate and the hissing undead that lingered on the other side of the portcullis. “Not to worry you, but has anyone seen our lovely Herald? I see our men and women, but not her; although, I suppose she would be rather difficult to find, small as she is.”

Cassandra’s eyes widened and her head swiveled to take in the carnage around them, seeing their company of men intact but for several wounded soldiers that were being tended to but not the distinctively pointed, delicate ears or cat like eyes that she was searching for.

“Lavellan? Your Grace, where are you!”

Cassandra and Blackwall broke for opposite ends of the courtyard while Dorian tended to the injured and the unoccupied soldiers searched the cooling bodies for anything useful. Cassandra took the stone steps two at a time and panted as she ran the length of the upper walkway. She heard muffled cursing from behind a broken door and drew her sword as she charged in, raising it with a cry as she spied a misshapen lump in the shadows of the destroyed room.

“Lethallan, dar’atisha! Emma eth.” There was a pained grunt, then a feral growl and a hissed, “Don’t even think about it, shemlen. I will end you if you so much as breathe wrong, understand?”

The next flash of lightning briefly showed Brynn hunched over a prone body, eyes narrowed in rage and a bloody gash on her temple. Cassandra took a confident step forward when the light fled and grasped the prostrate shadow by the scruff and yanked them to their feet. They ventured onto the walkway and down the stairs, Cassandra keeping a hand on the man – for a man it was, even bloodied and unkempt as he was – as Brynn brought up the rear with her daggers still drawn.

Cassandra shoved the man toward Blackwall, who had trotted over to them when he saw them coming down the stairs, and grabbed Brynn’s forearm and steered her toward a half collapsed stables near the wall. She waited until they were out of sight before unceremoniously dropping her shield and sword and wrapping the woman in her arms, tightening her grip until they were flush against each other. Chin tucked against Brynn’s temple, Cassandra smelled the scent of rainwater, blood, and metal, under laid as always with the smell of leather and herbs. “Are you alright?”

“Nothing an elfroot poultice won’t fix, emma sa’lath; he only got in one blow.” Brynn withdrew far enough for Cassandra to notice the toothy and somewhat bloody grin before she burrowed contentedly back into the crook of her shoulder and seemed to melt against her sturdy frame.

“That is one too many,” Cassandra groused, hands rubbing along the length of Brynn’s back. She turned her head and pressed her lips to her unbloodied temple, feeling chapped lips press against her throat in counterpoint. “Will you let me clean you up before we head further in? I want you at your best before we continue the search for our missing men; I am certain we will encounter more resistance before we find them.” Brynn nodded wordlessly and Cassandra dug through a deep pouch on her belt for her reserves of elfroot poultice. She dabbed it carefully on the long, thin cut on her temple and watched her eyelashes flutter as the slight hurt was numbed by the crushed herbs.
in the paste.

“That feels better,” she mumbled, lips turned up slightly.

“Is there anywhere else you need me to tend to?”

“If I told you my lips ached, would you ‘tend to’ them?” Brynn smiled coyly and cracked open one eye, snorting at the Seeker’s nonplussed expression. She set a hand on her armored shoulder and stood on tiptoe to press her lips briefly against Cassandra’s, nipping at her upper lip and dancing back before she could recover. “That feels better already,” she teased, “although I may require more ‘tending to’ later on.”

Cassandra opened and closed her mouth silently for several long moments, then shook her head and carded her fingers through her wet hair. “We have to finish this mission first, then... we may discuss further treatment for what ails you.” She felt her cheeks heat up at the continued banter but steadfastly kept eye contact until Brynn’s lips twisted and she threw her arms around her waist.

“I like the sound of that.” Cassandra smiled as she wrapped her arms around Brynn again and they rocked in place until Brynn turned her head aside, ears twitching with sounds from outside. “Someone approaches.” They broke apart just before Blackwall strode through the opening and stood rigidly before them.

“Lady Seeker, Lady Herald, I’ve questioned the man you captured; he swears upon his gods there are another score of Avvar men further in, along with our captured men.”

“So that is what these people are. We found their camp, at least.”

“So you did. Shame on me for doubting you.” Cassandra teased with an eye roll. She ignored Blackwall’s interested gaze and walked past him back into the drizzling rain, picking up her discarded sword and shield on the way. The man Brynn had found knelt in the mud sullenly, eyes turned down to the churned up earth and a scowl just visible through his matted beard. “You swear our men are within the walls?” She took a dagger and tipped his chin up with it, meeting his dark, angry eyes with hers. “It could mean your life.”

“My life is forfeit for losing to a lowly wench as your pretty little knife ear,” he spat coarsely, sneering around rotten teeth. “You cannot do to me what my clan will not do. But if it makes you feel better, yes, your dogs are within. You’ll not get to them, though,” he swore with a gravelly laugh, “my clansmen will tear you to pieces long before you get near them. The Hand of Korth will prevail!” He exclaimed, then threw himself on Cassandra’s dagger, impaling himself on the sharp blade without a sound. His eyes stared up through Cassandra, the hate and rage bled out as sure as his lifeblood that flowed over the hilt of her dagger.

Cassandra snorted derisively and yanked her weapon from beneath his chin as Blackwall and Brynn exited the stables, wiping the blood off on the skins that covered him. “He told me as much, too.” Blackwall sighed and rolled his shoulders, then eyed the soldiers around them. “Everyone in one piece?”

A ragged chorus of affirmations and Cassandra walked toward the inner gate. “Let us finish this,
then. At least it will be dry within.” Cassandra led them inside, followed closely by Brynn and Blackwall. They found little but dust and spiders in the empty hall but followed the line of guttering torches toward the raucous laughter that echoed eerily through the ransacked castle.

Brynn’s head swiveled at each intersection, her superior hearing leading them unerringly toward the root of the sounds. Brynn stopped Cassandra at the last corner and leaned up to whisper, “Let me lead. I am the one they seem to dislike the most.”

“That is why you should not be up front,” the Seeker hissed, eyes narrow. Brynn frowned and silently pushed her bow and arrows into her arms, then strode ahead, disregarding Cassandra’s hissed warning, and walked into the large throne room fearlessly. The sound of a dozen arrows being nocked drove Cassandra into action, sword drawn and shield up as she followed closely on Brynn’s heels, eyes searching out each threat in the large hall.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Lethallan, dar'atisha! Emma eth - Friend, be at peace! I am safe.

Emma sa'lath - my beloved
Victory

Chapter Notes

Edit: there is threat of rape in this chapter, nothing happens but do keep in mind that horrible people can and will do horrible things to others, including using the threat of rape as a fear tactic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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More than a score of Avvar stood warily on the fringes of a raised dais, upon which stood their chief, a larger man with a stern countenance. His hooded head was decorated with the horned skull of some beast and a large warhammer rested easily in his hand, beard disguising the sneer on his lips as Brynn approached him. “You dare come to this place after slaughtering my clansmen? Brave – or perhaps foolish – elf girl, this will end in bloodshed. Blood will answer blood!” He raised his weapon overhead and his remaining men echoed his cry furiously.

Brynn never wavered, although Cassandra could see her shoulders tighten with the cacophony of sound assaulting her ears. “Indeed,” she answered calmly, her lilting voice somehow carrying over the many voices raised against her. “Blood will answer blood, but I think it would be better answered between you and I alone.”

“You think you could beat me?” The chief laughed outright and Cassandra sneered, offended on Brynn’s behalf, although her fear quickly overwhelmed any ire she had toward the Avvar chief.

“What are you thinking,” she hissed under the man’s laughter.

Brynn’s head tipped toward her, barely noticeable but for the way her over-long hair slipped over the point of her ear. She didn’t answer but instead stepped toward the chief and, as she scanned the surrounding men, Cassandra spied an insouciant grin on her face. “I think,” she said conversationally, taking another step that put her on the lowest step of the dais, “that you are afraid of a wee elvhen da’len; what could such a big man as yourself have to fear from someone like me?”
The chief’s face was flushed red beneath his beard and skull hood, beady eyes glaring meanly down at Brynn. Cassandra anxiously rubbed her thumb on the pommel of her sword when Brynn took another step and nearly followed her up but for Dorian’s hand placed preemptively on her shoulder. “By all accounts, I shouldn’t be a challenge for one such as you. What have you to lose? Face me alone and, if I win, our men go with us without your clansmen attacking us.”

“And when I win,” he said arrogantly, “I will mount your pretty head on my gate after I mount you in front of your whipped curs.”

Cassandra growled with impotent rage and felt Blackwall’s hand take her sword before she could hurl it at the Avvar bastard’s face. She trembled with adrenaline as Brynn inclined her head and drew her daggers. “As you say.”

With a wide sweep of his warhammer, the Avvar warriors cleared a rough half circle around the dais, cheering and banging their weapons on crude shields as the Inquisition soldiers stood rigidly in silence, hands straying toward weapons but unwilling to unsheathe them for fear of the Herald’s safety.

“I am the Hand of Korth, and I will destroy you!” The chief raised his hammer overhead and swung it toward Brynn. She nimbly dodged out of the way and wheeled on the man with a feral snarl on her lips. Lithely leaping over the low sweep of his hammer, she flitted inside his guard and scored a shallow dig on his hip before he could recover. The chief roared and his hand flew out quickly, striking Brynn in the head and sending her sprawling.

“You’re a little slow, aren’t you?” She taunted, smirking and twirling her daggers as he roared and charged at her.

He swung with deadly force and Brynn skipped out of reach; Cassandra’s breath caught as she watched the chief suddenly take another large step and let his momentum carry his weapon over his head and back into Brynn’s path as she danced back. The head of the massive weapon hit her side and Brynn’s breath left her on a pained cry as she was swept off her feet. She landed in a limp pile some yards away from the chief, near the edge of the ragged circle, and laid there motionlessly as the Avvar man swaggered slowly over with his weapon brought to bear. Cassandra clenched her hands into fists as he approached and strained against her companions’ grips when he dropped the head of the hammer by her prone form. Her victorious laughter sent chills rippling down her spine and she ripped herself away from Blackwall and Dorian as the chief grabbed Brynn by the nape of her neck and hauled her up to hang in the air. Her eyes fluttered open and she yelped when he tightened his grip, instinctively bringing her hands up to grasp desperately at his thick forearm and take some of her dead weight off her neck.

“Not so tough now, are you, little elf bitch?” He shook her like a ragdoll and Brynn cried out in pain. Cassandra echoed her as she yanked the elf’s longbow over her head and nocked it with shaking fingers. Somehow, blue-grey eyes met hers over the Avvar chief’s shoulder and she shook
her head as much as she could, entreating her with wide eyes to stay her hand. “Got you good, now I keep my word.” His dark laughter and blatant palming of the rising tent in his pants sent Cassandra into a rage and she pulled back on the catgut string, sighting down the shaft of the arrow and aiming for just left of the chief’s spine and beneath his shoulder blade.

The glint of torchlight off steel caught her eye and the Avvar chief’s pained cry distracted her long enough to see him reel and release Brynn, holding his stomach as drops of blood hit the broken floor beneath him. Brynn landed in a heap and leapt to her feet, disappearing behind his bulk and seeming to climb over him, bloody gashes and wounds appearing amongst the scarred skin and tanned hides of the man. He reached with bare, bloody hands for the small woman but she slipped through his grasp time and time again, wrapping her legs around his neck and hands taking hold of his horned cowl to yank it off his head. He stumbled around, pained croaks slipping past his lips as the breadth of the damage Brynn had done was revealed. A long, wide wound just beneath his sternum bled down his stomach and dripped onto the floor, along with a dozen other, smaller wounds that were quickly draining his strength. As his weak grip latched onto her legs, Brynn took hold of his limp hair in one hand and yanked his head back, then drew her small knife across his neck with one smooth motion. Cassandra relaxed her grip as the macabre, bloody smile spilt his lifeblood and he collapsed to his knees.

Brynn dismounted his shoulders as he fell face first onto the stone of the dais and raised her knife overhead, staring out at the stunned Avvar with a grim smile. “I claim victory over your chief, the Hand of Korth. Will you honor his agreement or will you be oathbreakers?” Her voice was hoarse and heavily accented from pain, but carried over the nearly silent great hall.

The Avvar men stared hatefully at each other and Cassandra half drew the string again in preparation to fight, watching the battle lust slowly drain from their faces before they sheathed their weapons and walked away through a broken section of wall. “Follow them out; make sure they do not return,” Cassandra said to a handful of scouts. When they were gone, she sent the remainder of the soldiers to look for their captured brothers-in-arms, and she approached Brynn with Blackwall and Dorian at her back. Brynn wavered on her feet but defiantly met her gaze, eyes dark with pain and shining victoriously.

“You idiot.” The Seeker smacked Brynn upside the head and then crushed her in her arms, muffling the yelp of pain against her breastplate. “If you ever do something like that again…I will murder you.” Brynn didn’t answer but leaned heavily into her embrace, knife clattering to the stones beneath their feet as she relaxed.

Dorian set his hand on Cassandra’s shoulder to get her attention. “Much as it warms the cockles of my heart to see you thawing out, dear Seeker, I must insist on examining our Herald. She took quite a hit during that battle.”

Cassandra shook her head and pulled Brynn closer. “Not here. We will make camp in the courtyard; the stables are large enough to house us for the night, and dry.” As he acquiesced, a cry of happiness reached them and Cassandra heard their soldier’s greet their missing comrades. They appeared soon after, looking rather worse for wear – malnourished, bruised, but smiling wearily – and then the scouts returned, saying the remaining Avvar had headed off into the misty rain to the west, and the group straggled out into the rain toward the stables.

Blackwall was issuing the first watches and splitting the other able bodied soldiers into groups to scavenge for food while Dorian began tending to the recovered soldiers, and Cassandra helped Brynn limp to an empty stall full of somewhat moldy straw in a corner of the stables, away from the body of the troops. “You are…I cannot believe…” Cassandra made a disgruntled sound as she gently laid Brynn on the pile of straw and her hands flitted anxiously around the collar of her
leathers.

Brynn smiled weakly up at her and winced as her neck protested the movement. “I am sorry, Cassandra,” she said quietly, “I didn’t think he would be quite that fast.”

“Obviously.” Cassandra dragged her fingers through her hair and paced in the small stall restlessly. Her frown dug deeper with every second and her movements grew jerky as she grumbled in frustration and the dregs of fear that were snagged in her chest. “You just – threw yourself into battle with an opponent so much larger than you – did you think? Do not answer that,” she said over Brynn’s weak defense. “If you had thought, you would have seen we could have beat them with our men, without such injury to yourself.”

“You don’t know that,” Brynn said suddenly, sitting up with a pained grunt. She glared up at Cassandra who scoffed and rolled her eyes. “We could have lost our troops, any of you could have been seriously injured – what if Dorian were hurt? We have no other mage healer, and elfroot only goes so far!”

“They know the risks!”

“As do I!” Brynn cut her hand through the air viciously, silencing Cassandra with her vehemence. “Yes, they know the risks, but if I am able to take those risks on my shoulders and minimize the potential to everyone else, why should I not? Fenedhis, you don’t get it!”

“Then explain it to me! What makes them matter so much to you?!”

“We are all the same!” Cassandra paused, befuddled, and blinked. Brynn’s chest heaved and her eyesburned with passion. “We are the same,” she repeated more calmly but no less certainly. “So what if most of them have rounded ears? We all breathe, and think, and love. Who am I to say I matter more than any of them? This?” She scoffed at the green mark that flared dully beneath her skin. “It could have been any of them – it could have been you. I refuse to send good men and women to their deaths when I could do their job. All life is sacred, not just those of the people who have power.” Waving her glowing hand again, Brynn lowered her head and muttered, “I wish this thrice cursed mark had never chosen me.”

Cassandra felt the air leave her lungs in a rush and fell to her knees on the ground. “Please do not say that,” she whispered, all fight gone from her voice. “Do not say you wish you did not have that mark.”

“But it-”

“It gave me you, Brynn, do you not see that? If you did not gain that mark…you could have been – likely would have been – one of the dozens of casualties at the Conclave. I know…this, us, we are new, but – you do not understand, I have never felt such opposing emotions for a person. You infuriate me, fascinate me, drive me mad with want for your touch, your scent, your voice…I have known you for nearly five months now, and I have never felt such rapport with another, even my fellow Seekers.

“I do not want to see that gone; I want to explore its full breadth with you at my side, not just a meager memory to look back on.” Cassandra swallowed roughly and palmed Brynn’s knees, the only part of her she could comfortably reach at the moment. “Please, please do not say that again.”

“I am…ir abelas, ma sa’lath.”

“We are back to that familiar phrase,” Cassandra said with a weak smile.
Brynn’s lips quirked in a faint half smile and she reached out to brush her disheveled hair back from her forehead. “I will repeat it to the end of time if need be, Cassandra. I didn’t realize—”

“It is fine, just…keep my view in mind?”

“Always.”

They smiled at each other until Brynn sucked in a pained breath, and Cassandra hovered over her worriedly. “What hurts?”

“Everything, at the moment.”

“I believe I may be of service.” Dorian stood in the doorway of the stall and smiled tiredly down at them. “I don’t have much mana left, and I used the last of my potions while working on those we rescued, but I believe I’ve enough juice to tend to the worst of your wounds, my dear.”

“I don’t want you to tire yourself over-much—”

“Nonsense, rescuing damsels is my calling.” Dorian waved off her worry flippantly and knelt on the hard ground with a small grunt. “If you could help her remove her leathers, dear Seeker? I can better examine her wounds then.” Cassandra nodded and forced back the tremble in her fingers as she unlaced Brynn’s armor and helped her sit up long enough to remove it. As she laid back on the straw, Dorian’s hand hovered over the heavily bruised skin of her ribs and hip. “I suppose you didn’t think to move for this, Herald?”

“I’ll keep it in mind the next time I fight someone with a warhammer, Dorian, thank you for the insight.”

“My pleasure.” He hummed thoughtfully as his palms hovered over her skin and sat back on his heels. “Three cracked ribs, serious bruising, and a small fracture in your pelvis. Your other injuries…” He examined the back of her neck and the wounds on her temple and throat, then rubbed his hands together. “Obviously, the bones are most important, so I’ll focus on those first.”

Brynn inhaled sharply as he laid his hands over her skin and closed his eyes, chanting under his breath. Her expression smoothed over as a calming green glow seemed to burrow itself beneath her skin and sighed happily when he pulled back a few minutes later. “That’s much better,” she said, eyes lidded wearily.

Dorian nodded and hid a yawn behind his hand. “I think I should work on your neck, too; I’d rather know everything was working correctly after he picked you up like a bad Mabari pup than leave it to chance, but I’m afraid the lacerations will stay until my mana has restored itself and, of course, I can do nothing for the bruises.” He cupped his hand around the back of her neck and sent soothing waves of healing energy through Brynn’s skin and into her bones, checking and then double checking that there were no serious, underlying problems. She lay back with a quiet sigh when he pulled away and wove on his legs. “I think I need to have a lie down,” he said, wobbling uncertainly toward the front of the stables.

Cassandra turned her gaze from the open stall door to Brynn, who was burrowing sleepily into the pile of straw. “How do you feel?” She asked quietly.

“Less like an ogre used me as a chew toy, more like a bronto walked all over me.” Brynn winced as she shifted deeper into the pile of straw and Cassandra made a concerned sound at the back of her throat.

“Do you need...”
“I’m fine, lethallan.” Brynn made one last adjustment as she sank deeper into the pile of straw and patted the space beside herself. “You look like you could sleep for a week; come lay with me.”

Cassandra felt herself flush and stammered faintly. “I do not – are you – your ribs-”

“They are healed, I don’t mind laying with you, you know that.” Brynn offered a conciliatory smile, tinted with mischief. “But if you wish, I could bunk with Dorian tonight; I’m sure he would like to keep an eye on me tonight.”

“That is not necessary,” Cassandra said brusquely, frowning mightily at the thought and sneering through the sturdy wood like she could smite the mage with naught but a thought. She unbuckled her armor and laid it in a heap by the door, arms discarded similarly before she sat on the pile of straw and laid back next to the other woman. They lay quietly side by side until Cassandra broke the easy silence between them wryly. “If I were not so tired and warm, I would be terribly cross that you manipulated me so.”

Brynn giggled tiredly and gently rolled onto her side to throw an arm across the Seeker’s hips. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“Indeed.” Cassandra sighed, shutting her eyes and listening to Brynn as she made small sounds and molded herself against her side. Her fingers flexed where they were trapped between their bodies and she let her head drop to the side so her nose was buried against unkempt hair. “Sleep, Brynn. Rest yourself, I will wake you in the morning and we can finally quit this cursed bog and leave for Haven.”

“I cannot wait…I’ll take the snow over the rain, gladly.” Cassandra felt a sleepy smile crease her lips as they settled together and slowly nodded off, comforted by each other’s proximity and the joyous voices near the front of the stables.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

elvhen da'len - elvish little one
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They traveled as fast as they could with the rescued soldiers toward Haven once they left the Mire, making quick time into the Frostbacks with unusually warm weather melting the worst of the snow. Brynn shot fresh game most evenings and brought the creatures back to camp to field dress them and watch Dorian cook the meat over a fire, splitting her attention between the sizzling food and Cassandra. The Seeker normally planted herself beside her once she returned from hunting and helped Brynn clean the skins to tan back in Haven while drawing letters in the dirt and surreptitiously touching her on the arm or face, ostensibly to push some flyaway hairs back from her eyes.

“You should have this cut when we return,” she said one evening a week into their trip back. The soldiers were laughing around the fire, waiting impatiently for Dorian to finish the evening meal, and only occasionally would curious eyes alight on the duo sitting on the fringe of the firelight.

“Why? You don’t care for my roguish looks, sa’lath?”

“It is not that,” Cassandra denied, glancing aside quickly before sliding closer to Brynn and letting her breath ghost across a pointed ear. “I only worry that you will not be able to see the ground in front of you if you let it continue to grow unchecked. Can you even see me anymore?”

“Hah hah, Cassandra.” Brynn bumped her shoulder against Cassandra’s playfully and shook her head to dislodge the hair covering her eyes. “I can see just fine even with this. But I agree, it is getting a little long. Although…” She smiled deviously and continued to deftly cut the fat and blobs of flesh from the underside of the skin, ignoring Cassandra’s put out sigh.

They retired later that evening into their shared tent, curling up together on their doubled bedrolls after removing their outer layer of clothes. Cassandra slid her hand along Brynn’s hip when they were beneath the blankets and trailed a kiss up the column of her throat. “Back to what you were saying earlier,” she rasped, nipping at Brynn’s jawline as her hand migrated past her neck and fingers buried themselves in her hair to pull lightly at the roots, “what did you stop telling me?”
Brynn gasped when she pulled a little harder and scratched faint lines on Cassandra’s arm. She threw a leg over her hip and tugged her closer, fighting against the fingers wound in her hair to tilt her head down and press her lips fervently against Cassandra’s. She whined when Cassandra pulled her head back by her hair again and panted against her mouth.

“That’s why I haven’t asked you to cut it yet,” she gasped breathlessly, accent thick on her tongue as her eyes darkened to storm-grey, “the way you pull on it…Mythal, don’t stop.”

She dug her fingers into Cassandra’s shoulder as the woman pulled experimentally and groaned. Cassandra growled under her breath and leaned in, nipping her jaw and chin as she moved up to claim her lips again. Brynn tore her lips away when her chest stuttered for air and tipped her head into Cassandra’s arm, extended beneath their heads in lieu of a pillow. Cassandra breathed out a chuckle and brushed her nose across the shell of her ear, tightening her grip around Brynn’s waist when she shifted restlessly. She grazed her teeth across the delicate point and jolted when she felt teeth bite into her arm as nails raked across her shoulder and Brynn’s leg jerked over her hip. She did it again, just a little harder, and Brynn’s mouth pulled away as she keened. Cassandra’s stomach coiled as heat raced through her and dragged her hand up Brynn’s back to grasp the back of her neck and hold her still as she nipped at her ear until Brynn was shuddering and writhing in her arms.

She gasped incoherently, broken elvish slipping past her tongue as her hips rolled against Cassandra’s thigh. Cassandra felt her breasts heave against hers as she fought for air and followed the ink of her vallaslin down to where it disappeared beneath the loose collar of her shirt, half remembered whorls of ink flashing in front of her eyes. “I…Cass – please, I want-” Brynn whimpered as blunt teeth scraped across the point of her ear again and melted into Cassandra’s arms bonelessly.

Cassandra felt the small body in her arms coil tighter and tighter with each graze of her teeth, nails carving lines in her skin as the minute space between them heated with their gasps. Brynn moaned outright and the sound jerked Cassandra from the haze that had descended over them. She jerked back as Brynn shuddered in her arms and ran her fingers through her disheveled hair to calm the rogue, eyes searching out eyes in the darkness. “Brynn?”

“I…I’m fine.” Brynn turned her eyes away from Cassandra’s and the Seeker felt her flush heat her arm, where her head still lay.

“I did not – realize that you-”

“I didn’t either,” Brynn said sheepishly, fingers no longer digging into Cassandra’s skin but seeking purchase in her shirt and tangling in the fabric. She shifted her hips restlessly.

“But have you not?...”

“Not? Had other…lovers? Other liaisons?” Brynn’s voice was quietly mocking, her gentle smile a counterpoint to her words. “I earned the right to my vallaslin eight years ago, and after that…let’s say I was more concerned with feeding my clan than pursuing any of the eligible men, either within my clan or without. Besides, that would have been more of a duty to my clan than an actual relationship.” Cassandra’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion as she stared down at Brynn. “I was never interested in children, or keeping our clan strong with da’lens; I never expressed any interest in any of the unmated men that approached me either, even when they would lay their gifts at my feet. I guess…I was waiting for you.”

Wondering eyes turned up to Cassandra, who felt her own cheeks heat under the wide eyed scrutiny of the elf. “I suppose so,” she returned with a shy smile.
Brynn cupped her cheek, thumb brushing across the prominent scar on her jaw. “And I’m so glad I did. You are…Cassandra, ne enensal, emma sa’lath.”

“What does that mean?” Cassandra pressed suddenly. Brynn averted her eyes and the Seeker gently rolled on top of her, pinning her beneath her gaze and her weight. “Tell me, Brynn.” She watched as Brynn turned her head to the side and bit her lower lip stubbornly. Cassandra leaned in and rubbed her nose along Brynn’s jawline nearly to the rim of her ear, and dragged her lip along her skin. “What are you not telling me?”

Beneath her, Brynn squirmed and shifted, hands kneading her skin gently. “Please, please…I’ll tell you, but – back in Haven?”

Cassandra pulled back enough to meet grey-blue eyes and nodded slowly. Brynn bit her lip again and she leaned in, taking it between her lips as she kissed her gently. “Haven,” she said softly, resting their foreheads together and shifting enough so Brynn wasn’t completely stuck beneath her. “Go to sleep; we have more ground to cover tomorrow.”

“Ah, and the heroes return triumphant!” Varric greeted them as they walked through Haven’s gates, having left their mounts with the horsemaster and handed off the rescued to the waiting medics just within the gates. “So, do the dashing Seeker or Herald have any juicy stories to share?”

“Not now, Varric,” Cassandra said tersely, meeting Brynn’s eyes over his head. She didn’t know exactly where they stood on informing anyone else about their – relationship? courtship? casual-ship? Ugh. – and grimaced when Brynn stared helplessly back at her.

“Oh, come on, Seeker, live a little! It’s the Fallow Mire, home to innumerable undead, rainy bogs full of mysterious things…there has to be a story in there somewhere!”

“There is not.” Cassandra swept by Varric with Brynn in tow heading toward the cabins where their medics had set up, on the far side of the village near the Chantry.

The healer in charge tersely told them they had enough provisions for the time being and to let the soldiers recover in peace. Brynn offered a bemused smile as they left the cabin and headed toward the Chantry. “Why was he like that?”

“Probably not enough sleep…and interaction with normal people,” Cassandra offered.

“But he’s a healer, shouldn’t he be more…personable?” Cassandra snorted as she preceded Brynn up the stairs. “Some people just do not know how to behave around others.”

“Seeker, Herald!” A suave voice caught their attention as they walked toward the Chantry doors and they turned as one to find Leliana standing in the opening of her tent, gesturing for them to come closer. “It is good to see you returned unharmed,” she said with a smile ghosting across her lips. Cassandra set her hand upon the pommel of her sword as Leliana led them deeper into her tent toward the table near the back. “I trust the venture into the Mire went well, since you returned with nearly twice as many as you left with?”

“Aye, we rescued the soldiers, although our Herald decided to be reckless and endanger herself in order to facilitate that rescue.”
Leliana raised her eyebrow curiously and Brynn cut off Cassandra quickly. “It all ended fine, *sa’lath.*”

“Yes, but it could not have.”

“But it did.” Cassandra scowled at the top of Brynn’s head, the elf having turned her face toward the map and resolutely avoiding the Seeker’s irritated amber gaze. “Are these the movements for our scouts?”

“Yes, along with other…more delicate maneuvers,” Leliana said quietly. Cassandra looked at her and noticed the spymaster regarding Brynn with an unsettling expression (one that made the Seeker recall a particular encounter with a dragon that was determined to use her as a bone to gnaw on) on her face. Her piercing blue eyes bounced between Brynn’s head and her own owlish expression, and she hastily schooled her face to resemble its normal apathy. She felt a chill down her spine when Leliana smirked but walked to the other side of the table, and only paid half attention to their conversation. “We have received a missive from Val Royeaux since you left; we can discuss it at the war table after the noon meal, along with other business that has cropped up since your departure.”

Leliana’s expression clouded over as she dismissed them, and Cassandra led them out of the tent and into the cool confines of the Chantry. They spent the remainder of the morning catching up on news with Josephine (a messenger had arrived just two days prior to announce the arrival of a duke who was contemplating pledging his aid to the Inquisition, among other things) and visiting the armorer and weavers to hand over Brynn’s damaged armor and ragged cloak.

By the time they walked back to the vestry-turned-war room, the other advisors had already gathered. Josephine was daintily eating her meal while surreptitiously eyeing Cullen’s less than neat eating habits with a somewhat dismayed expression. To the side, with a clear view of the door and windows at the back of the room, Leliana stood with her arms crossed and her plate nearly untouched before her. “You have arrived,” she said. “Sit, eat, and we will begin.”

Brynn took a seat at the far end of the table and tucked into the thick stew, soaking up the liquid with the coarse bread given to her while Cassandra stood to the side and ate with mechanical movements. “As I said earlier, we have been issued an invitation from Val Royeaux; specifically, to the Winter Palace for a masquerade ball. It seems that our fledgling Inquisition has captured Empress Celene’s attention.” The look on Leliana’s face didn’t seem to indicate that would necessarily be a good thing.

