Their Lady in Chains
by Trewestriandta

Summary

When Corypheus used the Orb to try and break open the Veil, his actions had wide reaching consequences. But while Thedas is scrambling to figure out how to seal the Breach, Dawn Wesson is trying to figure out how a modern girl from Earth got dragged into Thedas and thrust into the middle of events that will shape the future of this new world. Dawn bears the burden of knowing what is to come and has to decide just what has to stay the same and what absolutely has to change. But this world is not the narrow confines of the game she remembers, and when things are vastly different from what she knows, Dawn has to play it by ear, only this time there are no save files or restarts.

Notes

Dragon Age schnazz doesn't belong to me (outside of the original characters I create)
This work is also not even a little bit beta'd so I apologize profusely for all the 'hte' you may find.
Also, if anyone really truly desperately WANTS to beta it, I am very bribable.

No clue what my update schedule will be at this time, aiming for once a week (please don't hold me to this, I will likely change it)
Chapters will eventually get stupidly long in all likelihood but they start out far more teaser length.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Dawn cracked over the horizon, blindingly bright after the endless seeming night. Mist rose from the ground, the slowly cooling bodies and blood no longer steaming in the chill air. Kasaanda felt her chest heave as she controlled her breathing, bringing her heart rate back down. The song of spirits danced in the air around her, goodbyes whispered on the breeze as they Faded.

“Valo-Kas, sound off.” Shokrakar called out, voice gruff as the lead Vashoth held a hand to her belly carefully and scanned the area around them.

“Adaar one and two.” Kasaanda’s twin Kaaras called out for them. Both mages grinned at each other, her job done and his just starting. Kaaras was already resting glowing blue hands on Katoh to heal her ripped up arm.

The rest of the Valo-Kas present called out and Shokrakar seemed pleased that other than Katoh, no one was hurt. Her maternal instincts were starting to get a little annoying to Kasaanda, but the younger Vashoth kept her mouth shut about it. She’d never been pregnant herself, and as she never planned to be, the least she could do is tolerate her leader’s pregnant personality change, even if it was bloody hindering and awkward.

“Another band of ‘bandits’?” Sata-Kas sounded too amused by the prospect. They all knew that the men and women they had just sliced and/or stabbed were Templars trying to kill mages.

“Considering the fact that one of them tried to Smite me?” Kaaras called out incredulously.

“Tried? This one DID Smite me.” Kasaanda grunted, kicking a corpse that had no head. That was the thing about Templars; they were so used to a Smite being all they needed to fell a mage that they never anticipated that a Vashoth mage like Kasaanda would simply use a physical attack when magic failed. In this case she’d ripped the man’s head clean off his shoulders with her Halberd. It would have been a clean decapitation except that her blade had hung up in his spine so she’d used brute force to finish the job.

“Let’s rejoin the others and keep moving, these mages won’t deliver themselves to safety!” Shokrakar barked out and the Valo-Kas were moving as one efficient entity again.

The two Adaar mages, Necromancer and Healer, were surrounded by their more pugilistic kindred and they quickly quit the field to return to the rest of the band. It never failed to amuse Kasaanda that all they had to do was march openly with the mages they were escorting and all of these ‘bandits with suspiciously Templar like habits’ came crawling out of the woodwork. In fact, one of the more Rogue-y types had actually popped out of a damn tree.

“Onward, outward, forward.” Shokrakar called out, though it was Taarlok that led the way forward. With pregnancy weighing Shokrakar down both metaphorically as well as literally, the Valo-Kas adjusted to not having their leader actually lead from the front. Instead their contracts genius took the lead, as far as walking first went at least.

Kasaanda shot a look to her twin, both of them already grinning as they continued to amble towards the Conclave. The Valo-Kas had been hired to escort groups in; so far they had mostly done mage runs though that was primarily due to the fact that the one group of Templars they had escorted in had come in surprisingly bruised. It almost looked like someone had slapped them around a little, but no complaints were filed against them. Kaaras was unbearably smug for a day afterwards too.
But with the actual talks to start the next day, this was their last escort run. Next job they got was to sit on their collective asses and act intimidating. Or whatever it was that Guards were supposed to do to discourage bad behaviour.

Surrounded primarily by humans, though there were a few Elves in the mages, the Valo-Kas kept silent and stern faced. Shokrakar or Taarlok did all the talking, while the rest lounged in casual seeming ease, though their eyes were never still. The Adaars were sent out to feel around the Templars for any suspicious outbursts; the assumption being that if you dangled a mage around in front of the Templars, the ones that want to lash out will. And that’s where the Ashaads would come in. Ashaad and Ashaad Two were shadowing the mages in Stealth, watching their backs, and if anyone ever took the bait suddenly they’d be dead.

There were no takers on this trip around the Conclave, though they had weeded out a few unwanted types the last time they’d done this. “Do you think they actually stand a chance of coming to an agreement?” Kaaras jutted his chin out towards the actual building the Divine was within. How one old woman with a funny hat was supposed to resolve all of this, the Valo-Kas didn’t know, but they had gotten paid in advance, and got more for every escort they’d brought in so no one really cared.

Kasaanda snorted. “They have as much hope of settling this as I do growing a tail and taking flight like an Atasshi.”

“You’d never be a Dragon sister; you’re about as graceful as a slug.” Kaaras slung an arm around his twin’s neck, knowing how much it irritated her. Sometimes his only seconds older sister really needed to learn to relax. Though the last time he’d tried to get her laid had backfired stupendously, so he knew to leave it alone now. One only needed so many scars after all.

“I will kill you and reanimate your corpse to be my slave.” Kasaanda warned with a smile that was all teeth.


“That it’s smarter to poison the spoon than the soup?” Kasaanda frowned.

“Well yes… but I was more referring to the fact that as brother and sister twins…” Kaaras started the long repeated spiel.

“We are obligated to look out for each other; the sword and shield.” Kasaanda completed while she rolled her eyes. “The irony is that neither of us are sword and boarders. You keep the living from dying, I keep the dying useful.”

They circled back around towards their own Camp, ignoring the hostile, suspicious, and fearful gazes that trailed over them like an unpleasant fog. The Templar side of the camp was all hostility and hatred, which would truly break Kasaanda’s heart, if she cared about their opinions. Kaaras was more amused by the Mage side of the camp, because there they got mixed looks of awe and suspicious fear. Apparently none of the Circles had ever seen a Vashoth mage before, and the fact that the ‘ox-men’ had no problems with mages fascinated them all. Kaaras wanted so badly to explain to them all how good they had it compared to the Saarebas but there was no need to give these humans more ideas on how to brutalize each other. Despite the hostilities on both sides of the mage-templar line, it was the Mid Camp that posed the most danger surprisingly.

Nobles, Merchant Houses, Guilds, anyone and everyone that thought they could turn this to their advantage somehow, were present and accounted for in the Mid Camp. And Nobles being forced to
camp in and amongst the ‘lower classes’ had caused quite a few incidents at first. At least until it was explained that any group found deliberately causing contentions would be offered the chance to either peacefully yield to the Guard, or be ‘peacefully’ escorted out. One of the two options was a lot more fun for Kaaras.

Shokrakar waved them short from their walk about, and the Adaar twins hurried back to their leader. Something was up if they were being called in already. “Ari, what news?” Kaaras called out to their leader.

“We are asked to investigate a group of armed individuals trying to sneak through the western quadrant.” Shokrakar answered directly.

