An Age of Dragons

by rachelamberish

Summary

When smoke rises and the autumn winds blow, change comes to Ferelden at the tide of a new age.

Diverges from and expands heavily upon main story.
**Prologue**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

PROLOGUE

Duncan came upon it in the woods.

Fire devoured the forest surrounding it, and smoke on top of that, and the pines crumpled and fell and the destruction was all-encompassing. Spawn of the Void clambered from the hole, their boney, charred fingers clutching at the womb’s edge and pulling themselves up and into the world. Though he stood miles away he could still hear their screaming. It echoed through the trees, indistinguishable from a murder of crows.

When he could tear his eyes away from the horror to turn behind him, he found himself faced with a creature, its laboured breath melding with his own. Its eyes were hazy, pale and ice-blue. Its skin blackened and peeled and charred. But when Duncan blinked, it was just a man. His shock sent him tumbling backwards, falling, falling over the cliff.

Before he snapped his neck on the swampy ground, he woke.

The Fade gave way to countless plaguing nightmares of late. None had been so vivid as this one, not even with the poison that corrupted his blood. He would tell the King of this. They should send scouting parties into the Wilds. The new camp was not safe, not until they knew these woods as the Chasind did. The Wilds were not kind to outsiders. The Wardens had lived here once, true. But that was many ages ago, and all that remained were ruins.

He swung his feet over his rickety cot and moved to slip on his boots. As he pushed his heel into place and leaned down to fasten the leather buckles, the ringing returned - not in his ears or head, but under his very skin. The pain deafened all else. Though it was a familiar tune, it sounded no sweeter to him than it had that first time. He squeezed his eyes tight and prayed for it to leave him. The sound of a cleared throat came from the outside his tent.

“Um, Sir, are you awake?”

Duncan’s breath came to him all at once, and he found himself chuckling, in spite of himself.

“Yes, Alistair. Come in. What is it?”

The flap opened and the boy—who was now, Duncan supposed, in every right a man—poked his head through.

“No rush, Sir, I just…well, before you leave today, I wanted to go over a few things with you. Assignments, patrol schedules and the like.”

“Over breakfast, Alistair. Give an old man some time to get out of bed.” Already he could smell the eggs and burnt potatoes and herbs over the fire. His stomach cried out something fierce. Appetite was a Warden’s greatest enemy, Walt had said. The fool boy, who could barely grow a beard, had been overcome by the spawn on Duncan’s first descent into the Deep Roads. So, alas, he had been wrong, but his point was not moot.
“Yes sir, absolutely. Not that you’re old. You’re not old. But I mean to say I understand. Only that…never mind. I’m leaving, now.”

A nervous smile graced his face as Duncan did his best to return a kind one and a nod, and Alistair left seeming pleased. His was the same smile, same voice, same face that Duncan had known an age ago. Was it so long now? The days of his youth had always seemed so uncomfortably familiar to him. Too close and too recent for him to sleep without pain or regret. But he had known men—great men—who longed for their youth more than they longed for purpose, or for the touch of a woman, or for the weight of a child in their arms, and he was glad to not be counted among them.

Protect him, a voice said, warm and lovely and firm. And he had done what that duty demanded, had he not? Was it protection he had given the child, or an early grave? Another voice, very separate and distinct from the first but one all too familiar, said that it was a curse. They were all cursed. The Wardens offered only death to protect from death. Suffering to protect from suffering. It was all a grand circle and they were in the middle of it, little mice on a wheel running from their own shadow.

He couldn’t believe it. He wouldn’t. The Wardens had saved him from a life of petty crime and meaninglessness and given him direction. Alistair felt the same, and was grateful to him, as he had always been. And he loved Duncan as he would a father. Duncan had kept his promise, the only way he knew how. And from it, he had gained a son.

Now that haunting song finally rang in his blood, like a growth he could not remove; a disease there was no cure for. It called to him just as she had said it would. It would call for them all, sooner or later. He was old, and it was his time. But he feared the day it called for Alistair. At twenty, Alistair had accepted the burdens of a Warden with too much ease and too much certainty, and for that Duncan was frightened. Frightened of when the boy would be forty, or fifty, and realize that he had been tricked. Hatred was also a thing that came easy for Alistair, and Duncan knew too well that it only came easier with age. If the Maker cared any for the troubles of old men, it would only do to pray that Alistair would never count Duncan among those who had betrayed him.

Strange, that he had become so self-important in his twilight hours that what he found himself fearing most was not death, but obscurity. Perhaps that was what Genevieve had feared, too, when she saw the boy he had once been drive a knife through her lover’s heart. Perhaps that was why she had cursed him, and kept him, though surely never truly forgiven him. Everyone needed someone, after all.

Though he doubted very much that the Maker heard him. When darkspawn rose from the ground and fires burned at the edge of the world, he doubted the Maker turned his gaze on the troubles of old men. Duncan emerged from his tent to look upon the early morning moon before it left the sky. As he glanced at the stars, the ringing returned, and he gripped his wrist tight. Briefly and in great weakness, as it subsided, he thought of death, and he thought of youth.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
Part I

-The Winds of Autumn-

SOLENA

Maker, make me not a mage. Please. Let it be a long and terrible dream.

She knew nothing of the Harrowing. Mages were not allowed to speak of it and if they did, they were not heard from again. Solena would not let herself think on it for too long. Preoccupying herself with the world’s injustices would not help her today.

Her firm resolve, for all it was worth, made it no easier for her to climb the grand staircase to the Tower’s topmost level. Her mind screamed at her to turn back and run as fast as her legs could carry her, as little sense as that made. Where would she go if she could leave, she wondered. To the half-remembered mother who did not miss her? To the father she never knew? Not likely. To the far reaches of the map, she decided. To the mountains of the Anderfels; the white beaches of Rivain. Sand between your fingers, her mind chanted. Salt water in your hair. How would the world feel, if only you could live in it?

Her breathing steadied, and she realized she had come to a halt on the stairs. She could feel the cold sweat of her palms through the fabric of her robes as she rubbed them furiously against her thighs. Cullen, sensing her pause, stopped and looked back, his hard brow furrowing, as it did often, before softening at the sight of her.

“Solena…” he spoke, before reaching out and awkwardly grazing her arm with his steel armored hand. The ghost of its sharp metal edges pierced her skin and she startled from him. He frowned, and offered her no further comfort. A fleeting thought told her that perhaps he did not know how.

Her eyes, lost in the flaming sword on his breastplate, rose to his face. She nodded sharply—not at him—before picking up her deep blue skirts and continuing her trudge up the winding stairwell.

The vaulted stained-glass ceiling of the Tower loomed over the room, filtering moonlight of purple and blue which shone down upon the heads of the gathered Tower officials and the stone floor beneath them. When they saw her at the top of the stairs the air shifted and the soft murmurs turned to silence, and each man and woman appeared as though they looked upon a ghost. First Enchanter Irving was who she laid her eyes on. His sympathetic smile, visible amidst a long, grey beard, stretched his wrinkled skin. Irving’s kind gesture ultimately meant little however, with Knight Commander Greagoir standing just to his right, a terrible scowl pulling at his face and his hand tightly gripping the pummel of a sword. Three more templars were lined up behind him. Cullen—who wore a strange look on his face, as though he were uncertain whether to go to her or his brethren—made a fourth when he joined the congregation. There was a third mage present, but she remained in the back, out of sight and in the shadows cast by the large concrete arches lining the
She had told herself that this was a time to be brave. She had determined to leave the little blonde girl with wild hair and bare feet that once ran the rounded halls of the Tower to cower under the bed sheets this morning, along with her silly notions and soft heart. A girl that had once dreamt of flight and freedom and joy. Joy. She would have no joy in this world, not unless she made it. Not unless she cobbled it together, like a castle in the sand, from unfortunate circumstance and books on library shelves. Her salvation would not come from any handsome knight. The only knights she knew were the ones that kept her here; kept her tame and docile. And it was knights—not monsters under the bed—that she would have to fear for the rest of her days.

Cullen had not spoken a word to her, outside of the blunt command to come with him as he had stood at her bedside around midnight. She had not known that today would be the worst day of her life. Though, when she had felt the young Templar’s hand gripping her shoulder through her groggy slumber, she knew, and dread overwhelmed her and stale bile formed in the back of her throat—but she could not cry in front of Cullen. So she did not.

“Welcome, Apprentice.” Irving offered another plastered smile, and she did not have the energy to respond in kind.

Greagoir, the most vile man she knew, took a few steps in her direction and considered her, his chest puffing out as he looked down through hooded eyes. His booming voice addressed the room.

“*Magic exists to serve man,*” he declared in Andraste’s name, *‘and never to rule over him’*. Thus spoke our lady and prophet as she cast down the Tevinter Imperium—ruled by mages who had brought the world to the edge of ruin. It is from her we learn that magic is both a gift and a curse: a mighty tool that can fell nations, but one whose use attracts the demons of the Fade, who prey upon mages and seek to use them as a gateway into this world.”

As he spoke, Solena finally took notice of the small pool, shaped like a stone birdbath, at the room’s center. She studied it curiously. A soft blue glow emanated from it like smoke from a fire, and a light, almost inaudible hum seemed to travel the distance from the pool all the way to her ear. She knew the mineral inside the pool and knew it well, but had never seen it in such great quantity.

“This is why the Harrowing exists,” Irving spoke to her. “The ritual will send you into the Fade, where a demon awaits. You face it armed only with your will.”

She turned to Irving, to see into his kind eyes and know that he was sincere. To her, she knew, he would not lie. She nodded slightly and wordlessly.

“The trial is a secret out of necessity, child. You will go through with it and succeed as I have—as countless others have. Once you pass, your test will end, and you shall be back here with us, safe and sound.” Irving reassured her with a hand on her shoulder, and if she spoke to him she knew she was like to cry, so it seemed she could only nod stupidly once more in response. “Keep your wits about you, and remember that the Fade is a realm of dreams and illusions. The spirits may rule it, but your own will is all that is real. Take heart in that.”

“The apprentice must go through her Harrowing on her own, First Enchanter,” Greagoir spat. Solena kept her head down.

At once, and despite the sick feeling in her stomach, Solena removed herself from between the two men and strode towards the pool. As she drew closer to it she could feel her magic surge with each step until she touched the pool’s surface and the sensation in her body reached a glorious height, the likes of which she had never felt before, and very suddenly she was in the Tower no longer.
Young boys and girls visited the Fade every night to spar with heroes of legend, dance with fairies and fly upon dragons. Grown men visited it to woo buxom women they could never hope to touch in the physical world, and make sweet love upon a bed of clouds. Women visited to transport themselves to a life of scandalous romance and material abundance that they would never live to see in the small farming villages they grew up in. And still some nights it would be terrible nightmares that plagued the dreamers of Thedas and ripped them from whatever silly fantasies they had conjured for themselves. Come morning, they would remember hardly any of it.

Mages were different, or so she understood. Mages remember, and see, and feel. For them, the Fade was a wonder—a joy to explore, to experience, and a power to draw from. But she knew none of that.

Since she was small, she had known her connection with the Fade to be wrong. At least, that’s what the other children had made abundantly clear. When they had blabbed to her instructor about Solena’s violent, vivid, repeated nightmares, the woman had given her a haunted stare that Solena was sure she could never hope to erase from memory. She would not have been able to keep the secret for much longer, as it turned out. At the age of ten she had begun to wake up in the dead of night screaming at a rate of three times each week.

She had been labelled so quickly as being different from her peers that she remembered afterwards hoping, for only a brief, perfect while, that there had been some terrible mistake—that she was not a mage after all, and that she could go home. The notion was a stupid one.

Whatever Fade that was—the Fade so full of raw, painful emotion that had once scarred her so greatly—that Fade was not this Fade.

Her studies had told her that entering the Fade consciously in this way made for a world of infinite possibility. But it was a rare thing—as only with copious amounts of lyrium was it ever possible. It was the only fantasy she had ever allowed herself as a woman grown, that maybe, one day, her nightmares would stop, and she would see the Fade as such all the time. It had always been clear to her that the only world in which she would ever be allowed happiness was not the one she was born into.

The landscape before her was something new—something foreign, and wonderful. The air felt still and cold but she could not see her breath in front of her. She was surrounded by icy brown tundra, which molded itself into impossible organic-looking shapes. Everything before her felt like a hasty interpretation of reality, from the mind of a man who had been blind his whole life. A lamppost that seemed to remain still while suspended in midair flickered into various states of light and darkness, casting light and shadow not only on the ground but in the forest-toned sky above her as well. She sat in the middle of a four-pillared structure of which the pillars seemed to be broken to pieces, but the rubble held together in its original form all the same. Solena crushed her knees to her chest and shivered, adjusting to the dry cold. Out of the corner of her eye, a small brown kitchen mouse scurried from one pillar to the next, but she paid it little mind. The object of her gaze was The City.

The Black City was visible and equidistant from every point in the Fade—and it was Mother Sybill who had taught her that, no mage. No matter where you stood, you could always see it above you: a hulking black mass to remain there and remind humanity of its most terrible sin. Such things were inescapable, it seemed. Even in the world of dreams.

“Someone else thrown to the wolves...”

The voice had come from the air. Solena raised her head and glanced nervously around her. When
she saw nothing, she rose and spun in search of the noise’s source.

“*Ha! As fresh and unprepared as ever.*”

“Who’s there?” she demanded, her brow furrowing. But as soon as she asked her question, she had answered it. The sound had come from the ground, where the mouse now sat. It spoke with the voice of a man.

“It isn’t right that they do this, the Templars. Not to you, me, anyone.”

“To you?” Solena questioned, “You’re a talking rat.”

The mouse scoffed. “And you think you’re really here? In that body? You look like that because you think you do. I only look like this because you think I do.”

Solena observed her arms and legs. Her own body had the same pale-yellow hue and the same eerie, inexplicable wrongness that everything from the lamppost to the mouse before her shared. Though her limbs were physically her own she could not recognize them as such. The mouse sighed.

“It’s not your fault. You’re in the same boat I was, aren’t you? You’re just a pawn in a much larger game none of us can hope to understand.” the mouse pondered.

In a flash of bright yellow light, the mouse she had seen a moment before was now a man, with a thin mop of blonde hair and a long, crooked nose, dressed in rags. He was balding on the top of his head and had a nasty brown wart on his right nostril. It was an awful face. She wondered who this man had been—a soul clearly now lost to time and history in this never-ending expulsion of abstract thought. He threw open his arms and smiled a crooked-toothed smile.

“Allow me to welcome you to the Fade. You can call me…well, Mouse, I suppose.” He shrugged loosely.

“Not your real name, I take it?”

“Ah, well, I can’t really remember anything from…before…” he seemed suddenly very lost. Absent. “The Templars kill you if you take too long, you see. They figure you failed, and they don’t want something…getting out. That’s what they did to me, I think. I have no body to reclaim. And you don’t have much time before you end up the same.”

Solena brushed past him. “That’s not going to happen.”

He shuffled behind her on the path. “You’re wrong to think you know everything! There is so much, still, that evades you. I know more than you of the danger ahead!”

“And what’s that?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“There’s something here, contained, just waiting for an apprentice like you. You have to face the creature—a demon—and resist it, if you can. That’s your way out.”

“I was told as much.”

“Men such as they will tell you just enough to mislead you. What’s one more dead mage? A safer world, if you ask them. Take anyone at their word, and you’re a fool,” he told her. “There’s more to it. There’s always more.”

She bit her lip, taking a moment to gnaw on the dry flesh there in contemplation.
“You don’t need to worry about me,” she said to the man behind her, as she turned to leave. He laughed a long, hearty laugh.

“You’re the only thing in the world I need worry about!” he shouted after her. She stopped in her tracks.

She considered his words. She found them strange. Their exchange, in its entirety…strange. He was beside her in a flash.

“I’ll follow, if that’s alright. My chance was long ago, but you…you’re more cunning than I ever was. You may succeed where I failed.”

He quickly transformed back into the kitchen mouse and scurried alongside her as she walked through forests of upside-down trees set ablaze and hopped across large chunks of rock that formed a floating path. Should she step off one, she wasn’t even sure where she should fall to, or if she would fall at all. The latter scared her more. She soon stepped off into a clearing which seemed to be made up of brown cobblestone, but was no more than dust and blew away in a gust of wind that she could not feel on her skin.

On a hill a few yards ahead of her there was a small fire burning, and a bright white figure which moved between two impossibly shaped trees that were surrounded by the most wonderful flowers she had ever seen, and even more besides that floated in mid-air around the fire. Marigolds, she recalled. That must be what they were. As she neared the fire, the figure turned, and she could see that it wore the plate of a templar. She halted.

“Another thrown into the flames and left to burn, I see. You…I’ve waited for you, though. For time immemorial.” He spoke with a roaring voice that echoed as though he were shouting in a deep cave. She tried to speak, but words could not seem to form from her lips at the sight of him. He was beautiful, and bright—so bright that she could hardly see him.

“You’ve been sent unarmed against an unknown demon. Hungry; waiting for prey. No soul is prepared for that.” He said it sadly.

“It is templars that force the Harrowing,” she reminded him, gesturing to his plate.

“Aye, that it is. This trial is a graveyard. A garden of bones, of innocents come before, and innocents yet to come. I wait. And I watch. And am powerless against the wheel.” His voice—the haunting echo—made her sad. She felt it very deeply.

“I see a great battle in your future against a powerful creature of the Fade. Let it be known, no matter what comes, I wish you victory. And afterwards, peace.” His response made her curious. He spoke earnestly, full-heartedly—as if he knew her.

“Thank you,” she told him.

Snow fell from a green sky, and both looked up to watch it. Suddenly, they stood knee-deep in the stuff, and the sun set around them. Inexplicably, tears fell from her eyes.

“Shed no more tears,” the figure said. “We two will meet again.”

“When?” she asked desperately, as he faded from her.

“I’m sorry,” said the wind, and he was gone—the snow and the sunset with him.

“An odd fellow, that one,” said Mouse from her side, far below her.
They continued walking.

As they moved further and further, an eerie whistle of wind could be heard, even though she could feel none on her skin, and the Fade seemed to turn darker and more foreboding, even though the sky remained the same bright shade of green. Around her she saw ancient ruins threatening to fade out of existence as they lost opacity, and piles of massacred bodies as tall as trees overcame them.

She heard wolves howling in the distance—prowling at the fringes of the Fade—and the sounds of a violent battle that was nowhere in sight. Decaying toadstools of an abnormally large size surrounded her as though they were a forest of their own, and eventually another, smaller clearing came into view, and a sleeping bear lay in the center. She inched closer, as quietly as possible.

“Be cautious…” Mouse whispered, “There is another spirit here who may help us…I believe him honorable, though I do not think he is as benevolent as the last…”

But as she drew closer the bear awakened anyway…and it was no bear. As she approached, she saw its claws were once over again the size of its paw, its eyes were bloodshot, and its fur was matted and decayed and torn away so as to see bloody flesh poking out across its entire body. When it spoke, its voice seemed as though it were coming from all directions, surrounding her and making her feel as small as her companion.

“Hmm…” it chuckled malevolently from where it relaxed on the ground, “so you are the mortal being hunted? And the small one…is he to be a snack for me?”

“I don’t like this,” Mouse spoke, transforming again into a man, though acting as a child might. “I take it back. He’s not going to help us. We should go.”

The beast slowly rose and stretched its front legs as it let out a yawn which sounded vaguely like a growl. “Oh, no matter,” it spoke, “The creature will find you eventually, and I…I will feast on the scraps.” The beast’s mouth stretched into a wide grin which showed off a full set of yellow teeth as sharp as blades imbedded into crimson gums.

“Begone,” it commanded, “Surely you have better things to do. You are a fly in the ointment, and I tire of you already. You have lost your battle before it has even begun, girl.”

She took a step closer to him, and Mouse squealed again. “I need help defeating the demon. If you aid me, I’ll leave you in peace.”

“You are a mage,” the bear yawned. “For all that is worth. Go. Use your wiles. You do not need my help.

“Not me. Mouse.” She explained.

“What?” Mouse squeaked.

“Teach Mouse to be like you. Dangerous. Strong. So he can help me,” she demanded, persistent in her efforts.

“Like me?” Sloth asked. “Ah…I suppose. Mice are such cowardly things. Not intelligent enough to think for themselves; forge their own identities.”

“I…I don’t…” Mouse garbled.

“Or perhaps he doesn’t wish to learn. Perhaps that is for the best. Teaching is so…exhausting.”
“If you want me gone, teach him.” She repeated once more.

In exchange for the inconvenience, the old bear demanded answers for three riddles. She agreed to hear them, playing at the game in exchange for the aid. He began, in a measured voice:

*I have seas with no water, coasts with no sand,*
*Towns without people, and mountains without land.*
*What am I?*

*While you live, we cannot part,*
*I live inside you, locked forever in your heart.*
*What am I?*

*Often will I spin a tale, never will I charge a fee.*
*I’ll amuse you an entire eve, but, alas, you won’t remember me.*
*What am I?*

When she answered correctly, he appeared dismal. But within moments, Mouse grew to the size of a bear, and the demon of Sloth slumped to the ground, sleeping or dead.

At once, the forest around them was set ablaze by fire from the sky. The ground beneath them trembled and lava rose vertically from the circle’s center, coalescing into the head of a great beast. Solena stabilized herself on the shaking earth.

The demon laughed, a dark and malevolent sound. Mouse lunged for its throat, but the demon cast him off, sending him tumbling to the ground. Solena remembered Irving’s words. *Not real.* Not real, not real, not real. *Only your will.*

She closed her eyes. Opened them. And when she did, the demon was gone—its fiery visage dissolved into water, which fell back to the earth as rain. When she held out her hands, she could even feel the drops on her fingertips.

Mouse stood over the fallen demon and in another flash, had transformed back into the ugly man. He jumped for joy, skipping in the puddles that the rain made, splashing water all around. “You did it—you actually did it! When you came, I hoped that maybe you might be able to—oh but I never dared hope that—"

“The Harrowing is designed so that I shouldn’t remain in the Fade after passing my test,” she spoke, all the answers coming to her suddenly.

“Precisely. Which is why we must leave. You must take me with you! Oh, the sights we will see! Unstoppable we’ll be, you and me! The world will be ours, just you see!”
“No,” she told it. Mouse stopped his skipping.

“What do you mean? We cannot stay here! The demons, they’ll find us, and they’ll tear us to bits!”

“Not you. You’re staying,” she said.

Mouse froze, but not for long. His lips curved upwards into a malicious, hungry grin.

“…you are a smart one.” The voice changed, as did the air around them. Mouse began to tower over her as he had not before, and the grin he wore grew to fold over half his face, making him unrecognizable. His skin fell off in slimy, black, ashy layers and beneath was a different being entirely.

“Simple killing is a warrior’s job,” he boomed, louder than the valor spirit, even louder than Sloth. “The real dangers of this world are preconceptions, careless trust… pride.”

In an instant, the light and the world around her disappeared, and Mouse had evaporated into smoke, and the smoke surrounded her and encompassed her form and would not allow her to breathe. She collapsed and choked on the air.

“Keep your wits about you, girl. True tests never end.”

The smoke cleared, and it was over.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
Marian’s hunt had not gone well, it seemed, and the rest of the day was tense (to say the least) as a result. Her sister’s responses to their mother’s inquiries were short and irritated. They ate their meager supper in silence, save for the light crackle of the fireplace. Marian violently pushed her chair out after finishing quickly and exited the room. Carver rolled his eyes. When Bethany heard the front door slam she knew she would not see her sister until the next morning.

It seemed when Marian got in these moods, no one was happy. Later, when Mother sat by the fire knitting, she gave what she must have thought to be a warm smile in response to Bethany’s simple jest. But the pain and self-loathing in her mother’s eyes as she turned back to the needles in her lap was all Bethany saw, and no sight in the world hurt her more. Bethany had to remove herself from their hut before the tears came. She resolved to find Carver. He was somehow able to ignore Marian, so it made him very easy to talk to on days like today.

It was newly autumn, and night had fallen. The sky was filled with stars and the moons and the air was fresh. Bethany could hear the far-away sounds of a dog barking, and drunken men stumbling out of the tavern as their wives reprimanded them and dragged them back home. Luckily, their cabin was set at a bit of a distance from the nighttime goings-on of Lothering and its denizens, or they’d never get any sleep. But Bethany was glad for the noise. She was glad for the stars, too. She was glad for the sight of her brother sitting on a tree stump and sharpening his sword. She was even glad to be here for Marian’s foul temper.

She had never been inside the Tower. She had never even been outside of Lothering, not in all her eighteen years. But she knew she did not want to go there. It was why she hid her staff underneath the floorboards. It was why a spell had not been cast from her hands since she was a child. Father had never talked about his time in Kinloch Hold, but the haunted look that remained in his eyes from the day Bethany showed her first signs until his very last told her that his mission in life had been to keep her from it.

Carver did not have the magic that ran so strongly in their bloodline, nor did Marian. That was something she alone had shared with Father, and Carver perhaps had resented the time their father had spent training her instead of raising them both. Training her on how to safely use her magic, but also how to hide it, and, most importantly, how to run from templars. But still, Carver had been bitter.

Marian was simply not that way, though. She had had seven years with father all to herself before Bethany and Carver were born, and at seven she was no longer hiding behind Mother’s skirts or holding Father’s hand. No, when the twins were born, Marian was left alone to do as she pleased, which seemed to Bethany to be the greatest freedom in the world. When Carver got to be that age, he soon joined her. If there was one thing that ate at Bethany’s mind when it came to her siblings, it was that they had always been allowed to do what she was not. She supposed she had Father to thank for that.
But Father was gone. Murdered by templars not a mile outside of their home, in front of the eyes of his children and his wife. He had insisted, as his dying act, that his family had had no knowledge of his magic. So they were left in peace to return to their cabin, where Malcolm Hawke was buried that same night. He was gone, and though Bethany had hoped that in such tragic times she and her siblings would bond in caring for their mother, it seemed she was left to that task on her own. Carver joined the King’s army, and was always being called away. And Marian…Marian would leave on a hunt one day and not return for a fortnight. Marian would go into town to buy eggs only to be caught by Bethany later that evening rolling around in the hay behind their home with some stable boy she hardly knew. Marian would drink herself half to death at the tavern and Bethany would wake the next morning to see she had crawled into bed beside her. She loved her sister, but she felt as though she barely knew her.

She and Carver had been brought into this world together, though, so she liked to think she knew him. He arrived mere moments before her—but of course, Carver liked to flaunt that. They were all protective of her, but Carver had a ferocity about him that she didn’t like to see. He once beat a boy from the village within an inch of his life when he and his two friends had accosted her on her way home. She had screamed and cried before Carver had eventually stopped, and back at the cabin, once he had shaken off his bloodlust, he held her as she wept and shook and until she fell asleep.

She approached Carver now, as the sound of stone sliding against steel grew louder and the left of Carver’s face came into view, lit up by the lantern outside of their home. She knew, objectively, that her brother was handsome. He was told so nearly as much as she was told she was pretty. They shared the same dark brown hair, the same hazel eyes. But Carver’s features were hard and chiseled where hers were soft. Her hair was long and softly curling where his was straight and cut shorter than any man she had ever seen.

Marian was rarely ever told she was pretty, but Bethany knew that she was, in her way. She had the black hair and steel grey eyes of their father, and looked more like him than her siblings. And Father had been handsome. She remembered thinking once, too, that her mother was the most beautiful woman alive. Though it probably wasn’t true, you wouldn’t be able to tell one way or the other now. With Father’s death came the decline of Mother’s features. She was still handsome, but her hair had turned grey and she grew wrinkles where Bethany knew she should not have them at her age. She was only forty-five.

“A copper for your thoughts, sister?” Carver asked, glancing in her direction.

She bit her lip. “It’s lovely out tonight,” she noted.

“It is.”

Bethany found comfort in the momentary silence between them. She always did. With Mother, she felt she needed to say something lest she drop her needles and burst into tears all of the sudden. With Marian, silence was awkward. Silence spoke to the unfamiliarity that already existed between them. With Carver, it was who they were. It was a mutual understanding and trust. It felt like home.

But soon, a different thought plagued her mind, and she found herself twiddling her thumbs and holding back tears. The sound of her own sniffling betrayed her, and Carver immediately stopped what he was doing to look at her.

“Must you and Marian both go?” she asked with a voice smaller than she had intended. “It’s just, I’ll be here all alone with Mother, and—”

In an instant, the sword dropped to the grass and Carver had her in his arms, cradling her head against his chest and rocking her softly as her tears wet his tunic.

She exited his embrace and attempted to dry her tears.

“I’m being silly,” she said, “It’s been Mother and I for years.”

“Well, you’ve had Marian too.”

“You know that’s not true.” She shot back.

“I know Marian can be…vexing. If you’re angry at me, Beth, I understand. Just know that I’m the one that has to be on the road with her for days and I’m not bloody well looking forward to it.” The ghost of a smile appeared on his lips, and she mimicked it on hers.

“Serves you right.” She muttered.

His smile faded, and he placed a hand on her upper arm. “I hate to leave like this. When we’re gone, tell Mother I’m sorry for how Marian’s acted today, and that she means well, and that we love you both very much, and we’ll be home as soon as the King allows.”

“You can tell her yourself, right now.”

“She’s still sore over Marian. I don’t think she’d hear me.”

He began walking with her, and silence befell them again. The moons were bright and cast a beautiful glow on the trees that stood to the right of their home. Bethany picked one and leaned against it, twiddling her thumbs again before sliding down the trunk until she was sitting on the grass. Carver soon joined her, leaning on the same tree but facing a different direction.

“When do you think the King will allow you to return?” she asked offhandedly.

“Whenever he’s certain there’s no darkspawn about, I suppose.”

“And when do you think that will be?”

“I don’t know, Bethany. He seems rather convinced that they’re popping out of the Wilds like flies. It might take some time. Some ranger parties. The man’s paranoid. It could—yeah, it could take some time.”

“Why? You don’t think he’s right to worry?”

“Oh, come off it, Beth. Haven’t been any darkspawn in four hundred years. You afraid there’s one hiding under your bed?” He tickled her arm and she swatted him away.

“No. Just…it all seems so strange. Folk say he’s calling on the Grey Wardens. Sister Leliana said that—”

“What? That he’s leading them all on some valiant march, like in her bloody songs? I told you not to listen to that woman, Beth, she’s nutty.”

“I think she’s fine.”

“Well, there aren’t any darkspawn, so Sister Leliana’s Grey Wardens don’t have anything to worry about even if they have somehow crawled out of whatever holes they fled away into. Do they?”

She gave an exasperated sigh. “I guess not.”
“Look, I’m sorry for doing this to you and Mother. But I know you’ll both be fine. Marian needs to…Marian needs to get out of this bloody town and do something with herself. For the good of someone other than herself. I’m hoping that when she gets back that she’ll snap out of…whatever mood she’s been in since…since Father.”

“She’s been in that mood for ten years, Carver.”

“I know. And it has to stop. She can’t continue on like this and provide for you and Mother.”

“I can provide for us. When you’re gone, I can—”

Carver gave her a pained look, and she knew what that meant. She didn’t care.

“I need to get out of this town as much as Marian does. Be on my own, like she always is, like she’s so bloody fond of being.” Carver winced at her language, but said nothing. “I’ve never known that, Carver. Father taught me enough, I can provide for myself. I’m sick of everyone else always risking everything to keep me safe. That’s not their job anymore, it’s not your job,” she turned towards him completely now.

“Beth— “

“Mark my words, I don’t want to die in our cabin, Carver.”

“And where would you go, Bethany? With what coin? A woman traveling alone is dangerous, not just because you’re a mage—have you thought about that? What about when you have to defend yourself?”

“I know how to— “

“With magic, yes, but you can’t use that in the open, can you?”

Perhaps she really hadn’t thought it through. Perhaps she…perhaps she was just being stupid. Like she had always been. Carver and Marian knew the world, they knew how it worked and how to make the most of their lives with what they were given. Bethany knew nothing. The voice in her head that told her that Carver was right only encouraged the hot sting of tears in her eyes. His face softened at the sight of them.

“Maker, Beth, I…I’m sorry. I know how you feel. Just…wait until we get back, okay? Everything…everything will be better once we’re back. Everyone will have their heads, and we can have this conversation around the table like adults, alright? I know you need to leave. I get that. It’s just…it’s just not been easy.”

He stood up as she did and he came around to her side of the tree to wrap her in his arms once again. She breathed in and out and felt the rise and fall of his chest with her own, and all at once she was so grateful just to be alive.

“But Beth, it’ll get easier. I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.
Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)

He could not suppress the deep sigh of relief when Solena fell to the ground from her standing state next to the pool. Luckily, no one had heard him. It had been a long while, and he could now see morning light through the stained glass, but she was alive. She had passed. He knew she must have. She was bright—brighter than any other apprentice he’d seen, likely even many of the senior mages. His suspicions were confirmed after Irving had examined her collapsed form and nodded to the Knight Commander, offering a small smile.

Greagoir did not return it. Instead, he charged Cullen with carrying her back to the apprentices’ quarters and depositing her in her bunk. She would be out for the rest of the day, most like. The Harrowing took a physical toll on mages like nothing he had ever seen. And nothing had ever pained him more than seeing her subjected to it.

When he set her down on the blue linens, he had almost resisted the urge to stay, truly. He was merely three steps from the archway that led into the hall when, in weakness, he turned back to look at her. He was supposed to report back to the Knight Commander. He shouldn’t linger. But Maker, Maker, how he wanted to.

When he looked at her he felt an ache in his chest that made him nearly fall to his knees. When she spoke to him his mind clouded and his lungs forgot how to produce the air with which to breathe. The sight of her blonde hair falling in haphazard strands over her face and pillow had him convinced that she must be Andraste herself taking earthly form, only to tempt him. Either that, or some desire demon.

No…no, that’s not what she was. The light of her would shame any demon back to the deepest reaches of the Fade. He would know. At night as he lay in his cot, when his own demons came to haunt him, he would bring her face to the forefront of his mind, and all at once he was home. He was standing in the hills by Honnleath, feeling the tall grass on his ankles, tucking his sister into bed. He was staring at the Frostbacks from outside his bedroom window, their snowy peaks reaching high into the night sky. He was holding his brother’s child in his arms. He was twelve and happy forever, and he never left home, not for anything.

With a tentative hand, he reached down to her face and brushed her hair behind her ear.

He had known from the moment he had laid eyes on her, and every moment he was with her from then on that he must be a masochist. One day this would ruin him, he knew that much to be true. It was not something he was proud of. If his hidden feelings for her were uncouth, then his outward fondness for her and their—dare he say friendship, was entirely lacking in propriety and tact. He knew he shouldn’t be sneaking her tea and raspberry cakes from the kitchens after dark. He knew he shouldn’t grant her extra time in the library. He knew he shouldn’t, well, talk to her. But she was so different from any mage he had ever met. She was…humble, and sweet, and kind, and intelligent, with a fervor for knowledge that he had never known from anyone, and so, so beautiful. And even… demure in a way that only seemed to make her more attractive. She was good. She was pure goodness, and—
The sound of a cleared throat from the archway startled him to attention from where he sat on the
dge of her bed. To his luck, it wasn’t Greagoir, or even a fellow Templar, for that matter. It was that
mage—what was his name again? Jowan, that was it. A friend of Solena’s. A bit too friendly, if
Cullen had anything to say about it.

“Ser Cullen,” he croaked, nothing in his voice that would betray his feelings towards what he had
just witnessed. “I’ll look after her, if you don’t mind.”

Cullen said nothing in response. Jowan stared apprehensively at him. He gave the mage half a nod,
and promptly exited the room.

He was reckless—careless—and this woman was making him so. Damn her. He had to clear his
head. But the Knight Commander would be waiting for him.

His armored feet carried him down the hall to the Knight Commander’s office, but the noises he
heard came from behind Irving’s door, and one of the voices was decidedly Greagoir’s.

“…exceptional test…”

“…didn’t notice anything special.” That was Greagoir.

“…typical of an apprentice…her age?”

“…talented…brightest student I’ve had…incredible power…”

“Is it...interest to…?”

He knocked on the door and the voices stopped.

“You may enter,” called Irving.

The Enchanter’s office was new territory for Cullen. It was spacious, but the space was filled by
tables upon tables of clutter. Stacks of books lay upon every surface, as there had clearly been no
more room for them on the packed bookshelves that lined the walls. Irving’s modest desk was
similarly covered in books and papers and magical artifacts that Cullen would not understand if he
looked at them until the next age. The room itself, like every other in the tower, was windowless and
drab. The featureless grey stone stretched from floor to vaulted ceiling, broken up only by the mortar
between the bricks. Candles were spaced throughout the room, providing light that glowed blue.

As it happened, there were three men in Irving’s office. The third was not one Cullen had seen
before, and certainly no Templar. He had dark skin and black tresses of hair tied behind his head,
and a neatly trimmed beard with two small braids hanging from its front. He must not have been any
older than forty. His ears were pierced with lurid golden jewelry that nearly blinded Cullen who
stood but three yards away. His armor was white with silver plating, and he wore a red sash across
his hips. He could see two ornate silver hilts peeking out from where the swords rested on his back.

“Ah, Rutherford,” noted Greagoir.

“Does she rest?” asked Irving, with a concerned lilt to his voice.

“Yes. I left her with an apprentice.”

“Good. She’ll need it.” Irving was pleased.

“Allow me to introduce Warden Commander Duncan. He has ridden here from Ostagar, on the
King’s command.” Greagoir interjected.

Warden Commander, was it? Commander of what? Of the ragtag bunch of washed-up old men hiding in the shadows of the Hunterhorn Mountains, waiting on a war that didn’t ever come? Certainly, it was no surprise that the King kept faith with them. No other man in Thedas waited more patiently for his chance to play out a fairy tale.

Though, Cullen supposed, this man looked bloody important enough, what with the shine on his plate and the gaudy gold rings and the silver engravings on his weaponry. He stuck out like a sore thumb, looking like some long-lost Rivaini prince. Were the near-extinct Wardens truly so profitable?

“A pleasure, Ser.” Cullen nodded to the man.

“Likewise. I understand you attended the mage Solena’s Harrowing.” Duncan’s voice was cool and collected, open and friendly, and he had a glimmer of intrigue in his eye when he spoke of Solena that Cullen did not particularly like, but would not think on until much later.

“I did, Ser.”

“And what was your impression?” he questioned.

“It went rather smoothly, Ser. Rather quickly, in fact. Quicker than most. She was very efficient, as it were.”

“And your impression of her, as an apprentice?”

“She’s…very bright, Ser. Demonstrates a great deal of restraint under pressure. She has…a great deal of potential.” He tried desperately not to sound as though he were too observant of her. Greagoir eyed him intently.

“Hm. Thank you for sharing your thoughts. If you’ll all excuse me, I think I’d like to retire to my quarters for the time being. It has been a long and arduous journey.” said Duncan.

“Of course. Rutherford, escort Duncan to the guest’s chambers on your way to your post.” Greagoir commanded.

“Follow me, Ser.” Cullen did as he was bid, though he was anxious to be anywhere else. The walk to Duncan’s quarters was a quiet one though, and it was still in the early morning, so few mages were milling about.

“Here we are.” he gestured to the ornate wooden door at the very end of the hall. The Knight Commander and First Enchanter’s offices, along with the chambers for prolific guests, were situated on the second highest floor of Kinloch Hold. Right below them were the apprentices’ quarters, and the mages’ below that, and the floors beneath consisted of the library, the commons, and a number of classrooms and study halls. All such floors were windowless. The barracks made up the bottom floors, and higher ranking templars slept on floors higher up and in rooms with windows. Cullen longed for a window, and one facing west. Perhaps then he could look across Lake Calenhad and convince himself that he could see home on the horizon.

“Thank you kindly,” said Duncan, “If I may, I would like to ask you another question. Regarding the mage you saw to this morning, that is.”

“Certainly.”

“She is nineteen years of age, correct?”
“Yes Ser, if my memory serves.” It did. Of course he knew. She was the same age as he. When she had discovered how young he was she’d giggled and looked up at him curiously through her thick lashes. When he asked her what she thought was so funny, she said she’d never met a templar so young. Clearly she hadn’t met many templars. When he was a boy of thirteen, he was the oldest in the training camp. And the least prepared.

“A fair age. How many combat experiences has the girl witnessed in her time here? Practical defensive or offensive magic? Certainly something of note?”

Cullen was caught a bit off-guard by the question, but answered to the best of his ability.

“Our instructors are…very thorough, Ser. She has read about a vast number of spells for practical combat use. But we do not imitate combat inside the tower. She has never seen a fight.”

“Ah. I…see,” Duncan responded, clearly disappointed by the answer, “Very well. Thank you, Ser Cullen. You are dismissed.”

His post was outside the commons, but Cullen’s head was ringing and his hands were shaking so much that he was sure Duncan must have noticed. After descending over thirty flights of stairs, he threw open the door of the barracks and scoured his desk for the small wooden box he knew he had placed there somewhere. After ripping several drawers out, he had found it. He opened the top to reveal the large needle and other equipment that he had hastily stuffed inside.

He quickly poured the iridescent blue substance into the syringe, gave it a few taps, and injected the lyrium slowly into the vein of his arm. He threw his head back and took the deepest of breaths. The pounding in his heart stabilized, he felt his headache subside, and an unmistakable calm flooded through his body.

Another templar—Giles, was his name, burst through the door to the barracks, laughing at the joke of a friend who he parted ways with outside. As he turned and saw Cullen, he snorted.

“Couldn’t even wait until after breakfast, eh, Rutherford? Sun’s barely up yet!”

Cullen ripped the needle out of his arm in frustration. He didn’t enjoy other people watching, and certainly not sneering at him as he did his injections. He growled, while stuffing the needle back in the box and locking it back in his desk.

“Hey now, no need to be so gruff. How’s that hot piece you fancy? Heard she had her Harrowing this morning. Didn’t hear much else though, so must not have been too nasty.” Giles had removed his armor and was crawling into his bunk.

“Fuck you, mate,” his eyes narrowed at his comrade.

Giles pulled the sheets up over him and looked rather pleased with himself as he closed his eyes. “Mmm…I’ll be dreaming of her soon, Maker willing.”

Cullen wore a look of disgust, but said nothing else as he ran a hand through his hair and left the barracks.

The rest of the morning dragged on. Breakfast in the main hall had come and gone, so he had to deal with apprentices loitering in the hall on their way to class and snogging in the corners. The morning shifts were always fairly uneventful. The older mages, the ones who would vandalize or shag in the library or, Maker forbid, try to escape, didn’t come out until later at night. He never saw anything like that, though. Mostly senior templars covered the night. He was almost grateful for it.
After his lunch, he moved to a different hall for an equally uneventful shift, which was just about to end when the subject of most of his thoughts exited the apprentice quarters to his left. There was no one else in the hall, so speaking to her was not a point of concern. So why did he shuffle his feet and clear his throat? Perhaps it was that she had been so different towards him. He could not remember when it had started, perhaps months ago, but one day she had been cold and distant and so very unlike her. He did not scorn her for it, only he wished that he saw her smile more.

He caught her eye, and she moved to him slowly, clearly still very dazed. Perhaps that was why, when she greeted him, it was so cool and tired-sounding. Yes, that was it.

“Solena, it is good to see you awake so early.” He gave her a small smile.

“Early? It’s well past midday.” She raised an eyebrow.

“Most…don’t wake up after their Harrowing until the next night,” he explained.

“Yes, and the rest don’t wake up at all.”

Her icy eyes pierced him straight through.

“Have I…offended you in some way?” he asked, timidly.

“…No, Cullen. You have not offended me. I do not know what I expected last night. You did your job, you did it well, and that was that.” She was clearly angry with him, but she did not yell. He had never seen her yell at anyone.

“Solena, I…last night, I was assigned to—” he could barely say what he meant to. She looked at him expectantly. “I was to be the one to…to cut you down, should…trouble arise.”

“Should I have become possessed, you mean.” She clarified.

“Yes. I…it would have been unseemly for me to speak to you under…under the circumstances. I apologize for that.”

“And so do I.”

“What? What for?”

“I’m sure it would have given you great pleasure to kill your first mage. I apologize for robbing you of that opportunity.”

Baffled, he rushed to reassure her.

“What? No! I—I would never—”

“But you would, wouldn’t you? Had trouble arisen.” The expression on her face was damned unreadable.

“I…” the question gave him more pause than he would ever dare admit. He felt a sharp pang in his heart when he looked at her, and felt as though her gaze alone might strike him down on the spot. Part of him wished that it did. “I would do my duty, yes. But it would give me no pleasure, I assure you.”

“Truly? I’ve heard the opposite,” she said coolly, once again. “I’ve heard that mage killing is one of the greatest pleasures in the world, for a templar. They say it’s something in the lyrium we both take. It’s all chemical—they say that it makes killing us an almost…sensual experience.” She had gotten
closer to him. When had she gotten closer to him? When had she put her hand on his chestplate? Her breath was on his lips.

“I…I…” any hope Cullen had of forming words at this point was shot.

“Enjoy your evening, Ser.” There was a venom in her voice. By the time he had registered that, her presence had left him all at once, and his mind cleared. He seemed frozen to the spot. He thanked the Maker that the tightness of his breeches was hidden by his plated armor.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)


MORRIGAN

The Wilds were always more glorious when she saw them through the eyes of a raven. The feeling of soaring above the trees and seeing just barely past the edge of the known world granted a sense of possessiveness. These Wilds were hers. For no one else seemed to want them, but they meant more to her than all the pretty baubles in the world. They were, perhaps, the only thing she truly owned.

As she soared, she could feel the crisp fall air under her dark wings. The tall pines fluttered in the breeze, and off in the distance the sunset filled the sky with rich purples and oranges. But not everything she had seen as she flew that day filled her with joy. Smoke gathered on the horizon. A dark mist swept through her woods that she could not understand. Something was not right. Something had been very, very wrong for longer than she wanted to admit. Perhaps, one day soon, she would become a wolf and travel all the way to where the smoke rose. Then she could see what - or who - plagued her Wilds, and she could rain hell down upon them.

But supper would be ready any moment. Her investigation would have to wait, lest Mother get impatient.

Morrigan flew down below the trees and landed on the forest floor on two legs. She brushed off her patchwork leather skirt and straightened the crooked bun that held up her dark hair, pulling twigs from it all the while. She rolled her slim neck back and forth, getting rid of the ache that had grown there. It was a quick jaunt back to the hut she lived in with her mother, and she jogged the distance. She ran her hand along the stumps of the trees and smiled to herself as a strong gust of autumn wind pushed her forward.

The sight of five dead birds all in a row on the forest floor caused her pause. She had seen the likes of this before, a few times in the past month. And it hadn’t always been birds. She grimaced and shook her head. Later, she promised herself, shutting and squeezing her eyes tight. She would deal with this later.

She arrived outside the hut faced with her mother’s back, who stood hunched over the pot on the fire with a bowl of stew in her hand.

“Morrigan!” she cried to the forest, cupping her hand over her mouth to make her shrill voice travel.

“I am here, Mother,” said Morrigan, already standing over the pot and taking in its smells.

“Oh, good, you’ve decided to join me, have you? Where have you been, girl?” croaked the witch.
“Trying to see what it is that haunts our Wilds, Mother. Lest you have forgotten that smoke rises to
the south and animals die by the hundreds,” spat Morrigan as she made herself a bowl.

“Hmph. I thought you had a bigger head on your shoulders. The King gathers his army to the north.
He gathers Grey Wardens. Do you think he does so simply because he has nothing better to do?”

Morrigan kept her thoughts to herself. She wished to speak to her mother no longer than she had to.
And, in truth, what she said had worried her. She had pushed the thought of darkspawn to the very
back of her mind. It was too terrible to imagine, and too unlikely. No, she would have to see it with
her own eyes. Tonight, she would go, she promised herself. The King was a fool—what did he
know? Whatever threat lurked, she could handle it well enough.

They ate inside, and in relative silence. When her mother finished, she stood and stomped out the fire
in their fireplace.

“We must make sure none of the King’s soldiers wander our way,” she said as she did, “If they do,
we shall have to defend ourselves. As we always have.”

“If I see any, I shall take care of them,” Morrigan resolved.

“No,” her mother said quickly. “Only if they get too close. If they are here for their darkspawn, do
not interfere. We two cannot stand against an entire horde alone, girl.”

Morrigan rolled her eyes but once again said nothing. Her mother left the hut soon after, nowhere to
be found. Morrigan did not care where she had gone. She often left unceremoniously, sometimes for
weeks or more, and sometimes Morrigan did not even take notice.

When Morrigan left the hut, the sky was dark, but the moonglow was enough for her to see with.
Perfect, she thought. She would need the cover of darkness for what she had planned. It took one
glance above the tree line to know where she was headed, and with that, she left with a sprint. She
was a few paces into the woods when her feet became paws, her body became covered with silver
fur, and her nose grew out from her face. She knew the spot where the smoke came from. She could
not make the journey tonight, but she knew a good vantage point that would tell her all she needed to
know.

Her feet hit the ground in a steady rhythm that made her heart swell. With the ears of a wolf she
could hear each leaf that crunched beneath her paws; each bird that pushed through the leaves of
trees in a panic as she grew near. Yes, she was fearsome this way.

Not to say she didn’t fancy herself as fearsome otherwise. But men, as they were want to do, took
her for a silly young girl lost in the woods. Something they could rescue and protect, and take back
to her wealthy parents upon which they would be granted with a handsome reward, and maybe even
her hand. That was the story she often went with, anyway. Before she lured them back to their hut
and Mother cut their hearts out.

In many ways, she felt more herself when she became something else. More fearsome, more
perceptive, more free. When she would catch a rabbit between her claws and rip it in two by the
neck, she could feel the blood rush to her head and the bond between her and her Wilds grow one bit
stronger. She felt ravenous. She was home.

She lost track of time in animal form, that was true. As Morrigan grew aware of her surrounding she
realized she must have been miles from their hut, and was nearing her destination.

The smell of blood and rotting corpses filled her nose and she began to prowl with caution. At the
sight of the first body, she recoiled. Not at its ghastly visage, but at its mere presence. It was a soldier, she noted. He should not be here, not this far from Ostagar. As she walked between two trees and into the clearing she had once been familiar with, she could no longer recognize it. Bodies littered the ground up to the cliff—all soldiers. She turned and saw three more hanging limply from trees, and shuddered.

As she edged towards the cliff, a different corpse drew her attention. It was no man. It had a body short and stout, and wore armor the make of which she had never seen before. It was sharp with hard edges and had the color of rust accenting its dark plate. Its skin, colored with greens and browns, looked like a man’s that had been boiled or stabbed beyond recognition. Its eyes were mere sockets; it had nostrils with no nose and a mouth with no lips.

When her paw reached out to touch its clawed hand, the beast jolted and screeched with the high-pitched sound of a flock of crows. In a panic, she latched her teeth onto its neck and ripped violently at the skin until it separated entirely, spilling blood onto the dirt, and the beast stilled.

A drowsy feeling overtook her, and she slowly lifted her head to see what she had come for. The smoke seemed much closer now, and she could see in the distance that it rose from a clearing she knew had not been there before. She could see a large hole in the ground, which must have had the diameter of her and Mother’s hut five times over. Surrounding it, she saw even more corpses hanging by the neck, and towering, sharp fences adorned with heads on spikes. A low rumble came from the clearing and she could see armed figures moving about, though she could not make out any details about them.

She knew, in her gut, that her mother had been right. The creature that lay by her feet was unrecognizable to her. The sight underneath the smoke was one more horrific than anything she had seen, and all at once she was filled with hatred and rage. She ran, as fast as her feet could carry her, back the way she came. The forest was nothing but a blur in her peripheral vision. As she neared a smaller clearing with a pond, she could hear the sounds of laughter and shouting male voices. She scowled and neared closer to look over the area.

Down below, two men bathed in the spring while one more sat on a rock, in full plate. More soldiers, she thought, too far into the Wilds for their own good, and too close for comfort to the hut.

“You fuckin’ twat!” one of the men in the water shouted, “Hurry up an’ get in ‘ere!”

The man on the rock looked haggard and worried. “These parts…supposed to be where the Witch of the Wilds lives…”

“Oh, fuck you!” the other man in the lake cried.

“Well, I don’t want to fuckin’ anger the cunt, do I?” he yelled back from the rock, “What if this is her pond?”

“Not to worry, mate! I just pissed in it! Claimed it as my own, I did. Ain’t her pond no more,” one boasted and laughed heartily. The other violently splashed him and backed away from him frantically.

“By Andraste’s tits you did! Disgusting wanker…”

As she emerged from where she hid in the shadows beneath the trees, she growled. The man on the rock saw her first, and turned white as a sheet.

“Oi, what’s the matter? Looks like he’s seen a ghost!” one from the spring said, who had not seen
her yet. The man on the rock quickly grabbed his sword and sprinted away from the clearing and away from her, tripping over grass and twigs as he did.

The other two caught on eventually, pointing and staring wordlessly at her wolf form. They rushed from the spring, nude and screaming, grabbing their armor and using it only to cover their modesty as they ran after their friend.

When the vile men were finally out of sight, she made her way down to the spring. Her reflection, in a way, was almost foreign to her, as blood obscured most of her muzzle and gave her a certain wildness and ferocity that was…not unwelcome, she supposed. She dipped her beak into the lake to quickly wash it off. After she had, she took in her reflection once more before it became that of a young woman with the moons decorating the sky behind her.

The walk back to the hut was slow and solemn. What she had seen tonight held…consequences that she did not like to think on. She would not leave this forest, ever. She had promised herself that when she was very young.

Of course, she had not always wished for that. Once, when she was small and foolish, she had found herself in a little town on the outset of the Wilds. There had been a festival that day, and she had seen floats and carriages of all shapes and colors parading down the street. Then, she had not understood any of it. But she watched intently with wide eyes that had never seen anything so wonderful—or so she believed. Back then, she never quite appreciated what she had.

The most ornate carriage of them all held a noble woman dressed in white and gold finery that waved prettily to the common people as she passed them by. Morrigan, silly as she was, had walked up to the carriage and deigned to reach up and touch her, as if to confirm that she were real. Looking back on it now, she was lucky she had not had her hand chopped off. But the woman was kind, and smiled warmly at the small, pretty girl Morrigan had been. She reached back into the carriage and produced a small hand mirror, the very same color as her dress, with beautiful sparkling vines and flowers carved into the woodwork. She handed it to Morrigan, and it had been the only thing she had eyes for all the way back to the hut.

Her joy had been short-lived. The day Mother returned, she was furious. In truth, Morrigan had never seen her quite as angry as she had been that day. As Morrigan screamed and cried, her mother had smashed the mirror upon the floor. She had told her then that beauty and wealth were fleeting, and had no meaning. Survival had meaning, though. Power had meaning. She had left her in her room and Morrigan did not come out for three days. Then, naïve as she was, she had not understood what her mother had told her; not comprehended its value. Now she did, though. As much as she despised the old crone, she had raised her with everything she knew and valued.

Now, Morrigan did not know what she would do. The Wilds were all she knew, and all she treasured in this world. If the darkspawn threat grew, she knew she and her mother alone could not contain it. They would have to leave, or die.

She had not shed a tear since the day her pretty mirror had been smashed. But, that night, when she arrived at the hut, Morrigan sat upon her bed and she wept.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.
Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
**MARIAN**

The more she drank, the less she thought about the fucking boar.

The beast had first reared its ugly head three days prior in the early morning, while Marian sat on her forest bedroll groggily eating on stale bread. She had heard the noises, and her head had popped up as she spied it through the tree line, eating its breakfast as well. She had risen too quickly to grab her bow with sleep still in her eyes and had tripped over a root and startled the little shit, sending it running. And so began the ill-fated hunt for the boar she had affectionately named “Fucking Bastard”, because like most other men who had earned that title, it was ugly and pig-headed, and ended up being far more trouble than it was ultimately worth.

Of course, she never caught it. Fucking Bastard may have been pig-headed but she hated to think too long at what that made her, because it had out-maneuvered her at every turn. Dashing about from brush to brush, hiding at tricky angles behind thick trees, making her wade across rivers. Damn thing must have been fifteen stone, but it sure was spritely. Or maybe she had just been tired and hungry from her until-then long and unfruitful hunt, and that’s why her arrows kept missing. The bow never was her strong suit, but she still thought herself better than most. Whatever. The closer she came to the bottom of the tankard, the less any of it mattered.

Anyway, after she had spent all her energy chasing the blasted thing, she had had none left for rabbits or squirrels, if she’d even seen any. Instead they had some river fish for supper that night that Bethany had proudly caught in a net, and some of Old Lady Turner’s sweet yams that she had kindly given them. It was enough, but not for tomorrow, or the days or weeks after. She didn’t have to take one step inside their front door before she knew what the look would be. One brief, interested glance up from her sewing needles, and a quick smile before looking down to Marian’s hands and seeing nothing. Then that frowny, downcast gaze, and some sad, short little question meant to be polite but laced with disappointment: “No luck, dear?” followed by the requisite mutterings about “what will we do,” and “perhaps Carver should give it a try, see what he can come up with,” and “you could always teach him, your father never had the time.” Then silence. For the rest of the evening. Marian had been gone for two bloody weeks, and the only absence her mother cared about was the boar’s.

That made Marian chuckle into her ale. Mother would rather have a Fucking Bastard than an eldest daughter.

It was Leandra Amell’s greatest misfortune that Carver hadn’t been born first. Carver didn’t know how to do shit except sulk, swing a sword about, and ruin everyone else’s fun. What Mother didn’t know was that Marian had, in fact, attempted to teach Carver to hunt. Once. And never again. Boy was loud as an ox and twice as stupid, and wouldn’t take any direction she gave him, just kept
asking fool questions like, “why must I do this?” and “wouldn’t it be more efficient if…?” as if he
were trying to teach her instead. At the end of exactly two days she couldn’t take the whining
anymore, and sent him packing back home while she finished the hunt alone, on the agreement that
they would not speak of it to Mother.

Yes, instead, Father had raised Marian to be the provider, which Mother had never approved of, not
even before the twins were born. And as soon as she had Carver, she truly realized the mistake
they’d made. She quickly tried to teach Marian dress-making and the harp, and that didn’t bloody
work. She had never taken to the harp or any instrument, and she only used what sewing she had
learned to patch up clothes and bits of child-sized leather armor that Mother believed belonged on a
boy. The day Marian had come home with all her hair chopped off, Mother had cried. Actually cried,
for a whole night with leftover sniffles and red eyes for the morning. But Father had made a big
scene of laughing, ruffling her hair and saying that it suited her, but that she had done a piss-poor job
with the blade. He fixed it for her the next day with a good, sharp pair of shears, and Mother
mysteriously had said nothing more about it.

Everything had changed when Bethany showed her signs. No one had any choice in the matter,
then. Father had no time for Carver, so Marian had to look after him. And then Father was cut down
by templars, so Marian had to look after everything else. Mother had accepted her role in the
household—certainly relied on it—albeit with reluctance. And soon Mother learned that hair could
grow back.

Marian knew that her mother still clutched her fantasies tightly to her chest as she lay in bed each
night. That her oldest progeny would marry well and leave the roost and provide for them from a
distance—send them money and give her tiny, snot-filled grandchildren. Until Marian fulfilled them,
Mother concerned herself with what Marian could give them here instead—food, coin and security.
And when she had given all of that, Marian could go drown in herself in the river at the end of each
day, for all she cared. She preferred the company of Bethany, or Carver, or no one at all. That had
always been made explicitly clear. There was not much to speak of between the two of them,
anyway. They were too different, just fundamentally speaking. Mother spent her time in a darkened
corner mourning what used to be. Marian mourned her father.

“Oi, Marian,” said Pete the lumberer, who sat to her left at the bar. “Bad hunt, then?” She looked
around and saw others were listening in too, and had gone a bit quiet to admire her in her drunken
stupor. Had she belched when she finished her drink?

“Like no other, my friend,” she told him and the rest, and raised her empty tankard high so Danal
would see. “Fucking Bastard boar slipped away from me at every turn. He knew I was coming, I tell
you. But I hunted him for three days with no rest, through cold nights and downpour mornings,
through the harsh and unforgiving wilds of Lothering village. He knows who I am now. When my
brother and I return from our King’s great battle against the great and terrible nothing at all, I’ll return
to the real war, and I’ll skin that fucking boar and his whole boar family, and the entire village will
sleep with full bellies that night, I swear to you.”

The whole room cheered and raised their cups to her, drinking their fill. She sat back against the bar
and smiled.

“You an’ Leandra and the rest of yuh’s like family,” Danal chimed as he gladly poured her another.
“If you ‘ave trouble with food, you know I’ll—”

“It’s good of you, Danal, really, but we’ll manage,” she told him, and that was the end of that.

The men in the tavern shuffled about a bit as they shouted and cheered unintelligibly, and Herrold
the smith emerged from the crowd, throwing a meaty arm around her shoulder.
“Come on, Marian, I know what’ll cheer you. Come ‘ere and put those arms of yours to some real work.”

She stood and laughed as he led her about, her ale sloshing over the rim and onto the floor as they stumbled together. “Oh no, Herrold, don’t make me pummel you sorry sods again, there’s no man in this town to match me.”

“Aye, and no woman neither!” called out some voice from the back, and they all banged their tankards in cheer, while even the barmaids laughed and looked on with anticipation. Marian winked in the direction of the voice and they all laughed again.

“No, no, we all know that,” Herrold said, as he began setting the knives off his belt down on the table in front of them. They were beautiful, freshly sharpened and glinting in the light of the tavern—unlike anything she could afford to buy from him. “But how ‘bout you show us just what you’ll do to that boar when you find it, eh?”

Marian glanced behind her to the wooden target on the wall, already dented with pissing matches of days’ past. She turned back to Herrold and smiled wickedly. “Oh boys, you shouldn’t have.”

In a fluid motion, she grabbed a knife off the table and spun around, snapping her arm and landing the knife fairly square in the center of the target—if not a little bit to the right. Everyone cheered all the same. She tilted her head and frowned, displeased with her work, and tried again, this time hitting a bit to the left. Everyone cheered again.

The room grew quiet as she turned again and grabbed another, this time taking a deep breath and gaining focus. I’ll get you, you Fucking Bastard, she thought, and pictured the target behind her as the boar, rearing up to charge. Her final shot must have been something to watch, because she managed to wedge the thing dead in the center between the other two, smirking to herself while the bar went absolutely wild, crowding her and rushing her with tankards and clanging their own together in celebration.

Some of the men threw knives of their own to try and best her, but none were able. Herrold gave her the knife that had hit the center—free of charge—and in response she had kissed the old codger sloppily on the right cheek, making him blush fierce red on dark cheeks. Within the hour, she was wobbling about on the bar, standing and singing about Maker-knows-what while the men clapped and swung their arms,

Too long I have traveled, soon I’ll see her smiling,
The girl in Red Crossing that I’m longin’ to see!
O, I know she is there, daisies in her hair,
Waitin’ by the chantry to marry me.

I’ve dreamed of the kiss I stole ‘neath the arbor!
I’ve dreamed of the promise ‘neath the old ash tree.
O, I know she is there, daisies in her—”

“—Marian!”

The men didn’t stop singing but Marian did when she looked to the door and saw Carver looming there, arms folded and looking as he usually did, as if he were smelling sour milk. She stumbled and nearly fell off the counter when she saw him, but she caught herself and began to ease herself down to the floor. The men clearly were not pleased with that, so she stood back up—only briefly—to placate them.
“Oh, don’t you all start wailing and moaning like a bunch of mabaris in heat, or I’ll never come back! You lot will never get your piece of Fucking Bastard!”

“Marian, now!” Carver bitched from the door.

“Please, forgive me, as you can see, one of the King’s men is here to arrest me for public indecency.” They all hooted and hollered as Carver grew ever-redder.

Eventually she made her way over there, through men patting her on the back and wishing her a good night, and Carver, predictably, hadn’t budged.

“Outside. Now,” he dictated through clenched teeth. Clenched arse, more like. She snickered. “Now!” he barked, and she shut up.

He shut the door behind him and the roaring energy and bright light of the tavern was traded for the crickets and cicadas and the starry night sky. She felt dizzy. Carver grabbed her very firmly by the wrist and pulled her out of the way of the door. He sized her up with his eyes, but Marian didn’t know why. He didn’t need to look at her in her drunken state to be angry with her—he had clearly decided to be angry before he had left the house.

“Right. I don’t know what I expected. It’s nearly morning, if you hadn’t noticed. We leave at dawn. And you’re fucking drunk.”

“So would you be if you’d seen that monster boar. He was huge, I tell you! And he got away from me. I’ll remember his face until I’m dead. You should go in there and get a drink.” She tried to shove his shoulder, but he was too quick for her, and slapped her hand out of the way. “Ow.”

“Oh yeah? Was he as big as your ego?” Carver asked.

She made a dismissive noise with her lips. “That one was a stretch, even for you. Come on. You can do better.”

“You’re a real arse sometimes, do you know that? With that shit you pulled earlier, back at the house? Mother’s been crying, she thinks she’s done something wrong by you—and Bethany’s in a fit as well, so I had to calm her down—”

“That last bit’s hardly my fault. Bethany starts crying when she laces up her boots wrong.”

“Marian.”

“And Mother’s not crying for my sake, I assure you. Perhaps over the fact that she’s so very hungry, and gave birth to the only son in the world who can’t hunt.”

Carver sneered at her condescendingly. “You can do this all you like. Deflect. Doesn’t change the fact that you get home after a fortnight, ruin everyone’s evening, then go get drunk and dance on bars while men fawn over you and I’m left to clean up your bloody mess! Maybe if you were ever home for more than a day at a time then you’d know what it means to be there for people, instead of —”

“Fuck off!” She shoved him now, hard, with both hands, and he couldn’t smack her away this time. “What do you think I’m doing out there for weeks, sitting on my fucking hands? I tried! Be there for —fuck you! Don’t start lecturing me about being here when you’re called away to wave your cock about in a training yard for months on end!”

“You really have no respect for anything or anyone but yourself, do you?” asked Carver, seemingly
Marian didn’t let him finish. She waved a choice finger in his face and was already running off, ignoring his fuming words shouted after her across the road.

Drunkenness made her bolder, probably because she had no idea what she was doing until she’d done it, and sometimes not even then. Somehow she had gotten past the houses and past the tree line and into the large open fields of yellow grass that the rare traveling idiot would say made Lothering pretty, or some shite that travelers say when they haven’t lived in a place their whole life.

It was fun making Carver feel dumb, leaving him to stand there by the tavern and inevitably storm home by himself, but mostly, she had left because she really needed to piss. She picked no particular patch of grass and began unlacing her trousers, squatting above a small ditch she had kicked open with the toe of her boot and sighing up to the moons—her only voyeurs.

That was, until, when she heard a rustling in the trees to her left, She raised her head, more alert than she had been, and glanced around.

Out in the distance—maybe two-hundred yards out, was a white-tailed fawn, ears pointing to the sky above and turned straight at her. It was no hog or fatted calf, Marian thought, but it would certainly feed Mother and Bethany until they returned. Her heart started pumping loud in her chest, and as soon as she moved to stand the fawn had darted off, so she laced her trousers quickly and sprinted after it into the woods.

It was stupid, objectively, that she thought she could catch it. Aside from the fact that she was drunk and exhausted, she had only one throwing knife to her name at the moment, and had quite literally been caught by the damn thing with her pants down. But something in her had stirred when she saw it, and she found she could not do anything but chase.

She lost sight of it in the middle of the woods, which was wonderful. Carver might very literally kill her if she didn’t show tomorrow morning and he found her a mile from home, hungover and face-down in the grass and the dirt. She looked frantically for hoof prints, but it was dark and that was also stupid.

That was when she heard the bleating, and the violent rustle of branches, and a twig snapping.

No, she thought instantly as she blinked away the sheen in her eyes, and ran after the noises. The forest had become a maze at night, and she must have looked a sight stumbling over herself and narrowly avoiding rocks and trees. But the bleating continued, on and on, this painful thing, and she followed it straight to the source.

The fawn lay dying on the ground. On top of it, eating on its innards, impossibly, was Fucking Bastard. Her disbelief turned quickly to rage as she screamed at the top of her lungs until it squealed.
and ran away, darting west back into the thick of the forest and away from town.

Then, she was left with the fawn.

Its death noises had quieted now, because it was bleeding out. But it still whined and cried, laying on its side covered in its guts. Marian kneeled over it, and pulled out the knife.

Just like that, the whole thing was over. The hunt, the day, and that fawn. Tomorrow they rode south, like none of it had ever happened or mattered at all. She took a moment to try and catch her breath.

She wondered when it had gotten so easy, finishing a kill. Believe it or not, there was a time when Father had had to guide her hands while she held back tears so he wouldn’t see. He did see, though. He wiped them away each time. Death was a part of life, he had told her. No less a part of nature than anything else. He told her it was alright to be sad, too. But she had figured out well enough on her own that sometimes it wasn’t.

Anyway, it wasn’t a fucking mystery. The last time it wasn’t easy was when it had been him on the ground, bleeding to death, and her family waiting behind her.

Marian backed away from the dead fawn until she rested against a tree, and slid down, knees spread and arms resting atop them. She let out a sigh. She stared at the knife in its neck.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
"This…is Lily," Jowan explained. The woman who stood next to him was a Chantry Sister, that much was clear. She was a pretty enough redhead with a shapely figure, but that didn’t make this situation any less ridiculous. Solena’s eyes widened, and just as quickly narrowed.

"An initiate? You’re shagging a bloody initiate?” they had to keep their voices down as best they could. They stood in an alcove in the back of Kinloch Hold’s chantry. After lunch, Jowan had confronted her and practically dragged her here, claiming he had something to discuss with her that couldn’t wait. He looked tired—even more than she did, if that were possible. She had not been allowed her bedtime tea for a few nights, following the massive amount of lyrium she had used during the Harrowing. As a result, she had been plagued with nightmares of being mauled by bears, attacked by wolves, and rats eating her alive all night and into the morning.

“I told you I met a girl!” he retorted somewhat meekly, “Months ago!”

“Not a fucking initiate! Do you have a death wish?”

“All right, all right, keep your voice down!” he pleaded. Lily stood there looking incredibly awkward. Solena almost felt sorry for the poor girl. She sighed.

“What’s this about, Jowan?”

He seemed very unsure of himself. He looked to Lily, who nodded at him with a small smile. He turned back to Solena, who waited impatiently with her hands on her hips.

“Well…remember when I said I didn’t think they wanted to give me my Harrowing? I…I know why. They’re going to make me tranquil.”

Solena opened her mouth to speak, but only air escaped. She diverted her eyes from Jowan momentarily, focusing intently on the golden bust of Andraste to her left.

“Jowan, that’s…that’s ridiculous,” she said, meeting his eyes again.

“Is it? They’ll take everything that I am from me—my dreams, hopes, fears…my love for Lily. They’ll extinguish my humanity! I’ll just be a husk, breathing and existing, but not truly living.”

“And how did you find out about this?” Solena asked skeptically.

“I saw the document on Greagoir’s table,” Lily spoke up, “It authorized the Rite on Jowan, and Irving had signed it.”
Solena steadied herself, suddenly feeling a little woozy. “Well, um, what…what are you going to do?”

“I need to leave!” he said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “I need to destroy my phylactery. Without it, they can’t track me down. Listen, we need your help. Lily and I can’t do this on our own.”

“If you give us your word that you will help, we will tell you what we intend,” said Lily.

Solena’s mind ran in circles and couldn’t seem to escape them. She had only known one tranquill in her entire life, and that was Owain, the clerk for the Circle stockroom. Of all the things she had ever seen, including, perhaps, the Fade, he was by far the most unnerving. Oh, he was…nice enough, she supposed, if you could even call him that. But really, she knew that he wasn’t. He wasn’t…anything. You looked into his eyes and you saw no life behind them—Jowan was right on that account.

If Lily said she had seen the document, she supposed she had no reason not to believe her. Jowan had been paranoid about his Harrowing for a while now, and in the back of her mind she had always known he had good reason to be, even as she had brushed off his concerns at every turn. He was twenty-four. Most all Harrowings she knew took place between the ages of sixteen and eighteen—even hers was a little late, and she had worried that if it had gone on any longer she would have been in the same boat as her friend.

Friend. True, Jowan had been a friend when he didn’t have to be. Her only friend, really. She cast Cullen’s name from her mind. No. Not him. Never him. He had never been her friend. She had thought so once, and look where it had gotten her. It was Cullen’s obvious affections that had soured all the other apprentices towards her—all except for Jowan. He was good that way. To picture him in Owain’s place chilled her to the bone. More out of fear for herself than him, however selfish that might have been. She didn’t want to have to depend on a templar for friendship or comfort. She didn’t want to have to depend on a templar for anything.

But escaping the Tower…if they were caught, she could be killed. Or worse, and more likely, made tranquill herself. In truth, she didn’t know what happened to mages who tried to escape. She knew of one, Anders, who had tried to escape multiple times over. He was a friend of Jowan’s, and something of an acquaintance of hers. Sometimes he even got to a nearby village, and they would find him a week later drunk off his ass and laughing up a storm at some brothel. No matter how many times they dragged him back—and they always did—she would find him regaling his adventures to the apprentices in the library with a smile on his face: the inns he’d stayed at, the drinks he’d shared with the common folk, the people he’d shagged. A not-so-small part of her envied him. And each time he returned, she became more and more amazed that the Templars still kept him alive.

No one had seen him in over a month. It sickened her to think of it.

Why did he keep trying? Why does anyone try and escape the Tower? For one thing, and one thing alone. One thing that meant the whole world and so much more. When she thought about it, a strange sense of excitement filled her entire body. But she had never let it get past that point. It had always been too dangerous a notion.

“AAlright, yes, you have my word,” she said, before she could stop herself. You idiot, she chastised herself. She had only just received her mage robes, and yet, here she was.

“Thank you. We will never forget this.” Lily grabbed hold of Jowan’s hand with both of hers and held tightly.

“Is there a plan?” Solena questioned. Lily nodded.
“I can get us into the repository. But there is a problem. There are two locks on the phylactery chamber door. The First Enchanter and Knight Commander each hold one key. But...it is just a door. There is power enough in this place to destroy all of Ferelden. What’s a door to mages?”

“I once saw a rod of fire melt through a lock,” Jowan offered.

“Yes...yes, he’s right, that should work,” Solena confirmed. “I can get one through Owain. I’ll go do that, and you both need to be waiting for me outside the repository at midnight with your bags in tow, do you understand?”

Jowan and Lily agreed. Before she took her leave, Jowan gripped her by the shoulder and smiled warmly. Her reaction was stone-faced, and she knew that must have upset him. She left the chantry without another word.

One did not escape the Tower. Who did she think she was, to be cunning enough to pull it off? Even if she did, she wouldn’t be leaving with them, she realized. She couldn’t. She knew her own mind and she knew she wouldn’t be strong enough to do it. No, she would stay here and come up with the best damn story Greagoir had ever heard. She laughed, in spite of herself. She could be one of the only people in history to successfully break out of Kinloch Hold—to break into the phylactery chamber—and she wouldn’t even be free at the end of the day.

_Freedom_. Was that something she wanted? It seemed so strange to her now, so abstract. She could barely remember what the outside felt like. She was in her infancy when she arrived at the Tower, and she knew no home and no family. When she thought of her mother all she saw were fragments: a laugh, blonde hair, the smell of lavender, maybe. But she had long suspected her mother must be dead. If she were alive, would she not have written? Unless her mother had longed to be rid of her, which she also feared. Regardless, should she ever leave, she had nowhere to go. It was impractical for her to long for anything but what she had in the Circle Tower: security, shelter, and a wealth of knowledge.

So there was no logical explanation for the way her heart leapt when she thought of taking a step outside of her prison. No reason that she found her nervousness soon transforming into giddiness. She was a being of rational thought, and this violated everything she knew, except...except that perhaps she had spent her entire life reading book after book, romanticizing the world that she read about and all its mysteries. Perhaps she had silently assured herself time and time again that anywhere had to be better than here.

There was a part of her—a small and silly part of her, that had always hoped she had some secret noble birthright. As a child, her argument had seemed flawless. Who was to say she hadn’t? She did not remember her mother nor the home she was born into. Maybe the light at the end of the tunnel was the discovery that she was a princess—that her imprisonment had all been some misunderstanding, and that she was meant to marry some noble prince who loved her and have his children and live in a grand castle by the sea.

That was before, of course, she understood what hatred meant. Before she had stolen that sweet from the larder and looked into the eyes of the Templar that beat her and saw, for the first time in her life, disgust. She had been eight years old.

She learned very soon after that no secret birthright would get her out of this hell. There was nothing in the world, as wonderful and fantastic as it may be, that would prevent the Templars from keeping her here until she was old and grey.

Maker, she had a headache. She rubbed at her temple and forehead in circular motions as she made her way to the stockroom. It was her mistake that she was looking down at the ornate carpet that ran
the length of the hall, and not where she was headed, because she ran face-first into a broad chest and a white tunic.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! Pardon me,” she spoke, sounding more flustered than she had ever sounded in her life.

“The fault is mine, my dear,” a warm voice said.

She had certainly never seen him before. He was no Templar. In fact, he smiled at her.

Her eyes were drawn to the dagger at his side, and the insignia on the hilt. She stilled.

“It was convenient we ran into each other however; I’m afraid I’m in desperate need of directions to the library. It has been a while since my last visit to the Tower.” He chuckled to himself.

“Straight ahead and all the way down until the hall ends, then take a left.”

“Ah. You have my thanks, Mistress…?”

“Solena.”

He paused, and looked for a moment as if he were going to say something else. He did not. Instead, he seemed to be taking her in as though he had not truly seen her the first time. He smiled at her again, nodded, and was on his way.

The stockroom was empty when she arrived, save for Owain and the two Templars which guarded the door. This was good, she thought. She would rather as few people see her as possible. She approached the main desk where Owain sat with a thousand-yard stare. He was middle-aged with a dramatic widow’s peak. His brown hair, she noted, had been groomed unusually short—another thing that was likely not under his control. She was not even sure he had any remaining autonomy with which to feed or bathe himself. The general unease of his presence had always been overshadowed by the pity she felt for the man he had once been. Solena hadn’t known him then, of course, but she knew that no one deserved…this.

“Welcome to the Circle stockroom of magical items. My name is Owain. How may I assist you?” he asked. She knew his name. He had told her his name at least a hundred times before. But that didn’t matter.

“Hi, Owain.” She gave him a smile. “I need to get my hands on a rod of fire. Can you do that for me?”

“Rods of fire serve many purposes,” was his monotonous response. “Why do you wish to acquire this particular item?”

“Oh, I’m doing some research into the effects of fire on the tissue of magical animals such as drakes and wyverns—all very boring stuff, I’m afraid.” She laughed to herself, and as anticipated, Owain did not.

“Here is the form: ‘Request for Rod of Fire’. Have it signed and dated by a senior enchanter.” He handed her a slip of paper. Her face fell.

Shit. She had expected this to go much smoother, and it was evident that she wasn’t going to charm Owain out of bureaucracy. She thanked him and went on her way. She needed to think of something sooner rather than later.
As she turned down the hall, she became filled with dread at the sight of Cullen walking towards her, his golden head glistening with his armor. She had not spoken to him since yesterday, and she had used some…harsh words, to say the least. She had just felt such anger in the aftermath of her Harrowing, anger like she had never felt before. Not at him, per say, though his coldness to her that night hadn’t helped. And a small part of her knew that guilt-tripping Cullen would always have its uses. Especially in a situation much like…this one…

She stopped in her tracks, and all at once everything came together. She had…an idea. It was a bad one. But it was the best she could do, and time was running short. She walked up to him with sudden determination and a smile on her face.

“Cullen,” she greeted.

“Solena, I—I’ve been meaning to—”

“Yes, I know. Perhaps we could…speak somewhere more private?” she proposed. A blush rose to his cheeks, one he probably hoped she hadn’t noticed.

“I…yes. Yes, of course.”

Her new chambers had been one good thing to come from the Harrowing, at least. They were spacious and comfortable. She had her own large feather bed, vanity, wardrobe and small bookcase. She wanted for nothing. Except a door, of course, but only the highest ranking mages had that. The room was still a small consolation prize, in the grand scheme of things.

“I understand why you were angry with me,” Cullen started once they knew they were alone. “I was terribly detached that night, and, frankly, I was frightened; frightened for you and what…what I might have had to do had you not—”

She gave him a sympathetic smile and reached out to touch his cheek. “I understand, Cullen. And I thank you for your concern, truly. My anger at you was misguided.”

“I—oh,” blurted Cullen, clearly expecting her to have said something else. “Well…good, then. I…was there something else you wanted…wanted to discuss?”

“Well, yes. You see, I need a favor,” she started, dipping her toes in and seeing where this went. “Anything. Name it, and it’s yours, after how I’ve acted.”

“You’re a dear,” she smiled at him again, and produced the form. “Lately I’ve been doing some research that I’m deeply invested in. It has to do with magical creatures and their susceptibility to heat. I feel as though I’m on the edge of a breakthrough, which is why I’ve tried to keep this a secret from my mentor. I wanted it to be a surprise, you know? And I…well, I need a rod of fire from the stockroom. But to obtain one…”

“…you need a signature from a senior enchanter. I see the problem. Don’t worry about it. I’ll throw some weight around and have it for you later today.”

“Cullen, I don’t know what I’d do without you,” she said incredulously before leaning up to plant her lips on his cheek. She let herself linger just a moment too long before pulling away.

He was aghast, though he tried to hide it. He exited the room promptly, running into the side of her bedframe as he turned back to her to flash a smile. She laughed and waved, and played the silly love-struck girl for him until he was out of sight. Then she got to work.
Cullen had made good on his word, as she knew he would, and she had sealed her gratitude with yet another kiss on the cheek before “retiring for the evening”. Instead, she had hastily made her way to the stockroom and retrieved the rod of fire, which still took longer than she had expected. Owain had a handful of papers for her to sign and questions for her to answer, and for a while she had feared she would be in that damned room past midnight.

That had not been the case, however, and when all were asleep in the dead of night she met Lily and Jowan down in the Tower’s catacombs outside of the repository. The phylactery chamber was only accessed through that room.

Both Jowan and Lily had their belongings in sacks with them, as Solena had instructed, and they held onto each other’s hands for dear life. They had a nervous energy about them that only heightened her own, which she desperately tried to push to the back of her mind.

Lily had stolen the repository key off of Greagoir’s desk. Solena did not ask how. She became far too preoccupied with something else as the heavy door creaked.

“What’s down there?” she asked as she looked down the end of a long hall as Lily pushed upon the door.

“There’s rumors about these catacombs,” Lily said. “Some say they run for miles under the lake. Like the Deep Roads.”

“Do you believe them?” Solena asked her. As she said it, her voice sounded far-off.

“No,” she said. “But it’s fascinating to think about, isn’t it?” she smiled brightly as she held the door for the two of them.

The repository was Solena’s dream. Here was where the Circle stored its most precious magical artifacts and treasures. The room was filled with enchanted statues, magically sealed tomes and ancient elven curiosities. A large mirror stretching from the ceiling to the floor that shone with moonglow and hummed a sweet song held a place of importance at the center of the room. It called to her like nothing she’d ever known before. But she had to stop herself from getting entirely derailed from their mission.

The more she thought about the room and the mirror, the more it saddened her, and angered her. Here were some of the greatest wonders in the world, all in one small room, hidden at the bottom of a glorified prison, gathering dust. No one in the Tower used them, she knew. No one admired them or hoped to glean useful knowledge from them. They were somebody’s sick collection—more than likely the templars’. All things for them to possess and control. In a way, nothing in this room was any different from her.

As it happened, the entrance to the phylactery chamber was hidden behind a bookcase. Once they had moved it out of the way, the rod of fire easily melted the door’s locks.

The chamber was chilled as a measure to preserve the blood-filled vials that helped Templars track each and every mage in Ferelden that had ever been kept in Kinloch Hold. How nice it must be to have never known the Circle, she thought, to have been an apostate from the day you were born. She wouldn’t know, of course, but she imagined that life on the run, apart from its dangers, must at least make one feel alive. Inside the Tower, she had always felt just a little bit like a husk of herself—of the woman she could have been.
She shivered and rubbed at her own arms for warmth.

“All right, it should be labeled. Help me look and we’ll be out of here soon enough,” Jowan said, hastily dropping his bags on the stone floor and dashing to the closest set of shelves. They split up among different parts of the room, eyeing each phylactery closely.