Cassandra swallowed her mouthful of stew and pointed at the table with her spoon. “How long until the ball?”

“Three months, plenty of time to gather information and barely enough to prepare our Herald for the Game.” Brynn’s head jerked up, a somewhat offended expression on her face. “It’s the truth, Your Grace. The Game is a very serious matter in Orlais, nearly always one of life and death,” Leliana said seriously. “You need to be able to maneuver the politics of the nobles there, or they will tear you apart. Before you leave for the field again, Josephine, Cassandra, and I will all help you to learn it.” Brynn’s *vallaslin* twisted as she frowned but she nodded compliantly.

“Okay, onto other business. My scouts have ranged far into Orlais and come across innumerable rifts that need to be dealt with; I suggest heading there post-haste. Our soldiers can defend Ferelden for the time being.”

“Where have the rifts been spotted?” Cassandra asked.
Leliana pressed her finger to several spots on the westward side of the massive map. “West of Val Royeaux, there have been reported sighting in the Hissing Wastes, Forbidden Oasis, and the Western Approach.”

“That sounds lovely,” Brynn chirped sarcastically.

Leliana smirked at her and nodded. “It is a harsh and unforgiving land that far inland, full of desert sand and lacking much by way of shelter or reprieve from the sun’s heat. You must be careful out there, dehydration and wild animals are just as dangerous, if not more than, as the demons and raiders you will encounter. Bear that in mind as you journey, Herald.”

Leliana splayed her hand flat on the surface of the table and Cassandra felt the mood shift as both Cullen and Josephine leaned forward, their expressions equally grave. “We’ve had other… disturbing news. In the past week, several of my spies have brought back letters from our enemies, many of which have begun referencing someone they refer to as ‘Master’ and ‘the Elder One.’ We are not sure who exactly this is, but they seem to be at the head of the problem. The letters defer to them, stating their intentions to ask this ‘Elder One’ about possible future moves to make against the Inquisition and how to best acquire their approval.”

Leliana’s frown deepened and Brynn set her bowl down. “You’re worried?”

“Of course I am. There is an unknown threat out there, one I haven’t found yet, and if it reaches you-”

“Then we’ll deal with it. But it hasn’t yet,” Brynn said certainly, “and I refuse to hide here until it does. I can be useful out there, helping to close the rifts and cut off avenues of opportunity for the Venatori to use.” Brynn stood up, face set stubbornly as she jabbed her finger against the table pointedly. “I will not be a figurehead to bring out when the Inquisition needs to put on airs, only to be put back away when my usefulness has run its course.”

Cassandra stared at Brynn’s profile in surprise at her outburst while Leliana looked vaguely impressed and approving of her stance. “I would not ask that of you, Your Grace, but nonetheless, we have to address these concerns. For now, I agree that you should be out there trying to do as much as you can, but if and when the time comes, you will come back to Haven where there are more men and women to protect you. You are the only one who can close the fade rifts, we cannot risk losing you.”

Brynn’s shoulders slumped as she nodded and planted her palms flat on the table. Leliana nodded decisively and folded her arms again. “Now that we have settled that, I suggest we all return to our posts. And, Brynn?” Brynn’s head jerked up at her given name, eyes round in surprise. Leliana grinned beneath her cowl. “Get some sleep, you look like you’ve been up through the past several nights.”

Cassandra felt her cheeks heat at the reminder of the past nights, spent wrapped up in each other and exploring their bodies as much as they could within the confines of their tent without waking any of the soldiers accompanying them. She felt the vestiges of arousal and frustration well up again at the reminder and watched Brynn shift uneasily in her seat under Leliana’s smirk, the knowing gleam in her eyes setting her teeth on edge.

They walked out of the war room under three sets of eyes and Brynn led the way to her cabin, leaving the door open for Cassandra to shut behind her. The fire had been lit by one of the myriad laborers in Haven and blazed merrily in the stone fireplace. Brynn unceremoniously stripped her leathers off and laid them over the stand on the opposite wall, pulling her boots off as she sat on the floor under the window. Cassandra pulled her armor off and set it neatly against the wall as
Brynn lit the candles on the window sill, kneeling before the bowl and ashy image on the wall. She muttered under her breath, vague words in *elvhen* that Cassandra barely caught on the fringe of her hearing. She finished pulling her damp clothing off and draped them over the chairs by the fire, suddenly feeling exhausted as the heat permeated her bones and settled deep inside her.

Brynn sighed contently when Cassandra walked up behind her and set her hands on her shoulders, kneading the tense muscles with strong fingers as the elf leaned back against her thigh. “Is it just me, or are you suddenly tired, *emma sa’lath*?”

Cassandra nodded and offered her hand, pulling Brynn to her feet and leading her to the bed, piled with warm furs and downy pillows. They nestled beneath the furs and rolled against each other, twining their arms and legs together until there was only one lump beneath the covers, Brynn’s head tucked neatly beneath Cassandra’s chin as she listened to her heartbeat and pressed occasional kisses to her sternum between the laces of her loose undershirt. Cassandra closed her eyes and rubbed circles on Brynn’s back beneath her shirt, feeling the lean muscle shift subtly beneath her skin.

“Sleep, Brynn, we will wake for evening meal.”

“You too…Cass…sleep.”

“I will.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

*Ne enansal, emma sa’lath* - You are a treasure, my beloved.
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“You too…Cass…sleep.”

“I will.”

Brynn turned when she heard enter her cabin and saw Josephine lingering awkwardly in the doorway, omnipresent quill and papers in her hands.

“My apologies, Your Grace, I didn’t-”

“It’s fine, Josephine.” Brynn smiled easily as she got off her knees in front of the small shrine by the window and gestured at the ashy symbol on the window. “I was nearly done anyway.”

“Oh. Uhm, if you don’t mind my asking,” Josephine said haltingly, “what exactly were you doing?” Her eyes were alight with curiosity and Brynn nearly laughed at her childlike wonder.

“It’s no great offense. Come, sit, I promise I don’t bite.” They sat on the chairs by the fire and Brynn watched Josephine arrange herself carefully, fidgeting fingers playing with her sash of office idly. “I was praying to Mythal to guide my hand and keep my thoughts just and fair. We’ve been through so much since the explosion…”

“Responsibility?”

Brynn blinked at Josephine and then her mouth opened in realization. “Ah, yes, uhm…one of the gods that the Dalish worship. She is the goddess of love and justice.”

Josephine leaned forward in intrigue. “Really? Can you tell me more?”

“Yeah, sure.” Brynn smiled in bemusement at the ambassador’s fascination and pulled her feet up to curl more comfortably into the chair. “There are nine gods and goddesses in our pantheon; headed by Mythal and Elgarn’nan, who is patron of fatherhood and vengeance.”

“Justice and vengeance, two sides of the same coin,” Josephine broke in.

“Aye, just so. Beneath them, the other seven represent the most important aspects of Dalish life,
and everyone from the littlest da’len to the Keeper knows the lore. Our hahrens keep the stories alive, passing down our history and stories.” Brynn spoke at length about the deities the Dalish worshipped and answered Josephine’s questions about them freely.

“And your language! It’s so...oh, what’s the word – soft sounding, you know?” Josephine was flush from the heat of the fire and her excitement, nearly falling over the arm of the chair she was in with her fervor. “Not like my Antiva, such harsh consonants. Even Orlesian doesn’t sound so pretty as Elvish.” Brynn felt her ears inexplicably heat up and looked toward the fire, eyes catching the light and reflecting it eerily.

“Can you teach me?” her head jerked up at the query and she caught Josephine’s eyes. She flushed under Brynn’s scrutiny, but kept her eyes steadily. “Elven, I mean. I just – it seems like it would be prudent for me to be able to understand. Forewarned is forearmed, after all.” She laughed awkwardly and ducked her head to stare into the flames.

Brynn felt a smile tug at her lips and gracefully uncurled from her chair, crouching beside Josephine’s and waiting patiently for the ambassador to sheepishly meet her eyes. “I’d enjoy that,” she said.

A smile broke like sun across fresh snow across Josephine’s face and she clasped Brynn’s hand resting on the arm of the chair. “So would I.”

Brynn pulled on the disheveled ends of her hair in frustration while Leliana, Cassandra, and Josephine all looked on with varying expressions on their face (amusement for the most part, underlaid with concern and vexation on the Seeker’s and Spymaster’s face, respectively) as she floundered in her most recent attempts at writing. “I can’t do this!”

“Yes, you can, and you must,” Leliana said with conviction, leaning across the table with papers and scrapped attempts at writing scattered across it. “In order to have any sort of legitimacy, you must be able to read, write, and dictate flawlessly. Any potential allies must be able to look up to you as their leader, not an unread, knife-eared savage—which is all they will see,” she said over Brynn’s vehement snarl, “because of your heritage. I certainly don’t agree with them, but you must see how others may very well regard you.”

Brynn’s hackles dropped slowly under Leliana’s steady blue gaze and she sighed. “Ma nuvenin. I just don’t understand what this will help with, exactly.”

“Besides giving you an edge over the diplomats and officials who will visit Haven,” Josephine broke in suddenly, waving her quill around, “it will also be beneficial to yourself to be able to read and write well. What if you come across a letter by yourself and it ends up having detailed instructions on the whereabouts of some artifact that may help us close the rift over Andraste’s resting place permanently?” Brynn nodded slowly and Leliana picked up on the ambassador’s train of thought. “If you can read, you become better informed and won’t have to rely on us so heavily other than in an advisory capacity. You can become more self-reliant, Brynn.”

Brynn’s grey-blue eyes flashed at the last with want and she returned her attention to the paper beneath her hand, painstakingly rewriting the words Cassandra had scrawled in her surprisingly elegant script. The Seeker felt affection crawl up her throat as she watched Brynn’s tongue stick out just a little in concentration and her vallasslin twisted with her expression as the quill seemed to leap from her grip. Her fingers clenched spasmodically and a pained gasp escaped her before she could catch it.
Leliana was at her side before Cassandra, crouching beside the chair and taking Brynn’s hand between hers. “Is it still sore?” Brynn held her breath as sickly green light flashed beneath the skin of her left palm and her fingers twitched out of her control, only exhaling once the light faded. A muscle ticked in her jaw as she nodded mutely and Leliana hesitated a moment before she took off her gauntlets. “I think we’re done today,” she said, wordlessly dismissing the other two women. Josephine picked up her quill and papers and escaped but Cassandra lingered uncertainly until Leliana met her eyes and smiled faintly.

“I will be training; come find me when you are done.”

“Of course, sa’lath.”

Cassandra flinched when Leliana’s eyes cut back over to her and fled the small room off the nave of the Chantry, leaving the spymaster cradling Brynn’s hand between hers. Leliana pulled Brynn’s hand closer and silently began kneading the knotted muscle in the middle of her palm. “Does she know?” She asked a few minutes into the impromptu massage, once the worst of the lines had left Brynn’s face.

“No,” the elf said quietly, expression dropping as she met Leliana’s eyes. “I haven’t told her yet.”

“Why not, lethallan?”

The use of the word in Leliana’s dulcet tones caught Brynn off guard and she relaxed as the redhead continued the rhythmic circles with her thumbs. “I…truthfully? I don’t know how she will react.” She shyly glanced up at Leliana through her lashes and the spymaster smiled gently. “Yes, you do.”

“…yes, I do.” Brynn swallowed and Leliana turned her attention to her fingers, coaxing the still tense digits to relax instead of curling protectively over their palm. “I’m scared.”

“I know, but you don’t have to be. Cassandra, loud and contrary and pigheaded as she tends to be, feels the same way you do. She is na vhenas, is she not? You can’t return to your clan any longer, but you don’t need their protection or shelter any longer, either. Cassandra has taken that place in your heart.”

“Aye,” Brynn whispered, slouching as Leliana rubbed the last vestiges of pain from her hand and ended with kneading her wrist. She slid out of the chair and leaned against Leliana’s side, nestling in closely under her wide blue eyes. Leliana slowly relaxed and wrapped a hand around Brynn’s shoulder, bringing her in closer to inhale the scent of leather and lavender that seemed to permanently surround her. “Your lover…the Hero, she taught you as I have taught Cassandra.”

The words were a statement, not a question, and Leliana nodded against Brynn’s crown. “She and I…we shared everything during the Blight. We were younger than you when the darkspawn came, and we kept each other safe, and sane, during that long year. It just…happened. Neither of us planned on falling in love, and now…I pray for her safety and return every day.” Leliana sighed, ruffling the unkempt hair beneath her chin, and Brynn nestled closer.

“She will come back to you, one’s heart can’t remain removed from its body for long without languishing away,” Brynn said with certainty.

“You can’t know that.”

“I can. You feel the same for her, Mahariel, as I do for Cassandra, and so it is true, because I would face Fen’Harel himself to return to her.”
“Rhys.”

“Pardon?”

“Her name…is Rhys,”

Brynn pulled away far enough to see Leliana’s melancholy smile and mirrored it. “You will see her again. Rhys will return to you, whole, healthy…yours.”

“I hope you are right.”

A frustrated groan filled the air of the war room, where Brynn sat before the map while her advisors stood scattered around the room. “Fenedhis…I don’t understand this! Why do I need to know how to tell lies within a truth?” Brynn frowned crossly and muttered under her breath. Josephine sighed and tapped her quill on the stack of papers beside her, Cullen rubbed his temples, Leliana crossed her arms and hid her expression beneath her cowl. Cassandra fought back laughter at the petulant expression on Brynn’s face and barely managed to school her expression before irate grey-blue eyes found hers. “This Game you all refer to is barbaric.”

“Aye, but it is the way of Orlesians.” Cassandra offered a smirk to Leliana, who rolled her eyes and turned to face the window. “They have nothing better to do than throw fancy parties and tell lies concealed within truths so they can make themselves feel better about sticking a knife in a noble’s back.” She scoffed as memories of past dealings with poncy nobles crossed her mind and Brynn scrubbed her face.

“But why do I need to learn this? This skill won’t help me to hunt, or close rifts, or defend myself.”

“No, but it will guarantee a place at the Empress’ side. You will face bias when we reach the Winter Palace because of your ears; you cannot afford any other weaknesses. You must be versed in the Great Game in order to survive the masquerade.” Leliana jabbed her finger against the worn map emphatically and Brynn bared her teeth in a snarl.

“But why can you not go in my stead? You are well versed in this ‘game,’ you would be much better prepared than I.”

“I cannot,” Leliana shook her head, “as my position as your spymaster requires a certain amount of secrecy, and my past…suffice it to say that if any number of people who are likely to attend the ball recognized me, barbed words and double entendres would be the least of your problems.” Leliana walked to stand by Brynn, hand on her shoulder as she squeezed it reassuringly. “Now, try it again.”

Brynn strode determinedly toward the gates of Haven, leathers secured over her clothes and newly repaired light armor fastened over that, the Inquisition’s tabard cinched at her waist with her belt and a mulish expression on her face. Cassandra spied her from the training grounds outside the wall and jogged to catch up to her. She caught her wrist by the stables and drew her to a halt. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re planning an expedition without any of your inner circle to accompany you.”
Brynn’s expression hardened further as she twisted out of Cassandra’s grasp. “And if I am? I am going out of my mind, Cassandra! These lessons on the ‘game,’ all of these phrases and gestures Leliana is making me learn; fenedhis, if I have to memorize one more way to kindly tell a noble to piss off!” With each word, Brynn’s voice grew louder and thicker with her accent, frustration stealing the careful enunciation she normally used.

Cassandra stood in front of her with an amused expression on her face and, when Brynn paused for air, took her hand and led her deeper within the stables to a dark corner. “Are you done?”

“No, I am n-“

Cassandra stole her words with her lips, pressing them together as she yanked the woman into her. Brynn yelped but melted against her quickly, arms wrapping around her waist as Cassandra cradled the back of her head and played with the hair by her ear. She pulled away when Brynn was pliant against her and kissed her temple when the elf laid her head on her shoulder. “Now, if you would listen?” Brynn mumbled incoherently against her shoulder and Cassandra smiled. “I understand your frustration, but it has only been five days. Your bruises have barely faded completely, and you want to go running out into the wilds again?”

“Anything to get away from them, emma sa’lath.” Brynn actually shuddered, hands clutching tightly to Cassandra’s sweat-soaked tabard, and the Seeker laughed lowly.

“Josephine and Leliana can be…overzealous…when they find something they can tackle together.”

“I’ve noticed,” Brynn said dryly.

“They just want you to stay safe, Brynn. You know that, right?”

“Yes, but do they have to be so bloody single-minded about it?” Brynn whined quietly.

Cassandra chuckled as she stroked her neck, squeezing gently to soothe her. “It is their way, you know that. But, I do understand. We can go to the Exalted Plains; there have been reports of dragon sightings out there.” Cassandra snorted derisively but pushed Brynn back to look into her eyes. “They are full of druffalo shit, but it will be a good diversion for a few weeks. It’s nearly ten days out there, plus a week or so hunting down rifts and sealing them, then we come back. And you focus on what they tell you. Deal?”

Brynn studied her for nearly a minute and Cassandra was just beginning to feel uncomfortable when she smiled and stuck her hand out. “Deal, Cassandra.” They shook and then Cassandra sat Brynn down so they could actually get their team together before they left.

“But we still have to be fast, we can’t let Leliana or Josephine find out we’re leaving.”

“As you say. I’ll get our companions together, you get the supplies from the quartermaster and we’ll meet by the road in a candlemark.”

They split up and Cassandra walked back into Haven, stopping in Brynn’s cabin for her armor and clean clothes, then quickly filled her pack and walked back out to gather the companions they’d decided to take with them. She stopped first by the Chantry, taking care to look like she wasn’t leaving. “Madame de Fer?”

“I am here.” Vivienne materialized out of the shadows of the nave, her elegant face impassive as always. “Did you need something, dear?”

“We are leaving for the Exalted Plains; you will be accompanying us.” Cassandra, while hesitant
to include the newest ally to arrive, needed to test her skills in battle, and felt confident that their team could make up for any inadequacies she might have. “We leave in a candlemark.”

Vivienne’s lips thinned, but otherwise her face remained expressionless and she nodded. “Very well. I’ll meet you at the gates.” She disappeared before Cassandra could say anything else and the Seeker shook her head as she walked to the fire at the gates.

“Varric.”

“Seeker! Come to visit my humble abode?” He gestured at the cheery blaze and tent and smiled up at her.

“Gather your gear, we are going to the Exalted Plains soon.”

“Soon? Like, tomorrow soon or now soon?” The look Cassandra leveled at him sent him backpedaling a step. “Now it is. Got it, I’ll be here when you come back.”

Her last stop was the training grounds, and Cassandra stepped into the middle of a bout between the leader of the Chargers and some Inquisition soldiers. “Iron Bull, a word?”

“Of course. Krem, horns up!” The man stepped into the makeshift ring and hefted his two handed sword with a nod, and Bull stepped toward the Seeker. “What’s the word, Seeker?”

“Do you wish to accompany us to the Exalted Plains? We are leaving within a candlemark, and will not come back for about three weeks. Can you leave your men that long?”

“They’ll be fine, Krem runs them almost as well as I do.” Bull smiled down at the Seeker and scratched his beard. “Why the hell not? Let me grab my pack. Wait here.” He returned a few minutes later with his pack slung over his shoulders, weapons sheathed at his back and scant armor strapped to his body. He drew his cloak, the one concession he made to Haven’s winter cold, around his body and nodded for Cassandra to take the lead.

They found Brynn tacking up their mounts in the stable and Bull stepped forward to lead his massive charger out into the crisp air. “Is everyone ready?”

“They should be here soon. You got the supplies?”

“Yes, the quartermaster gave us enough to last close to a week. Supplemented with hunting, we should be fine.” Varric and Vivienne arrived soon after the animals were ready and, with the exception of a few muttered curses from the dwarf when his pony tried to nip his arm, they were off with nary a sound and no fuss accompanying their departure.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Ma nuvenin- As you wish.

Ma vhenas- Your home
I know it's short, guys, but trust me.

“*They’ll be fine, Krem runs them almost as well as I do.*” Bull smiled down at the Seeker and scratched his beard. “*Why the hell not? Let me grab my pack. Wait here.*” He returned a few minutes later with his pack slung over his shoulders, weapons sheathed at his back and scant armor attached to his body. He drew his cloak, the one concession he made to Haven’s winter cold, around his body and nodded for Cassandra to take the lead.

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“So,” Varric began conversationally, “why didn’t you bring Chuckles on this grand adventure?”

They were several days out of Haven and had nearly made it to the westward side of the Frostback Mountains. Their horses were steadily maneuvering the rocky terrain with little input from their riders, leaving the party plenty of time to their thoughts. They were moving quickly without the extra time that bringing a company of soldiers would have added, although Cassandra wasn’t overly happy about the apparent lack of security for Brynn. She rode at Brynn’s side, surreptitiously edging her mount closer as they descended the mountain. She rolled her eyes at Varric’s question and said, “Brynn did not think his company was required.” She shot a look at Brynn, who studiously ignored her dark gaze and smiled to herself at the small scoff the Seeker gave.

“Oh, it’s *Brynn* now, is it, Seeker?”

Cassandra cursed Varric’s knowing tone and turned around to berate him when Vivienne rode into her line of sight, form impeccable as she trotted by. “I don’t know about you, darling, but I would like to rest somewhere warm and dry tonight, and at the rate we’re going, we won’t cover the distance to that little hamlet at the foot of the mountains.”

Bull bellowed out a laugh at the front of the party and the mage offered him a withering glance as she rode past. He shook his horned head as she took the lead and fell back enough to mutter to the others, “Icy bitch. Needs to get bent, just a little to dislodge that stick that’s taken up residence, I think.”
Varric chuckled as Cassandra snorted and Brynn blinked incomprehensibly. “I don’t understand.”

“Maybe our dear Seeker can clarify for you.” The look Varric shot at Cassandra was teasing and she felt her cheeks heat in response, stammering over her words and jerking her head around to stare down the trail.

“Cassandra? What doe-”

“It is nothing!” She shot a glare at the two men laughing at her side and urged her mount into a canter to catch up with Vivienne.

They rode like that until they could see smoke from the houses that made up the small mountainside hamlet and went into the village. They rode to a small, well kept inn and handed their mounts over to the stableman before walking inside. There were a generous number of patrons in the tavern area, drinking and eating and talking amongst themselves. To a man, their eyes swiveled to the newcomers lingering in the doorway with Brynn and Cassandra at the head of the group. Cassandra cautiously watched them as they walked further into the tavern and sat at a table against the wall. She planted herself facing the bulk of the room and Bull leaned against the timber beside her, crossing his arms as his eye perused the patrons with an amused gleam. She felt a smile pull at the corner of her lips as eyes lingered on the massive man standing at her side and their well armed and armored appearance, although she bristled as several eyes paused on Brynn, who had yet to lower her hood and was sitting at her side so she could watch the room. She could see a few groups leaning in toward each other and muttering under their breath, occasionally stealing glances their way as Vivienne sat elegantly in her chair and leaned her staff against the table as she removed her cloak.

“Well, at least it’s warm in here, although the décor and company leave something to be desired.” Her eyes traipsed coolly over the people near the bar and her lip curled. A barmaid walked over to them and barely gave the motley group a glance as she asked them for drinks and told them she’d bring out stew and bread for the table. When she left, Brynn lowered her cowl and draped her damp cloak over the back of her chair. She began disarming herself as her companions talked quietly amongst themselves, hanging her bow and quiver over the corner of the chair.

“Do not get too comfortable,” Cassandra whispered.

She nodded and smiled reassuringly, slipping her hand under the table to squeeze Cassandra’s thigh. “Don’t worry, emma sa’lath, I’m not fool enough to give these men an easy opening. I have eyes and ears.”

“Yeah, and I think they’re gonna come in handy, Boss.” Bull shifted his weight against the timber he was leaning against and casually rubbed his ear. “Some of them…”

“I know. Thank you, Bull.” Brynn squeezed Cassandra’s leg again when she stiffened up and said under her breath, “Don’t worry yet, Cassandra. Bull and I will let you know when something happens.”

Although uncertain, Cassandra forced herself to relax and drop her shoulders from their defensive stance. Their food was brought out a couple minutes later and they dug in ravenously. As they were sopping up the last of the stew with the hearty bread brought out, a couple men stood from a nearby table and wandered over to them. Cassandra felt Brynn’s hand, still on her leg, press warningly for her to stay still. She watched the men approach from beneath her lashes and continued to eat when they stopped behind Varric. The dwarf was still eating but his eyes were locked on Cassandra’s face, stony and ready to brawl on a moment’s notice. She shook her head minutely and a smirk crossed his lips.
“Can we help you…gentlemen?” Vivienne slipped as much subtle derision into her tone as she could while still appearing civil.

“We don’t like knife-ears or ox-men here. Got no use for their like,” one said gruffly. His companion nodded and sneered at Bull when the man shifted his bulk again. “Collar your pets outside or leave; no good for anything but back work and field work.” They laughed meanly and Cassandra nearly stood but for the firm hand on her thigh. No one else at the table moved a muscle, eyes riveted on Brynn as she pushed back her chair silently stood. The men eyed her lecherously as she walked around the table to stand in front of them, dwarfed not just by their height but also their impressive girths. Nonetheless, she stood fearlessly in front of them with a placid smile on her lips. “Kinda pretty for a knife-ear though, if you don’t mind the tattoos and weird eyes.”

“Why, thank you.”

The men seemed startled when Brynn spoke and then they smirked. “She speaks, will wonders never cease! I thought all knife-ears only talked tree-speech.” He elbowed his companions in the ribs and they laughed. They had drawn the attention of the other patrons, all watching with bated breath as the small woman stepped into the mens’ personal space and stared up at them with her wide eyes catching the light and reflecting back at them.

“Oh, no, I speak _elvhen_, too. I just thought common would be the easiest for you _shems_ to understand.” The smile she shot them was positively wicked and the men grew red faced.

One reached for her and she easily sidestepped him, putting herself in front of the other. “Get over here, girl!” When he reached for her again, she grabbed the other man and pulled him closer, planting him in front of the other. They tangled up in each other’s limbs and flailed against the side of the table.

Varric picked up Bianca and moved closer to Vivienne as Bull’s shoulders shook in mirth and Cassandra watched the entire display worriedly. She scanned the crowd, most who were stuck to their seats and only watching with faint interest. There were a few faces scattered amongst the people that gave her pause, but no one got up to help the men, so she forced herself to stay in her chair and keep a hand on the pommel of her sword. The men untangled themselves and reached for Brynn again, but her hand flashed out and they reared back with startled cries. Red welled on their palms from the blade of the small knife she was palming and dripped onto the floor.

“You fucking bitch, I’m gonna gut you.” One reached for his blade on his hip and Brynn stepped inside his guard. Cassandra immediately rose from her chair as Brynn pushed him into his companion with surprising strength and followed his uncoordinated backpedaling. His friend stumbled into Bull’s chest and was arrested with the qunari’s massive hands resting warningly on his shoulders.

The other man found himself held at knife point by Brynn, her small dagger digging uncomfortably into the sensitive skin beneath his eye. “Now, since I have your undivided attention, listen to me. You, _shem_, seem to be grossly misinformed about the nature of the _elvhen_ and _dorf’len_. You see, we’re not only pack animals or objects to be used and discarded at your whims; we are also quite…how to put this, _intelligent._” She casually dug the point of her blade into his cheek and he winced. “We don’t appreciate being ridiculed and spoken of as though we don’t understand. Now, since you can now see that, I suggest that you and your friend take your leave before my companions get any more riled up.”

She let the blade slip just a little as she pulled away and watched the blood trail down his skin as she stepped back. He cupped his cheek and, with a hateful – and more than a little fearful – glare,
collected his terrified companion from Bull’s grasp and they slipped out of the tavern. Brynn looked slowly around the inn and, once satisfied no one else would be challenging their right to dine there, sat back down beside Cassandra and tucked back into the cold remainders of her supper without another word.

“Well, then, that escalated quickly.” Varric’s gruff laughter broke the remaining tension at the table. “I didn’t know you had it in you, Your Gracefulness. Maybe next time you decide to go after the local yokels, let us know beforehand? I think the Seeker was ready to come across the table, and I really want to finish my meal.”

He smiled brightly at Cassandra as he lifted his cup at her and Bull laughed raucously. “Got that right! Way to go, Boss! I have to admit, I’m rather disappointed there wasn’t more blood, but you’ve got balls, I’ll give you that.”

Cassandra caught the flush that decorated Brynn’s cheeks as she ducked her head and it distracted her from the irritation of Varric’s comment. They retired to the three rooms they’d rented for the night not long after, Varric and Bull taking the one at the end of the hall closest to the stairs. Vivienne slept by herself in the next room while Brynn and Cassandra took the last room available, near the far end of the hallway. They silently stripped their arms and armor off, Cassandra stacking hers atop the scarred table pushed against the wall while Brynn laid her leathers over the back of the chair. She set her weapons within easy reach of the bed furthest from the door and laid her cloak out by the crackling fireplace to help it dry, then walked up behind Cassandra to help her remove the last of her chainmail. She wrapped her arms around Cassandra’s waist and laid her forehead between her shoulder blades, inhaling her scent and relaxing for the first time since they had walked into the tavern.

“I wish you had not done that.”

“I know, emma sa’lath, but there wasn’t any other option.”

“I know.” Cassandra sighed and turned in Brynn’s grasp, pulling her closer so she could lay her cheek against her head. “I know that, and I am glad you did nothing overly foolish; I just wish there was a way to stop it from occurring in the first place.” She smiled a little when she felt lips press against the bare skin of her sternum and scratched Brynn’s back in return. The woman relaxed further into her so Cassandra was taking nearly all her weight, and squealed when the Seeker lifted her bodily into her arms and walked over to the far bed.

She laid Brynn atop the blanket before climbing over to straddle her waist and pin her gently in place. “If I had it my way,” Cassandra said quietly, amber gaze locked on Brynn’s blue-grey eyes, “you would suffer no ills from small minded men like those. If I were able to protect you from all the world’s prejudices…”

“But you can’t, and for that, I thank you. Truly, the greatest thing you have done for me, dearest Cassandra, is to let me stand on my own and face my demons by my own power. I am stronger for it, and I never falter, because I know you’re at my side, not standing before me.”

Brynn reached up to curl her fingers behind Cassandra’s neck and pulled her down into a kiss that left them breathless. “Now, as much as I would absolutely love to show my appreciation for your gentility, we do have to make an early start in the morning.” Brynn nipped Cassandra’s chin and rolled to the side, pulling Cassandra with her so she was cradled in the bend of the Seeker’s body. “Get to sleep, sa’lath.”