“Not even going to try and call themselves bandits this time eh? Let’s go trounce some Basra.” Kasaanda sounded giddy at the prospect.

Kaaris was leading his squad around to take the left flank; Sata-Kas,ashaad Two and Katoh all comfortable with letting the poet lead them onwards. His skills as a poet left them all begging for succor, but his skills as a Warrior were proven time and again. Taarlok took Hissra, Sataa and Meraad with him and swung to cover the right flank, while Shokrakar led the two Adaars, and Ashaad as the main prong. Other Guards all gave them berth as the Valo-Kas moved out, though a few eyes watched after them suspiciously.

Kasaanda made eye contact with a gorgeous woman in armour that looked like the Templar sigil had only recently been taken away from her. The dagger in the woman’s back didn’t seem to faze her at all, and Kasaanda smirked as the human looked away with nothing but suspicion burning in her eyes. Whoever that gorgeously dark spitfire was, Kasaanda was willing to bet money that she hated to see the Vashoth here at all. Humans could be so xenophobic sometimes.

“Do we have a headcount?” Kaaras asked their leader carefully.

“More than us, less than twenty.” Was all Shokrakar offered in answer. They continued to venture further from the Conclave main Camps in silence. The forests around them were massive, ancient feeling, and smelled like musty leaf rot.

“We’re being followed, you know that right?” Kaaras casually smiled as he talked, keeping his words too soft to travel far.

“Mmmm… spotted the pretty one back at camp,” Kasaanda matched his volume. “Maybe it’s my lucky day and she’s enraptured by my come hither ass?”

“Is that why you’re walking like someone dislocated your hip?” Kaaras teased.

“Humans like seduction. They need to be wooed and played with. If I just walk up to her and tell her my intentions, I end up slapped more often than not.” Kasaanda spat, good humour gone. The human wasn’t posing a threat to them currently, and as she was far enough behind them to not be trying to warn their quarry, the Valo-Kas ignored her. Ashaad Two would keep her in line if needed, the Rogue Vashoth stunningly lethal without any hesitation.

“Apparently I absorbed all the romance in the womb.” Kaaras wasn’t joking by the comment. As many traits as they shared; Vashoth status, colouration, mage abilities, taste in women, they wildly differed in some key areas. Kasaanda was born to the life of a mercenary; she thrived on the constant moving around, the thrill of battle, and sometimes it seemed that Kasaanda got off on the destruction her magic could cause. Kaaras, however, liked the idea of having a home base, and as a Healer he was more equipped to handle life off of the battlefield. Although the Valo-Kas had
benefitted from his skill set exponentially, even Kasaanda knew that her brother longed for some unknown something to give him purpose still.

A shrill whistle from Kaaris called attention over to the left flank, where they’d found the trail of the group sneaking around. Although, from the broken underbrush and clear trail left behind, calling it sneaking was being too generous. “Eighteen.” Hisra burbled no hesitation in their voice.

The Valo-Kas shifted forms, their squads and numbers readjusting so that instead of three groups of four there were six pairs disappearing into the woods. They remained within sight distance of each other, but fanned out to prevent the likelihood of a single attack flattening them all down, then stalked through the woods to find their quarry.

Kasaanda felt her heart settle into its paces, her lungs feeling like they could endlessly suck in cool air as she readied for battle. Her nose picked out lingering scents of human sweat, long since moved on. The tang of body warmed metal was fainter, and sweaty leather kept trying to override all the other scents. Her eyes blinked rapidly for a moment as she focused her senses onto what her magic could tell her. Necromancer magic crept along the living earth beneath their feet, stretching out like tendrils from a spider’s web. Life rejected her magic wholly, and yet Kasaanda was as adept at Earth as she was at Death, and she wove the two together in a paradox that felt forwards and around them. Beside her, she felt her brother shielding for all he was worth, their magics conflicting until the moment they worked in tandem. She was stone and death, he was fire and life. Together they made one hell of a Storm that once unleashed only ever seemed to end with lots of dead bodies and both of them unconscious on the floor.

Today would not require the Storm. Kasaanda snapped back into awareness of herself. “Ahead.” She called out, pointing unerringly to a dense cluster of rocks and trees skirting the bottom of the sheer cliffs that the Conclave sat upon. The Temple of Sacred Ashes rested on a very defendable position, but these idiots were determined to prove that eighteen souls could in fact scale their way up cliffs while wearing armour.

Kaaris let out another, musical whistle and the mountain climbers all froze in place. “I’m far too pregnant to climb up after you, but I have no problem letting my people pick you off from here. You have twenty seconds to come down and surrender.” Shokrakar called out, her mighty voice booming in the eerie silence.

“Are you going to cook us and eat us?” one of the climbers questioned.

“No.” Shokrakar looked deathly serious but her Valo-Kas could all read the smile she barely managed to keep off of her face.

“But if you take too long to come down, I can cook you from here.” Kaaras called up and demonstrated helpfully by flicking a smallish fireball up at the farthest climber. It impacted over three feet away but every one of them still flinched as if he’d set off Gaatlok in their boots. Somehow that convinced them to climb down.

And then Kasaanda got the scare of her lifetime when someone tapped on her shoulder. With a strangled scream she spun around and grabbed a little Elf male by the throat. But before she could rip it out on pure autopilot, Kasaanda and everyone else was thrown to the ground when a violent explosion erupted above them. And then the world glowed green and Kasaanda knew neither fear nor alarm.
Duty and Honour

Chapter Summary

Not all those at the Conclave were representing Mages, or Templars, or even themselves.

Chapter Notes

If things are unclear, it might be deliberate (was that vague and enigmatic enough?)
I'm posting the 'get the bodies in their places' chapters all at once because they're all like... 8 words long.
Also, this is my first time EVER trying to deliberately use HTML for posting stories so please... treat me like a luddite in this even though normally I'm tech savvy.

Being stabbed in the back metaphorically as well as physically was not how Emma Trevelyan had planned on representing her Family at the Conclave, and yet there she was with both a dagger in her back and the perpetrator in hand. “Truly Garman? You’ve been on my father’s payroll for nearing eight years, and this is how you think to repay the Trevelyan name?” she sounded bored by it, knowing that Garman couldn’t reply to her question even if he wanted to. It was hard to offer any response in his defense, considering that Garman was a corpse. “May the Maker take you to His side.” She finally sighed as she dropped the corpse at the feet of one of the Conclave Guards.

With so many warring Templars and Mages in attendance, Emma could very well understand why the Divine had rightly brought in neutral Guards. She just could not fathom why the Divine had reached out for such...esoteric guards. Qunari, or Vashoth as the one had so rudely growled at her in correction, were definitely intimidating and helped keep the peace, but Emma knew her fellow Templars too well; she could see many of the more hot blooded of her brethren eyeing the horned giants as if trying to size them up. She sighed as the tension headache she valiantly ignored flared up into a full on migraine. Her teeth itched for a moment and she resisted the urge to huddle into herself to shield her core like a wounded animal. The frisson that shot down her skin was hidden by layers of leather and armor, and hard earned control kept it from her face. Somewhere nearby there was Lyrium and Emma needed it.

The Guard, this one a Dwarf, taking her report of Garman’s attack gave her an odd look and Emma tried to haul her attention back to the matter at hand instead of the addictive song of Lyrium. She was no longer a Templar, had in fact barely even been a Templar when Lord Seeker Lucius decided to nullify the Nevarran Accords. And still the Lyrium called to her, its song sickly sweet and rottenly irresistible.