It was only a matter of time until Solena laid eyes upon her own. She found it such a strange, silly, simple thing, to hold all the power in the world over her. It was as if it were magnetic—drawing her in closer and closer until her hand almost touched it. She quickly recoiled and pulled her hand back, and just in time too. Any further and she would not have been able to stop herself. Not even in the Fade had she felt such deep temptation. Her head rang in pain. No, Maker, why was she so weak? How could she be the only thing that stood between herself and happiness?

The throbbing of her skull stopped at once when she heard the crashing of glass on the floor behind her. She looked at her friend’s face and knew in an instant that he was free.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
Cullen II

Chapter Notes

***Content warning: Vague, non-explicit references to sexual assault. Discretion advised.***

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CULLEN

He had been in the middle of a midnight sparring session when it happened. When the sound of shouting and hurried armored footsteps reached his ears, he and his partner stilled momentarily before rushing for their armor. A thousand and one scenarios ran through his head, all of them outlandish and far-fetched…unless they weren’t. All the men were headed towards the repository. And every man, woman and child in the Tower knew what lied beyond the repository.

Cullen was already covered in a thin sheen of sweat from the sparring match, and the anxiety that now overwhelmed him made him feel almost feverish. Nothing like this had ever happened in his time at Kinloch Hold. Anything major that went on in the Tower was taken care of under wraps by senior templars, and he only heard the tail end of those stories. They all ended mostly the same.

As he threw his head out the door of the training room to look around, he saw templars abandoning their posts left and right. He would not miss this.

“I’ll catch up with you—go!” his sparring mate Gared shouted from behind him, still struggling with his armor. Cullen did not have to be told twice.

He hoped that Knight Commander Greagoir would be there to see how quickly he reacted to the call of duty. He hoped that perhaps once and for all his commitment and resolve would no longer be questioned. He knew there were whispers about him, and his favoritism of Solena. Greagoir had told him as much, and threatened to have him reassigned to the Circle in Kirkwall as punishment. Cullen had managed his way out of that one by the skin of his teeth, and had been fighting to regain the ground he lost each day since. It gnawed at his bones that he saw his peers advancing when he was stagnant, and that each one sneered at him and knew exactly why.

But it could not keep him from her, even though he thought that it might. Perhaps that scared him most of all—that he could not stop himself. That even his duty and his sense of self caved at the sight of her. What was he but a dog where she was involved? He thought back to earlier that day, how easily he had done her bidding, no questions asked, for a smile and a peck on the cheek. He disgusted himself, but he had done it regardless, and for the life of him he did not know why. Cullen had labored over that question the rest of the day.

And so when he turned the corner out of the hall to see where a congregation of Templars was forming, it was as if his whole world came to a screeching halt. His face fell and his heart began pumping faster than he could ever remember it doing. Suddenly, he knew the answer, and all he
could think was stupid, stupid, stupid.

In his mind, he was brought back to the night, a year ago, when they were together in the library. They had been alone, he at his post and she nearing the end of her leisure time, and he had watched as she grabbed a large book and headed into a more secluded area. A strange bout of confidence overtook him, and he had followed her with the intention of letting his feelings be known, once and for all. He truly had not considered that she might not reciprocate. He was sure he had caught the signals. And…well, if he was being honest with himself, he had settled on a fantasy involving her and the library tables for nearly a month at that point. This was back before he had gained any semblance of shame or humility, apparently. Though, he would be lying if he said he did not still conjure up the thought late at night from time to time—and sometimes during the day.

Needless to say, it did not go as planned. He lost his nerve, as he usually did around her. And once he saw her intently flipping pages as her warm cheek was illuminated by candlelight, all bets were off. She had looked up, and all of a sudden, the strangest of looks had settled upon her face. At first glance, Cullen had thought that maybe she…well, that she had been scared of him. But they were friends. He should frighten her no more than a kitchen mouse. He had not known what else to make of that look, not until today.

She had then insisted that he should leave; that it was late, and she was tired, and she was not in the mood for conversation. When he would not, she closed her book with a slam and rose to leave. He grabbed her arm. He had not meant for it to be forceful, but he feared that perhaps it was. He could not have been sure if it was a trick of the light or not, but he had thought he had seen tears forming in her eyes. She whispered a quiet, “Please,” and with a look of utter bewilderment on his face he had let her go. She hurried off, and they did not speak of it again. In all his ignorance, he had, over time, chosen to forget the encounter altogether, excusing it as a miscommunication between the two of them. Perhaps she had had a bad day, and needed to be left alone, and he hadn’t respected that. But now, he could not believe it had taken him so long to see the truth of it.

She was a mage. The look in her eyes had been hatred. She hated him—of course she did, why had he ever thought any different? She always had. She had never been his friend. And she had bewitched his mind today so that she could get what she wanted from him, and leave him. You idiot.

She now stood at the entrance to the repository with an unreadable look upon her face. Next to her was Jowan and an initiate whom he did not know, both looking equally as glum. Irving and Greagoir headed the gathering of Templars. Greagoir was shouting, and was red in the face. Cullen truly did not hear much of what he said, but he understood the gist.

“Not but a day after her Harrowing, and conspiring with a blood mage, and tainting the mind of an initiate! Is this your best and brightest, Irving? Is this your star pupil? Is that the story you still stand by?”

“I am…as disappointed as you, Knight Commander,” the old man spoke.

“Disappointed?” Greagoir’s outrage only increased, if that were possible. “No, First Enchanter, I am not disappointed. I am not even surprised. I call for the immediate execution of this woman and her accomplice!”

He looked, and Solena’s face did not change—it did not even flinch.

Cullen felt a hand on his shoulder and saw Duncan emerge from the crowd that had gathered behind him.
“What is going on? What is the meaning of this?” he asked him privately.

Cullen sneered. “What does it look like?”

Duncan paid him little mind, and instead tried fruitlessly to push forward through the crowd as Irving and Greagoir argued.

“Now Knight Commander, that is hardly—” he started.

“What is it, hardly? This woman is a disgrace! Do you condone her actions?”

“Surely not, but—”

“Then there is no argument to be had!”

“If we executed every mage who tried to escape the Tower, we’d have no mages in the Tower, Knight Commander.”

“Perhaps that’s all the better, then.” Greagoir scowled. Irving was horrified.

“And what is to be the punishment for your initiate? Is she blameless in your eyes?”

“The girl can be taken to Aeonar. She can live out her days in pious reflection of her sins.”

You would not have seen it if you had not been paying close attention, but Jowan’s face twitched. Cullen furrowed his brow in confusion as the initiate backed away in horror.

“The… the mages prison. No… please, no!” Templars marched towards her to seize her as she let out bloodcurdling screams.

Before they could reach her, Jowan raised his hand and pulled out a dagger, which he placed upon his palm. Every Templar in the room, as well as Solena, recoiled at once. Some then proceeded to move to tackle him. They did not get very far. As quickly as they moved, Jowan’s knife cut a gash deep into his hand, and a force swept through the room strong enough to knock even the largest soldier to the floor.

Cullen had never known darkness to cloud his vision so fast.

~~~

He was quicker to wake than most, but not all. He saw a handful of his peers rising to their feet as he opened his eyes, and he heard her voice from the center of the room.

“Are you deaf? I told you, I didn’t know he was a blood mage. He didn’t tell me anything—he likely didn’t even tell her!”

Cullen steadied himself as the shouting match between her and Greagoir continued. He had once thought this girl demure.

“And where is she now? Do you expect me to believe that buffoon kept the greatest secret of his life from his lover as well as his friend and confidant? Even when Irving and I had our own suspicions?”

“I. Didn’t. Know.”

“You may pretend to be stupid when you whore yourself out to my men but you will not play the idiot with me, girl.”
Cullen may have been keeled over in an attempt to catch his breath, but the sound of her spitting in the Knight Commander’s face was well amplified by the acoustics of the large room.

He also heard the subsequent rustle of plate metal and the distinct strike of it against flesh. His head shot up at that.

“Stupid bitch!” Greagoir cried as he only barely contained his rage. Irving was slowly rising to his feet, but clearly not in time to defend his charge. And Cullen…Cullen could only watch from a distance.

From where she now knelt on the ground from the force of Greagoir’s blow, Cullen heard a quiet, humorless laugh which he could barely believe belonged to her. It lasted until the Commander pulled her up forcefully by the hair.

But, in the end, it was the sound of steel being pulled quickly from a sheath that alerted every soul awake to hear it.

“Do you mock me? Do you think me weak, girl? Do you think I won’t kill you where you stand?” Greagoir’s right hand firmly grasped his sword, which still remained at his hip but had been pulled out halfway. His other still held her hair in a vice-like grip, facing her towards him. He knew Solena might have fought back, had Greagoir not been clearly draining her of magic. Cullen could tell by the darkness of his eyes and his heated look. It was a look he saw on his brothers-in-arms who hunted mages for the Tower, instead of standing at a post all day. He had never had a fondness for that look.

“Knight Commander!” Irving yelled, but it did not calm Greagoir, or stop Solena from opening her mouth.

“I think you a coward,” she said through gritted teeth.

Greagoir let out a cry one would usually reserve for the battlefield as he released his grip on Solena, sending her to the ground, and readied his sword. Cullen could not believe his eyes or ears, and it seemed his feet could not move him either.

“Stop this madness in the name of your King!”

The booming voice was enough to stay Greagoir’s hand, and he along with everyone else turned to seek its source. They did not have to look far. Duncan was storming towards the center from Cullen’s left with his left hand also poised on his sword.

“I invoke the Rite of Conscription on this woman and declare all of her crimes forgiven. I take her under my wing with the intention of initiating her into the Grey Warden order within the month, under the orders of His Majesty King Cailan the First, by the Maker’s blessing, of Ferelden and her people. Knight Commander, I suggest you stand down, or I may be forced to take up arms against you under the charges of high treason.”

Every soul in the room was incredulous, but Solena was, as she had always been, unreadable. She breathed deeply and unevenly as she stared up at the man who had saved her.

Greagoir, though begrudgingly, did as he was ordered. He looked as though he’d like nothing better than to run his sword through the Commander of the Grey instead.

“My Lady, do you accept?” Duncan asked. Solena could only nod. He offered her his hand, which she used to stand up. Her once immaculate robe which had been the colors of the sunrise, was now dusty, torn, and dirty. A hint of blood that he knew was Jowan’s stained her left side. A red mark
from the slap was sustained on her cheek, as well as a bloody scab from Greagoir’s armored hand. For a moment he later decided to forget, his heart panged at the sight of her and the thought of how Greagoir must have treated her before he had woken up.

Greagoir shook his head. “Get her out of my sight.”

Duncan placed his hand on Solena’s back and guided her out of the room. As she left, Cullen found himself unable to take notice of anything else going on in the space around him. He was transfixed by her. Not like he usually was—this time, she was an enigma; a mystery that he couldn’t believe he had once prided himself in having solved. All this time…had he not known one single, solitary thing about her?

“Rutherford! Wake up, you bloody fool! In my office, now!”

He had to give her credit. She did not look back.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
Alistair

Duncan was meant to have returned to Ostagar a week ago. He had not, and instead, Alistair stood at his place at the table, arms crossed and gnawing at the nail of his thumb, surrounded by the most powerful men in Ferelden. Duncan had said they would respect his voice at the table, standing in his place. That they would look at him and see a leader in his own right. Instead, Alistair thought, they looked and saw a fraud and a fool—a child, traipsing about in the shadow of a larger man.

When Duncan was present, the title of second-in-command fit comfortably, and honorably. It meant training the recruits, organizing assignments, and making sure the men didn’t get too drunk come sundown. When he was away, it meant something altogether different.

Camped at Ostagar under one banner—the King’s—were four factions. The King’s personal army made up the bulk of the force, followed closely in size by Teyrn Loghain’s large host. The Ferelden Wardens and the mages from the Circle Tower were smaller forces, but just as crucial. It was Duncan’s duty—on top of the meetings, the planning, the strategizing, and taking inventory—to oversee communications and relay messages between the Wardens and the rest of the camp. Or, it was—now it was Alistair’s undertaking. Some bloke named Rikker did Alistair’s job now.

It was late into the morning. The sun cast a yellow glow on the white, stony ruins of Ostagar, and the birds of the Wilds were still chirping loud enough to hear. Sometimes, the birds would sound out louder than the Teyrn, and Alistair would gain just a little reprieve.

“The last scouting party we sent, a group of my finest, returned at dawn. They found no trace of darkspawn activity to the south. I say we did not send them nearly far enough.” The Teyrn shifted a bit as he gestured at the map upon the wooden table, his heavy silver plate rattling with each movement. The man was tense—anxious, even—and his brow was furrowed something awful.

“And I say they were headed in the wrong direction,” came the King’s easy retort to his right. “We know the beasts first struck at the Fallow Mire. My men saw that devastation. Those poor people were massacred in their beds. It is west where we’ll find their force—whatever there is of it.”

“There was a handful of darkspawn left in the Mire. Stragglers, Cailan. Meant to lead you astray,” the Teyrn said.

“I doubt wild beasts are capable of leading anyone astray. The damage done to that village was the work of rabid animals, not a calculating army.”

The Teyrn made a low, disapproving noise from the back of his throat. The others in attendance shuffled awkwardly in place, observing from a safe distance. There was a mage there from the Circle—Uldred, as well as some others from the King’s Council whom Alistair did not know—lords of the Bannorn and accomplished war generals, most like. Though none, of course, as esteemed as the Teyrn.

“The Warden Commander,” Alistair began, “he told me he believed there was a…source. An entrance to the Deep Roads, lying in hiding. Perhaps we’ve not seen a force because they’ve not yet
fully emerged from the tunnels.”

“Duncan saw this in his dreams, did he?” the Teyrn growled. Alistair met his eyes, before diverting just as quickly away. It was not his place to rile the Teyrn against them any further.

“The Grey Wardens are our foremost experts on the darkspawn, Loghain. Let them advise you. You may learn a thing or two.” Cailan clapped the general on the back, though Loghain’s scowl only deepened. “Perhaps Duncan’s theory has merit. The Frostbacks to the west could offer the beasts some cover, if that is truly the case. It would be too great a risk to send a scouting party so far out. And if they don’t return, we’ll not know if it was the darkspawn or the terrain which made them meet their end. But if we send men past the Mire, perhaps they can find tracks leading to the mountains. Then we’ll have our answer.”

“Or we’ll have wasted weeks, and lives, on foolishness.” Loghain slammed his fist on the table, below the map he pored over. It was south, beyond the edge of the map—beyond the edge of the trees. “There. That’s where they gather. That’s where they stand. Beyond where we’ve got the courage to look. An army, lying in wait, ready to push. No stragglers. A force, to be reckoned with, that’s been watching us since we’ve arrived. These are intelligent creatures. If you underestimate them now, you’ll get no second chances, do you hear me?” He boomed, and the table shook. The backs of every warm-blooded soul in the hall straightened like a pillar—but not Cailan. He remained as he had looked from the start—proud, calm, and tired.

“I hear you,” he assured. “Let us do as you see fit, then. If your men return with nothing still, we’ll prepare for a western attack.”

The Teyrn made that same noise, but seemed to concede. Cailan leaned against the table for the briefest of moments, his head down.

“You should rest, Cailan,” the Teyrn told him, standing upright and stepping back from the table.

“I am fine, today will be…”

“This meeting is dismissed,” said Loghain, abruptly. The look in his eyes told them all to leave. Alistair wasted no time. He wished to have no more insight into family squabbles than he already possessed. One gleamed quite a bit when gathered about that table. The Teyrn and his son-in-law did not quite air their dirty laundry—but they certainly kept it where one could still smell it.

A different smell overcame him now, though, as he made his way out of the tall ruins and into the main camp. Men laughed heartily as they drank and cooked lunch on a pit—he could not tell what it was. Lizard, perhaps. The swampland offered few pigs or chickens.

Soon, the laughs turned into loud shouting. It took very little, where this lot was concerned. Loghain’s men—the men of Gwaren—followed him because they loved and admired him. They were a passionate bunch, with little reserve in battle. The King’s men were decorated with flowery titles and pretty golden armor that made them feel ten times taller than anyone else. The two did not get along. Men were shoved as mead was spilled from their tankards onto the dirt. Alistair sighed as he neared his tent, picking a piece of tender meat off of whatever Rikker had cooked on the fire.

Yep, definitely lizard.

“Why don’t you intervene, Alistair?”

He had not seen the old woman leaning against a nearby pillar, wearing her soft but irritatingly smarmy smile.
“Not my men,” he said, licking his fingers. “And I like my face the way it is.”

As he said this, the Teyrn descended from the ruins, and the men stopped their quarrel on a dime, moseying awkwardly back to their business.

“See?” he pointed. “It all works out.”

“How was your meeting? Anything terribly interesting?” Wynne inquired.

“Ha! A sense of humour! I knew what they say about you mages couldn’t be true.”

“Oh? And what do they say?”

“Just…that…oh, never mind.”

He retrieved his journal, pen and ink from inside the tent and sat back outside on the stump, beginning his notes for Duncan hesitantly. He did not know whether to include the shouting match across the table, or the Teyrn’s hostility, or Cailan’s odd state. The line between what was melodrama and what was relevant information grew blurrier each day.

“You miss him. And you worry for his return,” Wynne told him. The blasted woman hadn’t moved.

“I…do. This job is…I don’t know what I expected. It’s overwhelming, really.” He ran a hand through his hair.

“No. You **miss him**. Because you care for him, and feel lost when he is not here to guide you.”

Alistair sighed and narrowed his eyes.

“Well of course I—”


Wynne nodded. Alistair stood.

“Allright, what is it? What have the men done now? Raided your food supply? Let me apologize. I’ll make it right, I will.”

The priest shook her head, clearly confused. “Why…no! Would they do such a thing?”

“We Wardens are famously hungry creatures.”

“We shall…we shall endeavor to look over our stocks with greater care, then. But I bring a message for you to relay, a request from Revered Mother Hanna. Nothing more.” She handed him a small yet sturdy strip of paper, with elegant yet curt handwriting upon it. He eyed the words.

“Oh, bloody—”

The priest raised her eyebrow. Wynne coughed.

“Apologies. I’ll…get on that,” he said. The small, mousy-looking woman nodded and was then clearly eager to be on her way.

“For all the good you do with your men, Alistair, you still have no tact with the Chantry,” said Wynne once she was gone. “You should watch that tongue of yours.”
“You don’t have to tell me. The mages don’t care for me much, either,” he groaned.

She thought for a moment. “Yes, you’re right. I am the only one, I think, who will speak to you of my own free will.”

“Thanks for the confidence booster.” He showed her the note. “Now I’m the messenger boy between the both of them, while they squabble. Like their trained bitch.”

“Hm.” She looked it over. “Much to be expected, with Uldred’s presence, and Sellius. Though it surprises me that the Revered Mother would stoop to this level.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. A libertarian and a Tevinter at the head of a force of mages? Mother Hanna’s even older than you, I’m surprised she didn’t hear that and fall over dead.”

~~~

After, he walked along the bridge joining the main camp with the rest of the ruins, where the King and the Teyrn and the remainder of his council camped. Beyond that lay the main road—the Imperial Highway. Bloody thing stretched all the way across the continent—all the way to Tevinter—and it ended here, at Ostagar. At the edge of the world.

In the mages’ tent, he waited patiently for the man to be done with his conversation. The tent was red and gold and lavish, chimes hanging from the rafters and books open on every table and pillow. The scent of strange, earthy herbs caused Alistair’s lungs to fill as he choked and coughed. Sellius’ head raised.

“Oh, what is it now, Alistair? Have you not bothered the Circle enough with your inane prattling?”

“Never. I’d never miss an opportunity to talk to you, old friend,” he said through his violent fit.

Sellius scoffed, and his hooked nose wrinkled as if the unpleasant man had smelled something foul. Perhaps the herbs had finally taken their toll on him, too.

“What do you want? I gave you all my records on that mage Duncan was so keen on. Was he not to return with the girl last week?”

“Yes,” Alistair spoke through gritted teeth.

“Well. I’m sure he’s delayed by something overwhelmingly important. May I return to my work, or did you come to derail my entire day?”

He pulled the crumpled paper from where it was hastily stuffed inside his breastplate, unfolding it. “I bring a message from the Revered Mother, Ser Mage. She desires your presence. Now before you ask, for what reason I’m sure I don’t know.” He clasped the paper in Sellius’ hand.

“And the Revered Mother sends you? Why? To insult me?” The man raised a brow as he looked over the note.

“Well, perhaps. Though I’m sure if I spoke to the Maker all day, speaking with you any longer than necessary would be a terrible disappointment.”

“I will not be harassed in this manner!”

“Yes, I was harassing you by delivering a message.”

“Your glibness does you no credit,” Sellius said flatly.
“Oh, and here I thought we were getting along so well! I was going to name one of my children after you.”

Sellius glared and pushed past him, out of the tent.

“Get out of my way, fool.”

Alistair smiled, all too proud of himself perhaps, and followed shortly after. He should have done many things, then. Check in with Rikker, or memorize the field, or pore over a bloody map until his eyes hurt. Instead, he walked the ruins. He came to the rotunda, which overlooked the north, and sat upon the stone rail.

He let the breeze calm him then. It was crisp, and fresh, and it smelled like the new autumn. The pine trees rustled as he closed his eyes, and then opened them, just to watch the birds fly above.

Duncan would return, soon. He might not like to see him napping on a wall. But he would laugh first, before he scolded him. But he would never really mean it. And then he would relieve him of his duties, and send him back to what he knew—training and fighting and helping where it counted. He would never want for more.

“It’s a beautiful view.”

He jolted at the voice. It was feminine—not Duncan. But he still resented being caught in a daydream, especially by a woman.

Alistair coughed, and scratched his head. “Yes—uh, yes it—yes it is.”

She was a mage, in Warden robes and all. But she wasn’t one of his.

“Can I help you?” he asked, cautiously.

“I’m sorry to interrupt. My name’s Solena, I’m from the Circle Tower. Duncan told me I’d find you here.” She extended a hand.

“He told you—he’s here?”

“I…yes. We just arrived a little while ago, he was busy getting me these robes and staff, or I’m sure he would have told you.”

Alistair looked past her. “He…well, of course, I suppose…” he glanced down at her hand—perfectly manicured—and still extended. He grabbed it quickly in his own and shook. “I’m so incredibly sorry, I don’t know where my mind’s gone. I’m Alistair. Of course, you knew that already. I’ll be helping you undergo the initiation process.”

“You seem…distracted. Should I come back later? It’s no trouble—”

“No! No, please, you just…well, to be perfectly honest, you caught me sneaking in a break.”

“Oh,” she breathed. Her lips pursed into the slightest of smiles. Her voice lowered in mock-whisper as she seemed to lean into him. “Well. I won’t tell.”

He felt it run down his spine, all the way to his toes.

“Um, follow me.”

She hurried after him down the steps, into the main camp.
“You’ve got your armorer and your blacksmith—suppose you’ve already been there.” He gestured, and tried desperately not to glance over her, though he very much feared that he had. The armored robes suited her quite well, after all. Blue and silver, soft and tight and—\textit{never mind}.

“Up on that rise, Mother Hanna delivers sermons every day when the sun’s highest, if that’s the sort of thing you’re interested in.” Perhaps he should start going more often himself, came a snide thought. He was running up quite the list of things to repent for.

Behind him, she drank in all the information he gave her, eyes wide. It was strange, how attentive she was. Refreshing, but strange.

“You’ve got the mages’ camp to your left, but I wouldn’t go there unless you have an itch for unpleasant conversations and grumpy old men. If you do need anything, ask for Wynne. She’s the only pleasant one they’ve got.”

“The mages have a division here?”

“Oh yes, part of the King’s Army. Kinloch Hold sends them on request.”

“I’d never heard of that.” He barely caught it, but there was a dismal tone to her voice. His most intelligent response was to say nothing, and leave her to her thoughts.

They arrived at the recruits’ tent—smaller than the rest of the soldiers’ and set slightly apart. He drew back the flap, calling to the men inside.

“Daveth, Jory—you’re with me!”

The two men scrambled out moments later, strapping on armor as they fell in line. Alistair thought the three of them could not possibly be more different. Ser Jory was a large man in his thirties whose red hair was already balding. He had been composed, if not a bit reserved when Alistair had met him, and spent most of his time praying upon the hill with Mother Hanna. Daveth was young, lean, tanned and nimble, and had spent his time getting to know every woman in the damned camp. Alistair decided to keep alert when it came to Solena, whom he noted had immediately caught Daveth’s gaze.

They met Duncan at the bonfire in the center of camp, poring over a map, and Alistair was grateful for the sight of him. It felt like a gasp of fresh air after being held underwater. He felt the strangest of urges, then. To rush him, and embrace him, and welcome him back. To tell him he’d missed him and ask after his weeks away—what he had seen and where he had been. It was not the place or time. But perhaps later.

He told his charges to wait a few paces away, and approached Duncan at the table.

“Alistair, for the last time, stop harassing the acting Enchanter,” said Duncan almost instantly. “If I receive one more complaint from that man I would not be the least bit surprised if he ordered the next Exalted March.” Alistair grinned from ear to ear.

“What could I say? The man would be bitter if I had handed him a receipt for a thousand gold coins.” Duncan did not look amused at that. “My apologies. It won’t happen again,” Alistair receded. “It’s good to have you back, Commander.”

“Thank you. And see that it doesn’t. As for your charges, I’ve marked on your map just how deep into the Wilds the last darkspawn encounters took place. Retrieving blood may not be as arduous a task as it once was—fortunately or not. When you return, update me on where they’ve migrated. King Cailan will be interested in their patterns. I also need a favor, Alistair, if you will. It is…rather
delicate in nature, so I ask you handle it as such.”

“Of course,” Alistair agreed.

“I’ve taken the liberty of marking the location of a Grey Warden outpost not far out of your way that was abandoned years ago. It has come to my attention that inside, there should be a cache—likely buried beneath rubble. I hope they are not too far lost, but the cache should hold a collection of old documents. I need them returned to me with haste, should you be successful in finding them.”

“With luck, we’ll return by nightfall,” Alistair gave a curt nod, knocking on the wooden table as he turned to the three initiates behind him. “All right, move out, come on!”

They were well on their way to the gates that led into the Wilds when Solena caught up to him.

“Alistair, I need to speak with you.”

They did not stop walking, but he turned his head.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Look, I—I think there’s been some mistake. Duncan knows I’ve never seen combat. I’m trained, yes, but I’ve never—”

Alistair’s eyebrows raised at her admission.

“Never seen—?”

“I can handle myself, I just—”

He shook his head, quickly, and certainly disingenuously, reassuring her.

“Not to worry. Mages hang back from the battle by design. We’ll keep darkspawn off you.”

She seemed to relax a bit at that.

“I won’t let you down. I promise.”

Bloody fucking hell.

Never seen combat? What did they do up there all day in that Tower, have their young mages tossing spells at the walls? Never in his life had he heard of such a thing.

Duncan owed him for this. He bloody owed him. Man abandons his men for nearly a month to collect…what? A child who’d never seen blood? She had bright eyes and a pretty face, sure—though he’d never known either to have much sway with Duncan. Maybe she was even good at…spells, or whatever it was that she did. That didn’t make her a Warden. Didn’t even made her a soldier.

“We have permission to pass, on Duncan’s orders,” he declared to one of the men guarding the gate, who promptly pulled on the chain to open it.

“Of course. I must warn you, though, to tread carefully. Men have returned reporting strange sightings of feral beasts at night. On your guard, Alistair.”

Chapter End Notes
I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
Enough was enough. Following the day she had come across the men in the lake, Morrigan had flown into a rage. Each man that wandered through her pines on the King’s orders left in a panic with his tail between his legs. Admittedly, she had had a little fun at their expense. Some days she appeared a wolf; others, a grizzly bear, or a giant black spider. The spider was her favorite.

Mother had returned the day before, but had not taken notice of Morrigan’s foul mood. Though, that was not unusual. Her mother did not typically seek to validate Morrigan’s mood swings, or her feelings in general. It was not her way. They did not speak of the darkspawn, either. In fact, they did not speak much at all.

Soon, however, addressing the darkspawn threat would be necessary. Morrigan had already had to take care of many in the woods. The beasts pushed towards Ostagar, that much she knew. They had not yet, as it seemed, taken notice of their hut, as it posed no real threat. But Morrigan feared the day that they would. She knew she and her mother should have left already, most like. In truth, she did not even know if her mother would leave. The old bat was even more attached to this forest than she, and had lived here since long before Morrigan was born.

If her mother spoke true, and she had no reason to believe that she did not, that had been nineteen years ago. The seed that made her was from an unfortunate Chasind man who had wandered unwittingly into the heart of the Wilds on a hunt for his tribe. That was all she knew of him, for Mother only mentioned him the once, upon request, and never again. It was this that led her to the conclusion that Mother must have killed him, afterwards, rather than risk him returning and telling his men of the woman that lived alone in the woods.

She had no love for her mother, and she did not find that odd. They survived together out of necessity. Her mother was getting on in age at the time of Morrigan’s birth and could not hope to do everything she once could, and so Morrigan served a purpose. Morrigan was simply grateful that her mother had thought to raise her well enough—to teach her how to defend herself, how to know and respect the earth, and how to manipulate the arcane to her every whim. Morrigan had not read a great many books, but she didn’t need to. She learned more from the old witch and her Wilds in nineteen years than she could if she spent her entire lifetime in a library. That, she suspected, was why the great lords of Ferelden were so hopelessly stupid.

Out of precaution, Morrigan had established a perimeter around their hut that she would check each day as a raven, looking for signs of life, whatever they may be, and warding them off should they get too close. That was what she had just finished doing when she flew to the ground and changed back into her human form. Though only moments after stepping on the forest floor, a sudden rustle of leaves and the muffled sound of voices caused her to quickly recede back behind the tree line with care.

Four soldiers walked down the path. One, to Morrigan’s surprise, was a woman. And from the staff she wore on her back, Morrigan recognized her as a mage. Never in her life had Morrigan heard of such a thing. If the King conscripted mages into his army, was he truly as dull as Morrigan had been
led to believe?

The blonde woman was not the focus of Morrigan’s attention for long, however. As she observed the three other men with her, her gaze fell upon the silver griffons embroidered upon their royal blue armor. She gasped.

No. Not now, please not now.

The man at the head of the group had clearly heard her. His head darted to the trees in which she hid and he furrowed his brow.

“Hold,” he commanded, raising his hand. “I heard something. Not darkspawn. I would know if they were.”

The group froze as Morrigan cupped both her hands over her mouth and remained absolutely still. After what felt like an eternity, the woman spoke up.

“If it’s not darkspawn, I think we should keep moving, Alistair. We’re pressed for time as it is.”

“Alright,” the man seemed to reluctantly agree. “I just don’t want whatever it is getting behind us. Keep your eyes and ears peeled.”

“It’s probably just some bloody wolves,” another man spoke. He was shorter and dark-haired. “Can’t stand the beasts, but I’ll be on the lookout.”

They proceeded onward and Morrigan was left to let out the breath she had been holding. She leaned back against a tree and looked up to the cloudy sky as her chest heaved.

Had her mother known? Was that why she seemed so indifferent while the darkspawn threat still grew ever greater? Morrigan thought that most probable. In truth, Morrigan had not thought about the fateful conversation she had once had with her mother since that very day. She had pushed it to the very back of her mind and made it stay there. It was not something any little girl wants to hear. It was not something any grown woman would want to hear either.

She had known since then that her fate was intertwined with Wardens that would visit their forest, or so her mother would have her believe. Truly, Morrigan did not know if her mother knew the first thing about fate or destiny or if she had just been pushing her own personal agenda on the fearful little girl Morrigan had once been. She suspected the latter, but she feared both possibilities.

Her mother would force her to leave with the Grey Wardens. Or circumstance would. One way or another, today would be her last day in the Wilds. She was not ready.

But why were they here? The King’s camp was at Ostagar, where his army prepared for battle. A scouting party, perhaps, like the countless soldiers she had scared off before? No. Wardens would not risk their small numbers just to do a job for footmen. They were looking for something. Morrigan had a sneaking suspicion that she knew what it was.

She pulled herself together, and moved stealthily behind the tree line, trailing behind the Wardens who walked on the path.

It was inevitable that they would come across the forward camp. Morrigan had observed it not but a day prior. She would have felt sorry for the poor fools had they not been impeding on her lands, or had they only been more wary where they rest their heads. A more careful eye would have seen traces of darkspawn all over the clearing. But, yet again, the King’s army failed to surprise her, and they were slaughtered in their beds.
When the four of them halted at the site of carnage, Morrigan watched from the shadows.

The man they called Alistair rushed to the side of a badly injured soldier propped up against the side of a large rock and knelt beside him. The woman and the rest soon followed.

“What happened, man? Can you speak? Where is the rest of your charge?” the Warden demanded.

The soldier attempted to speak, but coughed up blood. The woman spoke in his stead.

“Alistair, isn’t it obvious? The man needs healing, move aside.”

The bold woman pushed through the other two and Alistair, though shocked, moved to accommodate her. She got to work quickly, moving her hands along his wounds as she used her magic to do what she could. The man would die anyway. Morrigan knew this, and the woman must have too. Her gesture of healing, regardless of the man’s state, perplexed her.

“Maker…bless you.” The soldier managed. “We were…ambushed. Dead of night. Darkspawn… came from the trees. Bloody massacre.”

One of the two men who stood at a distance began pacing, running a hand through his hair. The other stood absolutely still, but Morrigan could smell his fear from where she stood. It would not have surprised her if the fool had wet himself. *Grey Wardens, indeed.*

The Wardens did not get much more from him after that, and it was not long before the soldier had passed out from blood loss. The woman’s hands ceased their movement, and she offered Alistair a knowing look. Alistair hung his head before standing up.

“They could be bloody anywhere,” the pacing man said, nervously. “Did you hear him? They came from the bloody trees. I didn’t know they were this close to the fucking camp—“

“It is a surprise they are this close already, yes,” Alistair interrupted, harshly. “But you should quit your worrying. We are safe. If darkspawn are near, I’ll know. Grey Wardens can sense it.”

“Oh, that’s bloody comforting. Did you hear that, Ser Knight?” He lightly slapped the man who had not yet moved or spoken on his arm. “We might die—but we’ll be warned about it first!”

“Shut up.” The woman spoke from where she still knelt on the ground, by the man who Morrigan suspected was now dead. “Just stop. We’re getting what we came here for, and we’re leaving. That’s it.”

“She’s right,” Alistair agreed. “Duncan, Loghain and the King will need to hear this news as soon as possible. They should prepare for battle by nightfall. Which means we need to move fast.”

The pacing man stilled and his eyes grew wide, like the other.

“*Nightfall? The battle—you think….tonight?*”

“Tonight, most like.” Alistair confirmed, nonchalant in comparison to his charge. “If not, then certainly by early morn. They’ll want to catch us off-guard.”

The woman on the ground had no reaction. She had been staring at the dead man for some time now, with a blank look that Morrigan could not place.

“I didn’t…I didn’t expect…” the nervous man continued.

“None of us did,” retorted Alistair. “You do realize we’ll have to face darkspawn to get the blood we
need, don’t you? That is what you chose to become a Grey Warden to do, right? *That’s the job.*"

To everyone’s surprise, the silent man spoke up. “I signed up to face darkspawn in battle, yes. Not to die in an ambush on some silly fetch quest, in preparation for some ritual we’ve been told *nothing about.*”

“Then go home.” The woman turned, looking at the man with a restrained rage. “You’re no Warden yet. No one’s forcing you to be here. Leave, and do us all a favor.”

“I’m no coward!” he sputtered.

“Then prove it.”

“Enough—all of you!” Alistair yelled. “We’re moving out. If you’re staying, stay. If not, just go, and be done with it.”

None left. Though Morrigan agreed with the blonde woman that perhaps some of them should have. The two cowards were a liability, and would perish in the coming battle anyway, if not sooner.

Morrigan scouted ahead of them, as a bird. If they were truly only here to take darkspawn blood and be gone, then they were of no concern to her. But if they also sought what she suspected, then she needed to reach the old ruins before them. She would need to confront them, and she knew that they would be hostile. She needed to secure her exit plan, should things take a turn for the worse.

When she had staked out the ruins enough to feel safe, she flew and landed on top of a perch and she waited.

It was an hour before they arrived at the ruined tower, covered in blood from head to toe. They all looked shaken, which was not surprising. Likely none of them had seen battle in years, and certainly not with darkspawn.

“This is the place. Duncan said we should find them here. Spread out, look for anything buried beneath rubble,” Alistair ordered.

The two cowards had a sour look on their faces, as if they had smelled something foul. But they did as Alistair commanded regardless. They searched, fruitlessly, before the woman called out.

“Alistair, take a look at this.”

She had found the small chest. Once ornate, perhaps, but had long since been tarnished by dust and debris.

“It’s empty,” she noted, dismally.

“Empty? What—?”

Morrigan’s footsteps down the tower stairs alerted them, and their weapons were drawn instantaneously.

“Well, well. What have we here?” Morrigan’s smirk was predatory. She was clearly not the disfigured monster they had been expecting. Her long legs prowled down the steps, like the cat she would so often become. “Are you vultures, I wonder? Scavengers—poking amidst a corpse whose bones have been long since picked clean? Or merely intruders, come into these darkspawn-filled Wilds of mine in search of easy prey?”
The Wardens were at a loss for words. They all looked at her in shock. Alistair eyed her with suspicion.

“What say you, hmm? Scavenger or intruder?”

“Neither, *witch*. This tower was an outpost, belonging to the Grey Wardens. As did the documents that were inside that chest. I suggest you return them.” Alistair spewed.

Morrigan was offended. “I will not, for it was not I who removed them! Invoke a name that means nothing here any longer if you wish, I am not threatened.”

“Alistair, let me,” the woman stepped closer to her.

“Watch it. She looks Chasind—that means more could be nearby,” he warned.

“Oh! You fear barbarians will swoop down upon you?” Morrigan mocked.

“Yes, swooping is bad…” Alistair muttered idiotically under his breath, perhaps hoping no one would hear him.

“Sh-she’s a Witch of the Wilds she is! She’ll turn us into toads!” The dark-haired coward yelped.

Morrigan had to refrain from laughter.

"'Witch of the Wilds', is it? Ah, such idle fancies, those legends. Have Wardens no minds of their own?” Morrigan smiled, then looked upon the woman. “You there. Women do not frighten like little boys. Tell me your name and I shall tell you mine.”

“Solena.”

“And you may call me Morrigan, if it pleases you. It seems you seek something in these ruins, yes? Something that is here no longer.”

“Yes, documents. Do you know of them? Who took them?” she asked.

“’Twas my mother, in fact.”

“Your mother?” Alistair scoffed.

“Yes, *my mother*. Did you presume I sprouted from a mossy patch on a log?” The man grimaced even more at her comment, if possible.

“Could you take us to her? We are battle-weary and pressed for time. The darkspawn will arrive at Ostagar by sundown.” Solena requested.

“A sensible request! It seems common courtesy is not lost on you people after all. Follow me—do try to keep up. Wouldn’t want the darkspawn nipping at our heels.”

At last they sheathed their weapons, and Morrigan led them through her woods.

~~~

“Morrigan! Where have you *been*, girl? Supper’s gotten cold!” her mother croaked from the cauldron, and the smell of a hearty meal permeated the air. The Wardens trailed cautiously behind her.

“*Mother*, I bring you four Grey Wardens who—”
“I know who they are, girl. Do you think me deaf, dumb and blind?”

“I—”

“Come closer, girl.” Her mother did not address her. Morrigan stepped aside, sensing where she was no longer needed.

Solena looked at Morrigan, trying to read her—perhaps trying to sense whether or not this was a trap. She looked at her mother the same way. She stepped closer as she had asked. Alistair looked like he might say something, perhaps stop her, but he decided against it.

“Hmm,” her mother made a sound from the back of her throat. Morrigan saw the discomfort in Solena’s features at the closeness of the old witch. “Much as I expected.”

“We’re supposed to believe you were expecting us?” the dark-haired fool scoffed.

“You are required to do nothing, young man. Least of all believe. Shut one’s eyes tight or open one’s eyes wide—either way, one’s a fool.”

Morrigan could not refrain from smirking. The fool moved to speak in retort, but the other coward stopped him before he began.

“Oh quiet, Daveth. If she’s really a witch, do you want to make her mad?”

“Ah, there’s a smart lad.” Her mother smiled. “Sadly irrelevant to the larger scheme of things.”

The two cowards did not speak at all after that. Alistair put a hand on Solena’s arm, pushing her gently away from the witch.

“We came here only for the treaties. Your daughter led us to believe you had them. Then, we’ll be on our way and out of your hair.”

Alistair’s attempt to put distance between them and the witch was fruitless—it only drew her closer.

“That’s a good man. And handsome, too. Keep him close, dear. Don’t let him fly too far from your grasp. Oh, he’ll try to. It’s in his blood, after all.” Her mother let out a hearty laugh, at a joke no one but her caught. “I know why you’re here, boy. Don’t you fret. You’ll have your parchment soon enough. Let me look at the girl.”

Solena’s brow only furrowed more with every word her mother spoke. Morrigan was at as much of a loss as she, but she had heard less sane things come from her mother’s mouth, she supposed. The witch ran a bony finger down Solena’s cheek. Alistair breathed deep, his hands balled into fists.

“So much about you is uncertain.” Her mother took a long pause. “I admire that. Keeps me on my toes, even in my old age. Now, what of you, dear? Does your woman’s mind alter your perspective of things?”

Solena was at a loss. “I…I’m sorry, I…what?”

“Of everything, dear. Of me, of this place, of the darkspawn, the coming battle, of this Witch of the Wilds nonsense, the state of the world? Are there thoughts in that pretty skull or just dust? Don’t disappoint me, dear, I know you’re no idiot, so don’t play one.”

Solena flinched, as if slapped. She gave Morrigan’s mother a different look now, as if seeing her for the first time.
“I’m not sure what I believe,” she said with firm resolve. The witch smiled.

“A statement that holds more wisdom than most. My Morrigan thinks she knows everything that is and will be—for all the good that does her. You could teach her better. Then, of course, there is a flame of childlike wonder about her that has been nearly snuffed out in you—I see that now. Oh, how she dances under the moon!” Her mother let out another cackle.

“They did not come to hear your wild tales, Mother.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Forgive an old woman her ramblings. I have your precious treaties here.” She reached behind the cauldron and produced a stack of parchment that had clearly been worn at the edges through generations of non-use, but were otherwise intact. “And before you get all accusatory, young man, your silly magical seal wore off long ago. I have protected them from the elements—nothing more.”

“You—Oh.” Alistair spoke. “You…protected them?” He took the parchment in hand, carefully. The man was not quick to trust. Perhaps that made him smart, even though he had given her every shred of evidence to the contrary. Morrigan could give him that credit.

“And why not? Take them to your Wardens and tell them that this Blight’s threat is greater than they realize.”

“What do you mean by that?” Solena questioned.

“Either the threat is more, or they realize less. Does it matter? Either way, I fear the night will not go as they have planned. Warn them, and do keep yourselves safe.”

“Yes. Time for you to go, then.” Morrigan spoke as she grabbed a bowl to pour her supper into.

“Where are your manners, girl? These are our guests!” The witch raised an eyebrow at her. Morrigan licked the finger that she had put in the stew and slowly put down her bowl. She sighed.

“Very well. I shall…lead you safely out of the woods. Follow me.”

She could feel her mother’s eyes on her as she left with them, watching her every step until the trees finally blocked her line of sight.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :}
SOLENA

Jory’s pacing was going to drive her mad, if Daveth’s leering didn’t first. Alistair, Maker bless him, stood away from everyone. He stood leaning against a pillar, half in shadow—the picture of calm. Of course, it wasn’t him that had to face the ritual to come. In truth, it didn’t worry her. But this waiting, this…this nothing while the darkspawn horde marched ever closer to Ostagar was infuriating. Night had fallen, and she could feel something in the air, something so still and quiet that a lump formed at the pit of her stomach that would not go away.

“It has been long enough,” Jory declared. “Why have we not heard anything from Duncan? The secrecy of this ritual is entirely suspect.” He seemed to be talking to Alistair, but the senior Warden didn’t even glance in his direction. He seemed preoccupied with a small pendant in his hands. On it was what looked like a small flask, meant to hold something. But it was empty. He kept rubbing his thumb over the clear face of it. If the others noticed his strange tick, they showed no sign of it.

“Yes, well, try not to wet your trousers before we get started.” Daveth jeered.

“I’ve just never met a foe I could not engage with my blade.” Jory retorted.

“Maybe the reason they don’t tell us is they don’t think we’ll do it, you know? If we knew,” Daveth suggested.

“That’s what worries me,” Jory sneered.

“I’d do anything to stop the Blight.” Daveth shrugged. “If there’s a price, I’ll pay it.”

“You sound right sure of yourself, considering you’ve no inkling what it is.” Jory shook his head, put his hands on his hips and stopped pacing. He breathed deep. “I’ve got a family. Back in Redcliffe. A wife, and a child on the way. I can’t…”

Alistair glanced up. He didn’t speak. He just looked sad. If he thought no one had noticed, he was wrong. Solena moved towards him, but was intercepted by Daveth. She rolled her eyes, and her body mimicked the movement.

“You’ve been rather quiet, love. How about you, hmm? You got anyone back home I should know about?”

She stared him down with indignation.

“Oh, for the Maker’s sake, Daveth, leave her be.” Jory insisted.
“Now, now, I’m just making polite conversation, Ser Knight. Come now, any port in the storm, pet? Some nice mage boy waiting for you back at the Tower? Or maybe it was a big, strong templar that slipped between your sheets at night. Is that something you mage girls are into?”

She grimaced, slapped him across the cheek, and he recoiled. The sound echoed against the walls of the ruin. He would be nursing that sting for quite some time.

“Never presume to talk to me again.” She brushed past him. She heard the mutterings of Daveth and Jory behind her, but she paid them no mind.

“Sorry about him,” Alistair offered. “The slap was impressive, though.” He managed a hint of a smile.

"You didn't tell me what you thought," she told him. "Of that witch and her daughter. You didn't mention them to Duncan."

"Oh, them. The girl worries me. The woman's just an old hag who talks too much."

"But why not tell him?"

He shrugged and shook his head gently in thought. "They did us a favor. If the apostate stays in her neck of the woods, I don't see a need to disturb them."

"It's good of you."

"Maybe."

“What’s that?” she gestured to the necklace in his palm.

“You’ll know soon,” was his only answer.

“You do realize this is all rather morbid.” It was her attempt to lighten the mood. She wasn’t sure it really worked. He only looked at her. She could have kept talking, kept digging a deeper hole. She didn’t. She looked back at him, and kept looking even as he looked away.

His features were handsome, she had to admit. Even the shadow that the old ruins cast and the sadness now plainly written on his face couldn’t hide that. The old witch was right on that account. He wasn’t too handsome, though. Not like Cullen. Cullen, with his damned perfect golden hair and teeth and jaw and chin and cheeks and amber eyes. Cullen was so handsome and chiseled that she hated it—it unsettled her. It made him seem cold, hard and unforgiving. It wouldn’t have bothered her so much if she didn’t know, all too well, that there was a quiet, dark part of him that gave truth to all that. Alistair’s attractiveness wasn’t trying to call attention to itself. It was conventional, and comforting. His hair was only a shade darker than hers and his eyes were a deep honey. He was clean-shaven. She liked his face, she decided. She liked it more than most. Even more than she liked Duncan’s, who had looked warm, kind and almost holy as he took her hand in his, leading her away from her prison. Yes, she liked Alistair’s even more than that.

She placed her hand gently on his bicep. Before he could acknowledge her, Duncan’s nearby footfalls reached their ears. He held in his two hands a modest looking chalice that was perhaps made of ivory, and he walked as if each step carried with it the weight of the whole world.

“Finally. We’ve—” Jory started.

“Alistair, if you will.” Duncan took no notice of the man, setting the cup on a stone pedestal.
She felt, faintly, the air released from Alistair’s preparatory breath against her neck, and could sense the shakiness in his lungs. *He’s nervous,* she realized, briefly. The discovery made her uneasy.

“Join us, brothers and sisters.” Alistair began—a rehearsed monologue. One he dreaded repeating. But, Solena knew, Daveth and Jory wouldn’t have been able to tell. “Join us in the shadows, where we stand vigilant. Join us as we carry the duty that cannot be forsworn. And should you perish, know that your sacrifice will not be forgotten. And, that one day, we shall join you.”

Daveth and Jory looked confused. A voice in the back of her head told her that she had always known, deep down, what the price must have been. From everything she had ever read in all her books, the reclusive Wardens and their great burden was by far the most grim. Her books didn’t speak of a price. Everything recorded on Grey Wardens was vague and ominous. But she knew there must be one. She knew it had nothing to do with gold. Duncan’s voice rang in her ears.

“Our order was formed during the First Blight, when humanity stood on the verge of annihilation. So it was then that the first Grey Warden drank of darkspawn blood, and mastered their Taint. And so was the first Joining.”

“We’re going to drink the blood of those…*things*?” Jory could scarcely voice his shock. She had spilled the blood that was now in that chalice. Her first. She remembered the power that had surged through her, and the…*other* feeling as well. The rush. The elation. She had snapped the neck of one of those hideous creatures from yards away and watched the life leave its body. She shuddered, and she remembered the dying man in the Wilds. She had seen that before, once. One of her instructors at the tower was old and feeble and the life was leaving his body after ninety or so long years. She had liked him—he was a stubborn man, stuck in his ways, with a harsh tongue, but he had taught her well, and his quick temper balanced with her cautious demeanor. So she had volunteered to watch over him in his passing. He had no family. She held his hand and pressed a washcloth to his head as he went.

It was not the same.

“As the first Grey Wardens did before us. As we did before you.” Duncan confirmed. “The Taint is the source of our power, and our victory. Those who survive the joining become immune to its harsher effects.”

“Those who survive?” Jory questioned, nervously. He was ignored.

“Daveth, step forward.”

Duncan grabbed the chalice in both hands and held it towards Daveth, who looked at the simple thing as if it had transformed before his eyes. After a moment’s hesitation he stole the cup from Duncan’s hands, squeezed his eyes shut and washed down the liquid.

It did not take long to know. His fingers began to claw desperately at his neck as he gasped for air and collapsed to the floor. From the side, Solena noticed his eyes had rolled back into his head. She would have shuddered, but she did not have enough feeling in her body to do so. Small streams of red came from his nose, and then his eyes, and before long he was dead. Alistair closed his eyes. Duncan hung his head.

“I am sorry, Daveth.”

Jory’s sword was drawn before Duncan could even pour the next vial. Alistair placed his hand on the hilt of his own sword and maneuvered himself between Solena and the foolish man.
“Stand down, Jory.” Duncan’s calm demeanor put Jory to shame. She wished that he could see that.

“N-no. You ask too much. Had I known…”

“There is no turning back.” Duncan approached him now, slowly, with the cup in hand.

“There is no glory in this!” he insisted, swinging his sword to guard him from both Alistair and the man in front of him.

Duncan had disarmed and gutted the knight in one fell swoop, before he could take another step. Solena watched the blood and innards spill from him and onto the floor and felt little. Alistair’s feet were frozen to the spot, staring at the scene. His reaction was harder to gauge.

“I am sorry, Jory.”

Time seemed a blur as she processed what must happen in the moments that would follow. Though, she already knew the conclusion she would come to—the one she’s not sure she would have come to only but a few weeks prior. Ever since she stepped outside Kinloch Hold and felt the wind through her hair and the earth under her dainty slippered feet, she had made a decision for herself then and now and for the end of time: if it was death or her cage, then death was safer.

Duncan moved closer. She could not hear the words he spoke. Red clouded her vision.

All those years locked up in that glorified prison…she must have gone mad. That must have been it, because every other explanation for her own complacency frightened her. How was it, that when that Templar stood above her, a girl of eight, marring her face with his armored fist, she could only recoil into herself at the shame of her crime and not his? That she would retreat to her small bed and weep for her own sins and not his? How was it that she could let Templars drag mages away—men and women she once broke bread with in the commons—never to be heard from again, and still remain silent? How was it that when Cullen accosted her in the library alone in the dark that…that fucking night, when he had placed his gloved, sharp hands on her and gripped her arms with the intent to hurt her for her rejection, the steely scent of lyrium on his breath as he slowly, quietly drained her, when he had not stopped—not at the tears in her eyes, or the blood on her forearm, or her gentle protests—not until she had looked him in the eyes and begged for him not to do what he had come there to do…how was it that she forgave him? How was it that she let him treat her as a friend, even a year after the worst night of her life? Maker forgive her, she remembered lying in her cold bed one shameful night and thinking of him and his hands that had pierced her skin while she…while she…

She would never beg for anything again.

She grabbed the chalice and drank her fill. She choked on the blood and the world went black.

~~~

The dragon’s screech left a ringing pain in her ears even as her eyes opened on the physical world. What had felt like a fever dream had come and gone, and she now looked upon a face that grounded her. The fear was gone. She was free.

“She wakes.” Duncan smiled warmly, and glanced upwards of where she lay on the hard, jagged-edged floor. Her brain registered armored footsteps approaching. Duncan lay a hand upon her shoulder, warning her against rising too quickly. “Welcome. I wish I could stay longer to make sure of your good health, but I believe Alistair will see to you. I must meet with the King and his General at once—I believe I am already late. When you feel well enough, I would invite you and Alistair to
join. The King has requested an audience with you both.”

Alistair’s irritated voice spoke from over her shoulder. It was now that she realized he had propped her head up in his lap. “Why would Cailan—”

“It is not my place to question the King’s demands. Nor is it yours. I warn you to arrive at the meeting with an open mind, Alistair.”

“I…of course.”

“I’ll take my leave of you.”

Duncan left without another word, and without platitude, which Solena appreciated immensely.

She had come to terms very quickly with what had happened with Jory. Understood it, even. The Joining was secret for a reason. She knew why, now. Killing that man…it didn’t make her respect Duncan any less.

Her thoughts had kept her so busy since Duncan’s footfalls had faded that she hadn’t noticed the silence. Alistair took the liberty of breaking it.

“I keep thinking about his family,” he started. “You know, the wife and the unborn child. I keep thinking…I keep…I don’t know.”

She hated this. She didn’t want to talk about this. But she couldn’t leave it there. She knew if it were her, he’d say something comforting. He didn’t even know her, but he’d make her feel better.

“Keep thinking it could be you?” she offered, her head still resting delicately on his lap. Her comment clearly confused him.

“I—no. Maker forbid, I’ve never had the time for women. Or the…ahem, product thereof.” She would bet good coin that if she looked up, she could see the heat on his cheeks. He continued. “I just…I’d hate to know what that feels like. To have something you couldn’t bear to lose.”

“You don’t want anything in your life worth dying for?” She thought only of her freedom.

“I don’t want anything in my life I’m scared of dying for. His wife in Redcliffe will live in poverty. His child will be raised without a father. I…I don’t know. Maybe it’s better. How can you dedicate yourself completely to a cause when you’ve got something like that back home?”

“Better what? Better that he didn’t make it? It’s not better. Dead is dead. And if you don’t have something to fight for, then that’s what you might as well be. Don’t you care about anything?” She stood up. He moved half-heartedly to stop her, and failed. She glared back at him.

“I care about killing the blighted darkspawn. I care about saving the bloody country so that people like Jory’s family can live out the hard winter in peace, that’s what I care about. Does that matter to you at all, or is this whole thing just a convenient alternative to the Circle?”

“Stop it. You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t…everything I’ve been through…”

Alistair was silent. After a moment he pawed at something around his neck, tugged, and threw it to her.

“I know one thing.”

It was the pendant. There was blood inside the tiny flask now. It should have shocked her. She
should have dropped it and watched it shatter on the ground—that’s what any other girl her age would have done. But she didn’t feel her age. In that moment, she felt a hundred years old and hollow inside. She ran her thumb over the glass, in quiet reverence. The weight of the small thing grounded her. She had asked, an age ago, what it was for. Alistair told her that she’d know soon. He was right. She knew the price now.

And if she had stayed in her Tower, her safe Tower, none of the books in the world would have answered that question for her.

“You don’t have to keep it, if it’s too morbid for you. It’s just ceremony—blood left over from the chalice. If you—”

“Thank you.”

She put it on without a second thought. He stood and observed her, carefully, as if for the first time.

“Mine was…not as bad as yours,” he admitted. “Only one of us died. And Duncan didn’t have to…”

“I’m sure it was still difficult for you. You don’t need to qualify it. I saw your face before, and during. It was like you were back there, all over again.”

It wasn’t something he couldn’t respond to, she knew. But what he heard, it seemed he appreciated.

“Your head alright? I know my Joining gave me one hell of an ear-ringing.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.”

“Come on. Let’s get you some supper and head on over to the war council.”

Alistair’s hand, though gloved in mail, was warm against her back.

~~~

“Loghain, my decision is final. I will stand with the Grey Wardens during this attack.”

She and Alistair walked the length of the hall on their way to the meeting, and they could only just make out the King’s voice. But the man shone like a beacon from wherever he stood. His entire person was armored in the purest gold—intricate armor engraved top-to-bottom with the skull of a dragon, with roses twisted about its winding horns. His hair was golden, too, and his eyes were a similar amber. He was tall and lean, though he was certainly not the most beautiful man to have walked the earth, as so many young, hopeful girls in the Tower had assured themselves. Solena could see remnants of features that might have once been full and handsome and princely if not kingly, but he was now gaunt and so, so pale…nearly translucent. It was like he were some sort of walking ghost. Not more tired, though, than Loghain, his most trusted general. He was only armored in a dull silver metal, and stood beside his King, poring over a map as his black hair fell so as to hide the features of his face. He shook his head and sighed deep—a sound which traveled the length of the hall and was felt in the hearts of each soul present.

“You risk too much, Cailan. The darkspawn horde is too dangerous for you to be playing hero on the front lines.”

“Well, if that’s the case, perhaps we should have pursued the help of the Orlesian forces with greater fervor.”
“How fortunate that Maric did not live to see his son ready to hand his empire over to those who enslaved us for a century. Our numbers are limited, yes, but I must repeat my protest to your fool notion that we need the Orlesians to defend ourselves. Your uncle, had the Maker only granted us more time, sent word that Redcliffe forces should arrive within the week.”

“I suspect Eamon only wants in on the glory.” The King laughed to himself. “That aside, seeking Orlesian aid was not a fool notion—and you will remember who is King. But with or without them, we’ve won thirteen battles against these monsters, and this one shall be no different.”

“This is no simple skirmish, Cailan. The cost will be great. If what Duncan reports holds true, the darkspawn are to arrive en masse. I fear their numbers will be greater than we expect.”

Alistair led her to a spot around the room where they would be mostly out of sight. Other than the King and Loghain, Duncan stood at the table, along with some of Kinloch Hold’s high ranking mages, which she recognized. The most prominent among them was Uldred—a small, bald man with dark angular brows and a crooked nose. She had known him from afar. He was a great leader and instructor back at the Tower and well-liked among the younger, Libertarian mages. Jowan had spoken of him highly and often. Next to him was an older white-haired woman she recognized as Mother Hanna, dressed in her fine Chantry robes—gold and red adorned them and the Chantry’s insignia, a burning sun, was prominent on the shawl she wore. She looked peeved.

The King tore his gaze away from Loghain. “Duncan, are your men ready for battle?”

“They are, Your Majesty.”

The King caught her eye, and clearly recognized her in an instant from the brief introduction they had had on her way into the camp. His face turned from exhaustion to childlike joy in the blink of an eye. If he took notice of Alistair, he did not show it.

“Loghain, this would be the recruit I met on the road. A Mistress Solena, come to the Wardens from Ferelden’s Circle. Duncan has spoken rather highly of her.”

At her mention, she moved forward to the table. Alistair must have thought this too bold, as he grabbed gently at her wrist as she moved. He would not stop her. If the King wished to speak to her, he could do so directly or not at all.

“Charmed.” It did not escape her that this was nothing more than a rehearsed pleasantry for the general, but she did not pay it much mind. He eyed her only briefly, and with immense disinterest. The more she looked at him the more she recognized him as an ugly man. His eyebrows curved into a permanent glare, and his angry eyes were the color of the steel of his armor and sword. He had more of a pointed beak than a nose and, below that, fat, dry lips. The deep purple hues in the creases under his eyes were the only colors on an otherwise milky grey face.

“I understand congratulations are in order. Every great Warden is needed now more than ever. You should be honored to join their ranks.” The King’s smile was proud and hopeful, all for a woman he did not know. Solena would have doubted his sincerity if not for the knowledge that she was but a fly in his peripheral vision. Feeding her niceties gained him nothing.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” She bowed her head and dipped slightly, as she had once read she was expected to.

“You should know, all of you, that I expect to win the night.” The King spoke as if addressing a nation, not a small congregation of seven or so. “I hope for a war like in the tales: A King riding among the fabled Grey Wardens against a tainted army!”
Loghain grimaced.

“Your fascination with glory and legends will one day be our undoing, Cailan. Tonight, we must attend to reality. This horde could be at our doorstep as we stand here, fantasizing,” he spat.

“Fine, speak your strategy. The Grey Wardens and I draw the darkspawn into charging our lines, and then—”

“You will alert the tower to light the beacon, signaling my men to charge from the flank. The field behind the tower should provide enough cover for us to remain hidden.”

“I remember. Which brings me to the reason I called your charges, Duncan: the Tower of Ishal. I need a small team of men to light it, when the time comes.”

Alistair moved for the first time in a long while beside her. It was a quick jolt—as if he were suddenly wide awake. Loghain began to protest first.

“I have a few men stationed there. They will suffice. It is not a large task, and Grey Wardens are not errand-boys, as I’m sure Duncan well knows.”

“But it is vital, yes?” The King argued. “So we must send our best. What Alistair can do with a sword is nothing to scoff at.”

“While that may be—”

“It is done, Loghain.”

“Your Majesty, If I may…” Duncan began. The King gave him a curt nod. “You must consider the possibility of an Archdemon appearing.”

The room was silent, save for the hustle and bustle of the camp outside. Loghain seemed most pensive. He spoke first.

“There have been no signs of any dragons in the Wilds.”

“True. Isn’t that what your men are here for, Duncan?” The King asked, raising an eyebrow.

Duncan’s face flashed disappointment, and then quickly reverted to its regularly poised state.

“I…yes, Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty,” Uldred’s adenoidal voice requested. “The tower and its beacon are wholly unnecessary. The Circle of Magi—”

“We will not trust any more lives to your spells, mage,” Mother Hanna interjected. “Save them for the darkspawn.”

“Enough,” Loghain boomed. “This plan will suffice. The Grey Wardens will light the beacon.”

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.
Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
“No.”

It was all he could say, he was so bloody frustrated.

“Alistair, please. See reason.”

“No, I won’t bloody do it. If he thinks I’m going to abandon my brothers on the front lines for a task for some half-wit, he’s lost his marbles. Should I pick him up some milk and grain from the market while I’m at it? You know why he’s done this. You know it, I know it, and he knows it. It’s…it’s…it’s…” Duncan waited for him to finish. Alistair knew that face well. “It’s horseshit. With…with all due respect, Ser.”

“Are you quite done?” Solena inquired from where she leaned on the wall—removed from the conversation but not so much so where she couldn’t irritate him.

“Oh, I’m sorry, did you have something constructive to add?”

“No, I’m just waiting for silence so I can get my head straight before tonight. Maker’s breath, you sound like Jory.”

“Enough!”

At Duncan’s voice, shame flooded him.

“I will hear no more of this childishness—not tonight. You are both Grey Wardens. Act like you know what that means.”

“Ser, I…” Alistair started. Duncan raised his hand in protest.

“I won’t hear it. No more, and no apology. Do your duty.”

And then the sound of the bells shook Alistair to his core. They reverberated in his head until they blocked out all other noise and all he could think was no, no, not yet. They can’t be here yet. Solena stirred next to him. Duncan looked to the night sky. An eerie calm overtook the man before he removed a satchel from around his shoulders and handed it pointedly to Alistair.

“You know what this is, and why. Take it. Keep it safe. If it is lost, so are we.”

Alistair secured the bag around his body and nodded curtly.

“Get to your stations, both of you. We will have great need of you soon enough.” Duncan turned to leave.

“Duncan, please—” he stopped him. He had to.
“Maker’s breath, child, there is no time for that now.”

“All I wanted…I just…Maker be with you.”

Duncan nodded, accepting the gesture, and returned it with a small smile before walking off.

“Alistair. Alistair, come on, we have to go.” She was pulling at his arm now, and all he could do was stand there stupidly. He would rather die. He would rather self-combust on the spot than spend this battle babysitting her.

His brothers would die out there—he knew as much. He knew there would be losses, he was not blind like Cailan. And he knew the Grey Wardens would take the brunt of the attack. The battle plan was designed to ensure it. That was their duty, and his. And he…he wanted it to be him. He wanted to…he wanted…

“Alistair!”

“Get your hands off me!” he recoiled away from her and waved his arms wildly but that would not deter the blasted woman. She grabbed his face with both of her hands, unafraid of him.

“Are you here? Are you with me? Listen to me, Alistair, I need you. You can’t be somewhere else right now. Duncan needs you to do this. Your brothers need this. Forget about your fucking pride for just one moment, alright?”

He thinks he nodded, but he couldn’t be sure.

“Okay. Al—alright. Come on, let’s go.” She said, walking just ahead of him and turning back on occasion to make sure he followed.

Exiting the ruins and entering the main camp was night and day. The calm before the storm was no more, and men shouted and dogs barked and soldiers scrambled to fasten the buckles on their armor. The sky was purple and illuminated by the stars and fires on the towers of Ostagar. Smoke filled the air from those fires and the smaller ones on the ground, and the haze of burning wood filled Alistair’s lungs. And all the while, the bells still tolled and made their agonizing sound. He wondered fleetingly as they passed through rows of tents, just how many of these men would see the sun rise. He always thought of that, before a battle. The answer was always grim.

She turned again. She looked at him, really looked at him, and held his gaze. Gave him the same small smile that Duncan had given. He realized, perhaps closer to the back of his mind than the front, that he had been an ass. She had tried, too. Tried to empathize with him and understand him, and had maybe even tried to befriend him. He hadn’t cared. He had been so focused on the battle…the battle he would not even see through. And she had been such an outsider. You could take one glance at her and you’d know. She didn’t belong at a military camp. Even now, standing there in her blue and silver robes—a woman who shared his burden and had paid the same price that he had—he still didn’t buy it. She couldn’t handle this lifestyle. This job, this…this lighting the beacon nonsense, was perfect for her. But him? He had paid his dues out in the Wilds, and deep beneath the surface. He had seen men and women die in battle inches from him, had looked their families in the eyes and told them that they would not come home. She had only been introduced to the world weeks ago, and he had lived in it for twenty painful years. A part of him that he tried to keep quiet hoped that the Joining would smack some sense into her. If it had, he hadn’t noticed the change.

The Warden’s Oath hung from her neck. She had put it on proudly, as if she had understood what she was doing—what it meant. He wanted to rip it off her.
On the outside of the main camp was where they finally heard the battle waging beneath them—the screams, the clinking metal. The fighting took place beneath the bridge that they now had to cross. On their left and right, soldiers hurried past them. One knocked into Solena, nearly knocking her backwards, but Alistair placed a steadying hand on her back.

As the moving soldiers cleared, the bridge became visible and it was evident the moment she saw the massacre. Arrows flew as did balls of fire from catapults below, bombarding and killing man after man that armed the trebuchets and taking some of the old stone bridge away with them as their screams rang out. Her eyes grew wide and her mouth fell agape but she did not make a sound. When she realized she was being watched, her mouth shut and she grabbed firmly onto his wrist.

“Come on. We have to. Just run, and watch where you’re going.”

Since bloody *when* did she think she could—

She was gone before he could voice his irritation.

*Fucking hell.*

He raced to catch up to her before she got herself killed, and in so doing he only nearly missed a fire ball, which instead took out the ledge just behind him. He swore under his breath and kept running, dodging falling soldiers and debris. He didn’t dare glance down at the battle, for his own safety as well as his sanity.

She had arrived at the other side well before him, alive, if not a bit worse for wear and out of breath. He looked her over for injuries, but it seemed as though she were unscathed.

“Listen to me! Don’t you *ever* run ahead—”

Solena ignored him, and only nodded towards the stairs ahead of them, where two of Loghain’s men now scrambled from in an apparent horror. He didn’t care. He grabbed her arm.

“This conversation isn’t over. You could have been killed.”

She looked at him as if he were incompetent and shook him off, and he suddenly couldn’t remember hating anything more.

“Open your eyes. Everyone around you is dying. Accept that or don’t, but you won’t hold me back with you. Now look.”

She looked upwards and he realized now that the men had been sprinting from the Tower of Ishal.

“You there!” He shouted over the madness and strode towards the man closest to them, Solena in tow. “What happened, man? You were to hold your position until we arrived!”

“We were, Ser! But the tower is overrun. We don’t know how, but darkspawn…came out of bloody nowhere! Too many to take on our own. The tower is lost!”

“It can’t be lost—without the signal your Commander won’t know when to charge with reinforcements!”

“I’m only telling you what I saw, Ser! We can’t hold the bloody thing on our own!”

Solena, as she was like to do, appeared at Alistair’s side from seemingly nowhere.

“I’m a mage! Do you think the four of us could retake it with my firing power?”
The two men looked as if they had been slapped. The one hesitated before he spoke.

“...I suppose. Yes. Maybe. There were plenty of the bastards. Thirty...maybe as many as fifty! We left before I could get a good sense of ‘em.”

Her eyes hesitantly moved to his face.

Alistair considered her. She was over-confident. He had seen her handiwork out in the Wilds. She was powerful and had a level enough head on her shoulders, but was largely undisciplined and untrained for military combat. He and the other recruits had been inches away from a bolt of lightning to the face, on several counts. He had seen it before. Mages who got their first taste of battle could never restrain themselves. If they didn’t teach mages how to properly wield combat magic, then Alistair wondered what they bloody did teach them up in that Tower.

But, he could not very well say that she wasn’t eager, as well as too damned smart for her own good. He struggled to admit to himself that the Tower of Ishal would be a lost cause had she not been here, and the battle right along with it.

“We’ll need a lot of covering fire.”

It was his silent answer to a question she hadn’t asked, and they both knew it, because when he said it, she beamed at him with her big eyes and slightly upturned lips. He didn’t hate that look.

“I can do that.”

~~~

A hard, final squelch filled the room as he sunk his blade into corrupted, rotten flesh. Black blood stained his sword and the white stone floor beneath the foul creature. On the other side of the large, open room—the first floor of the tower—Solena did the same, finishing her fallen victims with the sharp end of her military-issued staff, creating fresh kills. The other two men scouted ahead.

“You’re not bad, you know,” he found himself saying.

“Oh?” Solena raised an eyebrow, playing along.

“I didn’t mean to make you think that you were. I know that you can handle yourself.”

“I know that too.” She smirked.

“I’m trying to give you a compliment.”

“Followed by a pointed critique, I’m sure.” She wiped the blood from the staff on the skirt of her robes and walked his way.

“Because you need them. You’re cocky and cockiness can get you and those around you killed.”

“And there we have it.” She sighed, placing her hands on her hips and becoming preoccupied with the ground.

“I’ve seen it before, in mages. You need to be mindful of your allies. One error in aim and you’ve killed your best man.”

She laughed dismissively. “Who says you’re my best man?”

He narrowed his eyes. “I meant in general.”
“The same could apply to an archer.”

“And I would give an archer the same advice—why are you so reluctant to listen to me?”

“It’s written all over you. You treat me like a child. How am I supposed to work with you as an equal when you treat me as if I’m five?”

“We aren’t equal. I’m the senior Warden here.” He jabbed, with calculated coldness.

“Well, you should still stop being such an overbearing prick. And I would give a junior Warden the same advice.”

“You’re insufferable. I can’t believe—”

“What? That Duncan thinks as much of you as he does of me? Because we’re both here, Alistair, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“No. I mean I can’t believe that he gave me the babysitting job. Because that’s what this is.”

She breathed through her nose in rage. For once, she didn’t have a fast, loosely-formed retort. He would have thanked the Maker, but then she spoke.

“You should have finished your Templar training. You’re just like them.”

“Floor’s clear! Stairs are this way!” came a voice from the archway. She stormed off in its direction. It was his turn to stand in silence and hate her.

He was wasting his bloody time. If the mage wanted to get herself killed, then she’d better do it and save him the stress of trying to keep her alive just for Duncan’s sake.

Duncan didn’t hold them in the same esteem. He couldn’t. She was only trying to push him and was spewing nonsense in the process. He had known Duncan since he was old enough to know the pummel of a sword from the pointy end. Come to think of it, it must have been Duncan who taught him that one. The man to which he compared all others could not possibly equate him with this child that cared for nothing and no one but herself.

He followed after her momentarily. She wouldn’t look at him the rest of the way up.

~~~

“Were you the only men the General had stationed here?”

“That’s right, Ser,” the shorter man answered as they walked. “Well, there was another. But he didn’t make it. Poor sod.”

“I thought there would be more. Out of precaution.”

The man shrugged. “Just following the Teyrn’s orders, Ser. Loghain couldn’t have anticipated the darkspawn.”

“Give me your names.”

“Daren. That there is Ian. The man we lost, we called him Dirk, but his name’s Ned. We only saw him getting dragged away. I wouldn’t hope he’s alive, Ser, but if we find his remains, I’m sure his family’d like to know.”
Alistair gave him a nod and a firm hand on his shoulder. They had just finished clearing the third floor of most darkspawn, and were making their way to the stairs. They had come across so many on the bottom floors that Alistair doubted the upper levels would give them much trouble.

Though he hadn’t had much time to think on it, the idea of darkspawn in the tower unnerved him. How had they gotten so close to the main camp so quickly? How did they know to attack the tower at all?

“On your right!” Solena called out, but before the men even drew their swords, the three stampeding darkspawn were turned to ash in a flash of blue. The sound of steel sliding back into its sheath echoed throughout the Tower.

She was just showing off now. She had done this at least three times in their ascension to the tower’s peak. She hadn’t even taken out her staff.

If he was being very honest with himself, he was no mage-trainer. Mages, for all he knew about them, which was more than most, still confused him. Maybe he was approaching her all wrong. Maybe she was right, and he should leave the advice-giving to Duncan or Wynne or bloody Sellius and just leave her be. They’d both be happier for it.

Who was he kidding? He was climbing to the top of the Tower with a handful of military rejects. He was in no place to give advice to anyone. Maybe that’s what she had meant. “We’re all in this shithole together, so how about you shove it and just do your job?” If she had just come out and said that, he might have done so. To know that she felt as miserable as he did might have softened the whole situation.

In an effort to test his theory, he glanced her way. She glanced back, clearly unsure of his motives. A hair came loose from her braid on the far side of her face as she turned to him, and suddenly he remembered that he thought she was pretty. He stretched his lips in a small, apologetic smile. She did not return one, but she didn’t glare at him either, which he took as a good sign. It would suit him fine if they didn’t like each other, but they couldn’t go on like this.

“You’re a good fighter,” he said. He didn’t care if Loghain’s men heard him.

She sighed, clearly dreading the fact that he had chosen to speak to her. “But…?”

“Nothing. You’re a good fighter. You have no practical combat training, but it still comes naturally to you. That’s above the norm. It…doesn’t matter what I think beyond that.”

He thought he detected a hint of a smile, but he wouldn’t have bet his life on it.

“You really don’t like me,” she noted. It wasn’t a question. And thank the Maker it wasn’t, because he didn’t know how to answer it.

After that, he adopted silence as his new policy.

~~~

They had heard it on the fourth floor, walking above them.

The ogre was twenty feet tall and its flesh was a sickly purple, though it was not immune to the blackened rot that made up the faces of other darkspawn. Flesh-ridden skulls hung from a makeshift belt on its waist. Horns the color of ebony were embedded onto the top of its head in a way that seemed quite painful, and its face was only a shell of what one should be: a missing nose and eyes sunken in to such a degree that the sockets seemed black and hollow. Its sharp, sparse teeth were
shredding a torso that seemed to have once belonged to a soldier. Its other hand lazily held the soldier’s bottom half, and blood and innards spilled like a waterfall from it and onto the floor with an unceremonious *splat*.

Alistair couldn’t remember ever being as terrified as when he saw it standing between them and that beacon.

A roar erupted from its mouth, thick saliva and blood flying in every direction. Loghain’s men were clearly shitting in their trousers, but they at least paid attention to Alistair’s nonverbal gesture to make their way to the ogre’s flank. Solena was already out of his sight.

With Loghain’s men distracting the beast from two separate directions, Alistair charged at its front, hacking at its legs like a Dwarven child at a Qunari warlord. If he had been watching the whole thing from a safe distance, it might have been laughable.

Only when the ogre was properly distracted and swinging at the three swords beneath it did the mage’s attacks come. Bursts of electric blue energy assaulted the monster’s face and knocked it backwards. As it was caught off-guard, Alistair hacked away.

The beast recovered quickly. A hand as big as a horse swung down, narrowly missing Alistair. It grabbed at one of Loghain’s men instead, Ian, and raised him high in the air before smashing him back down, likely crushing his chest and ribs. The ogre’s hand opened and his corpse tumbled out.

He heard the angry yells of Daren, and Solena’s attacks only grew stronger. In response, the ogre only grew more irritated. Its hands swung wildly, threatening to bash against Alistair who still attacked beneath it. Eventually, they did not miss.

Alistair could feel his chestplate being squeezed against his ribs as he was lifted and swung haphazardly. Preparing to die, as it happened, was a stranger feeling than he had expected. He thought about Duncan, down on the field. But mostly he thought about how he didn’t have much to think about. His heart beat erratically faster at the realization, until all the lights in the room went out.

It wasn’t the darkness he had expected—not yet. He could still feel the crushing hand around him. A chill swept through the tower—so cold that he could see the ogre’s labored breaths. Other than that, the sudden silence was deafening.

Though he felt himself fading in and out of consciousness, he began to see and hear the faint outlines of blue electric shocks on the ceiling. They appeared gradually, growing in size and power. A misty cloud, or so it appeared, began to form above the beast’s head. And the storm only grew louder and more violent. A painful sound rang out from the ogre that he recognized as a scream of agony. He felt the ogre dropping to its knees, and as it did so Alistair fell a good distance from its hand and onto the hard floor. There was pain there, but his mind stored it away for later. He could not process anything but the scene in front of him.

The screams didn’t end for what felt like an eternity. It must have been another eternity between the pound of the ogre’s corpse hitting the ground and when the flames on the torches reappeared from seemingly nothing, the room once again filling with light. Though it was not long before darkness began to cloud Alistair’s vision once again.

“Bloody light it, I’ve got to tend to him!” A woman’s voice. It was so panicked and broken that he almost couldn’t recognize it. He heard light footsteps approaching, and soon felt hands struggling with his chestplate.

“*Maker’s breath*…” he heard her say, and a part of him realized that his injuries must be bad. He
heard a soft hum as some pain was alleviated. His throat could not form a thank you.

A loud noise sounded behind his head that would have startled him had he not felt so distinctly unalive.

“The door!” The man shouted from the beacon, which was now lit.

*Good,* he thought. *Duncan will be pleased. The battle will be won.*

Something whizzed through the air just over his face. He could not put a finger on what it was, until he realized that the comforting hands were no longer moving over him. He could no longer hear the soft hum. The pain returned.

Solena’s eyes were wide. An arrow had lodged itself in her shoulder. It was too close to her heart. He saw the blood, and felt an intense panic. She fell to her side. Then, all at once, came the darkness he had expected. Somewhere in the distance, wings flapped.

~~~

The witch’s yellow eyes woke him.

“Do not get up. Your injuries are mostly healed, but it’s nothing that cannot be undone by your stupidity.”

She moved quickly away from him and rushed to the other side of the room, pretending to look at books on a shelf. As if he had burned her. She had been watching him, he realized.

He was in a small room on a small bed that seemed as if it were barely holding together under his weight. A fire was lit in a cobblestone hearth at his feet. The young witch—*Morrigan,* he remembered, was dressed in the same tattered clothes that he had seen her in before: black patchwork trousers under a sash made of leather and black feathers covered her bottom half. A dirty and worn band covered her small breasts, and a deep purple fabric draped loosely around her torso. More feathers and leather covered one arm, and the other was left bare, as if she had run out. He watched her as she put her leather gloves back on. There were holes in the fingers, and he struggled to understand whether or not it was intentional.

“Must you gawk? You remember me, do you not?” She stepped closer, less afraid of him now.

In an attempt to get his bearings, Alistair pushed himself up onto his hands. The room rocked his vision, and suddenly the witch’s hawk-like face became blurry.

“*Men,*” he heard her spit. “If you must ignore my advice, at least go slowly.”

His airways could form words. It was as if he had forgotten how to do that.

“Where…am I? What…”

“In the heart of the Wilds. My mother’s hut. Nowhere you have not been before.”

His vision cleared. But all he could see were wide, icy eyes, in shock as she fell unconscious, and blood—red, red blood…

Alistair swung his legs over the edge of the bed in a frenzy. Morrigan shot backwards in response, but his eyes searched hers desperately for answers.

“The battle. Maker, Solena…where is she? Is…*is she*?”
“No. Mother performed nothing short of a miracle in healing her, considering her injuries were grave. Last I saw her she was outside, by the lake. She…is not taking it well.”

“I want to see her. I have to see her.”

“That would not be wise.”

“Why bloody not?” he yelled.

It was not the anger in his voice that made Morrigan look at him the way she now did. No, it was…something else. What he thought might have been pity left her face as quickly as it had settled there.

“Not taking it well? What…what are you talking about?” he said, only now processing her words.

“The battle was lost.”

No.

“The General who was to respond to your call quit the field.”

Loghain.

“Every man remaining was slaughtered.”

It was in his fucking eyes. I said nothing. I said—

“The King is dead.”

Alistair stood. He moved to push past her, but he was weak, and she steadied him, holding him back.

“The field. The field. Duncan’s in the field. I have to…We have…The Wardens…count our losses, count our dead…”

“No.”

“Duncan…”

“Every man in that field is dead. You…would not want to see those ruins now.”

He saw it. In her eyes. She’s been there. She’s seen it.

“Take me there. I have to go. I have to know. Duncan…He needs…”

“Your man Duncan is dead. I saw the fields myself. Believe me or do not, you will not make it back there. You will die first. Darkspawn plague the swamps and forests outside the ruins for miles. I fear even this hut may not be safe for long.”

He felt his body collapse, and this time Morrigan could not hold his weight. He crumpled into his knees as the dry heaving racked his stomach. Gasps for air eventually mixed with screams of anguish, so much that he could not tell them apart.

~~~

Alistair found her at sundown where Morrigan had found her that morning. She sat knees to chest in the tall grass, looking out over the cattail-ridden lake, a red sunset reflected back onto her soft face.
Blonde hair fell loosely from her head, and she was dressed in a worn lilac shift that must have once suited Morrigan's tastes, but clearly did so no longer. The cold air of the Wilds did not seem to faze her bare arms and legs. Alistair, not but a day ago, might have recognized the scene as beautiful. But he was numb to it now. All he saw was the red.

She floored him. The weight of her, of what she had done...and for him. When he had treated her how he did, and she... she...

It was her. She was the reason he was here instead of dead. Dead, with his brothers.

"You..." it was more a breath than a word, but she heard it. She turned her head so he saw her in red profile. She had been crying.

"Alistair, I'm so sorry."

He didn't hear the words.

"I thought you were dead."

Solena gave him a tight smile and glanced down at the grass. "I'm fine."

He felt a sharp pull at the sight of her and came to sit next to her. Silence fell upon them like a tidal wave. The crickets and cicadas made their noises, and the frogs did too, and he could feel the stinging cool breeze against his cheek.

It amazed him how much life was in the Wilds, when so much death was so, so close.

"I can't believe they're all gone," she said.

It was the last thing he wanted to hear, but he let her talk. He did not have the energy to argue.

"Are we...are we all that's left?"

He wasn't going to answer, but she was looking at him and her eyes were still red and he had to say something.

"Yes," he said, truthfully. "Every Fereldan Warden was on that field. It was all we had."

"Or in the tower."

He didn't respond. He could have elaborated, but he didn't care to. Every last Warden was killed in the battle, and that was true. Except her. Except him. He was spared.