“As you say. Sleep well, Brynn.” Cassandra pressed her lips to Brynn’s neck and tightened her hold around her waist, molding them more tightly together as they drifted off.
Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Emma sa'lath- my beloved

dorf'len- grey children (my term for the Qunari)
She laid Brynn atop the blanket before climbing over to straddle her waist and pin her gently in place. “If I had it my way,” Cassandra said quietly, amber gaze locked on Brynn’s blue-grey eyes, “you would suffer no ills from small minded men like those. If I were able to protect you from all the world’s prejudices…”

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“As you say. Sleep well, Brynn.” Cassandra pressed her lips to Brynn’s neck and tightened her hold around her waist, molding them more tightly together as they drifted off.

They rode steadily through the Exalted Plains, startling the occasional halla and snoufleur as their mounts pressed through the tall, reedy grasses growing up. Brynn had dismounted her horse once they passed through the final stretch of woods and handed the reins to Cassandra before disappearing amongst the tall grass and scattered stands of trees with her bow in hand.

Once she was out of sight, Varric sidled up to Cassandra on his pony and shot a grin at her. “So, Seeker, since our lovely Herald is in absentia, I have some...questions for you.” She rolled her eyes at him and stayed silent, tracking the faint movements of animals far afield. She caught a glimpse of horns twisting in the sunlight as a halla trotted into a copse of trees and smiled to herself.

“So, how’s your little tryst with her going?”

Cassandra froze in the saddle and Varric took her silence as confirmation. Before she could form a response, he said, “Don’t deny it, Seeker. I’ve seen you around her, you’re not nearly as subtle as you seem to think you are.” He chuckled and nudged his pony into a trot to keep up with her. “Besides, her heart eyes are just as bad as yours are! Just be glad that I was the one to bring it up and not our resident Vint, he’d never let it go.” Varric shaded his eyes against the glare of the sun and ignored Cassandra’s glare. He frowned suddenly and squinted into the distance. “Not to interrupt our lovely discussion, but does that look like a rift to you?”

He pointed toward a stand of trees and Cassandra shaded her eyes to try and find it. A faint spark of green light caught her eye and she nodded. “Yes, it does. Bull, Vivienne, there is a rift up ahead!”

“Great, I was getting bored of all this nature and shit. Give me a fight!” Bull kicked his massive charger into a canter and the others followed on his heels. Cassandra unsheathed her sword and watched Varric load a bolt into his crossbow as he balanced himself with his thighs while Bull shouted a war cry and pulled his horse to a stop outside the treeline.
They tied their animals to a tree far outside the range of the rift and checked their weapons and armor as Cassandra looked around for Brynn. Light gleamed off auburn hair nearby as Brynn jogged through the grass. She stopped within arms’ reach of Cassandra with a pensive frown on her lips and the magic of the anchor just beginning to spark in her left hand. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah, I’m just glad you all saw it, otherwise we could’ve rode right past.” She flinched as a small explosion of sound came from the rift beyond the trees and a strong wind buffeted them immediately after.

“Come on, kids, let’s go have fun!” Varric’s voice called them to the matter at hand and they walked into the stand of trees. Sickly green light filtered through the trees as the rift came into sight and several terror demons leapt at them from the trees. They were immediately on the defensive, blocking and evading the demons’ long reaching attacks as Brynn struggled to get close to the rift. She was blown back when a terror demon appeared in front of her and swiped at her with its claws, sending her sprawling.

“Brynn!”

“Don’t worry, I’m fine; just help me clear a path!”

Cassandra helped Brynn to her feet and they tag teamed the terror demon, Brynn darting out from behind Cassandra’s shield to score hits on its grasping arms as Bull swung his massive weapon indiscriminately at their side. Varric and Vivienne stayed a little ways back, picking off the lesser despair demons and keeping the terror demons from swarming the others. Brynn ducked under a terror demon’s reaching arms and heard the whistle of metal cutting through the air a moment before it screamed and faded away, and she thrust her tingling palm into the air. The pain grew in her hand and traveled down her arm to her shoulder, making her grit her teeth as the magic under her skin resonated with the fade rift before them. It pulsed with energy and the demons they were fighting seemed to echo it, twitching in place until the rift imploded on itself and they were destroyed as a wave of heat rushed over them.

Brynn let out a breath when the pain faded to a dull ache and flexed her hand absentlly. She nearly fell over when Bull smacked her shoulder heavily. “Way to go, Boss! That’ll show those green bastards!” He sheathed his massive two handed blade and walked away, leaving the others to gather the remnants of the battle to take with them. Brynn picked up some scraps of cloth from one of the despair demons as Cassandra walked up with some viscous, unidentifiable substance clinging to her and a grimace on her face.

“What in the world is that?”

“I do not know, but it smells oddly and I think it is sticking to my breast plate.” Cassandra’s nose wrinkled and Brynn found herself giggling at the sight. The Seeker mock glared as she walked by and they returned to their mounts, skittish but waiting obediently at the tree they had been hitched to.

“Well, I was going to try and hunt something for us,” Brynn said as she swung up onto her horse, “but I think the fight scared any game off. Come, let’s ride north, I think I saw a path that way.” Brynn led them away from the rift and through a large woods. Slowly, the sounds of wildlife returned and everyone began bantering again.

“So, Madame de Fer, why did you come on this lovely excursion with us? I would have thought combing the backcountry for rifts too rough for you.” Varric grinned roguishly at the mage, astride her sleek mare, and Bull laughed.
Vivienne graced them with a cold glance before returning her attention to the trail they were following. “It is magic, and that is my area of expertise, so I came. Is that not sufficient, dwarf?”

Varric chuckled again as she pointedly ignored him and rode ahead, scratching his chest. “Guess I rubbed her the wrong way.”

“There isn’t a right way with ones like those, my friend. It doesn’t matter if you rub them hard, soft, in circles or straight lines, they just bite and scratch.” Bull crooked a hand and clawed at the air in demonstration as his other hand’s fingers twisted lewdly. Cassandra’s face heated in anger and embarrassment as he made eye contact with her and smiled. “Seeker, what say you? Is there, in fact, a right way to rub a stiff to get them to relax?”

“I would not know,” she said tersely.

He chuckled lowly and took the reins again. “No, I suppose you wouldn’t.” He eyed Brynn as he spoke, who was looking between him and the Seeker with a confused expression.

“Did I miss something again?”

“Maybe if you ask the Lady Seeker really nicely, she’ll tell you tonight when we make camp.” Bull wiggled his eyebrows and rode ahead to harass Vivienne some more, leaving the remaining three behind with varying expressions on their face. Varric took one look at Cassandra’s fuming glare at the qunari’s back and beat a hasty retreat, kicking his pony into a canter to catch up to them.

Brynn edged up closer to Cassandra, slowing her horse to match the other’s pace. “Cassandra?”

“Yes?”

“What was Bull talking about?”

Cassandra looked over at Brynn’s guileless expression and sighed in a long suffering way. “It was a crude reference, you need not concern yourself with it.”

Brynn pursed her lips and pulled in closer to the Seeker. “But I want to understand.”

Cassandra sighed again and dragged her hand down her face. “Fine. Fine, I will explain it to you after we have made camp and settled in for the night. But only after you have practiced writing some more.” Brynn groaned and Cassandra held up her hand. “That is my offer, take it or leave it.”

“Fine. But I’m holding you to it, Cassandra.”

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“IT WHAT!”

Brynn’s voice echoed through the small protrusion of rocks they’d chosen to camp amongst that night, drawing chuckles from Varric and the Iron Bull. Vivienne studiously ignored the distraction, keeping her nose buried in her grimoire as a slew of elvish cursing floated on the evening breeze. It was cut off abruptly, then a faint sigh reached their ears briefly, followed by silence.

Within the tent set furthest from the fire, Cassandra eyed Brynn balefully before she removed her palm from her mouth. She drew them both down onto the sleeping mat they shared and took the
rogue’s hands in hers. “Now do you see why I did not want to tell what he was talking about?”

“Well…I mean, it is crude, but…hardly the worst thing he could’ve said, sa’lath.”

“I know, but…Maker, he could have been more discreet about it.”

“He wouldn’t be the Iron Bull if he were,” Brynn said soothingly. Cassandra snorted and rolled her eyes but let the tension flow from her body. She lay back on the sleeping mat and Brynn lowered herself gingerly onto her, hovering just over Cassandra’s face with her hands slowly mussing her hair. “Don’t worry about them, they only tease because they care. I’d honestly be more concerned if they didn’t ask inappropriate questions about our habits when we’re alone.”

“That is the crux of it though; they do not know the extent of our…activities. We have not even—” Cassandra cut herself off with a choked sound and flushed, even though her hands, which had migrated to Brynn’s hips at some point, didn’t move.

Brynn studied her with a somewhat amused expression on her face and kissed away the perturbed frown on Cassandra’s lips. “Don’t worry. We just go at our own pace; their opinions and questions don’t have any bearing on our relationship.” She combed her fingers through Cassandra’s hair until the Seeker was a boneless pile beneath her slight weight, then shifted to the side and curled into her comforting heat.

“Besides,” she said through a yawn, exposing her sharp eyeteeth and pink tongue, “we’re in the field so often, we haven’t exactly had many chances to be alone. Tent walls don’t make for secure privacy. When we do get to that point, I want to be able to take my time and explore every inch of you without worrying some soldier or one of our other companions would interrupt us.” Brynn drew the blanket over them and buried her nose against Cassandra’s shoulder, falling into a dreamless sleep as the Seeker lay awake, staring at the shadows dancing on the canvas walls and examining her thoughts.

“Seeker, duck!”

Cassandra rolled to the side without question, watching a crossbow bolt bury itself in the demon’s throat. It reared back and roared in pain and rage, and she went after it again with a battle cry. Her sword bit deeply into its molten side, sending it sprawling in the midst of its attack and she pressed her advantage, pushing it toward the river at its back. Behind her, Vivienne fought off a despair demon with scary efficiency, sending spirals of fire toward its ragged frame and twirling her staff to ward off a cone of cold air.

The Iron Bull joined Cassandra as she pushed the demon back, swinging his massive weapon at its head to disorient it, then taking her shield from her arms and using it to send the demon flying through the air. It screamed when it hit the rushing water and disappeared beneath the water, hissing and bubbling madly as its inner heat tried desperately to avoid being put out. Bull smiled widely when it finally disappeared beneath the waves and handed Cassandra’s shield back to her, rushing back into the fray to help Vivienne dispatch the despair demon, which had been crippled and was only faintly fighting her off. Cassandra watched Varric put another demon on its ass with a well timed bolt to the chest, then a small body blurred past it.

Brynn leapt over the fallen logs that lined the riverbank, fleeing a terror demon that was dogging her as the mark in her hand sparked and snapped angrily. The rift over their heads reacted to its proximity, flickering wildly at its heart as tendrils snaked out and tried to reach her. Cassandra ran to help her, ignoring the sweat sliding down her body beneath her weighty armor as she blindsided
the demon with a shield rush. “Go!” She cried, putting her body between the terror’s and Brynn’s. “I will distract it, you seal the rift!”

Brynn ran back toward the rift, holding her bow in her right hand as she thrust her left toward the tear. She growled through the pain as a connection was made and held her position until it dissipated with a rush of warm air that blew over them all. The remaining demons were banished and everyone relaxed as the normal quiet returned to the riverbank. Brynn idly rubbed at her palm as she walked down to the riverside and started scrubbing off the blood and other unidentifiable substances that lingered on her skin.

She heard the others return with their mounts and Bull led them down to drink a little ways upriver where the incline was gentler. Vivienne kept watch at the top of the bank as Varric made jokes to her, trying to goad her into a verbal sparring match, and Cassandra joined Brynn by the rushing water. She removed her helm with a sigh of happiness as the breeze finally reached her skin and slicked back her sweat mussed hair. She cupped a handful of water in her palms and splashed it over her face, rubbing the sweat from her skin as Brynn sat back on her heels and watched her. “Is there something the matter?”

“Oh? You are staring.”

“Hm?”

“Nothing is wrong, I was just… admiring you.” Brynn blushed faintly and glanced away, looking back to find amber eyes staring back at her. A dark eyebrow rose incredulously and she said, “I’m serious! You just… how, in Mythal’s name, do you always look so damn attractive?”

Cassandra snorted in disbelief as she cupped more water in her hand and washed her face, then bent to submerge her shield and clean the remnants of the demon from it. She felt Brynn’s presence at her side, looking from the corner of her eye to find the woman still scrubbing at her arms. Long, thin furrows bled sluggishly from her left wrist and disappeared beneath the sleeve of her leather jerkin, cutting through the vallaslin that decorated her arms. “You are injured, why did you not say anything?” Cassandra took her arm and inspected the wounds as Brynn huffed out a sound like laughter and exasperation.

“It isn’t serious, sa’lath; they’re only scratches.”

“Scratches can still become infected,” Cassandra insisted. She reached for her emergency kit always on her person in the field and pulled out an herbal paste that helped to clean out wounds and keep the worst of infection at bay until more proper treatment could be found. “This should help.”

“Cassandra…”

“Please,” she asked quietly. Brynn searched her eyes and nodded silently, sitting back on her haunches as Cassandra twisted and took her hand in her grasp. “It may sting; some of the herbs are meant to clean out the wounds.”

As she applied the pungent paste, she idly stroked the underside of Brynn’s wrist until she flinched. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, no, it’s just a little ticklish.”

Cassandra realized what she was doing and flushed faintly, although her thumb continued stroking light circles over the thrumming pulse in her wrist. After she had covered the wounds, she bound her arms from wrist to bicep with bandages. “There.”
“Do I pass inspection?” Brynn asked teasingly.

Cassandra smiled in response and sunk her fingers into her tousled hair, scraping her nails lightly across her scalp until grey-blue eyes slipped shut and she nearly began purring from the attention. “I suppose it is sufficient.”

“Hey, if you two are done fondling each other, let’s get a move on!” The Iron Bull’s voice broke the moment and they broke apart with matching blushes staining their cheeks. Cassandra chivalrously offered the hand to help Brynn to her feet and they climbed the embankment to where their horses were waiting. Varric and Bull exchanged smirks as they set off again, grinning at the Seeker’s and Herald’s backs when they subtly moved their mounts closer to each other.
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The rain started the next day, muddying any tracks and making it tough going for the horses, whose shod hooves slipped in the sparse grass that grew on the hillsides. They made camp that night beneath an outcropping of rocks on the side of a large hill and stared out through the light rain from around the warmth of the fire. It was still raining when they set out the next morning, a light drizzle that slowly soaked through their cloaks and made everyone more testy than usual. Even Varric’s normally light hearted banter seemed dampened by the weather, more morose than playful that morning.

“Where in this thrice forsaken place are we going? I thought we left the damn rain behind in the Mire,” Brynn muttered lowly, ducking further into her cloak to avoid the wet droplets that pelted her nose. She shivered slightly under the soaked cloak as a faint breeze blew through and squinted through the rain. “What the…Bull, come up here.” The Iron Bull rode up next to Brynn and she pointed into the distance. “Do you see that, or am I imagining things?”

He tilted his head to the side and peered through the haze of rain. Behind them, Varric, Vivienne, and Cassandra all sat their mounts and waited impatiently to see if there was anything on the horizon. “Well, shit. Whataya know, Boss, I think you found something alright. Looks like a wall.” He spurred his charger toward the structure just taking shape in the distance, leaving Brynn to lead the others.

“What did you see, Your Gracefulness?” Varric rode up next to her on his pony as they trotted on what could barely be considered a path between the grass growing up and the muddy water running down it. He gave his pony its head and let it pick a cautious path along the ground, looking up at Brynn inquisitively.

“It looks like the walls of a structure…but there aren’t any villages out here.”

“Perhaps an abandoned fort?” Cassandra asked, shaking water from her hair.
Vivienne, looking particularly cross as the rainwater soaked into her robes and dripped off the gleaming dome of her skull, rode past them silently. “Regardless, you’d better hope it has four walls and a ceiling, or the princess up there is going to have a royal fit.” Varric jutted his chin toward Vivienne’s stiff back as she drew closer to Bull’s mount and they urged their horses on faster.

The rain began beating down harder the closer they got to what was a long, low wall, and everyone rode through a ruined arch into what had been a hall of sorts. Walls half fallen in and the roof only sparsely present, it was nonetheless drier within than without, where the rain had begun driving relentlessly into the ground and the sides of the structure. The wind howled down the ruined hall as they dismounted and searched for a more defensible place to bunk down until the storm passed, eventually settling down in a smaller room with the walls mostly intact and only a portion of the ceiling collapsed in, leaving the horses a place to drink as they sat on fallen blocks of stone and spread their sodden cloaks over other stones.

“Well, isn’t this a lovely predicament. Anyone up for a story? That’s the best way to pass the time during a storm,” Varric said, wringing out his shirt laying it out on the hewn stone beside him.

Cassandra sat next to Brynn and noticed her shivering, fingers trembling as she dropped her sopping cloak to the ground. With barely a moment’s thought, she slid closer and wrapped her arm around Brynn’s shoulders, drawing her against her side to soak in as much body heat as she could.

“Are you alright?”

“Just…bloody cold, sa’lath,” Brynn murmured, turning her face into Cassandra’s neck and burying her cold nose against her pulse point. “Why did it have to rain?” She asked plaintively.

To the side, Bull snorted and crossed his arms, water sliding off his toned physique and dripping from his horns as he shook his head. “Damn rain, putting a damper on things. Heh. Get it? A damper.” He nudged Varric, who chuckled, and met Cassandra’s eyes more seriously. “You and I, Seeker? We’re fine, between our armor, muscle, and stubbornness, and the dwarf’s fat stores keep him warm, to say nothing of all the hot air he generates-”

“Oh! I resent that; there’s a lot of muscle there too!”

“But the Lady mage and Herald? They’re walking sticks. No fat to speak of on either of them. Nothing against you, Boss, I know there’s nothing but muscle under your skin, but you’ve got nothing in reserve. You’re going to get colder faster than us.”

Bull shrugged and Brynn curled further into Cassandra’s welcome heat, going so far as to slide her far hand beneath her tunic and lay her palm flat against the Seeker’s back. Cassandra jumped at the cold touch but otherwise didn’t react, finding herself falling into a half-doze as the rhythmic drum of the rain on the ceiling lulled her. She blinked when a light flickered in the corner of her vision and watched Vivienne light a small flame in the palm of her hand.

“If one of you boys could be a dear and find some timber, we could have a fire,” she said suavely. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’d prefer not to feel like a drowned rat much longer.”

Both Varric and Bull disappeared back into the ruined hall, returning soon after with a couple short, half rotted timbers between them that Vivienne set ablaze with a muttered word to dry out the wood and then another to set the flame.

Brynn sighed happily as the heat reached her but didn’t move, content in Cassandra’s arms and surrounded by her scent. She slid her boots off, letting them drop to the floor, and stretched out her toes in the direction of the fire, wiggling them endearingly as she tucked her head more securely
against Cassandra’s shoulder. The Seeker absently shifted to take more of her weight and leaned her head against the cool stone, watching the flames eat at the newly dried wood and listening to the storm outside the crumbling walls.

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Cassandra stuck her head out into the hall when the dull thud of rain dissipated and found nothing but puddles of water left on the ground. “I think we can leave now.”

Bull walked out, ducking through the intact doorway and standing in the open hall. He stretched with a happy groan and looked both ways. “Hey, Seeker, look at this.” She paused in buckling her bracer on and stepped up behind him. When he stepped aside, she frowned at the deep marks gouged into the stone that ran up to the collapsed portion of the wall. “What are they?”

“They look like…claw marks. But that is ridiculous, there haven’t been any creature sightings around here.”

“Except for dragons, of course.” Varric walked up with Bianca on his shoulder with a lazy grin on his face.

Cassandra scoffed as she returned to the room and picked up her discarded armor. “There are no dragons in these parts, they were hunted out by slayers years ago.”

“Those claw marks would say otherwise.” Cassandra sighed as she pulled on her heavy gloves and buckled her sword on her hip, adjusting the belt so the hilt was in easy reach. Brynn pulled her leathers over her head, shaking out her hair as she walked out to look at the marks.

“We should see if we can find it,” she said.

“What? Why?”

“What if it is a dragon?”

Cassandra gaped at her incredulously. “Then there’s no way we’d be able to take it out on our own. Dragon slaying requires skill and many people-”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing you’ve got me, eh, Seeker?” Bull hefted his weapon onto his shoulder and walked past them, setting his hand on the claw marks for a moment. He grinned over his shoulder at them with a blood thirsty glint in his eye. “Been too long since I’ve had a good fight, gotta keep in shape!” He mimed hitting an opponent and laughed, taking off down the hall away from everyone.

Cassandra shook her head as Varric chuckled hoarsely and Vivienne stuck her head out the doorway. “Is that brute finally gone? Maybe we could accidentally leave him behind,” she recommended with a faint smile. As she adjusted her robes and picked up her staff, they heard the sound of stone crumbling in the distance, then a quiet curse and metal sliding against stone. The mage sighed and pulled her cowl up, hiding the dome of her head beneath the fabric as she pushed past them and started walking away.

Varric gestured for Cassandra and Brynn to follow her and leaned in the doorway. “I’ll keep an eye on our noble steeds; just make sure you come back for me, Your Gracefulness.”

Brynn led the way toward the noises and stopped behind the remnants of a wall, finding Bull grumbling to himself as he kicked broken stones out of the way. “What happened?”
“Eh, sorry, Boss…I might have gotten a little -“

“Overzealous? Yes, I can see that, dear,” Vivienne interrupted with an arched brow and faint sneer.

Bull growled at her as he kicked the last of the broken stones out of his way and strapped his weapon to his back. “I thought I heard something behind the wall, mage.”

Vivienne snorted as she peered over the destroyed wall. “I’m certain you heard something, but if you asked me, I’d say it was your stomach, not some creature.”

As they bickered, Brynn leapt over the small mound of stones and froze when she heard something squelch wetly beneath her boot. Looking down, she found a clear, thick liquid sticking to the sole of her boot and gingerly shook it off. “Ugh.”

“What is it?”

“I just stepped in something…” She moved aside some of the stones Bull had thrown and found the shattered remains of a massive, speckled egg in the midst of the rubble. “Oh no…” She moved aside more stones and uncovered the remains of a nest; sticks, grass, and animal pelts – their bones still scattered amongst the nest – at one point having protected the eggs from rolling away. Now, the six eggs with their thick, grey-and-blue speckled shells were broken into pieces, fluid running across the cracked stone floor and disappearing into the dirt. Cassandra stood to the side, watching Brynn run her fingers across the remnants of the eggs with a mournful expression on her face. “What kind of eggs are these?”

“They’re too large for any of the native creatures in this area. The only time I’ve seen eggs like this were when-” An unearthly bellow interrupted Cassandra’s words and they all looked up in alarm as a shadow passed overhead. Cassandra swung her shield over her head as the eerie screech came again, slightly further away, and then a dull thud rattled everyone.

“Was that…”

“A dragon,” Cassandra said grimly. “We need to get back to Varric, take the horses, an-”

“What? What craziness are you spouting, Seeker?” Bull drew himself up to his full height. “We need to go kill it! Can’t you imagine the prestige we’ll get for bringing back such a magnificent beast to Haven?” Bull excitedly left the room and headed toward where the creature had disappeared to, ignoring Cassandra’s hissed command to stay with them.

“I’ll go after him,” Brynn said, taking off after the Iron Bull.

Cassandra reached for her and the edge of her cloak slipped through her fingers. She cursed vehemently and took a step toward the vanishing duo but was halted by Vivienne’s hand on her shoulder. “Let them go, dear, what is the worst they can do?”

Cassandra’s lips twisted into a frown as she looked down the hall. “You do not know them very well evidently.”

The mage flashed a toothy smile and led her back the other way. “I know them well enough. If nothing else, our Herald should be able to keep that brutish Qunari in line long enough for us to get back to them with Varric in tow.”

Cassandra reluctantly followed her back toward the room they’d left the dwarf in and grabbed him by the collar when they walked in. Varric choked and whirled to face them, relaxing only minutely
when he saw the duo. “Where is our illustrious leader and fearless resident mercenary?”

“They foolishly decided to go on ahead. They seem idiotically inclined to believe that there is a dragon in the area and the Bull has talked Brynn into slaying it.”

“Well, sounds like a good time to me! Let’s go!” Varric hefted Bianca on his shoulder and jogged out of the room, leaving Cassandra to tiredly scrub at her face with the palm of her hand.

“I do not know…Maker, I just do not know sometimes.”

Vivienne laughed quietly behind her as she summoned some feed for the horses to eat until they returned and they walked back out. She sealed the room with a glyph, looking at the Seeker form the corner of her eye. “Does it really surprise you, Lady Pentaghast?”

Cassandra sighed to herself, armor creaking quietly. “I suppose not. I only wish they would exercise more caution.”

“You cannot change their nature, dear. Better to learn that now than later on, when it could be a matter of life and death.”

“I fear that is the case now.”

“Well then, we’d better get there sooner rather than later and save them from themselves, yes?” Without another word, they broke into a light jog, following the faint sounds of conversation up ahead. As they dodged a puddle in the middle of the decaying hallway, there was a surprised shout up ahead, then the unmistakable sounds of metal sliding from its sheath.

“Come, they engage the creature!” Cassandra poured on a burst of speed and vaulted over some fallen stones, rolling clumsily in a shallow body of water. She shook the water droplets from her eyes and looked up, jaw dropping at the sight before. Brynn, Varric and Bull stood in a ragged line, staring up into the gaping maw of a massive dragon. Its brightly colored scales warned possible enemies of its deadliness and aggressiveness – purple so dark it was nearly black offset by a bright yellow throat and extending beneath its belly – and it arched its neck to stare down at them menacingly. Cassandra slowly stood, drawing her sword smoothly and setting her shield in front of her body as she sidled up behind Brynn.

“What did you do?”

“Bull came running in like a herd of halla and it just!-” Brynn gestured helplessly at the dragon and it hissed, snaking its head closer to the ground. Its tail lashed angrily across the ground, kicking water into the air and throwing rushes and cattails into the air.

Cassandra heard Vivienne come up behind them as she glared at the back of Bull’s head and he shrugged like he felt the weight of her fury on his skin. “Don’t look at me like that, Seeker, I didn’t think there was actually going to be a fucking dragon here! But since we are here…” He hefted the massive blade on his shoulder innocuously and she barely had time to realize what he was going to do before he had taken off at a sprint toward the beast. “C’mon, you great big bitch, come at me! Give me a real fight!”

The dragon arched its head and opened its maw wide, baring sharp, dagger-like teeth. Cassandra’s hair stood on end as a static charge filled the marshy area and her eyes widened as she saw lightning spark in its throat. “Get out of the water!” She dove wildly to the side as it unleashed the lightning strike, feeling heat rip through the air and curling into herself when she heard stone explode at her back. She came up running, taking a couple steps to the side to regain her balance.
before sprinting toward the dragon. She ducked beneath its belly and swung at its exposed leg, feeling a moment of elation when bright blood welled to the surface beneath the armored scales. It screamed and then its leg was in the air and kicking toward her, sending her rolling bonelessly away from the immediate fighting.

She stumbled dizzily to her feet, shaking her head and rolling her shoulders as she watched Bull swing his sword at the dragon’s head, narrowly missing its snout as it reared back to strike at him. He dodged out of the way and Varric shot a bolt at it, grinning when the head sunk into the soft skin beneath its eye. It screamed in anger and reared back, pawing at its head in irritation. Vivienne froze the water it was standing in and it jerked to keep its balance, unaware that Cassandra was creeping up behind it with her sword at the ready. She shifted the shield on her arm and took her sword in both hands, swinging heavily at the tendon in its ankle.

Blood flowed across the ice and the dragon roared into the air, ripping free of the ice to whirl awkwardly on three legs and glare down at the Seeker. She began running, trying to stay out of range of its claws, and was suddenly airborne. The ground came up to meet her rapidly as she hit her head hard and bounced into the marsh, water going up her nose and down her throat. She came up sputtering for air, watching the dragon fold its wings back against its body and open its mouth to spit lightning at them again.

Brynn appeared from behind its crippled leg, springing onto the jut of its knee and using the leverage of its scales to climb onto its back. Cassandra staggered to her feet, falling to a knee as the world tilted sickeningly on its axis and watched helplessly as the dragon noticed the elf on its back and began bucking wildly. It leapt around awkwardly on its remaining legs, trying to throw Brynn from its back, but the woman stuck to its back like a burr, finding invisible handholds as she slowly climbed toward its neck. The dragon suddenly unfurled its wings and took off from a standstill, flapping powerfully to get airborne as Brynn clung to its back desperately. Vivienne shot a bolt of energy at it that missed as it wheeled into the sky, leaving the four to gape in horror.

The dragon wheeled through the sky, twirling and rolling madly as it tried to dislodge its impromptu rider, and eventually it took a sharp dive toward the ground. It landed roughly, sending Varric and Bull sprawling as the tremors knocked them off balance. Brynn scrambled up its back as soon as she could and stuck the point of her daggers between the scales of one of its wings, shoving with all of her strength to sever the muscles that allowed it to fly. The dragon screamed in pain as its wing dropped nervelessly to the ground, twitching with the few remaining nerves that allowed movement and feeling. Its head jerked around and the sound of its teeth snapping together jolted everyone into action again.

Cassandra forced herself to her feet as Vivienne fired a barrage of spells at its head, distracting it from Varric’s and Bull’s attacks on its already weakened side. Varric fired bolts into its shoulder as Bull got close and swung his sword at its ankle, trying to sever its tendon like Cassandra had done. The dragon averted its attention from the woman on its back to rake its claws through the air and send Bull bouncing across the ground. He grunted as he landed and got back to his feet, shaking his horned head at it and thumping his chest.

“That all you got, you great bitch!” He raised his sword overhead and bellowed a war cry, charging it again while Brynn yanked her daggers from its skin and scrabbled further up its neck. She perched atop its head, between the great curved horns that pointed toward its nose, and jabbed the point of a dagger toward its brain. It bounced harmlessly off the thick plating over its skull and sent the dragon into a frenzy, shaking its head to dislodge her while simultaneously fending off Bull’s persistent attacks to its foreleg. It snapped at the Qunari viciously with razor sharp teeth and sent him backpedaling to avoid losing an arm.
“Bull! Wait a moment!”

“Seeker, if I waited any longer, I’d be dead!”