“Do you require a healer?” the Guard finally queried, seeing the dagger still edged into her armour.

“No, it’s a minor wound. However I may require assistance to remove the obstruction as it has limited my mobility on that side.” Emma hated to admit the need for help, but her pride was as carefully controlled as her other emotions.
The Guard didn’t say anything else but he did indicate for her to turn around and she braced her body against the powerful jerk. Metal screamed its heinous wail as the dagger pulled loose and Emma made a face at the damage done. Her Family had done their best to get her well-fitting armour, and Emma appreciated the fine set she wore. Sadly it was almost too ceremonial to be useful in a real battle though, and she missed her Templar armour something fierce. But Family, Family comes first. When there is no honor left in the Templars, there is always honor in serving Family.

Emma looked up from her armour as the Vashoth Guards all stomped by in a group, and she felt a shock lash through her system as she caught her gaze into that of the bronze skinned, yellow eyed Qunari female staring at her. The interest in the other woman’s gaze was plain to see, but there was also an assessing weight to it that Emma recognized as one person trying to figure out just how dangerous the other is. It made her spine stiffen up but the Qunari looked away and tromped on without comment and Emma was left feeling off balance.

“Damned unnatural Blighters.” The Dwarf Guard spat.

“You do not like your fellow Guards?” Emma asked, turning her attention back to the Guard she was dealing with, but her instincts screamed at her to not turn her back on the Qunari.

“I don’t like working with people that ain’t got no rightful soul.” He grumbled and Emma Trevelyan took a closer look at him. He was a surface Dwarf, and it seemed an Andrastrian.

“Nothing the Maker has created is ever lost to Him.” Emma replied adroitly, seeing the Dwarf bristle at being corrected like that. “Good day Ser.” She nodded sharply to him and left before he could start to argue with her.

Emma Trevelyan knew her Chant, even the Dissonant Verses, and she Believed with all of soul in it. As a Templar memorizing the Chant was seen as a way to help strengthen the mind and spirit against the weakness inherent in men and women alike, and Emma had been groomed to be a Templar since she was born. With her elder sister as Heir, and the spare Heir provided in the form of her one brother, Emma was always destined for a Templar life. Her sisters had likewise been groomed for the stations they had filled, from her sister the Sister, to the Wives most of them had become. Only Emma and Ellen had escaped life as bargaining chips, though Emma was no longer a Templar thanks to their duplicitous leader.

But she thrust thoughts of that from her mind and focused instead on following the Qunari as they trekked through the woods. They were Guards, chosen and trusted by Divine Justinia herself. But Emma could not shake off the sensation that she needed to follow them and observe what kind of trouble they were about to get into.

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Far up ahead, much farther than a mere Human could see, Cedrick Lavellan watched both the horned Grey Ones and the Shemlen warrior creeping towards him. Not that they even knew he was there, but the Elf was amused enough that he almost waved. That would have defeated the purpose of him hiding in the first place, so he resisted the temptation and instead focused on the Shems he had originally followed out here.

Cedrick’s Keeper had given him the task of watching these quicklings and seeing what trouble their war would breed for his Clan and all future Dalish. He’d been on site at their Temple for over a week now and talks had still not started. It put lie to the concept that all shems rushed into everything they ever did, but after working with Wycombe so closely Cedrick had realized that many of his old beliefs weren’t quite as firm as he once thought. Patience was not a virtue humans
were known to display, and yet their Keeper, this Divine Justinia, seemed to display a fathomless depth of patience when even Cedrick felt agitation nipping at his control.

Of course if their Keeper was truly capable of controlling the shems, then this war would not have occurred in the first place, a fact that Cedrick only cared about in so far as the fact that humans killing humans was damned entertaining and he wanted to watch. Right up until the moment he saw grown men and women, in armour, slaughter mage gifted children. Unarmed, surrendering children, and these demons masquerading as men had slaughtered them all.

He had come upon the scene too far away and too uncaring to realize what he was about to witness. For months his Clan had carefully hidden and watched, witnesses to Humanity’s slow unraveling. Their armoured prison keepers, Templars, were abandoning their gods and killing the mage gifted. The mage gifted, free for the first time, were killing their old captors right back. It was such a good show. But then those same groups started to attach and kill anyone that came upon them, and Keeper Istimaethoriel had convinced Clan Lavellan to work with the humans in Wycombe to each other’s mutual benefit.

Admittedly, Cedrick had not loved that closeness to the Shemlens, but familiarity did not breed contempt. Instead, as his Keeper’s First, Cedrick had learned to tolerate the quicklings and he actually found himself almost admiring some of the mage gifted. Locked for a lifetime in Towers and forced to bend to the will of those imprisoning them, he could not help but see the parallel to his own People’s struggles.

When he had seen the children surrendering to the Templars, he felt contempt that they would allow themselves to be captured, but they were children. It was the duty of their Elders and Clan to protect them and show them the proper way. He watched only to see where the Templars would lead the children so he could free them under the cover of darkness. Only the Templars hadn’t imprisoned the surrendered mages. Instead, to a man, they drew their swords and slaughtered the small group of six. Rage had thrummed through Cedrick so hotly that he hadn’t needed to manifest fire to singe the bark through his grip on the tree branch. It was only a lifetime of careful teachings that helped him to ground his anger and center himself again, though his need to slake blood thirst did not leave. Gone was his usually flippant, charming nature and left in its place was the wrath of a First. Children were sacred, regardless of their species; they were the future. Rules of Human war even declared that children are not viable targets, but that did not stay the hands of these blood thirsty monsters.

So Cedrick decided that maybe they should learn to fear the things they couldn’t see. Originally the group he’d followed had held twenty five members, but he had crept up and slit the throat of several that fell behind, and used his magic to freeze or crush others. Still near twenty were scrambling for safety, snarling amongst each other about demons and monsters, all unaware that only one person was causing this kind of damage to their group. And Cedrick climbed with them, using his magic to feel where there were weaknesses in the rock, ready to bring the entirety of the cliff face down onto them for their crimes.

And then he heard one of the Horned Ones from below whistle. Cedrick always did love a good show, and he did not begrudge the others their chance to kill these men, as long as they suffered his vengeance was satisfied. He did not expect the world to explode around him when he finally decided to introduce himself to the Grey Ones though.
An assassin prowls the Conclave and a target is struck.

If there was one thing Alena Cadash hated more than cave spiders it was when one of her carefully wrought plans went absolutely tits up. Especially since her plan had been far from perfect to begin with, but it was the best she could do until some idiot decided to stumble in at the last minute to mess everything up. With over a thousand people crowding the Conclave, it was never going to be easy for one measly little Dwarf to assassinate a noble Daughter and not get caught. But a little difficulty had never stopped Alena before, and she wasn’t going to let it stop her now. It was just that thus far her target had always had far too many eyes watching to make a move.

Patiently Alena had plotted, her only time restrictions from her Clan leader that it must happen before the peace talks finished, and she staged out everything she could. Needing to try and control as many variables as possible, Alena started the dance of the assassin. The first week had her focused wholly on the patterns of the ‘household’ staff. Servants were easy to figure out but Guards were on supposedly irregular rotations. Alena had years of experience though and knew that no living soul ever did anything perfectly randomly. It took several days but eventually patterns started to emerge, habits that each individual had that crept to the surface and gave them away.