"Alistair, I'm sorry," she said again. She placed her hand on top of his amidst the grass. He couldn't really even feel it.

~~~

A red sun set, and so a red sun rose.

No one at the hut paid it any mind, save the old woman, who seemed terribly aloof that day. More so than usual, anyway.

Breakfast that morning was a farce. The four of them—Alistair, Solena, Morrigan and her mother, sat, at a comfortable distance from each other, around the fire outside the hut. Alistair pushed around his brown stew, making lazy patterns with his spoon. He could feel Morrigan grimacing at his
behavior from a few feet away, but he didn’t look up. Solena ate like a bird.

Neither of them must have slept, then, given the puffy bags under Solena’s eyes. Maker knows he hadn’t. He hadn’t even tried. The whole hut had felt stagnant for the day they had been here. None of them were speaking to each other. He had meant to offer thanks at least ten times before, to Solena as well as the witches, but the words just wouldn’t come.

“Your injuries have healed. You both must leave today. Before the sun looks down on us, you must go.” The old witch spoke matter-of-factly, breaking the uneasy quiet.

Alistair half-heartedly glanced up at her, preparing to agree and finally force a thank you. But Solena, with her now angrily furrowed brow, was the first to talk.

“And go where? We won’t make it out of the Wilds, if what your daughter says is true. Darkspawn surround this place.”

“And it will not be long before they close in, and swallow it whole. You must go now, while you still have a chance.” The old woman stood to clean her bowl. Solena stood with her.

“Am I supposed to buy that you and your daughter are going to stay and die here? Or is it that you just want us out of your hair?”

“Neither. Morrigan will be leaving with you.” The witch offered a smile, with one too many teeth missing from it.

“What?” Morrigan stood now with the other two, her bowl forgotten. “Mother. You cannot mean this, I am not ready!”

“Then you will never be ready. Since you were up to my knees you’ve wanted to leave me, girl. Now is your chance.”

“Surely I am mishearing you. If you think I will abandon these Wilds to the Blight, you are very much mistaken.”

“I am mistaken in nothing. You are not to stay here. You knew this day would come as well as I. After all, where these Wardens are going, they will need your help. As for you two, consider this your payment to me, for all I have done for you. She may even prove useful.” The witch let out a hearty laugh.

“What do you mean, ‘where we’re going’?” Solena’s irritation had heightened.

The witch shrugged jovially, and pointed a wrinkled finger to where Alistair sat, one knee up, on the ground. “Ask him.”

They were all looking at him now—Solena with a face of utter confusion. Reluctantly, he removed Duncan’s satchel from his shoulder.

“He gave…he gave me these, before the battle,” he began. “Probably…probably in case something like this happened.

“Surely I am mishearing you. If you think I will abandon these Wilds to the Blight, you are very much mistaken.”

“I am mistaken in nothing. You are not to stay here. You knew this day would come as well as I. After all, where these Wardens are going, they will need your help. As for you two, consider this your payment to me, for all I have done for you. She may even prove useful.” The witch let out a hearty laugh.

“What do you mean, ‘where we’re going’?” Solena’s irritation had heightened.

The witch shrugged jovially, and pointed a wrinkled finger to where Alistair sat, one knee up, on the ground. “Ask him.”

They were all looking at him now—Solena with a face of utter confusion. Reluctantly, he removed Duncan’s satchel from his shoulder.

“He gave…he gave me these, before the battle,” he began. “Probably…probably in case something like this happened.

“Alistair, what…”

“Treaties. The Grey Wardens, we have allies to call upon in case of a Blight. The last one was hundreds of years ago, so, I guess we’re lucky to have found these.”
The witch gave a small smile.

“Who are they for?” Solena moved closer to him now, looking over his shoulder at the papers he now held in his hands.

“We have one with the elven clan camped outside the Brecilian Forest, one with the Dwarves of Orzammar, and one with the Circle Tower.”

“Well, that’s not nothing, right? That’s an army!” The eagerness in Solena’s voice frightened him.

“What are we going to do with an army? Loghain will name it treason, no doubt. With his daughter on the throne by default, he’ll be pulling all the strings he couldn’t with Cailan. He’ll have us executed.”

“He has to know that the Blight will push north. He can’t be that naïve.”

“He thought the Blight trivial enough to thwart the Battle at Ostagar, so maybe he thinks he can stop it on his own.”

“That’s insane. He’s a seasoned general, how could he think that?” she questioned.

“I don’t know!” Alistair stood, angry with her incessant questions, angry with her ignorance, angry with her optimism. “The man killed his King! He killed every man on that field. My brothers!”

“Mine too.”

He glared at her. She glared back.

“What, will you deny me that now? After what we’ve both been through? I saved your life.”

“Yes, well, you shouldn’t have.”

“Fuck you,” she spat, but she was exhausted. He could see it in her eyes. She was tired of arguing. So was he. “You’re here now, Alistair. You don’t have to like it, but you’re here. Do you think Duncan would want you stuck out here in the middle of the woods feeling sorry for yourself? Sorry for being alive?”

He could have strangled her, had he not known she was right.

“Don’t,” was all he said. His hands were balled into fists.

“If I may,” the old witch spoke. “Your General may very well be unpredictable. Men’s hearts hold secrets darker than any tainted creature. But I would point out that such an army is certainly your only hope to push back a Blight, regardless of what this Loghain does. If you choose to shut your eyes in ignorance, Ferelden will fall. Is it not the Grey Wardens’ duty to protect against darkspawn, or did that change while I wasn’t looking?”

“It hasn’t changed.” Alistair shot back. Defeated, he looked back over the papers in his hands. “But...it’s not enough. Morrigan said the horde was massive, almost a hundred thousand strong and growing larger. You said you saw darkspawn coming from a hole in the ground?”

Morrigan nodded. “A few miles south of here, near the edge of the map.”

“Could you take me there?”

“No. The darkspawn may have abandoned most outposts in the Wilds, but if darkspawn are made
there, underground, then that area will be infested with the beasts. Especially now, when they think they are safe. It would not be wise.”

“Alright, fine. But we’ll need more men than this. I…I think I have an idea. We may be able to call on Arl Eamon, of Redcliffe. I know him well; he’s a good man. He would hear out our cause. And he would want to bring Cailan’s killer to justice. He might have the men we need, and if he doesn’t, he can tell us where to find them.”

“That sounds like an army to me.” The old woman gave a smile he hesitated to describe as gentle.

Alistair filed the treaties away back in Duncan’s bag.

“We don’t know how to thank you—you haven’t even told us your name.”

“Young man,” she placed her boney hand on his fist that gripped the handle of Duncan’s pack. “I give to you that which is most precious to me in this world—that which I hold above all else. I do this because I have faith in you. That is how you thank me.”

Alistair glanced briefly at Morrigan, who stood a bit away from the three of them. Had she not held herself with such dignity, she would have been a sad sight. Her already pale face was drained and tired. She looked miserable. She was a grown woman—her mother had no real right to decide on her behalf. But he supposed it was for her own good. He had no earthly idea how the skinny girl would be useful, but he could protect her in return for what her mother had given them.

“I understand,” he told her mother.

“Good.” The old witch paused in thought. “As for my name…well, some call me Flemeth. I suppose that will do.”

Alistair’s eyes grew wide, threatening to burst from his skull. He could hear Solena move closer to the two of them.

“The Flemeth?” she asked. “Of legend?”

“Daveth was right… you’re The Witch of the Wilds.” Alistair said, incredulously.

“Bah. And what does that mean? I know a few spells, true, and they have served me well. I can hardly live up to legends. You would do best not to listen to the gossip of old fishwives.”

“How did you save us from that tower? How did you get us out in time?” Solena prodded, her curiosity likely getting the better of her.

One side of Flemeth’s lips drew upward. “Does it matter? I saved your lives and you repay me with pointless inquiries? Perhaps I summoned you here at just the right time. Perhaps I levitated all the way to the top and fended off the horde myself. Perhaps I never got you out at all. Perhaps this is all but one long, sadistic dream. Ha!”

“I get the point. I’m sorry, I just—” Solena began, crossing her arms in front of her.

“Apologize for nothing, girl. Your curious mind will take you far.”

Alistair placed his hand on Solena’s elbow. “We should be going. Grab your things.”

She nodded and retreated back into the hut. Morrigan, it seemed, was already prepared. She had a pack slung across her shoulder and was staring daggers into her mother’s eyes.
“Morrigan,” he started.

“Hm?” she answered, switching her focus to him.

“Do you know a safer way out of the Wilds? One that would avoid running into the horde?”

“You ask me if I know my own home? Then the answer is yes, I do. It will be a simple thing to go around the ruins. My humble recommendation would then be that we head for the town of Lothering. It is not far north of here, and it may give us an opportunity to gather supplies.” She paused, pursed her lips, and stared him down. “Or, if you prefer, I shall simply be your silent guide.”

“No…no, I think I’d prefer you speak your mind.”

Flemeth cackled, once again, at a joke no one else seemed to have heard. “Oh, you will live to regret that.”

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
"Open the gates!"

The old, rusted thing was cranked open by lever and pulley, and through it the royal procession came. Each marched one after the other, every one as cold and as lifeless as the last. The midday sun glinted off the soldiers, clad in golden armor head to foot. Cailan would have been pleased.

Her handmaidens stood behind her, flanking her on either side. Each one dressed in their mourning black, just as she had. They had all but demanded they come. To comfort her, they had said. To console her. The poor things had no idea.

The autumn air was cruel and biting. Fitting, she thought, that with her husband’s passing came the first signs of winter.

“Halt! Attention!” All at once, the marching stopped. She could see through her dark veil that the officer had stopped not but a few feet in front of her. She straightened her spine and composed herself.

“All kneel for Her Majesty, Queen Anora Mac Tir, in Andraste’s name, of Ferelden and her people!”

And so they did.

“You may rise,” she decreed. “At ease.”

The officer, helmet tucked in the crook of his arm, reached into his breastplate and pulled out the dreaded parchment. He broke the seal and unfurled it, all in deafening silence. He raised a golden armored fist to his mouth as he cleared his throat.

“Your Majesty, it is my duty to inform you of the tragic and sudden passing of your husband, His Majesty King Cailan Theirin, First of His Name, by the Maker’s Blessing, of Ferelden and her people. He died nobly and bravely in battle at Ostagar, leading the charge against a great and tainted enemy. His loss is felt at this country’s heart. Our people weep and mourn the death of a great king, and a great man. You have our condolences and deepest sympathies in this difficult time.”

In silence again, he rolled the parchment back into its original shape and placed it in her gloved hand. Anora nodded. The officer turned on his heel.

“Ten-hut! Move out!”

The sound of the marching men eventually faded, and it was over. Her handmaidens rushed her with their kerchiefs, but she had not cried at all. She told them off with a raised hand, and they fell behind her, tending to her black train as she retreated inside the palace.

The large wooden doors creaked open so loudly that the sound echoed through the desolate main hall. It would not be so for much longer, she thought, sadly. Soon, all the lords and ladies of the Bannorn and all their sons, daughters, grandchildren, cats and kitchen mice would come to squabble
over every last crumb of Cailan’s person. Not just his throne and standing, but who he was and how he lived and how he died. They would dissect his corpse and memory until there was nothing left for her to keep of him. Maybe, just maybe, she could keep his eyes. She always loved his kind, golden eyes. Just as golden as the rest of him.

“Your Majesty,” her emissary appeared at her side as she walked, falling in line with her. “My deepest sympathies regarding your husband. The palace staff has truly felt his loss.”

“Thank you for your kindness,” she recited.

“I have received word that your father will be arriving in two days’ time, along with his host.”

There was a slight pause in her step, but she covered it quickly and quietly.

“I shall make sure the royal suite is ready to receive him.”

He bowed. “Your Grace.”

By that afternoon, the staff had dusted around the suite and straightened the rugs. Come the next day, they lit all the candles and prepared the dinner. All the while, Anora sat motionless at her vanity mirror. Her needlework, that she had picked up only after Cailan had marched off to battle, now sat sad and abandoned by the fire.

The ashes must still remain, came a thought, of the letter she had burned in there. She would have to have them swept out.

When her handmaidens arrived with the rising sun to fit her into yet another mourning gown, she played the perfect ragdoll. This new one had beautiful floral crochet work that danced about her lean neck, large, flowing sleeves and a suffocatingly cinched waist. They brushed her long blonde hair from scalp to end and braided it into two tight buns at the base of her neck. The buns pulling at her skin were painful and pleasant, and suited her fine.

She was to receive her father in the throne room.

When he marched through the streets of Denerim that evening with his host of five-thousand, she was alerted by Ser Bryton, the Captain of her Guard, and made her similarly long march to her station. There had certainly been no parade for his return, no banners flown in the streets, no cheers and pleas of gratitude—something her father was not well-used to. Today he was a losing General. A dejected General, who had fled the field of battle with his tail between his legs.

The golden chair was stiff and rigid. More so, she thought, than the last time she had sat in it. Strange. Stranger, even, that an empty chair sat to the right of her own.

The rugs and tapestries in the dull stone room had not yet been switched for black. Instead, they were a vibrant sky blue and spring green that made Anora want to retch. Harvestmere was coming to an end, and Firstfall would begin soon. It was no time for the silly colours of the spring. The decorators should know better.

There was a deafening sort of quiet as she waited for the large wooden doors that seemed so far away from her to be opened—for the bubble of tension filling the room and choking the air from her to finally pop, and give relief at last. Only a few men of her guard lined the perimeter of the throne room, Bryton among them. They seemed needless to her now. The castle had been so empty for so long after Cailan had paraded off. Truly, she knew not how many of his Council survived the battle, aside from her father. Her father…and her. She had survived the battle, in her own way. She survived it by holding down the fort. She survived wallowing in her grief and self-pity. She had
survived this miserable kingdom for five years. She could survive it five more, a hundred more, a thousand. What would it matter? She would do it as if it were second-nature. She would do what her husband could not.

When the men moved to open the doors, she realized her hands were cold and wet.

She stood frantically at the sight of him, which was nothing short of terrible. His silver plate armor was dingy and dirty, as if it had been merely grazed with a cleaning rag following the battle. His black hair fell clumsily around his face and hard eyes, which found her and did not lose her as he charged forward into the hall. And he wore that scowl. Anora was so worried that the very same scowl graced her face unknowingly, from time to time.

“Father.”

“Anora.”

He stopped walking a few yards away from her.

His expression was unreadable. As, she suspected, was her own. She tried her very best to look dignified. Before her subjects, poise came easily to her. It was a face she put on along with the rest of her rouge and dress. But her father never truly looked at just her face. He saw through it, beneath it, and past it. He saw a part of her that he had clung to and that she had long since discarded.

She wished desperately for him to stop.

Anora folded her hands in front of her and forced a smile on lips that had not pulled so in over a month. “You look tired, Father. Let us retire to the dining hall. It was a long journey for you, I know.”

“It was. I would sooner retire to my chambers, Anora. It is late and I must rest.”

“We will retire to the dining hall. The staff has spent the day preparing it for you.”

“I am not a child to be spoon-fed. I will retire to my chambers and will see you at breakfast. I trust the dining hall will look the same then as it does at present.”

“You—”

“Anora, we will discuss it in the morning,” he commanded through unbridled frustration. “I wish you a good night’s sleep. Maker knows everyone under this bloody roof will need it.”

Her father began the process of removing his gloves as he walked out the door to her left. She felt the slam of the door as it shut even though she did not dare to look.

Independent of themselves, she felt her legs buckle under her as she fumbled to sit back on her throne. She cradled her head in one of her hands, massaging her temples as the only solace she could find. She felt her maître d’ approach hesitantly beside her, and before he could squawk out some inane question, her vision became clouded with red.

“Get out.”

All of them did.

~~~

She could hear the soft clink of his fork hitting the plate across the long table of the dining hall and
she shuddered at the sound.

Night had come and gone and Anora had not slept through a wink of it. After all, she could wallow like a weighted corpse no longer. Funeral arrangements had to be made. Emissaries needed to be sent to every friendly nation. Unifying talks needed to begin and preparations needed to be made for war. The world at large didn’t sleep, and it would certainly not stop for her heavy heart. She would sleep when she was dead.

The Maker himself could not say if her father had slept. Did generals sleep? She found herself wondering. Did soldiers? Did Cailan sleep like a newborn babe the night before he sent those eight thousand men to their deaths? Most like, she concluded. Her husband was never a strategist. How could he know that the battle would go so poorly? His own death surely must have come as a surprise. Perhaps he had not felt the pain after all, or even seen the blood. Perhaps he had only felt the shock. Right up to the end.

A base cough sounded through the room. “I trust you have fared well here.”

Anora looked at him and did not blink. Her fork was limp in her hand but she still managed to hold it there.

“‘I have.’”

He breathed in sharply through his nose. “Good,” he said. “That’s good.”

She placed her fork down and her napkin along with it. She was finished with the farce of eating.

“Court will be full soon. I would imagine that some Lords will arrive as early as today.”

Her father growled and stabbed at his meat. “Ah. The scavengers are coming to make a meal of us, I see.”

“Do you know what you’re going to say to them?”

His voice grew louder. “About what?”

“Don’t be indignant.”

“I don’t have to answer to them. If they wanted to see the blasted battle, they should have been there! Beside their King!”

“Will you not answer to me, then?”

“Anora.” He grew quiet again. She did not follow up her question, so instead, the silence begged a response from him. “…It was the only way.”

“I believe you.” And she did. She looked at him and struggled to feel anything but hatred and anger, but she believed him. “How did it happen?”

“We were outnumbered. The field was a slaughter. If I didn’t pull back, this country would be without a standing army, and its King would be just as dead.”

“And Cailan? How did that happen?”

“I…” something flashed on her father’s face that she didn’t recognize. “I wasn’t there. I wouldn’t know.”
“I see.”

“I am…sorry, Anora.”

She flinched. It was such a reactionary thing. She knew he had seen it, and her game was up.

“He was…He was a good man.” He paused. “Like his father.”

“He wasn’t anything like Maric. You hated him.” She heard herself say the words, but couldn’t attribute them to herself. She would never say that to him. She wouldn’t. It was something they let hang in the air but never addressed, like some foul smell.

But he hadn’t meant those words. And she would not let him tell lies about Cailan.

Her father hesitated to word his response. “Cailan and I had ideological differences. I never hated him.”

“Is that why you let him go out there? On the front lines? Let him die?” She was emboldened now, and couldn’t stop herself.

“Your husband insisted. I have no authority over a King.”

“Did you even think of me? But once, did you think of me and my own happiness?”

“I thought of you every day!” He slammed fists on the table. Porcelain plates clanked and clattered but did not fall or break. “I thought of this city aflame and your head on a spike if it was left defenseless to the darkspawn horde! I thought of this country—a heaping pile of ash and ruin for you to rule over! Would that make you happy, Anora?”

“Do not address me as a child.”

“Then don’t act like one! Your husband died in war. You are not the first woman whose husband has died in war.”

Anora’s chair scraped against the floor and she stood. The rare occasion of her towering above her father gave her a strange sense of pride. She spoke through gritted teeth, her rage escaping through their edges.

“I am the Queen.”

Loghain Mac Tir shook his head. “Maker be praised, let us not have another spoiled child for a monarch.”

~~~

A week passed, a new month began, and the Court filled. Anora and her father kept to separate parts of the palace. Ser Cauthrien, her father’s right hand, assumed control of his men while he locked himself in his chambers, preparing to address the Bannorn. The men acted as glorified henchmen, stationed at every door the palace had, and even more filled the entrance hall and throne room, where the Landsmeet would take place.

She thought the men too brutish and Ser Cauthrien too presumptuous, but truly, it was when Arl Howe arrived that the situation in the palace went from bad to worse.

Arl Rendon Howe was perhaps the only man Anora had ever seen to be so proud for such a pathetic reputation. He arrived on horseback, with a modest following of about four or five men.
They rode in on elegant black horses with blonde manes, native to the northern rocky shores of Ferelden. The rest of his men, he said, were back in Highever, holding the castle against a possible repeat attack of the Alamarri tribe which had sieged it only a few weeks prior. It had been bloody news, for true. Bryce Cousland’s only grandson, a boy of eight, and his daughter-in-law lay butchered in their beds when the moon was highest. Their sons, Stevon and Fergus, died defending the castle. The Teyrn and his wife were killed in each other’s arms. When Howe’s men arrived, far too late after a suspect delayed rendezvous with Cousland’s soldiers, they said they spent over a day attempting to identify the bodies of the fallen. So many were torn apart beyond recognition.

But out of such a tragedy, Anora knew what the worm expected from her, and she would have to be deaf, dumb or blind to give it to him. The opportunistic weasel would put on a show alright, playing the hero, the grieving friend, until the Court would practically beg her to give him the Teyrnir. She knew better. No, the man was no hero. Her father was a hero. Her father, who had led the charge at the Battle of River Dane back in the days of the Orlesian occupation, was responsible for winning Ferelden its independence, and every man, woman and child at Court knew so. They would tell their children of how he led his battalion and the dwarves’ against an army of chevaliers, and won. Those children would tell their own, and every generation would know the Mac Tir family name forever. Arl Howe could covet all the land he wished, and he would still be the man that had to be carried wounded from the field of battle while his brothers were butchered. Only fifty men had survived the Battle of White River. Rendon Howe was decorated alongside them, for being lucky.

Soon after his arrival, Arl Howe was permitted an audience with her father, which Anora found distasteful. If her father wished to convince the people that he was on their side, counter-productive seemed a mild way to describe what Howe emerging next to him at the Landsmeet would do. A larger part of her worried that her father did not care to convince the people of anything. He would leave the diplomacy—the clean-up duty—to her, as he always did. But she could only dress up a kingslayer so much.

She could only imagine that was what they all thought. It was the richest story, after all. Teyrn Loghain Mac Tir, the late King Maric’s most trusted friend and confidant, turning on his only son in the heat of battle—Calenhad’s lineage destroyed in one treacherous maneuver. It was what the people always wanted: never the truth, and always what was most palatable to their gossip-starved ears. It would be so much easier for them to smear dirt on a war hero’s legacy, stomping the Mac Tir name into the ground.

Anora would not let them, she decided. She would never let them. Not as long as she still drew breath. Her husband and her father, her mother, and even herself, deserved so much more than that.

She met her father in the main hall of the royal suite right before the Landsmeet was set to begin. He had dressed himself in the same armor he had worn to battle, and appeared relatively well-rested. At the least, she noted, he had polished the metal. He looked the closest thing to handsome that she could remember him being in months. He was followed, as she had dreaded, by Arl Howe, and also Ser Cauthrien. Cauthrien dressed in armor, too, though it was far more drab than her father’s. She was a handsome enough woman, Anora supposed, and of an age with herself—perhaps a few years younger. Her brown hair was pulled back out of her way and she had no distinctive features, but she was not unattractive. Howe was the only one among the three dressed in vibrant orange silks, though it did little to improve his appearance. The Arl of Amaranthine had beady little eyes, barely-there lips, and a nose that jutted outward at the bridge, but was flat at the tip. His face was nothing short of unfortunate.

Anora had taken fine care of her appearance, but not too fine. She would not wear armor as her father did, for she was not at the battle. She did not wear something that made her too feminine either, for it was not her fair features that mattered today. Instead, her choice was strong; dignified.
Her simple black frock was decaled with gold at the belt, high collar, and cuffs. She decided to wear her crown, after much thought. But she wore a smaller one that she had had made a while ago. The golden crown decorated her head, circling a simple braided bun.

“Anora,” her father spoke, at the head of his pack of three, walking with vigor. She fell in line beside him. “There has been a development.”

“How so?”

“A witness has come forward. A squire of your husband’s, no less. He says Cailan told him to quit the field, and ride to Denerim, to deliver the truth. He claims the Grey Wardens influenced the field of battle that night. He says they killed your husband.”

Anora stopped walking. “That’s…you would take the word of a fanciful deserter? It’s madness, there’s no sense to it.”

“Is there not?” Her father raised a dark, wormlike eyebrow and turned on his heels. “Cailan was in contact with the Orlesians—you knew it; I did. He said they were being lofty, unresponsive, but he still had his fool’s hope that they would march in and win him his battle. What better way to cause this country’s undoing than through the manipulation of a third party? Kill our King and send the darkspawn at us from our southern border?”

“The Wardens?” she near shouted, expressing her disbelief.

“Aye. What have they done for you to cause you such shock? Or do you share Cailan’s idolatry of knights in shining armor? They are men. Put Orlesian coin in their pockets, and they’ll behave like any other. I raised you to know better.”

Her mouth seemed to open, and close, and say very little before she found the words. “We…we need more time to discuss this.”

“We don’t have more time. The Bannorn is waiting for an answer. What should I give them? A strong one, with a witness and testimony? Or an incriminating one?”

“You would cast aside a potential ally in the Wardens? Our only hope to stop a Blight!”

“The Grey Wardens are all dead!” her father roared. “They died in that field! If they were going to stop a Blight for us, they might have bloody well done it at Ostagar!”

“Might I say, Your Grace,” Howe chimed in, “that the possibility of this being a true Blight is rather slim. None, I’ve heard, have told of any Archdemon at Ostagar.”

Anora noted that Howe spoke the word Archdemon as if he were referring to something distasteful. A street urchin, or undercooked meat.

“What is your answer, Anora?” her father demanded.

A strange thought passed through her head. The Maker’s bride was a virtuous, innocent woman, burned at the stake because of another’s treachery and deceit. Would the Maker, if He existed at all, deny her a place at His side for lying today? Was that where Cailan was—the Golden City? Her rational mind told her that Cailan was nowhere, that Cailan was dead and gone and so would she be too if the Court thought her and her father traitors to the Crown. But perhaps she hoped for…something. It would be nice, she supposed, if…if he were somewhere.

“Do…do what you think is best,” she approved. Her father gave a nod of appraisal. Howe barely
contained a smile. Ser Cauthrien remained stoic, standing to the side and biding her tongue. If she
had any sort of opinion on the matter, she seemed to know it was not her place to show it.

On the rest of the way to the throne room, the air felt stale and it became increasingly more difficult
for her to breathe. She felt her heart pounding in a way it never had before meeting with the Court.
She wondered if they would be able to hear it—all those rats who ruled over Arlings and Bannorns
and Teyrnirs that were but pieces of her country. They would never know what it was to be Queen.
They would never know the pieces of herself she sacrificed daily, slaving for them, just to stand
before them now and keep face, like some hollow doll. How had Cailan done it? All those years
while she worked tirelessly behind the curtains, he was smiling and waving, roses in his hair and
roses on his crest, kissing newborn babes and giving the people their Golden King. They had been
the perfect pair.

The curtains to the upper balcony of the throne room were opened by the guard and the light came
in. She saw them—every blasted one of them, with blood-tinted wine in their cups as they huddled
around each other, whispering about her and how she had murdered her own husband. How she
stood before them, presumptuously, in her crown that she earned only through marriage and
demanded their fealty.

They did not bow at the sight of her. She knew they would not. Her legitimacy was what they were
here to contest, after all. But she suddenly felt naked, silly and stupid all the same.

“My Lords and Ladies!” Her father called out. “Thank you for making your journey here in this
difficult time for us all.”

The murmurs had already begun. She could not bear it.

“Let us not waste our breath,” he began. “This darkspawn incursion must be dealt with—quickly
and efficiently. Should it be allowed to spread, it will not be the concern of only the Southern
Bannorn. Ferelden still has a standing army. But my forces, combined with Arl Howe’s, which will
arrive in the city within the month, will not suffice. We must rebuild what was lost at Ostagar, and
quickly, and we must eradicate these darkspawn before they move north. What soldiers you have to
offer are needed effective immediately, and I expect each of you to supply these men with what you
can spare!”

Arl Bryland, of the South Reach, had not attended. His wife, a fair enough woman aside from her
pig-like nose, had come in his stead. She spoke.

“How can you expect us to defend our lands then? The darkspawn may reach Lothering within the
week, and South Reach stronghold soon after!”

Her father placed his hands on the railing and leaned over the crowd. “Do you think your thousand
men will defend against the horde? Ten thousand men died at Ostagar! Only an army can save your
lands, and only if we stand together!”

The murmurs heightened.

“There are those,” her father began again, “that would take advantage of our weakened state if we let
them! We will not allow it. Whatever we do, we must do now—without hesitation.”

Bann Loren, a middle-aged man with poorly cut blonde hair, spoke next. “And should we bow to
your daughter in the meanwhile? Is she to be Cailan’s heir only because she has failed to produce a
son in five years’ time?”
Anora could only hold her chin up higher.

“I recognize the political uncertainty that has gripped our nation in these dark times, following King Cailan’s untimely death. Though my daughter is a capable ruler and has earned her respect as your Queen, I would not expect you to so easily adjust to this change in custom. What we need now more than ever is strong military leadership. Until this crisis is averted, I declare myself Queen Anora’s regent.”

For the first time in her life, Anora found herself as shocked as the rest of the Court, and as furious. Was this her father’s plan all along? To sidestep her authority and rob her of her throne? Did he fancy her like her husband—a child to be coddled; to have the wool pulled over their eyes?

“Is that it?” Bann Loren cried out. “Your daughter or military law?”

The rest of the crowd seemed to share his outrage.

“It is temporary!” Loghain assured them. “Until we have the luxury of time again, and this Court may agree on to whom the crown should pass.”

There was nothing but idle chatter for a long while. The lemmings seemed to be at least somewhat reassured by her father. Anora was not. She struggled to control her breathing and her glare. She did not need to appear as if her father had surprised her, or these people would never respect her again. For what Queen does not foresee treachery from her own blood? This must look planned. This must look as though it were previously agreed upon.

Anora forced a tight smile upon her face—but a smile nonetheless. If he wanted to do all the talking, she would bloody let him. She must at least appear as though she still had some semblance of control.

It was then that Bann Teagan Guerrin stepped out from where he had previously blended into the crowd. He wore a dark green cloak over his simple garments. He still appeared a Lord, but one look at the light wool and brown color palette and you would know he came from the West. He must have been near forty now, but he was still handsome, with reddish-brown hair and a full beard, with the rugged cut of the Hinterlands. His green eyes were warm and kind and met hers first, before her father’s.

“Your Lordship, if I might speak.”

Her father seemed to still for a moment, but nodded at the man. His holdings were merely a small mountain province on the border, and one could scarcely find it upon a map. It had been sacked and liberated and sacked and liberated once more during the war. The man had had little rest in so many years. The Bann of Rainesfere would naturally hold very little influence at court, if not for Rowan. Cailan’s mother, the Warrior Queen, had been beautiful, as the songs said. Anora, of course, never met her. She wasted away when Cailan could still have been mistaken for a babe. Her father had fought beside her during the rebellion. All she had caught of Rowan Guerrin were his mutterings.

“You say we must unite under your banner for our own good—a fair proposal,” Teagan spoke. “But you have yet to address the army lost at Ostagar. Your withdrawal was most…fortuitous.”

In an instant the crowd was in an uproar. Her father closed his eyes, preparing to speak.

“Aye, that it was. I will not deny the spontaneity of my actions, and how they must appear to the public. But I will promise you this: with or without my withdrawal, the battle was lost. King Cailan was already lost when the beacon was lit—murdered by men he trusted. Let it be known throughout
the land that the Grey Wardens conspired with the Orlesian Empire against the King, and thwarted
the battle that day!” The uproar began again. “If any remain, the Crown calls for their execution—
effective immediately.”

If the Bann wished to speak again, he would not have been able to. The shouting of the crowd was
deafening. When Anora looked again to her left, her father was already gone, along with the Arl and
Ser Cauthrien. All of the sudden, her mind was spinning, and she felt herself become light-headed, as
though she might faint.

But she was not some painted Orlesian tart. She was a Fereldan noblewoman, raised in the harsh
rains of Gwaren, a city and a people which built themselves from the bottom-up. She was Queen of
an independent nation—a people that would not be silenced or ignored. She could take the yells and
jeers of the Court. She could take the machinations of her father. She would not faint.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the green-cloaked man pushing through the crowd.
Impulsively, she quickly descended the stairs to follow after him. Anora pushed through the bodies
of angry nobles and wondered if this was what it felt like to be on the field of battle.

She grabbed ahold of Teagan’s arm before he made it through the large doorway into the main
entry. He turned to face her, surprised at her closeness.

“Bann Teagan, please.” She did not know what she was begging for. She hoped that maybe he did.

“Your Majesty,” he shook his head, seemingly at a loss for words. “Your father risks civil war. If
Eamon were here…”

“He…” she begins, unsure of how, this time, she could defend him. “He is doing what he thinks is
best.”

Teagan’s eyes now seemed to bore uncomfortably into her own.

“Did he also do what was best for your husband, Your Majesty?”

He shook off her arm and exited the palace, leaving her to the wolves.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or
subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for
reading. :)
Bethany II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BETHANY

"And so Andraste said to her followers: ‘You who stand before the gates, you who have followed me into the heart of evil, the fear of death is in your eyes; its hand is upon your throat. Raise your voices to the heavens! Remember: not alone do we stand on the field of battle.’"

Bethany knelt in her pew in silent prayer as she listened to the Revered Mother’s sermon. She had come to the Chantry that day because she was in need of counsel, and felt she had nowhere else to turn. Also, she had needed to escape from their cabin. After Lothering had received word of the happenings at Ostagar three weeks prior, her mother had done nothing but stare into the lit hearth in silence. Bethany could bear it no longer.

No Lothering man or woman who left for Ostagar had yet returned. The darkspawn had not yet reached Lothering, but Bethany had already began to feel as though she lived in a ghost town. Families had locked themselves in their homes. Others had packed up what little they had and headed north, in some cases abandoning their farms. But that was simply not an option for some. Many knew bandits camped at the edge of town, harassing refugees traveling in and out.

She had never been so scared in all her life.

Bethany had come in hopes of speaking with Sister Leliana, but she was nowhere in sight, which was disappointing. She disliked speaking too long with the Revered Mother. Eighteen years in hiding and still she felt as though every Chantry official could just tell if she lingered too long. But somehow she knew, that even if Sister Leliana did discover her, she wouldn’t turn her in. They had become too good of friends for that. And she was so kind to her. Sometimes she wondered what exactly the Sister thought of the Circle, and of mages. Bethany knew that many of the other Sisters and Brothers didn’t care for Leliana much at all. She kept to herself, mostly, which Bethany would have thought sad if she were not guilty of the same.

If the Sister was not in the Chantry, Bethany had a clue of where else she might be. Quietly, without disturbing the prayer, she got up and walked out the wooden doors at the Chantry’s front.

It would have been a beautiful day in Lothering, if not for the fear that thickened the air. The autumn winds were not as biting today, though it definitively felt like summer no longer. Bethany wore a long-sleeved cream dress to compensate, and a green woolen shawl over that.

Lothering’s Chantry maintained a small garden next to the large bay window of its living quarters, in which the members of the cloister were allowed to grow whatever they wished. Many, sensibly enough, grew pumpkins or cucumbers, or strawberries—Bethany’s favorite. Others, who desired something pretty to look at when they woke up each morning, grew hibiscus for their tea, which bloomed nearly year-round. Bethany thought they were pretty, but she preferred daintier flowers. Regardless, everyone who grew in the Chantry garden seemed to make very efficient use of it, so they would never have a season where nothing bloomed for them. Sister Leliana grew roses.

When they did bloom, which was unfortunately only once each spring, they were very beautiful, and Sister Leliana tended to them marvelously. Sometimes Bethany even helped. But she knew the
bushes bothered the rest of the cloister, as they took up so much space. If Leliana knew this, she
didn’t seem to pay it any mind. She had two bushes, and in the grand scheme of life, Bethany
supposed they weren’t really doing anyone much harm.

That’s where Bethany found her: with her bushes, as she was like to be, even though it would be
months and months before they showed another bloom again.

Bethany grabbed the shears that hung on the fence behind her, prepared and willing to work if it
meant she could speak to the Sister. But as she knelt down beside her in the soil, she saw that
Leliana’s look was troubled. When Bethany moved to begin pruning, Leliana stayed her hand.

“They’re dead,” she said simply.

Bethany looked from her back to the bushes. Sure enough, the leaves were withering—the plant
slowly suffocating. She knew death when she saw it.

“I’m sorry. I know you loved these roses.”

Leliana sighed. “I’ll only plant new ones. It is the way of life, no?” Though she said it with
conviction, Bethany could see that she was upset. Her usually seamless chipper exterior had cracks
in it. She gave Bethany a warm smile.

Leliana was young and pretty, though Bethany thought she might have been closer to Marian’s age
than her own. She had orange hair cropped to her shoulders in which she sported a single, tiny braid,
a dainty nose, and big, green, doe-shaped eyes. Bethany found the Sister’s accent cute and
endearing, but she knew many more close-minded people in the village that did not like the Orlesians
so much. Though, Leliana’s affected voice was not as strong as others that had passed through
Lothering, and she spoke very good common tongue.

Bethany found herself unable to respond to her but offered her best smile in return.

They sat in a comfortable quiet, listening to the soft wind and the rustling of the leaves. Despite the
unease in the village, Bethany had to admit that it was calmer in the garden. The world’s troubles
didn’t haunt her so much here—but her own thoughts did. She carried her thoughts with her
everywhere, after all.

“How do you stay so pleasant all the time?” Bethany asked eventually. It made her wonder. The
threat of death had entrapped their village, and here death had even made it to the garden, where it
had leaked into the ground and snuck into their very soil, and still the Sister wore her mask of
contentment.

Leliana sighed softly, which was still a pleasant enough sound. “I am as worried as you are, sweet
girl. But I must keep a strong head on my shoulders.”

Bethany felt her face fall. She didn’t quite know why. Perhaps she didn’t find Leliana’s advice as
satisfying as she had hoped. Apparently, the Sister had noticed this, and rushed to reassure her.

“Oh dear! I’m so sorry, how foolish of me, I shouldn’t have said…well, surely I can’t be as scared
as you. Look at you, poor girl, you must be worried sick. I’m so sorry, Bethany.”

“It’s alright.” She gave her a small smile.

“She said it can’t be anything you haven’t heard, but your sister and brother are very capable
fighters. I’m sure they made it out, somehow. The Maker works in miraculous ways, you know. You
should still keep hope.” She rubbed circles on Bethany’s back with her hand to comfort her, and it
helped a little. Tears still threatened to fall, but as for now, they did not.

“My mother thinks they’re dead.” Bethany admitted, with more venom in her voice than she had intended.

“Oh, come now. Leandra loves you three so much, you mustn’t speak of her that way.”

Bethany shook her head vigorously. “No. She thinks they’re dead, because of how we lost Father. Now she thinks we’ve lost them too, and she can’t even look at me. She’s hardly moved in weeks, she’s not eating well, she’s barely sleeping…”

“Hush, hush now,” Leliana spoke soothingly, embracing her now. “It’s alright. It’ll be alright.”

~~~

There were slim pickings in the market that day, as Bethany had feared. What food and supplies were for sale had a heavy price. She left that day with a basket of three potatoes, two tomatoes, an ear of corn and a bar of soap, as the meat was too expensive. If Marian and Carver did not return soon, or…or at all, she would have to learn to hunt on her own, or she and Mother would starve within a month’s time.

It was at the market that she heard the shouting.

“Alligators of evil! Hell on your doorstep! They will feast upon our hearts! There is nowhere to run!”

It was coming from the Chantry courtyard. What few people had been out and about in the market were now gathering, and Bethany found her feet moving a little faster.

“This evil will cover the world like a plague of locusts!”

Soft murmuring came from the townsfolk. A child cried in the distance, but was quickly ushered inside his home by his mother. As Bethany turned the corner into the courtyard she saw the source of the chaos: it was a man, and not just any. He wore armor that was made of tattered leather and had the strangest markings on his face. His dark hair was pulled back in many tight braids. The axe on his back was long and double-edged.

“Keep it to yourself, you old twat! You’re scaring the children!” a different man shouted. The crowd agreed.

“Better to slit their throats now than let them suffer at darkspawn hands!”

There were gasps from the village people.

“You there, in the armor! Why aren’t you doing anything about this?” An older woman shouted at a Templar who stood against a courtyard wall. Bethany wondered this as well.

“If you want to try and shut him up, be my guest. I’ve got no authority to move him—that’s up to the Arl’s men. Chantry is public property.” The Templar grumbled.

“The Arl’s men haven’t come here in weeks! We’ve got children in this village!”

“Look, Mistress, if you want to—”

Shouting interrupted the Templar before he could finish. The crazed man pointed beyond the crowd. “There! One of their minions is already amongst us! This woman bears their evil stench! Can
you not see the vile blackness that fills her?"

Bethany, as well as the rest, turned their heads and settled their eyes upon a blonde woman in armored robes of blue and silver. She was young and radiant and beautiful, and if the man’s accusations fazed her, you wouldn’t know. So many things about her were foreign and wonderful, from the engravings on her plate that looked like a strange kind of bird, to the brightness of her eyes, to the easy way she moved and smiled, but Bethany’s gaze ultimately could not be torn from the staff on the woman’s back.

“What’s going on here?” she maneuvered deftly through the crowd to approach the man, hand on the dagger attached to her hip.

“My Lady, I would advise you to step back. This man is armed.” The Templar addressed her.

Bethany was floored by their interaction.

“So am I.”

“I beg of you, do not start a row,” he requested. She only smiled sweetly in response and turned her attention to the screaming man.

“You are scaring these people. Why?”

“I watched the black horde descend on my people! I will not be silenced!”

Bethany felt an armored hand move her gently aside, and saw it was a man, in armor the same style and color as the woman’s robes. He had tied three horses to a fencepost that Bethany realized he must have bought from the stable master, and pushed through the crowd to reach the woman.

“I came as fast as I heard the shouting—what’s happened?” he demanded.

“Lo! Another!” came the shouting once more. “Open your eyes! These minions are but the first of those who will destroy us!”

She saw the armored man—the handsome one—tense, but the woman placed a hand on his arm as if to tell him to stand down.

“You said ‘my people’. Are you Chasind?”

“Y-yes! South of the Mire! The darkness it…it swallowed us whole…”

“You poor man, what happened to you?”

He shut his eyes tight in sudden sadness. “My family. My clan. Those creatures butchered them all! Some of us fled here, and other clans farther north still, but it doesn’t matter. We cannot escape them! The darkspawn…they…they….”

“They can be defeated, good man. Keep faith.” The handsome man attempted to reassure him.

“No!” he shouted again, half-sobbing. “I have seen them! You cannot run! You cannot fight!

“Shouting and scaring these people won’t save you, or them,” The woman said. “Would your family or your clan, if they could see you now, want you to act like this? Doing nothing with yourself besides causing terror?”

“I…I…My ancestors…I’ve shamed them.” The man spoke, wracked with tears.
The kind woman placed a hand on his arm, as she had to the other man not moments before.

“Not yet. You can still do right by them. Help protect your people and the ones in this village from the same fate.” She raised her voice a bit now, making sure everyone gathered could hear. “Build barriers and defenses! Give the darkspawn a fight! Tell them Lothering will not fall so easily!”

“That’s easy for you to say!” yelled back a man from the village that Bethany did not like very much. “We’re not fighters! Half of our men have left already, and those among us who could fight died at Ostagar!”

Bethany felt herself frown. These people were so helpless. Just as she was. She wished Carver were here. He would hold her and reassure her and tell her it was going to be alright, just like Sister Leliana had. She even wished Marian were here. If Marian were here, the village could stand a chance. Every man and woman who could hold a weapon would fight. Marian would make sure of it.

“You can be,” the handsome man replied. “If you know the sharp end of a stick from the dull end, you can protect your farm and your own. The darkspawn aren’t smart like a man, but they go down just as easy. They’ll underestimate you, and that works to your advantage.”

“And…and if we do that,” a woman started, “you think we can survive the onslaught?”

“I think it’s very possible,” the man replied. “I won’t lie to you about your odds, but if this village means something to you—anything at all, then you need to defend it with all you’ve got.”

After that, the townspeople dispersed. Their murmuring was mixed with curses and questions, but most seemed to leave with more energy than when they had gathered, and Bethany thought that at least was a good thing. Bethany saw the man who was once shouting turn to the pretty woman, and smile sadly.

“Thank you, kind woman. My…my wife. She is with the Gods now, but, her hair…her hair was like yours.”

~~~

On Bethany’s path home she passed by the stocks and cages. It was unavoidable, or else, especially today, she would have taken another route. There was a man in one of the cages that she hated to gaze upon. Sister Leliana had told her that he was a Qunari, and that that was why he was so large and muscular, for he towered above all of the Templars. Bethany had asked her why it was, then, that he did not have any horns, but Leliana did not seem to have an answer to that.

The Revered Mother had called all the adults of the village to a meeting in the Chantry about a week ago, when Bethany had first noticed him in that cage. She had said that he had been discovered at a small farm that housed a family of five, covered in blood. He had approached the Arl’s men, who had happened to be patrolling near the farm, and had asked to be taken into custody. He had admitted, of his own accord, to killing every last person inside that farm. Even the children. Being that the farm was not so very far away from Lothering, the Arl’s men brought him here, for him to face the Chantry’s justice. Bethany did not understand why the Chantry should have anything to do with it, but she felt it had something to do with the fact that he was a Qunari. Most everyone was angry that he was here, especially with things as they were in the village. As of this moment, it seemed the Revered Mother still had not decided what to do with him. Either that, or she simply assumed he would die with the rest of them when the darkspawn came. Bethany could understand not wanting to go to the trouble of executing a man when he would die within the week anyway.
He was sitting cross-legged in his cage when Bethany passed him. He did not look at her. His eyes weren’t even open. And he was so, so still. She felt a chill run down her spine, thinking about that family and each one of their deaths. Not quick, not easy—certainly not painless. No means to defend themselves. They had not begged a fight of him. They were not soldiers. They were farmers, and their deaths were gruesome and horrible and for nothing.

Bethany hurried home after that.

There, she found what she had come to expect in her stagnant, silent mother and lit hearth. She looked sadly at the sight as she began to chop a meagre portion of vegetables for what she hoped would amount to a small salad. The food was not enough. Her mother was weak already, and Bethany had begun to feel the effects of the food shortage on her body as well. If she had the luxury of time, Bethany would fall to the ground and cry. But she didn’t even have that. She didn’t get to be sad. Marian didn’t cry when things had gotten tough, when she hunted for days and had nothing to show for it. She may have wanted to, of course. Perhaps that was why she got into her moods so often. But she never cried. And now, Bethany had to provide for…for those of them that remained. It was what they were all counting on her for. Marian and Carver…and Father.

She piled Mother’s helping of vegetables into a small wooden bowl, and laid it next to a fork on a small table by her mother’s chair. If she looked at her, Bethany might cry, so she resisted that. Perhaps she would try to talk to her in the morning, when her thoughts had been slept on and she had calmed down. But now was not the time. She would eat her food outside.

Bethany brought her bowl to Carver’s favorite tree stump and sat down. The sun was threatening to set, and perhaps if she didn’t think about them, the darkspawn didn’t have to exist at all. The day was so beautiful that she thought she could believe that, if only for a moment. And so she did.

The Satinalia festival would begin in a few weeks. Bethany had started on her dress a few months back. She had a beautiful vision for it: cream with tiny orange flowers embroidered on the collar. Unfortunately for her, she had never been very gifted in sewing or embroidery—that was Mother’s talent. Mother loved to sew, Bethany loved to sing, garden, and help Leliana instruct the village children, and Marian loved to throw knives. She supposed it was not so strange. Every woman needed her hobby, and Marian was rather good at hers.

It could have been the food shortage talking, but with each passing day Bethany seemed to understand her sister more, in ways she never had when she was home. It was the most bizarre thing. For instance, before, Bethany could never understand for the life of her why Marian didn’t want to stay home and take care of Mother—to be there for her after Father died. She loved their mother, and she knew Marian did too, even though they were often cross with one another. Now, Bethany couldn’t seem to get far enough away from their cabin; from Mother. She ought to have been ashamed, but she wasn’t. That was something she had confessed to the Maker that morning. She hoped He understood where she was coming from.

Sounds of a commotion in the village shook Bethany from her thoughts. At first, she passed them off, because she recognized they were coming from the tavern. Dane’s Refuge, Danal called it, named after the hero of legend that had killed all those werewolves. They had all thought Danal was crazy, when he had first showed up here. But as it turned out, he believed every town needed an inn and tavern, and he was right. Traders and merchants took up most of his rooms, wanting to get from Denerim to Redcliffe and vice-versa easily enough without having to pay more at an inn near the South Reach stronghold. And the men in the village, and Marian, seemed to appreciate the constant flow of booze. Carver didn’t drink. He said it dulled the senses and “made men stupid”. Marian proceeded to tell him that he “ought to pull the tree branch out of his arse”. She told him that often, and usually unprompted.
But it was the three men that exited the tavern that drew her interest. They were heavily armored—armor that was too expensive for them to be from the village, or South Reach even, but Bethany couldn’t see any colors or banners that she recognized. They looked freshly battered and bloody and they all seemed to stumble or limp as they walked. Now that the noise had died down, she was certain there had been a brawl. Bethany couldn’t understand why anyone would think that now was a good time to start trouble, with things as they were.

They were leaving now, anyway. The men seemed in quite a hurry to saddle their horses and ride on. The other horses at the tavern Bethany recognized as belonging to that man and woman from the courtyard.

It was none of her business. Lothering just didn’t see many strangers. Traders on the Imperial Highway from the south were clearly in low demand, and traders on the West Road were all but familiar faces, now. But, Bethany supposed, a lot of things would be changing with the war.

Her feet found their way to her father’s grave on a small hill next to their home. She hadn’t even been thinking about him much recently—not really. She had been so preoccupied with everything else. But she found herself staring intently at the small pile of stones nonetheless. Bethany kneeled and placed her hand flat on the raised ground. She looked at the bare grave and found herself wishing she had thought to pick fresh flowers.

The more the thought sat with her, the more she realized that it made her sad. Tears had fallen before she could think to fight them. They traveled too rapidly down her cheeks and mixed with the wetness from her nose. Soon Bethany could force her mouth shut no longer, and it too betrayed her with whimpers.

~~~

Sleep would not take her that night. Once she woke the first time, she could hear the cicadas, the rustling trees and the distant wolves and it just didn’t matter after that. Upon the third time she opened her eyes, she officially gave up. It was a good thing, too, because the first sight she was welcomed to was Sister Leliana’s shears peeking from her dress pocket.

Bethany cursed under her breath and threw the sheets back. On one hand, she now had to throw on her blue overcoat and take a long walk in the dead of night when the weather was at its coldest. On the other, it gave her something productive to do, seeing as she clearly was not going to sleep.

It appeared as if the people in the village had taken that woman’s advice. Bags of sand, rice, bricks, or whatever it seemed they could scrounge up formed a sort of sad-looking wall around part of the town, though it barely stretched to the Hawkes’ cabin. Some newly sharpened spears and swords had been laid out. Perhaps some things that looked like traps. It was the spirit that might make the difference, Bethany supposed.

By the moons Bethany could tell that it was, in fact, morning, though only just. Perhaps she had gotten more rest than she gave herself credit for. The early morning was as clear as the day before had been.

It was the clearness of the air that allowed her to see from so far away that the Qunari’s cage was now open and empty.

She felt her feet become glued to the ground beneath her.

Surely, the Revered Mother had moved him. He had not broken out of the cage, he had not broken out of the cage, he had not broken out of the cage. She could turn back, she thought, but it was a
longer way home than it was to the Chantry. And if she got to the Chantry, she could ask Sister Leliana about him, and she would know, one way or another. If she went home, she would be up all night with no sleep and no better way to defend herself than before she left.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she continued on with careful measure. All the horses at the tavern were gone. The man and woman—the heavily armed man and woman—had left. The village’s only defense against a rampaging Qunari were now the Templars. Somehow, that made Bethany mad.

At the Chantry, Bethany cut through the garden and opened the door to the living quarters as quietly and as quickly as possible.

She did not have to look for her friend long. The redhead was standing at the foot of her bunk in red leather and silver plate armor that Bethany had never seen the likes of, and she was…packing?

Leliana’s eyes met hers at the creak of the floorboard under her boot.

“Bethany!” she whispered. “What are you doing here? Do you know what time it is?”

“I came to give you these,” Bethany responded, pulling the shears from her pocket and handing them over. Leliana’s eyes widened, before she smiled and shook her head.

“Oh, you’re precious,” she said, before her smile weakened and her brow relaxed. “No. Keep them. I’ll need you to tend to the bushes while I’m gone, after all.”

The hand that held the shears went limp, but she was careful not to drop them. Bethany felt her face and heart drop instead.

“Wh-what do you mean?”

Leliana looked at her sadly for a moment, but that was quickly replaced by an intensity that Bethany had never known the Sister to have.

“It bloomed.”

Bethany blinked. “What?”

“One of the dead rose bushes. Yesterday evening, when I woke from a nap, I looked out the window and it had a single bloom. I swear it by the Maker, Bethany. I’ve not lost my mind.” She was shaken. Bethany would have reached a hand out to comfort her if she had not been so confused.

“I believe you—I…I’ll go out and look.”

“No. It’s gone.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s gone. Someone must have…taken it, I don’t know, it’s just gone.”

“O-okay, I just…I don’t see what this has to do with…why are you packing?”

Leliana grabbed her pack in one hand and Bethany by the wrist with the other and began to usher her outside, away from her sleeping Sisters and Brothers. Bethany pulled against her.

“Wait!”
“What?”

“The Qunari! He’s…he’s gone. The cage is open. I saw it on my way here.”

Leliana furrowed her brow. “I…yes, I know that. It’s alright, Bethany. He’s…changed custody. You don’t have to worry.”

Bethany relaxed at that. When they were safely back in the garden, Leliana turned to her again.

“I can’t explain it all to you now, because I don’t know how to do that in the time that I have. But I have to leave. Please understand.”

Bethany must have looked so stupid, standing there in the moonlight trying to process the information so quickly. Something in the back of her mind forced her not to cry. She had done that already. Not again.

“Where are you going?” she heard herself ask.

“Away.”

“Well, I…are you coming back?”

“I…I don’t know,” she answered, then added, “I don’t think so, Bethany.”

“Is it…is it the darkspawn?”

“In a way. I had planned to stand and fight here, Bethany. I know it looks like I’m running away, but it’s…it’s not that. I’m needed someplace else. Somewhere I’ll do more good.”

“Take me with you.”

“No.”

“Please, I—” she was holding onto Leliana’s wrist now for dear life.

“You don’t want that. You’ll be haunted for the rest of your life for abandoning your mother, or if your family came home and you weren’t there—“

“They’re not coming home! They’re dead!”

“Keep your voice down!” Leliana hissed.

“Everyone knows that!” she insisted, quieter. “They all look at me so sad now, Maker, even you do it!” She hated the words she was saying, even though she meant them.

“I do nothing of the sort. I know you can take care of yourself. You’re strong.”

“Oh, please. You’re just saying that. Just like that woman did today in the courtyard. You know this village won’t be here if you ever come back. You are abandoning us.”

“That’s not true, Bethany.”

“It is.”

“I have to go. I’m so sorry.” She wrenched her wrist away. Bethany knew how pathetic she must look—how she must sound. She didn’t care.
“We’ll all die here! Please!”

Leliana was crushed, but she did not stop. She shook her head and said nothing more before finally walking away. Bethany stared after her, defeated, until her friend was a speck in the distance. That was when she took the shears to the bushes, ripping them up from the ground.

~~~

Bells woke the village. Bethany knew what they were for.

The staff she had hidden underneath her bed in the floorboards seemed to burn a hole beneath her, but she made no motion to grab it. Before, magic had been the sword she could never put down. Now that she finally had, she couldn’t bear to feel the weapon in her hands again. If today was her last day, she would rather hold onto her last shred of normalcy. Of humanity. Once she picked up her staff, she forfeited it.

Instead she sat on the edge of the bed and pondered what her death might be. She doubted very much that darkspawn were in the business of quick and painless. She imagined a death much like the farmers that were butchered by that Qunari. For the crime of providing him shelter, the Revered Mother had said. Bleeding out seemed a terrible thing. That’s what Father had done. Right before her eyes when she was eight. The Templars had run him down—sliced him up the back and left him for dead like an animal. But she heard that sometimes bleeding out could take days. His death had been quick, in comparison.

Bethany was dumbfounded to see her Mother at her door, leaning weakly against the frame.

“Bethany…we have…we have to go.”

She narrowed her eyes in disbelief.

“Go where? Your first time saying a word to me—looking at me in weeks and you’re the one who suddenly wants to protect this family? You want to run now? Be my guest. I’m staying and facing this with some dignity.”

“Bethany.”

“Leave me alone!” She pushed herself up onto her feet as she screamed.

For the first time in ten years, Bethany felt magic surge in her fists. She did not have time to scare herself. The front door to their home was kicked open with a crash, and her sister, muddied and fierce, stormed through.

“Pack your bloody things! We’re leaving, now!”

She dashed into her room and came out again with more swords and daggers to strap onto herself than she already had. That’s when Carver limped in through the door after her. Bethany’s eyes darted to the makeshift cast on his leg in concern, then to his face—a face she did not recognize now, for it was cold and distant and hard and it had never been so before.

Bethany felt her heart pound fast, and faster, and faster still. It was the only thing she could think now. Maker, she could not recognize her own brother’s face.

Chapter End Notes
I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
MARIAN

_Breathe._

She was no use to them dead.

_Breathe. Breathe, damn you!_

They needed a plan, and a damn good one at that. _Gwaren_, she had thought. They would out-maneuver the darkspawn and head south to the port of Gwaren. From there they could set sail to…

to…

She swiped angrily with her right-handed sword and dislodged the scalp of a Hurlock.

_Fuck! Think!_

“Stop! Stop, we need to stop!” Bethany cried out from the back of the line they had formed. Carver, in his state, wanted to take her place, but Bethany wouldn’t hear it. Mother was third in line, and Carver watched Marian’s back. Granted, _that_ wasn’t very efficient, and they moved slower because of it, but Marian tried to compensate with the route they took.

Reluctantly, Marian slowed and turned, out of breath. “We can’t, not yet. Not until we can’t see the Highway.”

“Where are we going? South? Are you mad?”

“Only a little,” she replied. “Gwaren.”

“And then where?”

“Would you like to stand around and play twenty questions while we wait for the darkspawn to kill us all, or would you like to go?”

“Marian’s right,” Carver agreed coolly, settling a screaming match before it began. “We’ll sort it when we get there.”

For once in her life, Marian was grateful for Carver’s horrible case of level-headedness. Bethany grumbled incoherently but she fell back in line quick enough. Mother was weak and had to lean on Bethany for support every now and then. Marian told the voice in the back of her head which said they would not make it a day outside the village exactly where it could shove it.

The landscape just outside of the village was traditionally Ferelden, meaning dry, dirt hills as far as
the eye could see, with faint yellow-green patches that hardly passed for grass. The path she led them
down ran adjacent to the Imperial Highway, and they would walk in its shadow for at least five miles
until the path veered off and took them through the Breclilian Forest. It was near the route she and
Carver had taken north. Either the darkspawn had taken the efficient Highway or the less efficient
but more covert trail beneath it, and regardless, their goal had been to avoid both.

When they had returned after weeks of delay with Carver’s leg the way it was, her heart had
dropped at the sight of smoke billowing beyond the brown Southron Hills. The bells of Lothering
still rang in her ears. Families stumbled over each other to pack their things and leave the village.
Others thought they could stand and fight. None of them had looked back to see what was likely the
razing of the village. All of those people, came a distant thought, were dead. The men she had shared
drinks with in the tavern, the young blonde farmhand she had fucked in the hay, the baker that sold
them bread. Those people and all she could remember of them, torn to pieces like the men and
women that had been butchered before her at Ostagar. Her family was lucky.

She had tried to be good, and clear-headed about the whole thing, like they all needed her to be, but
it was as if some maddening thing was clouding her thoughts. Was it the likelihood of their fate? The
fear in Bethany’s eyes? Or Carver and that haunting stare he’d had for weeks? She couldn’t say.

“Stay close!” Marian threw over her right shoulder. “Bethany, are you alright back there?”

“I should be, short of any surprises.”

Her sister, for the first time since Father was killed, held a staff between her dainty fingers, wielding
it against the darkspawn. She had not seen her kill one yet, but she would before the day was up.
Marian was sure Bethany felt strange with the weight of a weapon in her hands, but the look suited
her. Father would have been proud to see Bethany defending her own.

As they neared a small rise Marian could already hear the noises from the other side. It was a small
crowd of darkspawn that had clearly been distracted from the horde. They were attracted by
something, and sure enough she heard the sounds of a battle and the grunts of a woman. Bethany
moved to stand from their hiding spot under the rise.

“What are you doing?” Marian hissed.

“She’s in trouble! We have to help her!” Bethany responded in kind.

Marian glared at her. Bethany only matched her fury.

“She’ll die.” Bethany reiterated. Marian did not budge. She thought Bethany’s observation a rather
obvious one, but she didn’t say so. What her sister couldn’t understand was that this woman was no
different from all those people back in the village who the Hawkes had turned their backs on. But
this woman was here, now, and would die before Bethany’s eyes. Bethany was still young. She
would feel guilt for this.

Just when Marian thought her sister might see reason and relent, she stood, and climbed the rise.

Marian shouted her sister’s name, and her mother shouted too, and Carver tensed and moved to
grab his weapon though he knew very well it was no good, that he would not stand in time, and all
Marian could do was follow her up.

There were maybe five spawn that surrounded the woman, and they engulfed her in a way that
Marian was sure she must be dead. It was the occasional glint of silver metal that she could see
through the spawn, as well as the small mass of darkspawn corpses at her feet, that told her she was
She was weakening, though, and so were her hits.

Their snarls scared her sister, who stood to her right, into a petrified state. Marian shook her head, preparing to lurch forward and fight, when Bethany shouted.

“Hey! Over here!”

“Bethany—”

Before Marian could argue, some darkspawn had already followed the sound. They drew closer to her sister and panic overtook her. She unsheathed a knife from where it rested on her thigh and threw it at the closest charging darkspawn. It lodged itself in its eye, and sent it to the ground, its bony jaws wide open in almost a grin. Though, almost immediately after, a blast struck at the feet of the other three charging darkspawn, erupting them into blue flames as they shrieked and collapsed, what little flesh remained to them peeling from their bones as they died.

The final darkspawn, which had not fallen for Bethany’s distraction, was quickly dealt with as the mystery woman drove her sword through its stomach with a guttural yell.

The attack, though unexpected, came from her sister, who had not even removed the staff from her back. She stood looking at her hands as Marian went to gather her knife. The hilt burned at the touch, and Marian cursed under her breath as she struggled to grasp it.

“I was trying to lure them,” Bethany directed the jab at her.

“Yes, well, warn me next time.” She responded, successfully dislodging the knife using a spare bandage from her pack.

“I thought it was obvious.”

Marian ignored her. The whimpers of the woman they had saved eventually reached their ears, and they both directed their eyes to where she lay on the ground, next to a man that she had not noticed. He was armored in—shit. Fuck. Shit.

“They will not have you,” the woman asserted to him, grabbing his face—which looked to Marian drained and tired—between her strong, calloused hands. “They will not have you,” she said again, lower this time. “Not while I breathe.”

The man placed a hand on top of hers. She smiled, and her eyes had a watery shine to them. Marian was one step away from awkwardly clearing her throat when the woman turned to face them.

“Wesley, can you stand?” she asked. “These people, they—”

“Apostate. Keep your distance.” Wesley’s eyes bore into her sister’s. He was weak, that much was clear, but not so weak that he could not uphold the sigil on his armor—a flaming sword. He found it in him to stand.

“Well, the Maker has a sense of humor. Darkspawn and now a templar.” Her sister spat bitterly, not intended for anyone else to hear, clearly. Marian thought Bethany might have been quaking in fear at this point, but her sister surprised her again that day. Bethany spoke to him directly now. “Have you abandoned Lothering so quickly?”

“Not so quickly that I can’t do my duty. The darkspawn are clear in their intent, at least,” he spat. “A mage is always an unknown. The Order dictates—”
“Wesley.” The woman warned. He would not stand down.

“The Order dictates…” He spoke this time with slightly less conviction, but he took a step forward, and so did Marian, shielding him from crossing to her sister. She placed her hands on the two daggers at her hips and stared him down unflinchingly. Marian was only an inch or so short of him, but she no doubt looked infinitely more intimidating. His hand hovered over the hilt of his sword. The prick of a needle could have released the tension in the air, the sound of the breeze the only thing between them and utter silence. She looked at his exposed throat and imagined where her blade would fit.

A careful hand was placed on the templar’s arm.


His shoulders, which had been stiff, released their tension at the woman’s reasoning. “Of course.” He stepped back from Marian, and his hand dropped to his side.

“I am Aveline Vallen. This is my husband, Ser Wesley. We can hate each other when we’re safe from the horde.” The woman had bright red hair pulled from her face in a fashion much like Marian’s own black tresses. She wore leather armor over a ragged cotton blouse, and was as bruised and beaten as her husband, with whom she was of a height, and even of a build. Marian took great notice of the woman’s toned muscles and the way they danced as she gripped the blade at her side. Her man though, had dark hair, a clean-shaven face, and features that were sharp and pointed and hard-looking. He looked like a bloody templar.

“A strange time to be hunting apostates.” Marian directed back at the man. “You just missed the desertion party. I saw his fellows leaving north with the Chantry priests.”

“What?” Bethany exclaimed. “They…they all left? After all of…those people, back there, they’re dying!”

“I was traveling to Denerim on business,” Wesley said coolly, in response to Bethany’s insinuation. “But I had to turn south when…when I heard of Ostagar.”

“Bad luck and poor judgement brought us together here before the attack.” Aveline directed the word judgement at her husband like it was an extramarital affair. “Be that as it may, we will be no threat to you or your kin, I promise you. If we are to stick together, we’ll need to move past this squabbling.” Aveline nodded in her sister’s direction. Marian only wished her approval had been more condescending, just so she would have something to be angry about.

At that time, Carver and Mother had made their way from beyond the rise to join them. Carver was tense at the sight of Wesley, but had clearly overheard enough not to raise hostilities again.

“You’re quick to offer your allegiance,” Marian noted. “You don’t know us, we don’t know you.”

“Another blade between us and the darkspawn? Marian, we should take what we can get.” Carver advised.

“As long as the horde is their first concern.” Bethany added.

“My duty is clear,” Wesley insisted. “But it can stand for another day, if the Maker grants us that opportunity.”

Bethany was quiet at that.
“You saved us when you didn’t have to. That makes you decent enough people. My husband will be fine. We all will.” Aveline assured. “For now, we move with you. North is cut off—we barely escaped the main body of the horde.”

“We saw. I scouted north from a high hill when we were still on the outskirts of the village. The darkspawn are more clever than we’d thought,” said Marian. “We go south. To Gwaren.”

There were no objections. They continued on together after that, in silence along the path, until Mother broke it. Though she had fallen into a stupor these past few months, for Marian’s whole life her Mother had never been one to let an uncomfortable silence go unchecked with a few unhelpful comments.

“For a while,” Mother spoke, “for a while I thought we were the only ones to escape those creatures. It is reassuring to see a friendly face.”

Something in Carver seemed to revert to another place, another time. Back in the frozen woods, perhaps, sitting around a makeshift campfire as she bandaged his leg, slit up the calf. It was difficult to tell, then, if the leg would have to go. Medicine was never her strongest practice. She didn’t know if she could amputate it. She didn’t know if he would die. The cold might have taken him just the same. Or maybe his mind took him farther back than that. “You didn’t see Ostagar, Mother,” came a voice that might have been his. “I would not be so reassured just yet.”

“You were at Ostagar?” Aveline asked, rather dumbly. Marian felt as if she had been glaring at these people for their entire exchange. “Yes, I…I see that now. I was Third Company, under Captain Varrell.”

“Then you saw how the entire army was defeated,” said Carver.

“We fell to betrayal,” Aveline asserted with conviction. “not the darkspawn.”

“Maybe,” was his only reply.

Marian fell in line with Wesley, who was towards the back of their formation. His wife headed it, with Bethany, Carver and her mother close behind. She waited until the man squirmed at the discomfort of her proximity to speak.

“I’m watching you, Templar. If I don’t like what I see, you’ll wish I’d left you with the spawn.”

“I would anticipate no less.” He was scared. She heard it in the quiver of his voice and she wondered if, under different circumstances, she might have smiled.

~~~

Confrontation did not come until they were all tired, and until one of them was very near death.

Marian had screamed at Aveline when Wesley had collapsed of exhaustion, his eyes sunken into his skull and the veins on his forehead pronounced and grey. She knew what this was. She and Carver, after having emerged from their hidden camp in the Wilds, had come across a man dying of it on the outskirts of Ostagar, a few days after the battle. He had crawled to the spot, away from the slaughter on the field and out of sight of the horde, and had laid there under a leafless tree to die. After the darkspawn had come and gone, snow had begun to fall, and a light blanket of it dusted the ground. He was shivering under a military-issued wool throw. He asked for water. They had none.

He had gotten some of their blood in an open wound, he said. It hadn’t been very much. He thought he had cleaned the wound well enough, and then he had stitched it up, but not before he
realized that the wound was not what would kill him. If the Wardens knew of this sickness, he had not been warned, and neither Marian nor Carver could recall hearing of it before then, except in old verses from the Chant of Light. The man looked so nearly like one of them. Even the horror on the battlefield did not match his gruesome face. Marian thought he might ask her give him mercy, but he did not. He only asked them both to leave, so he might die in peace.

“He has the Taint!” Marian yelled at the woman, supporting Wesley by one arm as Aveline held him by the other. “He has the fucking Taint and you didn’t say anything?”

“What does it matter?” Aveline shot back. “He’s my husband, it’s none of your concern.” They found themselves on another rise, a large open space where they could pause and catch their breath. They laid Wesley down on the ground, leaning against a rock.

“It will be when he’s injured and his blood finds its way onto my family.”

“That’s…that’s not how it works.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I…I didn’t think…”

“Marian, what’s done is done. Can we keep moving?” Carver encouraged.

She shook her head. “Not with him. He stays.”

“No!” Aveline shouted.

“He’s dying. Whether his disease spreads or not, he’ll get us killed by slowing us down.” Marian retorted.

“Marian! We need to go, this is a bad spot!” Carver’s voice seemed so distant to her now.

“Your brother is injured! I don’t see us leaving him behind to die, you bloody hypocrite!”

“My brother has a sword in his hand and can walk. Your husband is fucking unconscious!”

“You bitch!”

“Marian!”

She and Aveline turned and at once heard the snarling. It came from all around them—every edge of the dirt hill they had found themselves on. Carver had his sword drawn, and Bethany gripped her staff like a vice to where her knuckles were white. She and Aveline looked at each other and drew their weapons as well.

The beasts crawled over one another, toppling and pushing just to get to the top of the rise. They spilled over the edge like a tidal wave, stumbling to stand again on two feet. There must have been thirty of them.

“Shit,” Marian cursed, looking frantically for an out.

“Mother, stay back! Stay with Wesley!” Carver insisted. Their mother did not protest.

“Bethany, listen to me, we need you, do you understand?” Marian tried to reach her sister. Bethany nodded. With her staff in two hands, she spun it and slammed it down on the ground, releasing a force of energy strong enough to shake the earth, toppling many of the creatures. The ones near to
them Marian and Carver took care of, sliding swords into the base of their skulls. Aveline worked on shielding them from any darkspawn who decided to charge.

Bethany began to shoot blasts of energy onto the ground as she had done before, blowing away small groups of darkspawn while Marian, Carver and Aveline moved in on the rest.

It was working. They were down to a handful of the creatures, and then none at all, and they had a moment to catch their breath. Aveline did a round to make sure they all were truly dead. Carver, with a smile on his face the likes of which Marian had not seen on him in so long, hobbled over to her and placed a firm hand on her shoulder. Her mouth, hanging open from her laboured breaths, curved into a smile as well.

The ground shook.

“Bethany, I don’t see any more, it’s all right.” Marian called over to her.

The look on her sister’s face as she shook her head slowly to the left and right made her stomach feel so hollow.

The smiles fell from them all as the ground beneath them continued to rumble. Carver used her shoulder for balance. Bethany backed away from the edge quickly and in abject horror. Marian followed her eyes to the horns that now charged at them, and the towering body beneath it. The large beast was salivating, and it roared in a way that was not unlike the roar she had heard all those nights ago, as she stood back from a beast, larger than a pine tree, and watched him effortlessly snap the King’s body in two.

Men had followed after it in the interest of revenge, losing their nerve in the heat of battle as they saw their Golden King fall before them, and they had died too. She had not. She found Carver, not far from her, and she had protected him with her life until it was clear the battle was lost, that no one was coming. The signal fire burned hopeful upon the Tower of Ishal for every man and woman on that field to see, but time passed them by and still the horns of war did not come. Only the silence, and so, so much bloodshed. She had grabbed Carver and ran into the trees, but not before one of the wretched beasts had caught up to them, and had injured Carver up the leg. He had killed it, removing its head with a clean blow, but the face of her brother even before he had lowered his weapon was one of a man who was ready to die. He was eighteen, and in his eyes she had seen that he was ready to go that night. He had begged her to leave him, to go home and watch over Bethany and Mother and tell them he loved them. She wouldn’t grant him that. She had dragged his sorry arse, for all the weeks it took them, back to Lothering.

She and Carver had shared more memories as scrappy children, running through Lothering’s fields and trees with bruised knees and untarnished prides. Fewer now that they were older. Had she not reluctantly agreed to enlist in the King’s Army with him perhaps she might not have understood what was in his eyes now.

The grip of his hand was released from her shoulder. Somehow, she knew—she had known of the moments that would follow since that first night in the Wilds when she thought his fever or the cold might take him instead, but he would not let them. “Bethany needs you,” she had told him, the sting of the cold blinding her vision. “So does Mother, so you can’t. You can’t fucking go. I need you.” He had nodded, as it was all he could do, shaking under both of their blankets and the bark that she could find him.

And he hadn’t. He had not left her.

“Go,” was what he told her now, though. Go.
She heard the crunch of the dirt under his boots as he turned away from her, and each hobbled step afterwards as they grew faster and faster and faster, yet. A yell of panic rang out. It could have been anyone’s. It was not until the snap that the true screams came—the ones she would remember. Mother’s, then Bethany’s, and Aveline’s did not come. Marian’s mouth made the motions but could not give them sound. But Mother’s and Bethany’s were so violent, so sudden, that Marian’s eyes, in their haze, darted to them to confirm they had not been the victim instead.

The lack of air Marian felt coursing through her lungs made her foolishly consider if it had been her, not him. Not him. She had never remained so still in her whole life and this paralysis must be what death felt like. She flexed her hand to test her theory and was disappointed. It functioned just like it always had. It served a purpose, but was stuck in a state of misuse, as was her foot. She moved that too, and placed it back down again though she could not hear the sound it made. Or perhaps the screams drowned it out. The ogre was busy. That was what an old, familiar part of her mind told her. It had been locked away ten years ago with a key that she hid in the dark. The ogre was busy. She could make her way around it, to Bethany and Mother. The ogre was busy. It would not look to them.

Her foot stepped on a patch of mud that had been mixed with blood, and, not being able to repress it, vomit lurched from the pit of her stomach and out onto the ground. She steeled herself fast, as was her custom, and trudged on.

She reached her mother first, who was sprawled on the ground, fingers clawing into the dirt like it was the only thing that still held her to this earth.

“We have,” Marian swallowed, “to go.”

Her voice was a rasped whisper, and the order came like a painful secret.

“Now.” Marian tried to be forceful. She pulled her mother up by an arm and she was met with violent resistance. If Mother would not go then she would go to Bethany.

“Bethany, we have to run, we have to run as fast as we can, please, it’s what he—“

Bethany nodded profusely, her face still crumpled and wet but she followed her sister. Aveline appeared beside them and hauled Wesley up and over her shoulder. Marian and Bethany grabbed their mother by her two arms, pulling her up now with all their might. She screamed and fought them and Marian could see the ogre stir, as if threatening to look over his shoulder, but he did not yet divert his attention to them.