“Just hold for a moment! Varric, shoot a bolt at its eye; Vivienne, you freeze its leg in place! Bull, once Varric has loosed his bolt, you can attack it!”

“Sounds like a plan to me! C’mon!”

As they went after the dragon’s leg, Cassandra turned her attention to Brynn, still atop the dragon’s head. “Brynn! Get down from there!”

“Fenedhis, this damned creature has such a hard head!”

She bashed at its plated skull fruitlessly again and yelped when it suddenly lurched to the side, its foreleg similarly crippled so its right side was lax and immobile. The dragon keened in pain and beat its wing, whipping up the water in the area and making everyone on the ground cover their eyes. Cassandra heard the telltale intake of air, then felt static charge the air. She peered over her forearm at the dragon as lightning sparked in its mouth and ran for dry land, then froze when light surged in the corner of her vision and an inhuman scream pierced her ears.

Electricity cracked sharply in the air as Brynn was flung from the dragon’s head and the beast toppled to the ground, jaw askew as the point of a blade protruded slightly from its upper jaw. Its eyes slowly glazed over and it slowly exhaled a final breath and blood seeped form the corner of its mouth, staining the ground a dark color. Cassandra ran toward where Brynn had landed and found her laying in a heap nearby. The woman wasn’t breathing when she turned her onto her back and Cassandra started panicking. Vivienne ran up beside her and knelt, staff to her side as her hands hovered over her chest.

“What is wrong with her?”

“It looks like electricity burns.” The mage gestured at the skin of her right hand which was blistered and marked with strange, forking burns that disappeared beneath the tattered edge of her shirt. “She isn’t breathing,” she said with irritating calm, although her hands shook slightly as they hovered over Brynn’s chest.

“Well, make her breathe!”

Vivienne offered a worried smile as she jerked open Brynn’s leathers and undershirt and set her palm against her chest. “You may want to stand back for this.” She shot a small bolt of electricity into Brynn’s chest, watching her body jolt with the shock. Bull and Varric stayed back several feet, shuffling their feet nervously when nothing happened. Vivienne sent another bolt into her chest, holding the small spell for a few seconds, then sat back in satisfaction as Brynn gasped for air suddenly and tried to surge upright. Cassandra pushed against her shoulders to keep her on the ground and took her hand when it grasped her forearm tightly.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m…I don’t…what happened?”

“I was hoping you could tell me.” Cassandra squeezed her hand as Brynn took great gulps of air and blinked quickly. “I heard the dragon as it readied its breath, and then there was a great pulse of light and I saw you get flung from its head.”

Comprehension dawned in grey-blue eyes and her hand flexed in Cassandra’s grasp. She smiled
somewhat sheepishly, eyes flicking over to Vivienne and then over Cassandra’s shoulder to Varric and Bull. “Would you two retrieve my daggers please?” They took the obvious cue and walked away, talking quietly to each other. “Vivienne, would you mind getting our horses? We’re going to need them.”

“As you say, my dear.” The mage inclined her head in unusual acquiescence and gracefully walked back to the crumbled wall.

When she had disappeared, Cassandra turned her eyes back to Brynn in curiosity and watched as the woman flushed lightly under her scrutiny. “Well, you see…I couldn’t get through its head plating and didn’t want to get down; I didn’t think I’d have another chance to climb up. So, I kept looking for a weak point and managed to lodge the point of my dagger between two scales. It turned its head toward you and opened its mouth…Mythal, I felt the electricity on the air and I panicked.” She grimaced and flexed her fingers. “I pushed with all my might and the dagger went in to the hilt, but it wasn’t enough, so I leaned over its head and pushed my other dagger into the roof of its mouth. The next thing I know, I’m waking up with you leaning over me.” She smiled faintly and Cassandra mirrored it for a moment before sobering.

“That was incredibly foolish.”

“I know. Sa’lath, tel’abelas. It is worth anything to protect you.”

Cassandra froze at the statement, eyes wide in surprise. “You…you cannot mean that.”

Brynn smiled a little and cradled Cassandra’s cheek in her palm. “I assure you, I do. You are worth everything to me.” Cassandra searched her eyes for a long moment and swallowed before gently disentangling their fingers and standing. She offered her hand to Brynn, pulling her to her feet and waiting until she had stopped swaying on her feet before moving toward the massive corpse. “Cassandra?”

“I just…I have to attend to this.” Cassandra picked up her discarded weapon and shield as she walked on numb legs toward Bull and Varric, who had climbed atop the dragon’s head and were tugging at Brynn’s tightly lodged dagger. Vivienne returned several minutes later with their horses, prancing nervously with the close proximity of the dragon but following nonetheless to a tree growing on the banks of the marshy area where she tied them. Cassandra staggered against the side of the massive corpse, putting her hand on rough scales as a sense of vertigo assaulted her.

“Are you alright, Lady Seeker?” Vivienne laid a hand on Cassandra’s shoulder and she shrugged it off brusquely, wheeling on her heel to stagger to the side as nausea made the bile rise in her throat.

“I – ugh, I am fine.”

Vivienne smiled coolly and took her arm, drawing her to the side. “While I wouldn’t normally doubt you, the blood on your head and the way you can’t focus on me says otherwise. Stay still, dear, while I check you out.”

She was cleaning the blood from the side of Cassandra’s face when Varric jumped to the ground with one of Brynn’s daggers in hand. “Seeker, you gotta see this! The metal – whoa, what happened to you?”

“It is nothing.”

“It isn’t nothing; Maker, what is it with you soldier types?” Vivienne chastised her as she slowly sifted through her matted hair, looking for the source of the bleeding.
Varric shook his head and wandered over to Brynn, handing her back her dagger as she stared in confusion and hurt over at Cassandra’s back. The Iron Bull was rooting around in the jaw of the dragon, grunting and cursing quietly for several minutes before he cheered happily and eased out from between dagger-like teeth. “I finally got the son of a bitch loose! It’s junk, unfortunately, but that’ll be one hell of a story to tell at the Herald’s Rest.” He displayed the remnants of the other dagger, dark striations marring the previously uniform surface where the metal hadn’t begun to melt from the heat of the lightning.

Cassandra’s mind flashed to the blistered and scarred expanse of Brynn’s hand and forearm, the curious patterns that had appeared on her skin suddenly making sense. She felt nausea well in her throat again, having nothing to do with the cut on her head, and pushed at Vivienne’s hand where she was prodding a sore spot on her temple. “Leave it be, it is fine.”

The mage sighed in resignation and stepped away. “Fine. You want to walk around with a concussion, be my guest.” As she stalked away toward Brynn and Varric, Cassandra felt guilt gnaw at her stomach. She resolutely turned her gaze up to Bull, who was studying the ruined dagger with interest.

“You fucked up.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Not mine you need, is it? The lady mage I can understand; she needs to get bent in the worst way. But what’d you do to the Boss? Normally you two are joined at the hip, and right now, you won’t even look in her direction. That’s not how you were a couple hours ago. So, what’d you do to her?”

“Why would it be my fault?”

“You’re more likely to fly off the handle and avoid the problem, Seeker, and she’s too Dalish to stew if something’s wrong,” he reasoned simply.

Cassandra was stupefied and cringed at his wording but didn’t get a chance to say anything in return. Varric walked back over and jerked his chin at the dragon’s corpse behind them. “Not to interrupt your bonding session, but what exactly are we going to do with that? I mean, I’m all for taking it back to be displayed in Haven, preferably somewhere I can look at it and brag, but…it’s kind of big.” He scratched the back of his neck and pursed his lips as his eyes roved over the massive length of the dragon, turning his head when he heard shuffling footsteps behind him.

Brynn was slowly limping up with Vivienne’s help, her burnt hand bandaged and carefully tucked against her abdomen. “I think I can help with that.” She tried to catch Cassandra’s eyes but the Seeker stared stoically over her shoulder, eventually walking away to check on the horses when she went so far as to lay her good hand on her shoulder pauldron. “Cassandra, can we just—”

“If we are to go through with this plan of yours, we will need to divide up our remaining supplies carefully. I need to get my skinning knives, as well; excuse me, Your Grace.” She dipped her head stiffly, ignoring the way Brynn’s face twisted unhappily and how her own stomach lurched as she walked away, feeling her eyes burn into the back of her head the entire way.

Chapter End Notes
Translation:
Sa'lath, tel'abelas - Beloved, I'm not sorry.
Revenge

Chapter Notes

Super long chapter is super long. I would apologize for that but I know you guys love it, and besides, I couldn't find a good place to split it up.

Also, we're into the homestretch! Maybe three chapters left by my estimate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Cassandra rode stiffly at the front of the group, a near-debilitating headache pulsing between her ears with each step her mount took. She heard Bull’s jubilant laughter and the hammer pounded harder at her temples, forcing her to close her eyes against the pain and grit her teeth. She took several deep breaths to push it back, listening to the wheat grass sway in the post-rain breeze that whispered across the plains and the way the birds soaring overhead called their positions to each other. The faraway lowing of a herd of halla made their temporary pack animals snort. She weathered the vertigo as she turned in her saddle and watched the halla Brynn had coaxed from the copse of trees they’d bedded beneath walk sedately between the group, uncomplaining with their grisly burdens. Any spare clothes had been repurposed to carry their supplies while the satchels and saddle bags were packed tightly with dragon bone, claws, teeth, and tough sinews that could all be used in the makings of arms and armor. Cassandra had delicately skinned much of the leathery hide from the beast while Vivienne and Varric scavenged the largest and least damaged scales, and they tied the skins across the backs of the halla and their horses before breaking camp early in the morning.

Her amber gaze traveled past the halla to their companions; Varric and the Iron Bull in quiet conversation while Vivienne and Brynn lingered a ways back. The mage was leaning out of her saddle toward the other woman, a crease marring her brow as she studied her outstretched hand where the bandages covered inflamed skin. Cassandra felt a heavy twist of guilt in her gut, one that had yet to leave since the previous day’s words, and wrenched her head back around to face the quickly rising sun. She nearly fell out of the saddle with the next wave of nausea but firmed her legs in the stirrups and held onto the pommel with her hands until it passed, only opening her
eyes once she felt steady. They ate in the saddle, trying to make as much time before dark set in. Cassandra made sparse conversation with anyone, still nursing a headache as the evening wore on and Bull took first watch. She pulled a blanket over her hips where she leaned against a tree and shut her eyes, hoping the sharp pain would subside in the morning.

The tired animals wearily sped up when their riders caught sight of smoke in the distance, faint smiles creasing most of their faces. Brynn lingered at the back of the group with Vivienne, ignoring the mage’s covertly concerned glances as she cradled her right arm against her stomach. “I am sorry, my dear, but my talents, unfortunately, don’t lie with the healing arts. When we get back to Haven, Dorian or Solas can do a better job.”

“It’s fine, Vivienne, ma serannas. I appreciate what you tried to do; the herbs help quite a bit with the pain, honestly.” Brynn smiled over at her. “I’ve had worse.”

“While I don’t doubt that, I also don’t think you’ve had to go the better part of a fortnight without adequate care for your injuries.”

Brynn only smiled and spurred her horse on, riding into the midst of the halla. She caressed antlers as she passed by and slowed next to a younger animal that was carrying most of the dragon hide they had taken. The juvenile female’s horns were yet small, the twisting bones only just beginning to curl around each other loosely. Brynn reached out and scratched the joint where her ear met her skull and smiled when she pushed into her hand eagerly.

Vivienne rode up behind her. “You seem to have formed an attachment.”

“She is young, friendly,” she said. The young halla pushed her head into the side of her leg and lowered quietly. “She is proud and wants to prove her strength.”

“And you can tell that how?...”

“As you say, we have formed an attachment.” Brynn smiled down at the halla, whose dark eye stared up at her trustingly, then rode up a little further, urging her mount into a lazy lope to cross the distance toward the smoke more quickly.

They finally reached the edge of the village late in the afternoon but circumvented the village proper while Cassandra rode through to see if they had room at the tavern for the night. Bull stood dauntingly on the fringe of the group, staring down any curious passersby until the Seeker returned on foot. “They have a couple rooms available and stable for the animals. But I confess that I do not know what to do about the hide and bones we have. We cannot sneak them in and I refuse to leave them alone tonight.”

Everyone looked around at each other and pursed their lips, unwilling to volunteer to stay out in the cold but equally unwilling to leave their hard won bounty unguarded. Finally, Brynn sighed and stepped forward. “I can keep them company tonight.”

“Boss, we can-”

“No, Bull. They know me the best, they trust me. Besides, I’ll get your bedrolls for the night with all of you at the tavern.” Brynn smirked and the Qunari laughed as he scratched the back of his head.

Varric shrugged and Vivienne, although blatantly loathe to let her stay alone with her arm so damaged, only pursed her lips and dipped her head briefly. Cassandra, though, charged in with a
frown on her lips and a dark gleam in her eyes. “You cannot possibly think to stay by yourself out here tonight!”

“And why not? Have I not proven my own worth yet? Do you think me unable to stand by myself?” Brynn bit out the words with a challenge in her voice and Cassandra reared back as though physically assaulted by her questions. Her frown carved itself deeper onto her face, fists balling at her sides as she opened her mouth.

“Don’t. I am fully capable of defending myself and our prize for a night; go with the others, sleep in a bed tonight.” Brynn’s tone was uncharacteristically terse, her accent coming through thickly as she turned her back to Cassandra and walked up to a halla with elaborate horns. She spoke to it softly in a soothing voice, then took the reins of her mount and led the animals into the darkness, disappearing in the shadows with barely a sound.

Cassandra gaped after her, confusion and hurt crossing her features. She vaguely heard Varric and the Iron Bull walk away, jibing at each other as they left, and felt a soft hand press to her forearm gently. “Come, dear, let’s get some food and turn in for the night. We’ve an early start in the morning.”

“But…she jus-”

Vivienne took her arm and gently pulled her away, an unusual expression of care and concern overtaking her features. Cassandra allowed herself to be led toward the village, giving the dark trees at her back the occasional, worried glance.

Brynn led the animals into the treeline until the light from the village was barely visible and settled in a small clearing that backed up against a thick copse of birches. She walked up to the halla that led the small herd and stroked her hand along his forehead, staring into his eyes. “Hamin, ma falon. Ne eth sahlin.” He chuffed gently and nudged her palm with his nose, leading the others toward the copse of trees.

She clumsily pulled the satchels and skins off their backs and, as they settled beneath the heavy branches, she set about gathering kindling for a fire to ward off the rapidly descending chill in the air. Starting a fire with only one well working arm was a challenge, but she sighed happily as the first crackle of fire broke the quiet. She sat back on her heels, staring into the flickering flame, and pondered the past days’ worth of silence and awkward interaction with Cassandra. She sighed forlornly as a cold wind blew through the clearing and pulled her cloak closer around her.

Brynn tilted her head at quiet steps at her back and watched the youngest halla gracefully lay at her back, nosing her elbow gently. “Ma serannas, lethallan. My thoughts are so twisted right now…” Brynn settled against the halla’s side, running her fingers through her thick fur idly. The animal’s long nose laid beside her leg and a dark eye glinted up at her inquisitively. Brynn stroked her antlers gently, feeling the hard bone with her fingertips and laughing to herself when she pushed against her hand.

“At least you will keep me company, my friend. Cassandra…” Despondency twisted Brynn’s face. “I said something to her the other day…I think I scared her. Maybe for good.” The halla pushed her nose into Brynn’s lap and urged her to stroke the velvet of her ears. “But what could I have done? Not told her how I felt?” Brynn snorted incredulously and the halla echoed her. She smiled sadly down at the white head in her lap and a dark eye glinted up at her inquisitively. Brynn stroked her antlers gently, feeling the hard bone with her fingertips and laughing to herself when she pushed against her hand.

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They sat in companionable silence but for the quiet crackle of the fire now licking hungrily at the wood and the occasional snuffle of the other halla in the trees at their back. Brynn eased herself lower, cradling her head in the crook of the halla’s shoulder. In a half doze, Brynn nearly missed the sounds of footsteps outside the clearing, only just catching an uttered curse that caused both her and the halla to perk their ears. “Go hide,” she urged the beast, pushing her head away when she nosed against her side. “I’ll be fine, falon, but you need to hide.” The halla reluctantly moved into the shadows, beyond the firelight that would otherwise catch the gleaming pale fur, and Brynn readjusted herself as she reached for her dagger sheathed at her side.

She waited for the two people – she could hear two voices, both lowered in an attempt to remain hidden – to show themselves, stiffening when they appeared out of the darkness. The two men from the tavern that she had bested the last time they passed through stood tall on the other side of the fire, malevolence twisting their features. The cuts she’d given them both were scabbed over, although one had broken open with the force of the man’s snarl. They stalked toward her, grabbing at their weapons, and she scrambled to her feet, pulling her dagger with her left hand as she cradled her right against her stomach.

“Thought I recognized your friends, little knife eared bitch. Hard to miss an ox man, even if they all look the same with their grey skin and horns. Never thought they’d be stupid enough to leave you by your lonesome though; but guess we got lucky, didn’t we?” He nudged his fellow and they both laughed meanly. Brynn planted her feet before the fire, watching them round the pit to get on either side of her. She shifted her foot subtly toward the flames and turned her eyes on one, keeping her ears perked for the movements of the other.

“Come here, you little bitch,” one hissed, swinging his blade around as he jerked in a circle. The other was beating the last embers out of his clothes and she darted toward him. Her dagger left a long mark on his back, sending him sprawling with her rush and crying out with the sudden pain. She danced out of range of his flailing blade and barely avoided the swipe of the other man, who thrust his sword at her shadow. She parried his next thrust, dodging out of the way of his charge and feeling the air move with his proximity. The other man got back to his feet, grunting with pain, and they turned their weaker eyes on her shape. They charged her at the same time and, even with her better vision, Brynn quickly found herself on the defensive with only one well working arm. She drew her other dagger to try and better ward them off, but the hilt slipped through her grasp the first time she intercepted a sword.

She gasped as blisters burst beneath the bandages and heard the blade whistle as it spun out into the darkness of the treeline. The blade split part of her bandages and the coppery smell of her blood filled her nose as blood was drawn. Brynn kicked at one man and took the brief opportunity when he recoiled to throw her dagger at him. Her lips twitched in satisfaction when she heard the blade hit flesh and he cried out, falling in a boneless heap to the ground at her side. She dodged away from the other man, feeling his blade catch on her clothing and tear through the skin of her side and tear away her weapons belt. She bit her tongue as heat seared her side and backpedaled
into the deep shadows that lined the clearing. She cursed under her breath as blood coated the fingers that hesitantly pressed into her side and a bolt of pain flashed up her side.

“Come out, come out,” the man sang darkly, crouching in the midst of the clearing as he yanked Brynn’s dagger out of his comrade’s body and kicked her belt far away. “I’ve got a surprise for you, elf bitch. You can’t hide forever, I can smell your fear.”

Brynn grimaced and eased around the edge of the clearing with a steady eye on the man in the middle. He suddenly twisted on his heel and threw her dagger toward the treeline, barely skimming her cheek with her own blade. She heard the blade hit a tree nearby but didn’t stop to search for it, crying out in surprise and pain as heat washed over the side of her face. “I’ve got you now!”

He ran toward her and she dashed toward the birch trees, coming upon the halla standing stiff legged amongst the trees. They eyed her with wide eyes that reflected the faint moonlight and she hissed urgently, “Stay away, keep hidden! I just need—”

One of them approached her and turned aside so she could see the dragon teeth sticking out of the saddlebags. She grabbed one and patted the halla’s side before disappearing into the darkness, hefting the dagger-like tooth as she silently slid into the treeline again.

The tooth, with its wicked point and slightly serrated edges, was as long as her forearm and mostly flat but for the rounded root that she used as a grip. She held her breath when she heard the bushes nearby being disturbed and crouched low in the underbrush, watching the man stumble through the thick growth. He growled and muttered under his breath, passing by Brynn’s hiding place. She clutched her makeshift weapon tighter in her palm and relaxed marginally once he passed by, slinking out behind him to follow silently in his wake. “Cowardly little elf bitch…I’ll cut those pretty little pointed ears and make them into a necklace,” he muttered. Brynn narrowed her eyes as her ears twitched and took several deep breaths before she lunged at the man’s back, tackling him to the ground.

There was a flurry of movement as they both vied for the top position, she hissing in pain when his fingers dug into her wounded side, and he groaning as the blunt end of the tooth hit his temple. Brynn felt his legs around the back of her legs as he bucked to try and dislodge her, but she grabbed a handful of his hair and yanked his head to the side, baring his throat to the scrape of the dagger’s edge. He froze beneath her, the whites of his eyes shining in the weak moonlight with fury and hate, his fingers twitching around her bicep as his other hand was pinned under her knee with his sword in his grasp. “You wouldn’t dare,” he spit out.

Brynn tipped her head to the side and traced the pulsing artery in his throat with the point of the dagger. “And why do you say that? After all, I’m only a dirty forest savage.” She bared her canines to make a point and her eyes reflected the moon’s weak light as she tipped her jaw up to stare down her nose at the man. Ma emma harel.”

The man sneered up at her even with her blade to his throat and jerked against it, a thin line of blood appearing on his skin. “Go on then, you dumb bitch, do it. Be a man and kill me.”

Brynn hesitated – more concerned about his blatant lack of self-preservative instinct than over any compulsion to safeguard his life – and he took the moment to lurch with all his strength against her weight. Brynn jerked to the side and felt her blade bite into his skin as his arm slid out from beneath her and his blade flashed in the moonlight, arcing overhead. She twisted but felt the metal score a hit on her back as she moved, kicking her foot out to disarm him completely. His sword disappeared into the undergrowth and she bit back a curse as blood coursed over her skin.
She kicked the man in the head and straddled him again as he reeled, yanking his head to the side to bare the sluggishly bleeding wound. “Halam sahlin; ar tu na’lin emma mi.” Without another word, she drew the blade across his throat and watched his lifeblood spill into the dirt beneath them, soaking the earth and saturating the air with the metallic scent of his blood. Brynn watched the light fade from his eyes, rolling off him stiffly only once he had stopped kicking and wiping the tooth off on his shirt. She winced as she stood and limped back into the clearing, sighing as she stood over the other man’s corpse. His throat had been likewise torn open with her dagger, eyes staring sightlessly up at the cloudy sky.

She sat heavily in front of the scattered remnants of her fire, poking at the still warm coals as she mentally catalogued each ache and bruise she could feel forming. She tilted her head to the side when she heard near-silent steps behind her, relaxing as she saw the small herd of halla materialize from the shadows of the birch trees. “I’m afraid I might have overdone it a little…” The eldest snorted and laid nearby and the others mimicked her, settling in a protective half circle around the wounded woman in their midst.

The juvenile walked up behind her and settled again at her back, laying her head over Brynn’s shoulder and gently coaxing her to lay back against her shoulder with a quiet chuff. “I don’t….my blood…” The halla kept her head over Brynn’s shoulder until she relaxed, pulled into sleep as the last of the adrenaline left her body and a lightheaded haziness from blood loss settled in. Her eyelashes brushed her cheeks as she passed out, cloak tattered but drawn over her to ward off the chill that her makeshift bedroll couldn’t completely keep away.

The halla kept vigil that night, sleeping lightly and twisting their ears toward Brynn whenever she moved or whimpered in her sleep as her wounds pulled at her skin. By the time dawn broke, the young halla’s fur had been stained pink by Brynn’s blood and stiffened into spikes as it congealed. Several of the herd rocked to their feet and all ears turned toward the edge of the clearing when voices and heavy footsteps that disturbed the detritus reached them, forming a protective line in front of Brynn. Their heads dropped threateningly as the noises got louder and voices became audible.

“…told him I couldn’t drink anymore because I wouldn’t be able to get on my horse, and he said, ‘falling from a horse that little wouldn’t hurt you, especially drunk!’ So I said, what the hell, and ordered another!” Two voices laughed loudly, disturbing the otherwise tranquil morning noises, and the halla snorted. They stamped their feet as several people broke into the clearing, tossing their heads threateningly as various people broke into the clearing, tossing their heads threateningly as they came closer.

Cassandra was the first to notice something was wrong, blinking at the line of halla facing them. She scanned the clearing, lingering on the obvious signs of struggle that littered the space; scuffed dirt and the odd fleck of darker earth where blood had been spilled. “What…” The halla shifted just enough for her to catch sight of the dead man at their back and she gasped, reaching for her sword hilt automatically.

“Seeker?”

“Something is wrong. Where is the Herald?” She peered around and stepped closer to the halla, watching them warily until the one with the largest antlers snorted and stepped aside. Cassandra froze when she caught sight of Brynn’s motionless body half laying atop the young halla and her feet acted independently of her brain, propelling her forward until she fell to her knees at her side.

“Your Grace? This is not funny.” She put her hand on Brynn’s cheek and pulled it away sticky with the dried blood that had congealed overnight. “Vivienne!”

The mage knelt beside her, hands glowing as she ran them over her body. “She’s lost a lot of
blood. I can…Maker, I can heal the basics, but…”

“Just do it,” Cassandra said tersely. She eased Brynn upright, glad when the woman whined at the back of her throat although her eyes remained shut, and pursed her lips further when she saw the congealed blood that had saturated the halla’s fur. “Bull, Varric!” They snapped to attention at her tone. “Her weapons are missing; see if you can find them.”

“What about the unfortunate sod over there?” Varric thumbed over his shoulder at the dead man.

“Leave him. I recognize that man from the last time we were here. I’m sure his friend is nearby, or else we would have run into him, no doubt bragging, this morning when we broke our fast.”

Cassandra sneered over at the body and they left to scour the trees while Vivienne helped her to cut away the stiff clothes covering Brynn to better assess the damage. She sighed when the elf’s upper body was completely bare and rolled up the sleeves of her robes. “We’ll need water and rags to clean the blood off her skin so I can see what exactly is wrong, and herbs to bind her wounds until we return to Haven. Will you bring my saddlebags over, dear? I have my supplies in them.”

“Vivienne conjuring water into a small, hammered bowl and soaking a rag in it to clean the dried blood from Brynn’s skin. Cassandra’s insides twisted when she saw the first wound on her side, a long tear that started at her ribs and twisted suddenly toward her back near the subtle jut of her hip bone. Vivienne laid her hand over the top of the wound and muttered under her breath. The wound sluggishly closed, leaving behind an angry red line of barely-healed skin, and she turned her attention to the myriad nicks and bruises that decorated her torso and face next. Cassandra handed Vivienne salves and bandages as needed while her amber eyes flicked back and forth across the landscape of torn and discolored skin.

She startled when Vivienne’s dusky colored hand settled on her forearm gently. “Help me turn her over, dear.” They carefully laid Brynn on her stomach and both women gasped as the ragged edges of torn skin became visible. The jagged wound extended diagonally from her lower right side to just beneath her left shoulder blade, curving wickedly in several places like she had been moving while the strike was made. Cassandra didn’t recognize the sound that came out of her mouth, but the abject terror that was bubbling up her throat and threatening to undo her careful apathy was a familiar, if unwelcome, feeling. Their careful movement of her had reopened the wounds and they bled slowly down Brynn’s back, discoloring the vallaslin that decorated her skin in sinuous patterns.

Vivienne laid her palms over her heated back and breathed out deeply, shutting her eyes as she dug deeper into her mana reserves and every shred of healing knowledge she had. Cassandra’s brows knit as she watched the ragged edges of the wicked wound reluctantly come together near her hip, but Vivienne paused a fraction of the way into the wound.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t dare continue. If I’m to be perfectly frank, I’m rather terrified to attempt this level of healing.”

Cassandra glared and snarled, “If you do not heal her!”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t heal her, but I can’t continue to use my magic like this. I’m neither well versed nor particularly adept with healing magic beyond more superficial wounds, and this…this is no minor injury.” Her hand swept over the plane of Brynn’s back, barely brushing the wound and making the woman squirm in pain. “I can feel the depth of tearing, especially near the top of the
wound. It went through almost to bone, Seeker, and unless you want me potentially making things worse, I would suggest we clean her up and bind her wounds as best as we can, then make haste for Haven.”

There was an intense moment of staring before Cassandra acquiesced with a silent nod. She dipped the rag into the pink water and began dabbing at the edges of the wound, pausing any time Brynn shifted or moaned. By the time the blood was washed away, she was groaning continuously and her fingers had dug shallow grooves in the dirt, and hazy grey-blue eyes flickered up to Cassandra. “Cas?...”

“Be silent, you are injured,” Cassandra said quietly. “Vivienne and I have tended to your wounds, but the worst are beyond the lady mage’s ken. We need to bind your back and get back to Haven with all haste so Dorian or Solas can tend to you.”

Brynn swallowed and hissed as the muscles in her shoulders spasmed. The young halla that had yet to leave her side made a worried noise and nudged against her hair, velvet nose moving across her temple slowly. “Ir then sahlin, asha,” she whispered hoarsely, fingers twitching where soft fur brushed the tips.

Cassandra clenched her jaw as she met Vivienne’s eyes. “My dear, I’m afraid we aren’t done yet. We need to sit you up so we can bind your back.” The muscles in her back went unnaturally still and it was a long moment before she breathed out her affirmation. Cassandra took one side while Vivienne grabbed the other and they maneuvered her upright. Every pained cry made them wince and slow, but eventually Brynn was mostly erect, slumping against Cassandra’s side and shivering in the cold morning air. Her bare skin prickled with goose bumps, head turned down as tears dripped from her chin and her shoulders shook with suppressed sobs. Vivienne swiftly covered the gaping wound with a salve and pressed cotton to the length of it to further stifle the bleeding before binding it and giving Brynn a draught for the pain. By the time they were finished, Brynn was gasping for air and digging her fingers into Cassandra’s leg, face turned into her shoulder to muffle the cries and hide the tears that slid out from beneath her eye lids.

As Vivienne tucked the end of the bandage into the wraps, Varric and the Iron Bull edged out of the treeline wearing matching expressions of wariness. “Uhm, we found her weapons, Seeker. Found the other guy, too…he won’t be harassing anyone anymore.” Varric brandished Brynn’s bloodied daggers and Bull bore some of the dragon bone they had taken in his arms.

“I found where she set the dragon bits, too. I figured if we needed to get a move on, I’d start loading up.” Cassandra nodded and he made his way over to the halla pawing at the dirt anxiously.

While he tied the saddle bags down, Varric laid her weapons at her side and stared down at the woman. “Well, I gotta say, you aren’t really living up to my name for you right now, are you? What happened to your vaunted grace, Your Gracelessness?”

Brynn managed to laugh a little, then winced and sagged against Cassandra. “I suppose I just didn’t duck in time.”