After she was assured that should she need to, Alena could creep in and slit her target’s throat, the assassin settled in to watch for her chance patiently. Yes she could take the expedient route if necessary but the Cadash leader had asked for something a little more flamboyant. No one even noticed that there always seemed to be a Dwarf about; Alena could sit pretty much right outside the Noble’s tent and carve soapstone all day long and no one even batted an eyelash at her. It was astonishingly arrogant and narrow minded that they thought themselves untouchable. Or maybe it was a side effect of being surrounded by so many people, they believed that no one would dare target them with so many others around.

Of course that was exactly why Alena had been sent here by the Cadash Leader; make Emma Trevelyan’s death a poignant message to her father. The man had ambushed three of their last shipments, trying to muscle in on their territory, and he needed a reminder driven home about the consequences of interfering with Cadash and Carta business.

With the peace talks scheduled to start on the morrow, Alena had anticipated that today would be the best day to make a move. Everyone else would be so on edge about the mages and Templars that no one would be watching the Nobles. So Alena had all but vanished to these daft bluebloods, sinking into Stealth even though no one was watching the Dwarf anyways, and crept closer to her oblivious target.

And to her utter disgust, Alena spotted another trying to take advantage of the situation to kill her target. As if Alena were going to allow that. The no longer Templar Emma Trevelyan marched around with arrogance on her face and entitlement in her words, never seeing the murder in the eyes of the man that stood as her guard. The embossed armour of the Trevelyan name looked awfully pretty, and likely would prove to be utterly useless in the way of protection, so as the guard moved to attack Alena casually tripped the man, ruining his lunge. He still managed to sink a blade
into the woman’s back but it was nowhere near fatal.

Alena danced back, unable to retreat to Stealth with the Templar all but glaring around, and yet the human ignored her still! Instead Trevelyan responded to the man’s attack by sinking her sword into his chest without hesitation. Another guardsman of the noble was shouting off about traitors and assassinations and all but hustling the Noble away and still neither one seemed to see her sliding into the shadows, finally able to pull Stealth up and over her with their attention elsewhere. Idiots. With a distinctly unimpressed mood, Alena stalked back to her sleeping tent to come up with a whole new plan. Today was going to be out of the question now that Emma was on guard. But maybe there was a chance to turn this to her advantage; the noble would go one of two ways after this. She would either believe that the danger is past entirely, or she would believe that EVERYONE was a danger. Paranoia would actually be the better solution for Alena, as paranoid people were panicky, and panicked people got sloppy.

So if killing the noble wasn’t an option out here in the Camps, then Alena would just have to find a way to do it within the even more heavily guarded Temple. There was a slightly disturbed smirk on her face as she realized that this would be a lot more dramatic a message as well. Surrounded by the best and brightest, and most capable at surviving, and here this little Carta Dwarf cast off would sneak in and slit the throat of one of the precious human blue bloods. Things were finally getting interesting. Alena really could never resist a challenge.

As she had with the human Noble, Alena immediately went into probability calculations. But she didn’t know the inside of the Conclave well enough to properly plot things out. With a dramatic eye roll Alena pulled Stealth over herself once again, starting to feel a little disconnected from the world around her as she wove her way around, and past Guards until she was inside the Temple proper.

Everyone alive had basically heard of the discovery of the Temple of Sacred Ashes; the Hero of Ferelden discovered it on their quest to subdue the Fifth Blight. Back then Haven was apparently the home base of a very strange little cult that thought that the High Dragon that had made the Temple her home was Andraste reborn or some other nutty idea. Humans were apt to worship anything that seemed like it could kill them, which left an awful lot of things they’d likely worship no matter how bad an idea it was. Alena barely paid enough attention to her own pantheon of Paragons to be able to explain Dwarven theology, the entirety of bothers she could give about human religion could fit on the head of a pin. Still, they had a nice Temple. The architecture was beautiful in that slightly ruined way one could only ever find after history has moved on from a location.

Guards patrolled the well-lit hallways and Alena had to ghost her way past them carefully. Just because she had Stealth concealing her did not mean she could not be spotted. All it would take was one set of eyes that was resistant to a rogue’s tricks and she’d be done for. So Alena wrenched her eyes off of the delicate seeming buttresses and focused on counting each foot step forwards. If she could walk through the halls now she could memorize the layout, and then coordinate that with the schedule her errant blueblood was following. Having an accurate floor plan and schedule of planned events would give Alena an idea of a time she could strike at, and now she just needed to figure out the best location.

The Temple of Sacred Ashes was laid out in a counter-intuitive spread that had to be inspired by whatever deity they laid claim to. That was the only explanation possible for the labyrinthine passages, convoluted staircases and twisting walkways that filled the passages of the Temple. And nothing seemed to lead to the main center room directly; rooms seemed to feed into each other in a weird trickle down method that left Alena unsettled feeling. She could usually map out a building in her head simply by looking at the dimensions and anticipating the layout within, such a skill was
utterly useless here where nothing made sense and yet the building still stood.

The major deliberations would be taking place behind far too many well-armed and highly trained Guards to even contemplate slipping past, so Alena avoided the main vestibule areas whenever possible. But as her little noble Trevelyan was no longer a Templar, she was stuck in the audience area for the Noble Families. Again, that would be heavily guarded and watched carefully, so making her strike there would be tantamount to suicide. And Alena planned to live to a ripe old age of ’not dying yet’ so she skirted past that obvious location.

Beyond the main area there was a hallway that led on a subtle angle upwards, and Alena followed it. The smell of dust was slightly heavier this direction, warning her nose that it was a less used hallway, and likely one that they never intended anyone to wander down. If it led to an upper level Alena could use that as a vantage point to follow her target until it was time to strike. Curious as to why the rest of the Temple of Sacred Ashes was so heavily guarded and yet this hallway was all but abandoned, Alena decided to investigate. Curiosity was a terrible trait in an assassin, but not even obedience to and love of the Cadash Clan leader would allow Alena to simply turn her back on this unknown. What was down the hallway, why was it not guarded, and was that a scream she’d just heard?

Alena clutched her Stealth around her like a shield and drew one of her daggers. Whatever it was she’d possibly heard, there were definitely voices sounding out from ahead. Alena now had two choices: go down the dark, unpatrolled and seemingly suspicious hallway on her own, or turn back and alert one of the Guards, hope they didn’t arrest her for being there, and let someone else deal with it. The rough wood of the door blocking her from the voices scraped against her palm as she pushed the door open, intruding upon a very bizarre scene. They say curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back. Alena had a brief moment to wonder if the same held true for Dwarven rogues before the world fell apart.
The Dawn will Come

Chapter Summary

Dawn Wesson is lost and then found, and yet all she feels is lost.

Chapter Notes

I am trying something with the languages so we'll see how successful I am. Hover text SHOULD pop up over foreign languages if I've done it right. If not, I have ALSO included translations in the end of the chapter :P

---mild editing done Aug 22 2018

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Summer had been so hot that the weather network had had to come up with a whole new scale to keep track of how miserable it was outside. At first everyone just wanted it to rain, to relieve the dry baking heat, but not enough ever fell to do more than turn the dry heat into a sticky, cloying humidity that strangled everything. By the time the heat wave broke, Dawn Wesson was so sick of being stuck inside that she had no trouble begging her husband Larry to take her out to the market. The Market was an open air, outside street where vendors could lay out and hawk their wares and it was absolutely lousy with people by the time Larry and Dawn arrived. Her husband cocked an eyebrow at her and looked out at the crowd of people.

*Are you sure diving into that mess is smart?* he signed to her, indicating the crushing crowd of people.