Soon, Mother went limp, and her arms were slung over she and her sister’s shoulders as they ran. The three of them, though burdened, ran as fast as they could. She and Aveline did not look back. Bethany did. She must have thought her sister would not notice, but Marian had and she tried to forget it. She tried so, so hard to forget it.

~~~

Marian let the screaming come. The heat of her mother’s face was so close to her own, closer than she could ever remember allowing, but she did not stop the screams. She stared at the veins. She watched them as they danced about her mother’s skin, filled with blood.

“You! You killed him! You brought us this way, trying to be clever, trying to out-wit those…those things! Your foolish pride got him killed! You could have stopped him—you were right there! Could have reached out and grabbed him before he…before he…” the tears had been there since the start but the sobs were coming now and Leandra Hawke fought, weakly, to hold them back. “It was
you! It’s always you! You stupid, stupid girl!”

“Stop it!” Bethany screamed back, her voice cracking. Mother had collapsed to the ground again, at Marian’s feet.

“My little boy…my little boy…”

“It wasn’t Marian’s fault! None of this is Marian’s fault, you selfish, selfish woman! You’re a monster!” Bethany’s hastily repressed sobs betrayed her voice.

“Carver…Maker, not my son…”

“I hate you!”

“Enough!” Aveline snapped.

Marian walked away now, kicking the dirt from under her heels lazily. The dirt path was above them—it protruded from a hill a bit so that they could hide beneath it in a rock shelter. Marian meandered her way outside, beyond the shallow cave. They were on low-ground now, far below the Imperial Highway but not nearly as far away from it as they ought to be. That made Marian want to cry.

“He was not my kin, it’s true,” Aveline began. Marian assumed she addressed the lot of them though she was hardly listening. “And I’m sorry for your loss. But we need a plan. I’m sure that’s… I’m sure that’s what the boy would have wanted.”

There was no response that Marian heard. Only the sound of Bethany drying her tears and stifling her sniffles.

And then the snarling.

No.

“How…how could they have caught up to us already?” Aveline drew her sword, panic-stricken. “It’s not possible!”

“No. No, I can’t. Marian, please, I can’t!” Bethany cried, her staff forgotten on the ground. Her hands grasped at her head as she shook it violently back and forth.

Marian turned over her shoulder, her swords drawn. “Bethany, you must. You have to. Come over here.”

“I can’t!”

Their rotting, blackened skulls rose from beyond the top of the rise, some crawling on all fours, some sprinting. Heat flooded through her body and settled in her palms and forehead, and she rushed to calm her unsteady mind. Her knives trembled in her hands and water coalesced in the ducts of her eyes.

Her sister had completely lost her nerve. She was helpless, sitting under the rock shelter in fetal position, staring at the dust. They would rip her apart first, then swarm over her mother and Wesley. She and Aveline were just far enough away to look on, helpless, like worthless sacks of shit.

She gripped her knives tight; tight like how she had latched onto Carver’s hand that night and led him through the pines of the Wilds as the needles scratched at her face. The scratches bled later, just
like she thought her knuckles might bleed now. From the pit of her, she let loose a primal scream.

The darkspawn who had begun to climb down the rock looked at her, and then looked further up still. If she had been so proud she might have thought her yell to be the one that gave the darkspawn pause, made the tundra vibrate and dust fly into the air. After all, hers had blended seamlessly with the screech that could have been heard for miles and miles, bellowing proudly like a hundred thousand off-tune war trumpets sounding all at once. Marian felt her blood rush at the sound that was not her own.

A giant horned purple beast with a wingspan that would have covered all of Lothering in shadow soared down from the sky to land on an outcropping of rock high above the shelter. Lifting its beaked head, it roared again. It reminded her, faintly, of the large bird she had glimpsed flying high in the sky the night of the battle. While she bandaged Carver’s leg and his life’s blood had rushed like a river between the creases of her fingers, she had looked up and seen it, even through the dark trees and tears of frustration. It had lifted her spirits much more than that damnable beacon had.

The dragon swept down from its perch, lighting the darkspawn aflame in one fell swoop. They crumpled to the ground, nothing more than black ash, and blue flame burned ruthlessly on the ground to consume what remained. Bethany had gone quiet and had come to stand behind her, close enough to be effectively guarded. Marian could only follow the dragon’s movements, feeling the force of each of its wing flaps in the very fabric of her body.

The beast came too close and the three of them were forced to sprint out of the way, hugging the wall of the rock shelter. When Marian looked back, though, it was a burst of light she was met with, and a thick fog that had not been there before. It mixed with the dust on the ground and they all squinted and shielded their mouths. Bethany coughed violently into her neck kerchief.

Dark purple wings and sharp teeth were now nowhere to be found. Instead as the fog cleared, the dark silhouette of a woman appeared before them. In her grasp was a bloodied darkspawn torso, ripped apart by dragon’s fangs. She turned and strutted at a languid pace towards the Hawke family, dragging the corpse on the ground a bit before casually letting it hit the dirt floor.

Her hair was white, her lips were dark, and her eyes were yellow. A large silver pointed crown framed a face that could have been old. The leather she wore was the same deep purple as the dragon, and hugged her breasts and hips unforgivingly. Her pauldrons were large and black-feathered, and her boots, armored like her talon-like gloves, reached her knees. Her bright hair was fashioned, in part, to look like the horns of the dragon.

Her smile was the dragon’s tail, curving and snapping into something maliciously, wonderfully powerful.

“Well, well. What have we here?”

The woman’s voice was smooth and smoky, wise and dangerous. Marian, though intrigued, had little time or patience to be fascinated with her.

She heard the falling of a body behind her and Aveline let out a yell.

“It’s Wesley! He’s…he’s collapsed!” she shouted, running to his side.

“Is he breathing?” Marian questioned.

“I….yes. But I don’t know how much longer he can…Maker…”

Marian and Bethany alone stood against the woman now. She spoke again, nodding to Wesley on
the ground.

“I see your family has not had an easy time away from home. We seldom used to get visitors to the Wilds. Now it seems they arrive in hordes.”


“I am here to tell you that south is no longer available to you. That is, if your aim is to outrun the Blight. You are going in the wrong direction. I suggest setting your sights elsewhere.”

“Cheap advice from a dragon.” Marian jabbed. “Where did you learn that trick?”

The woman chuckled. “Perhaps I am a dragon. If so, count yourself lucky. The smell of burning corpses does nothing for the appetite.” She turned, walking away from them now, and casually turning over the charred remains of a corpse with her boot.

“Wait!’ Bethany cried out. “You can’t just leave us here!”

The woman turned, a thin brow raised in curiosity. “Can I not? I spotted the lot of you meandering curiously, aimlessly, and I wondered at your purpose. But now my curiosity is sated and you are safe, for the time being. Is that not enough?”

“You say south isn’t an option. Well, neither is north. We go east or west and risk the horde heading us off.” Marian explained. “We have nowhere to go. Your help would be invaluable to my family. I would—”

“Kirkwall,” Bethany declared suddenly, as if the thought had only just come to her. Or just resurfaced. “We need to get to Kirkwall, in the Free Marches.”

“Bethany, you can’t be serious,” Marian spat.

“I know, alright? But what other choice do we have? Mother has family there! Maybe we could…”

“There are a lot of templars in Kirkwall, Bethany,” Marian reminded, sharply.

“Kirkwall?” the dragon-woman asked, amused. “Oh my. But that is quite the voyage you plan. Your King and Country will not miss you, hmm?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Marian asked. “Ostagar is fallen. Cailan is dead.”

“And yet here you are.”

Marian stilled. The woman only studied her closer.

“Hurdled into the chaos, you fight, and yet the world still shakes before you. Is it fate or chance? I can never decide.”

She seemed lost in her own devices, chasing after a thought that seemed to be very physically slipping from her—at a point somewhere in the air above her head, in fact. Marian found herself genuinely unsure whether to back away or press the issue.

That was soon answered for her. The woman gained ahold of her senses again and turned back to them.

“It seems fortune smiles on us both today. I may be able to help you yet.”
“There must be a catch.” Marian stated.

The woman laughed heartily, near hysterically, at a joke Marian wished she had heard. “Ha! There is always a catch! Life is a catch! I suggest you catch it while you can.”

Bethany seemed to make a motion to back away in confusion. “Maybe we shouldn’t trust her, Marian. We don’t even know what she is.”

“I know what she is.” The venom in Aveline’s voice could be heard even from where Marian stood. “The Witch of the Wilds.”

“Some call me that,” the woman began indifferently. “Also Flemeth, Asha’bellanar, …an old hag who talks too much.” She chuckled. “Does it matter? I offer you this: I will get your group past the horde in exchange for a simple delivery to a place not far out of your way. Would you do this for a Witch of the Wilds?”


“Bah! As if I had nothing better to do.”

“You’re…an apostate?” Bethany asked, with an odd tone to her voice.

“Yes.” The witch smiled warmly at her sister. “Just like you.”

“So,” Marian began, “you would go through all that trouble just to have something delivered?”

“I have an appointment to keep,” she answered.

“And how much trouble will this delivery be exactly?”

“About as much trouble as me saving your lives, not moments ago.”

“Fair point.”

“Ha! If you knew my Morrigan, you’d know how seldom I hear that.” She walked closer. “There is a clan of Dalish elves just outside of Kirkwall, hidden up Sundermount. Deliver this amulet to their Keeper, Marethari.” The witch handed her a trinket like any other. Marian was sure she had seen twenty like it at a market stand in South Reach. “Do as she asks with it, and any debt between us is paid in full.”

“Hawke,” Aveline began. “I do hate to say this, but, Wesley…in this state…we’ll never escape the darkspawn without her.”

Wesley, eye sockets nearly blackened pits now, sweat matting hair to his face and barely able to move a muscle, spoke. “Leave…me behind…if you must.”

“No!” Aveline said, firm. “I said I would drag you out if I had to, and I meant it.”

“That is…another matter,” Flemeth said as her gaze settled on Wesley, and he let out a violent hack. Marian turned to face him as well. Aveline stood, blocking them both off.

“No.”

“What has been done to your man is within his blood already.” Flemeth told her, seeming to be saddened at the sight.
“You lie!” she yelled at her.

“No,” Wesley was barely audible. “She’s right, Aveline. I can feel it…the corruption, inside me, it’s…screaming…” It certainly looked it. His veins pulsed black, his eyes were sunken, and he trembled violently as if in freezing weather.

“How…” Aveline could barely get the words off her tongue. “How long before he…”

“Not long now.” Flemeth responded.

“And there’s nothing to do for him?” Marian inquired.

“Unless he is to become a Grey Warden, no.” Flemeth told her.

“And they all died at Ostagar,” said Bethany.

“Not all,” was the witch’s answer. “But the last are far beyond your reach.” She stepped away from the scene. Marian knelt down, to join Aveline huddled around Wesley.

“Bethany, look away if you must.” She told her sister, who could not meet her eyes. But the answer was a shake of her pretty head.

“Wesley, you cannot ask me this.” Aveline almost whispered it, like a sort of prayer.

“Aveline, listen to me, the corruption is a slow death…I can’t…” he choked out before resorting to laboured, heavy breathing.

Aveline’s bright green eyes pleaded with her, begging a question she couldn’t put to words.

“He’s your husband, Aveline.” Marian told her. “I’ll do it, if that’s what you want.”

“No.” She looked away from them both now. She took a moment. “No, it can only be me. But…thank you.”

Marian took a step back. A dagger was slipped from its worn leather sheath on the woman’s hip. Wesley’s last words were something of love, something only Aveline would know and hear and could keep. It was almost sweet. Not like the field of battle, where death was quick and sudden. There, it was a state of being. A lamp was lit, or it was not. A man had a sword in hand one moment, and he was on the ground the next. Wesley was somewhere in the in-between, where her father had been ten years ago as his family watched the life go slowly from him on the cold ground while he spat out red blood and his final goodbyes, before Marian had done what duty and love demanded.

When the tiny blade pierced his skull, Marian did not see a templar lying dead on the ground, but the man this woman had loved and wed and cared for. She would give him that gesture, as a parting gift: that she had felt no joy when he left.

Aveline’s face was hidden from the rest of them, and so Marian gave her the space she was sure was needed. Her mother stood well away from them, in her own world, looking blank and shaken. Bethany’s eyes, it seemed, had not left the dead man, staring at him so hard Marian thought she threatened to bore holes in his corpse. Everything about her sister had been so strange that day. She could not blame her, but this look was something else. A hand rubbing her sister’s arm attempted to tell her that she was not alone.

She next approached the witch, who stood away from them, looking out at the horizon.
“There can be no peace.” Flemeth said the strange thing to the wind, which blew Marian’s dark hair across her face in tatters.

If she had closed her eyes now and imagined wings upon her back, like she and Carver used to do as children standing atop the rolling Southron Hills, she could have granted herself a moment of reprieve, to remember him as she so needed to. To give her anything but those final moments—the footsteps and the crunch and the blood and the screams. The sounds had repeated, over and over in her head, like some sick tune. They would never leave her. She wanted to make herself think of anything else. How he had smiled, and scoffed at her, and chastised her, and laughed.

But there was no time for that now. Numbness masked whatever it was that was in her soul.

It was certainly not peace.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)


Cullen III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CULLEN

War had changed the Tower. Though he was young and “green”, as the older knights would call him, he was a man with two eyes, as any other. In a few weeks’ time, he could see a subtle chaos had begun to bubble beneath the surface. He looked at his brothers and saw, stirring in their eyes, a desperate uncertainty. They scrambled for meaning in confusing times. He understood at a cursory level. But wartime did not change him, or his duty.

Though Greagoir would later loudly express his displeasure at the oversight, word of Ostagar came only with the mages who returned—not with a raven. The stragglers who came trudging through the main gate were all older mages, those who had not been on the front lines. Advisors and healers they were, all tired and hungry and shaken at the death of their King and comrades. The young, starry-eyed hopefuls who had leapt at the chance to leave Kinloch Hold still remained on the field. Cullen did not recognize it as cruel irony—not until his mind betrayed him, and he saw blonde hair and pale blue eyes covered in spots of blood and snow and picked at by birds. He stopped himself before he added firm breasts and a pretty neck.

What if she were dead? He considered her fair mangled limbs sticking up from dirt and snow, as trite and ordinary as every other body that lay next to it. She was buried beneath the refuse of war. She gave her life for her country, or some other noble platitude, and the Queen would say a few stock words at a drab stone memorial that would be too small to have her name etched in its grooves with the rest of them. Her grave would be unmarked at the ruins of Ostagar. She had no Mother, no Father, no next of kin, she had told him. He might be one of the few people left alive that cared that she had existed.

The pang he felt was anger.

She had deceived him, made a fool of him. His peers snickered behind his back, he knew that to be true. They always had, even as early as the training camp, when he would be knocked to the ground by Chantry orphan boys half his size. And now he was not only a fool of the Order but a fool of love: some self-important arse who had lived his life in a contrived fantasy. A man so pathetically smitten to have become a mage’s plaything: a servant of the Fade. How, by Andraste’s grace, could he have been so blind?

If it was any consolation, no one had any reason to suspect him of playing a part in the raid of the phylactery chamber. Of that crime, he would be free and clear. He had demanded the signature of some old and senile enchanter who would not connect the rod of fire to her, or the events that night, and who had clearly been too frustrated at the brutishness and gall of the templar to bother requesting any explanation.

That day, after Duncan had stolen her away, Cullen had received an earful from the Knight Commander. Greagoir had focused his anger at her, though, not at him. The disgusting words that spewed from the Commander’s mouth had infuriated him. But he said nothing in response. He had been a coward even in that regard.
He had been so in shock, after all. It had all happened so quickly. But that had been a month ago, and he was a different man. Something about his new “temperament”, Greagoir had said, had impressed him. Cullen now found himself on nighttime patrols and longer shifts. If his work continued, he might be granted leave to see his family. Cullen felt a giddiness—and also a bliss, like he had never known before in his position. He had a place as something of an equal among the more experienced knights. If his peers resented him for it, he didn’t care. Being trusted with responsibility was all Cullen had ever wanted—to have a place within the Order. From the horror and trauma of a month ago, something wonderful had grown. His mind was at peace, and he was allowed easier rest at night. The heat had left her body. There was no heat left for him to dream of.

It was midnight. He had come to the chantry to pray, as was his custom. When the sun was high, the place had been flooded of late with men and women praying for husbands and wives, brothers and sisters. After sun-down, though, there was hardly ever a soul that came to sit and be with the Maker. He had the large room mostly to himself. It smelled of incense, and it was dark and quiet. Though, on nights like this where there was very little moonlight to filter through the glass into a warm orange glow, there was a chanter who stayed to light each and every candle. It was a long and seemingly fruitless effort—Cullen was, after all, the only one to see it—but the same small, balding man always did so with a smile on his face and a peace to his features. Cullen thought that was beautiful.

Knelt before the visage of the Prophet, Cullen uttered Her words: “In this the truth is found: Blessed are those who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter. Blessed are the peacekeepers, the champions of the just.”

The words held more meaning for him now. As a boy when he had heard them they had meant something far-away. They were his father, who marched off to war before Cullen had been a thought, who fought and bled for his country against the merciless invaders, only to die years later in bed after contracting an infection in the leg. They were his mother who cared for three fatherless children, all sprinting wildly in different directions. His younger sister Mia, a nanny. She had stayed in Honnleath with their mother. His older brother Branson, a soldier of South Reach. He had not been called to Ostagar. But that was good, because he had a wife and a newborn son. The words were them, too, who gave Branson comfort when his family could not.

They had never been him, though. He had been champion of no one, and he stood before nothing. His father had warned him in the early stages of his boyhood, that if he were to join the Order, he should do so because he wanted it; for himself and himself alone, not anyone else. Good, noble intentions, his father had said, would wither and fade once he faced war—true war. He had not followed that advice, at least in part. Perhaps that had been naïve. But Cullen believed in the Order because he believed it helped people, believed that he wanted to help people, and could. His father died, and Cullen held onto his good intentions, and carried them with him all the way across Lake Calenhad, where he trained with the other boys just outside Crestwood.

He had done poorly at the training camp, and that had been discouraging. He had been older but also tall and gangly and ill-prepared in comparison to the others. Perseverance seemed to have little meaning. Good intentions, as the drill sergeant had so kindly informed him, weren’t worth a damn when he was dead. The red-faced man had told him then that he should pack his things and go home. It seemed that was what Cullen had needed to hear. There had been nothing, after that, that he wanted more than to prove him wrong, to succeed where the old man, and his old man, thought he could not. So he fought back, and improved rapidly. He left training feeling like a brother of the Order. On the field of battle he was no better or worse than his fellow man, but at the chantry he had graduated top of his class. He had said his vows, and he came to know pride. And though they weren’t with him, he knew his family would have been proud too. Then, stationed at the Tower under Knight Commander Greagoir, finally, Cullen thought he knew what it was to serve something
greater than himself.

But that was when he had met her, blonde and bright-eyed and perfect. And then her Harrowing came, and it was his first. Greagoir had approached him the day prior, placed a shiny new blade in his hand, clapped him on the shoulder, and told him to be ready.

Then, he wanted to serve no longer.

But that was why he knew he was truly a man, now. He knew the cost. Boyhood fantasies would serve him no purpose from here forward. His father had been wrong. What a man wanted, for himself or others, did not matter when you were tasked with drawing the line between good and evil; when lives were on the line. He had wanted her. He had wanted the approval of his peers, and the Commander. He had wanted brotherhood and justice and righteousness and peace and so, so many things. Now, he wanted for nothing, and the Maker smiled on him.

“Ser Cullen,” a voice called gently from over his left shoulder. He turned his head.

“How?” It was the little man.

“Forgive me. I did not mean to interrupt. It’s just that you’re here so late, and so often.”

“I…prefer it quiet. Peaceful.”

“So do I. Was there—was there anything you wished to discuss? To confess?”

“No, Brother. Thank you. I’ll take my leave.”

“As you wish. Maker be with you.”

In truth, he only wished to be alone. He only ever wished to be alone since the incident. It was freeing, in a way. For so long he had craved the opposite, to feel her skin under his and her love flowing through him. He was lighter now. Weightless, almost.

The walls of the Tower had, as his time had passed among them, become a comfort. As he walked circles about its floors, the stone, seamlessly laid, would only go on and on. It seemed even in the lion’s den, there was a semblance of order. A promise that some things would always remain the same.

His feet found the library. He should have retired to his chambers, but something drew him here. His bare hand ran itself down the length of a wooden table, its surface cluttered with loose pages and old books that an apprentice had likely neglected to put away. The hand that lay upon the wood made a fist, and he pushed his weight into it, shutting his eyes and casting the memories from his mind. Soon, the searing pain was gone.

Murmuring alerted him. Through the book-stacked shelves he could see dark figures only a few yards from him. From their red robes and decorated pauldrons, he knew they were senior mages. A small candle illuminated their meeting, but not enough for him to see their faces. Most had their backs to his hiding spot. It took only a moment for him to notice that he was the only templar in the library. Why were there no guards this night?

“Uldred has become a problem,” said a voice.

“Bloody Libertarians. Anarchists, the lot of them!”

“They’re worried.” A different voice said. “In times like these, who can blame them?”
“I can. The Blight won’t take the Tower.”

“Says who? You?”

“Says bloody King Calenhad! The darkspawn won’t cross the lake.”

“That won’t stop them. You didn’t see the massacre. It was…it changed you.”

“So we’re to let Uldred do as he pleases?” another voice asked. “If we wait much longer, this will spread. The younger mages will stop listening to reason. Libertarians, Isolationists, Resolutionists, all. He’s taking them by storm.”

“If Irving found out, there’d be war.”

“We’re already at war. What’s another?”

“No. Bigger. This could reach far. The Circle would tear itself apart. It must be stopped here.”

“Inaction is our safest bet. Uldred could—“

“Hold,” said one. There was a pause. “I believe we have a fly on the wall.”

Silence swept the room and Cullen froze. The candle in the next room went out, independent of human interaction, as if there were a draft, and the library went pitch dark. Cullen frowned. He gripped his pommel tightly, and in a spout of bravery, rounded the shelves.

The tiny flame of the candle was alight once more, and the mages were gone. A chill ran down his spine. He twisted and turned and scoured the alcove in search of them, to find nothing.

Foul magic had caused them to elude him. He scowled and released his grip on his blade. Their words, however, had been curious. He knew Uldred, or knew of him, more like. Enough to know that Irving disliked him, but the professor was still popular with his younger students. And now he would use his influence to…to what?

He would not walk with this weight on his shoulders. He would tell someone. Irving, perhaps? Though he may know more of that which these mages spoke, they had said his reaction would be disastrous. And perhaps he wouldn’t share his knowledge with Greagoir. Perhaps he would try to handle the situation on his own. No. It had to be Greagoir. Only he could set Cullen’s mind at ease.

~~~

Not but mere moments later, knuckles rapped four times in quick succession on the dark wooden door. Cullen heard scrambling behind the panels and an unbolting of at least three different locks. Greagoir peered through the small crack he made, looking off-putting in a loose grey tunic and hastily placed dark trousers that he clutched, unfastened, in one fist. The light from the hall shone on one steely white-gray eye. A dark brow contorted almost sinisterly above it, casting a shadow.

“Rutherford. Do you know what bloody time it is? What’s this about?”

“Yes, Knight-Commander. My apologies. It’s urgent.” The Commander’s eyes widened a bit and his voice changed to a harsh whisper.

“There hasn’t been an escape, has there?”

“No, Ser. It’s something else. May I come in?”
…Yes. Hurry, now.” Greagoir hurriedly fastened his pants and ushered him in with a quick hand to the shoulder. Cullen heard the door lock behind him as he entered.

The room was spacious and pleasant enough. A tall, narrow window graced the wall behind the Knight-Commander’s desk. The desk was beautiful—surely one of the nicest pieces the Tower had—as was the chair behind it, cushioned in red velvet and framed in mahogany. To the side, there was an alcove for the Commander’s living quarters behind a privacy curtain. Cullen considered the man who lived and slept and ate alone. There were few of his comrades he held much love for, and he too craved solitude as of late, but this room in particular seemed terribly sad, even if the accommodations were nice enough. In Honnleath, he and his brother had shared a room, and Mia was always there too. She would often sneak in during the night with her little wooden chessboard their Father had found in Highever, and she and Cullen would sit on the floor and play. Some of the pieces were wobbly and a few of the dark squares had faded at the edges, but remembering it now gave him a sweet nostalgia. Branson would see the two of them, roll his eyes and turn back over in bed. Games of the mind had never interested his brother, but they enthralled Cullen. He still remembered his first victory against his sister. He would remember it on his deathbed, most like.

He considered the room again and hoped he would never live in one like it.

“Well, now that you’re here, how about a drink, boy?” Greagoir sauntered over to a small wet bar at the back of the room that held a few nice looking glass decanters with amber liquid inside. Cullen shook his head.

“No thank you, Ser.”

“Oh, you’re off duty. It’s all right. I’ve got a brandy here that’ll—”


“Well, al-bloody-right.” The Knight-Commander poured his own drink, and promptly swallowed it in one gulp. The quickness of the fluid to the back of his throat must have startled him, as he began coughing, all while Cullen waited patiently. “It’s good that you came, in fact, Rutherford,” he continued, his voice a rasp and his grey beard and moustache now splashed with small drops of amber. “It only just occurred to me that I wanted to speak with you.” Greagoir did not sit in the beautiful, pristine red chair. He placed his hands on its frame and leaned upon it, towering above Cullen.

“If I might, Ser, I really have to tell you—” Greagoir held up a finger.

“You may not.” Cullen furrowed his brow, curiously. “I’ll admit that I’ve been neglecting my charges. Every man has his faults, after all, and I have not checked to see how you were faring after that…incident with the girl. The mage.”

This was a trick, and Cullen knew he walked a thin line. The right answer here was casual, but distant. Honest, but cold; devoid of feeling for her or her memory. The wrong answer would have him transferred away, or worse yet, sent home in disgrace. He had come to Greagoir tonight to do his duty as a templar, and even that had been perverted into a test—a game. The thought made him ill.

“Permission to speak freely, Ser?”

“Go ahead, boy.”

“It’s just—” he paused for thought. “Seeing blood magic firsthand is no small thing, Ser. I’ve had trouble sleeping ever since that night.”
He could see Greagoir going red, bursting at the seams, as if he were ready to explode again, just as he had done to her. But no, Cullen knew that he wouldn’t. He had tried to play the friend, after all. A commanding officer his charges could confide in. He couldn’t give it up so soon, or he’d never get what he wanted. That was how it was done, or so he believed. Mia had a similar tell when she would bluff. His sister was a spitfire. But she was far more endearing than the Commander. Signs of her frustration were small, and impressively easy to miss.

“Yes, I…of course that’s understandable. Evil in its purest form will keep any man with blood in his veins awake at night.” Cullen thought that maybe Greagoir was done, and that they could move on to the problem at hand. He was not. “I saw it in her eyes too, when she looked at me. When she laughed at me. She was waiting for her opportunity to do the same, I knew. To slice her wrist and kill me where I stood. Don’t know what Irving ever saw in her. I hope that bloody Warden was pleased with the maleficar bitch. She didn’t win the war for him, so it seems.” Greagoir laughed. It was a disturbing sound.

Cullen hadn’t been looking at Greagoir. He was looking at the window behind him, at a fixed star in the distance. When the Commander’s voice stopped, Cullen looked down, and seeing the white around his knuckles which gripped at his chair, quickly relaxed them.

Not taking notice of this, Greagoir appeared pleased with the reaction he had garnered. After a short moment of waiting for an outburst from Cullen that did not come, he spoke.

“Glad to know you’re as firm on this issue as I am, Rutherford. One more whiff of blood magic in the Tower…well. I’d sooner let the whole thing burn.”

The star seemed to flare. Or maybe it was just in his head.

“What…uhm, now what was it you wanted to speak to me about? What was so bloody urgent to make an old man crawl out of bed in the dead of night, hm?”

“You know what, Ser, it seems to have slipped my mind.”

Greagoir frowned. “Oh. I…see.”

“Terribly sorry, Ser. If I think of it, I’ll let you know. My brain’s just been rattled of late.” Cullen stood.

“Of course. No need to worry. Go on, get some rest, boy, it’ll do you well.”

“Thank you, Ser.” His hand was on the door handle when he was stopped.

“Rutherford?”

“Yes, Ser?” He turned his head only, desperate to leave, but Greagoir inched closer and closer still, suffocating him. A hand grasped him by the shoulder once again, in what was supposed to be comradeship. It didn’t feel like it.

“I know you had your soft spot for her. I remember our discussion last year. Things looked grim for you, boy. But it’s good to see you’ve moved past it. There’s no room for weakness like that in the Order.”

“Of course, Ser. I know that now.”

“Shame, too. Pretty face wasted on a mage, and now it’s rotting away in some field.” He shook his head. “But no love lost in the end, eh boy? A whore’s a whore, that’s what I say.”
He endured the firm clap to the shoulder. He took it with a nod, a tight smile, and when he opened the door he could finally breathe again.

~~~

“You knew Lily, didn’t you?”

The three women looked at him with bewildered expressions. He had approached the initiates towards the back of the Chantry, out of sight. It was a new day, and he was in way over his head. But if he spent his downtime alone in his bunk, he’d lose his mind. So, instead, he had put himself to work.

The one with dark hair spoke for the other two, who looked almost frightened.

“Ser Cullen, please. This is a place of worship.”

“And no one is listening to us, so you can speak freely. Please, I’m not here to start trouble. I just need information. You don’t...have to be afraid.”

“Yes, we knew her.” She nodded.

“Did you know Jowan, too?” That made them even more nervous. “Please, anything you can—”

“He came to the Chantry often. He seemed nice. I knew him,” a different, more nervous woman spoke. “But not that they were together. Maker forbid, I would never have—”

“It’s alright, really. Did he ever talk about anyone else? Someone he spoke to regularly? A friend? A confidant? I won’t give anyone your names, please.”

The women went quiet. One looked sheepishly up at him.

“Well, of course, there was Solena.”

He looked away.

“No, wait,” another said. “He came in with a friend, once. It wasn’t her, it was a man. Older than him by a few years. Or, at least, he wasn’t an apprentice.”

“Do you have a name?” he asked.

“Oh! I know who you mean!” another said, rather loudly.

“Quiet, Lyra!” the dark haired one shot back.

“Sorry. It’s Niall. Brown hair, a bit of stubble. You’ll find him in the library probably, with this horribly serious look about him. Ruins his handsome features.”

“Andraste’s grace, Lyra!”

“Really, Lyra. You’re speaking to a templar.”

“Oh, Lily had the real thing. I’m only playing.”

Cullen cleared his throat.

“Thank you, ladies. I’ll...leave you to it.”
Lyra had been right. The man he needed was not hard to find among the books. He had seen him here before, he supposed. Granted, whenever Cullen had been stationed in the library, she had been there, and hence there had ever only been one thing on his boyish mind.

The loud scratch of pen to paper prevented him from speaking. Niall would not lift his head from his studies for even a templar, it seemed.

“One moment, Ser, and I’ll be with you.”

“I am hardly a patient man. I need to—”

“Well, I find that quite hard to believe, considering you waited very patiently for years for a girl who didn’t reciprocate your feelings.” The mage still didn’t look up from his work. Cullen’s gloved hands made fists.

“Watch your tongue,” Cullen spat. “And mind your superiors.”

“I know why you’re here, and I know it’s not on official business, Ser Cullen. You’re not very threatening.”

“How do you—”

“Greagoir already asked me where Jowan went, so I assume you’re another hopeful freelancer, right? Well, when I say asked, of course I mean that I was strapped to a chair and threatened with tranquility. And I already told him that I don’t have that information. Only guesses. You can have my guesses, if you like, but they’ll do you about as much good as they’re doing him.” The corner of Niall’s mouth pulled up in a small, nearly miss-able smirk.

“I’m not here for Jowan.”

“I don’t know where Anders is, either.”

Cullen narrowed his eyes. “You’re wearing me thin, mage. Let me ask my questions and I promise to leave you be.”

Niall slammed his book shut and turned to face him, finally, gritting his teeth.

“What?”

“What do you know of Uldred?”

Niall’s body seemed to still. Cullen recognized the color that his face was turning. It matched his knuckles which had gripped the chair so tightly just the night before.

“I can’t help you.”

“Why not? He’s your professor, isn’t he?”

Niall swallowed nervously. “Listen, I don’t know what you’ve heard, but it’s for people far higher up on the food chain than you. I’m doing you a favor.”

“Has Greagoir come asking about him too?”

“No. And it needs to stay that way. Maker, if he did…”
“If whatever this is threatens the Tower, someone needs to know.”

“I’m glad you templars live in a world where everything is so simple.” Niall’s contempt was evident. “I won’t be responsible for Greagoir tearing the Tower to pieces on rumor. Maybe you don’t care now, but if she were still here, you wouldn’t want that either.”

Cullen scowled. “If you tell me nothing, rest assured, I will take this to the Knight-Commander.”

Niall grimaced, but then slowly began to study Cullen’s face as he had studied his books, with great care and meticulous consideration. “You think you’re better than the rest of them,” he said. “You’re not. Just like she said.”

The words were meant to hurt him, but Cullen did not retreat. He stared the mage down with a hard look.

Niall shook his head. “I said I won’t be responsible for Greagoir’s wrath, and I meant it. But, since I can’t stop you,” he swallowed and wrote a name down on a small piece of parchment. “One of Uldred’s people. They’re dangerous and radical. But that doesn’t mean I want to see harm come to any of them. Please, just talk to him. Decide for yourself what must be done, since you’re so certain this is what you want.”

Cullen grabbed the parchment in his closed fist and stood. He nodded tersely. He would hear this mage out, provided he was willing to talk. He saw no harm in that. Any man could listen to reason.

“Now get out of my sight, templar. And don’t ask me for anything ever again.”

Niall flipped back open his large old book, and once again began pushing pen to paper, more furiously this time, as though his violent scratchings would somehow injure the templar standing above him.

~~~

Through the winding dark midnight corridors, the boy he sought after had caught on, all too quickly, that he was being followed. And he was quite that: a boy. Niall had given no warning as to the apprentice’s age. Why, he was no older than fifteen. Though he grew angrier the more he thought on it, Cullen supposed in the end it made little difference. Fifteen was old enough to tell right from wrong. It was certainly old enough to be a templar.

Cullen had found him in the commons, suspiciously alone, and had trailed him from there. The skinny thing, with the pointed ears of an elf no less, did many double-takes as he took notice of Cullen following at a distance behind him, the only other walking about the hallways this late in the night.

He took off into a sprint and Cullen was quick to follow suit, wrinkling the deep red carpet beneath his boots. Though he did not wish to alarm the rest of the Tower, he would not give up this lead now. The boy had left him no choice.

The boy was quicker than he was, that much was certain, but he was a piss-poor hider, mostly because he thought he was clever. At a hallway intersection, one door was left ajar and the other was tightly shut. One firm push onto the closed door elicited a yelp of surprise. Cullen grabbed ahold of the boy’s arm and pinned him to the wall of the small supply closet, pressing his forearm down onto his throat. He tried to be gentle enough, without allowing him to get the slip.

The boy was only an apprentice, but often that meant the most dangerous. Apprentice meant untrained, and untrained meant unable to distinguish their mana from their emotions, unable to
control their outbursts. Cullen maintained a steady drain of his magic. It required a fair amount of effort, as he had rarely had to do it since training. But a steady drain could not only stabilize his magic and keep them both safe, it could calm the boy. Or, at least, he hoped.

“You’re awful bloody jumpy, you know that? I just wanted to talk.”

The spit from the boy’s mouth hit his face nearly before Cullen could finish his sentence. He could have tightened his grip, but he resisted the urge. He didn’t know quite why, but there were flashes. Niall’s venomous tone, “Just like she said”, and icy blues that seemed to watch his soul.

“Dirthara-ma, shem. Uldred bellanaris din’an heem.”

Cullen had no way to understand him, of course. Elvish was certainly not a part of Chantry curriculum. It was a dead language, anyway, or so he thought. But he was sure, regardless, that he got the gist.

“What a coincidence—Uldred was just the man I wanted to talk to you about.” The boy sneered. “You’ll tell me what he’s doing or I’ll give you to Greagoir and Irving, and you’ll like them far less than you like me.”

“He understands us! He won’t sit on his hands like the templars, let the Blight take us! He knows! He knows what the templars know but will not tell us! The Libertarians are behind him, the Isolationists too! And the maleficarum!”

“Maleficarum? What does he need maleficarum for?”

“Fen’Harel ma halam,” he muttered.

Cullen increased his drain.

The boy hissed. “To make us better! Make us complete! So we can fight the darkspawn! He saw what was at Ostagar—he knows what’s coming. He wants us to be ready for it. Templars want us all to die here. The Knight-Commander would rather the darkspawn kill us all, save him the trouble.” Cullen shook his head in disbelief. “We’re going to make everyone better—whole again!”

“We?” Cullen narrowed his eyes, processing the boy’s comment. As the elf boy clawed at his arm, he glanced down at the boy’s sleeves. Furrowing his brow, he swiftly pulled them down with his other hand. Scars, some old, some fresh, littered the boy’s otherwise smooth dark skin.

It should have angered him. It should have infuriated him. In a way, it did. Not in the way that it should. But mostly, he felt the sadness come crashing upon him like a swift blow to the chest. It gave him a horrible sick feeling that ate, and ate, and ate upon him, each time more painful than the last. Was this what Greagoir had meant when he had said he saw weakness inside him? Cullen thought he had pried it out with tooth and nail when he had cast her from his mind. He hoped to have uprooted it, like a weed, but it seemed to have only grown back incessantly; mercilessly.

The man Cullen would have grabbed the boy by the ear and dragged him to the Knight-Commander’s office to give a second confession. It would take Greagoir not much longer than it had taken him to find the scars. Then, the elf boy who was not more than fifteen would have been made tranquil. And the man Cullen would have lived with that.

But the boy Cullen could not. The boy Cullen still thought of her, and her face, staring back at him void of feeling and life, but still alive. Heart beating, but barely. Eyes that he could no longer see himself staring back in. Eyes that no longer stirred him. He thought of tranquility and he shuddered. And so the boy Cullen let the elf go. As Cullen wiped the spit from his face, the elf boy sprinted out
of the supply closet in a mad dash, and the padded sound of his echoed footsteps in the corridor faded, faded, faded away.

~~~

The encounter with the boy had exhausted Cullen. The drain had required a great deal of his power, and that night, he fell onto his bunk after a heavy dose of lyrium, and sleep took him.

In the fade he was drowning. Hands that he did not know grabbed at him below the water and held him there. What scared him most was that he did not reach up. He did not fight. He let the darkness take him; another corpse in the dark, blue deep. And then he woke.

Somehow, the watery grave in his dream had been terribly familiar. Though he had caught only a glimmer of it from beneath the dark, it had felt to him like the small lake he had gone to so often as a boy, on the occasion that his siblings overwhelmed him. He would skip stones across the water’s surface and watch the ripples, entranced by their rhythmic simplicity. Now, that peaceful memory blended with this nightmare, and he shuddered. Was there nothing the creatures of the Fade held sacred? No part of a person that even they would not touch? He longed for dreamless sleeps, like the dwarves of Orzammar had. Miles beneath the surface with stone above their heads, they slept soundly each night without fear of the Fade, or the demons that embodied it. Cullen was envious.

But envy was a sin, along with so many other thoughts he had dancing around in his head and eating at his soul, like termites. When he prayed, lately, he found himself praying only for forgiveness.

His early-morning rise gave him a headache.

His brothers had not yet woke, and so Cullen dressed with care and ease, and made sure his footfalls out the door and into the dimly lit corridor were as soft as could be.

It was not ten steps from the door when he could go no further, as a cloaked figure came rounding the hall that halted his steps and froze his mind and soul. But he could not back away. The figure of Uldred prowled like a wolf might, closer and closer, grinning wildly at him. Cullen felt that if the sorcerer’s jaws opened any wider, they would open and engulf him and eat him whole.

“Templar,” the dark form hissed, much like a serpent. But his voice was many voices. It was Greagoir’s, and Solena’s, and his family’s, and the voice of the elf boy he had let run from him. It was voices he had known ages ago, and voices he would come to know. And they had all come to watch him crumble. “You cannot hide your soul from a god.”

Cullen could not open his mouth. Before Uldred’s teeth could tear at the skin of his face, the world went dark.

He woke again, his clothes and bedsheets drenched in sweat. The decision was quick. The walk to Greagoir’s office was not.

~~~

Like they had only one month prior, the uniform sound of marching footsteps echoed throughout the tall, stony walls of Kinloch Hold. This time, Cullen was among them.

The men Greagoir had rallied had been eager to answer the call. Too eager, Cullen thought. Like lion cubs fighting over a fresh kill, brother had shoved aside brother in hopes of being chosen for the select squadron that would move in on Uldred. Cullen blamed it on the war. The men were eager to have a physical enemy here, in the tower. One through which they could channel their fear and
uncertainty into a sense of purpose and renewed control. Cullen doubted very much they would be successful.

As compensation for his efforts, Cullen was selected to march at the head, with the Knight-Commander. He was anxious. His night-terrors had not helped, certainly. But it was what was to come that day that truly frightened him.

He saw the terrified faces of the mages as they rounded every corner and passed door after door. He wondered at how many of them had sacrificed their blood as well as their sanity at Uldred’s feet. Perhaps he truly did not want to know.

It was Greagoir who pounded on Uldred’s office door, a sound that straightened the backs of every man, woman and child in the hall.

“Maker damn you, open up, Uldred! You know why we’re here!” Greagoir boomed.

“What—what is the meaning of this?” Irving appeared behind the two of them, having pushed his way through stiff armored shoulders to arrive at the front of the crowd. “Why was I not informed such military action would be taking place?”

“We thought you’d better be kept out of this one, old friend.” Greagoir responded gruffly. “Might hit too close to home.”

“This is an outrage! You cannot drag mages out of their quarters in the middle of the day to arrest them without my signed consent—parading your troops down the hall like a barbarian! There are children here!”

Greagoir took two long, heavy steps towards the Enchanter so he could peer into his eyes, his chest puffed out so proudly that it almost touched the smaller man—an intimidation tactic that Cullen had seen from him many-a-time. Irving stood his ground. The frail old man seemed to have some fight left in him, after all.

“Then let this serve as an example to them,” Greagoir seethed. “What happens to maleficar who fester like rats inside the walls of my Tower.”

Irving shook his head. “The Circle will hear of this, Greagoir,” he spat. Greagoir paid no attention to him. He had already walked back to the door, and proceeded to pound on it more with a hard fist.

“Uldred, we will knock down this door! This is your last warning, you bloody snake!”

He was met with silence. Greagoir turned to Cullen and seemed to huff with defeat. He motioned for the troops behind him, and a large templar stepped forward—taller than Cullen by a foot and far heavier besides. He had to only force his shoulder against the door but three times before it gave way. Cullen saw the man tremble as he stood back.

Greagoir entered first. Cullen followed him and Irving pursued behind. But two steps into the room, and the three of them halted. Uldred was nowhere to be found. Instead, where the far wall might have been, there was an awful, sickly green glow were it not for its color, it might have been a crack in the wall. Its edges were so bright that Cullen could barely peer inside. What he could see was warped, and terrible, and it felt like the screams of his family, of Solena, high-pitched and deafening. It filled him with dread and an unspeakable sadness that tainted all of his happiest memories.

Above the green, smeared on the wall in dripping blood were the words, “We will ascend.”
Cullen thought he saw claws gripping the edges of the green tear, right before the screams in his head became so deafening that he could only remember the noise, the horrible green, the dripping blood which soon became rivers, then the white—a murderous, piercing, all-encompassing white—and nothing else.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
The cold night air at their camp in the Hinterlands was filled with ash that clogged their lungs and nostrils, and had become an appropriate omen of the day they had had, and the many similar days and nights they would have yet to come.

As Alistair stood warming his hands by the fire, he looked to his left and saw a hornless Qunari, convicted of murder. He looked to his right and saw the lay sister that had sullied three trained and seasoned men in a bar brawl. If he peered to the edge of camp, the swamp witch milled about her own small fire, likely plotting the quiet and painful deaths of every bloody one of them. And next to him, Solena slept quietly as a mouse. It was all so bloody surreal.

“That fire smells horrible. Add a log, at least. For your sake, since you’ll be the one keeping watch.” The sister spoke to him in a low voice, cautious of the sleeping woman beside him. Alistair acknowledged her with incoherent grumbling and by doing as she asked, sitting himself back down on the dirt once he finished. It was a sweet enough sounding suggestion from the sister, if he didn’t know it was really a command.

At dawn, they would ride for Redcliffe. He had insisted he keep watch that night. He would not sleep anyway, and though he needed years to properly collect his thoughts, he would settle for the night. Solena had protested, of course, at first. But she protested little after her yawns had started. Alistair doubted the Qunari would close his eyes that night, though. He started to wonder if he ever closed his eyes. That thought startled him.

Though, he supposed if the beast was going to crush their skulls, eat the bloody horses and leave, that it would be a less painful end still than what the Teyrn had planned for them. In times like these, one really must look on the bright side.

Below him, there was a loud, abrupt rustling, and Solena sat up, straight as a needle. Her wool blanket pooled at her waist. Her face was offputtingly spooked. She did not look at anything in particular, and her hands were clamped tightly over her mouth.

“Bad dreams?” he offered.

She did not respond.

“I get them all the time. They were at their worst right after my Joining. Scared me shitless, child that I was. Still do, in their own way. Less startling, maybe.”

Still, the woman was silent. She removed her hands slowly from her face and grasped at the dirt. She squished it beneath the palms of her hands and in between her fingers, as if she felt it for the first time.

“Anything you want to talk about?”

When the response was not there, he shook his head and prodded the fire. Out of the corner of his
eye, he saw the sister crawl inside her tent. At least, if she did decide to talk to him, they’d have a shred of privacy.

“I haven’t dreamed in years,” she confessed at once. She sounded far-off and distant—as if in a dank, dark echoed room many miles away.

“What?” he tossed the prod aside, baffled.

“I take tea at night. It cuts off my connection to the Fade, for a time. I got these… terrible night terrors when I was a kid. I’d wake up screaming, drenched in sweat, every night, the sisters didn’t know what to do with me, the Revered Mother said a prayer over me—didn’t help, and the Templars…well. Their patience always wore very thin.”

He listened intently as her face turned to a small half-smile.

“So Irving gave me tea.”

“Irving?”

“Oh! That’s right, you were never stationed. First Enchanter. He mentored me. Took a liking to me as a child, I guess.”

“I shudder to imagine what you were like as a child.” he smiled and so did she.

“Oh, equal parts wild and…scared shitless.” She laughed—a sound he had not heard before. He thought of asking her to do it again, so it might put him to sleep.

“The tea…it worked,” she continued. “I haven’t dreamt since. And then…tonight. There were flashes the…the night of the Joining.” She looked at him hesitantly as she referenced it. He was sure his face reflected a similar discomfort. “I didn’t know what they were until now.”

He thought he might respond, but the heart of the fire distracted him.

“Is that…really the Archdemon?” she pulled him out of his trance with a question. He didn’t know how long he had been staring.

“You’re asking me if it’s really a dragon?”

She furrowed her brow.

“Sorry. You’re asking what I asked Duncan, my first night as a Warden. If it’s speaking to you. If it’s really the Archdemon popping in to say hello, or if it’s all just one big trick of the Fade.”

“And?”

Alistair shook his head. “I don’t know. No one knows. Well, maybe someone did, but it doesn’t matter now. It’s the Taint. The darkspawn blood. Gets into your head, and it fucks with you. How it does that…doesn’t matter. It’s just one more thing to get used to.”

“It doesn’t matter to you if an Old God is seeing into your head, whispering into your ear?”

He shrugged. “Should it? Don’t know if I believe any of that, anyway. It’s a dragon, and the damned things worship it. We kill it, the Blight ends.”

“Surely you know that the truth is something far more complicated.”
“Not from where I’m standing. Belief and investment in all that rubbish just gives it power. I choose not to do that.”

That seemed to defeat her. She shook her head, and appeared to have no more questions as she looked away. All of the sudden, her head darted back to him and she glared curiously.

“What did you mean when you said, ‘one more thing to get used to’?”

His heart fell to the pit of his stomach and he sighed. “Maker…”

“What? What is it?”

He shouldn’t be the one to tell her. That was cruel, even for the Wardens. But so were their circumstances. It would be crueler not to tell her. He would want to know. When Duncan had told him, he had been angry, of course. He felt tricked; betrayed. Demanded to know why he wasn’t told sooner. But he had nowhere else to go, and Duncan knew that too. He had…he had just gotten used to it. Whether or not she would…well.

“There’s the hunger! Oh, the hunger…” he started. “Maker, the days after my Joining I raided the kitchens. The cook found me the next morning, passed out in a self-made bed of biscuit and cheese crumbs. And, well, let’s see, you know about the dreams—”

“Spit it out, Alistair.”

“You’ve got thirty more years to live.” he blurted, before he could think to stop himself. He cleared his throat. “At most.”

And there came the look that he had dreaded. Sheer, pointed anger. At him, no doubt. Her brows creased together and her eyes were icy and hard.

“No.” It came as a whisper. She cocked her head and her jaw tightened.

“The Taint in their blood is a poison,” he explained, “and it effects all living creatures the same—the Wardens have no cure. But when taken in such large doses, drinking it…it either changes you or it kills you outright. No one knows why some people adapt and others don’t. As far as I’ve been able to tell, it’s random chance. But it gives us an edge. We can sense darkspawn, hear them, a mile away. You did, at the Tower of Ishal. And I can too. And we’re the only ones that can kill an Archdemon, supposedly. But it…it’s in your blood. And it’s killing you. Slowly, but surely. And then, one day—thirty, twenty, ten years from now…”

An angry wetness had formed at the corners of her eyes and her voice broke. “It’s a lie.”

“It’s not a lie. It’s an omission. Do you think we’d get bloody volunteers if—”

“Call it whatever you like. Your army thrives on tricking people into some cruel joke, like these people’s lives are meaningless to you! That’s not right!”

“It’s not right? What’s not right is to sit and do nothing while villages are burned and innocents are slaughtered! The men and women at Ostagar were soldiers! They were prepared to die that day for their country, let alone thirty years from now! Every battle we see after that will be a million times worse, and you have to know that now, or it’ll come as one big shock for you later. Pig farmers and their wives and children will be run down by the hundreds, people will starve and wither away in the cold, but Wardens can do something about that—you can wake up and do something. Or you can go back and sit in your tower on a lake and hope the darkspawn don’t reach you.”
“How dare you—”

“Don’t start. You know I’m right. We both know why you’re here. You go back, and you’re miserable, or you stay, and you make something of yourself. Say what you will, but I know I chose right.”

“You believe that. You actually believe that those are your only two options in life?”

“I do. And it’s not right, and it’s not fair, but it’s the way things are. I was furious when Duncan told me. I threw things, smashed plates, I’m sure. Said things I regret. But you know what? Time and age and the rest of your forsaken life have a way of giving you some perspective. And now…now I’d give anything to give him my thirty years. If it’d…if it’d just bring him back.”

“Alistair…”

“He’s gone, and I know that, alright?” In a moment of clarity, he heard the sound of his own voice and realized he was crying. He hoped the bloody swamp witch hadn’t heard the shouting and decided to look over.

“Alistair, I’m so sorry,” she said warmly.

“He told me…” he started. The words had a hard time forming themselves into sounds. “He told me, not too long ago, that he was hearing it.”

“Hearing…?”

“The Calling. What all Wardens hear, when it’s time. When it comes, a Warden says their last goodbyes and heads down into the Deep Roads, to die in battle.”

“What does it sound like?”

“If I knew, we’d be in trouble.” It was supposed to be a joke, but neither of them laughed. “But Duncan seemed to think it was just intuitive. He said, after Ostagar, that he’d go. I guess I really just tried not to think about it.”

“Alistair,” she began. He turned. “He didn’t die for nothing.”

“Yes, I’d like to believe that,” he told her. He knew it sounded a lot like hypocrisy. He was just glad she chose not to call him out on it. “He was from Highever. At least, that’s what he told me. After this is all done—if this is ever over, I’d…I’d like to go there. Set up a memorial in his honor. It’s the bloody least I could…I mean—”

“I’ll go with you.” Her hand that was still muddy from the ground moved to lay on top of his own. The sensation was warm and cold all at once and oddly soothing. “If you’ll have me,” she added.

“Alistair,” she began. He turned. “He didn’t die for nothing.”

“I’d like that,” he said. And that was the truth. He’d go on his own if he had to, but having someone with him might make the toll on his heart just that much more bearable. Her offer was selfless. It surprised him.

“We can pitch you a tent, you know,” he offered. “We have the supplies.” She shook her head. Her hand moved and left his own upsettingly cold. She laid her back down on her small makeshift bed of blankets, lacing her fingers together and propping them behind her head.

“When you’ve spent your entire life looking up at the same stone wall…well. I know plenty of mages who’d give anything for this view.” The smoke from the fire polluted the air, but he could not
deny the beauty of the stars.

“Yourself included?”

“Absolutely.” The grin on her face was contagious.

Here, there was a comfortable silence that they both fell into as easily as one might slip into a wonderful, deep sleep. He had not felt such comfort since the nights at the Warden compound in Denerim. Although those nights were often louder, polluted by the city noise, they held an air of similarity to this one. Often he would sneak upon the roof to look at the stars and would be asleep before he knew it. His brothers had quite the time covering for him when he would be absent from his bunk the next morning. Duncan must have known, but he never told him so.

“How do you know the Arl?” she asked, breaking his reverie.

“Hm?”

“You said he was a good man. Sounded like you knew him.”

“Oh? Did I say that?”

“Yes.”

“That was silly of me. Don’t know him.”

“Sounds like you do.”

“Bloody…” he sat up, rubbing his head between his thumb and forefinger.

“Why are you covering for this?” she remained relaxed, radiating indifference. The woman was a bloody menace.

“I’m not—listen,” he started, and sighed a heavy sigh. He had not planned on telling her this tonight. He would tell her tomorrow, when she was rested and far less irritable. But she had burrowed down this rabbit hole, and it seemed as though he would follow. Of all the blasted…

He feigned deep thought. “Hm, let’s see, how do I put this—I’m a bastard.” He saw her mouth threaten to open and he jumped one step ahead of her. “And before you make any smart comments, I mean the fatherless kind.” Her lips closed and she seemed to want to let him continue.

“My mother was a serving girl in Redcliffe Castle who died giving birth to me. Arl Eamon wasn’t my father, but he took me in anyhow and put a roof over my head. He was good to me. And he didn’t have to be. I respect the man, and I don’t blame him anymore for sending me off to the Chantry once I was old enough.”

“Anymore?” She propped herself up on one elbow.

“Yes, well, you know how kids can be. I was young and resentful and not very pious. I screamed at him—smashed an amulet against the wall, the only thing I’d ever had of my mother’s, and I squandered it.”

“You were a child.”

“I know. And now I’ve nothing to remember her by. I can’t even see her face.”

Solena was silent. The light of the fire framed her. She did not look at him, but slightly past him, to
the right. She was somewhere else again—far-off. He wondered if this would be a regular thing of hers. He continued anyway.

“Eamon eventually married a young woman from Orlais, which caused all sorts of problems between him and the King, because it was so soon after the war. But I think he did love her. Anyhow, the new Arlessa resented rumors that pegged me as Eamon’s bastard. They weren’t true, but of course they existed. So off I was packed to the nearest monastery at age ten. Just as well. The Arlessa made sure the castle wasn’t a home to me at that point. She despised me.”

Solena seemed quiet. But she must have just been considering what he had told her, because her question came sure enough.

“Did he visit?”

“For a time, just to see how I was. But I was stubborn, and I hated it there, and I blamed him for everything. After a while, he just stopped coming.”

She had no response this time. Alistair instantly regretted telling her what he had. She was likely only asking to make polite conversation, or to get a sense of the Arl and his character. Instead he had told her a pathetic sob story.

“All I know is that Arl Eamon is a good man,” he said. “And well-loved by his people. And he was Cailan’s uncle, so he has a personal stake in seeing Loghain pay.”

She nodded.

“That’s good. We can work with that.” She let her elbow slip out from under her and went back to her resting position.

“How can you sleep in this bloody camp?” he asked her in a harsh whisper.

“Why? Can’t sleep?”

“Not with this lot.” He scoffed.

“Oh, they’re not so bad.”

“How can you say that?”

“Leliana wanted to help. She seemed earnest. And she’s a Chantry sister, how bad can she be?”

“She took down three of Loghain’s men in that pub. Almost single-handedly.”

“…She’s a very good Chantry sister.”

“Right.”

“Sten…Sten’s quiet, and a little foreboding, but I don’t think he’ll hurt us.”

Alistair glanced carefully in the Qunari’s direction, where he sat cross-legged on a rock, eyes closed and stone-faced. Alistair wondered if he would look the same come morning.

“A little foreboding? Solena, he’s a murderer—”

“The Revered Mother seemed to agree it would be best that he go with us.”
“Did she now? Please. With the darkspawn horde closing in on that bloody town, I think she didn’t want the trouble of having to execute him herself.”

“I think that’s being a little harsh.”

It wasn’t.

“And what’s wrong with Morrigan?” Solena asked, as if she were some sort of simple idiot. *What was wrong with her?* Please. He looked over to where the witch resided, a safe distance away from them, though Alistair wished she were further. She had not yet retired to her tent, it seemed. Instead she sat cross-legged and played with the fire in front of her, melding it with her hands as it turned colorful shades of purple, green, blue and black. Once she took notice of his prolonged stare, a pair of bright yellow eyes, like two blinding golden jewels, glared daggers back at him.

“Well, aside from the fact that she’s a complete and utter *bitch*—you’re right, what’s not to like?” he retorted.

“I like her.”

“Yeah, well, you would.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I suppose I’m naturally a bit more distrustful of an apostate that’s lived away from civilization her entire life than you are.”

“It must be better than the Tower.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Fine, can we drop this?” he asked the child, impatiently.

“She and her mother saved us. And Morrigan tended to your wounds. You should thank her.”

“Yes, well.”

“It’s probably why she hates you so much. She thinks you’re ungrateful.”

“Get some sleep, Solena.”

“Suit yourself.” She turned over in her blankets.

He stood up and walked away from the fire. It had become too hot and it had messed with his lungs, anyhow. If he were to make himself useful, it would be best to check the perimeter. He grabbed his sword that lied in the dirt and went on his way.

He cut through brush, checking all the noise traps they had set and making sure they were still in place. He and Morrigan had gotten into what must have been their tenth argument of the day when she insisted that she could set magical traps that would be “fifty times more effective than your child’s toys here”. But Alistair had won out, and had strung string, metal cups and spoons, as well as tree bark together around most of the outer camp edge. Checking the traps was mindless work, and as they had only set the traps a short while ago, it wasn’t really work that needed doing, but he needed something to do while he thought.
The Arl would not want to see him. He had realized that the moment he had suggested they seek his help, and then it was too late to take it back. And why should he? The last the Arl remembered of him was the brat of a boy that he was. The man had cared for him as he would his own son, and he had paid that love back only with hatred.

Now he came crawling back, begging on his hands and knees for help. How would the others see him when the Arl rejected him? He had every reason to, the least of which being Alistair’s lack of childhood gratitude, and the most of which being…well.

He couldn’t tell her. He couldn’t risk complicating their purpose, twisting it into something that could just as easily be used against them. He just had to hope and pray that the Arl would set personal grievances aside in favor of common ground, and a common enemy.

Alistair found himself thumbing at the incessant thing he kept in his pocket, and wondered why he had bothered with it in the first place. It was a stupid notion.

Behind him, a twig snapped. In an instant, his blade was pointed at the throat of a dwarven man with raised arms emerging from the trees, and another trailing slightly behind him. The former nudged the latter, indicating that he should follow suit and surrender.

“Pardon me, Master, we mean you no harm!” the older, red-bearded one in the front said.

“I remember you,” Alistair realized. “We passed you on the Highway. What is the meaning of this? Have you been following us?”

“No. I mean, well, yes.” The bearded dwarf said as he lowered his hood. “But all with good intentions, I might add! My apologies, allow me to properly introduce myself—Bodahn Feddic, at your service! And this bright-eyed lad here is my boy, Sandal. Say hello, Sandal!”

“Hullo,” he managed a small wave. Sandal was clean-shaven and blonde and his eyes were blue, glassy and distant.

“Very good. We two are traveling merchants, you see. But, with things being as they are with the war and all, well, business has not exactly been booming, as they say. Not only that, but it’s dangerous for two defenseless dwarves walking the Highway, trying to make a living! When our paths crossed at first, I didn’t think anything of it, but now, I’ve had some time, and, well, what safer place is there than the camp of two Grey Wardens? Hm?”

Alistair lowered his sword and let out an exasperated huff. “I don’t know who you think we are, but you and your son need to leave. We aren’t taking in stragglers.”

“What’s going on here?” Solena appeared at his side with a sickeningly pleasant demeanor, startling him half to death. Sandal gave her a shy wave and she gave him an overly enthusiastic one in return. “Hi!”

“Oh, Sandal? No, he’s not my son. Found him in the Deep Roads years ago, I did! Just wandering about! Not much of a talker, you can see, but from what I could get, he was lost, and his parents were, well, you know.” He made some sort of strangled noise and confusing motion with his finger and neck. Alistair got the picture.

“How horrible,” Solena empathized.

“So I took him under me own wing! Turns out, the boy has a knack for enchantments! You know, placing magical runes on weapons and other such things! We took him to the Circle, and an enchanter said—oh, what was the word he used…a savant! That’s right!”
“Enchantment!” Sandal agreed, giddily.

“Is there a point you’ll be reaching soon?” Alistair asked. Solena smacked his arm.

“Oh! Right! So that’s where you come in! The way I see it, we can help! I’m sure Grey Wardens such as yourselves will have need of my boy’s special talents—and free of charge, too! I can also offer you my wares at a discounted price, of course. In exchange, all we ask is safe harbor at your fine camp.”

“Your wares?” Alistair eyed suspiciously the two men who had nothing on them save the clothes on their backs.

“Oh, we parked our cart a few yards down the road, of course! Didn’t want to startle you.” Bodahn smiled eagerly.

“Look, there’s been some mistake. We’re not Grey—”

“Alistair, come on. They’re harmless. And he’s right, we could use them.”

He crossed his arms and glared down at her.

“Can I speak to you, alone?” It wasn’t a question. He grabbed her by the elbow and moved her aside, out of earshot, all while he listened to her irritated protests.

“What is your problem?” she demanded.

“My problem? We’ve picked up two extremely dangerous tagalongs in one day, now you want two more?”

“Extremely dangerous? Those two?” She all but laughed.

“He says his son’s an enchanter, that’s not even possible, he’s a dwarf!”

“Hey, maybe he’ll surprise you. If not, we’re doing a good thing for these people. Have a heart, Alistair.”

“I don’t think we should keep this high of a profile, alright? It was a mistake in Lothering, and now Loghain’s got a bounty on our heads. That news spreads fast.”

She placed a dainty hand on his breastplate.

“Relax. I’ll protect you from the mean, horrible dwarf men.” She winked and walked away before he could grab at her.

“Do you two need help pulling the cart?” she yelled back at them through the brush. He mouthed the word “NO” at her more times than he could count.

“Oh thank you very much, my dear, but we’ll manage on our own, won’t we Sandal? Thank the kind lady, my boy!”

“Thank you, kind lady.”

“We’ll be back in a jiffy! You won’t regret this, I promise you that!”

He heard the rustling of leaves and he buried his face in his hands.
“You’re going to get us all bloody killed. They’re going to come back with an entire army, I just bloody know it,” he mumbled.

“Oh, ye of little faith.” She shoved playfully at his shoulder and walked back in the direction of the camp. His nighttime watch was off to a roaring start.

~~~

To Alistair’s amazement, every one of them survived the night. It was less on his account and more out of sheer luck, it seemed. Bodahn and Sandal were true to their word, at least for now, and the Qunari had decided to postpone his murder-spree for another night.

Still, he remained sleepless. Leliana had insisted he shut his eyes while the rest of them packed camp that morning, but sleep would not take him. He did not mind it so much. She seemed to mind it more, and eyed him with suspicion when she noted what must have been obvious signs of his exhaustion.

“This not-sleeping thing of yours is going to take a toll on all of us. You should see Morrigan. She might be able to make you something that could help,” the sister told him as they packed up their gear, side by side.

“Help to put me to sleep and never wake up, more like.”

He glanced at the back of the sister’s head and a thought came to him.

“So…what do you think happened to all those people we left behind in Lothering?”

She shot him a confused glance while she shoved her deconstructed tent into her pack.

“Well, I didn’t know the place like you did,” he clarified. “Maybe they—”

“Maybe some of them found their way to Denerim, but that is doubtful. The rest of them are dead, as the Maker has willed.”

Alistair paused and turned to face her fully, his own pack falling lax in his arm. “And you don’t wish you could have stayed there? To help people?”

“If the Blight isn’t stopped, everyone will die.” She tightened the straps on her armored gloves. “This is the greater good we’re serving—both of us. Right here.”

“I…I believe that, yeah. That doesn’t mean you can’t—”

She shook her head and smiled to herself. “You believe what you must, Alistair. There is still worse to come yet.” She closed her pack and fastened it. After a pause, her eyes searched his, and for a moment he felt naked. “You will need to steel yourself. You know this.”

“I’m…fine.”

“I don’t believe you. And either way, you don’t have a choice.” She picked up her bags and her bow, and left him behind to go saddle her horse.

~~~

The morning Fereldan countryside was an admittedly welcome sight. Lush trees, flowing, dewy hills and the snow-topped mountains far off to the west made the landscape look a painting. But no one in their party seemed quite as taken with it as Solena. He had often found her trailing behind on
her horse, and had the displeasure of having to wake her from, well, wherever it was her mind took her as she gazed at the horizon. He was hard-pressed to recall a woman who had ever looked at him the way she now looked upon the Fereldan Hinterlands. She had called the scene an “enchantment”, and Sandal had wholeheartedly agreed. Her wonder was...a pleasant enough thing to behold.

He had begun to wonder at why it was she stayed. Certainly, it was the honorable thing to do, and as a Grey Warden it was her duty, but he had seen enough to know she didn’t care for any of that. There were no Fereldan Wardens left, and if she decided to desert, he couldn’t stop her. He wouldn’t even try. So, he wondered. But he had not yet gathered up the courage to ask.

Leliana, at the head of the group, seemed to smell the air in a grandiose manner, and sighed like some smitten Orlesian noblewoman from a trashy romance serial.

“Oh, I just love days like these. There’s no greater reminder of the glory of the Maker’s creation.” She smiled to herself. Alistair just hoped this wouldn’t set her on some wild tangent.

“Do you believe in the Maker, Morrigan?”

Alistair nearly gagged.

There was a brief silence as they rode. “I do apologize I must have misheard, are you speaking to me?” the witch snapped from the horse adjacent his.

“Oh, of course. I was asking if you believed in the Maker.” Leliana remained unfazed, happy and glowing, like some child’s doll. Nothing like earlier that morning.

“Certainly not! I’ve no primitive fear of the moon such that I must place my faith in tales so that I may sleep at night.”

“But look at this!” Leliana gestured vaguely to the hills with the hand that wasn’t poised on her reins and saddle. “This can’t all be an accident. And spirits! Magic, all these wondrous things around us, both dark and light. You know these things exist.”

Morrigan pinched her face together and narrowed her eyes in befuddlement. “The mere fact of their existence does not presuppose an intelligent design by some absentee father-figure.”

Alistair found the corner of his mouth rising in stifled amusement.

“So it is all random, then? A happy coincidence that we are all here?” Leliana asked, patiently.

“I do not know about you, but I would not call that coincidence happy.” Morrigan glanced at Alistair and the rest. But certainly, very pointedly at Alistair.

“I meant in general,” she clarified.

“I know very well what you meant, and attempting to impose order over chaos is futile. Nature is, by its very nature, chaotic.” Morrigan explained simply.

“I don’t believe that. Our destinies are not so easily avoided. I believe we have a purpose—all of us.”

“Yours, apparently, being to bother me.”

“Look! Is that it?” Solena pointed excitedly.

True enough, as they moved over the rise, Redcliffe Castle came into view, shadowed by the
clouds above. Sharp rays of light struck through, highlighting parts of the castle he had once known but had forgotten with time. The castle sat high upon a rocky island on the lake, and across from it lay the town, protected from view by rock, tree and hill. Everything about the town appeared still, even the water—a stark contrast from the bustling trade hub of his youth. The fishwives that swarmed the markets, the loud brothers that would preach in the square, the knights that patrolled on horseback—all absent. The streets of Redcliffe were empty, and all was quiet.

“Look at the trees,” Solena called, her head turned to the tall pines above—if one could even call them that. The leaves had been burned off and the trunks were singed off every tree in a clean line leading down the road that went from the castle down to the village.

“Something’s not right,” he heard himself say, and he shook his reins of his horse and hurried well ahead of the group. When he neared the top of the rise, which became the road that led down into the village, another sound of horse’s hooves in the dirt startled him, and he narrowly missed a man on horseback riding up the rise and rounding the corner, moving faster than even he.

“Whoa there! Whoa!” The man called out and reared his horse. He was in full plate and his shield bore the red tower. Alistair recognized the man without a second look.

“Ser Donall! Ser Donall, hold!”

“My apologies, Ser, but do I—” recognition flashed upon his face, and something else. “Alistair, by the Maker, is that you? What are you doing here?”

Not ignored was the caution with which Donall asked his intentions. The sounds of the rest of the party approaching came quietly to his left.

“We’ve come to speak to Eamon, on urgent business. Has something happened? Where is Bann Teagan?”

Donall seemed at a loss, and wore the most curious of looks. “Do you truly not know? Does no one out there know?”

“Out there? What—”

“Why should anyone out there care for the troubles of your putrid fishing village?” spoke the witch. “As if the rest of the world did not have a Blight to contend with.”

“A…a Blight? I beg your pardon?”

The group was silent.

An eternity passed, and Alistair cleared his throat. “Donall, please. What is it that’s happened?”

“I cannot stay long. I make haste for Denerim, on Bann Teagan’s orders. You can find him down in the village Chantry, he arrived only but a few days ago, he’ll want to see you. But, I’m sorry, I’m afraid speaking to the Arl will not be possible. Nor, for that matter, will you make it to the castle. It has closed its gates to the village, they haven’t opened in a month’s time.”

“Spit it out, man! What’s happened to him?”

“Alistair, it pains me to bear you such news. Eamon is deathly ill.”

Chapter End Notes
I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
Part II

-Dead Come Knocking-

SOLENA

"It is a grave matter," the Bann said, and with every word Alistair’s state grew worse. “Isolde has done all that she can, and she searches for every remedy, but Eamon has remained comatose for a month’s time."

The Bann of Rainesfere had welcomed them to Redcliffe village with open arms. The Chantry, it seemed, had become a shelter for the weak and weary, and reeked of fear and refuse. Tired looking villagers who sat upon blankets and the dirty floor in makeshift hovels begged them for alms and aid as quickly as they could walk in the door. The Revered Mother made her rounds, blessing the poor and the sick and the young and old in a routine fashion, though not, Solena believed, without heart. The scene had left her shaken.

The seven of their party, and also the Bann, sat on wooden benches in the back of the Chantry, and took the news that only kept on coming. Leliana’s eyes were sad and worried. Sten remained like stone. Morrigan leaned her head upon a wall. Bodahn and Sandal held none of their cheery disposition. But Alistair was the worst, his hands covering his face as he hunched over into a ball. Solena bit at her thumbnail, and glanced over at him as often as she was able without appearing a worried wreck.

“How…” came Alistair’s muffled and strained voice. “How did this happen?”

“Truly, I could not say. All I know of the goings-on in the castle was contained in the letter I received from Isolde, once all of this started. I have had no communication with anyone inside since. And I am truly sorry, Alistair, I wish I had more to give you. But, and I am sorry to say this so bluntly, what is happening up on that rock is far from my primary concern. It is this village that needs my help now—and yours, if you are willing to give it.”

“We have greater concerns than that of your village, surely you know this. Why is it you keep the truth from them, I wonder?” Morrigan asked, rather tactlessly, she thought.

“These people are tired, hungry, and scared,” the Bann bit back, clearly offended by her inquiry. “News of the Blight and the death of their King would crush them. I have to think of them, first. I must maintain morale as much as I can, which is why I ask your aid.”

“Scared? Of what?” Solena asked. “These people look destitute. Why are so many out of their homes? What has happened here?”

Bann Teagan shook his head; stared down at his hands. “I fear you would not believe me if I told
“You don’t seem to have a choice,” she told him.

He laughed without humor. “You are right about that. From what I am told, trouble in the village started when the rest of it did, a month ago.”

She glanced at Alistair. Her look must have clued the Bann to what she was thinking. It was so bizarre to think on, when Ostagar felt like so many years ago, not just a moon’s cycle.

“Yes, I know,” he said. “I don’t know how much of this could be coincidence, but I don’t dare think on it what with so much else going on. Since the day the castle shut its gates, every night has been a waking terror for these people. It is some…some curse. It must be. It…” he struggled with the words. “The living dead wake each night in that castle and they crawl down the rock. They rise from the lake, and they attack the town in force.”

Perhaps the Bann waited for signs of their disbelief, but none came.

“Every night the militia has done what they can while the rest hide in the Chantry, but we have lost many, and I do not know how long this can last.”

“So why send your knights away, then? It seems terribly counter-productive of you.” said Morrigan.

“Ha! That is hardly the truth. I have sent one, Ser Donall, and only because he so wished it, out of his devotion to the Arl. Isolde sent the rest, weeks ago. It is a fruitless quest borne of a woman’s love, I fear—a desperate search for her husband’s cure. So far, they have yielded nothing. Redcliffe continues to receive no word from Denerim—from the knights, or the queen. That is how I have managed to keep the news from the village.”

“Don’t you find that strange?” Solena asked.

“Less and less with each day—but more on that later. If you made a stand with these people, fought back the dead alongside them, perhaps it would make a difference. This village could use that kind of hope. I know these people, they would take it and they would run with it. Please, I beg of you.”

The Bann who might have been handsome was tired. Heavy bags soured his kind green gaze, and his furrowed brow cast a heavy shadow. Golden-brown hair hung in his eyes. Alistair seemed to have little sympathy for his pleas.

“You ask me this,” he started, raising his head slightly. “When he lays up there dying?”

“He is my brother, Alistair. No one’s heart aches for him more than I.”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

“What would you have me do? The dead guard the castle. Even if I wanted to abandon these people in favor of your quest, I could not. Help these people and I will do for you what I can.”

“We’ll help,” Solena agreed, straightening her back. Alistair made not a sound.

“I cannot thank you enough. I - ”

“Bann Teagan,” the Revered Mother appeared in the doorway, a haggard look on her face. “It’s Lia. The baby, it will come soon. I fear I do not have enough sisters to aid her.”
Teagan stood at once. “Murdock, the town’s mayor, can speak with you further. Ser Perth, as well. He is one of our only remaining knights. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must tend to our own.”

Leliana perked up. “I can help, too, with the birth. If I am needed. I am affirmed.”

“Maker bless you, child,” the Mother said. “We will take whatever help we can get. Come, come.”

The Mother ushered Leliana out and Teagan followed, and the rest of them sat in a terrible silence that was broken, eventually, by Morrigan.

“Will we next start rescuing kittens from trees, then?”

Solena stood and faced her. “These people need help or they will die. But I suppose your plan is better?”

“I would suggest abandoning the plan entirely, and moving on to track down these treaties you seem so fond of. We tried for your Arl Eamon, and it seems yet doubtful that he will wake before the war is even over. We leave, and we do not look back.”

“We can’t leave,” Solena told her, and she tried to communicate all she could with only the tone of her voice, what with Alistair still hunched over beside her. “That’s final.”

Morrigan scoffed, a reaction she had more or less expected.

“Bodahn, Sandal. You’ll be best suited here. See if the Bann or the Mother need any extra hands.”

“Certainly, ma’am. We’ll do our best,” Bodahn said agreeably. The two hopped off of their stools.

“Sten,” she directed. The Qunari did not scare her, and she cared little for what Alistair thought of him. To not engage with him would be the worst thing she could do. He raised his head slightly to acknowledge her. “Weapons. These people need them - lots of them. Find the blacksmith, and take inventory. Get him to make more than he’ll want to. Help him as best you can.”

Alistair stood behind her, wobbly on two feet. His eyes were bloodshot. “I should go with him. No offense, big man. But a Qunari on his own, walking around making demands, it might scare the locals. We don’t need that.”

“No offense is taken,” Sten answered.

“Alistair, you should -” Solena started.

“I want to go with him.” Alistair interrupted.

She nodded, taking her bottom lip between her teeth and biting down. She moved closer to him, and closer still. Closer than she could ever remember being. She looked up at him with pity in her eyes. “We’re going to do everything we can for these people, Alistair. And for him.”

He looked at her. She thought he might cry. He did not thank her, but he seemed to nod. And so she stepped back.

“Morrigan and I will take care of everything else. We’ll make our rounds, see what needs doing.”

She did not respond, and that was fine.

“Consider it done.” Sten told her, and his hulking form rose from the bench which she had previously worried might snap at the weight of him, and exited the room with Alistair close behind.
She placed her hands upon her hips and idly surveyed the room, sighing. She did not look to the corner where Morrigan sat.

“I know very well of the sentimental value Alistair places on this fool’s errand. You do not need to remind me,” Morrigan spoke. Solena’s eyes searched her face, begging for her cooperation.

“Then, please. Let’s just get this done.”

“That does not mean I see the point in it.”

“If he can’t fix this, it will ruin him. And if, Maker forbid, you can’t bring yourself to care about that, Arl Eamon will be a powerful ally. One we can’t afford to squander now, while there’s still a chance he’s even alive. The Teyrn will make sure we don’t get far without political backing.”

Morrigan raised a dark brow. “You have thought this through, I see.”

“Is that such a surprise to you?”

“I simply believed it was out of childish altruism and the pink that your cheeks turn when that fool enters a room that you agreed to do this. Your foresight is… impressive.”

Solena narrowed her eyes at the crude description of herself that could not have sounded any farther from the truth she knew. Did she truly think of her as some wistful do-gooder that joined the Wardens with lofty ideals and naïve preconceptions? Where had that come from, she wondered, when Alistair thought her to be some selfish shrew, using her chance conscription as an easy self-preservation tactic. Perhaps she had. Of course she had. But it wasn’t so chance, and it wasn’t so easy. Survival. Like a castle in the sand, cobbled together. She could only work with what she had.

“Hardly. It’s practical.”

“Perhaps,” Morrigan pondered. “Perhaps I was wrong about you. Though it is rather difficult for me to imagine they teach practicality, along with politics and intrigue in that Tower of yours.”

“They don’t teach it, no.”

Morrigan considered her for a moment with an upturned nose and contemplative eyes. “Well, then.” She dusted off her skirt as she stood. “Let us get underway while there is still daylight ahead of us, yes?”

~~~

When they rode into Redcliffe the sun was nearly at its highest, and before they knew it, it had sunk lower and lower. Once it became clear that the town needed, truly, days of work before it was near ready to push back against the onslaught, Alistair’s disposition turned far more sour. He was not wrong; the militia was a sorry sight, lined up in front of the Chantry at the behest of Murdock, who led them. All were men who had lost a brother; a wife. One had lost a child. But he still fought, and that seemed to have given Alistair something to work with. Quietly, he went to find any able men and women who could carry a weapon, and convince them to join the cause. Solena thought that unlikely. Many were petrified, looking at their young children and sickly parents, and expressing fear at what should happen if they could not return to them. They had no answers to give, and that was the hardest part of all. Some refused and none could blame them. Most, surprisingly, did not.

Of course, it was still not enough, even after knocking on every door and scouring the Chantry. They were less than seventy strong, and at the start, Alistair had to train them with sad looking weapons carved from wood. Sten and Alistair had reported earlier that the blacksmith had locked
herself in his home, drunk and raving about a daughter - a handmaiden to the Arlessa, a young, plain-looking thing and all the old man had left, still up in the castle where none would go to search for her. He had not accepted Alistair’s “words worth shit”, as he called them, to find and retrieve her if he was able. So Solena swore a vow, something convincing that might tumble easily from a Warden’s lips, and the gruff man was happy enough, it seemed, to open his door and make the weapons Sten had asked for.

Alistair had been skeptical of her intentions, and perhaps miffed that the man had preferred her word to his wholly more honest one. They shared the knowledge that the poor thing could just as well be dead; that she were no more special than the countless other handmaids and servants with patient loved ones who waited in the town, but they needed the weapons now. An old blacksmith’s wrath was something they could deal with later.

Ser Perth asked only for the Maker’s blessing to be placed upon himself and the few remaining knights of his company, and they would steel themselves and be ready. It was a request that the Mother was happy to accommodate after the birth was over. Solena and Morrigan returned to the Chantry later in the day, as the sun threatened to turn pink. They had spent a great deal of time helping to set up defenses. Sweat formed in thin droplets on her brow, arms and neck, and she longed for a warm bath. In the Tower, the alchemists made bath salts of all scents and colors, and others made delightful, frothy bubbles upon which one could blow and watch as they danced in the air and popped on the ceiling. As a child she had stacked hers as high as she could atop her head. Every bath became a competition - a test to see if she could stack the rose-colored bubbles taller than the last time. She used them less as she grew, opting for the soothing salts instead, smelling of rosewater and chamomile. Though one could never soak too long before another apprentice or ten pounded on the wall. It was not all perfect.

She did not envy the Bann, of course. He emerged from behind a screen wearing an apron and gloves, splotched with blood. Some had found its way onto his fine clothes. Out of her periphery, she saw an exhausted Leliana, sitting on a bench and dozing off against the wall behind her. Morrigan went to find some water to splash on her face.

“What sort of Bann,” Solena started as she approached the man, “gets his pretty finery ruined delivering children and aiding the sick?”

He laughed at that, peeling off his gloves. “Hopefully a very good one.”

“Did it go smoothly?”

“Quite. The mother is resting now. The babe, however - ” he was interrupted by a piercing scream. “The sisters are doing their best.”

She gestured to the screen. “May I?”

The corner of his mouth rose in amusement. “Be my guest.”

The babe was wrapped in a blanket that looked to be sewn hastily together from the sisters’ old robes. A sister, sat on the ground, cradled the child and shushed at it, to no avail. She watched Solena enter with the Bann close behind and clearly saw her opportunity.

“Boy or girl?” Solena asked quietly as the child was placed into her waiting arms.

“A girl.” The Bann smiled.

The only babes in the Tower were those that had been given to the Chantry. Or were taken. She
knew of mages that had…accidents. She had volunteered twice to help the sisters in caring for the newborns in the small nursery the Tower kept. There were maybe five children there at the time, and three had grown out of cribs. The newborns cried so. Much like this one. She did not mind. She imagined she would have done the same, a babe in a horrid place like that. Kinloch Hold was no place for children. She supposed that Redcliffe Chantry, in this state, was no fairytale either.

This little one was smaller than those she had held before, and so very red. She cradled her head and rocked her back and forth as she swayed. A hum came from her throat that sounded something like a song she remembered. The words to the lullaby had left her (something with sorrow, perhaps), and besides, she could not recall the last time she had sung. It seemed it was enough. The child’s cries turned to coos and soon it was quiet, softly asleep against her shoulder. The sisters looked at her as if she had performed a miracle. The Bann gazed upon her from the doorway with a look that was not at all difficult to place.

She handed off the sleeping little one reluctantly back to the sister who gave her a warm smile in thanks. She and the Bann exited the room, walking back into the hall.

“You are remarkable,” he claimed. “Not a sister here has been able to quiet the child, not even your friend.”

She smiled softly and pushed a loose strand behind her ear. The Bann seemed hesitant to speak again. “Alistair is very fortunate to have you. There are not many that would go to such lengths for friend or comrade.”

She nodded. “This means something to him. I want to see it through.” He seemed pleased with her answer.

“These people are fortunate to have you,” she countered. “They aren’t even your own.”

He smiled and shook his head at that, looking at his feet and seeming to disappear to another place, and time. “Well, nor are they yours,” he said. “And yet.” He raised his eyes to her.

She cleared her throat, and soon Alistair’s footsteps approached in the hall.

“The defenses are ready,” he announced. “And the troops are ready as they’ll ever be, I expect. They’re green, but they’ve got heart and a will to live through this. They’ll do.” He nodded his head firmly in assurance.

“I cannot thank you enough, Alistair. Truly,” the Bann said. Alistair seemed to look between them expectantly. The Bann clapped his hands together after a quiet, uncertain moment hung in the air. “You must be tired, after a long day’s work. Try the inn on the hill. Let the bartend know your rooms and drinks are my compliments.”

“That’s very kind, you don’t have to - ” she began. He held up his hand in protest.

“Please, I insist. It is the least I could do. We should all get some rest before tonight, I reckon.”

~

Anders had given her ale once. He, Jowan and Niall had sat in a quiet, dimly lit corridor and passed the flask around, and he had offered. Maker knows how he had smuggled it in - perhaps it was for the better that she had not asked. It tasted like swill. The three boys had laughed up a fit as she had coughed and spat and handed it back to them in disgust.

Sitting in the booth in the tavern across from Alistair, she tipped back her mug of the stuff and
swallowed in generous, bitter gulps. He looked upon her through hooded eyes, faintly entertained, clutching his flagon on the table in one hand. He shook his head.

The dark and dirty alcoves Jowan and his friends oft disappeared to, the ones which, to her misfortune she would sometimes stumble across, they were not so different from this inn. The air was dry and stale and the corners were riddled with cobwebs. The place was mostly empty, save for a few of the militia on the opposite side of the bar and a traveler near the door. A spare few torches hung upon the wall, casting a focused glow that did not reach the bar at the room’s center. Orange light shone on only the right half of Alistair’s face, rendering him unreadable.

“I trained a boy of ten today,” he said, drunk.

She had nothing to give in response.

“Begged me to,” he explained, answering a question left unasked. “No parents. Young sister. Wanted to protect her.”

“You did the right thing,” she offered.

“War is no place for a child,” he spat. He glared at her accusingly.

She shrugged lightly, and avoided his gaze. She was not trying to start something now. “Maybe not. He was scared. Perhaps now he is less so.”

“Then I have trained and armed a bloody halfwit. These people should be soiling their trousers. I would be.”

The barmaid glanced in their direction. The militia men grew quiet. Solena put a hand on his forearm and leaned forward. “Alistair, lower your voice.”

“What? So that the kitchen mice don’t hear me?”

“Alistair - ”

The door of the inn swung open, and Leliana stepped through. She glanced once around the place. She headed to the bar.

“Bann Teagan seems hopeful,” Solena assured him. “I think these people may surprise you, he has great faith in them.”

“Oh, The Bann Who Lost Rainesfere? Don’t get your bloody hopes up.” He gave something between a scoff and a laugh. She frowned, not knowing to what he referred.

“What?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t be so surprised. They don’t write about him in the songs, do they? None of the books in your Tower regale the tale of the fine Fereldan lord who let his holdfast burn to the ground during the Occupation?” He seemed to be taking great enjoyment from this.

“I don’t understand.”

“No, you wouldn’t, would you?” Her cheeks flushed hot with embarrassment. He mocked her now, and it hurt more than she would show him. “History is written by the victors, girl. You don’t know half as much as you think you do.”

She stared into the bottom of her cup, looking for answers that she did not find.
Leliana slid into the booth, next to Alistair. She spoke in a calm, muted tone. “Don’t look. By the door, back to us. Fine leatherwork. Expensive scabbard. Tipping the barmaid.”

Solena followed her orders and did not turn. Alistair glanced out of his periphery and narrowed his eyes.

“So?”

“Elf,” Leliana replied. Solena did not understand.

Recognition flashed across Alistair’s face. He seemed to stiffen.

“How do you want to handle this?” he asked her, gripping his sword below the table.

Leliana took a steady, lengthy drink from her mug and plopped it back down on the table when she finished, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Follow my lead. Ready?”

“Yes.”

They rose at once. Solena did not know if she should follow or remain seated, so she settled for watching them from the booth. At the sound of their movement she could see the elven traveler shift uncomfortably in his seat. He would have had little time to escape, though, before Leliana slammed him cheek-down on the table, her bicep pressed against his airway. The bar went silent.

“You’re not a very good spy, do you know that?” She asked, a sweet lilt to her voice.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fucking hell, woman!” he gasped for air. Leliana had been right, his leather armor was of beautiful make and his scabbard had gold detailing and was encrusted with jewels. He looked very clean, cleaner than she had been in a month, though his hair was haphazardly tied back and a bit disheveled. His long, pointed ears were unmistakable.

Alistair rid him of his weapons. “Who sent you?” he asked. The man squirmed but Leliana was stronger than she looked, it seemed.

“You’re fucking daft! I’m just a sellsword!” he choked.

“A sellsword, hm?” Leliana teased. “I am curious then as to a sellsword’s business here in Redcliffe in the middle of wartime. I’m sure the Bann would like to know as well.”

“My contracts are - ach!” Leliana pressed down harder. “- none of your business!”

Solena stood and approached the scene with caution. The other patrons, the militia men, shuffled out quietly.

“Loghain sent you. Why?” Alistair pushed. Leliana grabbed one of his arms and twisted it sharply when the response was too delayed. The man cried out in pain.

“Is this really necessary?” Solena asked. It seemed she was not heard.

“Fuck you,” the man spat. “I don’t have to - ”

Quickly, Alistair’s dagger was drawn from the sheath on his thigh, and he placed it against the man’s crotch, very clearly threatening to stab down.
“No, you don’t. But I’m willing to wager you’re fond of these, and would like to keep them.” The man was frozen. “Tell me what I want to know,” Alistair demanded again.

“I never met him! Never…never saw no Loghain. It weren’t Loghain that sent me;” he frantically assured. “I only heard the name tossed around, is all.”

“Then who?” Leliana asked.

“I don’t know! Didn’t get a name. All your fucking shemlen lords look the same.” Solena knew that word. It was elvish for ‘quick child’, but she never heard it used in the literal sense. It was a word used for humans. It was not a kind one.

“Must not have been a very smart man. You’re not who I would have chosen,” Leliana remarked.


“The Arl?” Alistair spoke up in shock. “And just how are you keeping tabs on him? From the bottom of a mug?”

“Well I couldn’t get in the bleeding castle, now could I? Word travels fast enough. If the poison wore off the whole village would be up in arms about it.”

The three of them shared a look, eyes wide.

“Poison?” Alistair managed. His eyes darkened. Bann Teagan had not told them that.

“It were an inside job. I got nuthin’ to do with that. Some fuckin’ mage they hired, I dunno. Don’t know no details, please Sers.”

Leliana looked at Alistair and gave a nod which he returned. She let go of the man’s neck and arm, and he took a deep breath, rubbing his throat and clearly wincing at the pain his arm now gave him.

When Alistair moved towards him with his dagger in hand, Solena moved to protest but Leliana was faster. She grabbed his wrist.

“No.”

Alistair’s look was confusion muddled with anger. The man noticed the exchange and panicked. He backed closer to the door, but was blocked again by Alistair.

“Are you mad?” Alistair asked her. “He reports to Loghain, however indirectly. We can’t -”

“We can, and we shall.” Leliana insisted. “We tie him up, keep a watch on him, do what we need to. Come night, put his sword back in his hand and let him fight. But if we kill him we are no better than Loghain.”

Alistair grimaced, and jerked the elven man’s wrists so he could hold them tightly behind his back. The spy winced at the movement, and so did Solena, but they both kept quiet. The elf knew when he was beat, and Solena knew to pick her battles.

“Yes, we are,” Alistair responded, definitively.

Neither she nor Leliana knew what to say. They shared a glance.

“Get some rope or twine from the bartend. I’ll tie him up out back.” Alistair huffed. Leliana nodded
and did as he bid her. Solena, her head now paining her, moved to go upstairs to their room and lie
down.

~~~

The chirps of the crickets soothed her, as did the coolness of her pillow and the soft breeze that the
window let in. Battle had not started yet. She still had these few moments for her own, before steel
clashed and the men she had met and shared smiles with that day turned to animals. She left her eyes
open, though she had taken her tea. Sometimes, when she closed them, there were flashes of
Ostagar. And if she drifted asleep, a different demon would plague her. Still, she could not discern
which was worse.

She did not know what she must have once thought war was. The Tower had made a stupid girl of
her. Alistair had made her see that. Duncan had. She was a woman now, blooded in more ways than
one. War would not break her.

Leliana sat by the door to their room, relaxed against the wall, her shortbow resting in her hands. It
was a cheap thing - Bodahn had mentioned having one in his stores and Leliana perked up at his
words. Bodahn had expressed interest in finding her a nicer one, but the sister had insisted it suited
her fine. Since then, Leliana had carried the bow with a fierce sense of possession. It was something
unique to those outside the Tower, certainly, the attachment people had to things. Leliana with her
bow, Alistair with whatever it was he fumbled with in his pack when he thought she wasn’t looking,
and what seemed to be the whole bloody world with those treaties. Pieces of ruined parchment, with
a few nice-sounding words on them, signed ages ago by long dead men. Words were wind. It
amazed her, the faith people in this new world still kept in them.

The room - drab, with holes in the roof and a draft running through it - was nothing like the well-
kept chambers they had given her in the Tower, but she could not find it in herself to care. If she had
her choice, she would still be on a blanket under the stars, the campfire warming her feet.