“Huh. Wonder if that’s an elf thing. You know, I knew this one back in Kirkwall with the most intricate tattoos on his face. The only problem was, half of them were missing on the right side because he’d taken a flaming bottle of dwarven rum to the face. He told me the same thing…” Varric’s voice dropped off, his eyes wandering across the huddled group and pausing on the bone half hidden behind the halla’s rear leg. “Well, what do we have here?” He studied the tooth, bits of dried blood flaking off as he tested its balance, and smiled down at Brynn. “Guess you weren’t completely defenseless then.”
“Hardly,” she bit out with a tired grin.

Varriç chuckled and flipped the bone dagger around to hand the hilt to Cassandra. “For safe keeping.”

He whistled as he walked back into the birch trees and Vivienne helped Cassandra get Brynn to her feet. She weaved drunkenly once standing and they stood on either side protectively with their arms carefully around her waist. “We will get you on your horse, and set out once we are loaded up.”

They began leading Brynn toward her mount but the young halla cut in front of them suddenly, standing with her blood covered shoulder toward them and eyes steadily watching. Brynn reached out with trembling fingers and brushed through the thick fur on her neck, speaking quietly in elvish. The halla tossed her head and snorted, dancing in place. Brynn smiled faintly as Cassandra watched in bemused silence and turned her head toward the Seeker. “Help me up?”

“Onto it?”

“Her, yes,” she emphasized quietly. “She wants to carry me, and I’m loathe to turn her down after she spent the night keeping me warm and safe.” Cassandra was unable to read the look Brynn shot her as the halla pawed at the ground. Brynn stabilized herself with her legs and sat unnaturally straight, fingers wound into the thick fur at her neck, and nudged her toward the edge of the clearing.

Cassandra hastened to her own horse as the others finished tying the last of the dragon hide down and followed her out of the clearing toward the mountains at their front. Vivienne caught up to her and stared at her with an inscrutable expression on her face. “Will you not ride with her?”

“I – I…” Cassandra stuttered to a stop as her horse picked its way up the hillside. She stared at Brynn’s back, the way her shoulders flexed and shifted and the slight sway of her hips as her halla walked steadily upward. She thought back to their conversation before they mounted up and shook her head. “You should check on her; she is your patient.”

Vivienne sighed and shook her head as she rode ahead and drew abreast of Brynn. “Are the herbs working, dear?”

“I can’t feel my back at all, if that’s what you’re asking.” Brynn flashed a smile over at Vivienne and dragged her borrowed cloak further around her frame. “I am a little worried about the fact that my fingers are going numb, but I think that’s just because they’re cold. I hope it’s only because they’re cold.” She flexed her fingers experimentally, then seemed to get distracted by the way the tips were red and stared at them for an inordinately long time.

Vivienne tilted her head to the side and quirked an eyebrow when the woman giggled to herself and began singing in elvish, a lilting melody that made her quirk her brow in amusement. She dropped off into upbeat humming as she let the halla pick her way up the hill toward the base of the mountain and Vivienne watched worriedly as she began to sway gently from side to side and her voice got louder. Behind her, she could feel intent eyes on the back of her skull and hear the quiet sounds of the herd between them, hooves on thin grass and stone as they made their way up the rough path into the mountains. She reached out to stabilize Brynn and smiled wryly. “T’would appear the draught is a little strong for you…I must have misjudged the dose.” Brynn smiled dopily and Vivienne bade her cling more tightly to the thick fur of her halla’s neck.

Cassandra rode up on her other side, keeping the mage between her and Brynn. The Seeker swept her gaze over to the lady mage, leaning forward in her saddle and watching in concern as Brynn
weaved dangerously to one side before straightening. “Why did you give her so much?”

“You don’t seem to grasp the severity of her wounds, Seeker. The fact that she is in the saddle at all baffles me, to be honest…but she is very stubborn.” Vivienne shot Cassandra a weak smile and leaned out of her saddle to steady the woman and speak quietly to her.

Cassandra fell back toward the others, ignoring the instinct to ride up on the other side of Brynn and beating down her worry, turning her thoughts inward as her stomach twisted uncomfortably and her eyes gazed up into the sky.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Ma serannas - Thank you.

Hamin, ma falon. Ne eth sahlin. - Relax, my friend. You are safe now.

Mir vhenas. Ar lath asha. - My home. I love her.

Ma emma harel. - You should fear me.

Halam sahlin; ar tu na’lin emma mi. - This ends now; I will see your blood on my blade.

Ir then sahlin, asha. - I'm awake now, girl.
So, I know it's been, like, three weeks, but I have a good reason! I had to work every shift at my job for two weeks since my employer went on vacation, so I basically got up, worked, came in, ate, slept, cleaned a bit, went back to work, came in, showered, ate again, then went to bed. Wash and repeat. But yeah, now he's back and I'm back to my complete and utter lack of hours, so I wrote after I caught up on my sleep!

Good news, I have everything, literally everything written to the end. Bad news, including this chapter, there's only five or six chapters left, depending on how the last one comes out. So yeah.

Anywho, I hope everyone had a fantastic holiday and New Year, and you guys continue to have a good 2017!

Read on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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“The Herald returns!” The cry echoed behind the walls of Haven as the gates slowly opened and the group passed through with their bounty. People gathered around them immediately and started talking about the halla in the midst of the companions as they slowly walked up to the Chantry doors.

Leliana stood with Josephine, arms crossed and cowl drawn up over her flaming hair. She stepped forward to receive them with Josephine on her heel and Cassandra offered a brief, strained smile as she brushed by them and disappeared within the doors. Leliana’s forehead wrinkled in concern that was replaced by worry when she saw Brynn being supported by Vivienne and Bull. “What
happened?”

Brynn smiled weakly up at her and winced as she missed one of the steps, cradling her right arm tight against her chest and trying to avoid moving as much as possible. The halla gathered around them protectively, heads high and antlers gleaming in the cold winter sunlight. The dragon bone caught the light as they shifted, glaring white against the snow that had accumulated while they were afield. “’Tis only a scratch, Nightingale.”

“It isn’t only a scratch, you stubborn fool,” Vivienne interrupted, glaring down at the elf sternly. She turned her eyes to Leliana and set her hand on Brynn’s shoulder. “This one injured herself several times while we were in the Exalted Plains and again on the way back and, alas, my skills in the healing arts couldn’t help enough. I would that a medic look at her, as I’m afraid that infection might have set in.”

Brynn rolled her eyes and muttered under her breath. Leliana looked at her again, the waxy hue of her skin and slumped posture, and nodded decisively. “Bring her to her quarters, I will find the healers.” As Vivienne turned to lead Brynn away, Leliana gazed up at the Iron Bull. She gestured at the halla standing beside him fearlessly with the dragon bits on their backs. “They are?...”

“Apparently friends of the Boss. She ‘asked’ them to help us bring all of this back. Good thing, too, ’cause there was no fucking way I was going to leave that dragon there to rot!” He laughed and Leliana blinked, staring at the bleached bones and hide again.

“A dragon…”

She composed her face as her mind raced ahead to what they could possibly do with such a wonderful collection. She walked up to the halla at the front and bowed lightly, reaching out toward its nose with her palm. When it pushed into her hand after a moment’s hesitation, she smiled faintly and scratched its chin. “If you go below the camp, there is a man who will unburden and feed you and yours. Will you do this?” It chuffed and turned away, leading the others down the path toward the gates, and Leliana turned to the cabins near the Chantry. “Bull, if you would follow them and tell Horsemaster Dennet to make sure those bones are under guard until I’ve met him?”

“As you say, Nightingale.”

She nodded and began walking toward the cabins with Josephine on her tail. “Josie, what do you think is going on with Cassandra?”

“I am not certain, but she did seem brusque when they arrived. Especially given how relaxed she’s been these past weeks.” Josephine tapped her quill against her chin. “Perhaps she is worried about the Herald’s injuries?”

“No, I don’t think so. If that were the case, she would have been by her side, not stalking into the Chantry like a vindictive spirit. No, something happened out there that caused her to fall back on old habits. The question, Josie, is what?”

They arrived at the healer’s cabin and asked him to go to Brynn’s quarters with a menagerie of supplies, following him down the snowy path to her door. When they walked in, they found Vivienne struggling to remove Brynn’s leathers. The elf was batting at her hands and twisting as much as she could without aggravating her injuries any more and Vivienne’s face was darkening with irritation.

“What’s going on?”
“This stubborn, foolish woman won’t allow me to remove her armor so we can tend to her wounds.”

Brynn pushed at Vivienne’s hands again and Leliana stepped forward. She removed her gauntlets and lowered her hood as she stepped between them. “Madame de Fer, if you would kindly go make your report to Cullen.”

“Very well, dear.”

Vivienne sighed but retreated from the cabin, leaving Josephine and the healer lingering in the background as Leliana waited for grey-blue eyes to find hers and took Brynn’s hands in her own. “You are trembling, lethallan. Please let us help you.”

Brynn stared up at her with hazy eyes and shook her head, struggling to pull her hands from the redhead’s grasp. She staggered over to the window where the smudged impressions lingered on the pane and Leliana caught her just before she pitched forward headlong through the glass. She folded her into her arms, cradling her head against her chest where the heat radiated even through her heavy leathers and padded tabard. “You’re burning up, please, let us tend to your wounds. I beg of you, rissa, ma nuvenin halani!”

“Venavis,” Brynn pushed away from Leliana and fell on the ground ungracefully. She ripped her leathers over her head and tore at her sweat soaked shirt, baring her skin and bandages to the air. Goosebumps rose on her skin even as she pushed herself to her feet clumsily and Leliana stopped her before she took two steps, struggling to direct her toward the bed while Josephine and the healer lingered uncertainly.

“Please, lay down, Brynn!”

“Dirty shemlen, don’t – touch me…”

Brynn pushed weakly at Leliana, her previous strength all but gone. She sat on the edge of the bed under Leliana’s anxious gaze and allowed the redhead to pull at the end of the bandage around her waist. Leliana’s eyes widened when the wound was revealed, angry red edges seeping fluid and radiating heat. She gestured the healer over, coaxing Brynn to lay back, although she muttered in elvish beneath her breath and reclined on her elbows instead of laying prone. Josephine’s eyes tightened at the sight of the wound but she stood nearby regardless, rolling up the sleeves of her dress and setting her papers aside as she picked up a basin full of hot water and rags. Leliana rooted through the medic’s satchel for needle and thread as he inspected the gash without touching it.

“Needs disinfecting,” he said gruffly, although not unkindly. He discarded his outer robe, leaving himself in a sleeveless shirt, and reached for a bottle of alcohol he’d brought in. “No proper agents available right now unfortunately, with the pass blocked with this last storm. You’ll want to hold her down.”

Josephine hesitantly wrapped her hands around her ankles as Leliana crawled behind Brynn on the bed and cradled her between her legs. She pulled her arms into the space between her thighs and abdomen, trapping them with gentle fingers on her wrists, and nodded at the healer. He laid a blanket at her side and splayed a hand over her abdomen, then slowly upended the bottle over the wound. Brynn wailed, bowing her back as the pain took her and she bucked in their grasps. Josephine’s lips flattened as she struggled to keep a hold of her legs and Leliana tightened her hold of her upper body, whispering in broken elven when she could. The healer swiped a rag over the wound to remove the oozing liquid, then poured more alcohol over it.
By the time they were done with it, everyone was in various stages of dishevelment and Brynn was heaving for air, head laid back against Leliana’s shoulder and her face turned in toward her neck. Her hands trembled on Leliana’s knees, splayed across her leggings bonelessly as the healer pressed a salve of elfroot and other herbs into the flushed out wound. “Put her on her stomach now. No point dragging out the pain.”

Leliana eased herself out from under Brynn’s slight weight and Josephine helped turn her onto her stomach. She cut away the remainder of the dirty bandages, slowly peeling them away from where they stuck to her skin. Her stomach swooped in her gut at the sight of the longer, deeper wound across her back, bone barely visible at one end and the ragged edges at the other where the blade had wandered across her skin. Brynn clutched weakly at the blood and sweat soaked sheets she laid on, panting heavily as the edges of the wound were gently prodded.

The healer bade Josephine and Leliana hold her down again, picking up the bottle of alcohol as Josephine took her legs and Leliana knelt at her head, holding her shoulders to the bed. The first touch of the liquid to the wound drew a gasping moan from Brynn’s lips and she struggled futilely against her bonds, fingers tearing apart the sheets with her pained scrabbling. Josephine shut her eyes against the sight, pursing her lips and grunting with each movement. Leliana, on the other hand, kept her eyes wide open, watching as the wound was slowly washed out and listening to each ragged cry that lifted into the air. Her chest twisted with empathy and her back itched furiously as the true extent of the damage was bared. She leaned down, cradling the back of Brynn’s neck to immobilize her and whisper soothingly in elven to her.

Brynn’s hands clutched at her wrists, nails biting into her skin, but she slowly ceased writhing as the redhead continued speaking lowly to her, although she jerked in pain and moaned occasionally and tightened her hold on Leliana’s wrists. The healer efficiently covered the length of the wound with the salve and then pushed a strand of thread through the head of the needle.

Leliana brushed back some of Brynn’s hair, kneading behind her ear as she said, “He is almost done, rissa, only a little longer and then you can sleep, okay?” She trailed a finger down Brynn’s temple and winced sympathetically as the medic pushed the needle through her skin and she whimpered quietly. Leliana distracted her as much as she could while the healer pulled the torn edges of skin together and then helped her sit up so they could wrap her entire torso in bandages. Brynn laid limply against her as they finished and Leliana cradled her head gently to her shoulder, feeling the tense muscles uncoil as she accepted more and more of her weight. Eventually, she was half reclined against the head of the bed with Brynn splayed mostly across her, the elf almost unconscious and boneless.

“Leliana,” Josephine began, “I could help you move her if you wanted to return to your duties…”

“No, I’m fine, Josie.” Leliana whispered quietly. She inclined her head at the medic and he bowed briefly before leaving them alone with a jar of the salve on the bedside table and a roll of bandages. Leliana continued to stroke her hand along Brynn’s skin from shoulder to flank on her uninjured side as she tipped her head toward the door.

“If you would have someone bring us back some food, light fare that she will be able to keep down once she wakes, and ask Dorian to come here when he has the time, that would be appreciated. Oh,” she caught Josephine with a hand on the door. “If you could locate our dear Seeker, too, and ask her to kindly come and speak with me…”

She smiled toothily, eyes glinting with fire, and Josephine felt a faint pang of sympathy for Cassandra. “Of course, my friend. I will return shortly.”

“Take your time, mon ami.”
Once Josephine was gone, Leliana turned her attention back to Brynn, who had settled heavily against her and was breathing deeply. Her skin was clammy and fevered, but she no longer squirmed uncomfortably and her fingers were loosely gripping her tabard as she slept. “What happened out there, lethallan?”

Josephine walked purposefully through Haven and caught Dorian on his way out of the Herald’s Rest. “Mister Pavus, just who I was looking for. If I could have your attention for a moment?”

He smiled genially and fell into step beside her as they wandered toward the Chantry. “Of course, my dear. What’s on your mind?”

“I have a favor to ask of you. It does require a certain amount of discretion, so…”

“Mum’s the word, my lady.”

“Good. If you would go to the Herald’s cabin, your services have been requested there. I will be behind you shortly, I only have to locate a particularly stubborn Nevarran first.”

Dorian laughed and nodded. “Do be a little lax with our dear Seeker, she seemed rather out of sorts when last I saw her.”

Josephine barely withheld a snort as she left the mage on the well trod path and walked into the Chantry. She looked inside the disused side doors briefly but found them empty save for cobwebs and mice before walking into the repurposed War Room. She found Cassandra glaring through the worn map on the table, hands splayed across the surface and shoulders tense.

“I hope you’re forming a useable excuse, Cassandra, and not avoiding everyone.” Josephine crossed her arms and tapped her toe in irritation as the Seeker ducked her head further, fingers tightening into fists against the worn parchment. “You never even gave a report to us, never made sure your party was in good spirits before disappearing; your paramour,” she felt a tight smirk play on her lips when Cassandra’s head jerked up and continued, “is laying unconscious in Leliana’s arms, and I am sent to find you hiding in the War Room like a bloody coward.”

She felt a vicious twist of guilt and satisfaction when Cassandra flinched back like she had been physically attacked. Folding her arms tightly across her chest, she frowned deeply and stared into dark eyes. “I should leave you here to wallow in your rightfully gained guilt, but our dear Nightingale has seen fit to summon you to the Herald’s cabin. So…” She gestured grandly toward the door, not missing the pallor that rose suddenly to dusky cheeks nor the faint shudder that wracked the Seeker’s muscled frame. “After you.”

Cassandra reluctantly preceded her out the Chantry doors, hand on the pommel of her weapon and shoulders dropped like she was facing her execution and Josephine was her jailor leading her to her death. She paused in front of the door and Josephine rolled her eyes, muttering beneath her breath while she pulled on the latch and shoved Cassandra bodily through. She stumbled to a halt in the middle of the floor, wide eyes bouncing from Josephine standing defensively before the closed door to Dorian, an amused glint in his eyes as he stooped over the bed, to Leliana, whose blue eyes froze her in place.

“Ah, Lady Seeker, so good of you to join us,” the mage said quietly, though no less jovially for the volume of his voice. “I was just finishing my physical of the young Herald. Quite terrible wounds, and rather old to be healed, too. But, I shall endeavor nonetheless.” He cracked his knuckles and, with a flare of magic in his hands, turned the soft warmth of healing energy wash over Brynn’s
battered and bandaged body. As he worked over the gash in her side, he said, “I can’t heal her completely—”

“Why ever not?” Cassandra spoke up suddenly, nostrils flaring as she took a step closer. She paused again when Leliana glared over at her with icy eyes and Dorian snorted softly, hands wandering across the slowly closing wound.

“One, there is still infection in the one across her back and, unless you wish it to be sealed within her, I can’t mend the skin. Two, these wounds are almost three weeks old. There will be scarring.” He paused briefly in his ministrations and sighed. “I can’t do anything for the bruising or scars, obviously, but I can put her into a deep, healing sleep until the infection and fever has left her, then return and heal the rest afterward.” He briefly met Leliana’s eyes as he spoke before watching the skin knit together again.

Silence filled the cabin, broken only by Brynn’s raspy breathing and Dorian’s tuneless humming as he worked over her. “Okay, there’s one. Now, for the burns on her arm…” He gently unbound the bandages that were wrapped from knuckle to shoulder and whistled lowly. “What in the world did she do? It looks like she got into a fight with a pride demon and came out on the wrong end of its electrical whip.” He skimmed his fingers over the blistered and burnt skin, eyes trailing up to her shoulder to where the ends of the wounds trailed off in fascinating, splintering patterns.

Leliana’s gaze settled heavily on Cassandra and she sighed. “When we were fighting the dragon in the marsh, she thrust her dagger into its maw as it tried to spit lightning at us.” Dorian winced sympathetically as a green glow pulsed in his hands and he started to heal her. The angry blisters burst and sealed over nearly flawlessly but for tiny star-like scars left behind, and the red, irritated skin slowly shed the damaged outer layers until pink skin was left behind. After long minutes, he exhaled and stepped away, shaking out his hands.

Cassandra hazarded a couple steps toward the bed, keeping a wary eye on the redhead cradling Brynn as she studied the freshly healed arm. Aside from the small star shaped scars, the electrical burns, where the damage was too deep, had left behind intricate scars that darkened her skin in fascinating forked patterns.

Cassandra slowly reached out to trace one of the thicker marks and reared back in surprise when Leliana smacked her knuckles. “What was that for!” The redhead only scowled and tightened her grip around Brynn’s shoulders. “No,” Cassandra spat vehemently, “you do not get to act like… like some mother hen! Ne banal tel’las asha ma!”

“You do not have the only rights to her! Where were you when the healer was trying to bring down her fever, or when I had to persuade her to even let us near to her?” Leliana switched to elven in her rising ire and they traded sharp words with barbed tongues.

Dorian edged toward Josephine and the door as their voices rose. He bumped into her, grabbed her wrist, and pulled her out of the cabin, whispering lowly until they were safely outside. “Best to leave them to their spat, eh?” She nodded mutely, staring intently at the scarred door and listening to the dangerous voices barely audible on the other side. Dorian threw his arm over Josephine’s shoulder and gently guided her away from the cabin, saying, “Now, I don’t know about you, my dear, but I could use a pint,” and smiling jovially when she sighed and kneaded her brow before nodding again and letting him lead her away.
Translations:

Rissa, ma nuvenin halani! - Little one, you need help!

Venavis, tel'garas sumeil! Mir lin ise! - Stop, don't come near! My blood burns!

Ne banal tel'las asha ma! - You cannot keep her from me!
Conversation

Chapter Notes

By the way, double update!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Brynn took several slow, unsteady steps toward the basin of water on the low dresser by the wall, cursing under her breath when her knees began wobbling halfway across the floor of the cabin. Sweat beaded on her brow and rolled down her torso, bare but for the bandages that covered her skin. She stumbled and caught herself on the back of a cushioned chair facing the fire, cursing under her breath as her vision tilted dangerously. She heard the door open behind her as she slowly pushed off the chair and groaned when an exasperated voice said, “And why are you out of bed?”

“If I stay on that cursed mattress one more day, I will go stark, raving mad.” Her accent thickened with her irritation and she tossed a scowl over her shoulder just as her legs decided they no longer felt like supporting her weight and gave out from under her. Arms circled her waist just as she fell and she leaned back into the comforting warmth behind her. “I was doing fine.”

“So you just decided to take a seat in the middle of the floor when there’s a perfectly serviceable chair right there?”

Brynn sighed in a long suffering way as she leaned her head back on the shoulder behind her and looked aside at the curtain of long, red hair that tickled her skin. “So what if I did? The floor looks particularly comfortable here.”

Leliana laughed musically, although her brow remained somewhat furrowed in concern, as she lifted Brynn to her feet and helped her over to the wash basin. “While I don’t doubt your opinion, I do admit my concern with your bias against soft surfaces, lethallan.”
“When you grow up amongst the Dalish, you learn to turn your nose up to any creature comforts,” Brynn said blandly. Leliana barked out a surprised laugh and let Brynn lean against the dresser, turning aside so she could gather a new roll of bandages and the jar of elfroot paste.

Brynn slowly washed her hands, then her face, and scrubbed the sleep from her eyes. She looked into the mirror and was surprised she nearly didn’t recognize herself. Her normally healthy complexion was waxy and wan, her eyes dull with the remnants of the fever that had yet to succumb its grip, and the bruising beneath her eyes from disturbed sleep called to mind a black eye she had received after failing to duck beneath a low hanging branch as she rode on the back of a halla when she was younger. Her collarbones stuck out starkly in the morning light and, without looking, she knew Leliana would be able to count her ribs and the knobs of her spine by sight alone.

She sighed lowly, taking the towel Leliana offered to dry her skin. The redhead took the tucked in end of the bandage and began unwinding it around her torso. “It isn’t as bad as it looks,” she said quietly. Brynn caught her eye in the mirror and raised her brow. “The thinness. Elves are naturally smaller than humans and, although you are rather skinnier than you should be,” she poked a rib experimentally and smiled when Brynn squirmed away as the touch tickled, “once you are back in good health, you can rest assured that Bull and Dorian will ply you with bread and meats until you’re fat as a noble.”

Brynn snorted at the imagery that conjured while Leliana finished unwrapping her bandages and shivered when the redhead ran a finger down her back. “You know, I think the infection is all gone.”

Brynn’s ears perked and she straightened slightly. “Dorian?”

“Dorian.” Leliana nodded decisively. “But first, let me see the others.” Brynn obligingly twisted slightly so she could look at the narrow scar on her side, then took her arm in hand and studied the swirling scarring that covered her from knuckle to shoulder. “These are healthy still; they look like they’re months old rather than a fortnight. I brought an ointment to rub in that will give you back your mobility; I’ve seen how difficult it is for you to twist sometimes.”

“Ah…ma serannas.”

Leliana smiled in return and helped her back to the bed where she laid on her side. “It will tingle a little, but given time, it will make your skin more supple.”

As Leliana rubbed the salve into her skin, she studied Brynn’s face and the way it steadily dropped. She left her hand on her side when she was done, watching the woman open and close her mouth several times before sighing and saying, “She is still avoiding me, isn’t she?”

“Aye. She keeps to the outer training field and the War Room, pouring over the maps and beating the new recruits senseless until she passes out in her tent.”

Brynn’s eyes dropped to the bed. “I told her she was everything to me, worth everything,” she said quietly. Leliana said nothing, only let her thumb run soothingly across her ribs and waited. “I should not have told her that…she wasn’t ready to hear it, but I just – I couldn’t not say it any longer. And now…”

“She will come around.”

“How can you possibly know that?” Brynn asked bitterly, sniffling with the first sign of tears that welled in her eyes.
Leliana cupped her chin in her hand and drew her gaze up. “I know it because it happened to me. When we were fighting the Blight, the Warden and I grew close.” Her eyes went hazy with memories long gone, a faint smile just lifting the corners of her lips, and Brynn was suddenly struck by her attractiveness as she unconsciously mirrored the expression. “Not quickly. No, we fought like starving dogs at first, both convinced our way was the only way, but slowly. One day, we simply…stopped. We agreed on a course of action for the first time ever, and it went from there.

“And when she told me she would do anything for me, go to any lengths to ensure my happiness, I fled. Much like Cassandra.” Brynn dropped her eyes and bit her lip, exhaling deeply when Leliana’s hand curled over the scar on her side. “I avoided her, inasmuch as one can in such an environ as the Blight, and didn’t say anything in conversation, and wouldn’t even look at her.”

“You know, this isn’t cheering me up as much as I thought it would.”

“Hush.” Leliana gently pinched her skin. “I’m getting there. It went on like this for – nearly a week if I had to guess, and then I just…I realized that the distance was hurting both of us. I hadn’t slept well since that day, I could keep next to no food or drink in me, and my fighting skills were suffering. We both were. So, I cornered her outside of camp one night.” The smile that followed was positively hedonistic and Brynn flushed a little as her mind filled in the blanks. “After that, we were back to normal.”

“So…you’re saying I should corner Cassandra alone somewhere and, what, take her?”

Leliana giggled, shaking her head. “I don’t think that would work as she is far more stubborn than I. I do, however, think she is nearly through with the avoidance.”

“What makes you say that?”

“For the past few mornings, I’ve come by here and found her standing near the door, staring rather forlornly at it. I think,” she leaned in conspiratorially, “that she is pining for you.” Brynn breathed out a weak laugh and rolled her eyes. “I’m serious. She tries to subtly ask about you whenever she sees me, too. Just last night, she cornered the cook and asked if you were eating enough!”

“And how do you know this?”

Leliana’s gaze turned sly as she smirked. “I may have been following her and eavesdropped on their conversation. ‘Tell me, ser, how the Herald has been faring these past days. No, I do not care about the state of the stew, I want to hear about her eating habits! Is she finishing her meals? Have you been giving her more meat than bread?’” Leliana’s impression of Cassandra’s voice, including her thunderous expression when she interrogated a hapless suspect, had Brynn in hysteric. Her melodious laugh filled the room as she curled around Leliana’s side and only let up when she ran out of breath and was laughing soundlessly, face red with exertion and eyes shining.

“Ahh, there she is.” Leliana brushed back Brynn’s disheveled, lank hair and playfully flicked the tip of her ear. “It’s good to have you back, Brynn.”

Brynn rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Go get Dorian, I’m more than ready to leave this thricethrice forsaken cabin. I swear I’ve memorized every knot and hollow in the walls.”

Leliana gracefully rose and bowed theatrically as she walked to the door. “As you say, Your Grace.” She barely dodged the pillow thrown at her head and laughed again before leaving. Brynn laid on her stomach on the bed, arms crossed beneath her chin as she stared thoughtfully at the
headboard and stretched as much as she could with the lingering aches in her back and side.

Leliana returned a few minutes later with Dorian in tow and she stood with arms crossed as he examined the long wound across her back. “Hmm, yes, it looks quite a sight better now than it did even a few days ago.” He pressed experimentally against the edges of the wound and, besides a sharp inhale from Brynn, there was no discharge of fluid or blood. “I don’t see any infection; the wound actually seems to be healing well, all things considered.”

He rolled up the sleeves of his robes and shook out his hands. “If it’s alright with both of you, I will remove the stitches and heal the skin afterward.” Brynn nodded and he retrieved a small knife from the belt at his waist. “Just a couple minutes, my dear.”

As he efficiently cut the threads loose and pulled them through her skin, Brynn laid her cheek atop her crossed arms and caught Leliana’s eyes. “Since it seems I’ll no longer be cabin ridden, I’d like to go to the stables. You said the halla have remained?”

“They have actually refused to wander further than the outer fields that butt up against the lake. Master Dennet feeds them with the horses every morning and night, and they forage the rest of the day.”

Brynn hummed thoughtfully and winced as Dorian pulled a stubborn stitch out, relaxing as the warm wash of healing energy heated her back. “Oh, that feels lovely.”

Dorian and Leliana both chuckled. The mage slowly knit the skin back together and, for long minutes, the only sounds in the cabin were of Brynn’s slow breathing and occasional shifting on the bed. Dorian stepped back finally and rolled his shoulders. “I daresay you won’t find a better patch job in the entirety of the Frostbacks,” he quipped.

Leliana stepped past him and ran her palm down the length of the thick, ropy scar left from the wound. It narrowed where it veered toward her hip and was thicker near the top of her shoulder, where the blade had bit deepest, but appeared entirely healed and clean otherwise. The vallaslin that was tattooed down the length of her spine was bisected by the scar and faded near the edges of the wound. Brynn’s muscles flexed under her hand, no longer shuddering with pain or fever but weak nonetheless from sickness and disuse.

“Can you stand up?”

Brynn got her arms under her and slowly sat up, then rolled her shoulders and neck, sighing happily as the joints popped. She stood up and weaved on her feet, glad when Dorian and Leliana each took an arm to steady her.

“Don’t go too fast now, healing takes a lot out of everyone involved. Take small steps, stretch a little and tell me if it hurts at all.”

Brynn did as he asked and slowly raised her arms, feeling the skin pull and stretch reluctantly but no lingering pain, and she told him as much. A grin lit up her face as she spun on her heel and threw herself into his arms, wrapping hers tightly around his neck, heedless of his squawk of surprise or the way he colored slightly when her bare breasts pressed against his chest. “Ma serannas, lethallin! Oh, this is wonderful!” She laughed and he smiled, squeezing her gently before releasing her.