*It’s almost lunch, let us circle the outside and wait for everyone else to go for food.* Dawn signed back, shuddering off the claustrophobia slithering across her skin.

In the summer the permanent shops around the Market almost always had their sidewalks decorated with items designed to draw the pedestrians further into the store, so Dawn and Larry walked hand-in-hand around those shops. They ignored the buskers earning their coins, the clothing stores that held nothing of interest, and the student shops that supplied books and university supplies. In fact the only shop that held anything of interest to the couple as the antiques shop.

Dawn loved perusing old antique shops because she loved the history each piece might contain. Larry liked these kind of shops because he could touch the items and determine for himself if they ‘spoke’ to him. The owner of this particular shop recognized them but couldn’t come over to talk until he was done bargaining with the hipster at the counter.

Larry rapped his knuckles against several wooden items, testing how solid they were. She could tell from the look on his face that Larry was thinking about something and trying to determine if he should sign it to her or not. She politely looked away from his face to allow him to decide for himself, and turned her focus to a stunningly tarnished mirror. It was massive, far too tall to stand upright in even a regular apartment, and looked to weight the same as their volkswagen did. Still,
something about the indelicate frame and deliberate shape resonated with Dawn and she stroked her fingers across the mirror’s surface and frame. Unsurprisingly the glass of the mirror wasn’t even cold to the touch, nothing was after the summer they’d had even with the air conditioning running full blast, but the frame itself nearly burned with how cold to the touch it was.

A purposeful stomp pulled Dawn’s eyes off of the mirror and to her husband. He had wanted her attention so she gave it to him fully, turning to see that he was standing over a perfectly and carefully handcrafted crib. She saw him stroking the perfectly stained wood almost reverently before he brought his eyes up to meet hers and she knew the question her husband wanted to ask her.

*Yes.* she signed before he could try and fumble his way through asking if she wanted a family with him. They had talked about it before, and with Larry’s concern over the hereditary nature of his deafness, Dawn had told him that the choice would be his to ask.

*You want to have a baby with me?* he signed anyways, eyes large.

*I want a baby with your eyes, my hair, and someone else’s temperament.* Dawn signed back, trying to push her emotional reaction aside even as tears started to well in her eyes. She was always such an emotive wreck, but her husband seemed just as moved by their conversation as she was.

Larry reached a hand out for Dawn to take, their fingers curling around each other almost shyly. He gave her that soft smile that she’d fallen in love with two years ago and Dawn grinned brightly back at him. Yes there was a painfully high likelihood that any child they raised would endure the same issues with hearing loss and eventual deafness as Larry had, but she knew that nothing would make her love her child with less than all her heart.

A scream of supersonic force tore through the air and Dawn flinched, hands slapping over her ears instinctively. Even Larry felt the sound wave, trying to haul Dawn sharply towards him even as something seemed to hook into her belly and pull.

Dawn staggered to her feet, shoes finding no grip on the rubble strewn grass around her. Her clothes were soggy on one side and singed on another and for the life of her Dawn could remember nothing about getting wet, burned, or going outside. She was standing in a forest, her ears ringing as if she’d just listened to a rock concert all night long.

“Dawn?” she heard the muffled voice of her husband and turned to see him covered in dirt and leaves, sitting in the grass.

*Are you ok?* she signed to her husband, shuffling over next to check on him herself.

*Dizzy. Confused. What happened?* he signed back, letting her help him up and dust him off.

Dawn shook her head, as lost as her husband was. She looked around, hearing what had to be voices. The air was hazy with smoke and getting worse by the moment, and still Dawn stared out at the impossible creatures before her. People with horns. Definitely not what she was expecting to see. Larry let out a strange gurgling sound and Dawn’s head swiveled back around.

Larry was grabbing at something red protruding from his chest and at first Dawn’s brain refused to understand. “NO!” Dawn shrieked as she finally broke out of her paralysis. The red glowing monster withdrew its hand from Larry’s chest and Dawn caught her husband’s body as he slumped to the ground. “NO!” She screamed again, staggering backwards under the weight of his dead body. It saved her life. The demon swiped at her and missed.
Dawn scrambled as she rested Larry’s body down, hands coated in his blood. She didn’t think about anything in specific, her mind shut down even as her body took action. The demon advanced towards her with weird surges and Dawn let out a blood curdling scream as she charged into it. Claws slashed at her and Dawn didn’t care, unable to even properly see the thing she was attacking through her own tears. Strike after strike Dawn somehow forced the demon back and away from her husband’s body until the demon shattered into ash.

Her breath heaved into and out of her body, nausea flooding her belly and all strength fled. Dawn dropped to her knees, cradling Larry’s body to her and sobbing uncontrollably. Voices and footsteps came closer and she ignored it. Let the next monster kill her, she didn’t care. When someone tried to pull her husband from her arms Dawn snarled and lashed out again.

One of the horned monsters grabbed her fists into one of its giant hands and crouched down in front of her. Dawn’s eyes dripped tears she couldn’t stop as she stared at what looked like a very pregnant monster. It said something to her in a language she didn’t know but the sympathy in the monster’s tone left Dawn gasping for air. Another one of the creatures tried to take Larry and Dawn screamed at it, bereft of words but the emotions tearing her apart warned them away all the same.

The seemingly pregnant one said something to her again and lifted a hand to touch Dawn’s face softly. And then lassitude flooded Dawn’s body, despite the situation, and she sank into unconsciousness, spelled into sleep.

She became aware of the world around her in a slow crawl back to reality. Dawn hurt but she couldn’t put her finger on exactly what part of her was wounded. Her hands were scraped up, knuckles torn and oozing blood, her shoulder ached and twitched, her back down right burned and there was this weird taste of ashes and sulfur on her tongue. But they all felt very distant, almost unreal entirely, and instead there was a sensation that she was about to start feeling a much worse, all-consuming pain. Every heart beat was a struggle and the air rasped into and out of her lungs and yet she was sitting down, no need to be panting for breath.

Some of her breathing difficulties could be waved off as an inevitable side effect of her sitting in the ruins of a forest that was somewhat on fire. Smoke inhalation has been known to have all kinds of adverse side effects, but they were far enough away from the conflagrations that the smoke tickled the nose instead of strangled the chest.

Boots entered her field of vision and Dawn felt her eyes slowly crawl from leather boot, to rough wool trousers, up to a thick leather belt, and there sanity stopped. The man standing in front of her was bare chested, and a solid candlestick bronze colour. To add to the inhumanity of his metallic skin colour, he loomed over her and his height was aided by thick, curling black horns. She stared up at him, the skin of her face tight with dried tear streaks. His eyes were the soft yellow colour of good butter but there was not a single bit of softness to the creature above her.

He crouched down, squatting on the balls of his feet easily, one hand casually angling his spear so it didn’t catch and trip him. He said something down at her but it wasn’t any language she understood, and it sounded disjointed, like several languages had crashed into each other and this was all that was left. Dawn just blinked, wondering if hell was supposed to populated by Demons that couldn’t speak her language to torment her. More words came from him this time, these ones touching each other as he spoke, a near continuous sonorous sound that she still did not understand.

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“Var! Vibasra merash karassam!” Kasaanda yelled out at Kaaras even as her twin carefully wiped the tears off of the huddled stranger’s face.
"Basra asala-taar… Ala-Ash, Aramer." Kaaras never took his eyes off of the human curled up in front of him. He’d expected her to flinch away when he reached forwards, but the human didn’t seem to care. Like whatever instinct had let her fight to live earlier was gone now. To his Healer gift she was a bleeding wound that still had shrapnel in it. He didn’t know where to start to try and ease her hurt and worse yet, he had no idea how she was still alive for the pain inside her.