Sunset had come and nearly gone. Morrigan was sound asleep on the floor, where she had gathered
many blankets and a pillow, and her pretty black tresses peeked out from just beyond the foot of the
bed. Bodahn and Sandal remained in the chantry with the young, old and sick, as they had been too
busy helping during the day to train. Sten, clearly preferring silence and solitude, guarded the spy. A
while ago Alistair had said that he needed some air and none dared refuse him. He had not returned.

“What was that back there?” she asked Leliana from where she lay on the bed. Over the covers,
and still in her same armored robes, as she would not dare get too comfortable. They both had
hooded, tired eyes and had gotten only a little rest.

Leliana gave her a lazy upturned smile. “No one is without worth. Whoever you are, whatever
your mistakes. All life is precious in the Maker’s eyes.” It was something she had said many times
before, Solena could tell.

“I didn’t mean when you stopped Alistair. I meant before.”

Leliana’s smile faded slightly, and she looked strangely. Distant, almost. “I did what needed to be
done. I take no great pleasure in it. Our purpose is too great to take risks.”

“Like letting him live?”

“He will not live, sweet girl,” said Leliana. Solena furrowed her brow. “It is likely he will not
survive the night. But if you are going to take a man’s life away from him, you need to mean it. You
have to be firm; resolute. Alistair is none of those. You know this. We do not need such blood on our
hands, weighing us down. Alistair does not need it.”

Solena accepted her justification with some ease. She was right, after all, though the woman seemed to easily contradict herself. Alistair’s mind was troubled, anyone could see it. It was reassuring to know she was not the only one who worried after him. He was a good man. She knew too well when a good man became something else. She had seen it in his eyes today. He needed to be more than just another good man.

“How did you know that man was a spy?” She asked, curious. She thought she knew, now that it was all said and done. But the sister’s conviction had been strange to her. Solena had known many elven mages in the Circle. The elves had mingled with the humans very easily, so much so that she had barely taken notice. She supposed life was not so simple outside the confined walls of a prison.

She had her answer when Leliana’s smile turned sad. “Take a bit of advice. You haven’t been outside the Tower long, but you’re a bright girl. Intuitive, intelligent. I know a kindred spirit when I see one. Out here, the rules may be different, but people are just the same.” All at once, the sister’s face became a shroud. “Don’t ever let your guard down. Men and women take what they can. Make sure you take it first.”

Her words took Solena to the high-stakes courts of Orlais she had so long read about in songs, where heroines with such drive and ruthlessness would flourish. She did not think of the sister as ruthless, but she certainly seemed driven. Every great Empress that ever was had the same qualities: fearless; beautiful; cutthroat. “You’re…from Orlais, aren’t you?”

Leliana relaxed. “My mother was Orlesian. My father, Fereldan.” She paused. “I consider myself Fereldan.”

“But, you did grow up there?”

“Is that so obvious?” Leliana laughed. “Yes, I grew up there.”

“Why did you leave?”

She considered the question. “Change. What I wanted…changed. So I followed where it took me. I have never regretted it.” Solena understood as well as anyone. For so long as a girl, she thought she had only wanted to impress her professors, the First Enchanter especially. Now that she was a woman, all she wanted to do was set fire to who she once was and watch her burn. She had been a mouse in a labyrinth for so many years, while the Circle dangled a piece of cheese at the end and called it her ‘great potential’. But the labyrinth was something they had built—no better than a cage. It wasn’t her. It had never been her. They had only tricked her into believing that.

Solena shook her head. Leliana’s secrets were her own. “I’m sorry for prying, I just…You’re not like the sisters I knew from the Circle.”

Leliana laughed at that, too. “No, I would reckon I am not. They did not like me very much at the Chantry. No more, I expect, than the Circle cared for you. Girls with bright heads on their shoulders and fresh new ideas are never typically received well.”

“How can you know that about me?” Solena asked.

“You made it out of there. That is all I need to know.”

Shouting heard from beyond their window ended the conversation and arose their suspicion. The bells of the Chantry began to toll, and with each chime the shouting in the night grew louder. Leliana stood and grabbed her quiver. Morrigan woke with a start and seemed to understand. Solena picked
up their two staves from where they rested against the far wall and handed Morrigan hers. She accepted it with a firm nod.

Alistair appeared in the open window, fiercely composed.

“Go to the windmill on the hill, all of you, find Ser Perth! He’s got a garrison there of twenty good men. Some of the dead will likely attack from the bridge, so we need someone watching our back. You’ll be of most use there.”

“What will you be?” Solena shouted over the noise.

“In the town center, with Teagan and Murdock and the rest of the men. I spent the day training them, I won’t abandon them now. When the dead come from the lake, we’re like to get the brunt of the attack. With any luck, we’ll make it through this.”

Instinctively now, her eyes drank up every detail of his face - memorized every plane and groove, appraised each expression. There was little difference here from the way he had held himself at Ostagar, transitioning into battle with such ease and naturalness. It unnerved her to think on it. War had been a part of his life, that much was clear. He wore it on his sleeve shamelessly.

But hadn’t it been a part of hers as well, before Ostagar, before the Wardens? She had battled her whole life. Would Alistair have survived a day in Kinloch Hold? Perhaps not. In one way at least, she was made of stronger stuff.

She committed his eyes to her memory, warm and honeyed. He would survive the night, she knew. Men with death wishes did not often get what they desired.

“Be careful,” she said, in spite of her certainty.

He returned her sentiment quickly and gruffly, and disappeared back into the darkened village, out of sight. A thick, unnatural fog hovered just above the ground and the air was still. There was a low whistle in the air that sang a dark, awful tune. A chill ran up her arms and set the hairs of her skin on end. When she exhaled, she could see evidence of her breath in front of her. Their nights in the Hinterlands had never been this cold.

Morrigan stared out the window with a grave look on her face. “Powerful magic is at work tonight. Your Bann was right on that count.”

The shouting turned to screaming and Solena looked up to the high stone bridge that connected the town to the cliff. A darkness seemed to have overtaken it, and in the darkness there was movement that was less than human. That darkness chilled the air and moved the angry clouds above. It was like the grim old wives’ tales the older apprentices used to whisper in the children’s ears before bed. They had frightened her so as a girl. But she had faced spawn, and they had been nothing to her after the first kill. This would be nothing too, and the night would pass.

Solena tried to shut the window quickly and pushed it in tight, her fingers trembling, betraying her mind as she fumbled with the latch.

Then, the ground shook with the first strike of thunder, and then came the bright light. Morrigan startled beside her, then shook it off and turned away. The clouds had turned to pouring rain which crashed against the window in fury. She had never seen a storm before. That night at Ostagar atop the Tower of Ishal, Alistair told her she had created one and saved his life. But she couldn’t remember. She just knew she had been so angry, and so afraid. The rain outside grew angrier. Solena stared out, perfectly still all the while, her lips parted in awe and eyes shining in the flashing
light of the tempest. *They mean for this to frighten me,* she thought as lightning struck again, rattling the glass. *The beasts can think again. I am the storm.*

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)

Alistair IV

Chapter Notes

***Content warning: Intense war violence and depictions of gore. Discretion advised.***

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ALISTAIR

Mud splashed beneath his boots as the rain poured in force and fell in his eyes. He strode at an angry pace, his blade grasped firmly at his side. *Let her hate me*, he begged. *Let her despise me. Give me a reason to hate her too.* Oh, he saw how she had looked at him, after he had taken that squawking shit outside and beaten him to a quivering, pissing mess, and tied him to that post. Two impossible eyes of ice, with that infuriating blank gaze. Like she were holding up her own stupid, warped mirror, trying to forcibly hold him in place and look back at the reflection; trying to make him care what she thought of him, when he *didn’t*. Likely she thought he was no better than that templar monster she mumbled over in her sleep. Well, she was nothing special, nor was the scrutiny she gave him. Was there anyone in his life who had not dissected his every move, only to end in that same relentless cycle of unsurprised and disappointed?

Yes. One. And after all those years, those sacrifices he had made for the boy he loved like a son, where had Alistair been in his final moments? He had been Duncan’s last disappointment. Another gone, for the likes of him.

Whatever Solena thought, it was not just her he seethed at. It was the both of them - she and the sister, standing aloof on their own moral high grounds. The sister had stopped him once before, too, from finishing Loghain’s men who had accosted them in the Lothering tavern. Well, she may have sweet-talked the others, but she couldn’t bloody fool him. When she had caught up with their party on horseback later that same night outside Lothering, he had seen her washing the blood from her dagger in the lake. *‘No better than Loghain’* - pah! That woman could stew in her delusions all she liked. He knew the man that he was, and he was starting to know her, too.

And now, thanks to her, that slying sack of shit was fighting by their side, sharpened sword in hand. It sickened him to think on it. He was grateful to Sten for keeping watch over the weasel, and being the one thing likely standing between Solena and an opened throat.

The village center outside the Chantry stank of fear and wet dung, and every man, woman - and Maker save him, *child* - that was armed and gathered looked a scared, sorry sight. But it was his own damned mouth that got him into this mess by promising Teagan that the night would be theirs. And in no surprising turn of events, he would fight Teagan’s own bloody battles for him.

The pampered ponce was there all right, out in the open with the rest of the militia, though he had a bloody squire strapping his armor on for him.

Alistair stormed up and shoved the boy aside. *Boy*. He might have been his age, though he looked a whelp. “That’s enough. Our Bann is a man grown, I’m sure he can dress himself.”
“Alistair, what in the Maker’s name - ” Teagan started.

“Yes, well, it’ll be my name you’ll be swearing to when I’ve won your battle for you. What were you thinking, having your squire braid your hair and kiss your feet in front of these men? You think that was some inspiring sight? Aren’t you supposed to be the man of the people?”

Teagan bristled at him at first, but Alistair saw that his words had struck the right nerve. He struggled to remember a time when Teagan had ever once listened to him as he did now.

“You are right, of course. It is only…it’s been many years.” The Bann admitted, fumbling helplessly with the final latches. Alistair huffed and finished the job for him, if only to get it done quicker. Perhaps then it would look like merely a brotherly gesture.

“And how many years is that, exactly?” he asked, smacking the Bann’s chestplate with a smirk. The pretty lord was a jouster, not a swordsman. And he had been chasing his dreams of fame and glory at the Grand Tourney in Starkhaven while Orlesian mages sacked his holdfast - while Eamon and his late father fought a war without him. He knew less about war than this sorry militia. Some of the older ones had at least been in Redcliffe for Florian to burn their lands and torture their parents. All while Teagan had been eating grapes out of some Marcher woman’s hands.

Anger began to brew just beneath the Bann’s skin, showing through as redness. “The night will be long, Alistair. Let us not start this now.”

“Well,” said Alistair. “It will be long, or it will be very short.”

He turned to look at the crowd. Murdock, the bearded mayor, put weapons and the armor they had to spare into shaking hands. Admittedly, he did not know most of these people. It had been many years since he had left Redcliffe and never looked back, and even when he was here, it was upon the cliff where he had spent most of his time. Eamon couldn’t stop him sneaking out every now and then to see the sights of the village and return under the setting sun, but the boys he had ran and played with on the shore had all grown to men, like he had, and their faces were like to be unrecognizable to him now.

Murdock approached. He was a gruff, large and imposing man who carried a demeanor that Teagan did not. His hands were rough and well-calloused and his armor had wear on it. This man had seen each and every battle Redcliffe had fought against the dead, and likely more besides. He had not been mayor when Alistair had lived on the cliff. He was like to have remembered him.

“Your plan is in place, Ser, just as you said. May it carry us through the night,” he told him. “Now, if you’ll allow it, milords, I’d like to say a few words to these people,” Alistair nodded, and did not correct him on the ‘lord’ part. It was better this way, anyhow. Alistair had not prepared a speech, nor was he good at them.

Over their shoulders and across the dark, quiet, scrap wood roofs, the lake stirred. The three men eyed it nervously. Time was not on their side.

“May I…start out?” Teagan pressed. “I feel these people should hear more from me than silence.” Alistair might have strangled him. Murdock seemed to humph an agreement, though also seemed to be growing rightfully impatient.

“Hear me!” Teagan turned and shouted, his voice wavered though he doubted the men noticed. “Redcliffe has not been my home, all you know this. It is not the Wardens’ home. But they have fought for it all the same, as have I!”
Prick. It had been Alistair’s home. How easy that was for Teagan to forget, when it suited him. Could Eamon have forgotten too?

“All of you have welcomed me, and them, with open arms and hearts, and - ”

“Because this is our home!” boomed Murdock, as he raised his hand axe high above his head. Every person gathered stood straight up at that, snapped out of their daze from Teagan’s prattling. Poor idiot couldn’t even see it. “And those dead sons of ‘ores mean to take it from us! From our sons and daughters, wives and husbands! From our children’s children and their children after!”

At that moment, noises came from the lake. The creaking and clicking of bones, and what could have been the snarling of rabid animals. Far off in the distance, an unmistakable hand shot up from the deep. Alistair blinked, startled.

“Let’s go kill the fuckers!” Murdock shouted with a final huzzah, and the crowd roared its approval, drawing their swords and punching them high into the air. Teagan swallowed back his pride.

Amidst the noise, the corpses began to rise from the lake and tumble out onto the shore. Alistair watched them. They were not like the spawn, as Alistair had thought they very well might be. The spawn were easy to understand. They were whole, flesh and blood, and when you stuck them they injured and died. These were mostly rotted bones, with occasional shreds of decaying flesh hanging off in tatters, with holes for eyes and echoing screeches. They did not move like people or animals. They moved jarringly and many tripped over themselves, falling atop one another as they clamored from the lake onto the sand.

When maybe seventy of the things had fallen upon the shores of Lake Calenhad, there was still and quiet when, for only a moment, the men could hope that they might not move again. They did, of course, and their skeleton fingers began to gradually claw and grab at the wet sand, hoping to push themselves up against the force of the rain and each other. One stood, then another, then five more, then ten, and then all of them had risen and far more still rose from the lake behind the rest. One at the front looked at Alistair, and screamed. The sound deafened every other.

Then, they charged.

“Stand your ground!” Alistair shouted behind him as he poised himself. “Steel yourselves!”

Alistair eyed the ground a hundred yards ahead. “Nock!” he yelled, as the dead neared close to the mark. The archers, standing beneath roofs just ahead of them, aimed their arrows of flame for the rum that had trickled slowly out of the barrels they had stacked in three places on the outset of the village. Alistair had found them in the cellar of a recently abandoned pub on the shore. Fifty of them.

“Loose!”

Three arrows pierced the air and stuck themselves in the ground. The rum caught flame, and it was mere moments before the fire trickled to the barrels, and their explosion rang through the night, creating a light that was near blinding. The flame consumed most of the dead on the front lines and cast a glow of orange on the buildings. The sight looked heavenly. Awe decorated the faces of the militia as the corpses screeched and burned and fell, though Alistair knew the fight was far from over.

He glanced up and to the left, upon the rise where the windmill sat. Faintly, there were shouts and the sounds of a battle, but little else could be seen or heard. The fog had spread from the bridge to reach there, too. Something stuck in his throat and choked at his heart. Whatever it was, he pried it
Back on the ground, the fire had died down a bit. A straggler corpse, aflame and noisy, ran panicked towards the center of town, and Alistair walked ahead to meet it with steel. He dislodged its head from its spine and forced it to the ground with two deft strokes. Then, ahead of the group and past where the torchlight fell, he listened.

He did not have to listen long. As if on cue, fifty more rose from the lake, this time crossing onto the shore with ease, their snarls as loud as ever.

“Shields! Shields!” Alistair yelled. “Make a wall!”

“More from the lake!” Murdock echoed back. “Shields - ”

He could not finish, for they were all stunned into silence. From the bridge leagues high above the water, the dead fell. They fell tens at a time, and soon what must have been over a hundred corpses dove into the lake. One by one, they stood, and began walking.

They had diverted, he realized, once they had heard the explosion. They mean to focus their force here, and abandon the windmill. He glanced upwards. He saw what she had done that night atop the Tower of Ishal. They needed her. They needed that firepower.

He ran back to the garrison, and grabbed Teagan’s squire by his shoulder. “Run! To the windmill! Tell Ser Perth or whoever’s left alive that we need every man and woman he’s got down here now! Go!” The boy nodded frantically and sprinted off. Alistair stood in line with his men.

The dead were upon them before the fire was done dissipating, bones crashing on their wall of shields like a tidal wave. They had no weapons, only brute force and bony claws. Alistair had thought their shields might survive the onslaught, but he saw quickly that it was not enough. Their spears took out many of the dead, but three, four, sometimes five of the skeletons would tackle a man with such fierceness that he lost his footing, and once he hit the ground they would tear his skin to shreds. Soon, their wall had weak points. It would fall before she made it down here. He wondered what would be left of them when she did.

The wall they had formed was quickly abandoned when the dead began to pile so high that they could simply climb over it. At last, over the screams and the snarls, steel began to meet bone. The militia fought well, but they were not soldiers, and often the dead were too strong for them to repel.

They were inevitably pushed into the very center of town, nearly every man back to back with another as they fought off the horde. Murdock held his own against three of the things, his axe flying crashing through the air and hacking the corpses to pieces, all while Teagan stood next to him and looked a sorry sight, swinging his blade not unlike a child with a wooden sword. A man fell next to the Bann and was ripped apart by the dead that climbed atop him. Blood splattered onto the Bann’s shiny armor, and he was frozen to the spot. Alistair put the corpses to the sword, and put the poor man with blood spurting out of his neck out of his misery. He had no time to give Teagan the thrashing that he wanted to. When Alistair turned, lightning crashed into a corpse’s head, inches from his own.

Solena stood on the rise, hands crackling, looking like some heavenly thing, and Morrigan had already joined the fray, wrestling with a corpse over her staff. She kicked the thing back a good few yards and blasted it with arcane power. The sister leapt from the rise and rolled to the ground, shooting from her bow as she landed. Sten charged in with a powerful yell, and with a long swipe of his battleaxe, shortened four corpses by half. He cut through the horde and the beasts swarmed him, and for a brief moment Alistair thought that the giant might fall, but he only hacked and hacked. He
raised one of the things up by the skull and swung it around him, knocking down a handful of the corpses that had him surrounded.

“Fight!” He shouted above the noise. “Fight! Fight for your home! Fight for what’s yours!” The men joined him in a resolute cry and pushed forward.

Strings of lightning crashed on the ground, sending corpses flying in explosions that shook the ground of battle. Alistair ran between them, cutting down the dead with shield and sword.

Men fell, but so did the dead. There were worse trades. After he had cleared perhaps twenty dead and a clearing had formed around him, Alistair turned and watched the fire rage on the rooftops. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Murdock overtaken by a crowd, and he was too far to save. Solena blasted the things off of the mayor, but even then he did not stand back up. The rest of the fight tapered down. No more dead came from the lake. They all lay at his feet.

~~~

The Chantry bells rang once. Twice. A third. Morning birds joined in their song, along with the crows. Bury our loved ones and burn the rest, Teagan had said. Morrigan had agreed. She said the magic was foul and dark and was uncertain if the dead would only rise again come morn. Alistair walked the field and helped the men - those that were left - to sort the corpses. The rest dug graves. There were tears and loud weeping. The village was small, and the bodies that the men lifted and threw into carts while the women watched were no strangers. Alistair only wished he were strong enough to do the deed by himself. These people had suffered enough.

Murdock had fought bravely and well, and the sight of his corpse, ripped to shreds, both pained Alistair and unsettled his stomach. He had not eaten breakfast, so his heaving was dry. With gloved hands and a kerchief around his mouth and nose, he and another man picked up the large mayor’s torso. The legs came next.

Atop the mayor’s corpse Sten placed another, and Alistair could not move. The corpse was small and the face he knew. He stared and stared, but the face would not change. Another was piled atop it, and he did not have to look at it any more. A man came by and placed a knowing hand on his shoulder. He had trained him. Spent the day telling him to keep his shield up and to grip the pommel firm and steady. He had ruffled his hair and told him that his parents would have been proud. It had not been enough. It was never enough. Nothing he ever did had ever been enough. He threw his gloves and handkerchief to the ground, and shrugged the man off him.

He sat on a stump on the outside of the field and watched the scene. He didn’t know what any of it had mattered, in the end. These people were no safer. If it was not the dead, it was the spawn that would get them in a month. If not the spawn, starvation and sickness and the cold. Without Eamon, their odds were worse.

What an ass he was. He had told her, sitting by the campfire, with a straight face and conviction in his voice that their mission had purpose. That they could help the people in Lothering, in Redcliffe, and even in Denerim. She had been right to think him pretentious and idealistic. They were in over their head, and only she had had the perspective to see it. The Wardens had come to Redcliffe and had left only death in their wake. If Duncan were here, he would know what to do. What to say to these people, when they had just lost so much. How to look in their eyes and know that he was in some part to blame. Or maybe if Duncan were here, there would not have been death at all. Maybe this was on him. His fuck-up, once again.

But Duncan had died just like that boy of ten had. Meaninglessly, and because of him.
He grabbed his canteen and splashed water on his face; let it drip with the sweat. He smelled as the dead did, and likely looked twice as worse.

On the ground ahead of him, a strange shimmer caught his eye. He narrowed his eyes and stood, walking carefully to the source. It was another corpse, and as he grew closer he knew it, too. The sword was jewel-encrusted and the long ears had golden piercings. It came as a relief. If the fucker had lived, he did not think he could handle another row with the sister, or another look from her.

But the corpse was in near pristine condition, and that was unusual. It had no scratches or dismemberments or tears at the flesh. Alistair kicked it with his boot to flip it onto its back, and he seethed at what he saw. A clean red smile, from ear to ear.

Ahead, by the Chantry, the sister stood with Solena and Teagan, deep in conversation. Teagan looked almost happy, and Alistair could have screamed. You have not won, idiot. There is nothing around you but loss.

“Sten, do you have a handle on this?” he asked as he passed him. The giant nodded, and Alistair clapped him on the back. “Good man.” He crossed to the Chantry.

“It might be best if I could help lead the women in prayer while the men finish,” he heard the sister say, sickeningly earnest, but appropriately sad. She played her part well, indeed. “Take their minds off of the bodies.”

“No, no. We should start soon. I’ll say a few words, and we’ll bury our dead.” Teagan told her. “These people need resolution. They need to know their loved ones died with meaning.”

Alistair clenched his fists tight. Solena, beside him, glanced down. She covered a fist with her hand.

“Alistair, are we close?” Teagan turned and asked, oblivious to Alistair’s demeanor but seemingly not to the location of Solena’s hand. He pretended not to notice, or care.

Alistair nodded stiffly.

“Ah, good. Leliana, be a dear and fetch Mother Hannah. I’ll try and gather the masses.” The sister departed, and Teagan spared the two of them another glance before splitting in the other direction.

Alistair sighed, and did not move. He only clenched his jaw and stared ahead of him. Solena turned in toward him slightly, looking down at their feet. He could feel the warmth and the closeness of her through his armor.

“You should wash,” she said, in a low murmur. There was no one that might overhear them, so perhaps she was frightened of him. “After this. Maybe rest. You’ve -”

“No.” Perhaps it was harsh. Perhaps he meant it to be. She did not press it, though. She understood that he would not budge.

“I’ll speak to Teagan about making a push into the castle. We’ll finish what we started, Alistair.”

Slowly and sparsely, the weary and weeping villagers approached the Chantry. Many supported and held each other, just as Solena held him.

“Alistair,” she called softly. This time, he turned and met her gaze. Wetness blotted his sight, but he could still see the blue of her eyes, so, so close to him. “There is no one that could have done what you did for these people. And nothing more you could have done. Know that.”
Her touch followed the length of his arm, and she was gone too soon, floating away towards the stairs that led up to the Chantry. Did she know what she had done? She had granted him absolution with a few pretty words and the touch of her hand. He knew he did not deserve it, but he could stand to hear her say it again, for the sound was sweet.

So sweet, it made him forget his dead. The boy in the cart, and his brothers on the field, and Duncan, and...perhaps that scared him more than anything.

Teagan, the sister, Mother Hannah and the rest already stood upon the platform and Solena joined them, Alistair trailing close behind. When all had gathered and were quiet, the mother stepped forward.

“Let us bow our heads in remembrance of those who gave their lives in valiant defense of Redcliffe. Now they walk with He who is their Maker. Long may they know the peace of His love.”

He closed his eyes as he bowed his head. Had Duncan believed in the Maker? He couldn’t remember now. Andrastianism was not popular in Rivain. Though Duncan had spent most of his life in Ferelden. Perhaps he…

“So let it be,” Teagan said, after a while. It shook Alistair from his thoughts. What did it matter whether Duncan had believed in the Maker or a bloody cheese monster? Alistair could never bring himself to believe in anything. Attribute it to one bad experience at a monastery perhaps, or just sheer disillusionment. Ideas had always made sense to him. Right and wrong, being a part of something bigger than yourself, a soldier’s duty, that sort of thing. Anything more abstract than that and he ended up smelling horseshit.

He could try to comfort himself all he wanted. He did not truly believe that Duncan was anywhere but dead.

Teagan stepped forward and thanked him for his valor and bravery, and although Solena smiled at him it still felt bitter. As the crowd moved to disperse, many of them grabbed for him, women kissed his cheek and men clasped his hands and shoulders, all of them thanking him with tears in their eyes. But he was a weak man, and he couldn’t meet their grateful stares.

Alistair caught Teagan leaning in close and whispering in Solena’s ear before walking away, and he grimaced. If he wanted to court her, he could wait until the bloody war was over. Or just exercise some subtlety.

Solena was right, he was tired. Of death, of Teagan’s wandering gaze, of the sister’s lies, of fighting, of losing. The urge to retire to the inn superseded all else as he struggled to shuffle between bodies and hands that grabbed at him and shouted their thanks. Their gratitude became nothing but noise and their touches suffocating as he could think only of a warm bed.

~~~

One foot after the other, he stumbled up the rise. He was rather discombobulated after a long day’s rest and, admittedly, a nightcap. Or...two. Sten had approached him at the inn while he was already a bit in his cups, to inform him that Teagan desired his presence at the windmill. He bloody well doubted Teagan desired his presence anywhere, but he decided to go, before the man got his knickers in a twist.

Truly, he felt a new man. If all it took to get him back in spirits was a warm bed and an even warmer drink, then he would follow Solena’s advice more often. The part of him that was anxious, that needed to constantly be moving toward their next goal was greatly subdued now, and he
thanked her for that. He liked a woman that made it seem as though the world could stop, if only for a moment, while he caught his breath.

The sight at the top of the rise, however, knocked the wind right out of him. To say it sobered him up would have been inaccurate, but not far off. He scowled. There they stood, framed by perfect moonlight, so close that it had taken him a moment in the dark to distinguish two bodies. He wondered if he would have been more or less surprised to see him fucking her right there on the grass.

Whatever they were saying to each other it was clearly intimate and intense. Her with that face she made whenever she was serious. Him with that dumb fucking look he always wore. Not two inches from each other. It made him want to retch. So did the alcohol, on an empty stomach.

She saw him approach and Teagan turned.

“Ah, Alistair—” he began.

“Excuse me for interrupting, I’ve always felt that three’s a crowd. Perhaps I misread my invitation to Moonlit Courtship at the Windmill.”

Teagan cleared his throat rather obnoxiously.

“You’re drunk,” Solena accused.

“Hardly,” he defended.

“We’re meeting to talk about getting into the castle. To help the Arl. And you’re drunk,” she pressed.

“I’ve never felt better. Isn’t this what you told me to do? Rest? Take the edge off?”

“Rest. Not inebriate yourself.”

“If I may—“ spoke Teagan.

“You may not.”

“You may.” Solena insisted.

“Thank you. I’d like to get down to business. There isn’t much time.”

“Oh, I bet you would.” Alistair muttered.

“Enough. Go on, please.”

The Bann cleared his throat again. If it wasn’t clear by now, it never would be.

Beyond the windmill was the castle and below, the village. Both asleep and peaceful and shrouded in darkness. You would never know that not but a few day’s ride from this place, a war raged that was like to bring the country to its knees. Very suddenly, he wished he was nine years old again. Young enough to not yet know Isolde’s scorn, but old enough still to have some fun. He would spar with the other boys on the wet shore, with the stupidest looking wooden swords. He’d bested every one of them, sent some bruised and crying into their mothers’ skirts. Of course, he was never clouted for it. Sometimes he would sit with the town criers, giving them false news that he swore he had heard from inside the castle walls. The things he would make them say…It seemed unlikely that Eamon didn’t know about his little excursions. But either he didn’t know, or he simply didn’t care.
Eamon’s love had been a confusing thing. Something he knew he should feel, but didn’t, because the man had always been so absent. Or maybe the old man truly did know that breathing in the air outside the castle, living amongst the common people, was the only thing that kept a young boy sane.

He had rarely gotten to see the village at night. Before the sun fell, he would always have to return to the castle, to be in bed when the servants went to check on him.

The Bann was likely saying something dire. Of course, he hadn’t heard.

How old had the dead boy been? Nine, perhaps? Ten? Did he once play with wooden swords?

“Why did you not tell us this before?” Solena was angry at something. Teagan’s guilty face told him all he needed to know. The secret mill passage. He had used a few times, himself. He simply figured they had closed it off ages ago.

“Because you would have gone! We needed you here! These people would have died!”

“That was our decision to make!” she retorted.

“No, he’s right,” he heard himself say. Both of them looked bewildered. “We all would have wanted to leave for the castle, and my voice would have been the loudest. Every single person in the village would have died last night. Eamon wouldn’t have wanted it, of course. He never thought so highly of himself as to put his own life before his people’s. We had to stay.”

Solena pondered what he had said. “Maybe so. But I don’t appreciate the secrecy.”

Teagan, wearing a peculiarly nervous face, pulled at his collar. “Then you will appreciate much less that I asked someone else to meet us here tonight. A friend, of course. From inside the castle.”

“No.” Alistair spoke at once.

“We need her on our side, Alistair. Inside those walls it is hell, I promise you that. From the letters she writes me…”

“I won’t see her.”

“You must. She will help us, she gave me her word. She knows you are here. She welcomes your help—anything to bring her husband back to her. Please, Alistair, see reason.”

He swallowed. “I see. Now that I’m worth something to her, she’ll speak to me. Deign to acknowledge my fucking existence. How bloody kind of her. How hard for her it must have been, to agree to see me—how hard and how terrible. Excuse me if I don’t begin weeping on the spot.”

“Alistair, please—” Teagan started.

“Such language is not necessary. You are here to help my husband, and my family. I come bearing all the gratitude a woman can give.”

He had not seen her emerge from the windmill door. Clouded in shadow she approached, hands folded, back rigid. Her face as icy and unkind as ever—even through the darkness, he could see that.

“Isolde. Thank you for coming,” Teagan said.

“No, no I’m not doing this.” He almost left. He really, truly did. Instead he found himself pacing between the path back to the village and the mill, his hands clasped atop his head, inanely listening to Teagan scolding him.
“Alistair, now don’t be childish.”

“That’s *rich*. Really rich. Don’t you *ever* presume to—”

“Your behavior ever since arriving here tonight has been frankly, abhorrent.”

“Fuck you. After all we’ve done for you, and you think you can pull one over on us, get her to—”

“You are in the presence of a Lady. Would you mind—” Teagan began.

“No one’s pulling anything, Alistair,” Isolde spoke, accent thick. “I’ll gladly set whatever ill will we still bear each other aside in order to save my husband, a man we both love.”

She had aged, of course. Ten years. But she was still youthful—younger than Eamon by half—and pristine. Blonde hair done up into a tight, clean bun, her dress clearly more Orlesian than Ferelden, but still with the practicality of her adoptive homeland. He could bear Isolde many grievances, but impracticality was never one of them. It was the only Ferelden thing about her, other than her family.

“I’m sure you do.” He eyed Teagan, who looked altogether uncomfortable, both at Alistair’s scrutinizing gaze and at likely the whole situation. Solena stood back, but not too far as to not be included. She eyed all the arguing parties with the same serious face, likely drinking in the drama like some Orlesian noblewoman at Court.

“And…*save* him? What do you mean save him? He’s been poisoned,” Alistair asked.

“Yes, and left comatose. By…a mage. That is what leads me to believe there may be a way to undo the damage.”

“If we get Morrigan to him, she could take a look. I could also help, with what little I know of healing magic,” Solena spoke up. Isolde seemed to not have noticed her before, and she frowned—a terrible thing, really.

“And who is this woman, Teagan? I do not think we have been introduced.”

“Lady—”

“Solena. I spent my adolescence in the Circle Tower. I’ve been trained.”

“And why is it then that you think you would know less of how to cure my husband than this…other woman?”

Solena seemed to stumble for words.

“Morrigan specialized in healing and alchemy. At the Circle. And she’s a few years Solena’s senior, I believe. She’s very good.” Alistair offered, hastily. Teagan frowned.

“Well, she certainly doesn’t look—“ A sharp glare, and Teagan knew to shut his mouth.

“That is very kind,” Isolde said, though she did not smile. “Though I do not believe it will be necessary. We can discuss it later, when the castle is safe. Right now, there are more pressing matters at hand.”

“Yes, you mentioned Connor in your letters, Isolde, but your words were cryptic. What has happened?” Teagan asked.

“The mage caused far more damage than just poisoning my husband. The same curse that the
village endured still haunts the castle. It is more than that, it is...a demon, I think. Each night the dead wake, and hunt the living. We’ve had to hide, and so far it has worked, but I fear the day that it doesn’t. And, amidst it all I think...I think Connor has gone mad, or...sick, or...something. This demon, it only allowed me to leave because I begged, because I pleaded, because I said Connor needed help! It allows a spare few of us to live. Myself, Connor, Eamon, a few of the staff, but I do not know why. It killed the rest.”

“Connor gone mad? How so?” Alistair asked. He had never met Connor. Isolde had sent him packing to the monastery shortly before he had been born. A part of him, larger than he’d like to admit, wondered if it was not Connor’s impending birth that brought on Isolde’s sudden wrath. But Connor was Eamon’s son as much as he was hers. The boy deserved none of his old demons.

“He won’t flee the castle. I’ve tried to get him to leave, to gather all that survive and leave through the mill, but...he refuses. Violently refuses. He lashes out at me, like he never has before. Says...terrible things. He won’t leave his father. I have no desire to abandon my husband, but I fear for my son’s safety most of all. He has seen so much death, I...it has shaken him. I don’t know what to do. Teagan, you are his uncle, and he adores you. Maybe you could...reason with him? I am at the end of my rope, Teagan, please. I beg of you.”

“The mage who caused all this—have you questioned him? Is he in your custody? Dead?” Teagan asked—the news of Connor had clearly shaken him.

“He is rotting in a cell. Where he belongs. He will not speak to anyone, me least of all.” Isolde spat.

“How did he get in? What is his motive? How—”

“An infiltrator, I believe. One of the kitchen staff. A rat.”

“A strange man poses as a kitchen staff for days under your roof and no one notices? How is that possible?” Solena’s voice was flat, her arms folded and her eyes squinted. Isolde wore an equally sour look in response.

“I’m sorry, my husband has been poisoned, my son is deeply ill, my home is under siege, and you want to make thinly veiled accusations? Just who is it you think you are?”

“Isolde, please—” Teagan managed.

“My apologies. It wasn’t meant to be veiled at all. You’re withholding information. How’s that for direct?” Solena was very attractive when she was like this, he noted. Even more attractive when Isolde was her victim.

“You little—”

“Isolde, please. I’ll go. For Connor’s sake, I’ll return with you tonight. I don’t want to waste time standing around bickering,” said Teagan. For a coward and a shit, he at least had some semblance of right and wrong.

“No! This plan is ridiculous, not to mention dangerous,” Solena argued. Alistair couldn’t help but roll his eyes. Her concern for the Bann was far more disgusting than it was endearing. “She says this demon has allowed only a few inside the castle to live. How do we know you will be among them?”

“We have to try. For my nephew,” Teagan insisted.

“Going in alone—with her—is suicide, and most likely a trap,” said Solena.
“Excuse me?” Isolde screeched. Alistair had the greatest desire to go jump off the cliff.

Teagan placed a familiar hand on Solena’s arm, glancing between the bickering women. “Please, Isolde…she is my brother’s wife, and I trust her. I trust both of you, but this is my decision. It is final.”

“Thank you,” Isolde sighed, relieved, but clearly no more amiable than she was before—or frankly had ever been. “Let us go at once. The sooner I am away from these Wardens, the better.”

“Please, Isolde, could you give us a moment? I will follow soon behind you, just wait for me.”

She pursed her lips in a fashion Alistair was well familiar with, but granted Teagan’s request and exited silently. When the mill door shut, Teagan turned to face him and Solena.

“Believe me, I know the danger. And I am willing to accept the risk for my family. It is…well. It is the very least I could do.” Alistair couldn’t possibly agree more. “But I’d like for you to follow me in. Discreetly, and at a distance. I won’t mention it to Isolde.”

“I thought you said you trusted her,” said Solena.

“I do. But she won’t like it. And I don’t want to risk her saying anything, even to Connor, that might give you away. My goal is to convince my nephew to leave the castle. Yours is to reach Eamon. If he can be transported out, then that’s what we’ll do.”

“If not?” Solena followed. Teagan thought for a moment.

“The mill passage leads to the castle dungeons. Find the mage on your way in. See if you can speak to him, convince him to help you lift the curse. Perhaps we won’t need to extract Eamon if we can secure the castle.”

“What about you? What if Connor won’t leave?” she asked, concern oozing.

“I am expendable. So is Isolde, if it comes to that. If I am in some kind of trouble, and you can offer me your aid, I would welcome it, but not if it places Connor or Eamon at risk. That is all I ask.”

“Granted,” Alistair said. “We’ll head back to the inn, get Morrigan, and bring her back here. By that time you should be well on your way, and we’ll follow.” The three of them would make a good number. If discreet was what they were after, Sten wouldn’t help. And he didn’t want the sister anywhere near Eamon or Connor.

“Good man, Alistair. Thank you for this. Thank you both. The Maker truly did smile on us when he brought you here,” Teagan smiled.

“The Maker didn’t bring me here. This was my home, in case you’ve forgotten. I came back, of my own accord, because I needed to. And I didn’t bloody do it for you, or her.” Teagan had lifted a finger, ready to respond, but Alistair had already turned and left down the rise, boots kicking dust behind him.

~~~

“Well, I don’t trust that shrew,” said Morrigan as she slipped on her gloves. They walked back up the path together, to the mill, where Solena likely waited. “What makes her presume the boy’s uncle will have any more success than she did, his own mother? It seems terribly suspicious.”

“Then you’re on the same page as the rest of us,” he agreed.
“As you, Alistair? I didn’t think you knew what a book was, much less have read one,” she casually retorted. He sighed.

“Can we not do this tonight?”

“Oh, in a foul mood, are we? Is it the way that Bann leers at your lady Warden?” the witch prodded. She had no idea when to stop, did she? Like some unruly, undisciplined child, but with the evil mind of a woman.

“Shut your mouth, and let’s just do what we came here to do.”

“Since arriving in this reeking village we have done anything but what we originally came here to do, and this excursion is no exception. We should have left when we had the chance. If it wasn’t for your sulking about and feeling sorry for yourself, we likely would have.”

He had had more than enough. Alistair stopped abruptly on the path and turned to glare at her.

“Look, when I ask for your opinion, trust me, you’ll know. Until then, there’s no reason we shouldn’t just avoid interacting with each other at all costs.”

She narrowed her eyes. “That is perfectly fine by me.”

“Good.”

“Good! Now turn around, would you, and let us not waste any further time.”

He huffed, shook his head and did so. He swore he heard “buffoon” muttered behind him, but he pretended that he hadn’t. He refused to give her the satisfaction. Or, for that matter, to deal with her at all. Not tonight, he had begged. Just not tonight. Evil witch couldn’t even give him that.

He stopped again. There was something else he had thought of. Something…that he needed to say now, before it was too late.

“Are we to do this all night—”

“Just, look, if…if he’s…” The words wouldn’t come out. He looked at her and saw her confused and expectant. He sighed. “If we make it up there, and there’s…there’s nothing you can do, then just…just tell me first. I should be the one to tell his family. It should…it should be me, not you.”

“Surely they do not know I am an apostate heathen from the forbidden Wilds who eats the bones of human young?”

“Very funny. No. And it should stay that way. But it’s not…it’s not that. It’s…if Isolde is going to claw someone’s eyes out, it should be mine, not yours. Maker knows she’ll see it as my fault anyway—’I didn’t get here soon enough’, ‘I didn’t try hard enough’, ‘I never loved him’.”

He shook his head—stopped himself from saying any more. Eamon hadn’t died yet. What would he say if he saw him speaking like this? Digging the old man’s grave before he had bothered to check his pulse. It was pathetic. He should save his tears for the next night, when he would be back in the warm comfort of his cups, and there would be no yellow-eyed witch to mock him and laugh.

“Very well,” she said. Funny. He had expected more.

He gave a curt nod, and they continued in silence up the rise. Teagan had long since left—likely after some heart-wrenching farewell—and Solena stood leaned against the mill, staring out at the lake. The moons were full tonight. He wondered if Morrigan would turn into a tall hairy beast and
terrorize the village. To his dismay, when he turned to look at her she was much the same.

The secret passage was still there, sure enough, towards the back of the mill. It seemed to have been covered by hay and old crates to remain inconspicuous, but they had been moved to grant Isolde and Teagan passage through. He let the girls climb down before him and he shut the hatch and grabbed the torch off the wall, but even with it one could only see a few feet in front of them, so Solena and Morrigan conjured light of their own as well, and they walked together in a pack. The tunnel ran under the village and under the lake and was very clearly intended for one person traveling alone. The air was thick and dusty and hot, and the space cramped, much more so than he remembered.

A mile or so later they arrived at the end, with a similar ladder leading up to a hatch. Once again he let the girls climb first, and put the torch back on the wall.

The dungeons, as remembered, were no more welcoming. Brighter, certainly, but dank still and clearly never tended to. Loose stones and cracks in the wall shot moonbeams onto the floor. The lake was still tonight, but he remembered being able to hear the water’s movement from down here as a boy.

“He—hello? Is someone there?” A meek voice called, and echoed against the walls. Solena’s head snapped to the source. She bolted, robes rustling, down the long hall. He shared a look with the witch, but both quickly followed after her.

When Solena reached the cell on the left at the end of the hall she turned toward it. He was not yet close enough to see the look on her face, but he watched as she slowly approached the cell and wrapped her hands around the bars, leaning her head against them.

She and the prisoner spoke in soft voices that he could not make out. Alistair, brow furrowed, picked up his pace.

“You betrayed me,” he distinctly heard her say.

“I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry. You have no idea. But I can—”

“And now what? Poisoning the Arl? Why?” her voice was breaking. She was upset—near tears, maybe.

“I know how it looks.”

“You don’t. Not the half of it. You’re a blood mage, Jowan. You’ve terrorized this family, the whole village. Countless people are dead!”

Alistair’s brows shot up. He pushed past her, just to get a look at him. He needed to look at him—needed to see.

And he was disappointed. He was a sad shell of a man. Dirty, unshaven, weak, and altogether avoiding his gaze.

“Hey! Hey look at me! Look at me!” he shook the bars, yelling.

“Alistair, don’t.” Solena spoke.

“You know him?”

“Yes, I do.” At her words, Alistair saw red. She wouldn’t look at him either, not at first. But as if sensing his boiling rage, she met his gaze, and tempered him. “I do,” she repeated.
A sad sound came from the cell—a weep; a wail, almost. And the weeping went on and on, quiet but powerful. Alistair shook his head, let go of the bars and spit on the ground at the man’s feet. The man pleaded and apologized in his small, broken voice, and though he looked, Alistair was glad to find no pity on Solena’s face.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
ANORA

"Maker bless his body and soul. Grant this man, your holy servant, your chosen King, a seat beside your golden throne. Andraste guide him and keep him in the next world—a better world, your golden city. And in his early passing, may you turn your gaze onto your children and guide them as well. May they find your light in these uncertain times, and may they ever carry with them the memory of their golden King. In the Maker’s name, we pray.”

Though the winds were cruel and the speaker dull, the prayer was kind. Cailan at least would have liked it. Grand Cleric Elemena, though old and half-deaf, did the service, as was custom for kings. Custom—what an amusing word, considering the funeral was corpse-less. There would be no pyre. No ashes with which to bury his crown. Just as it had been with his father before him. The common people would whisper that such was an ill omen. That his soul could not be given to the Maker. That he would be denied entry to the Golden City, as would the rest of those whose bodies remained unrecoverable. Anora would have had their tongues out, and thrown them on a pyre instead.

But she knew she could not be selfish. The people of Ferelden needed a funeral, needed this closure. She could not wait until the war was over, to scrounge up whatever bits of flesh and bone were left on the field of battle and dress them up in some joke ceremony, in a shining suit of armor. Today they buried only his crown.

Fleetingly, she thought she might throw her own in, just to spite the lot of them.

It all made such terrible poetic sense—that he should die and vanish and leave her now, alone. Surely there was no other woman in Thedas who deserved it more than she.

Through her blackened veil she saw all the lords and ladies—the very same who had jeered and shouted at her only days ago, and who had so eagerly traveled far and wide to see just what they could gain from her husband’s passing—who had come to gather now at his funeral. They looked properly sad, all, and how they sniffled and cried and put on such a show. They all departed once the prayer was done, ladies leaning on their husbands as they led them back inside the palace and out of the cold. Anora could bear it far longer, so she remained.

Her father had thought it silly to hold the ceremony in the gardens in such disagreeable weather, but Cailan had loved them so, so she told him she would hear none of his grievances. One summer he had grown her roses—bushes upon bushes—and when they bloomed, on their wedding anniversary he had picked them all and decorated the entire royal suite, before placing the last one daintily behind her ear. He had dubbed her “The Rose of Ferelden” that day—had announced the silly name to the entire Court, in fact. Anora had thought that was absurd, but the public seemed to love it. Perhaps it
was the attention that had made her so uncomfortable, but still so very giddy when she thought back on it. Had she ever thanked him for that day? Please, Maker, let her have thanked him.

Soon it was only her and her father standing above the headless crown. He stood beside her, in perhaps the only solidarity he could truly offer. He clearly had no taste for the wind, and thusly placed a firm hand on her shoulder and followed the crowd inside.

The Grand Cleric emerged from the crypt, and was clearly surprised to find the Queen still standing there.

“Will you set it in the tomb now?” Anora asked her, loud enough so the old woman could hear.

“Yes, Your Majesty. It’s been made ready.”

“Please. I would like to watch.” Elemena hesitated in her look, but was ultimately agreeable. Two templars came out of the crypt behind her, one to carry the pillow on which the crown rest, and the other, perhaps, to comfort her should she fall down in grief. Anora followed them back inside, remaining carefully out of their way.

His coffin, like the others, was carved with his stoic likeness on the top. She thought the expression carved in stone looked nothing like one he might really wear, and she liked that. It was easier to look at. Gently, the templar set the pillow within the coffin, and finally Anora watched and listened as stone slid against stone, sealing it all into place.

~~~

The palace had of course been redecorated with Cailan’s passing. Gone were the silly colors of spring and in their place were rugs and tapestries of black. It was a project she had overseen—micromanaged, admittedly. The staff had been alarmed at her insistence on it. Such affairs were never usually her concern. But with her father’s decree, she had been shuffled off to the side in her responsibilities of late. All ravens went to him, all messengers, all diplomats—everything.

Her father knew her better than this—knew how she detested helplessness, yet he had taken all purpose and direction away from her in one fell swoop.

In her chambers, her handmaidens disrobed her and removed the golden pins from her hair, letting it tumble down her back. They had run her a bath to warm her, and scented it with jasmine. The sun was setting on Denerim, and its dark yellow hue cast a dim light through the wooden slats of the window above the tub, and onto the cleanly-made canopy bed on the opposite wall—desolate and grim. Looking at it made her hollow.

She wondered if her father would notice if her grief swallowed her up and ate her whole. She could hardly stomach to look at him since Court had convened, and they hadn’t said more than five words to each other since. He should have more compassion in him than to allow her to suffer like this. He had lost Mother. So had she, certainly, but she had been very young. And to lose a mother so young is not the same as losing a wife—a husband. Grief in one’s younger years is formative, she had learned. Grief later is finite. It ends who you once were, and you become someone else entirely. Or someone you used to be.

Regency suited her father, of course—just as it had ten years ago, when he had been Cailan’s regent. Maric was lost—a wreck in The Waking Sea. Cailan was young yet, not quite a man. Two years passed with her father ruling this country. He was no shrewd politician, and had little patience for the petty squabbles of court or the appeasement of his bannermen, but he was strong. Under her father, stability reigned. When the two years had ended, Cailan pleaded with her father to let him finally mourn his. Then the funeral was held, and a month later, Cailan was crowned, and they were
It should unnerve her, she supposed, how easily her father had slipped back into the role—and her into loneliness. Like greeting an old friend. Whilst she bathed, Cailan used to lay in their bed, barefoot, shirt undone, head in a book. It would always be some history. Every few pages he would glance over the cover and smile at her. Just to look at her. And she would look at him more than he knew. She would study him, his every feature, and never grew tired of a one. Now, it was as though he had never been. Her happiness had been like a dream—a fleeting euphoria. But Anora had always thought herself a realist, and now she had her wish. She had woken up back in reality, where she belonged.

It had not always been such a happy marriage, but she supposed in that respect her marriage was not so unique. That was what she had liked so much about being married to Cailan. It seemed so ordinary. So unremarkable. It was an arranged marriage. Maric and her father had been so close that it seemed only natural. Her father brought her to court when she was ten, and Cailan only five. It was terribly uncomfortable, and she held the royal toddler in low regard. As they grew older they only continued to test each other. Cailan, unprepared and boyish, shirked many of the duties of kinghood that he did not have a taste for. Anora, on the other hand, had been groomed for the job her whole life. The understanding between them was difficult, at first. But love came with the passage of time. So very naturally, like a flower that bloomed.

Cailan was buried now, though. She supposed she should let him rest.

She stood from the tub and threw on her robe, walking now to the window, opening it just a crack. Cailan always had it thrown open, as wide as could be. It brought him closer to his subjects, he thought, to live and breathe in the sounds of the city. Anora had always disliked the noise, but she often allowed her husband his small pleasures. In Gwaren, sounds of the sea and the harbor were always near. She preferred those. In Denerim it was shouting merchants, squealing pigs, clanging metal and horses’ hooves. The city was no glittering jewel. It didn’t need to be. Cailan had brightened it, and she had strengthened it.

The sound of a raven flying above reached her ears. She knew it carried a message that her father would momentarily unravel—news she would not hear for days, perhaps weeks. She did not care if it was the marriage of some sixth-born from West Hill—she would hear it now. While she still drew breath, passivity was not an option. She tightened her robe and threw up her hair, not bothering to close the door to the royal suite upon her exit.

A passing handmaiden, mortified, dropped the folded towels in her arms and shrieked. “Your Grace!” Anora paid her no mind, storming barefooted in the opposite direction, far down the hall, past at least twenty stationed guards, two advisors and three servants, all with the most ridiculous looks on their faces.

She reached the ornate double doors at the end of the hall, petrifying the guards that flanked them. She pushed them open herself. Her father did not startle at the noise, only raised his head slowly to acknowledge her. Hastily, the two guards closed the doors behind her.

“Well? What did it say?”

“Anora,” he merely noted.

“Did you hear what I asked you?”

“What did what say?” He lowered his nose at her, his glasses sliding down slightly. When she was a girl, she had laughed at him, thinking they were too small for his face. He had feigned offense, but
never changed them for new ones. He used to wear them when he read to her.

“You haven’t read it, then. Good. We can read it together.”

He removed his glasses, and sighed. A fire burned warm behind him. “Anora, I feel terribly as though I am being left out. What is this about?”

The smaller door on the right wall then opened, and Arl Howe—now Teyrn—stepped through, widening his eyes at Anora’s presence. “Your Majesty. My liege.” He bowed. “I apologize for the intrusion, Your Majesty is not decent, I can return at a later—”

“No, stay,” her father demanded. “My daughter eagerly awaits whatever news it is you bring.”

Howe, confused, furrowed his brow, sputtering out a response. “Your Majesty, I’m terribly sorry to disappoint, but my news is rather dull—directed for your Lord Father. I’m afraid you must be mistaken at its nature.” He chuckled weakly, clearly looking for a similar response from her father.

“I am mistaken at nothing. I am still the Queen, last I checked. If a raven comes through this palace, I will hear it.”

The weasely little man seemed frozen to the spot, the letter in his hand nearly crushed by his nervous grip. “I do not mean to offend, Your Majesty, but…” he started. “When your father declared himself your regent, he overtook, however temporarily, the duties that—”

“And it is my place to grant or deny her request to stay, not yours. State your news and do it quickly, I have little patience about me tonight.”

She could hear the deep swallow from the new Teyrn of Highever from across the room.

“Sire, the news…it has to do with the Grey Wardens.”

Her father straightened up at that. “What? Have the Orlesians regrouped? Is it war they want?”

“No, Sire, it…it’s Fereldan Wardens, in fact.” Howe glanced in Anora’s direction. She might have missed it if she were not scrutinizingly eyeing both men’s faces for every reaction. “Two. That…survived the Battle at Ostagar, it would seem.”

“Would it seem, or would it be?” Her father spoke through gritted teeth, rage bubbling beneath the surface.

“It is what…my sources tell me, Sire. You know them to be reliable.” Howe managed.

“Spies,” said Anora.

“I…yes, Your Majesty. Patriotic men and women, loyal to me, who have proven exceedingly trustworthy,” Howe assured.

“Spies where? Inside our own borders?” she asked.

Howe fumbled for an answer, opening and shutting his mouth many times before speaking. “It…would not do for me to compromise their positions, Your Grace.”

“What aren’t I being told?” she demanded, hands forming to fists at her sides.

“The Queen is tired. Perhaps we should brief her on the matter another day,” spoke her father, dismissing her all too easily and pretending to turn back to the papers on his desk.
“You shall brief me now.”

That halted his movements, but not in the way she had hoped. He still turned down his nose at her, regarding her with little deference at all. He looked at her as he did that first morning upon his return, sitting across from her at breakfast. The only way he knew that could hurt her.

“Very well,” he said, folding his hands in front of him. “The Arl of Redcliffe has taken ill, as you well know. We are monitoring the situation from a comfortable distance.”

“Why?”

“In the unfortunate event that he does not recover, Ferelden will be short one more powerful diplomatic leader in the face of the war to come—the largest Arling in the country, with Orlais on one side and the spawn-infested south on another. It is our duty to ensure that Redcliffe does not fall into a squabble for power in what is already a time of such great uncertainty, would you not agree?”

The room was still. Teyrn Howe had not moved a muscle. Anora raised her chin.

“Of course,” she said.

“That these Grey Wardens are nosing about Redcliffe now is troublesome, indeed. Tell your source in Redcliffe to send frequent updates. We shall want to keep them away from the castle at all costs.”

“Of course, Sire.” Howe bowed his head. “Your Majesty.”

Anora did not watch him leave, but heard the door shut carefully.

“Are you satisfied?” her father asked.

“What ails Eamon?” she asked in turn.

“I do not know,” he responded. “If I had to take a wild guess, I might say age,” He raised an eyebrow at her. “...and call it divine justice.”

She swallowed. There was so much, in this instant, that she wanted to say to him—to ask him, to beg of him. She wanted to shout it all at the top of her lungs, just so it would reach him. But it wouldn’t, she knew. Nothing she said had ever moved him to do anything. Not once, not in thirty years. He was some immovable object. Some statue.

“Sleep well, Father,” came out instead.

“Anora,” he called, before she could reach the door. She turned.

“Don’t ever do this again.”

She was out the door before she could say something he would likely make her regret.

Her bare feet padded angrily against the carpet, back down the hall—the terrible long walk of shame of a child sent to bed without supper.

She stormed back into the royal suite—her handmaidens were still in the process of draining the tub and setting out fresh towels. They froze at her appearance. She screamed at them to leave, if for no other reason than so she didn’t have to look at another face for the rest of the night. The two girls scrambled to grab the buckets of bathwater and rushed out the door. She slammed it behind them.

Breathing deep, she was able to find some semblance of composure. She tiptoed across the floor
and grabbed an abandoned towel from the ground, padding at the dampness of her hair, and thinking.

Why would he lie to her now?

Why, for one, keep that weasel Howe so close? To watch him, perhaps? For she knew her father could never trust a man like that. But why confide in him with secrets he would not even divulge to her? She feared that answer. That her father kept things from her was hardly a revelation. Never had she thought her father would do anything but what he thought was best, for her and for Ferelden. But the air in his office had been so still, so tense. And when she had practically begged for his reassurance—for some semblance of truth, he could give her none.

Eamon. What did Eamon have to do with any of this? His absence at Court had been felt, it was true. What had Bann Teagan said? If Eamon were here...

Would he have believed the rumors so easily? Eamon was a cunning man. It was always said that Eamon would fight a man in Court with the same fury with which her father killed one on the field of battle. Would he have thought her father a murderer? Would he have thought her a murderer?

It was her shame to admit that she had let the Arl become an unknown factor to her. For all the greatness spoken of him, he had spent very little time in her presence. She knew not the sort of man he was, his values and agendas, how he behaved at dinner parties, if he loved his family, if he loved his country. Now it seemed that soon it would not matter. Still, her ignorance nagged at her.

A soft knock came from the door and she grew irritated.

“Wat?”

“A l-letter, for you, Your Grace.”

She turned her head up, set the towel down. Father.

“Slip it under the door, Clara. Unopened, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Of course, Your Grace. I would never…”

“Now!”

She heard a dreadful squeak and saw the envelope slide quickly into her chambers, as the pattering of slippered feet grew fainter down the hall.

She bent down to pick up the parchment and examined it. It was indeed unopened—blank and unaddressed. She hastily ripped open the envelope to reveal another underneath it. This one had been opened, and had been addressed to her father in what looked to be the scrawl of a child. The letter inside looked much the same—spelling errors throughout penned by an unsure hand.

But the letter was from no child. Valendrian had sent it—the alienage’s Elder. She started back at the top and read slowly, committing each word to memory.

To His Royal Hiness Logane Mac Tir (the title was incorrect, but she forgave him that, too),

Tragedy has befallen our alienage, and we beg for your ade and swift justiss. Ever since the Arl rode off to war and, as rumor has it, perished there, his son and erre Vaun Kendells has terrorized our community. Last week, in the midst of a happy ceremony, my granddaughter’s marriage was halted by Vaun and his merry men, who attacked our men and took many of the women, including
my granddaughter, to the Arl’s estate. As you well now, elves are not alowd to carry wepons, so we 
werr helpless to the attak. The city gard turnd theyr cheeks. I forgiv them that, as it was theyr own 
Arl who comitted the crime. That is why we turn to you. In our rage, I admit we forged meegre 
wepons of wood and stone and sent our yung, fit men to storm the estate, only to demand our 
women returnd to us. We harmd no one. By the time we arived, the Arl and his men had had theyr 
fun, and my granddaughter and one other was dead. They reeleesed the others to us, and gave them 
each a singal copper soverin, “for theyr truble”, and threw us out on the streets. I rite this with a 
hevvy heart, and hope you and your daughter will forgive me my penmanship. I greeve for my 
granddaughter, and hope in your own time of greef you may understand. I now well the grave 
charges I ackyuse the Arl of, and now that no one will lissen but you and your loving daughter, who 
has done so much for us. Maker bless you in thees tymes and may you find it in your hearts to bring 
this savage murderer and rapeist to justiss. Maker bless the late King Cailan.

~Hahren Valendrian

Anora swallowed stiffly. There had always been whispers at Court of Vaughan’s sadism. She had 
ever met him, herself. She had only dealt with his father, Urien. He had been listed among the 
missing at Ostagar, and so Vaughan, his only son, had taken up his mantle as Arl. News that he was 
unfit was certainly upsetting, and this, preying upon her people like a lion did sheep…this would 
cease.

And her father had entrusted this to her, to investigate and act accordingly. She clutched it to her 
chest, tightly, like the porcelain doll he had given her when she was eight upon his return from 
Denerim. So tight that he had worried the doll would shatter. Her heart stirred, for the first time since 
Ostagar. He was not lost to her, after all.

~~~

Two knocks at the door, and she opened it as her handmaiden had her fist poised for a third.

“Ahm—my apologies, Your Grace, am I interrupting your morning rituals?”

“Morning rituals? I’m your Queen, not a priest. Come in and hurry, would you?”

The frightened little thing stepped in with her silver tray, which Anora bid her set on the vanity. 
Anora sat down at the stool, continuing to fervently brush her hair. Her handmaiden poured her tea 
and set out a biscuit before looking rather alarmed and reaching gently for the brush.

“Your Grace, if I may, I can do that for you—”

Anora dodged her reach. “I’ve got two perfectly good hands of my own, thank you. Please do 
something useful and go ready my horse.”

“Your…your horse, Your Grace?”

“My horse.”

“Not your carriage?”

“I said horse, didn’t I? Maker’s breath—go!”

The girl left in nearly a trail of dust. Anora found herself having to bite her lip to stifle the giggle. 
Cailan would have chastised her with a smirk, for torturing those girls so. That one was new. She 
would likely have to track down another one, and they would bash their pretty little heads together 
for a while as they hopelessly tried to decipher how to saddle a horse. No matter. She would come to
their rescue and do it herself.

It was not yet dawn. She had bid to be woken just before sun-up, but it seemed she could not sleep any longer in her elevated state. She had been up for a short while now, dressing in her slacks and riding gear and writing her father a quick note on her whereabouts. He would not be pleased with the short notice, but he knew her well enough to not be surprised by her swiftness in this matter.

Her hair pulled back in a simple red ribbon and her cloak strewn about her shoulders, she finished her tea and made her way to the stables, past the kitchens on the opposite end of the palace. The halls were near empty this early in the morning, and she had no plans on drawing attention to herself. Upon arrival she gave her handmaidens quite the fright but spoke to them no more, promptly readying her chestnut mare and riding out of the palace gates, hood shrouding her.

Denerim was only just waking. The smell of bread baking filled her lungs, dogs barked, and the beggars were groggy but awake, reaching for her horse from the streets and pleading. She supposed poverty and hunger did not often afford one sleep.

The alienage was the farthest ride from the palace to any other point in the city. It was a small, walled-off and sequestered area, across a bridge and away from the hustle and bustle of the market square or noble dwellings. Far enough away that most did not have to acknowledge it as part of the city at all. There was no risk that some unknowing, red-cheeked noble would stumble upon it on his way to buy a fat pig to feed him and his portly wife.

When Arl Vaughan had marched into the alienage, he had done so knowingly, intent on the murder and rape of elves. That much she knew.

If Denerim was the ugliest city in the world, the alienage was its wart. Cobbled-together wooden homes still unfinished lined the streets—tall things that stacked one on top of the other. It made it so the city could fit as many elves as possible in the least amount of space. Sewage and other trash littered the dirt road. Squalor was too polite a word to describe the state these poor people lived in. Anora had worked tirelessly to help them as she could. Since becoming Queen she had provided them with ample healers and medicine, donated funds for community projects, and increased the presence of the city guard—for all the good that had done them. But in visiting the place it seemed she had hardly made a dent.

The sound of her horse’s hooves on the bridge of the alienage was enough to spark a few lights in the windows of the homes that looked over the moat, and even more still as she trotted down the narrow street.

Valendrian’s home was at the very end of the street, just before the village square that wrapped itself about a great oak tree—the alienage’s one redeeming quality—framed at its base in stone masonry with candles surrounding it. It was likely the grandest, tallest tree in all of Denerim. It was a magnificent, proud thing. She knew not what it meant to them, though had always wanted to ask. For some odd reason, she felt it was not for her to know. Cailan likely had. He often visited the alienage—to the fury of his advisors—and had encouraged that she look into getting rid of the alienage altogether. It had, of course, escaped her husband that nothing was ever so simple.

The elves, as she had learned, did not care much to intermix with the rest of the city. Instead, it was reform within the alienage that they so deeply wanted. Reform in the city guard. Reform in sadistic lords and ladies who took from them as Vaughan had. And that was what she would give them.

She remembered when she had first seen an elf. A little thing she was, with teeth missing and pigtails and so, so many questions. Gwaren had had an alienage, like most major cities. Her parents had not kept elven servants. She had first seen one on the streets. She had pointed at one, tugged at
her father’s hand and asked him about *that man’s ears*—long and pointed. After rightly scolding her for her tactlessness, he took her aside, hands on her shoulders, and told her what he could. That elves were much like human beings, but also very different. That the second Exalted March had driven them from their land and enslaved them to us. That slavery was illegal now most everywhere but Tevinter, but the elves had still been forced to recant their heathen gods and accept Andrastianism to be able to live alongside us. Those who refused were called Dalish, and had chosen to live as woodland savages rather than among civilization. As a woman grown it was her great shame to admit she still knew little else.

Valendrian had been kind with her, and patient, when she knew he did not have to be. It amazed her how little disdain he held for her and for her family, and for truly anyone at all. She hoped she could find it in herself, one day, to be as good as these people, in spite of all their pain and loss and sickness and hunger. Perhaps she was not made of the same sheer will. Goodness like that, when it came so easily to people like Cailan, and these elves, had always seemed to escape her.

The Hahren now opened his door and stepped out to meet her. She dismounted and removed her hood. He bowed, though it was admittedly sloppy and uncertain, as his bows had always been. It had never bothered her.

“Greetings, Your Highness. I must admit, I did not expect a personal call in such chaotic times. You have my gratitude.”

“And you my sympathy.”

“And you mine.” The white-haired elf closed his eyes in sadness. “The late King was much adored by this alienage. Especially the children. I fear a future where his great love and understanding is absent from the world.”

She found her mouth opened but did not give way to words—only the sharp intake of breath. *So do I,* she thought. *I fear it more than death. And yet, all the same, it seems it has come to pass.*

The bluntness of his words distracted her only for a moment. She shook herself from her fall into grief, removing her gloves and swallowing, hard.

“Where is your niece this morning?” she asked. Valendrian was the village Elder, that was true, but still old and not so quick as he used to be. When she worked with the alienage it was usually his spritely niece, Shianni, that she dealt with. She had taken a liking to the girl. She was quick-tempered, but intelligent and headstrong. She made for refreshing conversation.

“Still recovering.”

“Recovering?”

“My niece, unfortunately, was among those taken captive by the Arl. It is…hard for her to speak of the time she spent there. And she was in such poor condition when we found her.”

“I’d like to see her, if that’s alright. I reckon she would like nothing more than to help justice run its course.”

“I expect the same. You are, of course, free to do as you please. I must warn you, however, that she is still quite weak.”

“I shall keep that in mind, I assure you.”

She picked up her cloak and walked up the steps to their hovel, being sure to rub her muddy boots
on the wooden planks. Inside it was rather dismal looking—a candle was lit on a small wooden table but the home was otherwise unlit. Small droplets of water could be heard falling from the ceiling into a small bowl—likely left over from the rain they had had two nights ago. Against the far wall she saw a figure lying in bed wrapped up in a sheet. From the vibrant red hair peeking out from the cloth she knew it to be Shianni. A man was hunched over at her bedside, her hand clasped in both of his.

The man grew flustered at Anora’s presence and stood, again executing a dreadful sort of bow.

“Your Majesty,” he said.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” Anora said. She held out a hand for him to kiss which he did not seem to notice, or understand. She quickly lowered it, bemused.

From the bed came a sort of laugh, albeit a weak one. “That’s my Uncle Cyrion. Forgive him, he’s never seen a woman he thought was half as pretty as you.”

“Shianni, why that’s—” he retorted, then met Anora’s amused smile with a pair of bewildered eyes. “My apologies, Your Majesty.” He moved to bow once more, before promptly exiting through the front door.

“Why, you’ve scared him half to death. He’s probably in a worse state than me, now. Sorry for not getting up to bow or curtsy or…whatever. I would on one of my better days. This…isn’t one of them.”

Anora softly shook her head. “There’s no need to apologize.”

“I know why you’re here,” the girl said, after a moment.

“You do?”

“Yes. You want someone to go up in front of a bunch of posh nobles and tell them what that bastard and his buddies did—to me, to my friends. To my cousin. A-and I want to. I do. But I don’t know if I can. Or if I should.”

Anora sighed, and situated herself on the stool where Cyrion had sat. She was worried this was the response she might get. She had come prepared with a few motivational quips, though looking at her now in this state, they all sounded painfully inadequate.

“It won’t all be as graphic as that. I’d like to make it as easy as possible for you,” she tried.

“Easy? You want to parade me in front of the same people who’ve been to fancy dinner parties at his estate—who spit at me in the street—in the slim chance that they’ll believe me. I’ll be lucky if they throw tomatoes and not rocks.”

“If I don’t have a witness to speak against him in Court, you’ll have no chance at all.” Shianni looked defeated at that. Anora found her hand and placed her own atop it, comforting her as her uncle had done. “You’re right. It won’t be easy. It may in fact be very, very hard. But I’d like to try. And it was my hope that you would help me.”

Tears shone in Shianni’s eyes, and the redhead wiped them away with the back of her hand, clearly ashamed.

“I want to make him pay,” she nearly whispered. “The scars he gave me won’t ever heal. Not really. You weren’t there, you didn’t see…”
“I cannot imagine,” Anora agreed.

“I took it for granted that we’d never get justice. Maybe we never will. But you…why do you help us?”

“All people born in my country deserve the fairness and justice they seek. And what was done to you was an atrocity that should not go unpunished.”

Shianni looked at her curiously, and seemed to be thinking. Then she nodded, fiercely. “I’ll do it,” she resolved. “I’ll be your witness, if you think it’ll help. For the cousin I didn’t get to bury.”

~~~

A week passed while Shianni healed and interested noble parties gathered to attend Court—notably fewer than she had anticipated. The Arl’s bannermen, mostly—those who were most directly impacted by the matter. Likely most saw the whole ordeal as a joke, and could not be bothered to crawl out of their lavish estates so soon after the last session for the sake of a few dead elves. It made no difference. Law and other such matters were decided based on majority. It merely meant she had fewer people to convince that the delegitimizing of an entire noble house was a good idea.

Even worse offense was the attendance of many of the alienage’s residents. Elves were not typically allowed outside of the alienage unless serving under a noble family at their estate, and were certainly not allowed at Court, but Anora had demanded exception. She was granted it, with some sway, she suspected, from her father, who had not once spoken outright to her about the matter. He had not even announced his intent to attend the session.

Anora, for the first time since her father’s declared regency, would take her seat at the throne. At present, she paced in front of it, reciting her talking points in her head. Shianni stood a bit off to her left beside a small podium, dreadfully uncomfortable having to endure the accusing glares and whispers of the nobles.

Don’t worry, Anora wanted to reassure her. Eventually, you’ll learn to bear it.

Though they stood in their own private box off to the side, the nobles huddled away from the small party of elves in attendance as though they carried the plague. It might have disgusted her to watch, had she not expended so much effort simply getting them to stand in the same space together. The awful tension in the throne room would have to do.

Anora dressed in her mourning black still, but something relatively plain and simple. She did not want the attention to be on her, after all. No lace or jewels or embroidery, and her small, ungarnished golden crown had served just fine. Shianni and her relatives had dressed in their best, she suspected. In such times as these and with as controversial a hearing as this was, she could hardly commission the royal tailor to fashion garments for them all. Not to mention the insult to the elves. They had clearly tried—they each wore some color, mostly hints of green or black. Shianni wore a bright green ribbon in her cropped hair, to match her large, beautiful eyes. It was really quite becoming.

All awaited Arl Vaughan. That was where the pit of her stomach lay—in whether or not he would show at all. The palace had received no response from the Arl of Denerim’s estate to their call for a hearing. Of course if he did not show, his testimony was forfeit. The Court would decide his guilt or innocence without him. But perhaps, like most other nobles, today’s hearing did not worry him one bit. It should, she thought. They are all fools, who have forgotten that I did not die with my husband.

It was then that the doors at the end of the throne room barged open, startling every soul in the place to attention. In stormed Vaughan, alone, looking equal parts angry and arrogant. Anora folded her hands in front of her, waiting for what was sure to be an onslaught of bitter words.
“You are late,” she declared. “You are lucky indeed that we did not decide to begin without you, Arl Vaughan.”

He smirked and snorted, arriving at last before her not mere feet from the few steps leading up to the throne. “I must admit, I thought the letter of summoning I received from the palace was a mere prank, and had resolved not to come, until this morning when I woke to see, outside my very window, street urchins dressed up like nobles shuffling off to Court. Now I see that I was right after all—it’s a practical joke you’ve arranged for me here, my lady, make no mistake.”

Ser Bryton, who stood to the right of her platform, slammed his spear to the ground. “You will bow before your Queen,” he spat.

“Do not mind the Arl so much, Ser, I’m sure the exhaustion from his walk here has merely caused him to forget himself. And my title,” she said.

“Where is your liege lord? Him I’ll bow before. Certainly he could not take time away from war to indulge his daughter playing Princess.”

Though he was of an age with herself, with each word it seemed more and more as though she were talking to an insolent boy. Anora had to stop herself from laughing tears of joy. She might have thought him drunk, but he did not stumble or slur. Drunk on power, more like. On the assurance that he would not face consequence. Let the man speak his peace much longer, and her job would be done for her. She could see the nobles turning their irritation from the elves at their side to the man before her with every jab and jeer.

“Did you prepare a statement to make today in your defense my Lord, or have you come to plead guilty?” she asked.

He laughed in mockery. The lines that formed on his face made it even more unpleasant to look on than it was before. “Guilty? To what? What has that elf bitch there convinced you all of?” He gestured to Shianni, who winced.

“I believe assault, rape, and murder are the charges, my Lord. Along with disturbing the peace at the elven alienage.”

“I regret to inform you that she’s filled your pretty little head with poison, my Lady. Dumb cunt hasn’t a clue who I am. I’ve never once been to the alienage—and why would I? Have any of you?” he asked the crowd gathered. “Filthy place is ridden with disease.”

“You would take care not to use such language in my presence,” Anora said.

“Never heard of a cunt before, Princess? Your late husband knew them well.”

“Enough!” she shouted, and the room quieted, perhaps more at his words than hers. Vaughan was not affected by her at all, he merely continued to leer as she seethed. “Contrary to your belief, this is a trial, not a dockside tavern. The men and women behind you have gathered today to decide your fate.”

“No, they have come to see the circus. And it seems you have given them all front-row seats.” He turned to the elves gathered to his right. “Look at them all! They think they’re people.”

“Where are the rest of your men?” Shianni spoke, startling the audience, and Anora. “The rest, who tortured and killed my cousin after you raped her. Were they too cowardly to show their faces?”

“How dare you presume to speak to me, bitch!”
“And what did you do with the bodies? Throw them in the river for anyone to see, too brazen even to bury them?” she continued.

“What country do we live in where this elf has not been arrested for treason and heresy?”

“Ferelden, my lord. A nation that sees justice done.” Anora spoke. “Lords and ladies of the Court, the Arl has made his case quite clearly. I ask you now to cast your judgment on a man who has deemed himself unfit to rule a pigsty, let alone this great city. We are nothing if not a proud people. If you vote not for the sake of these poor people whom he has wronged, vote for the sake of your country, and whether or not you believe this man fit to represent it.”

She did not miss Shianni bristle at that. She hoped she could forgive her. If she did not speak to the nobles’ best interests, she could not know with any certainty how the Court would sway.

Bann Hammond of Liften, an older man with a well-groomed grey beard, spoke from the crowd. “We have all heard tell of Arl Vaughan’s sadistic ways. And we have all dreaded the day when he would succeed his father in Court, and we would at long last see the truth of them. What I have seen today is far worse than I could have ever imagined. This man here is a disgrace to Ferelden nobility. Your Majesty, I vote for his immediate imprisonment, and the stripping of all his lands and titles.”

“I second that! I stand with you, Your Majesty!” came another cry from Bann Evelyn of Darkmoor.

“Dragon’s Peak stands with Her Majesty, the Queen!” The rest followed, one after the other. Vaughan fumed.

“I do not recognize your authority in this matter! Where is Teyrn Loghain? I demand to see the Teyrn at once!”

“Consider your demands met,” her father boomed from above on the topmost balcony. She could not say for how long he had stood there. “And I bring with me a gift: a warrant for your arrest.” He removed the piece of parchment from his jerkin and waved it in the air. Even from here, all could see his signature. “Seize him.”

Vaughan sputtered and cried out rather pathetically as her guard closed in on him. He fought, of course, but not very well.

“Ser Bryton,” Anora called.

“Your Grace?” he moved from overseeing Vaughan’s arrest to her side in an instant.

“Escort Shianni to the Arl’s estate. Have her identify the other men she spoke of. Arrest each one she names. Place them in separate cells, so they may not speak with each other. When you are finished, escort the elves back to the alienage, see they arrive safely.”

“Your Grace,” he bowed. Clearly unsure of how to approach Shianni, he merely said, “Mistress”, and gestured for her to follow. Shianni did not look at her as she did. From the box, Valendrian nodded his gratitude, consoling a crying woman who might have been his wife.

When she glanced up at the balcony, her father was already gone. As Vaughan lashed out, screamed and yelled his last, pleading obscenities at her, she sat back on the throne and watched as he faded from her view.

~~~

In the light, the small, jeweled golden band sparkled, almost blindingly, casting beams onto her
chamber walls. It was her last memento. The last piece of him she would ever have. He had slipped it on her finger so gently that day and his smile had been perfect and white. She had been the luckiest girl in Thedas. Even her father had shed a tear, though he would later deny it. She had seen.

Three short raps came at her door, and she bid them enter.

“Your Grace,” her steward bowed. “Dinner is ready for you in the dining room. It is duck this evening, ma’am. With lingonberries and brussels sprouts.”

“Will my father be joining me?” she asked.

“Teyrn Loghain has already taken his dinner in his study, Your Grace.”

“Early? He must indeed be busy.”

“Certainly, with the ceremony this evening.”

She turned. “Ceremony?”

Her steward cleared his throat. “Why, indeed. I thought you knew, ma’am. He assured me you did not care to attend.”

She stood at once, nearly trampling over the small man on her way out the door. He called after her, but she could not hear him. She only heard the ringing in her ears. Her black skirt swirled behind her as she dashed down the hallway, moving with such fervor that she did not hear the footsteps around the corner, stumbling as she hit the man’s shoulder with her own at full force. Blinking at the invasion, she attempted to brush herself off and continue down her path, but the man smiled at her—a sickeningly charming look. And at the sight of his pointed ears she very nearly gasped.

“Your Majesty,” he bowed deeply and beautifully. He then stood, tossing an apple from his hand and catching it again, taking a bite from it all while gazing at her. “My apologies. I was simply taking a walk. This palace is so wonderfully large. One could so easily become lost in it.”

She gave him a quick, curt nod. Truly she was off her guard, and knew not what to say.

“I had the good fortune of arriving earlier this week, and witnessing your royal justice firsthand.” His thick accent permeated her ears. Antivan.

“You… attended Arl Vaughan’s trial?” She had not seen him there. There had not been any civilians in attendance.

“Surely the Arl no longer, eh?” One side of his lips drew up, revealing glimmering white teeth. “Tell me, this man, will he face execution for his crimes?”

“No,” she said. “No, but he will rot in chains for years.”

His voice seemed to carry with it a laugh, always. “Ah, still. It was a magnificent thing, how he screamed and carried on, as though you were sinking a knife into his chest! There are few places in the world where an elf could hope for any such justice.”

He was so close to her now, and she could smell him. He smelled of leather and steel. And blood.

“My country was forged on justice, Ser, and tempered in war. It is like nowhere else.” Finally it seemed she had gathered her wits about her.

He laughed, delighted. “I am no Ser. But if it is all the same, in my line of work you learn to keep
very little faith in countries. I find they are much like people. Diverse and pretty to look at, of course—but when wounded, they all bleed the same.” He smiled again. “Perhaps it is you. Perhaps you are simply a monarch of unparalleled constitution.”

“You give me great credit.” She straightened her back and folded her hands.

“Enjoy your evening, My Queen,” was all he said as he bowed slightly in farewell and turned away, tossing his apple into the air and back into his palm as he strolled.

Beside herself, she watched him walk even as she turned to leave. But every moment propelled her feet faster and faster towards the throne room, down the long hall, past portrait after portrait of the dead kings and queens before her. The Antivan had been wrong, she thought. Had he not seen? Had he not looked upon the walls? There was nothing more unremarkable in the world than a monarch who once thought they knew best.

She threw open the door to the balcony—the same balcony her father had stood upon not three days before. At that point, the sight before her was no longer a surprise.

The day she had gotten the dreaded raven—the one that signaled death—she had taken the strip of parchment in her trembling fingers and ripped it to shreds, watched it burn among the logs. She had screamed, she had sobbed, making sure first that there was not a soul in her wing of the palace who would hear her. She thought she would die in that room, that she would lose her breath and that it would never come back to her. That one could, in fact, die of a broken heart.

She had not cried for her husband since. She swore a vow to herself after that night—that that one moment of pure, unadulterated human grief would be all she could allow herself. But oh, how she wanted now to let herself feel that again.

Below, her father, clad in armor, tapped his sword on each of the man’s shoulders, and he stood before him.

“May the Maker protect thee, Rendon Howe, Arl of Denerim.”

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
"It was Loghain! Teyrn Loghain bid me do it!” The Circle mage squealed like a stuck pig. She had fruitlessly attempted to separate herself from the sad scene, standing a bit to the side, leaning against a far wall and idly picking at where the skin met her nails. It did nothing to dampen the sounds of the wailing—or the headache of Alistair’s unbridled anger—and she found she was forced to observe from afar.

“Oh, I’m sure you fought him on it, tooth and nail,” the templar fool spat, as if his childish jeers inched them any closer to their objective.

The man in the cage shook his head in shame. He was pathetic-looking and unkempt indeed—the ungroomed beginnings of a beard, his entire person both dirty and weary. He had been in this cell for quite some time. “His men found me and arrested me on the Imperial Highway.”

Solena, who had seemed for the past few minutes as though she had been stunned to complete silence, lifted her face from where it rested in her palm to shout suddenly. “Are you some half-wit? A runaway maleficar, traveling on major thoroughfare?”

“I had meant to make it to Chasind Territory. I thought that was a place where no templar would go to look for me.”

Morrigan laughed. “Whoever told you that must have loathed you, indeed.”

“It doesn’t matter now. When they realized who I was, he told me…” the mage trailed off, likely seeing Alistair’s murderous glare and rightly debating whether or not he ought to continue. He did, eventually. “He told me that Eamon was an evil man who would see the country fall for his own ambition. He said I’d be serving Ferelden. I see now that all he did was feed me lies. I didn’t ask many questions at the time—I took him at his word! This was Teyrn Loghain—a war hero! What was I to think? Believe me, I know I’ve been an idiot. I know I shouldn’t have taken the bait. But he promised me a royal pardon. He promised…he promised a pardon for Lily, Lena.”

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped at him. The woman seemed unable to look at him now, pacing back and forth amidst the dungeon floor, appearing as if she were trying to calm a headache. She is not the only one.

“What’s he talking about?” The fool demanded.

“And where is Lily, Jowan?” Solena countered, ignoring Alistair altogether.
“She…left. Early on. She was…racked with guilt. Hated me for…everything. And she was right to. She said she’d…turn herself in.”

“Aeonar. She’s rotting in some cell in Aeonar, because you lied to her.”

“Yes,” he sighed—a sorry sound.

“You fucking bastard.” She started for the cell, but Alistair had the sense to hold her back, to try and calm her before she tore the man’s head from his spine. “Do you have any idea what I went through to get here? What they put me through because of you? Greagoir would have killed me!” she yelled.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. Please, I—”

“You’re the reason I’m a Warden,” she spat, with more venom than Morrigan had expected.

“I don’t know what you want from me. I don’t know what more I can say. You can’t know how sorry I am, for everything. If you kill me, I’ll deserve it. Truly, I will. I’d take it all back if I could. I was no real blood mage—not really. I dabbled, and I’m so ashamed. You’re right. So many are dead because of me, and more besides that I put at risk—people I care about. You should kill me. You should—” towards the end of his overly repetitive monologue, the man seemed almost as if he were crying.

“I’m not going to kill you. You’re going to fix this. You’re going to make this right. And then, I never want to see you again.” Solena said. Alistair, as Morrigan had more or less expected, quickly grabbed her arm and pulled her to him, away enough from the man in the cell, but certainly not that she couldn’t hear. Spending so much of her time with the ears of a wolf had done little to keep her from eavesdropping.

“Perhaps we should talk about this later. Back at camp. Get him to help us. Don’t make promises that I can’t keep,” he said.

“It’s not our place to execute him. He’s Isolde’s prisoner. And I…I knew him, once. You can’t—”

“Don’t tell me what I can or can’t do—”

“Let go of me.” She pulled at where he grabbed her arm. It was nowhere near violent, but still firm. It appeared to unnerve her all the same.

“—not again. Not after today. Don’t take my justice away from me,” he pleaded, desperately.

“Justice and vengeance are not the same,” she spat back. He let go of her arm.

“Perhaps…another time would be appropriate?” Morrigan suggested, loudly, from where they very likely had forgotten her. “I do hate to agree with Alistair for once, but we are on a bit of a tight schedule.”

Solena seemed to see the sense in that, and seemed to compose herself, turning back to the cell.

“How do we heal the Arl?”

The man in the cage looked confused. Oh, no.

“Heal him? Lena, you can’t. The poison…it’s a slow, slow death. I can’t reverse—”

“Listen to me,” Alistair approached the cell. “If that man is in pain, I will drag your death out until
the next full moon.”

“No, he—he’s not. He’s not in any pain, alright? The poison, it separates the spirit from the body. The body is here, in our world, comatose, and the spirit remains in the Fade. It severs that connection entirely, making it impossible for the two to reconnect. Soon, the body decays, and the spirit is lost. It’s painless—physically speaking.”

“What do you mean physically speaking?” Alistair asked.

“He means your Arl is soon to become a lost denizen of the Fade, cursed to navigate its twists and turns in perpetuity. It is eternal psychological torture, especially for a non-mage who knows not the Fade’s true form. Loghain must have hated this man, indeed,” Morrigan explained.

“You’re lying. There’s a way. There’s a chance. Something—there’s got to be.” Solena insisted.

“I…maybe,” the Circle mage admitted with a sigh.

“Maybe?” prodded Solena.

“Maybe! Look, it’s a poor one, alright? As in, only if you’re as desperate as his wife and clinging to the coattails of rumor and superstition. And religion.”

“Oh, you must be joking.” Morrigan thought she might leave on the spot. She knew the path this led down, and she would rather be back in her hut—the sounds of her nagging mother echoing through her ears as she was eaten alive by darkspawn.

“Andraste’s Sacred Ashes.” Alistair so kindly explained, to a room of people perpetually five steps ahead of him.

“That’s not a solution, that’s a children’s tale,” Morrigan spat.

“And it’s the only hope I can offer you. You have no idea the market price of that poison. The coin Loghain must have paid…”

“He paid for torture. And for certain death,” Solena resolved, sadly.

“But we have to try! If it doesn’t work, so what? Then we’ll have exhausted all our options, and at least we’ll…we’ll know,” said Alistair.

“The other half of that sentence, I presume, begins with the inexplicably idiotic, ‘but if it does’?” Morrigan retorted.

“What do you want me to say? It may be rumor and horseshit, but if I don’t do this for him, what does that make me?” he asked.

“Remotely intelligent.”

“I don’t understand,” Solena spoke, suddenly.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have more to offer y—” The man started.

“No, I mean I don’t understand how any of this relates. You poisoning the Arl, and dead men attacking the village? The castle under siege? You didn’t mention Loghain paying for that.”

“He didn’t! I keep telling Lady Isolde, but she doesn’t believe me! I had nothing to do with the attacks! I don’t know what’s happened, but whatever it is, it’s nothing I did, I assure you.”
“You cannot possibly believe that,” Alistair said.

“I do,” Solena replied, affirmatively.

“He’s a blood mage! What else caused all of this pain and death if not that?” the fool continued.

“Necromancy is not a form of blood magic. And Jowan’s not good enough to have done all of this himself. These are armies of the dead.” Solena explained, rather patiently, Morrigan thought, considering.

“For a while I thought…maybe…never mind,” the mage started.

“What?” Solena encouraged.

“It’s just a theory, but…look, I shouldn’t even be telling you this. The Arlessa hired me to…to tutor her son. It was my way into the castle, and into the family’s good graces.”

“Before you betrayed them,” Alistair spat.

“Why would she hire you to tutor her son?” Solena asked, more cautiously.

“Connor…Connor had been showing signs. I don’t know how she ignored it for so long. His connection to the Fade is strong. Nothing like you, though. Connor’s case isn’t nearly as bad as that. But he has a hard time controlling it. I made some progress, but I fear I’m not really what he needs.”

Curious, indeed. At the very least, the woman had the good sense of mind not to send him to the Circle.


“As far as I know, he’s been the only other mage under this roof besides me. I don’t know how, or why, but perhaps he knows more than I do.”

“Isolde said Connor had been acting strangely,” Alistair remembered.

“We need to get up to the main hall. Now.” Solena said with urgency, and Morrigan could not have agreed more. She grabbed her willow wood staff and got ready to move. “I’ll come back. Once I’ve cleaned up your mess,” Solena told the mage. He had nothing to say in return, but he gave a solemn look.

“Alistair, how good of a templar did you say you had been, again? Before the Chantry kicked you out, that is.” Morrigan asked as they three began to climb the stairs from the dungeons. He gave her a distinctly ungrateful side-eye. His retort was sharp.

“They didn’t kick me out. I left, to become a Warden. And not very good. I had only been training for two years.”

“Well, whatever skills you learned there, you may need them soon enough,” she warned.