“While I won’t turn away praise, I do feel the need to protest the, ehm, assets you are currently flaunting shamelessly.” She grinned wildly and giggled, pushing her face against his shoulder. “I do have to caution you about overexerting yourself, as well. Take it slowly, my dear, and keep in
mind you will be significantly weaker from the fever and lack of activity for some time. Don’t overdo it.” She bobbed her head quickly and he ruffled her hair before leaving them with instructions to apply the ointment twice a day until she no longer felt any unusual pulling.

Brynn next dragged Leliana into a hug, weakly pulling her close as her muscles started trembling. The redhead wrapped arms around her middle and helped her back to the bed, depositing her on the edge. “I will rub the ointment into your back if you wish?” Brynn laid down and sighed happily as Leliana rubbed the salve into her skin and slowly massaged her back, releasing any lingering tightness in her muscles. She was boneless when Leliana stood and pulled a blanket over her waist, but turned her head to the side to watch with lidded eyes as the redhead cleaned up and paused by the door. “I will return later today with food, and company if you wish?”

“Who?”

“Josie has been raring to visit you, but with the busyness of the recent days and how ill you’ve been, I felt it best to wait until a better time.”

“Of course. I always enjoy talking with Josephine; her accent makes listening to her speak elven quite entertaining sometimes.”

Leliana laughed with Brynn and nodded. “I know! It’s rather comical sometimes, and she gets so frustrated when I laugh and won’t tell her why!” Her features softened with a smile and she set her hand on the door knob. “Sleep, Brynn. The world will keep for a few more hours, and you could use the rest.” Brynn nodded, already half asleep, and Leliana left her with a final glance at her small body that was dwarfed in the bed before pulling up her cowl and stepping out into the bitter wind.

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Josephine giggled behind her hand as Brynn pantomimed the expression a fellow hunter had worn when they were hunting one day and came upon a protective bear guarding her cubs, then acted like she was climbing a tree as she reached hand over hand above her head. “I swear, he never went hunting with me again; it was like he thought I had asked the bear to chase him!”

Josephine laughed again, eyes crinkling with her mirth, and laid her hand over Brynn’s shoulder. “You tell such fascinating stories! I almost can’t believe they happened sometimes.”

She shook her head and Brynn smiled faintly. “Oh, they did, believe that. I have the memories and scars to prove it.” The ambassador’s grin fell away, replaced with a pensive stare that made Brynn fidget after a while. “What?”

“Speaking of scars…” Josephine played with the edge of her sash of office, avoiding the grey-blue eyes she could feel on the crown of her head. “How are yours?”

Brynn blinked and flexed her right hand automatically, feeling the skin pull taut across her knuckles. “Still healing. Leliana says I may not ever get back my usual agility,” she said bluntly.

Josephine winced. “I, uhm, I heard that. But, they are healed? Dorian could help you?”

“…yes?” Brynn canted her head to the side and cocked her eyebrow in confusion as Josephine continued to squirm in her chair and refused to meet her eyes. “Josephine?”

“Yes?”

“Is something the matter?”
“No,” she said quickly.

Brynn raised both brows and got out of her chair to crouch before the ambassador and stare up into her face. “Josephine…”

She held anxious golden eyes until the woman flinched and leaned back into her chair. “It was Cassandra! She threatened to set my wardrobe on fire if I didn’t ask after you! My wardrobe! She said I could greet the emissaries and nobles in soldier’s garb!” Josephine cried indignantly, fist pounding the arm of her chair.

Brynn stared up at her for another moment before breaking down into giggles and leaned her forehead against the soft fabric of her dress. “Oh no, ma falon, not your pretty dresses,” she teased gently.

Josephine, realizing she wasn’t angry, laughed a little and carded her fingers through her tousled hair. She tapped on her temple to get her attention. “You aren’t angry?”

“No at you. You did nothing wrong.” Brynn’s expression darkened as she rose. “Cassandra, however…I need to find her. This has gone on long enough.”

Josephine took her wrist before she could move away and held it, along with her gaze. “Don’t be too cross with her. I think she’s just…” She sighed heavily and looked toward the window, where snow was falling in heavy flakes to coat the ground. “Cassandra doesn’t express herself easily, nor does she show her emotions without there often being some outside influence to force her hand. The last time she fell into bed with a person, he died. Not because of her, but she felt the loss nonetheless and resolved to avoid entanglements like that again.

“And then you somehow managed to scale all the barricades she put up. With surprisingly little effort, I might add.” Josephine smiled but sobered quickly. “What I’m trying to say is, though I know you’re angry with her, and believe me, I can understand why and don’t begrudge you that at all, try and see why she acts the way she does before you go and break her heart. I think she’s done it to herself enough since you returned to Haven.”

Brynn lifted the corner of her lips in a sad smile and bit her lip. “I…thank you, for your input. I think I need to go and find her. We need to talk.”

“Of course. I have to get back to my desk anyway, there is a stack of papers as high as me sitting in my room.” Josephine laid her hand on the door knob and paused. “If I were you, I would begin my search down by the lake. Your efforts may be well rewarded.”

“Thank you, Josephine.”

“You’re very welcome, Brynn.”

She slipped out the door and Brynn took a moment to calm herself before gathering her cloak, boots and gloves and venturing out into the cold. She avoided the heaviest concentration of crowds as she slipped out of the gates and down past the training grounds toward the frozen lake. She saw the twisting horns of the halla as they grazed on the lowest branches of some trees, stripping the young bark from the limbs as they foraged and shook the gathering snow off their thick pelts. The youngest swiveled her head toward her and lowed a greeting, causing the others to turn their ears and sound their own greetings. She wandered over and scratched at the youngling’s ears, whispering to her thanks and a goodbye before returning to the beaten path that led to the water.
Standing on the edge of the pebbled shore that passed for a beach, she spied familiar weapons stacked neatly against some driftwood and, closer to the water, a distinctly compact form that was moving sinuously through some forms. She could hear Cassandra panting from exertion from her vantage point and her keen eyes could just make out the sheen of sweat that had collected on her brow despite the frigid temperatures. She wandered onto the rocky shore, hands deep in her pockets and hood up to ward off the worst of the chill as she approached silently. Cassandra spun on her heel and froze mid form, wide eyes locked on her face as she stopped several feet away and shook her hair out of her face.

“Hey. Can we talk?”

Chapter End Notes

Also, cliffie ;)

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“Hey. Can we talk?”

Cassandra warily stepped up the shore line, closer to Brynn although only marginally. She picked up a ragged towel and wiped the sweat from her brow, all the while steadfastly avoiding Brynn’s gaze as she looked resolutely out over the frozen water.

Brynn slowly stepped up beside her, studying the way her muscles tensed and coiled the closer she got. She stopped beside her, staring out over the same icy expanse, and sighed. “I’ve given you time, and distance, now I want you to talk to me.” She felt more than saw Cassandra freeze, the utter stillness from the Seeker setting Brynn ill at ease, but she didn’t turn her head. “It’s been over three weeks since we killed the dragon, and you’ve yet to say more than a handful of words to me,” she continued evenly. “I… I know that… you weren’t ready, maybe you never will be, but – I couldn’t, wouldn’t, keep my emotions inside of me any longer. Maybe it wasn’t fair to you, but I felt like you deserved to know the depth of my feelings for you, even if yours weren’t as involved.” Brynn tilted her head to the side, just barely able to see Cassandra’s profile out of the corner of her eye.

“I just… Cassandra,” she turned fully to look at her, eyes roving across her features that were as smooth and unreadable as the lake before them, “I only want to know if we can even continue to be as we were. If my affections cannot be returned by you, then please, sa’lath, I beg you to tell me, that I may guard myself from further heartache.” Brynn chanced pressing her fingertips into Cassandra’s wrist, feeling the strong pulse beneath the skin, and retreated a moment later when the Seeker’s attention didn’t divert from the far horizon. Her amber gaze was wide but, to Brynn’s consternation, she couldn’t read the emotions within.

“Mala inan emma banal’ras, sa’lath. Dirthamen las dirth in’mala. Ir abelas.” Brynn ghosted the
back of her hand over Cassandra’s cheek and turned away, walking back up the shoreline toward the stand of trees she had come from.

Once out of sight, she let the tears that had been threatening wash down her cheeks and leaned back against a wide pine tree, sinking into the snow as the realization that Cassandra may very well not feel the depth of emotion that she did sank in. Hand pressed tightly over her mouth, she shut her eyes and let the tears fall, muffling her quiet sobs amongst the falling snow and trees. A near silent step made her head snap up, bloodshot eyes finding gentle brown eyes staring at her from several yards away.

“Ir emma abelas, ma falon. .”

The young halla stepped gracefully over to her and laid down beside her, pressing her head into her lap and lowing quietly. Their breath curled through the air as Brynn fought to regain her hold on her emotions and the youngling pressed closer, barely twisting horns digging into Brynn’s shoulder as she moved her head gently to nuzzle at her lap. Brynn’s stifled sobs tapered off into snuffles and hiccups as she idly scratched at the halla’s forelock, smiling wety when she grunted happily and pushed closer. “I wish…” She scoffed bitterly. “I wish I had never been tasked by the Keeper to find out the affairs of humans. I would still be hunting, unaware of this Inquisition, I would not be marked by this rift under my skin, I would not be so at odds with myself,” she said forcefully.

Her frown softened and tears pricked at her eyes again. “But I wouldn’t know Cassandra, either. Ma sa’lath, ma lath…no, I can’t call her that. Not until she talks to me.” The halla grunted when Brynn stopped scratching her forelock and butted her gently. She laughed quietly as her eyes slanted over at the white head in her lap. “You are intent on getting attention, aren’t you, da’len? But you listen well, so I don’t mind.”

As she sat in the snow, gradually losing feeling in her butt and legs but feeling disproportionately warm with the great animal laying at her side, she slowly felt the distress leave her. Eventually, she pushed the halla’s head away and stood, dusting herself off and fending off needy nibbles from the youngling as she tried to pull Brynn’s hand back to her. “You are insistent, da’asha.”

As she wandered toward the walls of Haven, the halla followed closely behind, bumping into her when she stopped abruptly. “You know, if you’re going to be staying here, being underfoot and a nuisance, you need a name.” The halla, snorting indignantly when called a nuisance, pricked her ears up at the last and grunted, lipping at Brynn’s cheek with her velvety mouth affectionately. Brynn laughed quietly and pushed her off, tilting her head to the side thoughtfully. “So, what to call you? I simply can’t keep calling you da’len, or pest, can I?”

The halla shook her head and they stood on the path, staring at each other’s eyes silently for long minutes. “Arwen.” Ears pricked as the halla snorted and pawed at the packed snow, bobbing her head. Brynn smiled and scratched her chin, giggling when the massive head nearly bowled her over as she pushed against her. “I think so, too. It means ‘noble’ in my people’s language. If you’re going to stay here and help me, then I think you deserve to be recognized as such, so let’s see if we can get the blacksmith to forge something for you.”

Arwen followed Brynn closely to the forge just outside Haven, stopping in the doorway as she got the blacksmith’s attention and sketched what she wanted made. She smiled when, after some chin scratching and questions about working the metals a particular way, the man agreed and they shook hands. Brynn led Arwen into the stables and fed her, then left the halla to her own devices as she walked back into the village proper and ducked into Leliana’s tent by the Chantry.

“Nightingale,” she greeted, noticing an agent standing at the table as Leliana pointed out an area
for them to explore. The spy departed with a brisk nod and Leliana turned her eyes on the woman, features softening slightly as they locked gazes.

“Brynn, you’re up and about. I’m glad. How do you feel?”

“Still stiff, but better than I have.”

“Good. What brings you here?”

“I was actually wondering where the dragon bits from the battle went to.”

Leliana hummed thoughtfully. “I believe most of it went to the forge to be used in arms and armor, although some of the smaller fragments went to the mages to enchant. Why?”

“I thought, since most of my leathers were damaged in the fight against the dragon, I would requisition some light armor to replace it.”

Leliana’s eyes lit up and she smiled. “That’s a wonderful idea. If you want, I can go with you.”

“If you’re not busy?”

“I just sent my scouts west to investigate a lead, there’s nothing else pressing immediately. Come, let’s go to the armorer.”

They spent the remainder of the evening picking out the lighter skins to use for Brynn’s armor and were given instructions to come back on the morrow to begin fitting the pieces in place to be stitched together. With the sun fully set behind the mountains, the cold set in with a vengeance and Leliana escorted Brynn back to her cabin after they supped. She massaged the salve into her scars and left Brynn to her own devices, few although those were.

Still recovering from the healing magic administered recently, she only had enough energy to disrobe and climb beneath the heavy furs, mind falling back on the rather one-sided conversation she’d had with Cassandra earlier. She sighed forlornly and turned onto her side, arm flung across the empty expanse of her bed as she fell into a fitful sleep.

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Within the War Room, tempers flared and glares were tossed about like the snow blown around by the storm raging outside the stone walls. Leliana jabbed her fingers emphatically at the map on the table, jaw set mulishly. “We need this information!”

“At the cost of your scouts? It’s a whiteout, Leliana, see reason!” Josephine shot back, hair unusually disheveled from running her fingers through it constantly. “We only made it here because of the guides lines strung between cabins, how do you think your people would fare out there?”

“They know the risks.”

“There is no reason,” Cassandra interrupted. She stared down Leliana until the spymaster reluctantly broke her gaze and then went around the table, lingering on Brynn’s downward turned head briefly. “We need to keep as many of our people safe as possible until this storm has blown over. We have sufficient supplies until the next caravan breaks through the snow, you know this, Leliana. Do not risk their lives for your need for knowledge.”

Leliana sighed and nodded, leaning back against the wall. “Fine. But we need to get them out as
soon as the storm has passed. Too much time has passed already, and these reports we’ve been receiving about a so called ‘Elder One’ worry me.”

“They worry us all, but there is nothing to do now, and no one can get to us either. We are safe for the time being. Now, onto the matter of the dragon hide and bone; how goes the crafting for that?”

“Enough arms and armor have been made to supplement the elite of our soldiers,” Cullen said. “They train daily with them and have expressed their preference for the durability of their weapons and armor, although some have complained about the weight.”

“They need only train further to adjust to the weight,” Cassandra said. “If there is nothing else, I believe we can adjourn our meeting?” Heads nodded around the table and everyone shuffled out of the room into the relative warmth of the Chantry proper.

Josephine and Leliana disappeared into the ambassador’s offices while Cullen drew his cloak closer and ventured into the storm, while Cassandra shuffled papers and Brynn waffled at the door indecisively. She narrowed her eyes against the wind when she cracked it open and sent her scarf flapping wildly, a crimson smear against the grey of the stone and the stark whiteness of the snow. She spared a glance at Cassandra before slipping out the door and leaving her alone in the smoky interior.

Cassandra sighed, jumping when a hand landed on her shoulder. Leliana stood behind her with an unreadable expression on her face and tugged her behind a thick column. “What are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play coy, Cassandra, you don’t have the temperament for it,” Leliana scoffed. She jabbed a finger into her breastplate harshly. “You’ve been ignoring Brynn ever since she ventured from her cabin. You haven’t even been coming around at meals anymore. Yet, you continue to watch her now, and she avoids your gaze. What did you do?”

“What do you mean ‘what did you do?’ I did not do anything! Brynn – she just…” Cassandra growled impotently and tried to walk away but Leliana caught the edge of her breastplate and yanked her back behind the column.

“Do not walk away from this,” she hissed.

“What would you have me do?! She came to me, told me that she – that she…”

“She loves you,” Leliana said quietly.

“Not in so many words.”

“She doesn’t have to. She is like you, dear, stubborn Cassandra. She speaks more through her actions than words. Although, she isn’t nearly as reticent with her words as you.” Cassandra turned her head away, facial features hidden in shadow. “What did she tell you,” Leliana urged gently.

“She said…she said she would do anything for me, in the Exalted Plains. And, a couple days ago, down by the lake, she asked me to spare her from further heartbreak if – I did not return her affections.” Cassandra moved her head to glance askance at Leliana. “What do I do?”

“Make a decision.”

“How can I, when I do not know the depth of my own feelings? After Anthony, after
Regalyan…” Cassandra turned her head just enough that Leliana could see the telltale brightness in her eye and she cupped her cheek affectionately.

“You can’t let past losses dictate your life. The dead are gone, Cassandra; they wouldn’t want you to mourn and shut yourself away always. You know this.” Cassandra shut her eyes and sighed, leaning back against the column behind her heavily as Leliana pressed her point. “No matter how grim and stern you make yourself, you can’t keep your heart from feeling. I know you, Cassandra, and I know how deeply you feel, regardless of how much you bury those emotions even from yourself. Go find her after the storm clears, talk to her. Think about how you really feel until then.” Leliana gently pushed Cassandra out of the shadows and toward the door, yanking her cowl up as she walked. She smiled faintly as she pushed Cassandra through the door and shut it behind her, leaving the Seeker blinking in the heavily falling snow and blowing wind.

Brynn looked out the window of the War Room at the snow blanketing the ground in deep drifts that piled against the sides of buildings from the wind. The storm had finally died out and Leliana promptly called a meeting with the advisors and herself to discuss sending out scouts once again. Once dispatched, they discussed the caravan that was due to arrive any day with food and tradeable goods and the likelihood of delay from snow blocking the pass.

In the midst of wondering if they should send out a company to clear the snow, the bells ringing Haven began to ring loudly and everyone froze. “Those are the alarm bells,” Cassandra said dumbly.

Cullen scrambled for the door and ran out into the snow where soldiers were gathering in confusion near the outer wall of the village, hand on the pommel of his sword as he pushed toward the commanding officer. “What’s going on?”

“Dunno, the alarm sounded and we’re waiting for a scout to come with information.” The man shrugged and barked at the milling soldiers until they stood in loose formation.

Cassandra and Leliana came up behind Cullen, wearing matching expressions of worry as they looked out over the walls at the treetops. Josephine and Brynn brought up the rear, standing to the side as tensions rose and the bells continued to ring. After nearly fifteen minutes without any news, Brynn scoffed and handed Josephine her cloak and tightened her leathers, making sure her weapons and belt were secure at her waist as she walked toward the gate.

“What are you doing?” Cassandra grasped her wrist and Brynn looked over her shoulder at her.

“I’m going to see what’s wrong.”

“You cannot, you are too-”

“I’m faster than your scouts and lighter so I won’t fall through the snow as much; I’ll be gone maybe half a candlemark.” Brynn held her eyes for a long moment before she gently pulled away and sped toward the gate on light feet, leaving barely-there impressions in the snow as she passed the gate and disappeared from sight.

Anxiety gripped all of the advisors as a candlemark passed and Brynn didn’t reappear. They did, however, receive reports about smoke rising in the distance from the guards atop the walls. Leliana paced and muttered to herself when none of her dispatched scouts returned and Cassandra
snapped at any lingering soldiers irritably. She yanked Brynn’s cloak over her shoulders and stalked toward the gate when Josephine caught her arm.

“What are you doing?”

“I am going to look for her; for all we know, she could have been captured by whatever waylaid Leliana’s scouts, and I aim to discover what it is. Now, release me.”

“No. We should stay together, it’s safer,” Josephine argued.

Cassandra bared her teeth in fury and snarled, “Whatever is out there should fear me.” She yanked her hand away and took only a few steps before there was a flurry of noise at the gates.

The guards scrambled to open the barred door and Brynn staggered through, doubling over as she gasped for air. Her skin was red with exertion and cheeks chapped from wind burn, hair more disheveled than usual from running as she trembled bodily. The advisors descended on her, questions overlapping demands overlapping statements until she held up a trembling hand in a request for silence. Abruptly, they shut their mouths and silence descended upon the small group, broken only by the clanging of the bells overhead and the murmur of voices as people milled about uncertainly. Brynn tipped her head back as she straightened and took several deep, cleansing breaths, then she faced them.

“Tell the soldiers to ready themselves. There’s an army coming to Haven.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Mala inan emma banal'ras, sa'lath. Dirthamen las dirth in'mala. Ir abelas. - Your eyes are full of shadows, beloved. *May Dirthamen show you the truth within yourself.*
I'm sorry.

*Literally, Dirthamen grant knowledge inside you.* More of a prayer than an actual statement, like 'God bless' or 'In the name of the Father, et al...' etc.

Ir emma abelas, ma falon. Ma vhenan tel'atisha. - I'm so sad, my friend. My heart is at war [with itself]. Literally, 'I am full of sorrow, my friend. My heart is not peaceful.'

Ma sa'lath, ma lath... - My beloved, my love...

Da'len - little one

Da'asha - little girl
Anchored

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

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“Tell the soldiers to ready themselves. There’s an army coming to Haven.”

“What do you mean, there’s an army?” Cullen asked incredulously.

Brynn stared at him with brows raised expectantly. “I mean there is a veritable sea of Templars marching through the pass toward Haven,” she hissed, “and our couple hundred soldiers stand as much chance of defeating them as a snowball does of lasting beneath the heat of the summer sun.”

Cullen shook his head. “That isn’t possible; we couldn’t be unaware of a force that size.”

Apparently we were, because they are nearly here,” she insisted. “This… thing was leading them, floating atop the snow.”

Leliana leaned in with curiosity written across her face. “What do y-”

“Dragon!” The terrified shout drew everyone’s attention and all eyes jerked into the sky at the inky blot rapidly growing larger. The twisted, misshapen body of the dragon flew over Haven and Brynn lunged for the ladder that led to the top of the wall, watching it land heavily near the lake. It folded its tattered wings back against its body and roared, an enraged sound that set the hair to stand on end as its throat moved with each ululation.

“That…is no dragon,” Cassandra said, pulling herself up beside Brynn to stare at the beast. “It is an abomination.” The dragon roared again and shook its massive head from side to side just as horns sounded at the pass and lights appeared at its mouth. Cassandra shouted over the wall, “Cullen, gather the soldiers! We are being attacked!”

He ran into the midst of the camp outside the gates and Brynn watched the men and women-at-arms arm themselves efficiently as their commanding officers strode amongst them, shouting orders. Below them and within Haven’s walls, Leliana was talking to her scouts, all hovering
nervously around her. They scattered to the corners of the village and soon, a river of non-military people were flowing toward the Chantry. Brynn slid down the ladder as Cullen reappeared and Cassandra stopped just behind her, her presence steadying even amongst the uncertainty between them. “Now what?” He asked.

“Now, we figure out who is attacking us and why they have a bloody dragon,” Cassandra said emphatically.

Leliana nodded and stepped forward. “My scouts saw no banners flying, no coat of arms on the Templars tabards.”

“Neither did I,” Brynn said, “but all of them had a weird…glow. Within their eyes, a red gleam that shouldn’t be there.”

“Battle lust, perhaps?” Cullen ventured and she shook her head.

“It was different. More…literal, not just the want for blood. And I swear I could see the same glow between the joints of some of their armor. It was…unsettling.” She felt a shiver run down her back at the reminder.

Cassandra stepped up next to her, carefully avoiding touching her as she spoke authoritatively. “Whatever the case may be, we need to make preparations. At this rate, they will be at the gates within half a candlemark. Cullen, ready the soldiers. Josephine, gather the most important documents and keep them on your person. Leliana-”

“I’m staying here, you could use another blade,” she said stubbornly.

“As you say. I need to get my armor. We will meet back here.” She stepped away from the circle and Leliana caught Brynn’s eye before turning toward the Chantry, jerking her chin at the Seeker’s retreating back. Brynn shook her head as she moved the opposite way toward her cabin.

She studied the dragon hide armor hanging from the rack when she shut the door. The armor, mostly a deep blue that verged on black, was accented with the yellows and whites that had marked the dragon’s hide in striking patterns and, although very light, was also extremely durable. She fingered the supple material and pulled a gauntlet over her hand, made of the same material but entirely black. The glove flexed seamlessly, thin enough she could grasp her weapons with ease but still sturdy enough to deflect some minor strikes without too much damage, and she nodded to herself as she removed it.

As she pulled a padded shirt over her head and then her chainmail and straightened the skirt so it wouldn’t bunch underneath her leathers, she looked in the small mirror over the wash basin and studied the still slightly sunken features reflected back at her. Her eyes, however, sparkled as adrenaline poured through her body. Her hands trembled slightly as she buckled the supple dragon hide on and adjusted the top so it fitted snugly across her torso. The bracers went over her padded shirt, buckled tightly so they wouldn’t move when she was fighting, and she pulled a pair of steel soled boots on her feet, greaves buckled above them for additional protection. She buckled her weapons belt at her waist and sheathed her daggers, filling the small pouches with vials of poisons to coat the blades in, some elfroot potions and salves to congeal less serious wounds, and other useful things. Taking her bow from its weapon stand, she strung the wood and slung the quiver full of arrows over her head.

She walked back out into the snowy landscape as laborers and other workers flowed toward the Chantry, carrying blankets and satchels of food and other necessities. Some of them offered her nods as they passed, but most were focused on their given tasks and warding off the panic that
hovered overhead like an executioner’s axe. Brynn weaved through the crowd toward the gates of Haven, climbing nimbly up the ladder to stare at the slowly progressing columns of smoke and lights that reflected off the snow in the pass.

Her eyes passed over the trebuchets that Cullen had, in a fit of paranoia, requested be built. Her breath stuttered in her chest and she blinked rapidly when she recalled what he had said about them when Leliana and Cassandra protested the requisition of precious materials for something they saw as nonessential. “They will be deterrents for our enemies. Remember, we allied with the mages. The Templars will not take lightly to that slight. I should know.”

She heard someone clamber up the ladder behind her and looked over her shoulder to find Cassandra hauling herself up beside her, heavy armor rattling with each motion. Her belt was buckled at her waist, pommel gleaming dully in the late afternoon light, and her expression was pinched as she stared across the frozen ground. “It is daunting,” she said lowly.

“It is. But I think I know how to help a little.”

Cassandra arched her brow curiously. Brynn gestured for her to follow her back onto the ground and trotted over to where Leliana and Cullen were conferring with increasingly agitated hand motions. “We can’t leave that side of the village defenseless,” Cullen hissed.

Leliana sighed and cut her hand through the air in annoyance. “We cannot spread our forces so thin, either! If we want to stand any chance of overcoming such overwhelming odds, we need to consolidate our forces. If that means sacrificing a portion of the village, it’s worth it!” He looked ready to shout at her, a vein bulging in his forehead as his face reddened, and Brynn cut in quickly.

“I think I figured out a way to mitigate that, actually.” They both jerked their heads toward her and she pressed on before they could speak. “The trebuchets. You said they are meant to bring down walls, correct, Cullen?”

“Aye…”?

“So aim them at a wall.” Cullen’s brow furrowed while Leliana blinked and comprehension dawned on her face.

Behind her, Cassandra inhaled sharply. “The snow in the pass,” she said.

“Yes. If we hit the sides of the mountain, would it collapse the snow beneath?”

“Possibly.” Cullen’s face tightened thoughtfully, hand tightening on the pommel of his sword as he ran the idea through his head. He nodded and smiled mirthlessly. “It very well could work. With a large enough impact, the snow could cave in and cause an avalanche which would close off the pass.” A dark expression passed over his face and he looked away. “We would bury hundreds of men.”

“Men who are marching here to slaughter us all, regardless of whether we are armed or not,” Leliana reminded him sharply. “I think it’s a very good idea. We need as many advantages as we can get, considering the dragon lurking outside the gates.”

As if on cue, the beast roared again and everyone within Haven’s walls cringed at the sound. Brynn squeezed her eyes shut as the piercing sound rattled her eardrums and felt something soft pressed into the palm of her clenched fist. She looked over to find Cassandra retreating with a sheepish expression on her face and opened her fist. The handful of thick wool unexpectedly
brought tears to her eyes as she recalled the first time she used it to block the worst of the screeching from undead in the Fallow Mire. She wiped the corner of her eyes under the pretense of brushing back her hair from her face and smiled to herself at the feeling fluttering in her chest. She cleared her throat and looked at the three before her once she had her emotions under control. “So, we fill the pass with snow, cut off whatever reinforcements may come for either side, deal with the remaining Templars, and kill another dragon. Sounds simple enough,” she quipped.

Cullen scoffed and Leliana cracked a smile. “Let’s hope that optimism gets us through the rest of the day. Cullen, send some of your men-at-arms to set up a trebuchet before more of our enemies get through.” He dashed across the trampled square toward a group of soldiers and Leliana turned back to Brynn. “With any luck, we’ll be able to beat back the Templars, but I will send some of my scouts to ferret out a way out of Haven to be safe. You should…prepare yourself.” She said cryptically, flicking her eyes over at Cassandra before departing and leaving the two standing awkwardly on the border of the village.

Brynn fingered the wool in her hand, glancing at the Seeker staring stoically over the village, then grabbed her gloved hand and dragged her toward some closely built cabins. Once behind the structures, she released Cassandra and turned on her heel. The Seeker stumbled to a halt a few steps away, confusion twisting her features.

“Brynn, what-”

The rest of her question was cut off as Brynn darted in and stood on tiptoe to kiss her, muting the sound of her surprise with her lips as she tipped her head to the side and brushed their noses together briefly. She pulled back before Cassandra could fully register what had happened, curling her hand behind her ear and kneading the nape of her neck for a moment.

“Just in case. Give me this one thing, just this. I won’t ask any more of you, but…I wanted to remember how it felt.” Cassandra gaped at her and Brynn searched her eyes for a long moment, kissing her lips again, chastely, before pulling back completely and smiling regretfully.

“The battle is upon us,” she said, hearing wood and metal creak as the trebuchet was fired nearby and men cheered immediately after. The ground rumbled beneath their feet as tons of snow buried soldiers and filled the pass, guilt roiling in her stomach when she thought of the lives snuffed out in an instant. She dragged a finger down the length of the scar on Cassandra’s cheek and swallowed. “Best find Cullen and ask where he wants you, emma sa’lash. Mythal guide your hand and protect you.”

Brynn turned and walked away, leaving Cassandra staring after with dread and regret pooling sickeningly in her stomach. She exhaled shakily and shook her head, feeling warmth suffuse her at the memory of warm, chapped lips pressed against her, and pressed her eyes closed as she prayed. “Maker, keep her safe. Let us come out of this alive, please. Do not take her from me yet, I do not think I could survive it.”

Brynn grunted as she threw her weight behind her dagger and sunk the blade to the hilt within the abdomen of a red Templar. The man, eyes lit with an eerie light, roared in pain and swung his sword at her head with all the power of a rage demon. She rolled to avoid the attack and neatly sliced through his hamstring, bringing him to his knees as the tendon was severed. With her next motion, she slit his throat, ignoring the warm wash of blood over her arm and the gurgle he made as he landed facedown in the churned up snow.