"Tal-eb Arividdath ratherah, ebost Valo-Kas!" Kasaanda hissed at him and Kaaras finally looked from the wounded soul in front of him.

The smoke was thicker, and distantly he could hear shouting. Even though the Valo-Kas had been there as Guards, all of them knew that now was not the time to appear to settle things down. Mainly because as the least humanoid of those present it would be mighty easy for the survivors to blame the Vashoth mercenaries for whatever it was that had just happened. Some would do it reflexively, so used to hating anything ‘Other’; it would be a continuance of their usual behaviour, but some would do it deliberately, as an attempt to expunge any guilt off of themselves. Now was not the time to stitch their wounds, instead simply dress them and run.

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The horned behemoths around her were barking at each other, agitation building to a crescendo that Dawn didn’t really care about. Her detachment shattered apart as the one that had been gentling her earlier now grabbed her by the arm and hauled her to her feet. He gently held her shoulders, as if expecting a fight that Dawn couldn’t be bothered to give him. With encouraging nods, the horned one babbled at her again in the disjointed language before letting her go and thrusting a pack into her arms.

With no other option, and more out of reflex than any desire to be useful, Dawn pulled the pack on over her shoulders. When that elicited a toothy grin, Dawn could only assume carrying the bag was the intent of the demons actions. It kept one hand on her shoulder as Dawn looked around and realized that all the others like the one guiding her around now were armed to the teeth and hustling along. She stared at the line of them moving out, letting the one that seemed to have claimed her take her along with them. She should have cared more, but nothing felt real to Dawn, shock and numbness finally washing away anything else.

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Shokrakar strode near them, their gravid leader keeping a wary eye on Kaaras’ marching companion. This human was only coming along with them because their leader insisted on it. Until she knew more, the Valo-Kas were in Calamity mode and the strange little human from the green was not their only unwilling tagalong. The stunningly gorgeous human that had been trailing them earlier had been picked up by Assad One, and Kasaanda had an Elf that had appeared a heartbeat before the world went to shit. None of them seemed to know any more than Kaaras and Kasaanda seemed to, but neither Adaar twin was going to go against their leader no matter how much bluster Kasaanda spoke with.

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU TO Casijaz for her Qunlat guide. I've utilized that as my basis for Qunlat, so any mistakes are entirely and undoubtedly mine.
Qunlat:
Var! Vibasra merash karassam! = Don’t touch her; we don’t know where she came from!
Basra asala-taar… Ala-Ash, Aramer. = Her pain… you can’t feel it but I can.
Tal-eb Arividdath ratherah, ebost Valo-Kas! = Be a Healer later, right now you need to be Valo-Kas!
The Wrath of Heaven

Chapter Summary

When an assassin wakes up in a cell and is told she's guilty, she doesn't argue. She plans for escape. Unfortunately for Alena Cadash, being caught red handed would have been a lot easier to explain than being caught green handed like she has.

Chapter Notes

Drink in the foreshadowing, like a fine wine or a gnarly swamp water cocktail.

Also, I don't have an editor and I rather suck at catching all of my own mistakes, so if there are errors (there are I bet), feel free to ignore them, tell me about them in the comments, or light them on fire as an effigy, I do not mind.

Alena had woken up in no less than four dungeons or prison cells in her life thus far, so she knew generally where she was even before she’d opened her eyes. Cells have a distinctive feel to them, a chill that had as much to do with the dripping stones used to construct them as it did the hope sucking reality of being a prisoner. But being familiar with the smell and feel of a cell did not offer Alena any explanation as to why she was waking up in a cell. Usually she had some kind of hint; either a correlating plan that had gone awry, or a throbbing hangover and blood stained clothing indicated bar fights. She opened her eyes to neither memory nor clothing providing an explanation.

Eyes opened confirmed that she was alone in a cell, and not injured outside of a strange wrapping around her stiff left hand. More than that Alena realized that she was hobbled and chained to the freaking floor, as if she were about to go full raging Berserker on them. As much as her ego appreciated having her lethality acknowledged, this left her in a wildly uncomfortable hunching position and unable to move out of it at all.

And then the world around Alena shifted, as if a rockslide were starting, and her bandaged left hand burned in response to it. Alena bit the scream of pain back for as long as she could and yet the agony inside her palm just continued to build, the shaking of the world around her a terrifying counterpart until both suddenly ceased, leaving the bound assassin slumped in a boneless heap. She was conscious but only peripherally so, everything in her mind shut down except for the pain and Alena had to pull herself back up and out of her own mind as the door to her cell rattled and swung open.

Four armed guards followed by two women entered the room; one woman stalked as if about to enter battle, while the other slipped around, almost easily forgotten compared to her attention demanding companion. Except for the fact that Alena was a rogue herself, and thus slightly immune to the tricks she herself used.

“Tell me why we shouldn’t kill you now.” The short haired, sword wielding woman demanded of her and Alena stared at her with a carefully perfected ‘terrified innocent civilian’ expression.
plastered to her face. There was an unhinged, almost desperate edge to the woman’s carefully controlled words that left Alena on high alert.

Her manacles were too well taken care of for her to slip free of them without some kind of torsion bar to help pick the lock. So either she had to convince these two ladies that she was harmless (about as far from that as a living, breathing entity could be), or get rid of them and find a way to pry herself free. As much as Alena would love to mouth off and point out that it is very hard to question the dead unless you’re a necromancer, she kept her mouth shut. Right now these women knew absolutely nothing, and Alena was in a position to find out more of what was going on by forcing them to talk to her. Even if she’d rather like to be uncuffed and given the chance to pee instead. “The conclave is destroyed. Everyone who attending is dead, except for you.”

Clearly irritated with Alena’s lack of confession and answers, the dark haired woman grabbed Alena’s bandaged hand, ripped off the dressings and thrust the wound into her face demanding, “Explain this!” even as the redhead human circled around her like a carrion bird.

This time the horror on Alena’s face wasn’t even a little bit fabricated. Her left hand looked like it had been ripped open, the skin of her palm flayed away. Green ichor like blood seemed to constantly well up from it and drip off of her hand, but it evaporated without ever touching the ground, and never left a stain in the fabrics it dripped onto.

“I can’t.” Alena’s voice was harsh, her throat painfully dry and tight feeling. She shuttled aside the terror skipping through her mind, focusing instead on what she could immediately do to improve her chances of survival. Her hand looked like it was bleeding poison, she was a not so secret Carta member, and most damningly, she was an assassin; the moment these people figured out that Alena had no clue what was going on, and had no way to help, they were going to slit her throat.

“What do you mean you can’t?” the dark haired one demanded, anger bubble past her carefully controlled emotions from earlier as she stalked towards Alena, looking ready to strike her dead.

“I don’t know what that is, or how it got there!” Alena didn’t have to entirely force the squeak she added to her voice, layering in more fear than she would allow herself to properly feel at this time. She could have a good freak out later, when there were no witnessed.

The redhead stepped in front of her storming companion. “Enough Cassandra, we may need her.” The smaller woman’s accent marked her as Fereldan by way of Orlais and suddenly Alena realized who these two women were; the Hands of the Divine. Exactly the two women Alena would never have wanted to come under the attention of, though she seemed to have been caught green handed as opposed to red this time.