~~~

Even on the approach to the doorway, Morrigan could tell two things: that the great hall smelled foul, the way all demons and dark magic smelled foul, and that the silence that came from it did not bode well.

The Arl’s hall was impressively large, though it was clearly in disarray and misuse. Cobwebs
drooped from the low-hanging chandeliers of iron. Tankards of ale lay toppled on the feasting tables, flies ate at old meat, and many paintings had been ripped from their frames and torn to shreds. Namely, a portrait of the Arl with his wife and son—ripped very neatly in two so as to remove the old man from the picture—had been left leaning against the fireplace.

It was a family gathering, indeed. The shrew was there, or at least whom she presumed to be the Arlessa. She stood to the side, looking altogether dejected and unpleasant, and rather mortified. Her guard stood around the room, lining the walls in dark coats of armor. The Bann was there too—oh, yes. Though it seemed now almost untoward to have labelled Alistair the fool when one so clearly danced before her—yes, *danced.* And juggled, and spun and jumped, all to the tune of his own ears, it would seem. All the while, the child laughed. Sat on his father’s chair, Connor laughed so hard she thought the hilarity of it all might kill him, all while clapping and shouting, “Again! Again!”

This one was not so difficult a puzzle to figure out after all, it seemed. Though Alistair to her right looked rather perplexed. Was it truly not obvious at this point? Even to him? Really?

Upon sensing their presence, it seemed as though all the life and sound and light in the room died with Connor’s glare. So like a demon to flaunt its great displeasure.

“My name does not matter. We’re here to help your father. He’s dying. Is that not something you want too?” she asked it.

“Liar! I know why you’ve come. To kill him, and steal his power!”

“Connor, I knew your father,” Alistair said. “Since I was a boy. I would never harm him. We are Grey Wardens, here to help.”

“Do not speak to it as if it were a *child,*” Morrigan interceded. “I know you, Demon. Release your hold on this family immediately, or suffer.”

“At his call, each and every armored soldier lining the walls poised their spears at the ready. Alistair reached for his blade.

“I do not want to kill these men,” Solena told the demon. “Stop.”

The demon wore a sour grimace on its face. Then, inexplicably, Morrigan felt the dark energy in the room waver. A brief pulse. Solena must have felt it too, but she imagined the demon had felt it most of all. When she looked back to the Arl’s son, he looked shocked—out of place, and confused. Fear flashed over his features. He looked down at his hands.

“Connor?” his mother asked, hopefully. She took a step towards him.

“Mother, I…” The boy glanced around the room. The fear in his face only grew as his eyes
widened. Soon, he had dashed from the room before any could stop him, leaving to some deeper part of the castle. His mother called out after him, but Morrigan stopped her.

“Let him go,” she said. “This may be the only peace we get for the time being.” She nodded to the Bann, who was now on the ground, recovering from his trance. Solena helped him to stand. The guards had stood down too, looking at one another, just as confused.

The Arlessa scuffled down the stairs to the Bann’s side. “Teagan, are you alright?”

“I am fine, Isolde,” he dusted himself off. “Your friend speaks true. For the time being, I believe we all are safe. Let us not waste this time.”

“How in the Maker’s name did this happen?” Alistair asked angrily.

“Easily. She lied to us. To everyone.” Solena directed her jab at the shrew. “Connor is a mage. It was never Jowan who did this—he told you as much, repeatedly. But you couldn’t live with the blame—that all those people had died because your son was untrained. Because you waited too long to accept the fact that he had magic!”

“Isolde, is this true?” The Bann asked, shocked, for some reason.

“And you know this mage who poisoned my husband? Betrayed my trust?” Isolde countered, ignoring the Bann.

Solena conceded. “I thought I did.”

The shrew seemed to accept that. “I hired him to train my son, yes, that is true. Apparently that was a mistake. A poor trainer and mage he was, who could not protect my son from demons.”

“No one can do that for your son. He must learn to do it of his own free will. If he has had magic without training from infancy then he has lived with this danger, under your roof, for years. I am merely surprised this did not happen sooner,” Morrigan told her. She did not seem to like that.

“And what would you have had me do? Give him to the templars as a baby, to take him away and lock him up so that I might never see him again? The heir to Redcliffe? Eamon and I had enough trouble conceiving as it was.”

“I don’t know, you seemed to have no issue sending me packing.” Alistair spat bitterly, and the conversation seemed to freeze. The silence between them all became ever more awkward. The shrew grew red.

“You were not his son. How dare you compare? Get out! Leave!” The Arlessa exploded.

Something passed over Alistair’s face. Frustration, perhaps. Or…something else. He stood, his fists clenching and unclenching, until it seemed he could not bear to look at the woman any more, or anyone. His eyes squeezed tightly together until he turned and left the room out the main door, slamming it behind him.

The Bann spoke first, sighing at the angry exchange but still clearly eager to move the conversation forward. “Isolde, you broke the law in harboring Connor here—training or no. His actions are a consequence of your own. Surely you must accept that.”

“I…” she started. “I can. I do. Hiring that mage was another mistake—one of many. I pray to the Maker that my husband will not hate me for what I have done here. I did it all only for him; for our son.”
“Be that as it may, you understand of course that in so doing you have doomed them both.”
Morrigan told her.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Teyrn Loghain arranged the poisoning of your husband,” Morrigan explained. “He paid handsomely to ensure that he would never wake up. It is very likely I can do nothing for him. And as for your son, this demon must be dealt with, immediately, before more life is lost. There is only one cure I know of.”

The Arlessa’s eyes widened at the realization of her words’ true meaning. “Surely…no. No! You can’t! I will not let you kill my Connor!”

“Normally I would never condone the killing of a child, but…” Solena began. “Even the templars know this is the only way. They execute any mage who becomes possessed."

The woman grappled for anyone who would take her side—she held the Bann’s arm as if it were a lifeline, and her eyes grew horribly wet, her voice breaking. “Please, Teagan, you cannot agree with this—this is madness! Please! He is only a boy!”

Morrigan shook her head and scowled to herself. A boy? Please. Whatever age this boy was, she had surely been younger when she had first encountered a demon. She had known better then, than to let it have sway over her. If she could have such will without the Circle’s help, then so could he. He was not blameless, and his mother was blind.

The Bann struggled. “Is there…is there truly no hope? This…this prisoner, the mage you hired, could he help? Might he know…something?”

“It’s unlikely. He’s not even a full-fledged mage. He never took his…Harrowing…” Solena drifted off into what Morrigan believed to be some sort of sudden epiphany.

“Well, do not leave us in suspense too long,” Morrigan prodded.

“What? What is it?” asked the Arlessa.

“I think I may know of a way to help your son. But it’s not…surefire, and it’s potentially very dangerous. And it involves myself and my companions leaving. For…a week, maybe two. I’m not even sure that it’s really a solution. The potential loss of life while we’re gone, it’s—”

“Please,” The Bann interrupted. He and the shrew clung to the woman’s every word as if it were gospel handed down from on high, and clung to each other just as desperately. “We will try it. We will try anything.”

“We need to go to Kinloch Hold. It’s the closest place that will have the lyrium we need. We need a lot of it. With it, one of us—myself or Morrigan, can enter the Fade consciously and confront the demon.”

“And what? Ask it kindly to leave?” Morrigan asked.

“Well. That’s what we’ll have to figure out,” Solena sighed.

Figure it out. Of course. A sound strategy. Perhaps she gave Alistair too little credit—perhaps all the men and women of this world were just as simple-minded as he.

“I will admit, I know little of such things, but I trust you to do what you must. Go then, with the
Maker’s blessing,” The Bann told them, as if somehow granting them permission. “We will watch over these people as best we can in your absence. Should Connor act out again, we will be cautious, and we will be safe.”

Solena spoke her pleasantries, and they left through the main door, Morrigan trailing the hero of the evening. Her eyes bored into the back of her head, hoping that it might explode.

“Upon our return, they will all be dead,” Morrigan told her. “‘We will be cautious, we will be safe’—ha! What is to stop that boy from raising another army? What is to stop him from running loose on a rampage through the Hinterlands?”

Solena turned on a dime. “Would you murder them both? Son and father, in their beds, and be done with it?”

“I would. As would you, if you did not do everything for the sake of that blabbering idiot,” Morrigan said.

“I could have sworn we’d had this discussion already. We need the Arl, we need—”

“Untrue. Alistair needs him. If the Arl and his son both should perish, the Bann is likely to take up the mantle, and you seem to have done a fine job wrapping him around your finger. This heroic derailment of yours will cost us more, I think, in the end.”

“Did you see what I saw in the Chantry? Out on the battlefield this morning? These people can’t take another loss—they’re weak, and the horde is on their doorstep.”

“You are right on one count: that they are weak. Arl or no, we do not need them in the war to come.”

The woman looked bitterly back at her. “You’re weaker than they are. How fortunate that human suffering is a concept so foreign to you that you can’t bring yourself to feel the least bit of empathy. To some of us, it’s commonplace.”

“What good does empathy do us? Leave that to the sister and the Chantry priests. I was under the impression I followed you to war, not to sermon.”

“I pity you.”

“I do not want your pity. Give it to someone who has a use for it. Give it to your templar fool.”

There was that strange look again. A recoil—as if slapped. She wondered who the templar had been, who had scarred her thus. Morrigan had noticed it since Lothering, when the templars there had seen their staves and confronted them. Alistair had talked them down, all while Solena had sneered horribly. For such a non-violent creature, she had a look that could kill.

“No. You can find him, and tell him we’re leaving. I’m going back to the inn, packing our things and rallying the rest. We’ll meet you both at the bridge. Or I suppose you can go, of course, if you think you don’t need us anymore.”

That woman did not know how closely she lingered to the truth. She would leave if she could. She would leave, and never look back. Not on the empty-headed sister, not on the fool, and not on the woman who pitied her.

The moralizer had continued out the front door, and she assumed it was customary after an argument such as this that she should not follow. Chasing after Alistair and calming him from one of
his many tantrums was her job, not Morrigan’s. She would just as soon leave him be, to live here with the demons and the undead. Would he approve of this, she wondered? Prolonging these people’s pain and suffering for the mere chance of saving a foolish boy and his bedridden father? Surely he would. Alistair sought paternal figures like moths did flame.

But she had seen the way he had looked, when he had stood amongst the mangled bodies this morning. Perhaps the fool did value something greater than himself and his own petty desires, but she did not let herself hope for it. That way, she would never be disappointed.

So here she remained, wandering the front halls of the castle aimlessly, like an idiot. Not to mention that every inch of the place looked exactly the same. Morrigan remained perpetually unimpressed with Fereldan architecture and its affinity for grey stone. How did these people live thus in a maze?

It was when she heard the dogs barking down the hall that she knew she was headed in the right direction. She rounded the corner slowly and quietly, as a cat might, wearing what must have been a smirk as she leaned upon the door. The fool sat hunched over the bars of the cages, rubbing one of the beasts behind the ears and looking properly miserable. The Fereldan mabari were intelligent and strong beasts—if not a bit smelly. She resisted the urge to hold her nose.

“More comfortable among your own kind, Alistair?” she allowed herself that one. Though in immediate hindsight it felt a bit easy—like low-hanging fruit.

“Go away, witch, and leave me to my thoughts,” he said, refusing even to turn and acknowledge her.

“Oh good, you shan’t take too long then,” she responded. “We are leaving. Come, I will explain on the way.”

She turned, but the man did not move. Her brow narrowed, as she looked back at him impatiently.

“I hated dogs,” he said quietly, as one beast licked the knuckles of his fingers, “for so long. Isolde told me once that that was how Fereldan lords disposed of unwanted children—by feeding them to their mabari. Mages, bastards—it didn’t matter to the dogs, she said. The meat was the same. And look at her now—a mage son she doesn’t know what to do with, and a bastard to help. I could almost laugh, but Connor doesn’t deserve that.”

Morrigan was quiet. She thought perhaps he expected a bitter jest—something cruel. She did not think herself a monster. She could not think of anything reassuring to say, but it was clear he did not want her there—so she would pretend that she wasn’t. A small favor, she thought, in the grand scheme of things. That she could manage.

“Took the kennels at Ostagar to rid me of that fear. Suppose I have Cailan to thank for that—his dogs, after all.”

He paused, forcing his lips together, as if to stop himself from speaking. He looked at her, then.

“Why are we leaving?”

It took her a moment to gather herself. “Your…fellow Warden. ’Tis her belief that she can solve this mess, without killing the boy. She wants to go to the Circle Tower, across the lake. To gather lyrium, and, I presume, collect on our treaty with the mages.”

His eyes widened, and he straightened his back. “That’s…great news. She’s clever, that one.”

“Isn’t she.”
“His mother’s like to be ecstatic. Teagan, too. And you…what do you think about all this?”

She nearly choked. “Me?”

“You know more about…these things than I do. Is it…is this safe? What she wants to do, will it work?”

“I…” she struggled to answer. “Truly, it is safe for no one but the boy. I suppose they all believe a chance for him is worth any price. I am not so sure. But…could it work? Yes, in theory, I believe it could.”

He listened. And…nodded. As if considering her words. “I see. I suppose…it’s what the family wants.”

Morrigan shook her head, baffled, wondering if she had misheard. “What the family wants? When has what this family wanted been any concern of yours? They disowned you—mistreated you!”

“Connor is not mine. I would not presume to give my input. I know my place.”

“Because they put you there!” she argued.

“I wasn’t looking for a fight,” he said, resigned and irritated in equal measure.

“I—” she began, but her voice—curse it—faltered. “—was not…either.”

A silence fell between them. It was terrible, and not, both at once.

“I only thought…of…the death that could result from this,” she told him. “The greater loss we could accrue that may not be so apparent now. I do not…wish harm upon the boy, of course.”

He nodded, firmly. “I know. So we should move quickly. The demon won’t wait while we decide.”

He grabbed his pack from where it lay at his feet, then stood and moved past her. She breathed deep, and followed soon after.

~~~

The camp that night was quieter than usual, or so she believed. Sound was always muffled from where she set up her tent, strategically a fair distance away from the rabble. She built her own, smaller fire, and had only just tonight—begrudgingly—began eating the food Alistair cooked as opposed to hunting and skinning her own vermin. It was at that fool’s inane insistence. He had made the trip over, practically shoving the wooden bowl of brown sludge in her face, calling it a “peace offering”, or something equally offensive. Thankfully, he did not stick around to observe her reaction. After a few hesitant gulps, it became clear that the choice going forward would be between her own tasteless rabbit, or whatever…taste this was. She was not yet sure which she preferred.

Camping at a distance from the rest granted her perspective. More than any of them had, certainly. She was quite sure she had been the only one to observe the tension shared between Alistair and the sister. Something must have passed between them while the rest were otherwise occupied, but
Morrigan knew not what. The sister was unresponsive, of course, maintaining the look of cool indifference that she always had, but Alistair every so often managed a glare—a vein threatening to burst from his forehead. Perhaps it was from thinking too hard. Perhaps he had come to the very same conclusion she had—that the sister was not what she seemed and not to be trusted. But that would be affording Alistair a degree of intelligence that she was not certain he possessed.

Outside of that, the mood had been somber since they had left the village. The air was fresher, and the nights quieter, so it only followed that Morrigan should be happier. She was not, and it was unspeakably annoying.

The events of the day nagged at her. In that, she was not alone, it seemed. The dwarf merchant comforted his simpleton son, quietly, by their cart. The sister was quiet and unsmiling—steely, almost. Alistair busied himself how he could, tending the fire and cooking a meal. The woman picked at her nails incessantly. The giant—the Qunari, sharpened his long blade, one foot upon a large rock. Though, he always looked such. He was far more difficult to read, nearing impossible. It was endlessly intriguing.

He had caught her once a few days back—her shameless gaze upon him as he emerged from bathing in the stream, standing taller than the tree next to him. He scoffed and promptly clothed himself, ignoring her. She had delighted at the exchange.

No part of her expected to lure the giant man into warming her bedroll, but she drew joy from her little games where she could.

Later in the night, when most were asleep, Morrigan woke, and found her eyes would not shut again. There was a painful, sick feeling deep in the pit of her stomach. She thought it might be her blood, but it was too soon for that, and the feeling was different. Then she attributed it to Alistair’s horrid stew. She grew restless, tossing and turning about, seeking an angle that would ease the pain. When it could not be found, she stood, dashing quietly into the woods behind her and leaning upon a tree. Her knees buckled, and she quickly forced the bile from her throat.

It left her breathless, gasping. She took the flask of fresh water from her belt and downed it in full, throwing her head back and letting the water cool the burning sensation.

Morrigan shivered. She let a simple spell ease the mild fever, collapsing against the tree and hugging her knees.

She thought only of her mother. In truth, it’s what had woken her. Her cackle—her horrid face and yellow eyes had haunted her that night. Morrigan wished that she were dead. She wished the darkspawn had torn her limb from limb, and taken their time, too. Then burned their hut and everything in it to ash. She knew, however, that it was not so. It felt as if her mother watched her, even now, though such a thing was impossible. The old crone’s yellow eyes had burned a hole in her, right in her stomach. As punishment. As warning. And as the cruelest reminder.

Her eyes grew wet, and she blinked to rid herself of it. Then she heard the murmuring.

It was soft, and intimate, and she knew at once it did not belong to intruders. Not far from her tree was a narrow glen with a quiet stream running through it. Solena must have set up watch near there, as one of the gentle voices was certainly hers. Morrigan could even see flashes of straw-colored hair through the tree trunks. The trees to the woman’s left rustled, and she could see Alistair’s form there, too, approaching her. Morrigan sneered. Both of them were clearly off their guard. The woman wore a short, peach-colored thing, likely what she had slept in. Alistair, in a rare occurrence, wore naught but a tunic and trousers, hastily thrown on. Staunch protectors, indeed.
Suddenly, Morrigan found herself feeling incredibly stupid, and felt the heat on her face, which was not the fever. The privacy and nature of the moment had dawned on her, and she quickly gathered herself to make her exit, quietly, when a flash of red caused her pause.

She squinted, attempting to make out the subject of the exchange. Alistair seemed to be holding it in his hands, fiddling with it like a child. It was that which made Morrigan’s eyes flare in recognition—the rose. The fool had come to her a week ago, clearly bitter and ashamed to ask her for anything, wondering if she could preserve it. She had laughed at him, of course, but ultimately granted his request. It cost her nothing but a wave of her hand, and then she was rid of him.

She wondered if this had been his intention all along. Witnessing the act…the mere thought of it, baffled her. She thought, for a moment that came and went quickly, that the bile might return. Instead, the sight before her just made her feel numb, and strange. Now, in earnest, she decided to leave.

As she did, she heard the clear sound of delight in the woman’s voice, the grappling and stumbling in Alistair’s, and the softness and quiet that followed, before she moved from earshot.

She sat back down in her bedroll. Sten—the Qunari—sitting awake without shame or secrecy, looked at her curiously, as if scrutinizing her, or asking a silent question. She shot him a glare, which must have been at least somewhat efficient because it resulted in him resignedly looking away. Or perhaps he just became bored. One never knew with him.

Morrigan turned over, shutting her eyes and conjuring thoughts of the next day and the road ahead. She saw the road split, and split again, and it calmed her nerves, until her mind went blank, the thought erased. All roads lead to one place, she reminded herself, but in a voice not her own. She heard the echo of a laugh that she hated.

~~~

Solena grew worse each day that passed.

Not that any of their company had been happy, certainly, since Redcliffe. But it was not Redcliffe that had the woman distant and distracted. Morrigan knew that much. Alistair was too caught up in himself and the events of the past few days to see it, or so she figured. No one else likely knew enough to understand, as Morrigan did, that bringing the lady Warden back to the Circle Tower was a poor, poor idea. Perhaps the woman had thought she could bear it, but she could not, and that became clearer and clearer by the hour.

It was not as if Morrigan awaited that place with bated breath, but no one seemed to concern themselves with her predicament either. She just assumed Alistair or the woman would conjure up some far-fetched lie to feed the templars and would cross their fingers tightly in the hopes that she would not face immediate execution. She would have remained at camp across the lake if she did not know that she was far more likely to be spotted and executed without two Grey Wardens to give her testimony than she was standing at their side.

Nevertheless, for all her perfect composure, the woman was, under the surface, a wreck. Morrigan might have delighted in that discovery if she were not the very fabric that held their party together.

She carried the rose with her now, in her pack, as Alistair had done. She took it out to smell and look at when she thought no one was looking. For as much as she did it, Morrigan thought to herself that it did not seem to be helping.

As they neared the southeastern shore, the continued silence on the roads became strange. Alistair
sensed it first, insisting that templars patrolled these roads often, and well. Bodahn suggested it were perhaps a product of the Blight, but in the end, that thought seemed to lose its sense.

It had been slightly less than a day’s ride in the sticky air. Morrigan had told the bearded dwarf, upon his irritating insistence to discuss the weather, that she believed it to be the dying breath of summer. It had been a rare warm day, but the way the winds blew told her there would be no more. Now, the sun threatened to set—oranges and purples mixed on the horizon. Small lightning bugs danced around the village that their horses now trotted through. Tomorrow, she predicted, the leaves would fall, and autumn would arrive in earnest.

On a sandy embankment on the shore past the quiet village, a single, bright lantern was lit. On the wooden dock stood, very clearly, a templar. Next to him, a modest rowboat. Behind was the Tower, bathed in shadow—tall and foreboding and terribly phallic-looking. Morrigan snickered.

She remembered when she had first heard of the Circle. She had thought then it was somehow some joke, and she was prepared to admit that a part of her still did. A mage kept indoors from the day they were born until they met their end? She would have hung herself from the rafters as soon as she was able. She did not know why any mage accepted such a fate with complacency. It made her wish to vomit.

Alistair dismounted first, and approached on foot.

“Hail, Ser,” he said, with a hand in the air.

“Hail,” came the curt reply.

“Might I know your name?”

The templar sneered. “Carroll.”

“Well met, Ser Carroll. My name is Alistair. My traveling companions and I thought it strange, on the approach we saw no templars patrolling the roads. Has the Blight pushed you all back to the Tower?” Alistair questioned.

“Yes, one might say so,” the ugly man sniffed, pointedly averting his eyes from Sten, and instead choosing to tilt his chin in Morrigan’s direction. The gesture alone made her want to bathe. “Staves, I see. You have mages traveling with you?”

Alistair coughed—a deep sound—masking a pause to remember his rehearsed story. “We are Grey Wardens, Ser. We have urgent business in the Tower, with your Commander and the First Enchanter. Inside, they can both confirm our story. My friend here studied at the Circle all her life.”

He wrinkled his ugly nose. “And the other?”

“From Orlais, Ser. The White Spire. She speaks no common.”

Morrigan could have incinerated him on the spot.

The templar frowned. “Teyrn Loghain has a bounty on Grey Warden heads.”

Each one of them froze. Only the horses shifted beneath them. Alistair seemed to be…thinking. Rather intently.

“That he does. But Kinloch Hold has with us a treaty. I have it with me. I assume you would rather report to your superiors before you dishonor it,” he said.
The templar narrowed his eyes. “It’s no concern of mine. And as for my superiors, I won’t be reporting it to no one. The Tower is closed off to outsiders. You’ll have to turn back.”

“Closed off?” Solena spoke, to Morrigan’s left. “Why? What’s happened?”

“Mind your business and your tongue, mage. It’s none of your concern anymore.”

“If I don’t see the First Enchanter today, countless people are likely to die. Does even that not concern you?” she asked, eyes narrowed to match the man’s. Even Morrigan could not hide her surprise at the woman’s tone.

“Best change your plans quick, then. The First Enchanter is dead, girl.”

Solena’s breath seemed to leave her body. “Irving is…”

“Dead. And you’re welcome, by the way, because you’d be too if I let you cross that Lake.”

“Listen,” Alistair began. “The Arl of Redcliffe is deathly ill, we’ve been sent—”

“Oh, you’re soldiers of Redcliffe now, is it? I thought you said you were Grey Wardens.”

“We are, we—”

“You’re lucky I don’t arrest the lot of you. Turn around, and consider it a mercy.”

Solena dismounted, and the sister was not quick enough to reach out and stop her.

“Has Greagoir ordered this? Tell me that pig has killed Irving and I swear, I’ll—”

“Back up! Back up, now, the both of you!”

“Solena, stop—”

The templar pushed Alistair backwards with an outstretched hand. “Keep your bitch on a leash, do you hear me? Or I’ll strike her down.”

Solena fumed, but had stopped in her tracks, saying nothing. Likely she felt the same drain set upon her as Morrigan now did. It was faint—a warning, clearly. Still, it set Morrigan’s blood boiling.

Alistair, who was gaping at him, shut his mouth, his jaw setting tightly. Morrigan thought she could even hear it click into place.

“Fair enough,” he said, and if she had blinked, she would have missed his head colliding with the bridge of the templar’s nose, knocking him unconscious. The draining sensation stopped.

Solena glanced once at the man collapsed on the dock before turning to tie her horse to a post. The rest of them dismounted, and followed suit.

The boat was not large, so Bodahn and his boy stayed behind, along with Sten. The dwarves would watch the horses, and Sten would watch the templar. It seemed a fine arrangement.

On the boat, they—that is, she, Solena, Alistair and the sister, were packed in close quarters. Her right shoulder rubbed uncomfortably against the sister’s own, as she suddenly remembered the last exchange she had had with the inane woman and how utterly pointless that had been.

The redheaded fool was captivated, it seemed, by the ruins of the bridge that stretched from the
Alistair, brow furrowing as he rowed, looked equally aghast at the question, and that certainly said enough. Solena did not seem to even notice that she had asked it.

“First of all, they do not row people fro, ever. Second,” Morrigan snapped, “All mages know how to walk. Few how to swim.”

Thus ended the questions. The only sound became the soft ripples of the water beneath the boat. There was no wind that night, and the moons were bright, though obscured by clouds. The trip was deafening in its silence—designed just that way, Morrigan presumed, to strike fear into mages upon arrival.

When they arrived, the sun had set at last. No templars were stationed at the dock that night, so they helped themselves onto the stone pier and tied the boat to a post.

The large double doors at the end of the long pier were made of the heaviest stone, with large rusty handles. Morrigan had felt the powerful wards which emanated from them even as she had exited the boat. Alistair pushed upon the doors, and after sensing they were locked shut, pounded loudly upon them with his fist. Solena hurried up next to him.

After a few long minutes of knocking, as Morrigan stood rubbing her bare arms in the cold and the sister next to her endlessly twirled and un-twirled a lock of orange hair, one of the doors was abruptly cracked open. A templar crowded the small opening, guarding from entry.

“Let us in,” Solena interjected quickly. “My name is Solena, I was a student here a little over a month ago. I’m a Warden now, here on urgent business. I must speak with the Knight Commander, immediately.”

“The Tower is closed—locked to outsiders under Greagoir’s strict orders.” The Templar insisted angrily. “Turn back this instant, or we shall use force!”

“Greagoir!” Solena shouted through the crack, as the Templar struggled against her. Alistair placed a warning hand on her arm. “I know you’re there, pig!”

The templar was shoved out of the way as a new, shorter, older one approached the scene, somehow redder and more irritating-looking than the last. Morrigan did think the woman’s description was apt—he was indeed quite pig-like. Solena took a careful step backwards from him, but still held her chin up high.

“I should execute you where you stand, girl. My patience has run dry for lying maleficars,” he croaked. “But once again it seems fortune smiles on you just as it smites others. You are the least of my concerns today. Waste not any more of my time, get back on your boat, and go back to the swampy grave you climbed out of. Why Ostagar spared you when it took so many brave men from us, we may never know.”

The door had nearly shut in her face when she spoke.

“Is Irving dead at your hand?”

The templar paused. “My hand? Why you insolent—”
“I know he is dead, your man at the docks said as much. To whom did he fall if not you? You despised him!” The woman accused.

“To demon filth—demons that maleficar such as yourself unleashed upon this tower!”

“Demons? In the Tower?” Solena asked.

The Knight Commander grumbled incoherently, to seemingly none but himself.

“Let us in. This instant,” Solena demanded. “Kinloch Hold has a treaty with the Grey Wardens. If Irving is truly dead, you must honor it,” she insisted.

The small man showed pause, and great reluctance. But something gave way, in the end. He let go of his grip on the door with spiteful force.

Alistair pushed and the door gave way.

The entrance hall of the Circle Tower was packed to bursting with templars, and with them, the stench of death. They crowded against each other, some clutching their flasks and blankets, others leaning upon one another. There was a meagre infirmary set up in a small dusty alcove. The men there did not look like they were being healed.

Then, Morrigan thought, who was there to administer the healing? There was not a mage in sight other than those who had just entered. She did not yet know the limits of the other woman’s piteous heart, but from what she had seen, it did not extend to templars. At the very least, they two had that in common.

At the end of the hall was a large set of doors that mirrored the last, only they were barricaded with every piece of furniture that had once been in the room. Benches and tables were turned on their sides and pressed up against the doors—it looked like a dam threatening to burst. From the infirmary, one man, missing a leg, cried out in pain.

“You see the state we’re in. The demons do not relent,” said the templar Commander.

“Of course they do not. They are demons. Did you expect them to tire?” Morrigan bit.

The man turned on his heel. “And who are you who speaks so boldly to a templar?”

“Another Warden, Ser.” Alistair was quick.

“I did not ask you, boy, I asked her,” he spat, his gaze never breaking. “Strange garb, for a Warden. I did not know you enlisted prostitutes.”

She would have watched the templar’s skin melt in flames—but he had drained her, with a shine in his eye.

“You waste your time, energy, and breath.” Alistair stepped closer to the man, engaging him in confrontation and drawing his attention. Morrigan felt his drain relent, and air filled her lungs again. “We can help if you let us, in exchange for the terms of our treaty. If you refuse, we shall seek aid elsewhere, and the consequences of betrayal shall be yours to bear when the war is over.”

The Templar’s fat lips twisted. “Maker spit on you. Wardens have taken a great deal from us recently. Now you come pounding at our doors again, demanding more?”

Alistair smiled tightly. “Perhaps you did not hear me—I was offering you aid. Your men reek of old
blood—you’ve been at this for nearly…two weeks, I’d say? Your lyrium supply must be near empty, and if you’ve cut off the Tower from outsiders, your food stocks must not be doing much better.”

Greagoir gawked, opening and closing his fat mouth rather stupidly.

“You’re fighting a losing battle,” Alistair went on. “You’re near ready to retreat, and surrender Kinloch Hold. Kinloch Hold hasn’t fallen to magic since Maric was crowned—I don’t imagine that would bode too well for a proud Knight Commander such as yourself. So, by my calculations, I don’t think you’re in any position to refuse us.”

The templar Commander, finally closing his mouth, huffed through his nose. “And by my calculations, you are not the Grand Cleric. So you have no aid that is useful to me.”

Alistair narrowed his eyes. Solena did not.

“The Rite of Annulment,” she breathed, upon some realization. “Irving is alive. Mages are still alive in the tower, aren’t they? But you can’t get to them. The demons won’t let you, so you’re going to… what? Purge the tower? Kill everything that moves?”

Greagoir turned quieter. “The Rite of Annulment is all we have left. Any mage still surviving inside the tower did not do so by any pure means. There is nothing left behind those doors but abominations. Once the Grand Cleric gives her holy blessing and our lyrium and forces are replenished, the Tower can be cleansed of demon influence.”

“Cleansed of mages, you mean. At long last, Greagoir, you get your excuse. To slaughter us all.”

The woman was at her tipping point. Morrigan knew nothing about Rites of Annulment, but its existence—some obscene templar fail-safe—surprised her not. All Chantry manure was the same shade of brown, she had found.

“Don’t you think you have grounds to shame me girl, I know not that Irving lives, or any other mage besides. And if they do, I know not which parts of them remain.” He shook. “The attack was a surprise. The demons cut through our ranks. We retreated here—what was left of us. We took time to heal ourselves best we could and regroup. When we launched our assault, we were at our strongest, and yet it was not enough. Of all our resources, I run lowest on answers. Give me another, or get out of my bloody way.”

He tried to move past her, but she blocked his way. “Send me in, I’ll do your damn job for you!”

“Don’t make me laugh,” he pushed her from his path, but she followed after. Morrigan hesitated to wonder when the man did laugh. Kicking little mage children, perhaps?

She remembered a templar who had visited their hut unwittingly, who liked to beat on little girls. Morrigan had been largely untrained in her magic then, so he had gotten one or two kicks in while Mother, in one of her young, seductive forms, had stepped outside the hut. When Mother returned, she fed him and bed him and Morrigan truly believed her mother had been none the wiser. But Morrigan found him in the bed the next morning, missing his legs. He later died.

Solena and the templar continued to argue rather intently, out of earshot among the mass of bodies in the hall. Alistair leaned back against the stone wall and Leliana continued to look around with that rather sad, pathetic face she wore when confronted with even a modicum of unpleasantness.

When they returned, the templar wore even thinner on patience. He stormed past them to the doors which led into the Tower, and they followed after. He pressed a gloved hand to the stone, whispering some quaint little words and lifting the ward. Then he and two other men lifted the barricade.
You have until the Grand Cleric arrives with our reinforcements,” said Greagoir as he lifted and hauled. “These doors open for no soul but Irving’s, who knows the words he must speak to me. If he is dead, then you are lost with him, and that does not concern me.”

“That’s—” Alistair began, ready to argue.

“Those were the terms of our arrangement, and that is the end of it,” he told him. Solena did not once even glance at the three of them.

Alistair and the sister seemed to choose not to argue the point further. Morrigan considered the benefits of not following her—only briefly. She would gladly take her chances with demons before she remained in the hall with the templars.

The two doors split, and slid against the floor as they opened. Solena stepped through without a pause, and the rest of them would have looked much the fools if they had not done the same. Once they cleared the way, the doors slid back into place. When stone met stone again with a clap, the familiar senses came—the eerie silence and the sickly stench that demons brought. But then there was also the Fade. Morrigan felt it. The Veil separating that which lived and that which dreamed was too thin here. And almost…sick.

“Solena, are you—” Alistair reached out.

“I’m fine,” she fibbed. She began to walk. “Irving’s alive. In what state, I don’t know. But he’s alive.”

“And if he is not the plan is to die, then?” Morrigan asked. They began to pass what looked to her like templar barracks.

“I find I must agree with Morrigan,” the sister began, to Morrigan’s utter shock. “I trust that your Irving is a wise, capable man, but our cause is—”

“Don’t trust in him, trust in me.” Solena interrupted. “If things go wrong, I can get us out.”

Morrigan shared a cautious look with the sister. Alistair said nothing, perhaps in fear of his fellow Warden turning him into a toad.

“Why have we seen no demons on this floor? Have they retreated up the tower?” the sister inquired.

Solena slowed her step. “Perhaps…” and she seemed to feel something Morrigan did not. “There’s something here.” She began to jog down the hall which was encased by arched ceilings to rival the heights of the Wilds’ pines, and as they all rounded the corner what Solena had felt became quite obvious. A ward blocked the path—though not placed there by any templar, for it shimmered with the magic imbued in it, and she did not feel any drain upon her. That was when they saw the mages in the shadows. Huddling together and hiding like scared animals.

An old woman stepped out first. Hair ragged and a face truly abysmal—from exhaustion, or so it looked. Alistair seemed to lower his guard.

“Wynne? Maker’s breath, is that you?” The blade in his hand clattered to the pristine marble floor, and the two met in what appeared to be a friendly embrace. “I thought you were dead. I thought surely you were all dead—!”

“You were not far wrong,” she said. “Countless of our finest—and youngest—were left on the field, Maker rest their souls. I and a few of my colleagues were spared.”
“Wynne, you—this is Solena, she’s a friend and fellow Warden, from Ostagar as well.” He gestured to the woman who stood off to his right. “We were the last, or so we thought.”

“We’ve met,” she smiled in her direction. “A very talented young woman you’ve found—I’m so glad the two of you yet live.”

The touching reunion appeared to end there. The old woman’s look rather soured then, and she distanced herself—ever so slightly—from the two Wardens.

“So,” she said. “Why are you here? And why did the templars let you through? Do they plan to attack at long last? Should I expect you to take up arms against me?”

Morrigan watched as children—yes, she could see some were children now—scurried further back into the shadows, hiding behind another woman’s skirts, frightened now of Alistair. Alistair appeared to be lost. Lost for words and lost in his mind—she would say that was typical of him, but it wouldn’t be quite true.

“If Greagoir has told you we are all abominations to be put to the blade, he knows not of what he speaks,” Wynne continued. “Mary and I have protected these children with our lives. This ward has held out against the demons for a week now. We are weak, but we are still in possession of our own minds.”

“I do no bidding of the templars, Enchanter,” Solena told her. “You have nothing to fear from us.”

The old woman raised an eyebrow. “Then what?”

“I must find Irving. Our business is urgent—lives are at stake,” she said.

Wynne shook her head. “I last saw Irving before this all started—as Greagoir pounded upon Uldred’s door. I couldn’t say where he was, or if he even still lives. But I will let you pass through the ward so you may discover that for yourself.”

“Uldred? You said Uldred?” Alistair asked. “I met him at Ostagar, he was in Cailan’s inner circle—he made it back alive?”

“Yes,” Wynne said sharply. “Alive, but changed.”

“We were all changed,” said Solena—a tone to her voice that once again Morrigan could not place. “Not as he was. He did not stand in the back lines with the rest of the Senior Enchanters, he fought with his students. Saw them all die before him—and had to be dragged off the field when it was clear the darkspawn had won. Few lost what he did.”

“You think Uldred is behind this? Would he attack the Tower?” Solena inquired.

“I…do not know,” said Wynne. “In truth, I saw him little after we returned. We did not know each other well enough. There were whispers about him. I meant to check on him, see how he was faring, but never did. I should have. Next thing I knew, Greagoir was marching his men down the halls and knocking down his door. That was when the demons attacked. I couldn’t say where they came from, or where Uldred was during all this, but I will not deny that as we’ve been stuck here my thoughts have drifted to him and what exactly he might be capable of. In short…yes, I suppose…there is a strong possibility.”

“Are you…” Solena began. “Are you all that’s left? Are all the other mages dead? None were evacuated?”
The old woman shut her eyes. “No. There was no evacuation. Templars and mages both fought as they could. When the battle was quickly lost, the templars retreated without a mage among them, assuming us all to be at risk of possession. Many mages died in the initial onslaught, yes. But that is not to say that some of them do not yet live, somewhere in the Tower. It is my hope and my prayer that they do, and that Irving is still among them.”

Solena considered this. The old woman spoke again, hopeful. “Is your goal to put an end to this madness? If Uldred is truly the culprit, will you kill him? End the demon infestation so the Tower may be saved?”

An odd thing happened then. The lady Warden’s face changed. It was as if something washed over her. A darkness like Morrigan had not seen from her. Her eyes narrowed and her lips twisted. “And why would I do that?”

Alistair looked upon her strangely, then. The sister looked apprehensive as well. The old woman looked as though she had been slapped. It was almost amusing.

“So we may rebuild. So the Templars may reclaim the Tower and the Circle may be reinstated. As it stands, the Tower may not recover from this.”

Solena searched the older woman’s eyes. “Maybe it shouldn’t.”

The elderly enchanter was quite clearly insulted by the discussion, but apparently decided to put her grievances aside for the sake of the present, which Morrigan rather appreciated. She lowered the wards as she had promised, allowing them passage through the Tower. After which she raised the wards once more, saying she would await their return, guarding her charges all the while.

The barracks were largely empty—it was another floor up before they came upon a demon. It stood away from them, sulking, hunched over and facing an empty wall. It swayed—its purply-brown mass moving gently and slightly back and forth, aimlessly—while it ruminated rather intently upon nothing. It was dormant. Almost docile. A most curious sight. Mother had summoned a demon or two in their hut—cautiously, of course, and never without cause. But they had not lasted long enough for Morrigan to observe them in this state. A demon existing in the physical realm without a purpose, without a drive, appeared to be…lost.

The woman took it upon herself to dispel it. She cast a quiet spell that triggered a small explosion within the demon’s form, killing it instantly. The four of them quietly scoured the rest of the floor, finding little, and were on their way.

The floors that followed were strangely much the same. No sign of the man Solena sought so eagerly, but plenty of dormant demons in their sleeping, vegetative state, showing aggression if provoked or startled but none if left to mind themselves. Nothing like the colorful picture the templar Commander had painted, of vicious things that tore his force to shreds. Morrigan suspected he was not lying, however. That was what made it all so strange. The demons had retreated. To where and for what purpose none of them could say, and the thought did not set her well-at-ease.

It was not right. None of it. The Fade-tinged air of the Tower was potent and hazy, and everything within it moved slower. It was stuck in a trance. Stuck in time. Morrigan thought to express this, but then grew tired, and thought better of it.

More than half of the way up, they reached what Solena had described as the common area. As they opened the doors that led up the floor they saw that not a single demon roamed upon it. The room was dark and largely cast in shadow, save for a single candle lit in the far back corner of the room. A man stood there behind a table—or so it looked like a man, for he stood inhumanly still and
Morrigan truly could not even tell if he breathed. The four of them looked at each other curiously, before Solena set upon approaching cautiously and quietly.

She of course led the pack of them, and as she drew closer towards the alcove she leaned in to look upon him better, before speaking. “Owain?”

The man turned his head. Morrigan could see now he wore robes. A mage, certainly—and at that discovery she elected to move no closer. If the woman wished to be food for demons, that was certainly her prerogative, but it did not have to be Morrigan’s. She witnessed Alistair and the sister do the same.

“Hello. Welcome to the Circle stockroom of magical items. My name is Owain. How may I assist you?”

Morrigan stepped closer then. Closer, only to get a better look at the symbol upon his forehead. The rising sun of the Chantry was seared upon his skin.

Solena shook her head. “Owain, you…” she looked back towards the three of them, but they clearly did not offer whatever answers she sought. “Why are you still here?”

“I do not understand your inquiry,” the dimwit informed her, with no curiosity to his voice, which Morrigan found to be the most suspect. Though, certainly not a sign of demonic possession. “I am the proprietor of the Circle stockroom. My job is to oversee the Tower’s provision of magical items to mages and Enchanters.”

“Yes but…” she began. “Have you not seen the demons in the Tower?”

“I have seen demons in the halls, yes. However, they do not enter the common area, nor have they bothered me in my daily tasks. Thus, I remain. I suppose if my work was interfered with, I would have to leave the stockroom, and seek shelter elsewhere. I hope that does not happen.”

“What is this?” Morrigan had had quite enough. She bit the question at the air, waiting for an answer. Instead, Alistair and the sister looked upon her strangely.

“He is tranquil,” Leliana answered. “Have you not seen a tranquil before?” As if it were commonplace. As if Morrigan were some small-brained fool for having asked in the first place. She huffed.

“I presume this is more of your Chantry nonsense which you think me simple for knowing nothing about?”

“I do not think you simple, Morrigan. Quite the contrary. I am merely surprised. I thought all mages knew of the tranquil,” the sister answered, though the end of her thought was stifled by a yawn.

“They’re soulless,” Alistair explained, which Morrigan was briefly very grateful for. “The templars cut off their connection to the Fade. Leaves them empty; docile. Like this poor sod. Left behind while everyone else ran for their lives, most like.”

Morrigan considered the tranquil man.

“Slaves, then,” she said.

“Yes,” Solena agreed, sadly. “Slaves.”

The man, of course, had nothing to say to any of that. He merely blinked at them.
“Why does he look untouched?” Alistair asked. “Why would the demons leave him be like this?”

“Demons can’t possess the tranquil,” the woman said in response. “They may even be frightened of them.”

Alistair failed in holding back a laugh. “Frightened?”

Morrigan thought this was odd, too. Should demons not treat a mage without a connection to the Fade as they would any other human being? Was that not what they were, in the end? She would have to ask the woman about that, later. But she could see that now was not the time for her little curiosities.

“Owain, have you seen the First Enchanter recently?” Solena asked.

“No, I’m sorry, I have not. Now that I think of it, I have not seen very many mages walking about,” said Owain, observantly.

“What about Uldred? Have you seen Enchanter Uldred?” she pressed.

“I have seen Senior Enchanter Uldred, yes. Though not, as I recall, for over a week now.”

“Did he speak to you? What was he doing?”

“He asked me a great many questions. He seemed interested in me.”

“Owain, what sort of questions?”

“I believe he asked: how long had I been tranquil, if I could describe the tranquility process, what being tranquil felt like. I told him I was not permitted to answer the first two questions, and did not know how to answer the last. He seemed frustrated. I hope I did not upset him.”

~~~

By the time Solena informed them they were a floor from the top, Morrigan was grasping the stairwell, near ready to collapse. She attributed it to the climbing. It did pain her, so. And oh, how exhausting it was. How right her mother had been, to keep her from this horror.

It was at this point she realized the others were faring no better. The sister had sweat upon her brow, which was not typical of her at all. Alistair breathed deeply, and the lids of his eyes slid closed every so often when he believed no one was looking. Solena was tired too, or so Morrigan believed, but it appeared that the woman ran on determination alone. Either way, she did not seem to pay any heed to their struggles.

Instead, she pressed them onward. She directed them to Irving’s study, one of the first doors they came across. Alistair signaled Solena to wait as he pressed his ear to the wood. Moments later he stepped to the side, and signaled Solena to open the door. As she did, Morrigan heard a painful screeching, and saw a demon rushing towards the entry. As it passed the threshold, Alistair swung, and sent the demon to the floor in two pieces.

The Wardens entered after that, and the sister took a careful, dainty step over the carcass on the floor as she followed. Morrigan trailed behind.

“Shut the door,” Solena told her. “We’ll be making some noise.”

As soon as Morrigan did so, Solena threw flame upon the torches that lined the wall so that they
were permitted sight, and began rifling through stacks and stacks of books and papers laid out upon endless tables. Old things, new things, rusted things and torn things. Morrigan could not recall ever seeing so many artifacts. There were scales and weights and sketches and maps and spherical things that spun around each other when you tapped on them. Alistair was easily preoccupied by the latter.

“What is it you are looking for, exactly?” Morrigan asked, equal parts annoyed and curious.

“Anything. Irving knew everything that went on in this tower. Uldred must have raised his concerns.”

The sister quickly began helping in earnest. Alistair did so half-heartedly, still clearly tired and distracted by the many colorful and shiny objects in the room. Morrigan, truly still not understanding what it was she should be looking for, at least made it appear as though she were being useful.

Solena began rifling through desk drawers, then. Making, as she had projected, a great amount of noise. That was when Morrigan heard the scratching and clicking of metal, and looked up.

It seemed the woman had found a key, and was now making quick work of opening up a large chest in the back corner of the room. Alistair crowded her then, and Morrigan could not see whatever it was they were so intently looking at.

But then the woman lifted it up out of the chest, and between their two forms Morrigan could see what looked like another book, but was thick and covered in dark wood carved to look like root tendrils. She could see the dark energy that radiated from it. To look upon it sucked the soul from her. To think of it made her cold, and made her shake.

“Is this…is this what we need? Do you think it has something to do with Uldred?” Alistair asked.

“No,” Morrigan said from behind them all. They all turned. “I know that book. It is my mother’s.”

She walked closer towards it, and held out her hands for Solena to place it in her own. She felt the cover, let her fingers run down the woodwork. She dared not open it here.

“Your mother’s?” Solena asked her.

“Yes. Or, it must be. I have seen one exactly like it, locked away in our hut. I was never permitted to open it, if I valued my life. Which I very much did,” she answered. “I presume this is not the same one. But perhaps…a copy? Or a second volume. I could not say. How your Irving got ahold of it…that is a true mystery.”

“Your mother wants it back, I take it?” Alistair inquired.

“Oh, yes. I can only imagine,” Morrigan said, though she did not look away from the book until a thought gripped her like a vice, and would not let go. Her head jerked up, and she looked into Solena’s eyes then. “Let me have this.”

The woman looked taken aback. “It is not mine to give you.”

“Yes, but only you have the ability to allow me to take it. Your Irving will not know it was you—he will presume it to be this Uldred, or the work of his demons, and consider it lost.” Morrigan clutched the book to her chest, tightly. She imagined she looked much like a little girl, begging for a gift. She felt silly. She remembered her mirror.

“Listen to me, please,” she persisted. “I have never known who or what my mother truly is, nor the extent of her powers, nor her reasons for bringing me into this world. This book likely contains
secrets—answers I could never have even dreamed of one day acquiring. If there was something in this world that contained the key to your existence as such, would you not do anything to obtain it?”

Solena looked at her very intently. Morrigan at first thought the look was her pity again, and resented it, but then recognized it as something altogether different. An understanding, perhaps? Perhaps that was not so awful. Regardless, Morrigan knew the look she returned her was nothing short of begging, so she was certainly in no place to criticize.

“You will not return it to your mother?” she asked.

“The crone may kill me for it. Beyond that, no. Never,” she answered her honestly.

The woman swallowed. “Then take it. I hope you find whatever it is you’re looking for.”

Solena closed the lid to the chest. Morrigan nodded. She knew there were words she should have said, but she could not think of them. Only of the breathlessness she felt, looking at the thing she now held in her arms. And of how very tired she was.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
"16th of Bloomingtide, 9:30 Dragon:

I followed another apprentice through supposed secret maneuvers today, and exposed her tendency towards blood magic. The environment of the tower is such that certain modes of thought are encouraged, both for good and ill. The students think we toy with them. The truth is far more intricate and directed. Deviant traits must be exposed early, or the whole of the Circle suffers.

Uldred has been very helpful in identifying the markers to look for. His skills at misdirection are admirable. I daresay that the apprentices would be shocked at his ability to manipulate them. I must organize a retreat such that the other enchanters can benefit from his skills.

“Did you find anything?” asked Alistair, across the room.

She flipped away from the page, closed the journal and stuffed it back in the desk drawer. “No. Let’s go.”

~~~

The tower’s halls were long and empty and grey and confining, in a different yet familiar way.

Now, no matter how long she walked, each time she rounded a corner Solena could see nothing but greater darkness at the end of the stretch. The high vaulted ceilings were as warped and terrifying-looking as they had always been. The air just as stale. The danger just as present.

Before she had had no frame of reference. The Tower was the Tower. It had always been the beginning and end of the world—something not even her memory nor her dreams could ever stretch beyond. Now she had discovered envy. She envied Morrigan who had her forest, and Leliana who had found peace, and even Alistair who took it all for granted. She had said little to any of them as they climbed the Tower and even as they had approached it hours ago, she knew that. She knew how she must look to them now. But in her mind she screamed at them on every floor; in every room she had endured for nineteen years: See? Do you see? Appreciate what it is to live, for I was dead before I left, and deader still now that I’ve returned.

There was a wrongness here, now. A noise that didn’t come from the halls. It told her that time had forgotten her place in this tower, and that she should too, and that she should not have returned. It told her that it was better to have let it die. The tower, the templars, the mages, and the First Enchanter, all of it. She should have let it die, and let the Guerrin boy die too, rather than return here, playing in the buried past and digging up truths she would have been happier not knowing. To have come so far only to arrive back at the start seemed an awful shame.

It also told her that she was very tired, and that she should rest. The Warden, the Knight Commander, her old mentor and the Enchanter, they would all wait for her. They should wait. They deserved her not.
“Are you sure that was the right choice back there?” Alistair asked through a yawn. Quietly, so the other two could not hear. “You think there are any spells in that book to, I don’t know, end the world, or something?”

She rolled her eyes. “You think Morrigan wants to end the world?”

“Well,” he started. She stopped him.

“She just wants answers. Let her have them, Maker’s breath.”

Over a month by each other’s sides and they still tested each other like this. Nothing she did pleased him. Nothing she did was good enough. It made her very sad. Perhaps they should both rest. They were both very irritable and tired. That was it.

“Hold,” said Alistair, and they stopped moving.

“What?” Leliana asked.

He inched closer to a door on their left. The Chantry. “Do you hear that?”

Solena did. It sounded like…giggling.

Leliana drew an arrow through her bowstring. Morrigan at last stuffed her book into her pack, and gripped her staff tight. Alistair stood ready, hand at his pommel. Solena pushed open the door.

“Supper is ready, pet,” spoke the demon, clad in nothing and standing beneath the golden statue of the prophet.

A templar kneeled at its feet, still clad in heavy plate. He did look a sight, with bags under his eyes sunken deep into his skin, long red hair matted, and an outgrown, scruffy beard. He looked so happy that he was near bursting. Happy like Teagan had been as he had danced and clapped and spun before his nephew.

“Wonderful, darling. I’ll get the children. What is it we’re having?” he asked.

The demon gestured at a table, barren and empty. It spoke in long, sultry gasps. When it smiled, its fangs shone in the light. “Roast boar, your favorite. And candied yams. The meal looks sumptuous.”

The air of the room was harsh and hostile, and Solena feared if she disturbed it the four of them would be dealing with far more than they could handle, not with how tired they all were. It required a gentler touch. She conveyed this to those behind her and they nodded their understanding.

The voice of the demon cut through the air again, but this time it sounded like a young boy. “Mother is helping me with my penmanship. She raps me on the knuckles if I get sloppy with my letters,” it said.

“Good, good. A young man should know how to write. And you, my sweet Lissa? How was your day?” the templar asked, his blank stare not once changing.

“Mother taught me to play the harp! And I helped cook supper!” said the demon, its sharp tail whipping as its voice became the daughter.

“Well, it is delicious. Thank you, dear.”

Solena began by clearing her throat.
The templar cocked his head at the sound. “Do you hear something, my love?”

The demon caressed his face, its long sharp talons threading through his hair. It drew close, its purple eyes burning bright into his, almost as if it were searching, desperately, for something. Solena knew not what. Its nude, pink human shape pressed sensually into his own. It tried as best it could to mimic love, but its best would never fool anything not under its spell.

“It is nothing, my darling. Just the door. I’ll get it. Put the children to bed, and I’ll be upstairs in a moment.”

The templar smiled goofily, and turned to go face the stone wall, unmoving. The demon darted across the room to right in front of her, likely to startle her into turning tail and running. She did not startle easy.

“You are intruding upon a loving, intimate moment and I dislike disruptions,” it howled at her. When it spoke to her it sounded different—it sounded like a thousand voices. It lost its feminine charm and became something far more true to itself.

Solena raised her hands in the air to show she meant no harm. “There’s no need for the façade. I see what you are, and what you’ve done here. You and I can speak on equal footing.”

“What I’ve done? Whatever do you mean?” The demon asked. Its hands trailed leisurely across its breasts and navel. Just as it had no grasp of love, it had no grasp of feigned innocence, either.

“You’re a demon of desire, holding this man hostage. I’m asking you to let him go,” Solena said, and at once she wished she hadn’t. She was so exhausted, and she had no idea of what time they had still remaining to them. Yet here she was, sticking her neck out for some mindless templar. Never had she met a templar who would have done the same for her. If she left him to his fate, no one would know. Not Greagoir, not Irving, not his fellow men on the ground floor. And it would feel so good to leave him. Leave him, leave the tower, and rest comfortably in their camp. She would not lose a wink of sleep, either.

“I have given him everything he has always wanted. A loving wife, a doting family. Pull him away from me and he has nothing. Nothing but misery and his cups. He has gone through life empty, resentful of his vows and vices. You would do such a thing to him? To me?” It asked, something like sadness in its voice.

“He would have his freedom. All you’ve given him here is deception,” Solena responded.

The demon narrowed its eyebrows. “All emotion is intangible. You cannot see it, cannot grasp it. I saw his loneliness. I replaced it with something greater.” It began to shriek at her, either out of desperation or anger. “We are linked, the two of us! By something powerful, something mortal! Is that not what love is? Through me, he is granted his innermost desires, and through him I am granted mine! I feel what it is to be alive!”

“It’s not love,” Solena told it, unflinching. “It’s not real.”

The demon levitated above her, screaming and crying and surging dark and purple. “How dare you? How could you? You would tear us apart? You monster! You shrew! What do you know of it? Just like a human to fail to grasp anything larger than themselves! I gave him everything! I could give you everything! Instead you—”

An arrow lodged itself in the demon’s head. It turned, shocked, to the other door across the room, before another embedded itself in its neck, and it fell to the ground dead.
Leliana stood over it soon, removing her arrows. “I’ve never seen one like that. It was unholy. Feeding off human emotions and desires—and in a Chantry no less.”

The templar in the corner shook himself from his stupor, stepping carefully in a circle and looking as though he were reassessing the space around him, seeing it again for the first time in years. Solena approached him.

“Greagoir and the rest of your men are on the ground floor, but they won’t open the doors until I return with the First Enchanter. We’ve cleared the tower of demons from this floor down. Go as far as you can until you see the blue wards blocking the way, and ask for Wynne. Tell her I sent you—refer to me by name: Solena. She’s protecting her charges, you’ll be safe behind her wards until we get back.”

The man nodded, still emerging from the daze of it all, and headed towards the entrance.

“Oh, and, one more thing,” she called out, and he turned. “Get Owain from the stockroom while you’re there, tell him he’s been reassigned to the ground floor, or whatever you have to. Just get him out of there.”

He agreed, mumbled out a confused word of thanks, and left hastily.

Solena thought of Irving’s journal, which she had read and lied about, burning a hole in the drawer she had left it in. It burned a hole in her mind, now. Now she knew the truth. Knew he had kept secrets from her, knew he had betrayed her. It wasn’t Jowan’s fault, none of it was. Irving had caused all of this. If he was dead at Uldred’s hand, it wouldn’t matter. He deserved it. She wished she had never read that. She wished she had never come here. She wished for them to leave, now.

…

No, she didn’t.

No, she didn’t.

“Something’s wrong. We have to hurry,” she spoke with an urgency that was difficult to feel. The exhaustion weighed heavily on her body, and she did not know how much longer she could keep herself upright.

“We haven’t seen Uldred, the mages, or any of his force yet. They’ve likely retreated to the top floor,” said Leliana, lethargic and sluggish, like speaking underwater. Solena tilted her head at her.

“Why are you talking like that?” she tried to ask, but the words made no sound.

Then, the Chantry grew dark, and warm, and she could not see the way to leave. She could hardly make out her companions beside her.

“Why do you rush?” said Sloth, from nowhere and everywhere. “Why do you hurry? The world rests upon your shoulders. The burden must be so… heavy.”

Her breathing grew slower. She could not think. Soon she lost all senses except the ability to hear the words.


~~~
Drummers played music for her on the ground below, and each bang rang out like a crack of thunder.

She stood on a balcony between two pillars of fine sandstone. She smiled down at the Wardens, who played drums large as horses, and sang and drank their fill and made merry in celebration of their victory. The sun grew low, welcoming an evening that would be cool and quiet. These festivities, however, would last well into the next morning. She was a hero, now. A name written in legend and sung by bards. And Weissaupt Fortress had welcomed her with flying banners, exquisite foods, and rhythmic music. At last she could see the mountains of the Anderfels and all the deserts between them, the waves of sandy dunes parting only for the grand Warden fortress, which stood taller than Kinloch Hold and might have sprawled half of Lake Calenhad.

She had once wanted to be a princess. How stupid and unimaginative. She had dreamt up a fantasy for herself, but in it she was just another type of prisoner. To the lords and ladies who expected things of her, to the children she would have to bear and to the man who demanded she bear them. Why instead had she not thought of this? She had always been capable of attaining it. A woman in charge of her own will, who bowed and deferred to no one but herself. She could be a Queen. A God, if she wished it. Who was there to tell her otherwise?

She was decorated in real Wardens’ robes, now. Not the grimy armor she used to wear on the road and into battle. The metal of it glistened in the sunlight like nothing she had ever seen, and two luminous silver griffons danced side by side on her breastplate, resting atop the deep blue and white fustian velvet of her robes which draped over her shoulders and breasts, down to her calf. Underneath her robes and over her leather trousers, she wore sleek black leather boots buckled high. She had never owned anything so fine or expensive. She had never truly owned anything at all. The thought brought tears to her eyes.

The tears were so that she could not see Duncan approach at her side. He drew her in close with an arm about her shoulders and handed her a small rag that she might dry her eyes.

“Hush, now,” he said, in that warm voice that had made her feel so safe from the start. “This is no time for tears. Below you, men and women sing and dance with your name on their lips. Why do you not go down and join them, child?”

She laughed a little and smiled, but wetness fell on her lips and she remembered her tears again. “I don’t know that I’d be much fun. I’m not sure I know how to…”

“To relax?” he offered.

“Perhaps. It is difficult to celebrate a war that’s only just finished. There’s so much that remains with me, and I’m…I’m afraid it won’t leave,” she admitted to him.

“It will not stay with you for long. Life continues on, even in darkness. Go down and join the others. Occupy your mind, and you’ll see how I’m right.”

She nodded and he let her keep the kerchief. Before he was out of earshot, her heart leapt in her throat, and she called out his name again to ask him a question.

“Will Alistair be joining us soon?”

Duncan’s brow furrowed, and his eyes grew dark. “Who?”

She shook her head in disbelief. Perhaps he had not heard her right. “Alistair. Will he—”
She rounded the familiar corridor, slippered feet padding against the Tower’s silk rugs. Classes had ended for the day, and so she found herself headed for the library before bed, as was her routine. Many were asleep, or relaxing in their quarters, and the halls of Kinloch Hold were quiet and still.

Each time she entered the room, she fell in love with it all over again. Gone was the stone of the Tower’s prison walls—instead the walls were covered from bottom to top in bookshelves taller than giants. The shelves in the center of the room were so many that they had to be arranged such that the library looked quite like a maze. She had witnessed even senior enchanters become lost from time to time—but never her. As a girl she had hid here, taking her stolen sweets and her rag doll and crawling into an empty shelf in an alcove where the templars would not find her. She would open up a book, and cake crumbs would find their way onto the old pages. Irving had discovered this once as he opened up one of her school books to begin their tutoring session. The warmth of his smile then had stayed with her through a childhood of misery and loneliness.

She ran her fingers fondly along the spines of the books before plucking one off of the shelf and opening the cover. Before she could focus on what the words said, a voice from behind startled her.

“What are you doing here?”

She gasped and turned and clutched the book to her chest. When she laid eyes upon the man’s face, she managed a smile and a nervous laugh.

“Niall, you scared me,” she said. “I didn’t think anyone else would be here so late.” Niall was older than she was—a full-fledged mage and assistant to Enchanter Rothfield. He had free study periods, so he usually left the library earlier than she did. Occasionally he stayed later to chat or help her with her studies. Perhaps he had simply had a late night. He did look a sight, as if he’d been tired for hours or days even—was he sleeping alright?

He asked again, more demanding this time. “Solena, what are you doing here?”

She began to grow frightened at his tone, though she did not know why.

“I don’t understand. You know I come here every night. We study together sometimes.”

He crowded her then, grabbed her shoulders fiercely and firmly and shook her, and though she tried to wiggle from his grip it did not work.

“This isn’t real,” said Niall. “None of it. This is the Fade, can’t you see that? We’re both trapped. How did you get here? Can you remember?”

She laughed at him again, now understanding better the situation at hand. “Yes, quite, I walked here from Irving’s office. I’m not so tired that I can’t remember the trip. I swear, if the enchanters find you boys have been raiding their elfroot stock they’ll throw you from the highest—”

He shook her more violently though she could not feel it, and screamed in her face though she still struggled to hear him, as if his voice were somehow muffled. “You have to listen to me, we haven’t…time! You left…how you’re here now but…dream…demons’ making. If we don’t….. time…bodies will decay, and—”

The library began to melt. Niall found his words no longer made sound. As Solena looked at him frantically, he pried the book from her hands and opened it, fanning through the pages, showing her that all were empty.

~~~
Then there was a palace, made of glass.

Bright towers stretched towards the clouds above, and she nearly felt she had to shield her eyes from the light of the scene. The glass cracked but did not crumble. The palace was fragile, but had stood for a long time. She stood outside of it on the bridge. Behind and around her was nothing and nowhere but the infinite sky, so she walked forward, small cracks forming beneath her bare feet with each step.

She wondered then if this was what it was to dream.

The main hall of the palace was no dimmer than the outside. Tables and chairs and chandeliers and gargoyles all glittered like diamonds, her reflection bouncing across each surface in constant motion.

That was when she noticed what she was wearing, looking in the glass. Long silk in the deepest purple, with plunging cuts and sheer fabric which trailed and made waves behind her as she walked. It felt like she wore the air. She stopped admiring the dress then to look at her face, which shocked her. She was older than she recalled. Harsh lines and dark contours marked her face, showing cruel years that she did not remember living. The face was cold and the olive hue of her skin was gone. Now it looked like snow. Or death.

She cast down her gaze with feelings she couldn’t put a name to, and turned to look behind her, only to meet the same pair of eyes once again on the other side of the room. Her eyes. Over, and over, and over, and over again. The faces tilted and sneered at her.

“This is what you wanted,” they stabbed.

Violently then, the wind came, and the rain with it from newly dark clouds above. She heard the shattering glass and looked above her as the palace came crashing down on top of her, the shards slicing through her skin and ripping her apart just as she began to smell death in the air.

~~~

The next thing she smelled was baking bread, and it was then she knew that she was dreaming.

It was more than just bread, it was fresh, buttery pastries and hearty meats with onions and carrots and other vegetables. There were spices too which she recognized—cinnamon and nutmeg and cloves. There were even fainter traces of fruit and citrus—baked apples, lemons and oranges, and through it all she got the most luxurious waft of warm brandy. The air smelled far better than the kitchens of Kinloch Hold on a Sunday morning, though even in her sheltered ignorance she had never believed that could possibly be the height of cuisine.

She opened her eyes and there was a wooden door in front of her. Eagerly she pushed upon it, and warm light filled her vision. In the corner of the modest room there was a fireplace roaring, and on the tables there were candlesticks. She could see the oven from where she stood, and through the slat saw the pie that she had smelled outside. Solena realized she was starving.

There was a woman, who sat in a comfortable looking armchair by a small bookshelf, candlelight illuminating the pages of her book. She was sat facing the door, and stood when she looked up to see Solena, and smiled with grace.

“Ah, we have a guest, I see.”

She was older than Solena but not by so much. Beautiful, tall, and honey-haired with full curly locks. Old enough, clearly, to have young children running about, maybe ten years of age or so. Two, in fact—a boy and a girl, just as beautiful as she was, sitting at the dining room table playing
checkers. They looked up at their mother’s announcement.

It was then Solena saw the figure sitting on the floor by the fireplace with his back to her, cast in shadow.

“Alistair, come look,” the woman said, and Solena’s heart found her stomach. She looked back at the children again, studying them intently now. *A dream,* she thought, but *would a dream torture me like this?*

But Alistair turned and gave an almost comically large, genuine smile, practically clambering from his sitting position to reach her and embrace her, spinning her around in the air as she laughed delightedly. She found she was in her Warden armor though he was not—he wore cotton instead—a loose-fitting cream shirt and green trousers which suited him well. He looked off his guard in the best of ways, and happy.

“Alistair, what—” she began as he set her down, but he could not wait for her to finish.

“I’m so glad you’re here—I can’t believe you’ve made it, this is so wonderful!” he said. “Please, this is my sister, Goldanna, and her children.”

“Oh, I…” Solena found herself mumbling, a bit ashamed with her presumptions.

“We’re so delighted to finally meet you,” said Goldanna, clasping one of Solena’s hands in both of her own as if it were something very sacred. “Alistair, I believe, has not ceased telling us about you since his arrival.”

“And when was that?” Solena asked, remembering the dream. Goldanna opened her mouth preparing to speak, but then decided to shut it and continue smiling, looking now at Alistair, who was stumped.

“It, um…look, will you stay? At least for dinner? Goldanna’s making her famous mince pie,” he said.

Solena remembered the delicious-smelling pie, and that she was very hungry. She should stay—it was only polite. And for once, it seemed Alistair desired her presence, and was not irritated or cross with her, and the hand now on the small of her back reminded her of when he had first placed it there after her Joining. Warm and comforting, and she knew she wanted it to remain there forever. After dinner, she would leave, and return to…whatever it was she had been doing.

“Alright, I’ll stay,” she agreed, and Alistair’s face lit up again, so she knew in an instant she had made the right decision. He ushered her to sit at the dining table that the children now worked diligently to set with delicate napkins and pretty white plates and silverware. Goldanna wandered to the kitchen. “I must admit, I did not know you had a sister.”

He snorted at that, walking to the oak wine cabinet and picking out some Orlesian red vintage along with three glasses, which he poured generously. “Nor did I. Teagan, ah, brought it to my attention in Redcliffe. A half-sister, on my mother’s side. I’m just grateful we’ve finally found each other.”

Solena sipped her wine, which she found sweet and delicious. “That was kind of him.”

Alistair toyed with the stem of his glass. “I…yes, it was. I suppose he felt badly for me. He needn’t, but…I appreciate the gesture all the same.”

“Felt badly why? Because of what Isolde said?” she asked, and he raised his eyes from his glass to her face then, blinking at her.
With one quick glance towards the kitchen seeing Goldanna’s back and the children beside her waiting eagerly, Solena gripped Alistair’s wrist on the table as tight as she could and her eyes pleaded with him. The touch of her skin on his must have electrified the both of them, because it felt better than anything in this world. It felt better than the smells coming from the kitchen, or the music that rang out through Weisshaupt, or the feel of the books in the Tower. He was no dream. Neither was she.

“Alistair, remember. Please. Think about where you are.”

She did not know if she had reached him. He looked away from her then and seemed to be assessing the wood of the table and the clothes that he wore.

Goldanna arrived with pie.

“Here you are,” she said, setting it down between the two of them and setting the knife beside it. “I imagine you’re both famished. Please, take the largest slices you’d like.”

Alistair did not move—did not say a word. Solena did not know what to do. Goldanna watched expectedly with folded hands, as did her children who sat at the table now with napkins in their laps and cutlery in their hands.

“Alistair?” his sister cooed. “Is everything alright? Is the wine not to your liking?”

“The wine is wonderful, Goldanna,” Solena quickly assured her, her hand still resting on Alistair’s. Though foolish and stupid, she prayed. She prayed for something. She did not know what. For Alistair to see as she did, for Goldanna to not suspect them, for them both to leave this dream safe and alive and together. Instead, her face and body felt hot and the pit in her stomach only grew.

“Alistair was just telling me how tired he was.”

“Oh,” said Goldanna. “Well, of course, if you need to go lie down—”

“I’m fine,” he said, sharply. Too sharply. Goldanna winced.

Then, Goldanna’s eyes snapped downwards to the table. Her look had a fire behind it. “What is that?”

Solena followed her gaze. In Alistair’s other hand was the rose, red and full and not a thorn missing, just as she had left it in the real world in her pack. Alistair had given it to her—he no longer had it. How did it come to be in his hand, here?

“Nothing. A…a gift. Please, forgive him, he—” she began, but it was too late.

“I’m not tired, you don’t need to say that,” he stopped studying the rose to look at her now, eyes wide and alert. “I haven’t been tired since I arrived. I haven’t been tired, haven’t been hungry—” he pushed his chair behind him and stood. Solena followed quickly.

“Alistair, please—”

“—haven’t been happy, really. I haven’t been anything. This isn’t…you’re not real!”

Goldanna tilted her head, then. Not curiously. Dangerously. “I’m what?” her words barely came out sweet. The candle on the table was snuffed out by the air.

“You’re not my bloody sister, for one,” he sneered, and all the light in the room left. Then, the pie exploded. After Solena and Alistair had jumped back in shock, the chair to their right exploded too,
and the dining table, and the windows broke one at a time, and the floorboards creaked and the whole house felt as though it were dying. Goldanna shrieked and began to show her true colors then, the purple of her skin starting to faze through as her eyes turned cloudy and white.

Before Goldanna could move nearer to them, Solena grabbed the carving knife off of the floor and lunged forward with it, stabbing the woman in the eye. As Goldanna collapsed to the floor Solena fell on top of her and struggled to get back up again. Alistair grabbed her by the arm to help her stand, and they watched together as the children at the woman’s side evaporated, and the house creaked and moaned and shattered for only a few more moments before Solena felt that Alistair was gone from her side. Then the scene before her disappeared completely, and all was quiet.

~~~

“You are as much my mother as my little finger, here, is the Queen of Ferelden!”

She knew the voice immediately, so the dream was not very hard to guess.

Solena stood where the tall forest pines met the swampland upon which Flemeth’s hut rested. In the distance, in front of the house, stood Morrigan and the demon who imitated her mother. Or, more aptly, they circled one another. Magic surged sporadically in Morrigan’s hands—perhaps the demon was stifling her power, or Solena presumed she would have killed it by now.

The detail of it all was impressive. From what she remembered of the place, it seemed as though everything was as it should be, from the green of the swamps to the chill of the breeze to the wrinkles upon Flemeth’s face. Though it was clear that Morrigan was not fooled.

“You deny a mother who has loved and cared for you? From infancy to adulthood?” asked Flemeth, feigning hurt.

“My mother loved and cared for me no more than the dirt loves and cares for a weed. She raised me, demon, and gave me tools for survival. That is all. She did not read me bedtime stories and give me warm milk.”

“Insolent girl!” Flemeth croaked, and struck Morrigan across the face. Morrigan took a moment to massage the red spot and shake off the pain.

“At last, that’s more like it. A little too late, spirit, but you’ve got the idea.”

“Morrigan!” Solena cried out as she walked closer, and the young witch turned her head.

“Oh, finally. Please, be rid of this thing now and let us leave. Even the true Flemeth was never as annoying as this.”

The demon began to act strangely just as Goldanna had, as it screamed and cried out and the landscape and the sky around it grew darker. Solena quickly conjured a blast of energy that knocked the thing backwards, then another to kill it. When it had disintegrated into nothing, she looked back at Morrigan strangely.

“Does your magic not work here?” she asked. Morrigan clearly considered the question offensive, and she scoffed.

“Of course it works. Why would—”

“You knew it was a demon. Why not kill it before I arrived?”
The color left the other woman’s face then, and her deep well of quick retorts seemed to run dry at last. Solena knew Morrigan did not care for her, and she knew this line of questioning was earning her no further admiration. Still, it would bother her more if she did not ask at all.

“I do not know. Does it matter? It is dead. Leave it be.” She said it quickly, and stormed away towards the trees. Soon, she was gone with everything else.

~~~

She could never abide the smell of incense.

It was too much, too overpowering. And it had followed the Chantry priests in the Tower wherever they went. No Mother or ordained Sister had ever beat her or threatened her life, but still some days it seemed the only thing that distinguished them from the templars was the armor. Solena had read somewhere that the most complete way to wipe out a people was not with blades but with books. She bore the Maker no ill will. But his bride, since the very dawn of the Chantry, had doomed every child to ever carry magic in their blood to an early grave or an indefinite imprisonment. When she had been told the tale of Andraste’s death on the pyre over and over as a little girl, she had not felt very sorry for her.

It was what she smelled now, as she looked around and found herself in the Lothering Chantry. It was nighttime so the light was dim, aside from small red glass lamps that lined the wall above silent priests with bowed heads. In front of the altar stood the Revered Mother, white and stern-looking, and knelt below her was Leliana, hands clasped and eyes shut tight in prayer.

“Hear my sins, Revered Mother, so the Maker may grant me forgiveness,” Leliana began, as Solena inched down the aisle. “I have strayed from His light, thinking I knew better, that I could carve my own path. And I was so wrong…” Solena thought Leliana might be crying, but the sister tried to conceal it. “I’ve kept many secrets; told many lies—the largest ones to myself. And I’ve taken life. So much life…”

“You keep no secrets from the Maker, child,” said the Mother. “He sees all sin, all betrayals of His love. Yours has been a great disappointment.”

“I know,” she said. “I know it has. It’s—”

“You soul is black, child. We must work to scrub it clean.”

“Leliana,” Solena called out, and the word echoed through the long Chantry hall. The Mother’s head snapped to her, glaring.

“Quiet!” she hissed. “Do not disturb our Sisters from their meditations!”

But Leliana had already opened her eyes and turned to see.

“You…what are you doing here?” Leliana stood, and the Mother grew anxious. “I…no. I know who you are. I don’t want to go with you.”

Solena moved closer, slowly. “Leliana, this isn’t real. This is the Fade. You’re back at Kinloch Hold, with me, and Morrigan and Alistair.” She gestured to the Mother. “And this is just a demon, meant to deceive you, to trick you into complacency.”

Leliana looked curiously to the woman beside her, then back to Solena, as if working out some grand puzzle.
“No…no, I want to stay. This is what the Maker meant for me, always. I was a fool to think otherwise.”

Solena took a brave step forward then, and out of the corner of her eye she saw the Mother flare with demonic power—brief and quiet.

“When you left Lothering to join me, you told me you had had a vision. You didn’t say what, but some…sign from on high that this was what you were meant for. Why are you doubting that now?”

The Mother made a *tsk* sound, and folded her hands tightly in front of her. “Leliana, we have spoken about these…visions of yours, and their nature. They are fanciful creations of your mind, meant to lead you astray, back to a path of wickedness. The Maker has left us, dear, you know this. He will return only when His voice is heard across all Thedas. Until then, we are creatures of no special treatment—you have not been *chosen*, girl.”

But Leliana’s gaze had already changed. There was a heat there, now. The Mother felt it, and she looked panicked.

“I may not have been chosen, but I know what I saw. And I refuse to believe the Maker has abandoned his children, sin or no. Mother Harriet may not have always agreed with me, but she accepted this.” Leliana narrowed her eyes. “I do not know who you are.”

The demon exploded, shirking its human form and shrieking in Leliana’s face, who quickly darted out of its way. Solena backed away as she saw Leliana reach for a lamp hanging on the wall and swing it around, bashing it against the head of the demon that pursued her. The demon melted in the flame until it was nothing but simmering ash on the floor. Leliana took a deep breath, still watching the pile.

“Thank you. I have a great distaste for feeling out of my own head. That was…incredibly unpleasant.”

Solena meant to warn her. To tell her of what she’d seen, and of Morrigan and Alistair, and to say that they may be separated soon and that she did not know where she would end up next. But as soon as she opened her mouth, another shriek rang out that was far louder than her. It came from deep within the Fade. The world went dark again.

~~~

In the darkness, there was a wooden table. Beautiful and sprawling and intricate, the life’s work of a woodworker with no equal.

Circling the table was a lion with a proud mane. He circled the table until he grew tired, and then climbed atop it to rest. The table was so sturdy and well-made that it did not even buckle under the lion’s weight.

On top of the table, to the right of the sleeping lion, was a large piece of old parchment, weathered and worn and falling apart. Drawn carefully onto the parchment were many strange symbols. Ones which looked like little silver archways were by far the most abundant. Inside the arches were even stranger symbols. There was one which looked like a snake. Another looked like a dragon perched upon an island. Another looked like old, blackened ruins.

That was all she could see.

~~~
A flower grew upon a riverbed, until the river rose and drowned it, and it withered and died.

Time passed. Men rose from the ground and fought on that same river bed, clashing their steel in the name of war as the sky changed its colors.

A great sleeping beast drank from the river, which was red with blood. The beast flew off, and the vision was over.

~~~

Distant from her was a castle by the sea. Its stone was beautiful and white and its spires were something out of a fairy tale, and they shone in the low sun. The castle was set sturdily and strategically upon a white rock, so one could look out upon the waves of the sea crashing into the shore without fear of being swept away by them. Surrounding the castle for as far as was visible was the tallest, greenest grass Solena had ever seen, blowing in the stiff sea breeze and tickling her legs and fingers. The air was salty and fresh and smelled like she had once imagined true freedom would smell.

Suddenly she could see inside the castle, and there she was. Not but a few years older and smiling down at a belly heavy with child, which she caressed and hummed songs to. Strolling down the spiral stairs behind her was a husband who loved her—who reached her and kissed her stomach and then kissed her deeply. She laughed into the kiss. She was happy.