She wiped her brow with the brief lull in battle and looked around at the fires raging in the village
from the enemies’ torches and the passes the dragon made overhead, the cabins that had been their homes fast becoming tinder beneath the hot blaze of dragon fire. The snow, previously drifted high against walls and beaten into vague paths that cut through the village, had melted in the heat and what was left was churned under booted feet. The muddy ground was littered with weapons and corpses of both sides, Inquisition and Templar tabards laying side by side where they fell.

Brynn sighed and threw herself back into the fray, making her way to the Iron Bull’s side where he was happily swinging his massive weapon at a veritable sea of enemies, taking out several at a time if they got too close. She sheathed her daggers and drew her bow, loosing an arrow between one breath and the next and watching with grim satisfaction as the head buried itself in a Templar’s neck. He went down and another arrow disappeared into another man’s eye, blood misting through the freezing air as he dropped soundlessly. She jogged up to Bull’s side, drawing her daggers again to stand at the qunari’s side.

“Nice shooting, Boss. Good eye.” His breaths were labored from the extended time spent fighting, skin gleaming in the firelight with sweat and blood, his and others’. Some shallow wounds had congealed on his torso and arms, but he seemed otherwise unscathed, she was glad to note.

“Have you seen anyone else?”

“Heard the crazy-ass Vint near the Chantry, laughing at something, and I saw the Nightingale dart by a while ago with some pissed off Templars at her back, but otherwise…” He shrugged and blocked a panicked swing from a red Templar. His fist flashed out and the man reeled, nose broken and spouting blood at an alarming rate. “They’re probably near the Chantry, keeping the workers safe.”

Brynn nodded and drew her bow, stepping in front of Bull to fire into the throng of Templars that were hesitantly crowding near them. They scattered, leaving another corpse behind that fell with a thud, and the fight reengaged as the duo darted into the thick of the bodies, cutting down men without regard. Brynn hissed when a blade nicked her forearm and slid in the mud between another man’s spread legs, twisting onto her back to sever the arteries on his inner thighs and slipping in the muck as she ran toward the Chantry.

Up the slight incline, the battle was fierce, bodies coiling and sliding together in a nearly unrecognizable mass. She climbed atop a low wall and searched for familiar faces, panic cresting when she couldn’t immediately find anyone. A burst of light near the doors of the Chantry caught her eyes and, looking over, she sighed when she saw Solas wielding his staff with deadly efficiency. He twirled the carved staff in dizzying patterns, warding off searching weapons as he formed another spell and launched it into the midst of the Templars before him. They ran from the pulsing light and were caught by rapidly expanding spikes of ice, screaming as they were caught and impaled on the pointed ends.

She turned her head from the macabre scene and looked overhead as the dragon made another pass, jaws open in a scream she only vaguely heard through the wads of wool stuffed into her ears. Fire flickered in the depths of its mouth and was released on a breath to sear across the land outside Haven’s walls, setting the stables and forge afire. Brynn had no time to worry about the animals trapped there though, as she ducked beneath a bloodstained great axe and dropped clumsily off the wall to go toe to toe with a mammoth of a Templar.

The man’s features were obscured by the helmet covering his head, although two hard pricks of red light where his eyes should be set her ill at ease. She deflected his next attack, stumbling with the force behind the blow, and backpedaled as he advanced steadily on her with murderous intent. The strange red lyrium they had found deposits of before seemed to have fused to his skin, adding bulk
and weight to his form. His armor was partially concealed by the growths peeking from beneath his pauldrons but didn’t seem to stop him from swinging his axe with abandon. She narrowly missed the next sweep from it and slipped on a slick patch of blood.

Her ears rang as her head smacked the frozen ground and she barely managed to focus her eyes when she saw the glint off firelight off the axe head and rolled to the side. The ground vibrated from the impact of the blade but Brynn couldn’t orient herself as she reeled. She put her daggers up in weak defense against the next blow but it never came, and, when she looked up, she was relieved to see Cassandra’s stoic visage overhead. The Seeker pulled her to her feet, steadying her when the earth tilted sickeningly, and guided her around the massive man now crumpled on the ground with chips of red lyrium scattered around him from Cassandra’s blow to the side of his neck. She felt Cassandra’s arm slip around her waist when she staggered and leaned gratefully into her side, staring up at the Chantry. The fight there was nearly over with only a few Templars fighting for their lives against the trio of mages bearing down on them. Vivienne flashed a mirthless smile as she pushed the bladed end of her staff through the visor of one’s helmet and Dorian dispatched the last small group with another spell.

They stopped before the doors and Solas walked up to them, soot and blood covering part of his face. He rested his hand against the back of her head, fingers pressing lightly against the welt there, and the warm wash of healing magic stilled the worst of the nausea inducing spinning Brynn felt. “I need to conserve as much mana as I can, but this should help.”

“Ma serannas, Solas.” He dipped his head and walked into the village toward the sound of fighting, followed by Vivienne. Dorian smiled wearily and Brynn waved her hand toward the gates. “Bull was near the entrance if you want to find him.”

“I think I’ll stay with you two, actually. Another hand never hurts.” The mage walked ahead and left Brynn still leaning on Cassandra, soaking in the strength from her armored form. She gradually straightened and looked overhead when the dragon made another pass, watching its head sway from side to side predatorily.

“We need to take it down,” Cassandra said from her side. Brynn nodded and stepped away from the Chantry, watching the dragon circle over a spot a ways away from the village, calling out to something on the ground. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to get its attention and kill it,” she said bluntly.

Cassandra took her arm and pulled her to a stop. “By yourself?”

“Well, no, I have you, don’t I?”

Cassandra felt her throat close up as Brynn turned her face up toward her and nodded mutely. As they walked, Cassandra hesitantly pushed her fingers into the spaces between Brynn’s and squeezed gently. She felt Brynn’s eyes on the side of her face but kept her gaze searching for Templars in the flickering shadows and ignored the heat curling in her stomach as Brynn slid closer.

They came across Leliana on the fringe of the village, vibrant hair gleaming in the firelight as she twirled in a deadly dance across the churned up snow. The men coming at her barely had a chance to get their weapons up before she was upon them, throwing knives into their midst and disappearing and reappearing at random amongst the group. Cassandra and Brynn watched from the fringe as the Templars fell one by one until she was standing in the middle of them, panting for air and wiping a bloody streak away from her face. Brynn walked across the corpse strewn area with her eyes bouncing cautiously from body to body until she was in front of the redhead.
“Brynn, I didn’t realize…”

“I thought you were handling it very well,” Brynn said with a shrug. Cassandra stepped up beside her and set her hand on the pommel of her sword, keeping a wary eye on the shadows. “I’m glad I ran into you, though.”

“Oh?” Leliana leaned down to wipe the blood off her dagger onto a Templar tabard.

“We need to kill that dragon. If you’re up for it, we’d like your help.”

Leliana met Brynn’s eyes, then flicked her gaze over her shoulder to Cassandra, who nodded rigidly. “How do you plan to do that?”

“The same way we did in the Exalted Plains.”

“Climbing atop it and sticking your dagger into its mouth does not sound like a good idea.” Cassandra crossed her arms and frowned. “I refuse to allow you to put your well being at risk like that again.” Brynn scoffed and rolled her eyes, turning to bite back a response, and Leliana put herself between them with a genial smile.

“There’s no need for this. I agree, we need to kill the dragon, but we should find our companions and have them help. Numbers, after all, are the key in such a battle.”

“Dorian was around here somewhere.”

“Did I hear my name?” The mage appeared from the other side of the area, soot covering his face and the hems of his robe singed. He waved off their worried gazes with a lazy hand motion. “I just had to find our dear Qunari, no problems.”

“Hah, speak for yourself, Vint. I was the one carrying your ass through the village.” Bull materialized out of the ashy air behind him, skin darkened several tones and nearly black in spots, although with soot or blood, they didn’t know. He hefted his weapon on his shoulder and rubbed his jaw. “Although…” With a speculative glance at Dorian’s frame, Bull grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. “Never mind, I take back everything I said. What are we standing around for, anyway? There’s still more of the red bastards to kill.”

“We need to kill the dragon, first. It’s going to bring the village down around our ears otherwise. I don’t know why it’s left the Chantry alone, but I don’t want to tempt fate,” Leliana said.

Dorian gaped and Bull cheered happily, lifting his weapon into the air. “Finally! A battle worth fighting! These Templar assholes were getting too easy.” Everyone rolled their eyes and they conferred shortly, deciding to follow the wall toward the furthest trebuchet and get its attention.

“If this doesn’t do the trick, nothing will,” Dorian said as he lit the pitch covered projectile in the sling of the trebuchet. Bull cranked it until it was taut and then stepped back so Leliana could climb up.

“Everyone ready?”

They nodded and she loosed the mechanism that allowed the arm to swing up, the projectile singeing the dragon’s side as it flew by. It screamed and turned its empty eyes on them, banking widely toward them. Bull hastily loaded another boulder and cranked the arm back as fast as he could until the dragon landed heavily on the ground and loose a gout of fire that sent everyone scrambling.
Brynn dashed behind the corner of the trebuchet as fire melted the few small piles of snow remaining in Haven, and ran from cover when she heard the dragon inhale for another breath. She charged at it directly, aiming for the vulnerable skin between its toes, and noticed the others coming out from behind cover in her peripheral vision. A feral smile crossed her lips when she scored a deep hit in the fleshy, unprotected webbing between its claws, and she darted away as it twirled on its feet to come after her, snaking its head along the ground to futilely follow her erratic movements. She heard its jaws snap shut just behind her as she dove over some debris and rolled safely away.

Peeking over the makeshift barricade, she watched Bull and Cassandra harry the beast with their weapons, making shallow cuts on its legs and sides where the scales were thinner. Dorian stood near a copse of trees, casting spells that slickened the ground directly beneath its feet and caused it to shake its serpentine head to dislodge the hallucinations he put there. Standing atop the platform of the trebuchet, Leliana fired arrows with pinpoint accuracy and smiled grimly each time an arrowhead found purchase in the soft skin around its eyes and nostrils.

It bellowed in rage and pain, sweeping its tail across the ground to unbalance the warriors at its feet, then turned toward the trebuchet. Brynn felt dread creep up her throat when its mouth gaped open and she vaulted the barricade to sprint toward Leliana, knowing full well she couldn’t possibly reach her in time from across the clearing. She watched in horror as the dragon took progressively faster steps toward the redhead, hissing and snarling and ignoring the attacks Dorian launched at it in a panic. Her voice caught in her mouth when a dark head of hair appeared suddenly ahead of the dragon’s charge, sword and shield fearlessly raised to protect Leliana, who was running off the trebuchet platform with her daggers in hand and shouting something unheard over the dragon’s incensed roars.

An animal sound of fear and horror escaped Brynn’s lips when Cassandra and Leliana disappeared beneath the dragon’s bulk. She leapt onto its back and sunk her daggers into the meaty muscle of its thigh to the hilt, sliding off its back when it wailed in pain and lurched around. She darted between its feet toward the trebuchet, nearly falling over her feet when she saw the fresh, bright red blood in the churned up mud and slush and the two motionless forms that lay together.

She slid to her knees next to Cassandra’s body, hands trembling violently as they hovered over the mangled armor hiding her skin, eyes flicking desperately across her slack, blood covered face. Beside her, Leliana lay crumpled on her side, her leathers ripped and torn and behind her, she could hear the sounds of the dragon as though from down a tunnel. Red flickered across her vision as she brushed her fingertips across Cassandra’s cheek, thumb caressing the long scar for a moment before she pushed herself to her feet and turned on her heel.

She watched Bull and Dorian desperately try and keep the dragon’s attention as she ran up behind it and leapt onto its back again. It began bucking and wheeling wildly when it realized where she was but she stubbornly clung to the progressively larger spines on its back as she reached for her daggers and wrenched them out viciously. As it bellowed in pain and limped back a few paces, she ran at Bull and yanked his horned head down to her level. “Get them out of here,” she said lowly. He shook his head, moving her entire upper body, and opened his mouth to speak when she snarled ferally. “I swear to every deity in this forsaken land, Fen’Harel himself will not keep you from me if you don’t remove them, immediately.”

Something in her face must have convinced him, because Bull nodded silently and quickly trotted over to the motionless Hands by the trebuchet. Brynn turned and gestured for Dorian to run to her, keeping an eye on the dragon as it glanced at the black-bleeding wounds on its rear leg and eyed them warily in return. The mage was out of breath as he reached her and she said, “Go with Bull, get them to safety. Get out of Haven, send up a signal when everyone’s clear.”
She shot a dark look at him which he flinched at, and watched him go to the Qunari to take Leliana’s smaller form into his arms while Bull gingerly hefted Cassandra into his own. Her heart clenched painfully as the Seeker’s head lolled to the side and her arm dropped, blood dripping a path onto the ground from some wound beneath her pauldron and breastplate. They withdrew into the treeline while the dragon growled and tried to put weight on its rear leg.

Brynn brushed back Cassandra’s hair and looked at Bull. “Get to the Chantry, keep them safe.”

From Dorian’s arms, Leliana groaned and tipped her head to look dazedly at Brynn. Her blue eyes were unfocused as she reached for the elf, taking her hand and pulling her in with surprising strength. “Watch the…drag’n…it bites…”

Brynn couldn’t help the watery chuckle that left her throat, squeezing her fingers gently and feeling tacky blood against the pads of her fingertips. “I noticed. You bloody stupid, shemlen fool, why didn’t you get away?”

“Couldn’ leave Cas…now could I?”

A smile faintly touched the tips of Leliana’s lips and tears sprung to Brynn’s eyes again, overshadowing the red tinted rage for a moment. She leaned in as close to Leliana as she could and whispered urgently to her, nodding in satisfaction when the redhead repeated her words back successfully. She squeezed her hand tightly for a moment, then stepped back and jerked her head toward the Chantry.

“Don’t you dare die, Boss. I don’t wanna listen to the Seeker bitch and moan about having to find another savior. Get the fuck out of here when we’re clear.” Bull’s words were gruff but a telltale sheen lingered in the qunari’s eyes before he quickly turned away and started toward the rear of the village. Dorian only looked worriedly at her as he shifted Leliana’s slight weight and walked away, staff strapped to his back as he leaned in toward the redhead.

Brynn took a deep breath as she let the rage wash over her again and stepped out of the treeline, daggers drawn and a snarl on her lips. “Elgar’nan ghilana emma mi i las emma shem’nan. Halam sahlin.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Elgar'nan ghilana emma mi i las emma shem'nan. Halam sahlin. - Elgar'nan guide my blade and grant me swift revenge. This ends now.

Also, another cliffie! Who knew! ):3
Penultimate chapter, guys! :'( I know, it makes me sad, too. But! There's a shitload that happens in this chapter and the next, so buckle up!

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Brynn couldn’t help the watery chuckle that left her throat, squeezing her fingers gently and feeling tacky blood against the pads of her fingertips. “I noticed. You bloody stupid, shemlen fool, why didn’t you get away?”

“Couldn’ leave Cas…now could I?”

A smile faintly touched the tips of Leliana’s lips and tears sprung to Brynn’s eyes again, overshadowing the red tinted rage for a moment. She leaned in as close to Leliana as she could and whispered urgently to her, nodding in satisfaction when the redhead repeated her words back successfully. She squeezed her hand tightly for a moment, then stepped back and jerked her head toward the Chantry.

“Don’t you dare die, Boss. I don’t wanna listen to the Seeker bitch and moan about having to find another savior. Get the fuck out of here when we’re clear.” Bull’s words were gruff but a telltale sheen lingered in the qunari’s eyes before he quickly turned away and started toward the rear of the village. Dorian only looked worriedly at her as he shifted Leliana’s slight weight and walked away, staff strapped to his back as he leaned in toward the redhead.

Brynn took a deep breath as she let the rage wash over her again and stepped out of the treeline, daggers drawn and a snarl on her lips as the dragon turned its empty eyes on her. “Elgar’nan ghilana emma mi i las emma shem’nan. Halam sahlin.”

Brynn dodged around the dragon’s claws and scored a strike on the underside of its foot, dropping behind some debris as it roared and swung around. She felt the heat from its fire wash across her back as it slowly ate through the barricade she was hiding behind and set her eyes on the treeline. As she ran toward it, her eyes lit upon the trebuchet sitting near the edge of the clearing and a stroke of inspiration hit her. She abruptly reversed direction, dipping around the dragon’s snapping jaws to nick a shallow wound along its jaw, then darted away and shot at its eye when it reared back.

“C’mon, you bloody beast, where’s your master! Where’s that misshapen creature that led you!” She shot another arrow and scrambled away when it suddenly darted its head in. Razor teeth tore through the heavy pants she wore and she cried out, tripping over herself and landing heavily on the muddy ground. Her hand trembled over the deep, grisly looking wound spilling blood down her leg to pool on the saturated ground and she gritted her teeth as she lurched back to her feet and began limping toward the trebuchet.

Suddenly, everything in the clearing seemed to go completely and utterly still. The ashes lingered
on the air in dark parody of snow, the wind ceased to blow, and she slowly turned around with a grimace on her face. The creature, easily twice her height, walked into the clearing, running long, clawed fingers down the length of the dragon’s hide until they stood side by side.

“Pitiful, naive child. You toy with forces you have no understanding of.”

The creature’s voice echoed beneath her bones, full of corrupt power that pulsed angrily in her temple and tempted her to kneel in supplication. She snarled instead and straightened, narrowing her eyes at the man – for man he was beneath the misshapen form he occupied – and taking a bold step closer. “Who are you! Why have you done this!”

The man chuckled hoarsely and Brynn’s knees buckled beneath the weight of the grating sound. He stepped forward and lifted his arms, ragged robes fluttering with the motion as he sneered down at her. “Names have no meaning any longer to myself, but you have already heard of one moniker. Exalt the Elder One, foolish elfling! Bow to the might of Corypheus!”

The dragon roared in sequence, throat rumbling with its powerful vocalizations.

“What do you want?” Brynn pressed her palms to the muddy ground and weaved on her feet. She suddenly found her air cut off as the man – Corypheus – moved inhumanly fast and wrapped his over-long fingers around her throat, lifting her bodily into the air. She choked and flailed, ripping at paper thin skin but unable to break his grip.

“I want order restored to this world, the proper order of things long lost again found. But I ask nothing of you, elfling, because it is not in your power to give. That, however, will not stop me.”

He grabbed her left hand from its frantic clutch at his wrist and lifted it, appearing to scrutinize the appendage. With a scoff, he pressed a ragged nail against the center of her palm, where the glow was concentrated, and Brynn felt a pulse of pain ripple down her arm. She shuddered and gasped for air as he said lowly, “I am here for the anchor; the process of removing it begins now.”

His nail broke the skin of her palm and she screamed as a pain unlike any other ripped through her arm. Her legs kicked wildly in the air as the scent of ozone filled the air and snapped electrically in the space around them. Corypheus’ face twisted with rage the longer he stood with her hand in his grasp until he yelled in rage and threw her away. Brynn gasped as her back smacked the corner of the trebuchet, feeling pain radiate from there as well her entire arm. Her face felt overly warm and, when she pressed her palm to her eyes, it came away shining with her blood. She shuddered and gasped for air as he said lowly, “You have destroyed my anchor with your inept flailing, and now I shall have to begin anew! Years of work, rendered useless because you somehow survived!”

The manic light in his eyes suddenly dimmed and he released her. Brynn dropped to all fours, gasping for air as he paced before her. “What…why do you do this,” she rasped. “What is your purpose bringing this madness to the world?”

“Madness? You know nothing of madness, mortal. You know nothing of the despair that comes with the knowledge that you failed!” He bent and jerked her to her feet, raising her left hand overhead again. “Beg that I succeed this time, for I have seen the Black City, the throne of the Gods, and it was empty!”
He pressed his nail to her palm again and Brynn screamed, knees buckling so she dangled by her wrist as he attempted to draw the power from her hand. Spots danced in front of her eyes as the pain washed up her arm to her shoulder and slowly into her back. She clutched her arm with her other hand and forced herself to function through the blinding pain, bringing her feet up and planting them against Corypheus’ chest and pushing violently. She felt something pop as she fell back into the mud and stared up at the man blearily. His face, devoid of all emotion, stared placidly down at her, one long fingered hand toying with an ornamental dagger belted at his waist.

“You dare assault a God? You, insignificant elfling, who would flail at rifts what I crafted to assault the very heavens, think to harm me?” A grating chuckle made Brynn wince and struggle backwards as he pulled the dagger from its sheath. She felt wood beneath her palm as she backpedaled onto the trebuchet platform. Over the man’s shoulder, she saw a trio of bright lights flare briefly in the sky, arrows dipped in pitch and lit before being loosed into the sky far beyond Haven. She smiled grimly as Corypheus reached for her with his hand, brandishing the dagger overhead. “If I cannot remove the anchor from you, I will ensure that you and your fledgling Inquisition cannot use it either.”

“Not today,” Brynn said, grunting as she kicked at the lever that released the arm of the trebuchet. Corypheus’ gaze automatically followed the projectile as it sailed through the air and landed with a dull thud on the mountainside on the other side of the village, behind the Chantry. Brynn smirked when she felt the ground vibrate and watched snow begin to fall from the mountainside and he turned back to her with hatred blatant on his face.

“This is not the end, usurper. We will have a reckoning, and I will rejoice when your corpse is hanged from the arms of my throne. If you survive. If not, your grave will remain hidden until the end of days.”

With those words, he bound her in place and tore apart the snaps for her leathers, then slipped his dagger between her ribs and yanked the bloody blade out and mounted the dragon waiting nearby. They took off into the sky as Brynn bit her tongue to keep from crying out and pressed her palm tightly against her side to stem the bleeding. The rumbling grew louder and she looked out to find a wall of snow slowly gathering speed on the other side of the village. She growled when she sat up and felt warm blood roll down her side as she used the crank of the trebuchet to haul herself to her feet. Her vision tilted sickeningly when she was upright and she shut her eyes against the nausea inducing swimming. She staggered off the platform and made herself jog toward the far side of the clearing, recalling finding an old mineshaft nearby on one of her excursions around Haven when she had first shown up.

She had just reached the treeline when she heard a familiar bawl a ways off. She peered through the trees and ash hazily, eyes widening when she saw familiar short, twisting horns bobbing toward her. “Arwen,” she croaked. The young halla trotted up to her and danced in place, ears flicking madly as the sound of approaching snow grew into a steady roar. Brynn hauled herself up across her back, crying out as pressure was put on her wounded side, and hung on as Arwen trotted toward the incline. “The mineshafts…get below ground, Arwen…”

The halla snorted, ears flicking nervously as the ground trembled. She lifted her head when she saw a small, dark cave entrance in the side of the hill and walked into it fearlessly, picking up speed as first a few small snowballs, then tons of snow beat past the entrance and sealed them inside. The cave was pitch black and silent but for the occasional rumble from deeper within and their breaths.

Brynn slid haphazardly off her back, leaning against the rough stone wall she felt at her side. A dull green glow appeared in her left palm, flickering and snapping painfully beneath her skin but
providing some meager light for them. She inhaled sharply at each pulse of light as she glanced at their surroundings. Rough hewn stone walls and half-collapsed support beams comprised the tunnel they were in, a solid wall of snow at their back and pitch black at the fore.

Brynn sighed, shifting her weight further off her wounded left leg and immobile left arm. She gingerly removed her right hand from within her leathers, palm coming away slick with blood as she looked down at her torso. The side of her leathers were sticky, and her pants were heavily torn from the dragon’s teeth. The skin beneath was similarly damaged and hung limply in shreds, and she gagged a little at the sight. She took the cuff of her pants and tore it off, cutting it into a long strip to tie as tightly as she could manage around her thigh. She panted as she tightened the fabric around her leg, moaning in pain as she tied a knot in the makeshift bandage, and then tore another strip off and wadded it beneath her leathers. She rebuckled them to keep the wad of fabric in place and pressure on the sluggishly bleeding wound.

Arwen stood steadily next to her and stared at her with trusting brown eyes. Her fur was covered in soot and singed in places, and matted with blood across her back where Brynn had laid. She weaved on her feet as the blood loss and shock hit her, grateful for the strong shoulder at her side when the halla moved closer. “*Ma serannas, da’len.* I’m fine; we need to keep moving. If I remember correctly, most of these tunnels came out further up the mountain. They mined ore and coal deposits until it was scarce and never completely closed the shafts, thankfully for us.”

Brynn laid her hand on Arwen’s neck, scratching up to her jaw and then behind her ears as she watched the sickly green light in her palm reflect off the colorful bangles that had been slipped onto her twisting horns. “Let’s go. Ghilan’nain guide us safely out of here and return us to Cassandra.” Her face pinched worriedly at the last memory she had of the Seeker, unmoving and covered in blood after fighting the dragon. “Please let her be alright,” she whispered, twisting her fingers into Arwen’s fur as they slowly walked into the darkness.

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Leliana slowly let out the breath she was holding when Dorian pulled his hands away from her skin. Sweat was beaded on both of their brows from the extensive healing, and she was still very sore with the bruising that was just beginning to show on her skin. She experimentally arched her back from the cot she was laying on and breathed more deeply when she didn’t feel anything grating together.

“I have to say, my dear, you don’t do things by halves. That is one of the most taxing healings I’ve ever had to administer before. You’re lucky that beast didn’t get its teeth on you.” He sat back on his heels and wiped the sweat away, then grasped his staff and got to his feet. “Of course, I can’t do anything for the bruising, but I could get some elfroot potions if you want them?”

“No, others need them more than I,” she said. She looked over to the other side of the tent where Cassandra was laid on her stomach, a blanket draped over her legs but leaving her back and arms bare. The Seeker’s muscles twitched and rippled with spasms as quiet whimpers left her throat with each movement. Her back was scored with a dozen deep marks, all parallel to each other from the dragon’s teeth ripping through her armor and tearing through skin as it shook her. Her stomach was likewise damaged but had already been treated by Dorian with the limited supplies they had to offset any infection that could set in from the beast’s maw. “And you’re sure you can’t heal her at all right now?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” The mage sighed as he pulled his cloak over his shoulders and tied the cord at his neck. “Until we can ascertain if that undead abomination had any toxins in its mouth, I don’t want to risk healing those wounds and seal them in.”
Leliana pursed her lips as she nodded. “I understand. I just...hate to see her like this.” Dorian set his hand on her shoulder and left, securing the canvas on his way out. Leliana cautiously levered herself to her feet and stretched a little to remove the kinks left from staying so long in the same position, then knelt by Cassandra’s cot. “Cass…”

“Mmmm...Leliana?”

“Yes. How do you feel?”

The Seeker grunted and shifted a little, only half swallowing the pained groan that came with the motion.

“Let me get you a potion for the pain, please.”

“No,” she said stubbornly, “I will wait for Brynn. She has yet to return?”

“No one has seen anything yet, and the storm is getting worse.” As if to accentuate her point, the tent whipped about a little in the wind that had picked up in the past couple hours. Leliana’s fingers danced along Cassandra’s shoulder, tracing old scars and the defined muscles of her back unconsciously. “We can’t send anyone out either; they may not be able to find their way back and then we’ll have lost more people.”

“We cannot simply leave her out there on her own,” Cassandra protested as she started to squirm.

Leliana flattened her hand over her shoulder to still her movements. “We won’t, we are only waiting for the weather to clear up a little. I promise, we’ll send out a party as soon as the snow lightens up.”

Cassandra turned her head to the side to stare up at her with a bloodshot eye. Even weakened from blood loss and stuck lying prone, the Seeker exuded an air of authority that Leliana was hard pressed to ignore. “Leliana.”

“Yes?”

“There is something you are not telling me.”

“No, there isn’t.”

“Do not lie to me, Leliana. You forget how long I have known you; you never could keep the truth from me.”

Leliana allowed a small smile to slip before it was pushed away by other thoughts. “When we were fighting the dragon,” she began slowly, eyes locked on Cassandra’s scarred cheek, “when the others saved us, Brynn told me something. She asked that I tell you when you woke.” She looked away and crossed her arms over her stomach. “I don’t wish to tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Her words...feel final.”

Cassandra exhaled shakily and her hand slowly reached down to grasp Leliana’s knee and squeeze. “I will not break.”

Leliana didn’t reply, but laid her hand over Cassandra’s and closed her eyes. “Very well. She told me to protect you; she said she would break my other ribs if any harm befell you. She wanted me
to tell you…Ir abelas, sa’lath.”

Cassandra’s lips quirked up faintly. “She’s always apologizing to me.” They lapsed into silence but for the wind blowing outside and Cassandra’s labored breaths. “What does that word mean?”

“Hmmm?”

“Sa’lath. She has said it to me for…Maker, several months, now, and she promised to tell me back in Haven, but then…we got sidetracked. I have wracked my brain, but I cannot figure out what it means!”

Leliana brushed her thumb over her knuckles with an inscrutable expression on her face. “She thought you might ask. She told me I could tell you.”

“You know?”

“I do. My…Mahariel, she called me it on our travels, and in our letters, still.” Cassandra turned her head to look at Leliana, whose eyes were nostalgic and filled with tears. “It means ‘beloved.’ It is…very nearly a sacred term. Not many Dalish use it even, only those whose love has lasted through the most difficult of trials.” Tears dripped down her cheeks and off her chin, hand trembling as it held Cassandra’s.

The Seeker’s face was frozen and her eyes pricked with tears that she refused to let fall. “Why would she…no.” Horror washed across her face as realization set in. “No, I will not…” Her voice wobbled as her chin began to tremble and Leliana had already halfway squeezed herself halfway onto the cot when the first sob ripped through her.

“Shhh, it will be okay, Cass.” Leliana lay facing the Seeker and cradled her head against her chest, whispering into her ear and combing her fingers through her sweat-and-blood stiffened hair. “It will all turn out.”

Brynn stumbled through another deep drift, nearly falling into it as her legs shook with each step. Before her, Arwen turned her head and chuffed worriedly, dancing in place. “I…I’m fine, s’kay. Jus…keep gon’…” Her eyes rolled back in her head as she collapsed into the snow and Arwen wheeled back to her, grunting in concern. She nosed against Brynn’s face, pushing harder until she blinked her eyes and looked around muzzily. “Arwen? What…happ’n’d?”

Arwen nudged Brynn until she was weaving on her feet and danced in place next to her, turning to butt her hip. Brynn clumsily climbed astride the halla and wove her fingers into the thick fur at her withers, face pressed into her short mane. “Fin’ Cass…” Brynn’s grip slackened and Arwen hopped slightly as she began wading through the deep snow again, eyes slitted against the driving snow and howling wind coming through the pass.