Alena had to play this just right or end up so dead even the Ancestors wouldn’t be able to recognize her in the afterlife. “All those people….dead?” she sounded so devastated that Alena silently applauded her acting abilities.

The Nightingale herself stepped closer, the human’s eyes bright with suspicion and curiosity. Alena dropped her eyes away, purposefully shuddering to fake shaking with emotions. “Do you remember what happened? How this began?” both women were constantly circling her, a deliberate tact intended to leave her feeling exposed and vulnerable.

Alena opened her mouth to explain and bullshit equally but nothing came out. “I remember nothing.” Her astonishment wasn’t even a little faked. “No wait…there was something chasing me, and then… a woman?” Alena raked through her mind for a memory, any memory of what had happened but she had nothing past being irritated that someone had made a move on her target.
“A woman?” The Left Hand of the Divine sounded incredulous at that kind of detail but for once Alena wasn’t lying to her. That made it very easy for Alena to saturate her tone with confusion and no little anxiety.

“She reached out to me, but then…” Alena frowned, the strange gaps in her memory making her more uncomfortable than even the manacles and cell floor could.

The Hands of the Divine stepped away from her, as if to have a private conversation. “Go to the forward camp Leliana. I will take her to the Rift.” Cassandra Penteghast, Seeker of Truth, directed. Without further argument, and only one last suspicious look shot at Alena, the Nightingale left the cell.

“What did happen?” Alena finally demanded as the Seeker knelt down to unclasp the manacles. The human was surprisingly gentle as she helped Alena to her feet.

“It… will be easier to show you.” Cassandra sounded so heartbroken in that moment of hesitation that Alena nearly staggered back. She didn’t know the human beyond her reputation and still Alena couldn’t help but hurt for whatever loss she now bore. Cassandra tied her wrists back together but at least Alena was standing upright this time.

They left the cell behind, a long walk up some stairs later and out through a Chantry into the cold light of day. Except as Alena flinched away from the bright lights, waiting to adjust after Ancestors knows how long inside, this was no bright light of day. The weak winter’s sunlight was washed out by a much brighter, more horrific source of emerald light. A sky wound that matched the one on her palm, bleeding out impossibility even as she stared upwards at it.

“We call it ‘The Breach’. It’s a massive Rift into the world of demons that grows larger with each passing hour.” Seeker Cassandra’s voice had become as emotionless as she could manage it, straining to express only the facts and not her own despair. “It’s not the only such Rift, just the largest. All were caused by the explosion at the Conclave.”

“How can an explosion do that?” Alena demanded before she could stop herself from asking. She could make smoke bombs, sleep flasks, confusion smokes, and handle any of a dozen poisons and toxins; but bombs were not her forte.

“This one did.” Cassandra sounded as painfully unimpressed by that fact as Alena felt, though the woman was still all but spitting suspicion at her through her eyes. “Unless we act, the Breach may grow until it swallows the world.”

As if to emphasize the seriousness of the Seeker’s words, the Breach flared out and the world shook. Alena couldn’t focus on that upheaval, as while the Breach flared, her hand felt like the bones were being torn out through her palm. She tried to swallow the grunt of pain even as she was driven to her knees by it. Light emitted from the wound, a sickly green glow to mirror the Breach up above.

The Seeker went to her knee but still out of arm’s reach. “Each time the Breach expands, your mark spreads. And it is killing you.” If Alena wasn’t in so much pain she would have marveled at the concern in the Seeker’s voice. “It may be the key to stopping this, but there isn’t much time.”

“I understand.” Alena chuffed out, trying to act like she hadn’t fallen to her knees in pain a moment ago.

The Seeker looked almost surprised by her acceptance. “Then…” she stopped herself, as if too afraid to jinx it.
“I’ll do what I can to help.” Alena agreed, knowing that it was the only way to possibly continue her survival.

The Seeker nodded and regained her feet, helping pull Alena onto hers a moment later. The human woman waited until Alena seemed more steady before walking forwards, and yet never took her hand from Alena’s shoulder. It took the Dwarf about six seconds to figure out why. As Cassandra walked with her towards the gates of the town they were in, the people watching all started to crowd closer, anger and violence a heartbeat away from reality.

“They have decided your guilt. They need it.” Cassandra warned. “The people of Haven mourn our Most Holy, Divine Justinia, head of the Chantry. The Conclave was hers.” There was honest sorrow in her words and once again Alena wondered who it was this warrior had lost to wound her so. “It was a chance for peace between mages and Templars.” The Seeker continued to explain as she led Alena up the roughhewn trail away from Haven. “She brought their leaders together. Now, they are dead.”

Cassandra marched towards a guarded bridge, no one standing in her path even with the ‘prisoner’ stumbling along with her. “We lash out, like the sky. But we must think beyond ourselves. As she did.” They walked slowly along the bridge, Alena wondering how long it would be before she could escape. “Until the Breach is sealed…” when the Seeker pulled a knife and turned to face her, Alena had a split second to decide whether or not she was about to be murdered. In less than a heartbeat she had taken in the emotions straining the Seeker’s words, the hope and pain equally dancing in her eyes, and the duty that had driven her thus far. The assassin backed down, deciding to trust this Human a little, just enough to keep alive for now. “There will be a trial, I can promise no more.” The human cut the rope binding her wrists and Alena breathed again. “Come, it is not far.”

“Where are you taking me?” Alena cautiously demanded even as she valiantly tried to ignore the glowing green coming from her hand.

“The mark must be tested on something smaller than the Breach.” Cassandra stated firmly, as if this were a carefully elected plan instead of a last ditch effort.

Alena stayed silent as she tried to review the memories that were all jumbled and broken inside her head. The Seeker led her on through the far gates and up towards where there had once been a Temple. The snow underneath was matted and packed, churned in with the frozen ground underneath. Many feet had trampled the path towards the Temple, but very few were seen coming back from that direction. As she carefully ascended, the snow and mud started to show signs of blood and other unsavory fluids starting to sink in.

The Breach crackled again, pain radiating up Alena’s arm between one stride and the next, the suddenness of it staggering her to her knees again. Cassandra didn’t hesitate to swing back and help Alena back to her feet, brushing off some of the snow even as Alena huddled around her painful hand.

“The pulses are coming faster now.” The Seeker warned. “The larger the Breach grows, the more Rifts appear, the more demons we face.

“How did I survive the blast?” Alena finally managed to ask, the question bothering her subconscious before it finally danced its way free.

They were crossing another bridge towards more soldiers as Cassandra explained. “They say you leapt out of a Rift, then fell unconscious. They say a woman was seen in the Rift behind you. No one knows who she was.” Before the Seeker could finish her tale, a flash of green collided into the
bridge exploding the stone work, and dropping all those that had been on top of it to the frozen river below.

To add insult to injury, the green explosion belched out a demon onto the ice in front of Alena. Cassandra charged forwards, her sword and shield bared for attack. “Stay behind me!” the warrior commanded even as Alena scrambled back.

Alena had absolutely no problem with letting a warrior, well trained and armed, handle the situation, except that another sickly green swell started too close to her. Another demon was being birthed violently into the world and Alena was not going to politely wait to die on its claws or be rescued. Instead she dove towards one of the now very dead and broken soldiers, and shamelessly rifled the daggers free from the belt. Even as the demon lunged towards her, Alena spun herself out of its direct path and slashed her daggers into the base of what should have been a skull.