It was a dream, though. But it had been made for her, all the same.

She wanted to stay, but she couldn’t. She had to leave, even though it killed her. She had to leave, now.

~~~

“Solena?”

She opened her eyes. She looked around. It was an empty room, small and unassuming, without even doors or windows from which to leave. Still the Fade, she knew. It was Niall in front of her again, looking worried and haggard, dressed in his orange robes just as he had been before.

“Niall, where are we?” she asked him as she assessed the space.

“I was just about to ask you the same,” he told her. “It feels different, though, does it not? It’s…quiet. Almost like…like he can’t hear or see us.”

“He who?”

“Sloth. The one who trapped us both here. He watches over everything in this realm. Protects the sanctity of the dream for as long as he’s able—that’s why your dreams keep ending when you get too close to being able to discern reality.”

“We both seem alert enough. Why haven’t we left yet?” she asked.

“It’s not so simple. You’re still his prisoner. He’ll keep throwing dreams at you, keep trying to trick you, or at least make you happy enough so your desire to leave becomes forfeit.”

She furrowed her brow. “And…how do we leave?”

His look turned to one of deep thought. He began to pace, walking up to a wall and feeling the
stone, pressing his hand hard against it.

“I didn’t think one could escape Sloth. I had almost given in to defeat. Then you arrived.”

“What did that change?”

Niall did not speak for a moment, instead backing away from the wall and looking to the ceiling. Solena could not tell what he was doing.

“This room is not of Sloth’s making,” he said. “and it is not of mine.”

At his words she startled to attention, and looked around the room once more, taking it in like she had not before. But the absurdity of it all caused her to give a somewhat half-hearted laugh. “You think… I did this?”

He did naught but look at her.

“Niall, I’ve not dreamed since I was a child, and even then... that you think I’d have any control over…” she fumbled.

“I think you’re a powerful mage, capable of more than you know. I do not know how you did this, but nonetheless I believe that you did. Sloth has likely discovered this room and is working now to destroy it. Quickly, before that happens, you must tear down the dream.”

“What?”

“The whole realm. Tear it down. If you can manipulate the Fade here, in any capacity, then you can surely do it on a larger scale. Focus—find Sloth, and will him out of existence. If the demon that lords over this realm is killed, the dream should collapse with him.”

“You’re joking. I can’t—”

“Solena, please! This is all we’ve got, or we’re stuck here until our bodies rot away in the world of the living. Just try,” he said—begged—and she looked on helplessly.

Familiarly, she found her heart was stuck in her throat. But coughing it up or forcing it back down… neither would serve them now. She had to live with it, move on and make do with it, and forget about all the rest, or they would all die. Her and Niall, and Leliana and Morrigan, and Alistair. Alistair would die if she couldn’t do this. And if she couldn’t do it, then she was nothing. Less than nothing. In life, you either did what you had to, or you lost. There weren’t second chances. There wasn’t any going back. At long last the room stopped spinning, and she shut her eyes.

Solena saw the Fade.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for
reading. :)
Solena stood in the tall yellow grass, as he used to, and the wind blew her hair so beautifully that it seemed to him like a dream.

“Cullen, I miss you,” she had said in her letter. “I need you. Please agree to meet me in Honnleath, as soon as you are able.” And he lived in no sort of world where he could refuse her anything. So here he stood.

He had always wanted to show her Honnleath. Before she was a Warden, it was never possible. But he had imagined she would like it. He remembered she had asked him about lightning bugs one day as they spent time together alone in the library. He had fumbled to explain what they were and why, but she had seemed very interested. Well, there were plenty of them in the fields of Honnleath come nighttime. When you sat down, they framed the Frostbacks with twinkling lights, and made you believe that stars had fallen down into the mountains. Like the sky had no end.

Yet still, Cullen preferred mornings like this one, where the sky was blue and the clouds were rolling, and you could step out and feel as though you owned the countryside.

She was a vision in red. She wore a long thing, sheer and sinful, and it billowed behind her. At last she turned her head, saw him and smiled. Greeting an old friend had never felt so sweet.

She reached out her hand, and he took it. “I’m so glad you came,” she said. “I’ve missed you so much.” She said many other things, too—where she had been, and why she had waited so long to write, and how happy she was that he had not been angry with her. How could he be? Here she was, in front of him, gazing up at him with nothing but love in her eyes. That was more than enough. It was all he had ever wanted.

That was when she had kissed him. When her look of love had turned to heat, and she slinked her arms about his neck and pulled him in and melted against him. His fingers found her hipbones in the haze of it all, and squeezed, and she moaned and purred as his confidence grew.

They eventually buckled beneath the weight of each other and so in the sun he laid her down, the grass parting around her as she smiled up at him wickedly. That was when he knew to rip the dress. She, in turn, worked urgently on his shirt and trousers as he hiked the ripped shreds up over her thighs. The path to her was easy, then. She wore small lacy underthings that were easy to move aside, and when his fingers pushed into her wet heat she threw her head back and choked out a
moan, feeding his smug pride. Her body bucked into his hand, seeking greater friction with such
desperation that he could swear he saw a thin sheen coating her blue eyes. Like everything else, he
ultimately granted it to her, adding a third finger which he moved torturously slow, in and nearly out,
with the rest. He watched the motion with great intent and focus and had to bite his lip to keep from
crying out.

But, in this, he found he was not a patient man. He removed his hand, to her vocal displeasure—as
if she could not bear it when he was not inside her. He wiped his fingers on the grass. Then, he
finished unlacing himself—quicker than he had ever done anything in his life—and at once became
one with her.

They both still at the initial feeling. He felt himself near ready to shed tears, now. Feeling her
enveloped around him was beyond words, beyond any process of his mind. She was a demanding
thing, though, and her long, perfect legs wrapped themselves tightly around him and pressed on his
arse, urging him to move and release them both from this stillness. Again, he obliged. He moved and
felt her velvety smooth and hot and tight around him. His thrusts became sharp and unrelenting as he
held himself above her by his forearms and watched her writhe, eyes hooded, her pretty bottom lip
falling open as she made the most arousing noises, sweet and wanton and rife with temptation.
Gruffly, in a voice he could not recognize, he told her to look at him. She obeyed him, and that was
his undoing. He grabbed her thighs then, angling them up so as to thrust himself deeper, and he
buried his face in her neck, breathing in her scent and kissing the smooth, silken skin there. He rode
it all the way to his end, finishing inside of her and relishing in everything that meant.

It had sucked the soul from him, and he breathed heavy and deep as though he had been held
underwater for many years and had only now breached the surface. But the smell of her soothed him,
and soon his breath had come back to him and he pushed himself up from where he had collapsed,
exhausted, atop her.

But then his hands and body began to shake, because the sight beneath him was surely not the one
he had made love to. It was Solena, dead as he had imagined her at Ostagar, beaten and mangled and
broken, the red of her torn dress nothing but a pool of her own blood, stained now forever on his
palms.

He screamed from the pit of him.

The demon’s laughter reverberated against the walls of his mind as Honnleath melted into black tar.

“Cullen…” it whispered in her stolen voice. “Cullen!” again, all around him—a thousand of her,
through giggles and moans and blood-curdling screams.

“Stop this!” he yelled—pleaded—to the Void.

“I don’t understand,” she said as she appeared, nude, before him, and feigning earnestness. “Don’t
you love me?”

He averted his eyes, knelt in front of her. “You mock her. A poor copy.”

Another appeared, same as the last. “Why should that matter?” it asked.

“It’s the closest you’ll ever get,” laughed another.

“You pushed her away.”

“You made her hate templars.”
“You drove her to leave.”

“You killed her, Cullen. It was you.”

“Stop!” he bellowed.

“‘Stop, stop!’” they mimicked and laughed all together.

“That’s what she said in the library that night.”

“You didn’t listen.”

“Too strung out on lyrium to care what she wanted.”

“You would have taken her that night—fucked her as she cried and cried.”

“‘Boo hoo!’”

“She probably would have liked it anyway.”

“A whore’s a whore, right?”

They formed a circle around him now—however many of them there were. It seemed endless. He had collapsed into himself. A shell—a husk.

“Please,” he whispered. “I can’t. I’m not strong enough.”

The countless Solenas became one, standing above him, tipping his chin up to look at her with one dainty finger.

“Cullen,” she said, patient. “Do you love me?”

“…I do,” he answered.

“Do you want me?”

“I do.”

“Then why do you deny me?”

He did not want to, and that was what horrified him the most. He wanted the demon who pretended to be her, and he just couldn’t find it in himself to care. When she touched him, when she laughed, when he fucked her in the grass, it felt real enough. He had had more of her in this nightmare than he had ever been granted when she was alive.

He sickened himself. He wished the demon would kill him, and end it.

“I won’t dishonor her,” he said, but the demon saw through every part of him that was left.

“Oh,” it laughed, gone now. “It is far too late for that.”

He found a rare moment of quiet then. It took everything he was to try and clear his head. It had been weeks, or so he thought. He couldn’t be sure. It felt like months, or even years. As hard as the demon tried though, he still remembered. He remembered Uldred, and the green and the white, and the horrible screaming and the blood, and the attack. The Tower had fallen, that much he knew. Where he was and why the demon kept him alive…sometimes that grew fuzzy. He lost pieces of
himself each time the demon returned. Soon, there would be nothing.

He knew one day the Maker would punish him. He just did not know He would be so cruel.

It was not always her. Only mostly. Once, it had been his family, welcome and waiting for him back at home—his mother and sister, his brother with his wife and son, and even his long-dead father. Greagoir had granted him leave, and so he spent the summer in Honnleath, feasting on potatoes and roast chickens and drinking cool cider while Emilia, his sister-in-law, sang and danced for them, and Mia made him laugh somehow, and his father even smiled.

Then, the Blight had come to Honnleath, and slaughtered them all in front of him as he stood there, paralyzed.

Now, he found he couldn’t move again. Strapped to a wooden chair and unable even to turn his head. The demon approached from a distance, once again with her face and body, slinking towards him unnaturally. It climbed into his lap and straddled him, nibbling at the flesh of his ear.

“Cullen,” she cooed. “Cullen, can you hear me? Cullen, it’s me.”

He shut his eyes, squeezed, and let out air through his nose. Soon it would be over. Soon it would pass. Soon.

“I know you’re in there,” she said as she rubbed his thigh. “I need you to help me get you out.”

He squeezed his eyes tighter and prayed under his breath. He knew what she was doing. He knew this trick. It was the cruellest one of them all.

“Tell me you can hear me, or I can’t do anything for you.” Sharp nails bit into his leg. He growled in pain.

“Leave me,” he said. “Leave me, please, I beg of you. I can’t…”

“I’m not going to leave you,” she said. “But you have to—”

“This is cruel,” he told it. “It is cruel even for you. I beg of you, demon, don’t show me this. Show me anything but this. She is dead, and I cannot bear it any longer.”

There was silence then, and he thought maybe the demon had relented at last. He hated how foolish and hopeful he was.

“I’m not a demon, Cullen. I’m real. I’m standing in front of you.”

“Stop it, damn you!”

“I’m trying to help you—”

“I know, I know I’ve had sinful thoughts. I’ve lusted after a mage, and now I pay that price, but no one deserves this.”

Hands grabbed his face, and forced him to look. Behind her, an image fazed in and out. A room, maybe. It looked like the Tower.

“If you keep asking me to leave, eventually I will. Don’t think for a second I won’t,” it said sharply, and cruelly. “I don’t owe you anything. I never have.”

He peered up at the face, blurry and unclear. He found he could move again—he was no longer in
a chair, and the body that moved against him had disappeared.

“I…I don’t…” he managed.

“There,” said another voice that he thought he remembered. “Uldred’s work should be completely dissipated now. He may need a few moments to collect himself. Otherwise, all demon influence should be gone. I would wager he suffers no possession. This seemed to be more of a…haunting.”

He blinked. The room still moved around him, warped and melting, and it was hard to steady himself. He realized he was keeled over on the floor.

“Cullen,” she said again—the woman with Solena’s voice. “Cullen, are you…alright?”

“I…” it was difficult to open his mouth without fearing he would vomit. “What…is this?”

“Do you know where you are?”

“I…no.”

“You’re in the Tower. It’s been overtaken by demons. By Uldred. Do you remember that?”

The screams came back. The laughing. The flashes. It hurt.

“Yes…yes, I do. I do. The attack, and…and…the Knight Commander…has he moved against him? Is Uldred dead?” He tried to look at her again but she still would not come into focus.

“No. He’s on the floor above us.”

Cullen shook his head. “I’ll kill him. I’ll kill him for what he’s done. I’ll—”

“Why was he keeping you alive?” she asked.

That required him to think, hard. Uldred had captured him in the initial attack. Why? There was…a boy. Tranquil. Had he done that? Was it his fault?

“To…punish me, maybe. Torture me. I…I led the investigation against him. I remember…”

He was able to sit up straight then, and he saw her. Standing there, arms crossed and looking down upon him. Breathing. Living. Real. In her Warden’s garments. She looked…she looked…

“Alive…You’re alive…”

She regarded him curiously.

“Thought you…were dead. We believed everyone at Ostagar…”

“Not everyone,” came the curt reply from a man at her side. A soldier. Another Warden.

He stood, careful getting up on two feet again. There were three others there—two women. And there was the voice he knew—the mage. Niall. He remembered…he was upset with him, for some reason. But he did not bite the hand that fed. “My apologies,” he said. He knew not what for, though it sounded right.

“You don’t have to stand on my account. Take it slow. We have food and water, and—” she began, but he would hear none of it.
“No. I thank you, but no. I have one purpose now, and that is to kill that monster. I will not rest while he still breathes the air.” He found his blade leaned up against the wall, and sheathed it. He grabbed the flask from his belt and drank it all, the steely taste of lyrium soothing his tongue. His body stopped screaming at him. He could see clearly again.

“Does he have Irving up there?” she asked him.

“Yes. He does. And more besides. But my only concern lies with my meeting my blade with his neck.”

“You’re like to get yourself killed. No. Sit down and rest. We’ll return when it’s done,” she told him. He knew she was being kind, but he would not let her take this from him. He approached her. The Warden at her side took a step forward, but Cullen could hardly care.

“You know not what you ask of me. You know not what he did, and continues to do. The things he showed me…”

“Then tell me,” she pressed.

“No,” he said too quickly. “You would not thank me. What he does now above us is inhuman and unholy—a crime against every living soul.”

“What do you mean?”

He wished to spare her this. He wished to spare her all of it. Maker knows he did not want it, but thinking she was dead…it was easier knowing she would never learn of the horror.

“Listen to me, I know you and the First Enchanter shared a…close bond. But Uldred’s plans went beyond even possession. I fear none of the mages he’s captured are the same as they were.”

“I would see it for myself,” she insisted, moving to the stairs. He stopped her with a firm hand to the shoulder.

“No, you do not understand me. They are lost. We cannot spare any mage that was exposed to Uldred’s influence. If even a single abomination slips through our ranks, we risk another catastrophe.”

She seemed to freeze. Her eyes bore uncomfortably into his own, seeing things he did not want her to.

“You would kill them all?”

“I will not have the blood of even more innocent lives on my hands. I will not endanger the Tower again, nor after what’s happened,” and he knew he spoke with conviction.

“You’re mad,” Niall said, aghast. “You’ll cause one bloodbath in the hopes that maybe it will prevent another.”

“He’s not mad, he’s a templar,” she said harshly, shaking herself from his grasp. “This is all they want, in the end.”

It shattered him, that she had looked at him not moments ago in his dream with such love and warmth, and now looked at him with nothing. Hardly even indifference. Did she think so little of him? None of this was what he wanted, couldn’t she see? She almost swayed him. Tempted him, like the demon. Her, with her good heart, who did not know the things he’d seen and dreamt, who
had not seen the face of evil. But in this he would not falter.

He bit his tongue, and looked at her. She looked nothing like the dream. She looked better. Flushed cheeks and mussed hair and a heart he could almost hear beating. Maker and all things holy, he just wanted to taste her again. For real, this time. Her lips and sweat and tears and cunt, all parts of her that were wet, and breathe into her mouth as she breathed back into his.

In the prison he thought he had left, he heard a cackle. He remembered her limp, cold, bloodless body. No, no, no. He remembered it all.

He backed away from her, his head in his hands and his ears ringing—louder than anything he’d ever heard.

“Cullen, what’s wrong?”

“Maker…”

“Cullen—”

“Just leave me be!” he roared, and he knew Solena and the rest had recoiled in turn. “Do what you must but do not keep me from him!” He drew his blade from its sheath and charged up the stairs before any could deny him. She yelled out his name but he could barely hear her. The voices were all too loud. Too loud. It was all so loud.

He ran up the spiral and forced open the doors to the topmost level. There, there was horror. The screams grew so loud then that he could no longer distinguish between the real and the fake. He smelled the blood, and the wickedness, and the death that filled the room. He was lost, spinning in circles in place, seeing nothing but raw flesh and blood everywhere he looked. Broken windows and glass and refuse lay upon the floor. Faintly he heard the door open again behind him, the others who had followed after him rushing in.

“Ah, Ser Cullen,” said a voice he knew well. “I’ll admit, it’s a surprise to see you here. Did my desire demons fail to please you?”

It was a veritable army. Abominations stood in droves—tall, hunched, looming demon husks that might have once been people—mindless, with nothing remaining. It was worse than he had ever feared. Far to his left, Cullen saw what drew Solena’s gaze: Irving and the rest, held by a prison of blood magic.

“And you’ve brought Grey Wardens with you! I know the both of you all too well—the pretty timid thing and the blabbering fool, both walking about in britches too big. I doubt they fit you any better now that your brethren have died and left you all alone. A true tragedy. I rather enjoyed Duncan. He always had eyes and ears for things larger than himself.”

He was a smaller man than Cullen remembered, stepping out from behind one of his sick creations to address them. Smaller, and still appearing human, to those who did not know him any better. It did not matter to Cullen if he had tentacles and fangs or wore the guise of innocence. He was an abomination, through and through. All of them were. He would sooner destroy the whole floor, watch it all crumble to pieces and fall into the lake below. Be done with it all. Let there be peace at last. Let it be over.

“And Niall, as well! You’ve impressed me, boy. My brightest pupil, too smart to fool. I see some fresh faces, too! Have all of you come to accept my gift?”

“Why have you done this?” Solena asked, nerves wracking her voice.
“Solena, Solena, Solena, Solena…” he sung. “I know about you. You’re not one of mine, though. No, you’re Irving’s pet. A shame, I think. You killed my gatekeeper, and carved your way through this whole tower just to meet me here. You’ve got power my students only dream of. That I only dream of. I could offer you more.”

“Your students died, at Ostagar,” she said, paying no heed to his demonic bartering. “It drove you mad.”

He shut his eyes, as if remembering it, or trying not to. “Many did. But now, they live on. I’m not mad, Mistress. I went to war. I saw and learned a great many things at Ostagar. Paramount among them that the Blight is coming, and this whole country is powerless against it. You know this. I do. We mages are sitting ducks here in this tower, and the templars would sooner we all die than let us use our Maker-given gifts to defend ourselves.”

“That’s not true!” Cullen shouted. “The Order was taking precautions against the Blight—we were prepared to fortify, and—"

“And what? Pack us all down in the tunnels and wait out the storm? You were not there, boy. You did not see it. There is no waiting this out. We must either rise to the occasion or become its victims. I shared this news with my supporters here at the Tower, among other things, and hence we derived a solution.”

“But you had no true supporters,” Solena claimed. “It was a mask, all of it. You weren’t even a libertarian; you were as much Irving’s pet as I was. You lied to your students—encouraged them to pursue blood magic until they relented, and Irving made them tranquil.”

Uldred tipped up his chin and smiled. “Oh, she is a marvel, is she not? I must admit, Ser Cullen, I see it. I really do.” Cullen tightened his grip on his blade, threatening to shatter it. “Mistress, then you and I are one of a kind. We have both been lied to and betrayed by Irving in ways beyond imagination. And as to your first accusation, I beg to differ. My supporters are all around me.”

Cullen watched as Solena took in the information, fitting the horrible pieces together. “You’ve transformed them all into monsters,” she said. “You think that’s how you honor the students you betrayed, through more deception?”

“On the contrary, they volunteered! That is the only way to produce such marvelous specimens. An unwilling host always turns ugly.”

“And the mages you killed?” Niall asked. “What have you to say about them?”

“Undeniably unfortunate casualties. No more, no less. Though I nor my people can be charged with that crime. It was the demons that did that. But they had to be unleashed, to flush the templars from the Tower. Nothing with them can ever be done in peace.”

Cullen wore a sneer on his face. He thought to drain him but that would do nothing. Blood mages were damnably immune. Cullen wished to kill him where he stood, for the Maker to smite him down. No such prayers were answered.

“As you can see,” Uldred went on. “I saved who I was able. They have yet to accept my gift, but I am ever the optimist.”

“You’re a blood mage,” Cullen spat at him. “You seek to control their will, not sway their minds.”

“Will is such a curious thing,” he said. “You templars take ours away from us in the crib, and you say it is to serve a greater good. In response to fear, is will not the first thing we place on the
sacrificial altar? I do not think it is such a great crime, to choose security over agency. That is one thing you and I surely agree on, Ser Cullen.”

“Not like this,” he said. “Do not twist my words or my intent, monster.”

“Disappointing. Just like a templar to fear the truth.”

Cullen felt a punch to his gut, and he was thrown across the room, hitting his head upon a wall to the right, hard enough to cause bleeding. The room went blurry then, much like it had when he had been just waking from his nightmare. A force of blood magic held him to the wall, rendering him unable to do anything but watch. The demons returned. He did all he could to push them away.

“I believe we four can converse civilly, without fear of the lesser among us,” Uldred said to them, and with that sent the other Warden and one of the women flying to the walls as well.

“Let go of them,” Solena demanded and through her inaction Cullen knew that Uldred must have also been suppressing the mages. Cullen kicked and thrashed but still he could not move. The room grew dark. Wind gusts came through the windows. Solena’s hair blew.

Cullen heard violent choking, and realized that it came from the Warden.

“Let go!”

Solena’s eyes flared with something inhuman.

Uldred smiled. “Life is choices, Mistress. Here, I have given you one. See the light. See truth.”

Across the room and away from Uldred’s focus, Cullen saw that Niall was crawling on the ground, moving painstakingly towards the prison in which Irving was held. He reached for something and struggled and grunted to pick it up. Uldred was too late to see it. The shard of glass glimmered in the light of the moon, and the blood from Niall’s hand now coated it. The encasement around Irving and the other mages subsided, and Cullen felt he too could move again—the cloud lifted. The First Enchanter, eyes hard and tough, stood up on two feet. A loud, angry shout, unintelligible to Cullen, rang out through the room. Irving slammed his staff down upon the floor. Cullen saw light, brilliant and blinding, as if emerging from a pitch black cave.

~~~

Cullen’s adrenaline raced as he stepped among the bodies of Uldred’s fallen army. The abominations looked such no more. Upon death, they had reclaimed the faces of mages who had been too weak to say no. Uldred lay dead in the middle of them—a sick smile upon his face.

“First Enchanter, you shouldn’t stand, you’re weak. Rest for a moment, we can help carry you down the stairs.” Solena knelt over a very tired Irving. Around them, mages seemed to wake out of a stupor, stretching their legs and talking amongst themselves.

“Thank you, child. You are kind. But I am certain the moment will pass. Give me…” Irving trailed off. Honestly, Cullen was not listening. He had passed them already.

“Does that feel alright?” asked the woman in leather armor to Niall. She bandaged his hand as he sat down leaning upon a wall. “Can you move it?”

“I…I think. I…yes. Yes I can. Thank you—”

“I saw you, mage!” Cullen shouted at him, barreling through the standing bodies in his way. “I
The woman stood and took a slight step away, her face rife with concern. Niall pushed himself to stand, and when he spoke, did so on two feet.

“Ser Cullen, you were there with the rest of us. There was no other way.”

Cullen breathed, hard and heavy, and seething. He looked upon the mage with disgust.

“There is always another way.”

Solena pushed through the crowd after him, pushing through bodies that were still and silent in their watch of the scene. “What’s going on here?” she demanded to know, but Cullen could not stand to deal with her.

“I remember now—before the attack. The contact you gave me, one of Uldred’s people. A boy of no more than fifteen, and a blood mage!”

“And where is he now?” Niall took a step forward.

“Tranquil, and killed in the attack. You knew the punishment. All do.”

“You’re inhuman.”

“And you are less. I know now how you survived the onslaught. I remember seeing you, his favored student, and the demon Uldred charged with guarding this place. I know the deal you made.” Cullen placed his hand on his blade’s grip.

“I made no deals! Sloth captured me in his net of dreams—I’ve been asleep since!”

“Cullen, he tells the truth, we escaped together.” But her voice was far-off. It stirred him not.

“Stop your drain upon me,” Niall whispered, though it sounded like it was spoken directly in Cullen’s ear. Like the demons that had haunted him, night after endless night. The maleficar’s eyes were hazed with black. Cullen saw it. How could the rest of them not?

“I know what you are,” Cullen said again. The abomination took a step back.

“I saved your life!” it cried.

“How easily you justify horror when a demon speaks for you.”

“I am possessed by no demon! Nor do I practice blood magic! I saw what it did to Jowan. To Uldred. Men I admired, reduced to nothing. But there was no other way.” The demon dripped its poison upon him, waiting for him to bend and falter.

“Cullen!” her voice shouted through an ocean.

“And now you, monster, are nothing too. No better than those dead on the floor!”

“There is one monster left here in this room, templar, and it is not I.” The demons returned. They laughed at him.

“I know what you are!”

“What are you, then?”
“Cullen, STOP!”

He looked down. His blade was sunk in. Straight through the mage’s stomach and out the other side. Cullen had gripped him and pulled him in by the shoulder. Now he spat out blood onto his armor.

Shouts and wails and gasps rang out. But many remained quiet. Cullen drew his blade out. Niall fell dead onto the floor.

Solena ran and knelt. Cullen looked at the dead mage. Blood trickled from his mouth like a geyser. Blood ran in rivers from the hole in his belly. Blood slid from Cullen’s blade onto the stone, blending with the rest.

“No…n-no…” she pressed her hands on his chest, perhaps trying to settle on how best to heal the gaping wound. In Cullen’s periphery, the other Warden took a step towards her, unsure of himself.

Moments passed of relative quiet.

Then, “You killed him.”

She turned, showed him her hands. Red. Red. Red.

The laughs turned to roars of hilarity. Screeches of glee.

“You killed him!”

“Solena, child,” Irving said as he ran to her, holding her tight in his arms and rocking her.

“Let me go…let me go!” she sobbed, and sobbed, louder even than the laughter in his head.

“I…” Cullen’s voice said.

“Please, let me go…” her face was covered in rivers of tears and snot.

The doors opened behind them and the sound of armored soldiers filled the large room.

“We heard Irving’s voice from the first floor,” the Knight Commander said, gasping for breath. “It shook the whole bloody tower. What’s happened?”

He felt Greagoir arrive next to him.

“Oh,” the Commander said.

“This mage saved our lives. Saved the tower,” Irving said from the floor. “He did so using blood magic. Ser Cullen thought it right to kill him for it.”

“I…I thought he was possessed, Ser. I…I knew it,” Cullen fumbled.

“Did he defend himself?” Greagoir asked him.

Cullen couldn’t remember.

“I…”

“No,” Irving finished for him. “He did not.”

“Backed into a corner, a demon defends itself,” said Greagoir. “You know that.”
Cullen did. He did know that. He did, he…he forgot. He saw…it was all so…he was so sure…

Wiped of tears, Solena shirked off the First Enchanter and stood, bloody and weak. Her voice shook.

“He murdered a good and innocent man, unprovoked,” she said.

“The situation may be unique, but a blood mage is no innocent, girl, as you tend to forget,” said Greagoir.

Cullen was, briefly, courageous enough to look up into her eyes, which stared back into his, and were empty of anything but hate.

“I want him to answer for this. I want him dead.”

“Lake Calenhad will rise and swallow us all before a mage orders me to execute one of my own men. Stand down, immediately."

“You…” she started, choked of air. “You can’t do that, you can’t act like nothing happened here, you—”

“How I discipline my men is not your concern, stand down.”

“Discipline? A slap on the wrist? A man is dead! All of you…” she looked around, at the mages and templars that surrounded the scene, encircling her, Irving, and the body. “Why are all of you just standing there?”

“Solena,” Irving soothed.

“Solena, I…” Cullen started, wishing he had not. “I didn’t—”

She punched him, and he took it, and the bubble that had encased the room finally broke.

Greagoir stepped in front of him and drew his blade, shouting something. The other Warden rushed and pulled Solena back by the waist and towards the door as she kicked and screamed and thrashed. Irving stood and urged Greagoir to calm himself. Niall’s blood formed patterns in the cracks of the floor.

Cullen stood there and touched his face, right below the eye where she had hit him, and pulled his hand back to look at it. There was blood there too. He didn’t know which…he didn’t…

Laughter.

Screaming, blood, and laughter.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for
reading. :)

**ANORA**

Denerim Palace had once been scorched by dragon fire.

She did not know when. Certainly before the Steel Age, when the Pentaghasts had hunted the beasts down and driven them to near-extinction. Perhaps it had even been before Calenhad the Silver Knight had unified the land and worn the first crown.

The Palace was older than anyone knew, but it was a resilient thing. It had been a fortress first, built strong and nigh-impenetrable by the Alamar. Then the city had been built around it. What began as a small fishing village now stretched from up upon the hill at Fort Drakon to the alienage at the very bottom of the rise. The wealthiest had settled in the Palace District near the prison. Most Fereldan lords and ladies kept a home in the city, even if they seldom made use of it.

To the foreign eye, the Palace looked a decrepit ruin. During the Occupation, the Orlesians had taken one look at the tall blackened towers that cast long shadows over the Palace District and had declared the ground haunted and uninhabitable. They turned nobles out of their homes, but the Palace itself had remained untouched by Orlesian influence. Orlesians had a rather exhausting preoccupation with the mystic and superstitious.

As they rounded the large black stone—which stood taller than her carriage—poised at the center of the district, where a few Chantry sisters were knelt in prayer and a handful of wealthy nobles stood by and clutched at their hearts, Anora pursed her lips in thought. Perhaps it was only fair, then, to acknowledge the Fereldan preoccupation with religious sentimentality. For the rock, as it was told, had rained down from the top of Dragon’s Peak during Andraste’s lifetime, in the largest explosion the mountain had ever seen. Surely, the prophet had not been in Denerim at the time. But as the Maker’s bride had been born in the city, and as it was the only artifact left to the Fereldan people from her time, it was so named the Birth Rock. Pilgrims came from across the continent just to hold their palms to the rough surface. When the sun shone upon it at midday in the summer and the rock seared their soft skin, they dubbed it Andraste’s divine fire, and considered themselves blessed.

She looked up out her window and eyed the top of Dragon’s Peak with a scrutinizing look. The very same people also said that upon the death of the last Fereldan king, the Peak would reawaken, and fill the skies across the continent with fire and ash.

Needless to say, such did not bode well for the supposed divinity of the rock.
They reached the Palace, and she could hear the shouting of her guard, the scrambling of men in plate metal, and the rusted chain of the gate wound about the pulley. Outside her litter, the city guard—stepped momentarily away from their post in front of the gate—formed a taut line. Silver helmets hid their faces—their windows shut, so the whites of their eyes could barely be seen through the slats. Anora peered at them through a narrowed gaze.

Cailan had made it his business to know most all of the high-ranking city guardsmen. And resultingy, so had she. Ser Motran, the Captain. Bishop, Bleaker and Yoren, his right-hands. She even knew the faces of a number of his charges. Certainly, she knew the faces of those who stood guard outside the Palace. It had been Cailan’s preference that they not wear helmets at their station. He believed it too impersonal. He thought if the people could not know the faces of the men who watched over them day in and day out, they could never learn to cohabitate. Motran had agreed.

Anora shut the window of her litter and faced forward. She wrung her hands, absently tugging at the ring on her finger.

When Ser Bryton helped her from her litter, it was a city guardsman who stood with his hand firmly on the carriage door. When she approached the Palace, city guardsmen held open those doors as well. They lined the entry hall. When she dismissed her small following, including Bryton, and made her way up the stairs and through the long Palace halls to her father’s office, she did not miss the cold suit of armor stationed at each and every corner.

“Howe has replaced the city guard,” she said, standing in front of his desk. It was no longer a question.

“Mm, perhaps,” her father said, dipping his quill in ink. “It was past time, if you ask me. Motran and his men were getting old, and slow. Your husband saw that Urien Kendalls kept them on as a favor. Motran was his friend, and a friend of his father’s. A good man. But such personal investments give way to corruption. You saw that yourself, with that business in the alienage.”

Anora nodded slowly, pointing her chin to the ground in thought before looking back up at him. “How many men has Howe replaced?”

“How should I know?” her father deadpanned.

“I saw the lot of them during our return trip. I would wager it’s more than half,” she answered for him. “How is a city guard in Rendon Howe’s pocket any less corrupt than the one that came before it?”

“What is this truly about?” her father asked. “Because as I see it, this sounds like a concern you should be taking up with the new Arl.”

“You place far too much trust in him,” she bit, and it was out. Her father raised his eyebrows, and after a brief pause, he placed his quill gently back in its pot. He folded his hands in front of him over the deep mahogany desk.

“I place as much trust as he’s earned,” he spoke coldly. His voice harbored great restraint. She knew one push in the wrong place and the dam would break—a shouting match that devolved into admonishment. All her feelings of shame and stupidity, laid plain and bare. She held her chin up higher.

“He holds the capital and the northern peninsula,” she stated. “And the Teyrnir of Highever. When the war ends he’ll have more holdings than we do. You’ve made him the most powerful man in the country, second only to you, in the span of two months. What could any man possibly do to earn that
“The Teyrnir is a temporary grant, until the war is done. We must consolidate power, or risk losing the might of our army to the whims and fears of foolish nobles who intend to squat in their castles and wait out the storm,” he said, patiently. It seemed Anora had not stepped wrong yet. “Howe has proven his loyalty, and committed his troops to our aid unequivocally. He will not rest, as I will not, until this war is ended and this land reunited. And for the few weeks that he’s held his title, he has proven his ability to the security and integrity of this city. I dare not ask much more from him or any man alive.”

Anora let loose a scoff. “Integrity? Just what has he done in the name of integrity? I cannot walk five feet without hearing the clink of his coin rattling against plate metal.”

“Howe has proven his loyalty, and committed his troops to our aid unequivocally. He will not rest, as I will not, until this war is ended and this land reunited. And for the few weeks that he’s held his title, he has proven his ability to the security and integrity of this city. I dare not ask much more from him or any man alive.”

He was found dead in his cell two nights ago. They’re saying it was poison that made its way into his dinner. Palace guard heard nothing and saw no one. Howe’s launched an investigation into the matter. His commitment to formal justice rather matches your own, I must say.”

She found her voice, then. Only barely. “Wh—why was I not told about this?”

Her father had already picked up his quill and returned to writing his note. He took the briefest of moments to glance up at her and say, “I’m telling you now,” before returning his focus to the desk before him.

~~~

It was back in the hallway, beneath the cold gaze of monarchs past, that she remembered the scent. Steel, and leather, and blood.

She halted her step when she thought of it. How dizzy it had made her. How strange it had struck her. As clearly as she saw the stretching corridor before her, she saw the red apple fall into his palm, and remembered that it had made no sound.

“No, Your Grace. Not that any of the girls have seen,” Adelaide responded.

Anora tightened her brow. “Any…suspicious characters, then?”

They both shook their heads. “No, Your Grace.”

“After the trial, you didn’t see any…elves wandering the Palace?”

“Elves?” asked Clara. Anora was sure she was suppressing a fit of nervous giggles. “No, Your
Grace.”

“I would have screamed so loud that your lord father surely would have heard me from the throne room,” cut Adelaide, ever-sharp as a blade, and Clara’s giggles burst from her like a flood of water from a poorly-constructed dam.

That night, as Anora rest her head upon her pillow, sleep would not come. Shadows played their tricks in the corners of her room, and even worse images were found in the deep recesses of her mind. It was always the man—the one none had seen—with his sickly sweet words and his breath that smelled like rotten blood. At the dinner table she choked on poisoned wine, only to see his face in the cup’s reflection. He walked silent as a ghost behind her in the long hallway outside her room, and cut her throat to the bone, leering above her as she bled out on the carpet. Lying flat on her bed she drew short of breath, and at last had to sit up and clutch at the neck on her nightgown. When it would not relent, she tore the damned thing off her—ripping the frock at the seams and violently throwing the shredded dress across the room.

She grew stifled and uncomfortable from her feverish sweat, and strode nude to the window, hurrying to unlatch it. If any saw her, she cared not. In that moment, the cool breeze on her skin was worth any price.

After she had caught her breath, she wandered her room, arriving at the small bowl of water on her vanity, which she used to splash herself with. She ran her finger along the ripples. She wondered, fleetingly, if she should call for a healer. She had felt so unlike herself all day, and she felt the least like herself now. But she did feel the heat gradually subsiding. She would live. She stared at the water in the bowl, and at her faint reflection. She was haggard, and tired, with deep bags beneath her eyes. Long hair tossed and unkempt, like some wild witch of the forest, or some Avvar shieldmaiden. She wondered if her fever was truly gone, or if the reflection would yet warp to that of the elven man’s. She wondered if he would then become Howe. And if Howe would then become her father.

She tapped her finger at the center of the water’s surface. Soon, the ripple made all the faces blend together.

Her fingers traveled with minds of their own, it seemed. They walked the length of her vanity—danced about the caught hairs on her brush, fondled her silk ties—ultimately, they found their destination in a small pile of hair pins her handmaidens had left behind.

She twisted one of the metal things between her thumb and forefinger absent-mindedly.

Anora was only seven when her mother had grown ill and died. After they buried her, Father had locked up her room—kept the key on him at all times. Anora had been so angry. Child that she was, she had been so desperate to do all sorts of irrational things. She wanted to plop herself down on her mother’s bed and smell her. She wanted to run her hands along her beautiful dresses. She wanted to sit in her chair and cry. But she could not have told her father any of that. And he would not simply hand over the key.

So, instead, she had gotten creative.

~~~

The Arl’s Palace office was handily well and away from the living quarters or the office of the Chief Advisor, which her father now inhabited. When she crept from her room in the dead of night, none had seen her. She had observed that day where Howe had stationed the new guards, so she had mapped a path to avoid them. She was barefooted again, clad in her silk robe so as to make no sound
when she walked.

She fumbled with the lock on the door a spare few times. She had picked a lock just that once, and never again. The quiet murmurings that always filled the Palace halls—regardless of the hour—made her palms sweat.

But soon rang through the air a subtle, tell-tale click, and she could turn the doorknob in her hand. Hurriedly she stuffed the hairpins back in the pocket of her robe and opened the door, walking through it silently on the pads of her feet and leaning back flat against the wood on the other side so as to gently shut it behind her.

The room was overly spacious and lavish. Before Howe, it had been a councilmen’s guest room, complete with a bed and bath. Now, the Arl’s desk sat in front of a large window, and looked out over a luxurious sitting area, with plush, velvet couches of purples and reds—grapes and apples laying upon golden trays and goblets and rare vintages littering the wooden tables.

Anora had not brought a candle with her, so she counted herself lucky that the moons were out. She tiptoed towards the desk.

Rendon Howe, she thought then, was either very innocent, or very certain that his office was impenetrable, because the large blue book that rested comfortably in the center of his desk was far more than light reading material. Tucking her hair behind her ears, she folded the cover back only to confirm her hopes and suspicions. She traced a finger over the pen markings. The records he kept in this book, at least, only stretched back a month—since being named Arl.

She grabbed the book by both covers and held it up, to hit the writing with the light from the window, squinting at the markings on the page. One thing was very certain, and caused Anora’s eyes to light up in shock. The Arl did not deal in small fees. The numbers on this page added up to something far beyond even her royal budget. She could not imagine that even as rich a man as the Arl could afford what she saw here. Did he plan to use royal funds for the rest? Claim it all as spending for the war effort? Such figures would put the crown in considerable debt when the war was done. Wartime meant hard spending, that she knew. But her father was a shrewd man. He had always held exorbitant military spending to be the sign of a lazy tactician. Had he seen these figures?

What she could not hope to make heads or tails of were the names of the creditors. Some of it seemed to be straightforward. There were no signs of embezzlement. His personal funds were marked out and accounted for, at least. No taxpayer money would pay for his expensive wines and his horrid tunics. As for the rest, there were figures for arms and armor. She recognized the spending for the city guard, and there were plenty of figures for troops for the war. It seemed they had turned to mercenaries after all. How long now had it been since her father last ridiculed the man who let the flip of gold coin choose his loyalty? Not so long that she could not still hear the hatred in his voice, or see the curvature of his sneer. Then, she would have sworn by the Maker and on her husband’s grave that her father had not laid eyes upon these records. That he could not have granted their approval. Now, she retained no such certainty.

But it was the remaining names that perplexed her most. White rose, brown bear, black bird. She flipped the page. Tall tower, black lily, gold road. It baffled her. Some of those names carried sums with them to rival troop spending. Then it dawned on her, that Howe had told her of spies in his employ. He would not use their names in his records. He would write in code. She looked again. Brown bear could feasibly mean his spies in the Hinterlands, she supposed. She already knew of those he had stationed in Redcliffe. Tall tower…Kinloch Hold, perhaps? Spies watching the docks? Or Highhever. But he shouldn’t have need of spies in Highhever while his troops still remained there. Gold Road was certainly referring to the Imperial Highway. It could be nothing else.
On the rest, she still found herself at a loss. And she could not imagine any spies that charged more than a full armed battalion of the Blackstone Irregulars. But she committed the names to memory, whispered under her breath like some silly child’s chant.

She shut the book and left it just as she had found it, then tiptoeing back out of the room and twisting the latch so that the door would lock when she closed it.

There were more voices in the halls than there had been on her way there. Morning must have been closer than she thought. The return trip to her room then took longer, as she hid behind walls and ducked into dark alcoves to avoid guards and maids and scribes and councilmen and cooks all making their way to their stations before the sunrise. Perhaps, if she had been caught out of bed, she could have explained it away somehow. But some part of her told her not to risk the discovery. Perhaps it was merely paranoia, or the fever, but she followed it anyway.

It was only as she lay back in her bed and began to finally close her eyes that the pieces seemed to fall into place before her, and she at last recognized that uneasiness she had felt in the hallway as having come from her gut, which had not once in thirty years told a lie.

*White rose.* A spy for the Queen.

~~~

She had caught hardly a wink of sleep, in the end. And she rose again far earlier than usual, leaving the Palace unannounced as the sun had only just peeked above the buildings, and when she was absolutely certain none had followed her. She left on foot, and out the kitchen door in the back, which led directly into the market square. She narrowly avoided a puddle of mud as she took her first step onto the loose cobblestone, and was quite nearly trampled to death by a small litter of pigs being herded through the streets.

In truth, she knew not where she would go. She just knew she needed to *get out*. Breathe the fresh air and think. She could not do it in there any longer, where his beady eyes found her at every turned corner. The feeling was stifling. It was worse than the fever—which had long passed now, only to give way to something much more terrifying: utter vulnerability.

She lifted her skirts as she stepped forward through the market. When she neared the center of the square she planted herself and gulped down the morning air.

“Ah, what am I payin’ ya for? Lousy bunch of sorry sods…”

Anora turned her head and peered through her hood at the scene to her right. Merchants were still hard at work setting up their stalls. A butcher, it seemed, began shouting at two young boys who had dropped a wooden container filled with meat—the wood splintered and raw meat spilling out onto the mud. He smacked both of the boys across the head.

“You! Clean all this shite up! And you! Go to the wagon and get another shipment—hurry up now, and don’t trip on your skirts this time!”

The boys mumbled something and hurried along. Another stall owner nearby, hearing the commotion, wandered over, hands on his hips.

“What can I help you lot with something?”

The butcher turned away from his stall to engage the man in conversation, folding his arms with his hands tucked on either side of his chest. “No friend, not unless you’ve got two sons to replace the halfwits my wife delivered me—Maker rest her soul.”
The two carried on in hearty banter, which prompted Anora to look away—or, she would have, had she not caught a flash of the tiny figure moving behind the butcher, and then just as quickly dash away from him in the opposite direction.

Anora’s eyes flashed with recognition.

“Pardon me—sir!” she called out, but he let out a bellowing laugh just as she spoke, and didn’t hear her. That’s when she looked back at where the figure had ran to, and caught it in her gaze before it ducked behind a building. It was a she—a small, skinny elf girl, no older than twelve, with the butcher’s purse in her hands. She seemed to lock eyes with Anora, only for the briefest of moments, before disappearing from her view.

The butcher, at that point, had begun to fumble around with his belt and curse out obscenities at the noted absence of his purse. Anora opened her mouth as if to speak, but instead decided against it. She moved away from the scene, heading south and uphill, and knowing her destination.

~~~

The Arl of Denerim’s estate, much like the Alienage, also rest across a small, narrow moat. Anora tried not to think of what Shianni had said the day of the trial—of Vaughan Kendalls throwing the corpses of the girls in the water when he and his men were finished with them—but she was markedly unsuccessful. He was dead now anyway, she supposed. Justice was justice, still, and whoever had murdered him had forsaken the law, which she vowed to uphold. And yet, all the same, she did not find herself wishing that the Arl had been spared any pain.

She crossed the bridge and the courtyard that followed, and only let down her hood once she appeared before the two guards stationed at the large wooden door.

Anora raised her eyebrows, hoping the gesture alone would communicate enough. The guards did not seem appropriately moved.

“State your business,” came the voice from behind the helmet on her left.

She straightened her back and folded her hands in front of her, never having been so bluntly and rudely addressed in her life. She knew she perhaps did not look much herself this morning, though she hoped she were not so unrecognizable.

“I’m the Queen.”

The helmet on her left then looked towards the helmet on her right, who looked back, seeming to finally realize their mistake.

“Forgive me, Your Grace. We only assumed you to arrive with your guard and litter,” said one.

“Do you...have an appointment to meet with Arl Howe, Your Grace?” asked another.

“I require no appointment. Let me through immediately,” she said, not mincing her words.

“Your Grace, with all due respect, at such an early hour the Arl of Denerim does not take—”

“Now.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

The two immediately turned and pushed open the doors. One arrived at her side, and gestured in
“If you’ll follow me, Your Grace, I’d be honored to escort you to—”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll be fine on my own, thank you.”

The two called out pathetically behind her as she walked away, but seemed to give up rather quickly, shutting the main door behind them, as she’d hoped. Quickly, she diverted into a hallway on her right.

She assessed the space in front of her. The hallway was wide but largely empty, with morning light coming through three arched skinny windows on either side that stretched from floor to ceiling and illuminating the stone. On a table up a ways and to her left, two elven maids folded towels and spoke in hushed tones.

Anora steeled herself. In truth, she did not quite know how to best approach this. Trial and error, she supposed. That was her safest bet. She took a breath and walked forward towards the sitting women.

“Erm…I beg your pardon,” she began, and the two women instantly became stiff as boards and stood up from their wooden chairs, promptly bowing and kneeling, murmuring apologies and throwing her title around like it was the Maker’s name.

“No, no! No need, please, I…there’s no need for formalities. I have a few questions, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Certainly, Your Grace,” they said to some measure, speaking over one another and nervously thumbing their aprons.

“Please, stand,” she begged, as they still remained bowed. Hesitantly, they obeyed. “Have both of you been on the staff for very long?”

They both looked hesitant. “Only since the Arl Howe was named, Your Grace,” said one. “Arl Howe dismissed all of Arl Kendalls’ staff upon arrival.”

“All of them?” Anora clarified, stunned. The one nodded in response. “Even so. Perhaps you can still help me. Tell me, have either of you seen any…suspicious figures about the estate recently? Anyone that looked like they didn’t belong?”

It was subtle, but she saw the straightening of their spines, and the flash in their eyes.

“What…what do you mean, Your Grace?”

“There’s a man I’m looking for. An elf, in fact. He—”

“There’s been no elves other than the staff, Your Grace,” said one. “No one like that.”

“The only men going in and out would be the councilmen, for their meetings,” said the other.

Anora’s blood froze.

“What?”

“The…councilmen, Your Grace. Ever since Arl Howe arrived, he’s been having meetings here in the estate. The Teyrn Loghain, Your Grace, he’s among them.”
Anora had not attended a council meeting since her father had declared himself regent. At some point, it became her understanding that they were no longer occurring. Evidently, that was not the case.

She swallowed, hard.

“Is there to be a meeting today?”

“Yes, Your Grace. We prepare the council chamber for guests here shortly.”

Anora nodded slowly. “Thank you. You’ve been very helpful.”

She turned abruptly and headed the rest of the way down the hall, fuming. And thinking. Her fingers had coiled themselves into fists at her side.

At the end of the hall and around the corner were the sweet cooing noises of a child, followed by short, bird-like caws. Anora tilted her head curiously to see the sight.

It was, in fact, a child. A little girl—an elf—running about in circles with something in her hand held up high above her head. It was the color of wood. Anora smiled softly, relaxing her figure.

Accidentally and without looking, the little girl ran the wooden thing into Anora’s skirts, and startled instantly, backing up and hanging her head and hiding whatever it was in her hands behind her back.

“No, don’t fret.” Anora knelt down. “What is it you’ve got there?”

The sweet thing peered up at her with large, green elven eyes from under a mop of dark hair.

“…A bird,” she said quietly.

“A bird?” Anora asked, amused. She knelt down to address her. “Can I see? I won’t tell anyone, I promise.”

The girl hesitated, but nodded, and slowly pulled the figurine out and held it in front of her in both tiny palms.

It certainly looked the part of a bird. It was carved, of course, by hand. By someone who knew what they were doing, clearly. It was completely smooth and cut with precision and care. Anora ran a finger down one wing in admiration.

“It’s very beautiful. Where did you get it?”

“The tall man in black gave it to me.”

Anora at once looked up over the bird and into the eyes of the little girl, searching.

“Who?” she asked, even though she had heard her the first time.

“The tall man in black, he carved it with a knife and gave it to me as a gift,” she said again, this time with a pleased grin on her face. “He was an elf, like me, but he was taller than Papa. He was nice.”

“When was this?”

The little girl twisted her lips in thought. “I don’t remember,” she said, somewhat sadly.
Anora’s mouth hung open, like a fool. She searched for some question, but what can one ask a child?

“It’s not only a bird,” the girl continued to share anyway. “It’s a crow.”

Anora raised an eyebrow.

“A crow?”

“Yep! He said he was going to give me a crow, because that’s what he is. A crow!” The young girl then moved her arms to her sides and back down again, getting faster and faster until they made a flapping motion. She cried out, “Caw caw! Caw! Caw caw!”, all while Anora sat upon on the floor, dumbfounded.

Soon one of the maids rounded the corner, alerted by the noise, and grabbed the little girl by the shoulders to stop her movements and chastise her.

“Kira, please! Enough!” gasped the maid, tucking the child which was likely her own against her skirts. That was when she glanced over and saw Anora, still sitting there. She all but shrieked. “Oh! Your Grace! I’m so sorry, my daughter—I’ve just no idea what’s gotten into her. Kira, apologize to Her Majesty at once!”

Anora stood on shaky feet and dusted off her skirt. “No, mistress, your daughter…she…” Anora met the woman’s eyes, but she suspected she must have looked crazed to her. Crazed and lost. It’s only what she felt. “Please, excuse me,” she said under her breath, and brushed past both of them.

Each and every footfall down the hallway felt heavy.

Black bird.

~~~

She had found the gardens after that. Sat on a bench and collected herself while the estate came to life before her eyes. Smoke from the kitchens blew out of the chimney, guards began training exercises in the courtyard, and servants came out to the gardens to work, tending to the autumn plants.

She could hear the horses arrive out front, one by one, though she could not see them from where she sat. She heard the stuffy, fat men clamber out of their litters and occasionally thank their carriagemen. Heard them greet each other and clap one another on the back. Somewhere in there was her father, silently waving his horse off to the stables and storming through the front doors, as one might storm the field of battle.

It had been long enough since the last of the noises came from the front gate. Anora stood, allowing herself to wring her hands once. Then she walked back inside.

Anora heard the muffled sounds of men speaking intently from down the hall. She turned the corner and arrived at the doors to the new council chamber, under guard.

“A council meeting is currently in session, Your Grace,” said one guard, spear in hand. “If you are searching for your lord father, you may feel free to wait in the parlor or the gardens. Shouldn’t be long now.”

“Move aside,” she said clearly, and the guard sputtered.
“Your—Your Grace, I’m not—”

“Move.”

With a deep breath, he bowed his head. “As you wish.”

The two guards moved to either side of the doors, and Anora pushed them open herself, with both hands flat on the wooden panels, providing full force. In response, every seated man in the room before her jolted upright. All except one.

“Anora!” her father stood at the far end of the table, slamming his hands down on the wood. “There has been a search party out for you since dawn. Thirty men with dogs at their heels, no less. I hope you know the time and coin that has been expended by the royal guard this morning—”

“Perhaps we should have spent that coin better training the dogs, then,” she said, simply. “I’ve been here the whole time.”

Howe, from the end of the table closest her, addressed her then. “Here? In the estate? Whatever for?”

Lord Cumberland to his right, the Master of Ships, looked her up and down, likely eyeing her mussed, loose hair and mud-ridden boots and hem, letting loose a sort of scoff that set his moustache quivering. “Your Grace, forgive my saying so, but you look a wreck! Whatever has happened?”

“Oh? Arl Howe has not told you?”

The Arl feigned confusion, shifting in his seat. “Me? Why should I—”

“Forgive me. Perhaps it’s still a secret, then. I shan’t tell them.” Anora drifted towards the nearest empty seat, pulling it out and sitting herself down, hands folded neatly on the table in front of her.

Every man looked to another and began to shift or cough nervously, then. Perhaps she had miscalculated. Perhaps the whole lot of them knew, and thought they had all been playing her for the fool. How utterly uncomfortable they must all be.

She managed a glance to her left. Her father had not yet returned to his seat. His expression remained much the same.

“…Your Grace,” Arl Howe began, “If all is indeed well, and there is no assistance we may provide you, I think it would be best if you returned to the Palace. I have an escort—”

“Yes, I know very well that you do. They followed me on my way here. And all last night, and all through the past month, I suspect.”

The room was very quiet then. Anora wondered if she were closer, if she could see Howe’s sweat upon his brow. He broke the silence first.

“Her Grace must not be feeling well. I must insist that you—”

“Yes, I know very well that you do. They followed me on my way here. And all last night, and all through the past month, I suspect.”

The room was very quiet then. Anora wondered if she were closer, if she could see Howe’s sweat upon his brow. He broke the silence first.

“Her Grace must not be feeling well. I must insist that you—”

“Her Grace is feeling perfectly fine. Have you told the esteemed council members that you intend to bankrupt the crown before the war’s over?”

“Anora.”

“I only ask so that I may be briefed on the content of these meetings since my absence. How silly of me that I did not think to look for the council in the Arl’s personal estate! What a curious thing that I
should assume they continue to meet in the Palace council chamber, where these meetings have occurred for only the past three hundred years.”

“Your Grace, I assure you, it was never our intention to—”

“Anora, stop this behavior at once.”

“Did you hire Antivan Crows to murder Vaughan Kendells in his prison cell?”

The room was sucked of all air.

Howe only looked at her, and the look she could not hope to place.

“Are you quite finished?” eventually came a voice behind her. She recognized it as her father’s.

“Wh—” she started, but Loghain Mac Tir hardly paused for breath before speaking once more.

“If you are finished embarrassing yourself, embarrassing me, and embarrassing every member of this council by regurgitating the ravings of the mad beggarwoman on any given filthy street corner I happen past, then I suggest you leave now, before I have the guard forcibly remove you.”

Anora stood then, too. She could make herself as big and frightening as he was. Cast just as terrifying a shadow. Make her voice just as loud. She was Queen. What was he?

“Have him show you his books before you dare besmirch my name with words like madwoman. I am the Queen, lest you have forgotten. I have more than a right to sit on this council. More than a right to tell you what that pig has done while you willfully looked the other way.” she shook her finger down at the Arl.

“After your stunt today, you will not sit in on a council meeting until the next age!” he boomed. His whole form shook with rage. “Do you know why every man and woman at that trial voted to imprison the Kendells boy for the rest of his life? Do you know why some hero came along and slipped poison into his food? It wasn’t because of your stirring speech! It wasn’t because they felt sorry for your elves! It was because he stumbled into Court that day, drunk, shouting and spewing nonsense, and running the names of noble men and women—you and I and your husband—through the shit and the mud. Much like you have done today!”

“You have no right—”

“And you have no ordained right to anything. Not a seat on this council, not the crown! Because you’re not Queen! I am your regent by royal decree!”

“I am your daughter!” She screamed, with traitorous salt water pooling in her eyes.

“You’re a spoiled brat with a head too big for her shoulders, who insists on inserting herself where she isn’t wanted.”

Anora gasped for air through her tears. Her chest heaved. Her father sat back down in his seat.

“Now. Leave us.” He waved towards the door, not sparing a glance up at her. Like one of his fucking horses.

And she did. She left. With no spared glance at Howe or anyone. She ignored the cries of the guards at the main door, begging to saddle a horse for her. She trudged back the way she came, out of the Palace district and back through the market, walking through the shit and the mud and dirtying
her boots all over again.

She found herself at the back door of the Royal Palace—the one that led into the kitchens. Anora found she had no strength left to open it. She just leaned against the wood, teeth biting at her fist, and sobbed into the door.

As her knees buckled and she found herself sinking, in a moment of weakness, at last the poison thought breached through. She allowed herself to think it. She allowed herself to sob it into her fist, quiet like a prayer. She asked whoever was listening if he had done it. The terrible thing they all accused him of, behind their backs in whispered conversations. She asked it, and gasped, and sobbed, and wished that she had not.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, now come once a month. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
She had not spoken to them in days, now.

Leaving the tower had been a mess in and of itself. He had to be the one to pull her out of there. It was three flights down before she stopped resisting him. One flight more before she stopped the screaming. He still had to steady her the rest of the way.

That was when Alistair realized he would need to return, of course, to finish negotiations with Irving and the Knight Commander, and he had not been bloody well looking forward to that exchange. He led her outside the tower, let her sit on the dock with a blanket from his pack so she wouldn’t catch cold. Leliana had come down soon—Morrigan close behind—so he had left her in their care while he went back inside, tail practically visible between his legs.

It had been uncomfortable for all three of them, so that made him feel only marginally better. They reconvened on the main floor. That templar had been nowhere in sight, which was a good thing. Alistair didn’t know what he would have done if he’d caught wind of him again, but murder was certainly on the table.

Greagoir thanked them, stiffly, for their efforts, and said little else, for which Alistair was also grateful. He pulled the treaties from his pack and showed them to the First Enchanter, rolled out onto a rickety old wooden table.

Alistair had blanked when the old man had asked after Duncan. He must have stared like a proper idiot for the longest time. Thinking on it now, he can’t even remember what was said. Vaguely, he remembered the First Enchanter’s downcast gaze, a hearty condolence, and a mention of a years-long friendship. Duncan had had plenty of those, Alistair knew. He did not own that grief alone. Regardless, Alistair had elected to move on from the subject without further ceremony. The weight of the old mage’s eyes on him in that moment had nearly snapped Alistair in two. No question, truly, who had raised Solena.

Even with mutual loyalty to Duncan, it took some convincing to sway the First Enchanter. Greagoir, Alistair didn’t even hope for. He hoped that they would work much like dominoes. Convince the one, and have Irving do the rest of the work for him. Or something like that.

“I cannot claim to know your charges,” Alistair had said, “but defeat and death are the apple and the tree.”

Irving and Greagoir had stared at him blankly.

“You know, the one it didn’t fall far from. Anyway, what I’m saying is…they’ve suffered loss. Heavy, heavy loss. And they’ll need time to recuperate, no doubt, but sooner or later, they’ll need something else to fight for—some shred of hope. You let them stew in this state for long, dormant, with no way to move forward from their grief, and you’re treading dangerous waters.”

Thankfully, Irving had seen the wisdom in that. Greagoir didn’t like it, but Alistair knew that he
had, too. Irving, however, could not say with any certainty what the mages’ force might look like when the call to arms came. Alistair had left with the promise of a hundred-fifty. A hundred templars were certain. The fifty, Irving believed, was an optimistic estimate for battle-ready mages. Whatever he could not provide, Greagoir would make up the difference.

Fifty mages was nothing to turn one’s nose up at. And Alistair knew that templars, with their heightened abilities, could be worth at least twice your average foot soldier. And...they were only getting started. Two treaties remained yet, and the promise of Redcliffe’s forces. But one-fifty...was not what they had hoped for. And yet, it was certainly more than he had expected after seeing Solena’s friend dead on the tower floor that night.

When the treaty business was over, and Greagoir had lost interest and buggered off somewhere, he spoke of Connor. That, he knew, was a far more manageable request. When it came to the...demonic possession bit, Alistair must have sounded quite far out of his element. But he did his best to repeat the vagaries of what he understood from Morrigan and Solena, and Irving had listened intently and nodded like he was comprehending it all, so Alistair must have done something right.

The First Enchanter would gather five of his best, most trusted enchanters, two templars for escort, and as much lyrium as the tower could spare, and follow them back to Redcliffe. That was the deal.

That was what brought them to a camp that seemed far busier than usual, on the first truly cold autumn night of the season. The draft from the lake certainly did not help. Wynne, as one of Irving’s gathered five, had cooked for them that night. Most of them sat about the fire with blankets and hot bowls of flavorful soup—with three exceptions. Sten, who had always separated himself a fair distance from the main camp, was no surprise. Neither, really, was Morrigan, who, if it were said that she had been unsociable before, was easily fifty-times that now that a small posse of Circle mages and templars had joined the mix. That, of course, and she couldn’t keep her nose out of that damned book. She had remained holed up inside her tent the entire evening—and every evening that preceded it—which was set up where the clearing met the woods. Alistair hoped that perhaps that meant she’d be the first to be eaten if a bear caught wind of their camp in the middle of the night.

And so, that brought him to Solena. Currently, nowhere to be seen.

He knew she had taken her bowl and wandered off into the woods somewhere to be alone. And Alistair knew better than to follow her there. For the first few days, he had. It always ended the same. She would leave. He would wait long enough to give her the space he knew she so desperately needed, but not so long that his palms began to itch. He would find her, sat on a tree stump or by a small pond, knees tucked to her chest and back facing him.

He wouldn’t have to say anything, breathe, or make any noise at all. “Please leave me alone,” she’d say, not rudely, without turning her head. And, slowly, dejectedly, hoping that she might reconsider at the last minute, he’d turn and go.

He would not dare imagine what she could be feeling, but he knew it was tearing him apart. He ran it back in his head, too. Over and over again. The whole thing. Wondering if he couldn’t have done something. Stopped it. He kept coming up inconclusive.

It was just so senseless. All of it. Niall, Cullen, Uldred, all those mages—the ones that were slaughtered and the ones that chose to follow a madman instead, turned into monsters. It all came back to Ostagar. It made him want to retch.

He knew he couldn’t have been a templar. Duncan saved him from that. It had never been right for him, but certainly after the tower he shuddered to picture himself as some Maker-loving, unfeeling mage-killer. That templar disgusted him. Not only for what he’d done, but for everything he claimed
to stand for. And the way he’d looked at her.

It was less jealousy than it was anger. They’d snapped him out of his demon-infested prison, but his eyes had still been glazed over as they’d rolled over her form. Worshipping her. Like some eternally forbidden fruit. Bloody repulsive.

He knew she hated him. He saw it in her eyes, every day. Even now. And it had always been there, since the very beginning. That templar followed her everywhere. Alistair just wanted to make her know that he was on her side. That it wasn’t…that she didn’t have to be…alone, in this. It was hard to do that when silence still filled the air between them.

Irving grew concerned, as well. When Alistair had returned from the woods that first night, the First Enchanter had looked up from his conversation with Wynne with interrogating eyes. Alistair had only hung his head in response. Each time after, they had shared the same exchange.

“She is still unresponsive, your lady friend?” Wynne sidled up to him the next morning as they walked on the road.

“She’s not—” Alistair spared a quick glance behind him to see that she was in fact out of earshot. Sure enough, she had strayed to the very back of their company, joined only in stride by Sten. He lowered his voice anyway. “Don’t call her that, she’s not *my* anything. But, for your information, no. She’s not speaking to anyone.”

Wynne nodded, seeming to take in the information slowly.

“Why are you not on a horse?” he asked her, somewhat irritated. Their party had given up their horses so the Enchanters could use them in their stead. The least she could do was take advantage.

She pursed her lips. “I am not so old that I cannot walk, Alistair. My colleagues have far greater need of them than I. I will be fine. And *don’t* change the subject.” She pointed an accusatory finger at him. He huffed.

“Everyone needs their space,” she said eventually, affirming his thoughts exactly. “Grief is a messy, complicated emotion.”

Alistair swallowed.

“When you mourned Duncan,” she continued, to Alistair’s great dread. “Was she not there for you? A shoulder to lean on? Perhaps, even when you did not want her to be? Did that not still ease the burden of your grief, in the end?”

He shook his head. “That was entirely different. We were both there. We shared in that together. We both lost…”

“Oh? It was my understanding that you were also at the top of the tower when that poor boy was killed. Was I mistaken?”

Alistair grimaced. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“What you’re doing. Making sense.” He adjusted the bag on his shoulder and quickened his step, avoiding the old woman’s knowing gaze. Bloody mages and their *looks*. They were like to smite a man on the spot.
By lunchtime, they had stopped on the side of the road, tied their horses to a fence and sat down in a field to eat on hard bread, cheese, and the goat that Sten had killed, skinned and roasted. From the small hill they rest upon, there was a clear view of the lake that day. Birds chirped and soared high above them, and the wind had a bite to it but wasn’t cruel. The Enchanters seemed to enjoy it well enough, chatting amongst themselves and even laughing every so often as they sat sequestered away in their own little circle. Considering what they had been through, it was a nice thing to see.

On the other hand, none of the members of their party—scattered across the field and hardly even looking at one another—had so much as cracked a smile all week, and they certainly did not start then.

That was when the sister stood, and left unceremoniously towards a small gathering of trees, likely to relieve herself. That’s when Alistair remembered—the events of the past two weeks flashed before his eyes. All the business with Connor, and the tower, and then Solena, and it had rendered him distracted.

He stood and followed after her.

Alistair was, admittedly, a loud, lumbering fool in full plate armor, wading through the woods, shuffling leaves and snapping twigs and branches with every step, so it was no surprise that she had been alerted well in advance to his presence. Sure enough, he caught her squatting near a quiet brook.

“Can a lady not receive privacy when nature calls on the road?” she called from below, not turning her head. “Perhaps you boys don’t care much, but we still do.”

She finished and laced herself up and at last turned around to face him, seemingly surprised to find him still stood there, arms crossed with what he knew was an unpleasant look on his face.

“I know you’re no lady. And you’ve forfeited all right to privacy, as far as I’m concerned.”

She furrowed her brow in apparent confusion. “What’s this about, Alistair?”

“I don’t know what you are, or why you’re here, but you need to leave. As soon as possible, I think would be appropriate,” he told her. “I saw the body of the spy in Redcliffe. A clean slit from ear to ear. The dead didn’t do that. And I know you went back and killed those men from the Lothering tavern. If they’d made it to Denerim, we’d be neck-deep in assassins by now.”

The sister assessed him curiously, rolling her eyes over him, before letting out a short laugh. “So, let me see if I am understanding you correctly—you want me to leave because I have helped you too much?”

Alistair opened his mouth. Involuntarily, sputters came out. “I…well, no, I—”

“I’ll tell you what. I did kill those men. And I apologize for the subterfuge. I thought it would be easier.”

“Easier?”

“Yes, easier. I saw what this…group of yours was, in its early stages. It was my understanding that any of you getting your hands dirty in such a way would have been a messy affair. You had a lot on your plate. You had suffered a great deal of loss. And yet, messy things needed to be done to ensure our safety. We both knew that. But without the appearance of a strong moral code to guide you, I feared for the direction and stability of this party, and our mission, which I am sure we both agree is of paramount importance.”
Alistair looked down on her, saying nothing, in silent, begrudging agreement.

“If it would make you happier, I will be sure to tell you the next time I plan on killing someone.”

“I don’t know that happier is the word that—never mind. Look, it’s not why you did what you did that bothers me. Well, I don’t love it. But you had your reasons. I would’ve killed that spy if you hadn’t, and…maybe you’re right, about some of that other stuff,” he admitted. “But I’m the only person here who has the good sense to ask how you do what you do. Chantry sister, my arse. I was in the cloister. They didn’t teach the lady initiates any of that.” He gestured vaguely to her whole person. “Maybe you’re a double agent. Maybe you’ve been a spy for Loghain this whole time. What do you say to that?”

She sighed. “Before I devoted myself to the Chantry, I was a traveling minstrel.”

He had to stop himself from laughing. “I’m sorry—a minstrel?”

The Orlesian sister narrowed her eyes. “You don’t have to poke fun. Yes, I was. Storytelling and song were always my passions. Sadly, they…didn’t pan out.”

“That explains precisely none of what I just asked you,” he noted.

“Minstrel life is messier than one might expect. Particularly the feuds. I…let us say I did not get along well with a colleague of mine. Creative disagreements. You pick up a thing or two. You learn to watch your back. I watched mine,” she said, rather ominously. “That was when I decided it was no longer for me. I left for the Chantry, and I didn’t look back.”

He looked at her expectantly, but nothing more came of it. Then, he simply didn’t know where to begin.

“Oh-ho! Alright. You have no intention of telling me, then. I get it.”

She crossed her arms. “It’s the truth. Just because it’s not as glamorous as whatever you imagined—”

“No, no. Truly. Keep your secrets. But I’m watching you. And if you threaten the safety of anyone in this camp, I’ll have no qualms about striking you down.”

The minstrel opened her mouth as if to say one thing, then clearly decided on another.

“I wouldn’t worry too much, Alistair. Just think—if I truly wished you harm, I could have killed you just now. Alone. In the woods.” She tapped her finger to his nose, brushing past him as she left. His flinch and shudder were delayed, coming well after she was gone.

That night, the camp was much the same as the last. Solemn, and distant, and cold. The darkened sky marked the end of their fifth day on the road. By Alistair’s estimations, with their new company and limited horses, it would be at least another three. Connor could be dead by then. Eamon could be dead. All of them…the whole town could be...just like Lothering.

He lay in his tent, rolled onto his side with the blankets pulled up around him, and he squeezed his eyes shut tight. But even when he closed them now, he thought of death. Nothing helped.

They had not yet encountered darkspawn on the road. He wondered why that was. Perhaps the cold had slowed them down. Perhaps they had taken more losses at Ostagar than he had thought, and the bulk of their force waited within the fortress’ frozen walls, rebuilding their strength. But why take Lothering? An easy target, certainly, but a hundred miles was quite the venture for low-hanging
fruit. Likely, the spawn had been able to take the village with just a small forward party. The capture of Lothering must have disrupted trade and travel along the West Road. A strategic move, perhaps? But that was madness. The spawn were a hive-mind, and Alistair would have never thought an archdemon to be much of a battle tactician.

At the very least, its screechings that plagued his nightmares remained indecipherable as ever. Worse, certainly, with each sleep since Ostagar. And louder. With every twist and turn in his sleep he saw a different shade of red. He had begun to feel clawing on his skin, only to wake with no marks. He wondered if Solena’s were as intolerable. He wondered if the tea she took each night helped her any. Maybe he would give it a go. Anything was worth even a little relief.

He shifted on his bedroll and huffed. He missed her. It was simple, really. And the thought of both the pain and the numbness she must certainly be feeling, it undid him. Wynne—dastardly old woman—had struck a chord of truth. He wanted to be there for her. He wanted to reach out—to repay her even a little for the kindness that she had shown him, even when he hadn’t deserved it. This…this isolation from each other would not do. It would ruin the both of them, but him especially. He had to be the bigger person, here. He had to step up and take charge of something, for once in his miserable life.

Before he knew it, he was sat up in his tent, hastily pulling on his britches.

He emerged on a silent camp, save for the crickets. Irving sat on watch, cross-legged by a now reduced fire, his staff laid out across his legs. One of the templars was awake too, poking at the fire repeatedly with a stick as if he were expecting it to do something exciting.

Alistair approached the old mage slowly, but Irving caught wind of his presence early.

“She is awake,” he croaked once Alistair was in earshot. “She rose from her tent not but a little while ago. Took off down to the shore, without a word.” He pointed north, down the long, tall hill that their camp rest upon. Alistair, hands stuffed awkwardly in his back pockets, nodded his gratitude and started to leave, but the First Enchanter stopped him with a soft tap to his elbow.

“Please, I beg of you,” he started. “Do something. I have known that girl all her life. Never have I seen her such. As wise as I would like to think I am, as many years as I’ve lived, I…haven’t the slightest idea how to reach her now. It would seem she does not want to hear anything I might have to say. And in her shoes, I do not know that I can say I would feel differently.” He hung his head a bit. “She places great trust in you, young man. I can see that much. I pray that you can find a way to honor that.”

Alistair’s eyes widened. Then he opened his mouth. “I…yes, of course, I…yes,” he said, or something like it, and Irving nodded his approval that he might leave. Alistair took off in a fast walking pace that soon became a brisk jog, carefully balancing himself as he traversed the steep hill, already seeing her in the distance. A dark figure, dressed in a deep blue shift that blended with the depths of the lake. The moons were hardly visible that night. Her hair was the only beacon he had—she remained still, and the slightest sliver of light glinted upon the top of her blond head and on the right side of her face. Her arms were crossed over herself in the cold.

She was watching the horizon when he approached, sand shifting slightly under his boots.

“Alistair, please go.”

“No. Not this time.”

He heard the sharp, pained intake of breath that followed, as if he had injured her with his defiance.
She angled her head a bit to throw her words over her shoulder. But he had beat her to the punch. They began speaking at the same time, battling for the air.

“I really can’t do this with you anymore. Please, just—”

“Look, it’s alright that you’re not… alright, I—”

They both stopped, and he sighed. She turned the slightest bit towards him now, and he considered that a victory. Alistair could see the right half of her face now, and he could see that she had not been crying. It looked now as though she were waiting for him to speak, so he decided to take that and run with it. He did not know if another opportunity would ever present itself.

“No—no one in their right minds would be alright after what you’ve just been through. Bloody, everything is just… fucked, alright? Fucked, is what it is. And, without a doubt, nothing that *I* say here is gonna change that. I just…” he took a deep breath. “I wish you wouldn’t do this. I understand. This. I mean, I do. I know what this is. And I know no one can tell you when to pick yourself up and move on, but I just wish you wouldn’t do it alone.”

He let her stare at him for a moment. Catch up with what he had said. He watched as she processed it.

“That’s very kind of you,” she began. “But I promise, I’ll be alright. When we arrive back in Redcliffe, I’ll be ready.”

He stepped towards her. “No—bloody— sod Redcliffe!”

She snapped her eyes up to his, as if to alert him to what he had just said. But Alistair didn’t take the time to be surprised at himself.

Alright? And stop fronting—you don’t need to do that,” he continued. “Not for me.”

“I just wanted to assure you that—”

“Is that why you think I came down here? For you to reassure me?”

She faced him completely now, eyebrows narrowed.

“I’m not glass, Alistair. I’m not going to break on you.”

“And if you did, it wouldn’t matter.”

That stuck. She softened.

He started again. “I didn’t come here to talk about Redcliffe. I came here because I am currently operating under the suspicion that we… are… friends. And, I… care. Very much. About you, and knowing that you’re… alright.” He cleared his throat, perhaps awkwardly. “And I couldn’t stand the silence.”

“You were there for me,” he reminded her, “back there. In the Fade. I would have been lost. All of us would’ve been lost if it weren’t for you. I don’t know how you did what you did, but I’m fairly certain that I owe you my life. Going on… three times over now, if my math’s right. Maybe it’s more than that, I don’t know. But it’s not because I owe you! Or anything like that, I just—” he rushed to clarify, stumbling over himself. “I’m here because I want to be. And because I think that, maybe, neither of us have it all together right now. And I just thought that if we’re going to be, for the time being, a couple of broken people, that we might as well bloody do it together.”
Her mouth sort of hung open, and like before, she just stood there staring at him, causing Alistair to immediately reevaluate if his impromptu speech had been nothing but a bunch of incoherent grunting noises. But soon after, she seemed to collect herself.

“Um,” she said, her voice sounding shaken. Alistair thought it might have just been his imagination. “Would you…sit with me?” She gestured to the sandy shore beneath them.

Alistair looked at her, clad in only a shift and shaking, and him now starting to feel the bite, his back teeth chattering as he spoke.

“Aren’t you…aren’t you freezing?” he managed.

“I…yes, a little. Yeah.”

“Let’s go back to my tent,” he suggested, and immediately wished he had his sword to impale himself on. She had turned stiff as a board. “Fuck. No, I didn’t—I didn’t mean, just—Andraste’s bloody knickers, I only meant—”

And then he saw she had managed the slightest of smiles. He stopped.

“Alistair, I know. It’s alright.”

His fingertips ghosted against the familiar dip of her back as he led her back up the hill, to camp. All at once he was greeted with a pleasant feeling that he could only describe as serene, which also felt strangely like happiness. With each step, she began to huddle closer to him to share their heat—so close that he could soon smell the woody scent of her hair—grass and pine—accompanied by the spray of lake water. Shyly, she spared a glance up at him and found him staring back down, and for once he did not panic and look away.

Irving lifted his head at the sight of them appearing up the rise. Alistair desperately avoided the old man’s eyes as he guided the woman in front of him to duck into the flaps of his tent. He hastily followed in after her, cheeks scorching, finding it fortunate indeed that the Enchanter had not roasted him alive with a thought.

With shaking hands, Alistair gathered up three of his blankets from his bedroll, folded them each in half, and draped them across her shoulders. He saved the last for himself.

“Do you really have a sister?” was the first thing she asked as they settled themselves, sitting cross-legged on the soft ground.


“Do you think she’s anything like she was in your dream?”

He shook his head and laughed. “I sure bloody hope not. I don’t know how I’d feel about a demon for a sister.”

She smiled again, gently. “I don’t mean that. I mean…everything else.”

“Beautiful and warm and kind with mince pies baking in the oven at all hours? Doubtful.”

“But that’s what you hope she’d be like.” It wasn’t really a question. His dreams had already betrayed him in that respect.
“I think that’s what everyone hopes their family would be like. The reality is never so ideal, is it?” He asked, rhetorically. She shrugged limply.

“I wouldn’t know,” she told him.

It was then that his stupidity truly began to set in. He bumbled out his response.

“Do you…not…do you not know your family?”

“I was taken to the Circle when I was a baby. They could be anywhere. They could be dead. Or want nothing to do with me.”

He immediately recounted all his whining and moaning—about Duncan, and Eamon, and Isolde and Teagan. She had listened to all of it. Not once had he asked after her. Very suddenly he wanted to bury himself alive.

“Sometimes I think I remember my mother,” she admitted, quietly. Suddenly, to him, she seemed very small. “There are…flashes. I don’t know how reliable they are, though.”

Alistair worried his lip, pondering whether or not to speak. Despite his better judgment, he did.

“You have flashes and I have a locket I pissed away when I was too young to care. All I know is I’d do anything just to know what she looked like. I understand how that feels.”

She gave him a sympathetic look. “What about your father?”

He grimaced, looking down at his hands. His fist clenched, and unclenched. “A passing soldier. A raper. Some married prick noble. I don’t know, I don’t care. I’m a bastard. Who he was makes no difference.”

After a deep breath, he looked up at her again. It wasn’t supposed to be about him, anyway. And he very suddenly desired to spend no more time speaking of his parents. “Did you never ask about them? To Irving?” he managed.

“Mages aren’t allowed to inquire about such things,” she said, looking down and running her fingers across her knuckles.

“What about now?” he asked. “You’re not in the Circle anymore. Do they keep records? Would anyone…know?”

She bit her lip. “I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, after an unbearable pause, unable to come up with anything else.

“Don’t be,” she shifted her blankets a bit. “You may have had your freedom, but neither of us knew our parents. You know what that’s like. What it is to not know your place in the world.”

He thinks he nodded.

“And now you have a chance to find that out for yourself!” She reached for his hands—folded on his lap—and placed one of hers atop them. She searched for a way to look directly in his eyes. “I think that’s wonderful, you have to go and meet her!”

For a moment, he tried to picture it. Showing up at a door to a long-abandoned house. Or, the door opens, and promptly slams in his face. Or worse than that, he’s invited in, invited to sit down and offered tea, and there are children that look vaguely like him crawling all over him and tugging at his
arm, and Goldanna is sat across from him with eyes that are kind but ultimately disconnected—scraping the bottom of the proverbial barrel for polite chatter and personal inquiries with no genuine care for what the answers may be. They would stand, and share in an uncomfortable embrace. Or maybe they wouldn’t even do that. He would leave feeling hollow. Empty. Feeling nothing one way or the other.

No. He couldn’t. How old would she be now? Twenty-five? Thirty? She had children. A family. A life that had nothing to do with him.

“I don’t know,” was what he said instead, even though he knew his answer.

“What? Why not?”

“The whole thing will be bloody awkward. We don’t know anything about each other. She doesn’t even know I exist. What—am I going to knock on her door and say, ‘Hi, I’m your brother!’? No. What do you even say to something like that?” He ran a hand absently through his hair.

“I don’t know. No one does. But every relationship has to start somewhere, right? What’s the worst that could happen?”

Before Alistair could give his numerous answers, from outside the tent came a muffled, “Solena? Child?” that could only have been Irving. “I’ve made your tea.”

She opened the tent flap and grasped the stone cup in two hands, mumbling a quick thank you, followed by an equally hurried, “good night”. For the brief moment that his face was in view, Alistair could see Irving craning his neck to assess the inside of the tent, and confirming for himself that Alistair was still in possession of all of his clothes.

But then the flap closed and they were alone again. Solena blew on her tea, then looked at him.

“Don’t throw away this opportunity, Alistair. Please,” she said, her plea earnest.

They sat in silence as she drank.

“Does it really help?” he asked offhandedly.

She peered up over the cup. “The tea?” she asked, lifting her mouth from the rim. “Yes. Why?”

“With…with all of it? Even the nightmares from the Taint?”

“I don’t dream,” she responded simply.

“I may have to try it then. What’s in that?” he gestured.

She began to explain that on the road, the easiest thing to make tea from was spindleweed leaves. Many other types of herbal teas would not work—and spindleweed was easily attainable. At the tower, however, she had used tea tree leaves.

It was then, with great struggle, that she mentioned him by name. He would bring it to her at night sometimes, she said, when she was up late studying in the library and grew hungry. Along with raspberry scones, and apple bread, and small peppermint candies. She did not say it with fondness—a tone that implied that she now wished she had never accepted the gifts in the first place—and after that, she spoke no more of the monster.

Instead, Alistair asked—cautiously—for her to tell him about Niall. She took a shaky sip of her tea,
brushed a strand of hair behind her ear, and continued with hesitant eagerness. She told him about Jowan, and another mage named Anders, and their generous inclusion of her into their tight-knit brotherhood. Niall had tutored her and engaged with her in lengthy late-night debates on magical ethics and Circle politics. Jowan had befriended her—attached to her hip, in fact. He walked with her to every class. And Anders had given her her first sip of mead. Once, she recounted, he had offered her a puff of elfroot, which she had declined. This caused Alistair’s eyes to bug out of his skull.

“Mages smoke elfroot?” he asked, incredulous.

She nodded and failed to contain her laughter.

“Why? What does it do?”

“It’s like a—um, relaxant? I guess?”

“You’re joking.”

“No! No, I’m not—Maker knows we’re all so high-strung in the Tower, we could use it.”

“And you never…?”

“No, no I didn’t.”

“You sound like you regret that.”

“I…maybe, I don’t know. Maybe I should’ve taken it. He was always saying I was so wound-up and uptight…”

“First of all, not true. But second, do you think we should try it?”

“Like now?”

“Yeah!”

“No—” she burst out laughing. “Maker, we have to be on the road again tomorrow!”

“Alright, fine,” he conceded. “But when this is all over, you and I have some unfinished business to take care of, just remember that.”

Her fit of giggles petered out, and she began to move and adjust her position in the tent to one that was significantly closer to him, which set him a bit on edge. But it wasn’t until he realized that she was attempting to lie down on his bedroll that he well and truly froze—face plastered in a half-smile that he was sure gave way to a great deal of nervousness and uncertainty.

She placed her blankets down where his head usually rest and propped herself up with one elbow, sighing and seeming to relax. He had just begun to relax as well, when she asked:

“So, you were in the cloister until you were, what, ten? Twelve?”

“Give or take.”

“And then you were in the Wardens.”

“My life story.”

She looked up at him with wide, mischievous eyes through heavy lashes. It set off a thousand
warning bells.

“So…then, have you never…?”

He just barely prevented himself from choking.

“Never? Never what? Never…”

“Sex,” she offered easily.

He regretted inviting her here instantly. Irving really was going to murder him. Alistair closed his eyes and, preemptively, began picturing anything but what she looked like laying on his blankets, in his tent, staring up at him like that, asking him about…that.

“I…I mean I’ve…I’ve certainly thought about it. I’m not…you know.” He had been doing quite a lot of thinking of late.

“Oh. I see. You lack the proper parts, then.”

He glared down at her. “You’ve been spending far too much time with Morrigan.”

She began giggling again, so much so that she rolled flat onto her back with her hands pressed on her ribcage, and it was rather hard to be mad at her after that.

“No. No, I haven’t, is the short answer. Laugh all you like.”

“No! Alistair,” her giggling withdrew and she reached out to touch his arm in what he could only assume was an effort to show her sincerity. “Alistair, really, I’m not laughing at you. I mean that. I think it’s sweet.”

“Oh, good,” he deadpanned.

“Don’t be like that. There’s nothing wrong with being a virgin.”

“What about you?” he encouraged the diversion away from himself.

“Oh. Yeah.” She spoke after a brief pause. “Um, I’ve only…once, I mean. And it was…Maker, a mistake. But, nonetheless…”

Images of the templar with his hands and breath all over her bare skin flashed in his mind, and he began to rub his forehead, willing them to leave him. “Actually, I’m really sorry, maybe I…maybe I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“…Oh! Oh, no, I—” she said, seemingly surprised. “No, it wasn’t…it was, uh, Jowan, actually.”

He looked up at her and realized his mouth had slacked open.

“Oh, please no.”

“Look, I told you: a mistake. I was seventeen, neither of us had…you know, and we both just wanted to get it out of the way. It was…awkward, and terrible, and we never really spoke about it again, and if I had to do it over, I’d never have said yes. But…there it is.”

“Well, now I don’t feel so bad, then,” he quipped. She smacked his arm.

“You wretch. It was—”
“A mistake, yes, so you’ve said.” He offered a half-smile. “So, there was no…feeling behind it then? Please don’t tell me you’re secretly pining after that man.”

“No.” She glared.

He held up his hands in surrender. “Alright, alright!”

“His palms were all sweaty, and he kept doing this awful thing with my breasts—like he was kneading dough—and it took him a while even to get it up…”

“Oh, Maker, stop, stop!”

“…and the actual penetration was just really too dry when it came down to it, and he was really kind of shit at the whole thing. He was making these strange movements, kind of like a fish out of water, and ultimately out of sheer pity and a need for it to be over I had to fake my—”

“You’ve made your point. Please, stop, it’s so awful,” he groveled, palms covering his face.

She snickered. They both wore smiles then that faded gradually with each passing moment—not looking at each other but instead at random, nondescript corners of the tent. Solena cleared her throat. Another few moments passed before she reached behind her for her cup, and began to sit up.

“I should…um, I should get going.”

“Can you tell me something, first—please, it won’t take long,” he found himself asking. She had already raised herself up to her knees and had almost reached for the flaps, but turned and paused to hear him out. He stared at her directly in the eyes. “What do you plan on doing, once we get to Redcliffe? What’s going to happen, exactly?”

She sighed. “Well, Irving and the other mages will use the lyrium to…send me into the Fade. I’ll find the demon possessing Connor, and…force it to leave. Or kill it.”

“Solena, you can’t go back in there,” he said at once.

She looked at him—her face somewhere between confused and affronted. “We came all this way to save that boy. Now you’re telling me you don’t want this?”

“No, I…” he twisted his face, thinking. He didn’t know quite what he was saying, himself. But he knew what his gut told him. “I appreciate all you’ve done. I mean, you can’t possibly know…all of this, it’s…frankly, it’s so far beyond what I expected was going to be possible, once I found out about Connor’s…predicament. You’re one of the most selfless, brave, determined people I’ve ever met. But what you’ve just been through…Solena, you can’t. It could kill you. And I’m not sure…I’m not sure this is worth that.”

She shook her head. “He’s a child. We have to do something, and it can only be me.”

“Why? Why can it only be you? Why can’t one of the other mages do it?”

“Alistair, just…trust me, alright?” her voice almost sounded angry. He didn’t like that. “I’m Connor’s best chance of coming out of this alive. I’ll be fine.”

It was clear that she was choosing to end the conversation there. Before she left, she turned back to him again.

“Thank you. This was…thank you.” She looked at him one last time, and he nodded in turn with
his best attempt at a smile.

The flaps closed, and he was back to being alone again with his thoughts. Sleep eventually found him, and at first he was not so restless as before. But still, in the Fade, he dreamt of her. Of watching her go where this time he could not follow. Of watching her die in front of him. For him. Because of him. Duncan and the Wardens, Lothering, and then Redcliffe, the boy on the cart and Connor too, Teagan, and Isolde, and Eamon, and finally, her.

When he woke again it was with a tortured shout in a pool of his own sweat, chest heaving and breathless, and with his head in his hand pinching his eyes shut, he sobbed.