Leliana laid beside Cassandra, hand thrown gingerly over her waist, and watched the Seeker fitfully sleep – even with the potion she had finally convinced her to take – with eyes moving rapidly beneath her lids and incoherent mutters coming from her lips. Leliana brushed back a strand of limp hair as she listened to the wind howl outside, sitting up with dagger in hand as footsteps became audible. A scout appeared in the entrance, eyes bright with excitement. “We’ve found something, Sister Nightingale! A halla, wandered up from the village it seems. It won’t let anyone near it though, but we can see something draped over its back.”
Hope filled Leliana’s chest, but she beat it back with her usual tempered pragmatism. “Don’t approach it; I will be down presently.” The scout left and Leliana silently untangled herself from Cassandra, dressing with jerky movements and drawing her heavy cloak over her shoulders with trembling hands. She swept out into the blowing snow and followed the footsteps toward the edge of camp, where torches burned in a loose circle. Most of their inner circle was gathered near the nervous halla, trying futilely to close the distance only for the animal to shy away as it carefully balanced the dark lump on its back.

“Stand back,” she told them, and they all reluctantly took a step away. Leliana caught the animal’s eyes and recognized the short horns, decorated with colorful bangles, and felt hope leap in her chest again. “You follow Brynn,” she breathed near silently. The halla stopped, ears pricked and intelligent eyes locked on her. “She made those ornaments for your horns. How did you make it here?”

She took a small step forward and the halla turned to the side, showing the dark bundle draped across her back. “Is that?...” She took a couple more steps and gasped. “Shit. Dorian, Solas!”

She dragged Brynn off the halla’s back as they approached her and, together, they man-handled Brynn into Cassandra and Leliana’s tent. They laid her down and Leliana immediately unbuttoned her leathers, taking them and the damaged chainmail off hastily. She took a knife to the frozen underclothes as the two mages knelt on either side, hands already glowing as they checked her for wounds. “Multiple abrasions, mostly minor, dislocated shoulder and fractured clavicle, some odd wounds at her neck…like nails,” Dorian said.

Solas swept his hands over her torso and legs with a frown on his face. “There’s a deep wound here; it is bleeding inside. Pavus, help me.” Solas washed her side as Dorian pulled some tools from his satchel and swept them over a flame he held in his hand. Blood sluggishly flowed from the narrow wound in her side as the crusted blood was washed away. Immediately, Dorian inserted a narrow tool just inside the wound to open it further. Leliana watched Brynn’s face rapty, concerned when she never flinched as the tool was forced through the clotted wound. Solas’ hands hovered over to draw the blood out which flowed into a bowl Dorian set aside, thick and bright against the pallor of Brynn’s skin and, when the flow thinned, Dorian withdrew the tool and held his hands over the wound. The edges slowly began knitting together under their combined power until only a thin scar remained. Leliana watched Brynn’s face rapty, concerned when she never flinched as the tool was forced through the clotted wound.

The mages turned their attention to the other wounds, healing her neck and setting her clavicle to knit the bone together. They popped her shoulder back into place and frowned jointly down at her thigh. The shredded skin was frozen together with blood and discharge, and a livid red bruise had covered the immediate area.

“Looks like infection,” Dorian said grimly. He laid his hand over her skin. “Unfortunately we can’t do anything more until we warm her back up. My Lady Nightingale?”

“Yes?”

“Gather as many blankets as you can spare and bring them back, post haste.”

“Aye.” She dashed from the tent and raided the tent that had been set up to distribute the limited goods they had salvaged before fleeing Haven. No one asked why she had taken such an armload of blankets, thankfully, and she draped a couple cured skins over her shoulder as she waded through the snow again. She dumped the load at Brynn’s feet, kneeling to push her cot next to Cassandra, who was still passed out. She laid a couple blankets on the cot while Dorian and Solas stripped the rest of her clothes off, leaving her in only her smalls.
They carefully moved her so she was laid directly next to Cassandra and dressed her thigh to keep it from bleeding once she warmed up, then left them alone. Leliana pulled her clothes off and laid down next to Brynn, turning onto her side to drape herself over as much of the woman as possible. She rubbed her arms briskly up and down the length of her back, feeling the knobs of her spine under her hands. She pressed Brynn’s face into the crook of her neck and twisted their legs together as she whispered a fervent prayer beneath her breath, terrified when she realized Brynn wasn’t even shivering.

“Maker, bring her back to us. Please don’t take her from our sides.”
Here it is, the last chapter. Not much to say, guys, but thank you all so much for coming on this adventure with me! What was originally intended to be a five chapter foray into the Inquisition universe turned into a monster that spanned 24 chapters, 80,000 words - what the actual fuck - and several months. You all are amazing, seriously. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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“Maker, bring her back to us. Please don’t take her from our sides.”

Cassandra groaned as she groggily came to, feeling the ache in her back and across her torso with the last draught of pain potion wearing off. She gingerly shifted and froze when she felt warmth at her side. She forced an eye open but couldn’t see anything past the unruly auburn hair that filled her vision and tickled her skin. The familiar scent of herbs and leather filled her nose and she tucked it into the source of the smell, breathing deeply as a deep lethargy overcame her again. She nearly drifted off again when her eyes opened wide and she jerked back, hissing in pain when her wounds complained of the sudden movement.

Brynn laid before her, face lax in sleep and covered with a veritable mountain of blankets and furs over her. Tousled red hair was just visible on the other side of her and blue eyes just beginning to wink blinked at her. “Leliana,” Cassandra said hoarsely, “is this a dream?” Her hand reached out to slowly trace the familiar curve of Brynn’s jaw, lingering on the vallaslin tattooed in the corner of her eye. “I do not think I could take it if it were.”

A calloused hand covered hers, drawing her gaze over Brynn’s to Leliana. “It isn’t. They found her late last night, unconscious on the back of her halla. My scouts returned this morning after ranging back toward Haven and report that snow covers the entire village now. Not even the spire
Tears pricked at the corner of Cassandra’s eyes as she returned her gaze to Brynn’s face. She draped her arm over the blankets and carefully scooted closer. “What happened down there?”

“Only she can tell us, and then not until she has regained consciousness.”

“She did not?”

“She wasn’t aware when the halla wandered up last night, no. Solas, Dorian and I worked over her here while you slept. They healed the worst of her wounds,” Leliana explained, fingers pulling back the blankets to show the bandages covering Brynn’s chest and neck. “She had dislocated her shoulder, strained her wrist, and there were curious marks on her neck, like it had been scratched deeply. They popped her shoulder back into place and bound it to be safe, but their main concerns were these.”

Pulling the blanket further down, she bared Brynn’s body to the knee and the two vicious wounds on her side and thigh. “She was stabbed, although there were no puncture marks in her leathers, which leads me to believe someone restrained her. It was clean, though, and they healed it after drawing the excess blood out. And her leg…” She gingerly peeled the blood saturated bandage away to reveal the grisly wound, shredded skin still hanging and the furrows now leaking blood and discharge. “They fear it is infected. See the redness? It’s the same as your back and stomach. They won’t heal it until they know for sure.”

Cassandra curled her fingers over Brynn’s hip, a tense line appearing between her brows. “The dragon?”

“It would appear so, yes.” Leliana replaced the soaked bandage and pulled the covers back up so only Brynn’s face was visible. “She hasn’t yet woke, but her temperature is back up and she was shivering through much of the night, so…” Leliana shrugged as she stood and stretched, unselfconscious about her near nudity.

Cassandra turned her attention back to Brynn’s features, absorbing the flush in her cheeks and thankfully similar color in the tips of her ears. Leliana finished dressing, pulling up her cowl in preparation of the bitter wind they could hear blowing around the tent. “I’ll go find Solas and Dorian, and we’ll see about getting both of you further patched up. Don’t move.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes as the redhead left the tent and settled herself more comfortably on her stomach. She studied Brynn’s slack features until the mages swept in with Leliana on their heels and shook out their cloaks. Dorian knelt beside Brynn, pulling back the blankets with a hum. “She certainly looks better. Good color in her fingers and ears; no signs of dying skin, thank the Maker.” He peeled back the bandage on her thigh and winced. “That certainly doesn’t look good though.”

Solas scoffed quietly, settling beside the other mage and sweeping his hand over the wound. “Infection has set in already. We need to draw it out. Can you handle that, Pavus?”

“Of course, most knowledgeable and respected ser,” Dorian returned with an eye roll as he sifted through his satchel.

Solas came over to Cassandra’s side and turned down the blankets covering her. His cool fingers pressed into the skin surrounding the teeth marks on her back, efficiently measuring the heat radiating from them with a touch. “The poultice has drawn out most of the infection already, Lady Seeker. I’ll wash them out and apply it again, but with any luck, we’ll be able to begin healing you
On the other cot, Dorian washed Brynn’s thigh. “My Lady Nightingale, if you would be a dear and assist me a moment?” She kneeled beside him and he gave to her a large rag and bowl. “I need to cut away the shredded skin, and you will put the rag over the wound if it bleeds.” She nodded and he grabbed a piece of skin with a slightly squeamish expression on his face.

As he cut away the skin with a small, sharp knife, Brynn shifted slightly. He put the piece in the bowl and took another, watching carefully as Brynn’s face pinched slightly. “Solas, I may need you here. I think our dear Herald is beginning to wake.” Solas dried Cassandra’s skin and moved to kneel beside Brynn. He put his hands on her leg to arrest any movement as Dorian cut away more torn skin and Leliana dabbed at the sluggishly bleeding wounds. Brynn groaned and tried to shift away, muscles rippling in her leg with the attempt.

“Hurry, Pavus,” Solas grit out when she flexed harder. “I can’t hold her forever.”

“I’m going, man. This is delicate work. I don’t want to damage the skin anymore than it already is.” He took another piece of skin in his hands and, as he made the first cut to detach it, Brynn grunted and threw her body to the side. Solas dove for her legs and Cassandra took her arms, ignoring the pull across her back as she moved. Brynn moaned when Dorian took the skin in hand again, hands clenching at her sides and eyelids fluttering.

“Why can you not put her to sleep?” Cassandra asked with panic laced through her voice.

“She has a concussion; I daren’t do that lest she not wake again,” Solas said tersely. He grunted when Brynn flexed again, hips lifting as Dorian cut away another piece of skin and dropped it in the bowl.

“Almost done. Maker, that dragon did a number on her leg.” Dorian took the last piece and cut it away, leaving Leliana to push the rag over the bleeding wound as he took up a foul smelling poultice. “This will clean out any infection, although it does burn a little. Hold her still.” He liberally applied the salve to the entirety of the wound, pulling back when the elf bucked and moaned in pain. He wrapped her thigh and tucked the end under the bandage and everyone relaxed marginally. “Now that that’s taken care of…my dear Lady Seeker, have your wounds been tended to?”

“Solas already applied the poultice, Pavus. I will be fine until tomorrow, although I detest the restriction of movement,” Cassandra said with a sigh.

The mage grinned cheerily and patted her leg. “Give it a little time, my dear, I’m sure that lassitude will hold some appeal to you with some incentive.” Her brow wrinkled at the odd phrasing but Dorian had already excused himself, taking his satchel and the bowl with its grisly contents out into the snow before she could ask what he meant.

Solas excused himself soon after, promising to check them again in the morning as he stood in the tent. “If I may have a word, Leliana? Outside?” Leliana tipped her head to the side but nodded, following him out of the tent with her cloak in hand. When she walked back in, a perturbed expression twisted her face and stiffened her normally fluid motions.

“What did he say?”

“He…intimated that I should send my scouts further north. He wouldn’t specifically say why, only that there may be a place for our people further within the cradle of the mountains.”
“What, then, sours your expression?”

“I don’t trust him,” Leliana said vehemently, “he knows too much and *never* says where he gets his information from! He knows things even I don’t know, with my extensive network! I can’t explain it, and he *won’t*, so I don’t trust his words!”

Cassandra cracked a smile at Leliana’s mulish expression, but she did agree with her, and said as much. “Just send a few of your people in, like he suggested. The worst that happens is they find nothing, and we have to think of something else. There is no harm that can come from this, Leliana.”

The redhead sighed, sitting between the two cots with a sudden hopelessness that surprised Cassandra. “I know. I just… I don’t like this not knowing, or the fact that those Templars managed to catch us all off guard. It makes no sense.”

“No, it does not. Get your scouts, send them out, and come back here. We will discuss this further, Leliana, but you need to get something accomplished, and this will put you a step closer to that. I will still be here when you return, do not worry.”

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Brynn first noticed the excessive heat surrounding her that was making beads of sweat pool in the hollow of her stomach, sweltering but welcome nonetheless after the frigid cold in the mountains outside of Haven. She heard the wind whipping outside canvas walls and the quiet breathing of someone nearby, steady and slow in the cadence of sleep. She gauged the aches that centered around her shoulder and left arm and another in her leg that pulsed with every beat of her heart and slowly opened her eyes. Dim, flickering light filtered through the thick canvas of the tent she was laying in, upon a fur if the velvety softness beneath her palms was any indication. She could hear voices outside, faint and indiscernible, and steps from passersby. She yawned widely as she woke more and tipped her head to the side, wincing as her shoulder creaked and pulled with the motion. Her pupils blew wide open and she was suddenly wide awake when she realized it was Cassandra breathing deeply at her side, sound asleep with her lips just parted and brow wrinkled even in repose. She beat back the urge to leap upon the Seeker and reluctantly contented herself to study Cassandra for a moment. She lay on her stomach, torso bare but for heavy bandaging and furs slipped down to her waist. The sharp scent of herbs permeated the crisp air, a mixture Brynn recognized from smell alone that was used to draw out infection.

Her thigh pulsed at the thought and she recalled the way the corrupted dragon’s teeth had torn through her skin like so much paper, and the earlier wounds inflicted on Cassandra as she was snapped up in the beast’s jaws. Panic clawed at her throat suddenly, urging her to press her palm against Cassandra’s shoulder, drag the pads of her fingers over the sculpted muscle as she slowly worked her fingers into her hair and felt the tendons of her neck flex as she sighed and shifted in her sleep. She ghosted her hand across her sharp jawline and lingered on the deep scar on her cheek, idly stroking the impression.

Cassandra grunted and her hand bridged the slight distance between them, tripping uncoordinatedly across Brynn’s bare stomach to come to rest on her opposite hip. Brynn sighed happily at the contact and carefully eased herself onto her side, working her injured leg over Cassandra’s so her calf was nestled in the cradle between her legs and pressed her face against her shoulder, relaxing completely when the familiar scent of leather and the peppermint oil Cassandra used to rub into an old wound on her hip filled her nose. She shut her eyes and listened to her breathe, matching the cadence but not falling back to sleep.
An indeterminate amount of time later, she felt Cassandra shift and groan quietly. Her hand, still loosely gripping Brynn’s hip, flexed lazily and kneaded the skin as she smacked her lips and her lashes fluttered open. She blinked incomprehensibly at Brynn’s eyes that glowed faintly in the guttering torchlight outside the tent and smiled dreamily, reaching out to tuck an errant strand of hair behind the point of her ear. “I must be dreaming,” she whispered hoarsely, “for I remember laying next to you in sleep, and your skin was as blue as the mountain ice above Haven.” The calloused pads of her fingers traced across her vallaslin delicately as her eyes roved across her face. She shut her eyes and carefully shuffled closer to press their foreheads together.

Brynn tipped her head to buss a kiss across Cassandra’s chin and dug her fingers into the small of her back. “I’m here, sa’lath.” Cassandra reared back, eyes searching her rapidly, then made an ecstatic noise in her throat and lunged for Brynn, tugging her against her roughly as she peppered kisses across her face. Brynn laughed lowly and nuzzled under her jaw, nipping at her chin as she skated her fingers across the bandages covering her torso. “I’m here, I’m alive, it’s okay.”

Cassandra wrapped her arms around Brynn, rolling onto her back and pulling the woman atop her so they were pressed flush against each other from top to bottom. “You are here…awake.” Cassandra brushed back Brynn’s hair, cupping her jaw and running her thumb across the crease by her ear with a reverent look in her eyes. “I cannot believe…” She swallowed roughly, closing her eyes and laying back on the furs.

Brynn lifted herself up a little on her knees and brushed her fingers across Cassandra’s cheek. “Believe it; even with all the luck in the world and the Creators’ blessing, I never thought I would make it back to you. Emma sa’lath…” She carefully leaned down, noses brushing as her breath washed across Cassandra’s lips. “Ma vhenan, ma arla.”

Cassandra leaned up and caught her lips, drawing Brynn down with fingers tangled in the hair at the nape of her neck. She rested her other hand at the small of Brynn’s back, shifting a knee so she fit perfectly in the cradle of her hips and tugged her closer. When Brynn pulled back for air, Cassandra ducked under her jaw to nip at her chin and throat, tongue laving the small marks and gently latching onto her shoulder with her teeth. Brynn rumbled out a groan, pressing up on her arms and collapsing with a gasp as her shoulder spasmed painfully. Cassandra grunted as Brynn’s slight weight landed on her and grimaced when the scabs on her torso pulled, rolling to her side and pulling the elf with her. They laid tangled together, foreheads touching as they caught their breath and ran their fingers across skin. Brynn chuckled quietly and Cassandra cocked her eyebrow. “What is funny?”

“It’s just…we parted in the midst of a battle and I…I didn’t honestly know if I would make it.” Her expression suddenly somber, Brynn reached out to stroke the Seeker’s cheek. “All I could see was the blood, and your damaged armor…you weren’t moving; I could scarcely even see you breathing.” Her eyes filled with tears and she sniffled as her chin trembled. “I didn’t know if you would live, I just told Bull to get to the Chantry with you and Leliana…I had to keep you safe, sa’lath.”

Cassandra exhaled shakily, carding her fingers through Brynn’s hair as she slung a leg across her hip. “You did. I am here, alive, because of you. Because you had to go and be a brave, foolish woman.” She smiled tremulously as Brynn kissed her nose, closing her eyes when the elf burrowed further into her. “But you lived, too. You are here.”

They lay together quietly, listening to the wind outside the tent and the faint footsteps of a patrol passing nearby. Cassandra nudged Brynn’s forehead with her nose, pulling back to catch her eye. She opened her mouth several times but didn’t say anything, unable to phrase her words correctly, and a perturbed expression crossed her face. Brynn gently poked her side. “Spit it out,” she
“I do not…I am not particularly graceful with my words,” Cassandra said slowly. “I know this, but…I just had to say – I need to tell you.”

“Tell me what?” Brynn’s face was scrunched up in confusion as Cassandra pulled away a little more, although she kept her fingers firmly twisted through her hair.

“All the languages in Thedas are not sufficient to say how I feel about you,” she whispered. “Sa’lath. Emma sa’lath…ar lath ma.” Her eyes were locked with Brynn’s as she spoke, conveying the certainty behind her words, and Brynn’s eyes welled with tears as she smiled and pressed their lips together. They stayed like that, trading kisses and softly whispered words, until sleep took them, and laid together tangled beneath the furs as the sun slowly rose over the mountains.

Brynn studied the papers spread across the makeshift table in the central tent with barely concealed frustration, a furrow carving deeper between her eyebrows with each passing minute. Cassandra stood beside her, offering support as her leg was still weak from the dragon’s bite, even though several days had passed and Dorian had healed it to the best of his ability. A ragged scar remained because of the length of time that had passed and it ached deep within the tissue with the changing of the weather. Brynn idly rubbed the scar and shifted her weight to her other leg as she sighed and raked her fingers through her disheveled hair again. “Are we sure we should do this?”

She looked at the others around the table. Leliana and Josephine stood together, a thick blanket around their shoulders, and Cullen stood to the side with his fur lined cloak drawn tightly around his neck, snow dusting his hair. “I don’t like it either,” he said, “but we have no other options.”

“We have already been out here nearly a week; every day we spend exposed like this increases the number of people we lose to the cold and sickness, and the healers are nearly out of herbs to deal with even minor illnesses. We need to take this chance.” Josephine curled into Leliana’s side as she spoke, hands hidden within the folds of her dress.

The redhead curled her fingers around her waist and nodded. “I don’t trust Solas at all,” she said bluntly, “but we cannot afford to waste more time bickering in the snow. My scouts reported a massive structure within the heart of the Frostbacks, nearly a day’s march from here, which looks inhabitable. We need to go there, and soon. I don’t know his intentions, or how he could even know of a place like this when I’ve never heard of it, but I’ll take his kindness over freezing in the snow.”

Brynn pursed her lips and Cassandra squeezed her hip reassuringly. She nodded to herself and stabbed a point on the map that had been circled with charcoal, deep within the Frostback mountains. “If we want to make it before nightfall, we need to leave now. Send your scouts through the camp, tell everyone to break down and be ready to move within the hour.” Leliana nodded and wrapped the blanket tightly around Josephine before stepping away, and Brynn looked at Cullen. “Have your men aid in breaking down the camp and send some ahead to break through the drifts; tell them to take the most frail and infirm with them.”

“As you say, Your Grace.”

Josephine was left behind as Brynn returned her gaze to the map spread across the table, fingering a corner of the blanket with her nose buried into it. Cassandra caught her eye and smiled faintly. “Go warm yourself, Josephine. We will be a while yet; get your documents together and put on
She smiled thankfully and disappeared, leaving Brynn and the Seeker standing alone in the tent. Cassandra gently bumped Brynn’s hip with hers, pulling her head around to brush back her hair from her face. “You know,” she said with a playful glint in her eyes, “we really do need to get this cut. I can barely see your eyes anymore, and the tips of your ears have disappeared entirely.” She ran the pad of her finger across the delicate ridge of her ear, smirking as Brynn shuddered and made a small, plaintive noise. “But until then, we need to pack and get your halla ready to travel.” Cassandra pulled away and smiled to herself when she heard Brynn scoff quietly.

Her staggered steps followed behind the Seeker as she walked to their tent. Around them, those who were still able bodied were breaking down tents and fire pits, gathering everything to carry on their day long trek through the mountains. The members of their inner circle were at the heart of the chaos, tying satchels with twine to keep them shut, directing others efficiently and, in Bull’s case, carrying the heaviest items toward the edge of the camp to be set on sleds they had made from branches of trees above Haven. They ducked under the flap into their tent and began packing, efficiently moving around each other. Cassandra set her pack at the doorway and pulled her chainmail over her head. As she was buckling her chest plate together, she watched Brynn finger the edge of her leathers with a pensive expression on her face.

“What is the matter?”

“I just…what if we can’t do this?”

“It is only a day’s trek to this place, sa’lath.”

Every time Cassandra let slip the words, Brynn lit up from within, her eyes gleaming with ecstasy, but they remained somewhat dim now as she stared at the Seeker. “No, I know that, but I mean…this.” She spread her arms wide, encompassing the width of the tent. Her shirt rode up her wrists, baring the burns on her right arm that spiraled up her forearm, and her left palm sparked in the morning light that filtered through the canvas. “This whole…foray; this battle to take down Corypheus. What if-”

“We will. We can, Brynn.” Cassandra took Brynn’s hands in hers and tugged her close. She leaned down to press her lips to her forehead and hummed contentedly when she felt wiry arms wrap around her waist. “We can do this, defeat this creature and close the rifts and fix this mess he has made of the world.”

“Why are you so certain?” Brynn tucked her head beneath Cassandra’s chin, breathing in the scent of lavender and steel that coated her when she donned her armor.

“Because I believe in you. Your Strength and determination, your stubbornness,” she smiled as she tipped Brynn’s head back, “your inability to let an injustice go. Your sense of righteousness. Brynn, you are so, so unique.” She pressed her lips to Brynn’s, tipping her head to the side to deepen it and brushed her tongue against the seam of her lips to coax them open. Her hand kneaded the nape of her neck as she tasted the inside of her mouth and nipped her lower lip, keeping her eyes shut as she pulled away. “You are mine, and we will not fail.”

“Okay,” Brynn whispered. “Okay.” She smiled up at Cassandra and reached out to buckle the straps at her shoulders, kneeling to press her lips against her knee before securing her greaves. Once Cassandra was armed, she turned to take her undershirt and pull it over her head.

“Let me help you, your shoulder is still sore.” She gently coaxed the heavy fabric over her shoulder and straightened it while Brynn stood in the midst of their tent. She did the same with her
chainmail, then held open her leathers for Brynn to shrug over her shoulders. As Brynn buckled her belt at her waist and checked the myriad pouches, Cassandra buttoned up the leather jacket, hand lingering over the place she had been stabbed. She didn’t say anything, but Brynn covered her hand with her own and leaned up on tiptoe to buss a kiss across her cheek.

“Come, we should be at the front when we leave.”

Cassandra quickly broke down their tent as Brynn walked toward the central firepit. She came back with Arwen on her heels, head bobbing as she waded through the snow and sunlight glinting off the bangles that decorated her antlers. The animal bumped her nose against Cassandra’s shoulder and grunted in greeting, prompting a scratch beneath her chin from the Seeker. “Good morning, Arwen. Are you ready to leave?”

The halla nodded and danced in place excitedly, showing her back to Cassandra so she could lash the bulk of the canvas tent to her. Brynn stood at her head, whispering in elven and rubbing the velvet of her nose. “Thank you, lethallan, for carrying this burden for us.” Arwen snorted and shook the snow out of her thick coat as she walked toward the edge of camp, pausing when Brynn put a hand on her haunch. “Wait, I have something for the journey.” She pulled a makeshift bell from her satchel, made of scraps of metal that chimed pleasantly, and strung them between the points of her antlers. Arwen shook her head and they jingled merrily in the cold air. The halla jumped in place, prompting more crazed noise, and took off toward the edge of camp.

Cassandra canted her head to the side in question at Brynn. “It’s a tradition my clan has when we move camp. The finest bells are strung in the lead halla’s antlers, providing music and asking for safe passage from the Creators. Sometimes, the da’len will sing, riding on the other halla’s backs, or the hahrens will tell a story to pass the time.”

Brynn smiled at the memory, the edges tinted with sorrow, and Cassandra took her hand. “It is a fine tradition, and Arwen certainly seems to be enjoying herself.” Across camp, they could hear merry jingling and laughter, and the mood picked up considerably. “Let us go. The sooner we leave, the sooner we can find this place, this Skyhold.”

“Aye, sa’lath, let’s go.”

Brynn and her advisors were at the front of the caravan, with her inner circle spread amongst the other survivors, as they walked into the mountains, along the trodden path the scouts and infirm had left some time ago. Arwen’s steady pace led to a constant, soft sound of chimes that floated across the cold, still air and eventually, some worker’s voice raised in song. Soon enough, most of the line had joined in, passing the time until they caught the advance group and melded together. They passed out some of their meager stores for the midday meal and kept walking until the sky was shot through with blues and purples, a majestic conglomerate of color set against the dramatic backdrop of a tall spire that somehow seemed at home in the midst of the Frostbacks.

Arwen’s pace picked up as she felt the excitement on the air and she stopped at the crest of a steep slope, snorting and tossing her head. Brynn stopped beside her with wide eyes as Cassandra and her advisors pulled up short at her side. “Wow, that’s quite…impressive.” Josephine’s extensive vocabulary apparently failed her as she nodded mutely beside Leliana, who had uttered the awed phrase. The line of people behind them exclaimed as they caught sight of the dilapidated keep and they broke through the snow, making a beeline for the bridge at the bottom of the hill.

Brynn bade her advisors head down to keep the chaos to a minimum and try to find places to sleep for the night, catching Cassandra’s hand when she started to walk away. “Wait. Just a moment?”

“Always.”
They stood side by side until the last straggler was across the massive stone bridge and torches were being lit on the ramparts and within the castle. Brynn tangled their fingers together and pulled Cassandra into her, leaning back against Arwen’s sturdy shoulder as she hooked her arms around the Seeker’s shoulders. “Thank you.”

“Whatever for?” Cassandra rested her hands on Brynn’s hips and pecked her temple.

“For staying with me. For standing beside me, not before me. For letting me follow my own path.”

She shrugged and Cassandra snorted quietly. She yanked off her gauntlet and cupped Brynn’s jaw in her hand, feeling her push into her palm as she shut her eyes. “Thank you for not giving up on me, even when I was being a stubborn arse.”

“Was?”

Cassandra rolled her eyes and pinched her skin lightly. “Stop making light of it, I am trying to say something.” Brynn schooled her expression and nodded for Cassandra to continue. The Seeker took a deep breath and moved closer so her feet were planted between Brynn’s. “I am sorry that I pulled away like I did. I just…I do not deal well with emotions sometimes.”

“I know, but you’ve done very well these past several days.”

“I have had reason to. I almost lost you.” Cassandra’s eyes filled with tears, hidden as she shut them and leaned her forehead against Brynn’s. “I nearly lost you, and I could not do anything. You could have been gone, and I…I would not have had a chance to tell you how I feel.”

She felt Brynn’s fingers tangle in the hair at the nape of her neck, nails scratching lightly at her skin. “How do you feel?”

“I love you.”

Lips covered hers immediately, coaxing Cassandra’s tongue out as Brynn framed her face in her hands and stroked her cheeks until they pulled back for air. “Ar lath ma, Cassandra. I love you, sa’lath, ma vhenan.”

“What does that mean?”

“My heart,” she whispered, bringing Cassandra’s bare hand up to cover her chest where her heart beat strongly. “My reason to keep fighting, my beloved.”

“Always.” Cassandra kissed Brynn hard again until she felt Arwen shift impatiently and reluctantly pulled away. “What say we get down there and find suitable arrangements for you?”

“Only if you say you will stay with me.” Brynn twined their fingers together as she started down the slope with Arwen at her side, bells chiming happily and a spring in her step.

Cassandra felt a smile tug at her lips as she brought Brynn’s hand up and kissed her knuckles. “I can think of nowhere else I would rather be than at your side.” Brynn smiled with all the force of the sun and Cassandra felt her heart swell as she returned it, an airy feeling burrowing deep in her chest as hopefulness suffused her entire being and they walked onto the bridge together.

Fin
Chapter End Notes

So...that's it. Not to say this is the end of this universe for me by any means, but this is the end of this particular installment. I will be revisiting this universe again in the future, but it will be for Origins and will feature a fem!Mahariel/Leliana pairing. But, that's for the future. For now, I will be focusing on drawing some thumbnails I've had languishing on my drawing pad for like, a fucking year. So, yeah. I'll be working on that on my brand spankin' tablet for some time.

I will be starting, after that, a really fucking long Mass Effect story, if any of you are interested. I know I would be, simply because Dragon Age readers tend to also be Mass Effect readers lol So, hopefully I'll see you guys over there!

See you on the other side, dudes!

~Cheyanne~

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