~~~

He helped the last of the enchanters up onto their horses, made sure they were saddled correctly, and told the lot of them to move out.

It was a later start than he had wanted. Solena had slept longer than the rest, and none dared wake her. None except Bodahn’s boy. Not that he could help it, Alistair suspected. He had had a breakdown of sorts that morning. Alistair could still hear the screams. Panicked—terrified—and loud. Certainly among the most awful sounds he’d ever heard, one right after the other, each the same length and pitch as the one before it. Birds flew in flocks out of the trees around them. The entire camp had stopped in their tracks to turn and look. Solena had groggily emerged from her tent. They all watched from a distance as a nervous Bodahn tried desperately to talk him down. Eventually, it worked. Irving then seemed to engage the two in lengthy conversation, while Sandal was still breathing heavy and looking rather petrified.

The event had left the camp spooked, to say the least, but they did their best to carry onward.

Not long after midday, they found themselves at last entering the Hinterlands. That seemed to set everyone at ease a bit. Alistair found himself towards the back of the party, falling in line with Sten. The hard giant remained stoic as ever, front-facing and unfazed by seemingly anything around him.

“How are you holding up, big man?” Alistair asked him. He was already well enough aware that shooting the breeze with the Qunari was a fruitless and often painful effort. But still, it made Alistair feel better to check in on him every now and then.

“Your eyes fail you, human. I am holding nothing,” he said, and Alistair immediately hung his head.

“No, I meant are you alright? Are you sleeping well, are you eating well, how are you feeling?”

Sten narrowed his eyes. “Feeling?”

“Yeah, I thought as much. Alright. Good talk, Sten.” Alistair sped up his walking pace immediately. Not only to be done with the most horrid exchange of his life, but also to catch up with Irving’s horse, which was now so situated in their lineup as to be out of earshot from Solena. Bodahn and Sandal rode on their black, long-haired pony adjacent to him, which hauled their wagon along behind it.

“Good afternoon, Master Alistair!” the merchant greeted cheerily from the other side of the Enchanter.

“Bodahn,” Alistair nodded his acknowledgement. “How’s your boy faring?” He glanced at Sandal, who seemed to be sucking idly on his thumb.
“Oh, much better, thank you. I swear to you, I don’t know what had him so spooked! He’s never done that before!”

“Not to worry. We’re just glad he’s alright,” Alistair assured the dwarf.

“Perhaps he overheard what happened in the Tower! Dreadful thing, that. My condolences, all.” He nodded in Irving’s direction.

“I was just telling Master Feddic how remarkable his son truly is,” Irving spoke. “Never in history has the Circle recorded another instance of a dwarf being able to manipulate magical artefacts successfully. And I reiterate once more how delighted the Circle would be to house Sandal for a few months, and explore his talent further. Once we have fully rebuilt, of course.”

“We thank you once again for your kind offer First Enchanter, but I’ve brought up the matter to him several times already, each to the same response. Sandal’s made up his mind, I fear.”

Alistair noted the drool that now ran down the corner of the boy’s mouth.

“Very well.” Irving smiled. “Do not hesitate to contact me should he ever reconsider.”

Bodahn smiled kindly in turn and soon began chatting away with another Enchanter in front of them who sounded as though he had been saving up a rather long list of questions to ask about the young dwarf prodigy. Alistair moved closer to Irving’s horse and lowered his voice slightly.

“Has Solena told you of what she intends to do?” he asked Irving.

“Yes,” sighed the First Enchanter. “She asked for none of my input.”

“We cannot allow her to re-enter the Fade. Not after what happened in the Tower,” Alistair insisted.

Irving seemed to look around for Solena as well, as if she might pop out from anywhere just to yell at them both for conspiring.

“On that, we agree,” Irving said, speaking lower. “I would volunteer myself, but I would personally feel better overseeing the ritual. I still believe that is where I will be most useful to the assurance of Connor’s safety, as well as that of whosoever ultimately enters the Fade attempting to save him.”

Alistair bit his lip in thought. At the head of their company came a flash of raven-black hair. He shut his eyes and sighed.

“I suppose now would be a good time to ask you if you believe this will even work at all,” he said.

“In confidence, because I trust you, I will tell you that this is not something ever attempted at the Circle. When a mage becomes possessed—when he becomes an abomination—he is executed promptly. Such a risk in security…well. You witnessed what happened at the Tower. And what has befell Redcliffe already. Had I told Greagoir the whole truth of this excursion, he and a small army would be storming the castle as we speak, slaughtering the boy and the whole noble family, most like. The mother for harboring him, and the uncle and father for risk of demonic influence. That would be the end of it.”

Alistair winced, and resisted forming his hands into fists. “But?”

“But I agreed to this…unusual request for the love I bear that girl. And with the sympathy I carry for the child—young, with an extraordinary gift and none to guide him. Eamon has been a friend to the Circle, his young wife’s errors in judgment notwithstanding. It could work, yes. I hope sincerely
that it does. But I guarantee nothing. And, if I may make a gentle suggestion: you may wish to prepare yourself now for the worst."

At that, Alistair’s walking pace began to slow and Irving went on ahead of him. Apparently he must have looked stricken enough, as Leliana sidled up next to him to ask if he was feeling alright. He waved her off dismissively, and began to take the old man’s suggestion to heart.

~~~

One heavy foot in front of the other, he forced himself all the way there. Soon enough, he was standing above the blue flame of her campfire wearing a look on his face that must have been a painful sight—jaw clenched tight and eyes sharp as knives.

The witch did not acknowledge him, though she doubtless knew he stood there waiting. She was too busy intently searching the pages of her blasted book, probably looking for a spell that would incinerate him to a pile of ash on the ground. She lay with her knees out to one side, atop blankets which were littered with pages upon pages of notes and strange-looking drawings. Her tent had, he noticed, been set up strategically so that no one at the main camp could look over and observe her activities. Namely, Irving. Every bit of it unnerved him. The secrecy, the bizarre symbols and markings, and the feverish intensity with which all of it consumed her.

“Can you look up from there for one bloody moment so I can talk to you?”

Even though she was turned away from him, he saw her freeze, and then slowly snap the cover shut. She turned her head, expectantly.

“Yes?”

He breathed deep and steeled himself.

“I need you to enter the Fade in Solena’s stead, when we arrive tomorrow.”

She scoffed, which was more or less what he had expected. “And why would you even begin to presume that I would agree to do that?”

“Because you owe her for that book you hold in your hand that you keep fawning over. And you know as well as I and everyone that if she goes back in there, she could die.”

“As could I! And as for your first brilliant conclusion, it is you that has come to ask me this, not her. If this were something she wished of me in exchange for allowing me to take the book—which, by the by, I just as soon could have taken by force without her permission—then perhaps my answer would change. Perhaps not. Regardless, your incessant need to coddle her like some delicate flower in the hopes that she may one day take you to bed is nauseating, and your blatant lack of regard for whether I live or die or run off to live with the hill tribe cannibals has been, as always, well-noted. Now, if you would please leave—you are blocking what little light the setting sun still affords me.”

Soon, he heard the sound and felt the dull pain of his back teeth grinding against each other. He swallowed stiffly and loosened his jaw, though the witch’s mere proximity set every part of his body aflame, screaming at him not to let his guard down, lest she decide to unhinge her jaw and eat him alive in one bite.

“You’re selfish. You’re a selfish person,” he told her.

“You’re a child.”
“Oh, you’re not even human!” he shouted. “A little boy could die tomorrow, and you don’t care! A woman who has been nothing but kind to you—defended you when all I ever wanted to do was send you back home to your stinking swamp and evil hag of a mother—is probably going to die trying to save him, and not only will you do nothing to try and prevent it, it doesn’t faze you in the slightest! You just sit out here, every night, half a mile away from everyone else doing Maker knows what, reading out of a book that I’m willing to bet contains more blood magic than I’m comfortable with. Well, I’ve got news for you: you and that mother of yours? You’re one in the fucking same, as far as I’m concerned. I don’t see a shred of difference.”

In front of him, she transformed into a wolf. Pale limbs became dark grey fur, though the same yellow eyes remained. It shook him for a moment, and would have probably scarred him for life had he not witnessed her do it earlier, once or twice, sneaking away from camp in the dead of night to hunt or…do whatever she did. The wolf snarled and barked. He backed away an appropriate distance, but not so much that it looked as if he were running away. He glared back.

Eventually, it seemed she grew tired of the game. She turned tail and ran into the woods behind her, shrouded by cover of darkness.

“Leave, then!” he cried out after her. “I hear the Void is lovely this time of year! Tell your mother I said hello!” He picked up the discarded pages on the ground and waved them above his head. “You forgot your black magic!”

When he was certain there was no way she could still be listening, and he no longer cared enough to waste the breath, he discarded the papers back on the ground. Rough palms rubbed at his scalp and face as he paced absently in a circle, his footing lazy, and tired, and thoughtless.

“Fuck,” he swore, long and sharp. This time, to no one.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, now come once a month. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
Morrigan IV

Chapter Notes

A/N: So, so incredibly sorry for the wait on this one. As I've mentioned before, I am a
full-time student, and these chapters are now taking a whole lot longer to write. I'm
trying my best going forward to improve how I balance my time writing these, but thank
you for your patience in the meantime. I am going to continue to try and update
monthly, but please understand that my schedule may continue to deviate occasionally.
Thanks and enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MORRIGAN

The owl’s eyes—two bright beacons in the dark of night—bore down upon her, the bird’s watchful
gaze cruel and unwavering as it hooted softly in time with the rustling of the trees. It was soon after
that she began to feel the creeping pain of her womb, and heat and sweat pool on her forehead and
beneath her arms. Morrigan brought her knees to her chest and did what she could to ease the ache—
but the ghost of it would not leave her, and the discomfort of her blood made her face twist and her
eyes scrunch and water.

Huddled upon the flat face of a cool rock clutching her arms in the cold, she wondered if Alistair
would follow after her into the woods, as he had for the woman each night since the Tower.
Morrigan did not find it likely, and quickly grew angry with herself for even thinking it. She was
angry with herself, too, for following in that woman’s footsteps and throwing herself another
childlike pity party. For running away from a confrontation with the fool instead of simply biting off
his hand at the wrist and continuing on with her evening.

The truth was that she did not want to go back to that camp. Not even her own tent—as far
removed as it was from the rabble. She would rather die, she thought. Die starved to death still sitting
on this rock, as the owl who would not cease its hooting watched her wither and decay, only to
eventually fly away in disinterest. And even still, Alistair would not come to check on her.

There were templars there. And not a one of them had removed their sharp, calculating eyes from
her person since they had set foot back on the road. She was not afraid of the them, perish the
thought! But there was a key difference between the templars she had encountered in the forest as a
young girl and the templars she now traveled with. The difference was that she was no longer
allowed to kill them.

Heavy feet approached on the forest floor. She glanced up. It was Sten, securing the last of the laces
on his trousers.

“You have left the camp,” he noted, eloquently. “Why?”

“Because I wish to be alone,” she snapped. “Is that not apparent enough?”

The beast scowled, if such were possible, for it always looked as though he were scowling.
“Imekara,” he said, and though Morrigan knew none of the Qunari tongue, it sounded much to her like a profanity. “Children. You and the Warden, both. We will accomplish nothing with this dallying about, aimlessly, like lost sheep.”

Morrigan straightened her back and narrowed her eyes. “How I spend my time alone is none of your concern, Qunari. Take your preachings elsewhere.”

“A mage unaccounted for is everyone’s concern. Return to camp, or I shall alert the templars.”

She grew hotter in the face as he marched away, unfazed. She would have thrown a rock at the back of his head—the largest, sharpest rock she could find—if she had not known he would crush her skull in an instant with only one of his palms in retribution. And she knew the threat was more than empty air. The Qunari did not spend words frivolously, she had quickly learned.

Instead, she complied, though her blood boiled. She was going to return soon anyway. After all, she had left her mother’s grimoire back at her tent, and she could not stand to be parted from it for long. Time was too valuable.

Merely opening the book had been the first of many challenges. The grimoire had no lock or buckle—merely a taught strap made of something like leather that bound the front cover to the back. And despite her attempts, no knife would cut even the smallest tear into it. After that brief interlude resulting in an accidental slice in the pad of her index finger, Morrigan began searching her memories of her mother for a word—any word—that she might have invoked as some sort of magical passcode. Utter the word, and the strap would dissolve, or something of that variety. Her guesses were weak, and few, and none of them worked.

Then, she settled on spells. Though with this, she exercised great care. Cast the wrong spell, and she suspected the book may self-destruct. She used spells of low-power that caused no direct damage—healing spells, protective wards, cooling spells. It was when she cast a mild warming spell that the book flickered with the faintest glow, but did not open. Morrigan’s eyes lit up along with it, understanding quickly the intent behind the grimoire’s protective seal. Flemeth had always had the most sadistic sense of irony.

Taking a deep breath, Morrigan had set the book down on the grass, well-and-away from her tent and belongings, and backed away. She quickly exhaled and sent a fireball crashing to the ground, erupting the entire book in a barrage of tall orange and blue flames. She caught herself letting loose the tiniest of yelps at the sight, rushing towards it to check for damage, struggling to navigate the hot, burned grass beneath her two bare feet in brief, hobbled hops.

Thankfully, the grimoire itself was none the worse for wear. But the tree carved into its front had been illuminated, embers forming at its trunk and rising, stretching out to each limb and singeing the leather, tiny plumes of smoke rising from its surface. When the tree and all its tendrils were black with soot, the leather strap at last snapped in two.

The book had appeared at first to be utterly indecipherable. That was likely why the fool Irving had it locked away gathering dust in some old chest. Her mother may never have intended for any eyes to gaze upon it but her own, but even still she was far from careless in the grimoire’s composition. Most of the book was not comprised of words. Instead, there were symbols and diagrams and drawings—none without meaning, clearly, but all foreign and strange. In some cases, entire pages—sometimes sections—had been torn out by the book’s spine, likely to be relocated. Maybe destroyed. To decode the entire book, if even possible, would take years. Perhaps Morrigan’s whole life. And who knew how long that would be?

Flemeth had told her little of her spells, fewer still of her plans, and absolutely nothing of her
dalliances upon leaving their hut. Of common magic, Morrigan knew a great deal. Such was a part of her training. But Flemeth performed many spells and rituals of her own creation, and she seldom involved her in their completion. Morrigan had only caught faint, brief glimpses. Broken noises—shrill, ugly sounds that pierced one’s ears and kept frightened little girls awake at night. Colors of sickly green, black, and blood-red. Unfortunate templars and Chasind folk who wandered too near to their abode—whose bodies her mother would dispose of alone.

It was possible that she would find answers to all of that and more within these pages. But right now, that which concerned her most of all were the pages which referenced “M.”, and “child”. If the book and nineteen years of living a life in isolation with the witch had taught her anything, it was that her mother did nothing without purpose. It was the question that nagged at her mind for years, and now consumed it like a disease. It had been there, in her childhood, when she first began to understand that her mother had no genuine care for her. That she thought little of her, regarded her less, and called for her only when she had the potential to prove useful. Not a daughter, a tool. Thus followed the question.

_for what purpose?_

What use had Flemeth for a young daughter?

So far, the grimoire was reluctant to give way to such secrets. But Morrigan, as it so happened, was far more stubborn, and far more persistent. Outside of the book, there was nothing. Nothing that mattered more. Inside its pages was…everything. Everything in the world. It did not matter to her if anyone else understood that.

Such was why, just as soon as she had finally settled back onto her bedroll and delved back into her studies, it was so irksome that she felt the presence of yet another standing over her, attempting to look over her shoulder and concern themselves with that which by its very nature did not concern them.

She scowled and looked up.

“Have you found anything?” Solena asked. That the question was, in fact, polite, only raised Morrigan’s ire more.

“I am not interested in small talk, at the moment,” Morrigan cut back.

“Good. Neither am I. Which was why I asked about your book,” the woman said, continuing to be irrationally and maddeningly well-mannered. “I know you tend to mock the Circle—probably for very good reason, but I did conduct studies there. I know what an all-nighter looks like. By the sheer volume of notes around you and the state of your hair, I’d say you’ve pulled a few.”

Morrigan said nothing.

“This is important to you,” she concluded.

Morrigan glanced around her—the state she was in, the loose pages of mad scribblings the woman referred to. The book in her lap. Her teeth pulled at her bottom lip.

“I…” she knew not what to say, or why, even, she had begun to discredit the woman’s claim. It was true, after all. “Yes,” she admitted, seeing no further point to the façade.

She sighed and rubbed furiously at her temples.

“I’ve found rather close to nothing. It’s…it will take time. A great deal of it.”
Solena knelt down on the grass, gesturing to a page of Morrigan’s notes.

“I take it that’s not Common.”

“No. Nor any language I’ve ever seen,” Morrigan told her.

“Is it all like this? Symbols with no words?”

“No exactly. Though all of it looks just as foreign to me.”

Solena furrowed her slim brow, eyeing the grimoire in Morrigan’s lap. She moved a hand towards it.

“May I?”

The reactionary “no” threatened to escape, along with the urge to grasp the book in both arms and hold it as far away from the blond-headed mage as was possible. But that was…silly. The woman had no reason to steal or defile it. She had granted it to her in the first place, after all. And she did not seem to have any desire to mock her, as Alistair had.

It must have shown on her face.

“I’ll be careful with it, Morrigan. I know it doesn’t belong to me.”

Belong was an interesting choice of word, seeing as they two had stolen it from the office of the woman’s feeble mentor, who had somehow stolen it from her mother. That Solena considered it Morrigan’s regardless of that fact was…appreciated.

She carefully handed over the tome.

Solena’s eyes scanned the page, then she flipped to the next. Her lips scrunched and moved and folded under her teeth, conveying various degrees of deep thought. Morrigan thought that she looked tired, too. Not in lack of rest, perhaps, but…something else. When she spoke she sounded strangely—almost as if she were in a daze. As if she were back in that tower still, trapped by Sloth in his web of dreams. As if she had never left.

If she were anything like Morrigan, she must hate the fussing, she thought. The fool, prattling on about her state of mind, regarding her like a string pulled taught, that could quite easily snap under the slightest pressure. And her, sitting there, regarding her as she was. Morrigan shook her head and averted her eyes. She would not like to be thought of as such. She would pay this woman the same courtesy.

The woman’s eyes widened slightly, and she pointed to something on the page, tilting the book for Morrigan to see.

“There. This bit here, I recognize it—it’s in Tevene.”

Morrigan looked at the book, then back up to the woman’s face. She was no braggart. She did not shove her discovery down Morrigan’s throat, so that she was forced to sit there and revel in her Circle-bred intellect. It did seem to Morrigan that she was, in fact, genuinely attempting to be…helpful.

“Really?” Morrigan asked, simply.

“Mm,” Solena mumbled in confirmation. “I’m nowhere near fluent. But it would come up from
time to time in my studies. That word, there, that’s the word for daughter.”

Incredulously, Morrigan continued to glance from the page back to the woman’s intent look. “What else do you see? Anything?”

Solena seemed to pause, staring blankly at the book. “Yes,” she said, “one more thing.”

She pointed again, at the next page over. “Immortality.”

Morrigan grasped the book in both hands and pulled it from her lap, eyeing the page.

“Where?” she demanded, frantically. “Wh-what does the rest of it say?”

“I don’t know. As I said, I’m not fluent. I’m sorry, Morrigan.”

Slowly, Morrigan lowered the book down to the blanket. She stared at the page below her. *Two words.* It was the most concrete translation she had yet gathered, and it had taken her weeks, and the eyes of another. There were hundreds more words written in that language, and even that was only the smallest fraction of the whole tome.

Flemeth would find the book in her possession and kill her for it before she translated more than a single page.

“Morrigan,” Solena said, cautiously, “just how old is your mother?”

Morrigan merely shook her head. “Truly, I…do not know. She…told me a story, once, from back when she was a young and beautiful woman—if you can believe it. She recited it to me once upon request, and never again. But I have never forgotten it. As she tells it, she was once married to a man named Conobar, Bann of Highever. However, the marriage was one of her father’s making—his daughter’s virtue for a small sum of land and a few goats, or something equally insulting—and so she cared not for him as a wife should.”

“She was the Teyrna of Highever? A noblewoman?” Solena asked, appropriately surprised.

Morrigan scoffed at that. “Doubtful a position for any woman in her time would be so dignified. A prize slave, more like. Regardless, one day—she told me—in the Bann’s court, a young poet arrived. His name was Osen. Flemeth claimed that his verse caused her to…fall in love, for the first and only time in her life. Desperate, the young lovers sought the help of Chasind folk to help them flee Conobar’s lands and take refuge in the Wilds—out of the Bann’s reach, where he might never find them. For years they hid, until word reached the South that Conobar lay sick and dying, and Flemeth, for whatever reason, felt that it was her duty to visit him one last time, to put old ghosts to rest. Osen went with her.”

Morrigan glanced up briefly to find the woman still hanging onto her every word, though she knew not why.

“It was a trap, of course. Osen was butchered by soldiers on arrival—his head mounted on a spike—and Flemeth imprisoned in the highest tower of Highever Castle, her one window large enough only so that she might look down upon the ramparts and watch the head rot in the sun.”

Solena swallowed. “And then?”

“And then she used her magic to break free in the dead of night and kill Conobar as he slept, and fled back to the Wilds, where she’s lived ever since,” Morrigan explained with a shrug.
The woman frowned. “The details seem rather muddy.”

“They seem muddy because they are muddy. The story is a lie. Every word of it.”

“What?” she blinked.

“There was no Bann Conobar, ever. I checked. I would often…dally in towns on the fringes of the Wilds, when Flemeth was on one of her long and frequent absences. One had a library. Tomes on genealogy and Fereldan noble houses are not difficult to find.”

Solena’s brow lowered in confusion.

Morrigan continued. “Then, I thought, perhaps she had merely changed the names, so I searched for any record of any Bann murdered by an adulterous wife—that took quite a while, but I did find one, from Highever. _Tal...something_. His wife’s name was not Flemeth or anything resembling it, and there was no mention of the Wilds or the Chasind tribes. The wife was released from her prison cell by sympathetic servants, who then found her sitting by her husband’s bedside the next morning, covered in his blood, shaking and petrified. She was executed at dusk.”

Morrigan swallowed. “But, even if, somehow, that woman was indeed Flemeth and had somehow survived, that would make Flemeth just over six-hundred years old.”

“That’s…impossible,” Solena noted.

“That was my thought as well, as a young girl. Now I know differently. The estimation is far too low.”

“Low?” the woman gaped. “How old do you think she is?”

“Old. Very, very old. She told me that tall tale because she knew I would ask questions. Because she knew I would seek the truth of whatever story she chose to tell me. Her supposed truth is just unbelievable enough to be believable. That Flemeth had murdered a jealous husband who had done her great ill? That all accounts of her magic had been erased from the history books? That instead of facing execution she had escaped into seclusion, devising a spell to slow the process of aging so she may never be found again? All things that my mother, as I knew her, could easily accomplish, had she the will to do so.”

Solena shook her head. “I don’t understand. If the story holds up, why do you doubt it?”

Morrigan narrowed her eyes. “Because she does nothing on accident. She did not _stumble_, helplessly, to where she is now as the result of some great suffering, eternally mourning for a lost love, in hiding from the rest of the world. She is what she is because she has always been thus. She is a creature of pure evil. And capable of things neither you nor I could ever conjure in nightmares. And her grimoire, according to your very own translation, contains far more than a spell to merely _slow aging._”

The two of them then seemed to sit in pensive silence. They both stared at the open book.

“Redcliffe Castle has a full library,” the woman said, suddenly and confusingly.

“And?”

“And I would be shocked if their collection did not include books on Tevinter language. Bann Teagan owes me more than a few favors. I’m certain I can get ahold of them for you.”
“Why are you doing this?” Morrigan demanded, harshly, and full of vitriol, and instantly she hated herself for it. She tried to soften her expression, but she was sure it just looked pained and awkward, and the feverish anxiety that now coursed through her, she knew, was more from hot shame than her moon blood. She lowered her eyes to the ground.

“I have done…nothing to deserve—” her voice broke, and quickly she aborted the sentiment she had started. “I have nothing to give you in return for this. You know that.”

Something flashed on the woman’s face that Morrigan was not certain she appreciated. Something like the pity she was so fond of. But it soon became something that Morrigan found far more tolerable.

“I’m not asking for anything,” she said, with a gentle smile. “You’ve helped us plenty. You saved my life, and Alistair’s.”

“Then you should thank my wretched mother. I did nothing to speak of,” Morrigan said, crossing her arms.

She seemed to think for a moment. “I saw you back there, before we left your hut. Flemeth sent you with us without any regard for what you wanted. The forest meant so much more to you than she ever did. Leaving like you did…it must have felt like abandoning a loved one on their deathbed.”

Morrigan swallowed stiffly.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be presumptuous,” she continued. “I know we’re…not that close. I just… I saw that, and I recognized it, is all. I felt for you. I know you’re not fond of pity. But when I left the Tower, the first time and then the second, I…well. I don’t know quite what I felt. It wasn’t the place, it was…me. A part of myself that died, I suppose. And…and then, Niall.”

The woman closed her eyes and held them there.

“Maybe there’s something there that we can both understand,” she said. “That’s all I’m saying.”

“Perhaps.”

The woman left then, without further ceremony. Morrigan appreciated it. The hour grew late, and the pain in her belly would only lessen with rest.

Though when she shut her eyes and sleep took her, the ache followed her into the Fade. In the darkness of the Void, the grimoire floated before her. The cover flew open, and the pages fanned in the wind. Suddenly, the book ignited. Flames ate through the ancient book and consumed every word—every bit of it, turning each page of her salvation to ash that fell into the Void below like snow. Morrigan went to scream, but her screams were the dwarf boy, who had seen her hide the book in her pack that morning and had sounded off like an alarum bell, frightening her to her core. Above it all came the laughter—her mother’s laughter.

When she woke, she did not dare close her eyes again.

~~~

They arrived back in Redcliffe the following night, as Alistair had predicted. As if by some miracle, the village appeared no worse for wear than it had upon their departure. Some of the wretches had even begun to crawl out of their homes to mill about the town center, though as Morrigan passed them by she could smell the fear still wafting off of them. She wagered many of them now jumped at their own shadows when the sun grew low.
Meanwhile, the fool would not cease with his looks. Every so often, Morrigan would happen a glance over her left shoulder and there he would be—eyes on the back of her skull. Morrigan could not hope to deduce anything from the blank stares, other than that perhaps he hoped to somehow sprout magical powers with which to control her mind, forcing her into completing his inane request from the night before. She chose to ignore him.

As they crossed the castle drawbridge, clouds gathered above, and the air grew too still and too quiet. There were guards stationed at the portcullis, which at the least told them that all the inhabitants of the castle had not been massacred as soon as they’d left. But the men’s faces were tired, and haunted.

*It is as if this village were frozen in time,* Morrigan thought. *Like one of the paintings on the walls.*

They hitched their horses outside and made their way to the main hall. Morrigan rubbed her hands together and blew on them. It was dread cold, even within the stone walls. Though not cold like autumn was. Cold like death.

The Bann greeted them straight away, embracing Solena and clapping Alistair firmly on the shoulder, a sheen in his eyes. The shrew—the Arlessa—raised her head to look at them. Morrigan stared at her curiously. A wisp of a woman she was, with deep, round, purple bags beneath her eyes and gaunt cheeks. She might have been skinner by half than when they had left, if such were possible. Her fingernails were blunted and chewed; her hair crazed. Dressed in a white, flowing dress, she looked half a ghost.

Morrigan grew sick to look at her, so she looked away.

The great hall looked much as the Arlessa did. Worn and weary, starved and grieving. A meagre fire was lit, but its warm light stretched thin, and the rest of the room remained dank and grey and old-smelling, as though it had been abandoned for an age.

It was then Morrigan took notice of the mage—the guilty one—who sat clapped in irons in the corner of the room, asleep in a wooden chair. Near him was the archway which led to the rest of the castle, warded by his hand. A sensible move—and likely the very one which had kept the village standing. But it would not hold forever.

The Enchanter entered with his small posse of templars and spoke carefully to the Bann and the shrew both, and from the looks of them, his words were a sweet mercy.

“How will you do it?” the shrew asked eagerly.

He smiled. “Delicately. And, mercifully, if need be.”

Her lip quivered at that. “You—you think—”

“We shall strive for the best, my lady. And prepare for the worst. Steel yourself. Your son is not lost to you yet.” He placed a wrinkled palm atop the ones that she had folded in her lap, though it did not seem to comfort her any. Morrigan thought that she had even grown paler.

The enchanters went to work preparing the lyrium, which they handled in a copper pot placed atop one of the room’s long oaken tables. The Bann comforted the Arlessa as best he could. Alistair sulked away in a dark corner, knowing when he had no hope of being useful. The chained mage in the corner had woken by then, and he looked almost as miserable as the Arlessa had. None spoke to him. Morrigan wondered if anyone had spoken to him since they left.

Most of their party kept to the sides of the room, save for Solena, who played the attentive
apprentice, fluttering about the enchanters and helping when she was asked to. Morrigan wondered if such was how she had always behaved in the Circle. Like a trained dog, content and obedient. ‘Twas sickening, really.

Morrigan sat upon the floor, with her knees tucked to her chest.

The pain of last night lingered like a ghost, but the agony and the tears and the heat had left her. Her belly did churn, but she was no longer so certain of the cause. She grew less certain with every moment that passed, as she looked between the blond woman flitting about and working busily with the rest, and the glances—which now she was sure carried with them a strange twinge of sadness—spared her by Alistair.

She dared not hope for an apology, surely. He had meant the words he had spoken last night, and she had given him no reason not to. He had no care for her, and she had no care for him. Such was the way of things. But he had great care for her, though. Morrigan had seen evidence enough of that to last a lifetime.

She thought of her mother’s grimoire, and of Solena’s sad smile, and kind eyes.

After quite a while, when the enchanters had finished their preparations, they began to step away from the lyrium now glowing and singing on the feasting table. The Bann and the Arlessa stood at once.

The old Enchanter seemed to breathe deep, then, before speaking.

“We will have need of a mage, to…volunteer, to enter the Fade and confront the—”

“I’ll do it,” said Solena.

“Solena, no,” said Alistair in immediate reply.

The woman snapped her head to where he stood, glaring daggers at him. “Don’t tell me no. This isn’t your decision.”

The old man’s hand graced her elbow. “Child, truly, do you believe it is wise to undertake such a task, after all you have endured these past few weeks?”

“I’m fine,” she bit, in a way that much confirmed to everyone that she was not. She shrugged off the hand.

“Bullshit. You’re in no state,” Alistair argued.

“What would you know about it?”

Chains rattled to the left, and the mage spoke from his corner.

“Solena, please, let me do it. I—”

“No.” The word seemed to come from Solena, the shrew, and the Enchanter all at once.

“I have no motive to enter the Fade simply to betray you again! I could die, just the same as you. Only difference is, I’ll deserve it,” he said, and looked at his feet.

“That may be,” said the Enchanter, coldly. “But no one here will allow you anywhere near the Fade, or that boy.”
The mage sat back down in his seat, no happier than he had been before.

“The matter still stands,” the old man continued. “While I still cannot recommend this course of action, I accept it may be our only option. Very well. You should—”

“I’ll do it.”

Morrigan had not allowed the words to leave her mouth until then, though she had been stewing them over for quite a while. Letting them go now was an oddly satisfying release.

The room was quiet. She stood.

“I… I apologize, I’m not overly familiar with… what was your name, dear?”

As she considered whether or not to answer him, she found herself looking once more to the corner. And Alistair’s eyes upon her.

“Morrigan.”

“Morrigan, you are most kind for your offer. Which Circle did you say you hailed from again? Ostwick, was it?”

She did not respond to that. Instead, she and Solena met each other in the middle of the room. It looked as though Solena had lost all of her breath. The woman placed a hand upon her forearm. It was gentle.

“Morrigan, you… you don’t understand, I—” She wore confusion on her face, clear as still water.

“I understand well enough.” Morrigan spared one more glance to the corner, then back again. “I shall be honest and say that I do not know how you accomplished what you did in that tower, nor why it has you so contemptibly full of yourself of late, but one task is not the other. Any mage could do this; it needs not be you.” Morrigan then lowered her voice, so that only she would hear her. “And you know that you have given me more than I could ever hope to repay you for, so let me contribute something, at least.”

“You don’t have to,” she responded in near-whisper.

“I do. Cease the polite formalities and let me do what I have offered before I change my mind.”

The woman looked as though she might have more to say. Though, to Morrigan’s surprise and relief, she chose not to say it. A moment passed and all she gave was a gentle nod and the subtle flickerings of a smile. Solena turned to Irving.

“I trust her. I vouch for her. She is as fine a mage as I am, and she knows the Fade. And the dangers and tricks of demons.”

Behind her, Morrigan heard the old man release a great deal of air through his nose, sounding not unlike a bellows.

“Very well,” he agreed—his mild displeasure silently and clearly aired. “Let us begin, with haste.”

Suddenly, she felt a tug on her arm. She looked down. The shrew had grabbed her hand in both of hers, almost massaging it with both thumbs. Wetness danced in her big green eyes and she gasped for air as she spoke.

“Please,” she said. “You must… please, my son… my son. Please, I beg you, save my son.”
Morrigan might have grimaced at the sight, had she her wits about her. But caught off-guard as such, her mouth only hung open, like some dying fish. Upon realizing this, she closed her lips tight and locked her jaw. She did not hiss at the woman. That was the most she could offer her.

~~~

She did not remember closing her eyes. But when she opened them, she stood in the Fade.

The screams were everywhere, and painful.

Connor, Father, Connor where are you, I see you witch, witch, witch...

Morrigan did not bend to them, or flinch. Demons preyed on weakness, and she had none of that.

The demon screamed so loud that in the physical world it might have shattered glass.

Instead, here, the scream brought to life a plane of existence before her—all at once, like the lighting of a candle in a pitch-black room.

This realm was Redcliffe Castle, though not. Morrigan stood now in the courtyard. The sky was sick and green, and there were no leaves on the trees there. Instead they were black and burned. The air was still, but cracks of sharp thunder and therumblings that followed told her a storm brewed in the distance. Surrounding her, crooked grey gables and tall stone towers stretched upwards to the wispy black clouds and cast dark shadows below that twisted and stretched to take the form of monsters.

Sat on a grey stone bench was a tall man, facing away from her towards the tree that grew in the courtyard’s center, though it was dead and barren like all the rest. He was dressed in elaborate and exquisite garb—white puffy sleeves and a tunic embroidered with florals both large and delicate, all in a blue that might have been rich and deep—though all colors in this plane appeared dull. He did not stir. He did not even seem to breathe.

Morrigan stepped closer, moving around the bench to peer at his face.

Blond-grey hair was combed neatly backwards from features that were stern and dignified—a strong nose, and a strong jaw, and a strong brow. But the Fade had given him a green pallor that made him look ill.

At first glance she might have elsewise thought him a king. But she knew the Arl of Redcliffe from his portraits, the shreds of which still lay in the castle halls, gathering dust on the floor.

He turned his head to look at her, no great interest in his eyes.

“Have you seen my son?” he asked, sounding far away.

She shook her head.

Something flickered on his face. Some…deep sadness. Then it left.

“Then leave me to the courtyard. The winds are favorable today, and the gardens are in bloom. Off with you, girl.”

She granted his request, heading up the stairs and across the terrace made of stones cracked and broken, some of which floated in midair around her and would sometimes crash to the ground and break into tiny pieces. Weeds grew in small forests and twisted vines hung down from the floor
A witch in the garden..., the air cried. A witch! A witch!

The vine tendrils stretched and grew and slithered quickly after her. Morrigan ran towards the nearest open door, but even as she sprinted it only seemed to move further from her view. A thorny tendril latched itself painfully onto her ankle and she cried out. Soon all her limbs and chest were wrapped in vines as they pulled her down, down, down beneath the stone and into the ground below.

Then, she was falling—falling forever, it seemed. Until after so long she landed, hard, on a cold stone floor. Nothing was broken or fractured, and she maintained full use of her limbs, though she felt sharp pain everywhere that she was capable of feeling it. She coughed and moaned groggily until she was able to find strength enough to push herself up off the ground and into a kneeling state.

Connor sat upon the edge of the bed, his legs swinging back and forth off the side. It was his room she had found herself in, she decided. The bed was smaller, and there was a large wooden rocking horse by the fire, carved by some expert craftsman and likely given to the boy as a gift by his wealthy parents. Still the Fade, she reminded herself, focusing on the bookshelves along the walls that floated and bobbed in the air.

His neck craned down to look at her, and his eyes studied hers intently. They were green, like his mother’s. Or were they black?

“What are you doing here?” he asked, sounding more like a young boy than she had ever heard him sound. But she would not let herself be fooled. She knew plenty enough about shape-changing. It was easier for the demon to play its games here. To hide behind the dream. In the Fade, the demons made their own rules.

“I was looking for you,” she told it.

“Oh. Well, here I am.”

“Here you are.”

They tested one another for quite a while, staring at the other until one broke first. It was not her.

“Time for you to go, I think. You’re boring me.” The demon yawned.

“I think not. Unhand the boy, and I may let you live.”

The demon furrowed its brow in feigned frustration.

“What are you talking about? You’re not making any sense. You’re an idiot.”

“Demon, my patience wears thin. Out there—the boy’s mother and uncle and the rest, they are weak, and they are timid, and they may be merciful, but I am not. If you press me further, I shall kill both you and the boy, and be done with it.” She stood.

The boy brought his legs up from over the edge of the bed and tucked them to his chest.

“You’re evil! You’re just an evil witch! Mother would tell me stories about your kind—you live in the swamps and eat little children and dance naked under the moonlight, drenched in the blood of good men!”
Morrigan laughed. “Is that so? If that’s what I do to good men, what do you think I’ll do to you?” She cocked her head.

For a moment, the demon just stared back at her with a frown. Then, the pain must have started. From its toes, rising, ever so slowly. Its eyes grew wide and terrified. Morrigan was almost to the neck when it shrieked a “Stop!” that sounded not at all like Connor.

She did not stop.

A shriek rang out again, just as painful as the one that had illuminated the castle. The walls and the floor shook, like an earthquake. Dust and debris fell around them.

“STOP IT STOP IT STOP!”

Connor began to bleed from the eyes.

The world went black again.

_Connor? Connor, where are you? WITCH! Father! What’s happening? WITCH! Father, help me! WITCH!_

Smoke formed plumes in the space around her feet. She was in an open, empty field that stretched to the horizon and far beyond. The demon of desire stood before her, in true form.

“Very well,” it spoke languidly, its long purple tongue slithering out of its lips and hissing in the wind. “We may speak now, face to face.”

“How did you come to possess the Arl’s son?” she asked it. “What deal did you make with him?”

The demon mocked sadness. “His poor father was sick. Dying. He prayed in his sleep. Prayed for his father to live. When his god didn’t answer him, I did. What his god couldn’t provide, I could.”

“His father sleeps in an endless coma,” Morrigan sneered.

“Alive.” The demon smiled. “I stabilized his condition. Assured that the poison that evil mage administered would never kill him. I saved him. He would have soon decayed and wasted away otherwise. The whole family, alive, thanks to me. Father and son, together again, in the Fade. And yet I receive no gratitude.” The demon even had the nerve to look offended.

“Yes,” Morrigan said. “How very strange indeed.”

“There. I have shed my layers. Now you must shed yours.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Why do you do their bidding?” it asked, circling around her. “Why put your life at stake for any them? What have they ever done for you? That blond-headed whore, the pretty idiot and his silly little adoptive family—none of them care a wit about you, do they?”

“The boy means nothing to you. Let me have him. And in return, I will give you power.”

Morrigan might have snickered at the attempt. “You are afraid for your life, and so you offer empty—”

“I know what is inside your book,” the demon lied.
Though Morrigan’s heart beat faster all the same.

“That is what you seek most in this world, is it not? Answers? Your mother’s well-kept secrets? I can reveal them to you, if you’d like.” The demon shrugged its feminine shoulders, and its fiery pink eyes surged with flame.

“I do not need your—”

“You will never find them otherwise. They will be lost to you forever. Your mother will murder you. She will rip your still-beating heart from your chest and feast upon it whilst you are still alive to watch. And you will die knowing that she won.”

Morrigan blinked at the demon. Once, twice. As if giving truth to the demon’s words, her heart began to beat so fast it felt as though it were being squeezed and crushed. She could see it. She could feel it. Her mother’s victory. Her death. Her complete and utter obsolescence. The endless Void. She gasped in horror. A salty tear fell into her mouth.

The demon’s sharp mouth drew to a smiling point.

No, she said. Even this, I am stronger than. She closed her eyes. Morrigan let herself feel the breeze of the Wilds through her hair, and on her skin, and remembered where she was, and where she had been—and where she still would go.

Her yellow eyes opened. Laced with fury, she shot the demon from her at least ten paces, and watched as it landed flat on its back.

In an instant, it was back on its feet, tssk-ing at her.

“Leave,” Morrigan demanded once more. “Or I kill you both. I will not say so again.”

“Leave?” it asked, batting its long, feathered lashes. “And go where?”

“I do not care.”

“With you, perhaps?” the demon ignored her. “Shall I live inside your pretty head instead?”

“Go back from whence you came. And nowhere else.”

The demon frowned. “It’s awfully dreary in the Fade. And me, alone, with no one there to—” it howled in pain as Morrigan began to rip the demon in two from the inside, pulling at its fibers and tendons and stealing away its life force. It screamed. But Morrigan did not relent.

YOU CAN’T YOU CAN’T YOU CAN’T YOU CAN’T

Blending with the demon’s screams, she heard the squeals of Connor as well—long and painful.

The demon’s once unblemished purple skin grew grey—drained and decaying as its body started to shrivel, and die. It gasped for breath.

Just before the last bit of color left the demon’s face, the Fade went black once more.

When Morrigan opened her eyes, she was back in Redcliffe, staring at the ceiling, and feeling a sharp pain on the back of her skull.

“Do we have a healer—a healer?”
Fingertips graced the spot that pained her, and she smacked them away, raising herself up on an elbow. The large circles of color that clouded her vision became smaller, and she could soon make out details—like the worried crease between Solena’s two finely groomed eyebrows. An imperfection, Morrigan thought. How very refreshing.

“You fell back out of your seat and hit your head,” she told her.

“Yes, thank you, I quite gathered as much,” Morrigan snapped.

“Don’t sit up so fast, you may have—”

“A concussion.” The old man was kneeling behind her and assessing her injury, without her permission. “Almost certainly. Look at me, dear. Can you focus your eyes on my finger, here?”

He held his pointer finger far too close to her face. She tried to do as he asked, though she wished very much to tell him where he might shove his finger instead.

“A mild concussion, perhaps. Hard to be sure. We shall see how you feel the remainder of the day. Solena, child, could you seek out Wynne for me? She will be better suited to treating our friend than I.”

Solena stood and left, without a word. Then, Irving’s voice lowered.

“Tell me now, and tell me true. What became of the boy?”

Morrigan could not respond. At first, because she kept forgetting what it was he had asked her. Then, because she realized she did not know the answer. The look he returned her was grave.

“Well?” came the harried voice Morrigan was expecting. “What happened? Wh-what did…what did you do? Is he…i-is he…?”

Irving leveled his gaze and breathed deep. “We do not know, my lady.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? She was there! What—what did you see? What happened? What has happened to my son?” Her last question came as a sob. Snot pooled around her nose. The Bann steadied her, and tried to hold her close, though she made every effort to pry him off.

Morrigan shook her head at the sight, her eyes grown wide. “I…I don’t…I…”

The Arlessa seethed, and spun quickly to the doorway, where the bound mage sat—spine straight and frozen to the spot.

“Lower your ward! Lower it! I want to see my son!”

He gulped and stammered. “My lady, I don’t know if that’s wise, we can’t know for certain—”

“Lower the fucking ward!”

The room erupted in a commotion then. Irving stood and walked to the Arlessa, adding his voice to the rest. Solena had since returned with Wynne following behind, who walked to her at once and began saying things to her in some intolerable cooing voice. Morrigan did not particularly care what they were.

“I think your son is alive,” she said to the room, though none heard her. Only Wynne, maybe, and she did nothing but stare back at her, confused.
“I think your son—” the old bitty attempted to shush her for some inane reason. Morrigan decided to just speak louder. “I think your son is alive!”

That, the Arlessa heard. Her eyes met Morrigan’s through the shuffle of bodies. Some of the room grew quiet.

“I think you should lower the ward.” Morrigan nodded, as though agreeing with herself. She realized then that her throat felt very dry.

Irving furrowed his brow. “Just how…certain of this would you say you are? I should not have to remind you that lives are at stake.”

Morrigan hissed. “I have no certainty to offer you. Only what I believe. What I met in the Fade was a demon. It does not deal in certainty.”

“But the demon is…gone? No more?” he asked.

“It is either gone, or dead,” said Morrigan. “For the boy’s sake, we should hope for the former.”

The room was entirely still, until Irving gave a single nod to the mage in the corner. With a wave of his hand and a shimmering noise, the magic barring the doorway evaporated. Yet still none moved.

The Bann swallowed. “Isolde, I will go ahead first.”

“You will do no such thing. He is my son.”

“Please. Follow just behind me if you will. But let me be the first. In case…”

Isolde shook her head a somber no. “He is either dead, or he is alive. Either way, I will know. I will see it with my own eyes. And you are a fool to think you could keep me from that.” She walked forward through the door and out of sight. Following a pause, the Bann continued after her in stride.

The old woman helped her to stand, guiding her to a sitting room with a large couch for her to lay upon. Morrigan resented the aid but did not fight her. She left the room and returned some moments later with a small bowl of water and a towel—drenching the towel and wringing it out before laying it on Morrigan’s eyes and forehead. The relief then was almost as strong as when she felt gentle healing magic working against the back of her skull. Morrigan must have sighed, or moaned, or something else utterly embarrassing. Though she did not have much time to feel thus ashamed before the old woman had left the room and shut the door.

Years could have passed then. Morrigan did not care. No sooner than she was left alone with the cool towel over her eyes had she fallen into her first dreamless sleep in months. She woke at the sound of the door opening again, and a shuffling to her right that told her a chair had been moved. She thought it might be the old woman once again to check on her, but it was not.

“Here, drink.”

She lifted the towel up over her eyes to see a flask offered to her. Alistair looked down at his extended hand expectantly.

She sat up, took it and drank without question, emptying the cannister in long gulps. She was grateful for the water, but would have appreciated a strongwine just the same. When it was all gone, she wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist and returned the flask.

Her eyes darted between his face and the cracking fireplace he looked into so intently, waiting for
him to speak. It was quite a long while before he did.

“He’s alive. He’s fine.”

Morrigan swallowed, then nodded, turning her gaze to her lap.

“Don’t take it personally if Isolde doesn’t thank you. She’s not really the type. Even if she were, she’s far too busy with Connor now to pay anyone else any mind.”

“I do not need her thanks,” Morrigan muttered.

“No, I know you don’t.”

He said nothing further. When Morrigan risked a glance over, she found his face and mannerisms indecipherable. He could not even really look at her.

She cleared her throat.

He jolted, as if woken from some trance. “I—I’m sorry, I’ll let you rest.” He stood, returning the chair to where he had moved it from.

“Please. If you wouldn’t mind.”

He turned, and this time, seemed to almost force himself to look at her. For one moment, then another. Then he nodded, curtly, turned and left.

Morrigan did rest after that, and well. It was late morning when she woke again. White sunlight streamed through the arched window, and the fire had long since died. She turned her head on her pillow to study the ashes for a long while until she smelled the bacon, and her mouth began to salivate. Groggily and rubbing the grain from her eyes, she stood, and left the room towards the main hall.

Looking upon it now, Morrigan wondered if she had in fact been asleep for many days. It was not the same room that she had left. It had been swept, tidied, and far better lit than it had been before. It bustled with servants, milling about, cleaning and serving plates of food.

Many were already awake, it seemed. The Arlessa sat with her son at the far table, a fool smile gracing her face as she ran her fingers through Connor’s copper hair and spoke to him in soft tones. The boy saw Morrigan standing in the doorway, and his green eyes regarded her curiously.

That prompted Morrigan to turn away quickly and sit at the other table, across from Alistair and the sister who sat at a measured distance from each other, but seemingly still eating together and conversing occasionally and amiably. Next to them sat the dwarf merchant and his son, also eating away with contented smiles on their faces. Leliana generously spread butter and honey on a biscuit while Alistair tore a piece of bacon with his teeth. He pushed a platter towards Morrigan as she sat. It overflowed with rich red fruits and soft cheeses. A servant brought her a tiny cup—too small even for drinking—that Morrigan looked at confusedly. The woman then produced an egg from her apron, rubbing it clean and placing it in the cup, before setting a small spoon beside it. She then left, saying nothing. Morrigan stared at it harder, as if willing the answer to come to her.

The sister reached over the table, grabbing the spoon and knocking the top of the eggshell off with one deft stroke before sitting back down and turning her attention back to her own plate. Morrigan said nothing, but was silently grateful.

Soon she was handed more food and drink than she knew she could possibly eat, or for that matter,
had ever seen in one place in her entire life. Amber ale in a mug larger than her head, biscuits in an unappetizing looking grey sauce that Alistair enthusiastically told her was gravy, black blood-sausage, hotcakes with apples and butter and apple-butter. Morrigan saw Alistair dipping his bacon in the egg-cup, and so she followed suit. Then the servant only brought another egg to replace the last, and Morrigan glared at her irritably. Wynne soon appeared over her right shoulder and gave her hot water in a cup with lemon and honey, and told her to drink. Morrigan thought it unnecessary, but did so anyway.

Morrigan wondered aloud where the servants had all come from, and Alistair answered that the Arlessa had sent them back to the village weeks ago when it was finally deemed safe again and had called them all back in the middle of the night. She then asked after the Qunari, to which Alistair replied with a shrug that he took his meal in the kitchens somewhere, and seemed to have low tolerance for the newly populated castle. Morrigan only wished she had thought of that as well.

“Won’t the templars take the boy away, then?” she asked, thinking of Connor’s unsettling gaze but not daring to look behind her again.

Alistair chewed and swallowed. “Yes. Keep your voice down, though. Isolde won’t hear it. She screamed at Irving all night. I thought she’d woken the whole castle.”

Morrigan scoffed. “What did she expect? The mercy they did her was not killing the boy. It’s more than I would have gotten.”

“She knows he has to leave. I think she’s even accepted it. It’s his father she’s angry about. She wants Connor to be here when he wakes. Irving won’t relent, though.”

Morrigan bit into a biscuit with cheese. “And the mage? The other one? To be executed, I presume?”

He shook his head, and his voice grew even lower. “No. Irving’s denied her that, too. He’ll be taken back to the Circle as well. Made tranquil.”

Morrigan took note of Alistair’s somewhat distracted gaze. She soon found its focus: towards the very end of their table sat Solena, wide awake and fresh-faced, with an attentive Bann Teagan sitting at her side. She had her hair pulled from her face in a loose braid, showing the pink blush of her cheeks at whatever the Bann’s sweet words were. Morrigan thought he might start feeding her from his hands, from the way he leered. Clearly Alistair thought the same. He gripped his ale tight as he drank from it.

Soon, after they were all stuffed full and the servants at long last began taking platters away, Solena and the Bann both rose and moved to stand behind Morrigan, to her left.

“Good morrow, friends. You all slept well, I hope,” the Bann greeted them.

The dwarf merchant looked up at him with a toothy grin. “Like babes, milord, like babes!”

“Excellent, excellent. When you all are finished with your meals, there is something more I would discuss with you. But I would not do it here, where…certain ears might hear us.” His eyes gestured to where Connor sat across the room.

He took them to the Arl’s study. The room was small in comparison and they all stood rather close together but it was comfortably far enough removed from the great hall. Teagan stood behind the great wooden desk, with his hands resting on its surface, though he did not sit in the chair.

“My nephew is safe, thanks to you. I have no words with which to thank you all. Nor, I fear, can I
offer you what it is you seek. But, I know who can. My brother still sleeps. The demon is gone, and its hold on this village thus lifted, but along with it, the protection it granted Eamon.”

“What do you mean?” Alistair asked anxiously.

“Our healer who sits by his bedside called for me in the night. His condition is no longer stable, yet the poison still holds him in its unrelenting grasp. First Enchanter Irving has offered some of his mages with knowledge of healing magic to remain here and help keep my brother alive, but he is worsening. That much, they tell me, is now unpreventable. I have not told Isolde the truth of this yet. It is the last thing she needs to hear now.”

“What can we do?” Solena asked.

The Bann hesitated. “You…you may think me a fool. Truly, I think myself one. But when I say I have reached the very end of my rope…” he closed his eyes. “Isolde believed…believes, that the cure to my brother’s ailment may be found in more…unconventional methods. Religious ones. I speak of the Urn.”

Morrigan shook her head. She had a keen urge now to seek the solace that the Qunari had found, rather than hear one word more. Even Solena looked desperately uncertain as she looked between Alistair and the Bann.

“Forgive me, I just…” Solena began. “Truly, is there nothing else?”

The Bann raised his head. Then shook it back and forth, grimly.

“We’ll do it,” said Alistair after a resolute pause. “We’ll find the Urn, if that’s what it’ll take.”

Morrigan scoffed and walked to the corner of the room. She was ignored, it seemed.

Admittedly, she knew little of religion, to her great fortune. But she knew of Andraste’s sacred ashes, oh yes. She remembered the parade that day—the one where she had been gifted her mirror. A merchant peddling what he claimed was the cure to all ailments: the ashen remains of Holy Andraste, rediscovered by man and now sold by the pouch for ten sovereigns each. Even as a girl, she knew a con when she heard one.

The Bann shut his eyes. “You grant me more hope than I could ever have expected. Thank you. Isolde has sent knights to Denerim, seeking out the aid of one Brother Genitivi, who keeps a home there. That may be a wise place to begin your search.”

“I’m familiar with his work,” said Solena, bright-eyed. “He’s a great scholar.”

Morrigan doubted that.

“Such may be,” said Alistair, “but we’ll never make it into the city. Loghain’s placed a bounty on Warden heads. Even if we make it through the front gates, we’ll be in the belly of the beast. Surrounded by Loghain’s men.”

“I can get us into the city,” spoke Leliana. “No need to concern yourself with that. As for remaining safe once we’re through the gates, well. We’ll simply need to keep our heads down.”

That seemed to be the end of that discussion.

“Unfortunately, he is the only lead I can offer you,” said Teagan. “He has studied the Urn of Sacred Ashes and its possible whereabouts for years. But the trail has since gone cold. We have received no
ravens from our knights abroad, nor anywhere else, as you well know. We cannot know if this is Loghain’s interception, or…something else. If you can find out what has become of our men, I would be most grateful.”

Many thank you-s and gratitude-s were thrown about then, and once Morrigan had heard so many polite formalities that she thought she was like vomit, she left the room. To Denerim, then, was their next destination. Morrigan thought they’d have a better time stopping the Blight if they all threw themselves from the top of Redcliffe Castle, but she was not asked her opinion.

The mages and their templar guardsmen left before they did. Jowan, clapped in irons, and Connor quite nearly pulled from his weeping mother’s arms. Solena stood next to her on the ramparts and watched them leave, her face a blank gaze. Morrigan passing wondered how she felt about her friend’s impending fate, but dared not ask. Based on the horrid man they had met in the tower, execution would have been kinder. The First Enchanter, before seating himself upon his horse, threw his former charge a warm smile and a wave, but it was not returned to him. At that, Solena turned on her heel and retreated back inside the castle. Morrigan followed soon after.

They packed their things and the food they could carry on their horses and left the following day, horses’ hooves trotting loudly over the drawbridge as the castle faded into the deep morning fog behind them.

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a month. Add this fic to your alerts so you know when I post!

Comments and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)
Zevran I

Chapter Notes

***CONTENT WARNING: Mention of suicide/suicidal thoughts. Brief, semi-graphic description of gore. DISCRETION ADVISED.***

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ZEVRAN

The Fereldan winds were fair and low, and carded through his hair like the fingers of a courteous lover.

It was the kindest thing he could say, truly. The rest of the country smelled of rotting piss and wet dog, and oftentimes it was difficult to tell the men from their hounds. The women he liked, however. They were bold, and harsh, and utterly brutal, and a glorious sight for travel-weary eyes.

This one was one such woman. Rheina. He had been lucky to cross her path at the inn in Greenbanks. In his bed that night as he had trailed a finger across her naked spine, she had confided to him that she was an aspiring actress, traveling on the road in a company of mummers and saving what coin she could for passage on a ship that might one day take her to Val Royeaux. Her will and determination only made her more attractive, and when she had demonstrated that she could cry on command, he had offered her the job on the spot. Lure them away from the main road and lead them to me, he had instructed, and make sure they are none the wiser. Ten sovereigns he had offered her up front, and another ten once they were finished. She had never seen a gold sovereign in her life until then. He remembered the way her eyes lit up, as she had taken the first from his hand.

He enjoyed her. In many ways, she reminded him of himself from back when he was no taller than a tree stump—from before the Crows, and then just after.

She had not even seemed to notice his pointed ears. If anything, they excited her. He remembered the flat pad of her tongue against one, as she had twirled her hips atop him more deftly than he had expected from a miller’s daughter. Full of surprises, she was. Though he hoped only pleasant ones.

He spared a glance up from the tiny griffon he had been whittling away at to the rise where she laid in wait. She sat upon a rock, cheek in hand. He hoped she did not fall asleep on watch. It would be his fault, after all, having worn her out well and good the night prior.

Behind the rise, he and a small company of Crows waited beneath the shadows of tall, rocky outcroppings. No faces there were overly familiar to him. He watched them all—watched the way an elf with angry eyes nocked her bow; the way a gruff, bearded man sharpened his axe; the way a blond man took a piss against a tree. A sigh let loose, and Zevran turned back to the wooden griffon in his hands.

He had never killed a Grey Warden before. Perhaps he would today. Perhaps he would even kill two. He supposed he would return to Antiva a Warden-killer, then. Taliesen would grin—sharp, white teeth from ear to ear—and raise a glass of fine red in his name. He would be named Master,
and the Crows would send him to kill kings and princes and magisters.

Either way, the dirt beneath his feet would run red today.

He made one final stroke of his knife on the griffon’s mane, then blew off the dust, holding it out in front of him to admire his work.

Gravel crunched loudly to his right, and he listened to the large man who had just finished relieving himself approach for many moments until the dust made by his boots created a thin smoke near to where Zevran’s feet dangled off the rock he sat upon.

“We’ve been out here half a day, Arainai,” he made a wet, spiteful sound of gathering saliva in his mouth, then expelled it onto the ground. “Are they coming or aren’t they?”

Zevran shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps.”

The ugly man scrunched his face up very small, making his brow hard and angry in a rather sad attempt to look intimidating.

“What you mean by that?” he asked.

Zevran raised his head, bothering now to meet his eyes with a level gaze.

“Perhaps they will. Or perhaps they will not, and in such case, you will have benefited from being taught the art of patience.”

The man took a step too close, and then the knife once at his hip was pointed in the direction of Zevran’s neck, in what Zevran supposed was some form of threat. The man’s face turned red.

“You have my men out in the middle of nowhere in the blazing sun, getting heat stroke, with our arses hanging out in the—”

The man was so inept that Zevran had to gently push the knife he had long since pressed up against his groin so that he would even know it was there. His eyes turned wide and his throat bobbed as he swallowed.

“They are my men,” Zevran said lowly, “and if you threaten me again, you’ll have a bloody gash between your legs where your cock should be.”

He began breathing sharply through his nose, so that—if it were not already—his anger towards Zevran might be known. Resignedly, he lowered and sheathed his knife, and turned and left without another word.

Zevran’s jaw clenched as he put his own knife away. He had only himself to blame. He had selected his own troop of men, after all. That one was Fereldan, and knew the country, and headed a company of men who loved him. He had seemed like an attractive option at the time. He should have known his mistake by the look on Taliesen’s face when they were lined up before the Grandmaster.

It mattered not now, anyhow. What was done was done. Now, they laid in wait. His information was good, that he knew. The Wardens traveled from Redcliffe on their way to Denerim and would take the North Road. The West Road would be closed to them, what with the darkspawn about. Even Grey Wardens wouldn’t risk the horde. Or so he hoped. He had never met one before—perhaps they were all as dumb as a bag of rocks.

He glanced towards the sun, up the rise again towards his little actress. He peered and squinted,
until the rock she sat upon came into focus at last, and he saw that she was gone.

Zevran froze, and thought. She would not run and leave them. She would not. He was certain of it. Well, he was reasonably certain. He had only known her for one night, after all.

The unpleasant blond man approached him again, looking up at the rise just as Zevran was.

“Your peasant girl has flew the coop, Arainai. With Crow gold in her pockets.”

Zevran shook his head, standing from his rock.

“No. They’re here. We missed the signal.”

The man sputtered, drawing his sword. “What?” he spat again. “We were supposed to take the Warden by surprise, not the other bloody way around.”

Zevran ignored him, whistling and ordering the company to their positions. As they moved, he stood and did not even see them all. He looked past their harried shuffling and scurrying about. He looked past the hills and rocks and cliffs and dirt, all the way to moments from now, when a Grey Warden sword was buried in his belly, his blood leaking out onto Ferelden soil. He closed his eyes and breathed in the air one last time. So it goes.

He turned, stood by the wagon at where the stone path ended, and awaited fate to claim him.

For a long time there was silence, and the wind blowing. Birds flew from a tree just past where the road curved to the right. The angry lumbering man shuffled anxiously behind him to the left, from foot to foot, gripping his blade tighter.

“Be quiet,” Zevran hissed.

“I’m not bloody moving!” he whispered angrily back. Zevran was sure from his tone that he did not even realize he was lying.

“You are breathing,” said Zevran instead. “I cannot hear myself think.”

The archers above them knocked their arrows, pulling their bows taut.

Rheina darted around the corner, running to the wagon as fast as she could. She met Zevran’s eyes, and gave a sly smile. He returned one.

Then, like dwarven clockwork, around the bend came the company of Wardens. He had only time enough to notice that there were far more than two of them before the Crows on the rise cut the rope, and to the ground behind the Wardens, falling maybe fifteen feet, a tree came crashing down, its trunk wide as a horse was tall. It cut them off from behind, trapping them at the road’s end with cliffs surrounding them on all sides.

As soon as they realized what was happening, their company moved to scatter. Before they could, the archers flanking from above sent loose their arrows in a terrifying flurry, filling the sky above like drops of rain.

Though moments before the arrows found their targets, something like an explosion set off from the center of the Wardens’ party. It grew quickly from its source until it formed a bubble which encased the lot of them. The arrows met with it and bounced off its surface like stone pebbles off a brick building.
The man behind him stepped forward in incredulity. Rheina looked on in wonder. Zevran’s breath faltered.

At the center of the bubble stood a woman. A Warden, from the colors of her armor. She held her arms out from her sides, and looked as though she were straining to hold up the weight of the barrier.

“Mages,” he swore, and cursed the lot of them.

As no other alternative faced him, he unsheathed his daggers.

The Wardens rushed them. From behind, another mage stepped in front of the last, raising her hands up high. The archers above them on the cliffs on either side all rose into the air at once. Their bodies contorted painfully—their screams gnarled and broken. When they crashed to the ground, the cliffs went silent, and none rose again.

“Rheina, run!” he ordered the girl, once he saw that she had not left. But he had no time to see if she obeyed him.

On him at once was the other Warden, bringing his sword down from above his head as Zevran dodged to the right. The man swung up, and Zevran trapped his blade between his two daggers, forcing it to the left as he kicked out the man’s knee, tripping him. Once he was on the ground Zevran’s blade slashed at him, meeting his cheek and drawing blood across the gash. He kicked at the man’s hand, disarming him and sending his blade across the dirt.

Screams rang out from his men. Zevran, unthinking, glanced up. A lumbering beast in armor, tall as two men, was cutting through all of them, impaling his long blade through one only to rip it out and cut the next in half at the waist. Zevran felt the blood leave his face.

He saw the motion out of his periphery to his right. Rheina sprinted for the cliff. Then she turned back, only briefly, to see if she was followed. The arrow found her heart as soon as she turned. The second found her head.

Flashes attacked him. The smell of leather; of semen and sweat and Taliesen’s skin. A woman dead and bleeding on the ground. The warmth of her kiss, and the chill of his own cruel laughter, filling his head until there was no room for the rest.

Dizzily, he turned back towards the ground, where he had left the Warden. He had only time to see that he was no longer there before the fist met his jaw, and the darkness came for him at last.

~~~

Waking again was unexpected.

When he did wake, he did not see what he thought he might. If it were the Void that he had been sent to—which was most likely—he expected there would be nothing much at all. And he thought the eternal torture he was always hearing about might have started by then. If, by some miracle or terrible misjudgment of the Maker’s doing, he were to wind up in the Golden City, Zevran thought there might be more gold. Beautiful music, wine. More naked women, for certain.

Then again, all he knew of religion was what little he had heard from the women of the whorehouse he was raised in, so perhaps his expectations of the afterlife were rather unfounded to begin with.

His head ached all over—from the connection of the man’s fist with his jaw, and from the back of it likely being knocked against the rock he was currently propped up against, sitting with his legs out in
front of him. His arms were bound to his sides, and his hands were bound together and tied to the
ropes around his feet. He supposed he should be flattered that his captors were so frightened of him
to make doubly sure that he would not craft an escape.

Groggily, his eyes fluttered open, and a tall woman came into focus. Or, at least she was tall from
where Zevran sat beneath her. His eyes raked from her toes, to round hips and breasts, to the top of
her gorgeous blond head. Perhaps he had not missed the mark after all, and he had found himself in
the Golden City indeed.

“He’s awake,” she called over her shoulder.

A man—the one who had hit him—stood from a rock behind her, a large bandage now covering
his cheek.

“Good. Let’s bloody get this over with.”

They all began to gather around him. There were seven of them, if he could still rely on himself to
count properly. All of them wore a similar look on their face—exhaustion, irritation, and skepticism,
in equal parts.

He did not know what started it, but he found himself laughing. It started as a dry laugh—perhaps
from the heat, or the fight, or the blood that he still tasted in his mouth. But it soon developed into a
crazed fit of giggles, as the gathered crowd watched and waited and did not know at all what to
make of him.

“Does he even know he’s awake?” said a voice.

“I’m not sure,” said another.

Zevran sighed. When he spoke, his voice came gravely and tired. “You must understand. I did not
expect to wake up at all. That I am still alive has come as quite a shock, please excuse me.”

“Who hired you?” the woman in front asked—abruptly, and far too loud for his aching headache.

The man to her right scoffed. “Please. There’s only one man in the country who wants Grey
Wardens dead. This isn’t a mystery.”

Zevran rolled his head around to look at the two of them as best he could manage in his state. “Oh,
yes, but of course, it was Loghain. Loghain hired me, though, you must forgive me, I did not know
Wardens looked as you do, or I should have thought a bit harder before accepting my contract.”

The woman did not blush, or sigh, or berate him. She had quite an utter lack of reaction in any
capacity, which only made him pout.

“Are we going to kill him now or later?” asked the man next to her.

“Ah, you are feeling...left out? Do not be so cross, my good, handsome man. I would gladly share
your bed instead. In...exchange for my life, of course.” Zevran grinned at him.

The man narrowed eyes of honey. “Do you think this is helping your case?”

Zevran frowned. “I don’t think it’s hurting it.”

“It is.”

The woman in front pursed her pretty lips. “You’re awfully eager to give out information. Aren’t
assassins supposed to be rather secretive in that respect?"

He tsked. “You ask me for information, and when I answer, you say I am too eager. I say this game of yours is rather rigged.”

“Game? You do realize your life is at stake.”

“All the best games are thus.”

A woman from the back of the crowd stepped forward—pretty and delicate, with fiery orange hair and eyes of blue steel.

“He is an Antivan Crow,” she announced, an Orlesian accent blending smoothly with Fereldan for a result sweet and lovely. “They are the world’s deadliest assassins, feared by all.” She paused, raking her eyes over him in a disinterested manner.

“Clearly they did not send their best man.”

Zevran leaned to get a better look at she who had sussed him out so cleverly. “I did not know such loveliness and cruelty could coexist. Tell me, dear girl, how it is you know a Crow when you see one.”

“Dark wings in the sky are not so hard to spot when you pay attention,” she said flatly. Zevran eyed her carefully.

“Feared by all? How come I’ve never heard of them?” asked the Warden whose distaste for him only seemed to grow with each passing moment.

“Truly? You have...never heard of the Crows before?” Zevran asked him, only mildly insulted by the notion.

“No. Here in Ferelden when we want somebody dead, we just go to war. It’s simpler that way. And louder. With a lot more death and carnage.”

“Not so. Or I would never have been hired to kill you,” Zevran noted.

“And you make a habit of giving up your employers, do you?” asked another woman with raven-black hair and eyes of yellow.

Zevran looked from person to person. “In your intelligent opinion, would you not say I have…failed my contract?”

“I should say you have.”

“Then Loghain is no longer my employer,” he said with a shrug.

“Won’t he want you dead, for failing him?” asked the blond woman again.

“Loghain? I would not know; you know him far better than I do. Now, assuming that in this hypothetical scenario of yours, I survive my encounter with you exquisite people, then the Crows will want me dead almost certainly. Unless I can somehow wittily charm them into taking me back; though I have been trying to charm the Antivan Crows now for nearly twenty years, and it has admittedly never yielded me much of anything except a few lashes on my back.”

The few of them eyed each other, sharing looks that Zevran did not bother to try and decipher.
“Why will they want you dead?” asked the beguiling Orlesian.

“The Crows are not ones for second chances. If you fail your mission, it ought to be because you died trying. If not, then clearly you did not try hard enough, and should therefore die for your incompetence.”

“And did you?” asked the blond.

“Did I what?”

“Try hard enough.”

Zevran smiled, looking down to study the rope that bound his hands. “I suppose that is up for you to decide.”

His eyes caught a flash of red, then. To his right, on the path up the cliff, lay Rheina—drained of blood and white as a sheet. A startled look remained frozen on her face, brown eyes wide with fear. Zevran felt a pang of hurt, and his face grew numb.

“That one was only an actress,” he told them. “Do Grey Wardens slaughter civilians now?”

“She was armed. She tried to throw a knife at my head,” said the Orlesian, not unkindly.

“I told her to run,” he said thoughtfully, sounding distant.

He looked between them then, noting the great beast of a man—the one who had cut down so many—looming in the back. A qunari, Zevran thought. And a freakish, hornless one at that. “I suppose all of my men are dead.”

The blond woman nodded.

Zevran frowned. “Surely not all of you are Grey Wardens. I was only told to expect two.”

“No,” said the handsome man, with gritted teeth. “Just the two. Your Loghain killed the rest of us.”

“My Loghain?” Zevran scoffed. He remembered his brief meeting with the man. Short, and to the point. He had hardly even looked up from his desk. It was his lackey—the one with the ugly, crooked nose—who he had dealt with. Unpleasant man. And his breath smelled sour. “I never heard of the man until just a month ago. I have no love for him, no more than I have love for any of you—no offense.”

“None taken.”

“In fact, I am prepared to say, transactional relationship notwithstanding, you all seem far more personable, and wholly more attractive.”

“It’s transactional no longer, of course,” noted the Orlesian.

“It is as you say. No, I will not see any of that coin. Nor will the Crows, for that matter.”

“Won’t they send someone else in your stead?”

“Eventually? Eh…perhaps. It is hard to say. This contract was not like many others I have taken.”

“Why is that?” The man asked.
“No one wanted it, for one. I was the only volunteer.”

“Why did no one want it?”

“We Crows do a lot of killing. Innocents, not-so-innocents. A lot of greedy politicians and businessmen. I cannot remember the last time a Crow was asked to kill a Grey Warden. I’m sure it’s happened, of course, but still at first listen, even for a Crow, the idea was…how you say, eh…taboo. Loghain may have all of Ferelden convinced of Grey Warden treachery, but the rest of the world is not so easily swayed.”

“Assassins with a moral code?” he asked, unconvinced.

“I would not say that. Grey Wardens are feared warriors, renowned through Thedas. Perhaps they all quaked in their boots at the mere thought of you.” Zevran coughed, clearing his throat. “Also, eh…the contract did not pay enough for the trouble.”

“So why did you take it?” inquired the woman-Warden.

Zevran raised his chin up high. “My reasons are my own.”

They did not seem to care much for that. After some incoherent mumbling, the handsome man spoke again.

“You intercepted us on the road. You knew we were on our way to Denerim. Does Loghain?”

Zevran frowned and thought for a moment. “I do not see why he would. Though I cannot speak for him with any degree of certainty.”

“Why would that be? Didn’t you work for him? You didn’t report back what you learned?”

“No. I work for the Crows, and myself. It was my responsibility to kill you, not to inform his war effort. In short, Loghain had his spies, and I had my own.” Zevran smiled. “Mine were better.”

“Where are those spies now?”

“Look around you.”

The man shuffled, squinting his eyes in thought. “So, as far as you know, you’re the only person alive who’s aware that we’re headed into the city?”

“That would be accurate, sí.”

His hands found the hilt of the blade at his side. Zevran watched the motion, still as a painting. “Well, in that case, I think I’ve heard enough.”

“Wait,” the voice came from the blond woman, who still stood with her arms crossed, considering Zevran carefully.

“Where will you go?” she asked. “Assuming my friend here doesn’t kill you.”

Zevran furrowed his brow in thought. Truthfully, he had not considered it until this very moment.

“I suppose I would have to go into hiding. Though, who knows how long that will last with the Crows at my heels.”

“Why not try to finish the job? Fulfill the contract before it’s too late?”
He blinked at her.

“I think…not.”

“Why?”

“Why?” he laughed—a single loud and boisterous sound. “Eh…the Crows and I…I think perhaps it is time we went our separate ways.”

“Does all the killing get old after a while?”

Zevran swallowed. His eyes found a particularly interesting-looking rock in the distance. He breathed.

“Never.”

“Then what? Does the job not pay enough?”

“Far from it. The Crows supply everything. Gold, wine, women, men—whatever it is you happen to fancy. As for me, let us just say we have creative differences, and leave it at that.”

“He meant to die on this mission.” The Orlesian had been staring at him for quite some time, though not in the seductive, alluring way that he might have liked. Zevran gave her a cutting glare in return.

“Didn’t you?” she prodded him.

“We all die,” he told her. “Some of us sooner than others. I made no plans. My death will come when it comes.”

“But you expected it,” stated the blond.

Zevran did not have much of an answer for her. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged noncommittally, diverting his attention back to the tree line.

“And you wouldn’t attempt to finish your contract because you no longer have any desire to work for the Crows.”

“That is more or less the gist, yes,” he replied.

She continued to look at him with a terrible scrutinizing gaze that he could only shrink under. He could see deep thought on her face, but knew not the subject of it. Admittedly, it made him impatient. A part of him wished the man to his left would draw his blade and end it, so as the waiting might end.

“If no one else will say it, I will,” said the pretty Orlesian. “He should come with us.”

“What? No,” Zevran said quickly, not even realizing that the man with a hand on his blade had said the same thing in unison. Zevran laughed, albeit a bit nervously.

“I thank you for your kind offer, but, ah…I do not think that is wise.”

“Why not? You have nowhere to go. You’ll be on the run, dodging the Crows. Traveling with Wardens grants you a degree of protection.”

Zevran made a dismissive sound with his lips. “Another bullseye, more like. Loghain seemed like quite the temperamental fellow. Not someone I would much like to anger any more than I already
have.”

“I might note that you’re not exactly in a position to bargain,” said the blond. “We could simply kill you, instead.”

“You will have to give me a moment to decide which it is that I would prefer,” he told her with a roll of his eyes.

The woman smirked. “Alright. Take your moment.”

He gaped at her briefly, then quickly shut his mouth. True to her word, she gestured that the company turn on their heels and move at a distance, giving him his silence.

No doubt death was what he deserved. Were he in their shoes, he would have killed him already. Now that they seemed disinclined to do so, he found himself in a rather rough spot. Fighting for noble causes had not ever been his strong suit. He knew the type of man he was. He was an opportunist. Fate offered him a way out, he would take it. That was how things used to be. And until only recently, fate had been kind.

The silver of the man’s blade caught a glint in the sun. Zevran considered how it would feel when it met with the flesh of his neck.

He rather liked living. Always had. Though death had never scared him so much. It was more… something to avoid, if possible. How soon had he realized he intended to die, after accepting the contract? As soon as he had done it? The week after? Last night, as he lay naked in a bed, staring at the ceiling? Or far, far, far before?

He frightened himself; the sneakiness with which he had decided on suicide. He had never been so crafty with a kill as when he was plotting his own death.

Perhaps he should not die. Perhaps that was his punishment. If he had any honor left in him at all, he should bear it, and live.

He swallowed, and nodded, once. “Alright,” he called out, as the lot of them turned their heads from where they stood and argued in hushed tones. “So be it. I shall follow you to war, then. If you still agree to have me. If not, well. This is rather awkward.”

The man, at least, seemed displeased. Forcefully, he pushed his blade back into its sheath, and stormed off in another direction in something of a tantrum. The rest seemed to largely ignore him.

The raven-haired woman looked to the blond. “I should say that if you agree to this fool endeavor, do not be surprised when he slips into our tents under cover of darkness and slits our throats to the bone,” she told her.

“My lovely woman, do not worry so. If I were to have the pleasure of finding myself in your tent, I should like to think I would seduce you first.” Zevran gave her a smolder. She recoiled in seeming disgust.

The Orlesian approached him then, cautiously. She kneeled in front of him and pulled out a knife, seeing to his rope.

“Do you have a name?” she asked him as she began to cut him free.

“Given to me by my mother,” he told her with a grin. She did not find it so amusing. “It is Zevran Arainai,” he added thereafter.
“A nobleman?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

He laughed. “I never knew Orlesians to be such comedians! No, no. House Arainai. A Crow House. That is all.”

She nodded once to show her understanding.

“You should give me your name, my sweet orange-haired temptress. We are to be traveling companions, after all,” he cooed at her.

The woman sliced through the last of his ropes. Zevran set to massaging his wrists. She stood over him.

“If you are not dead by tomorrow, then I will consider it.”

“Dead? Why might I be dead?”

“That depends on you. And whether or not you drive me to kill you in the night.”

Zevran did not have a retort to that. She turned. The rest had already begun to head up over the rise.

“Move,” she demanded over her shoulder. He stood quickly and followed, only sparing one glance back for the dead girl on the cliff. He had met her, and bed her, and paid her, and put her here today. And now the wolves would have her.

That was what he thought of, lying in his tent that night. The wolves and dogs and birds that would eat her corpse. It was all he thought of. His belly full—the fire warm. The wolves that ate her. Until she was pieces, and until she was nothing at all. Young, and beautiful, and bright, and gone. After, he slept. And the next morning, he would wake. And eventually, he would not bother to think of her at all.

Chapter End Notes

I am rachelamberish on tumblr.

Chapter updates, with occasional exceptions, come once a week. Bookmark this fic or subscribe to me to get alerted every time I post!

Feel free to discuss in comments. Feedback and questions always welcome. Thanks for reading. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!