Demons were not as easy to kill as people were. A fact that Alena could now say she honestly understood thanks to first hand experience. All of the attacks that the Cadash assassin was used to being absolutely lethal were now only managing to annoy instead of slaughter, so she changed her tactics. Alena tore into the weak spots, slowing the demons down and herding them right into the path of the Seeker’s righteous sword.

“It’s over.” Alena called out as she scanned the area for more demons. They seemed to enjoy literally popping up out of nowhere so she wasn’t too trusting of her own words.

To add to the sense of calm and well-being, the Seeker immediate turned to her and snarled, “Drop your weapons, now.” Her sword was ready to continue striking.

Alena gave the Seeker an assessing look, confident that if she needed to make a run for it right now she could conceivably escape. But seeing how rattled the Seeker was by all of this, Alena had to admit to just herself that she wasn’t confident that running and living to fight another day was the best way forward this time. “If you’re going to lead me through a demon infested valley, you’ll have to trust me.” Alena countered, holding her body ready to defend and flee if needed.

“Give me one reason to trust you.” The Seeker snarled back.

“Because my life is on the line.” Alena sounded exasperated even to herself. “Trust that I don’t want to die.”

An eternally exhausted sounding sigh gusted out of the Seeker even as her body language shifted from attack to putting her sword away. “You’re right. I cannot protect you, and I cannot expect you to be defenseless.” The Human turned away, deliberately giving Alena her back for a moment before turning back around to face her. “I should remember you agreed to come willingly.”

The Seeker handed Alena a health potion, which was the first Alena became aware of the fact that she was injured. The explosion and fall from the bridge, the attacks of the demons… even whatever it was she had survived but didn’t remember, all had left their marks on her. Some quite literally. Not caring for the taste, Alena thumbed off the cork and quickly drank.

They continued up the frozen river, skating the length of it until they were able to regain solid ground. More demons blocked their path and were dealt with in the same manner as the first set. Alena and Cassandra fell into a habit of Alena flanking their enemies and coming at their weak points, all while distracting them and driving them onto Cassandra’s sword.

Side by side the pair climbed the trail upwards, each watching the other’s flank as more demons fell from the Breach the closer they got. Cassandra called out about hearing others up ahead and
the way she said it indicated she didn’t mean more demons. Apparently there were living, breathing people up this way too. Alena would believe it when she saw it; so far it had been nothing but bodies and gore.

A crossbow bolt whistled past her ear even as it sunk into the suddenly there form of a Wisp, and Alena saw a flash of magic even if she couldn’t feel it. Her hand throbbed as she stumbled around a low wall and saw a Rift. Her heartbeat thundered in her veins, the Rift seeming to match her pulse even as the men and women around her fought the last of the demons into ash.

“Quickly, before more demons come through!” an Elf called out, grabbing her left wrist and nearly getting shanked for his efforts. Alena managed not to murder the Elf for the impertinence of manhandling her, mainly because the moment he held her hand up, the green wound in her palm latched out tendrils that touched the greater Rift. She couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, around the pain that shot through her. Like every part of her being was folded inside out and then thrown to the ends of the universe before being forced back together.

As the pain ceased and Alena regained awareness of more than just agony, she tore her wrist away from the Elf. “What did you do?” she demanded, officially sick and tired of whatever nugshit was going on.

“I did nothing,” the Elf emphasized as he answered, “the credit is yours.”

“You mean this.” Alena carefully gestured with her left hand, not letting anyone else near it just yet.

“Whatever magic opened the Breach in the sky also placed that Mark upon your hand.” The bald Elf explained, not unkindly. He seemed to be watching her with an assessing eye, but Alena knew when one hunter was sizing up another, even if she didn’t think the Elf was a direct threat; yet. “I theorized the Mark might be able to close the Rifts that have opened in the Breach’s wake – and it seems I was correct.” There was an undercurrent of smug satisfaction in the Elf’s voice.

“Meaning it could also close the Breach itself.” Cassandra walked closer to stand just to the right and slightly behind Alena, though the assassin didn’t feel as if it were a guarding position.

“Possibly.” The Elf acknowledged easily to the Seeker before turning his attention back onto Alena. “It seems you hold the key to our salvation.” Before Alena could utter a likely inappropriate response, the other Dwarf finally piped in.

“Good to know! Here I thought we’d be ass-deep in demons forever.” He was adjusting his gloves so Alena took a moment to really look him over. Auburn hair, no beard; surface Dwarf. But that chest and those arms and that crossbow? Alena could likely ride her fellow Dwarf into battle and die happy. “Varric Tethras: Rogue, storyteller, and occasionally unwelcome tagalong.” He winked at the Human as he said the last bit and Alena tucked any and all thoughts of his handsome chest away. A little side action never hurt anyone, but the wink warned her that his flirting was as common as him breathing.

“Going to go out on a limb and guess that you’re not part of the Chantry.” Alena remarked. The Elf laughed as much scorn as humour. “That’s one way of saying it.”

“Technically I’m a prisoner, just like you.” Varric admitted with an uncaring shrug.

“I brought you here to tell your story to the Divine. Clearly that is no longer necessary.” Cassandra sounded so annoyed that Alena was painfully curious as to what the Dwarf did to annoy her thus
far. Anything that could rattle a Seeker was a trick she wanted to learn.

“Yet, here I am. Lucky for you, considering current events.” The self-deprecating tone of voice hid nothing of his concern about current events.

“That’s…a nice crossbow you have there.” Alena gave him a half grin, not at all convinced he was as hapless as he wanted her to believe.

“Ahh isn’t she? Bianca and I have been through a lot together.” He sounded besotted and Alena couldn’t keep the laughter out of her voice entirely.

“You named your crossbow Bianca?” Alena queried rhetorically, nodding as if it made complete sense. “Well… it’s good to meet you Varric.” She concluded almost lamely.

“You may reconsider that stance, in time.” The Elf joked.

“Aww, I’m sure we’ll become great friends in the valley, Chuckles.” Varric rejoined.

“Absolutely not!” Cassandra stormed over to the Dwarf while Alena just watched. “Your help is appreciated Varric, but…”

“Have you been in the valley lately Seeker?” Varric cut her off, his easy going nature barely concealing a steely resolve. “Your soldiers aren’t in control anymore. You need me.”

The stare down was epic, although short lived. The Seeker gave a disgusted sigh, rolled her eyes and turned away, conceding the point to Varric. Alena though the whole exchange was very interesting; although the Seeker was supposedly in charge here, she was clearly not interested in being their leader.

“My name is Solas, if there are to be introductions. I am pleased to see you still live.” The Elf interjected a vein of irritation hidden in his words.

“He means, ‘I kept that Mark from killing you while you slept’.” Varric translated helpfully.

“Then I owe you my thanks.” Alena graciously bowed her head to the Elf in gratitude.

“Thank me if we manage to close the Breach without killing you in the process.” Solas sounded as if he were doing her a great favour with his words. “Cassandra, you should know: the magic involved is unlike any I have seen. Your prisoner is no mage. Indeed, I find it difficult to imagine any mage having such power.” He turned his attention to the Seeker. Something about how the Elf held himself warned Alena that he had experience as a fighter without his staff and magic; he was just too bodily aware not to have.

“Understood.” Cassandra sounded exhausted with one single word. “We must get to the forward camp quickly.” She turned and started to head off, the Elf following.

“Well… Bianca’s excited.” Varric remarked, thumb indicating his crossbow before he walked after the Elf and the Seeker.

Alena stared after her companions for a moment, giving one last solid thought to just running away and letting someone else deal with this shit. Her hand was wretched with pain, and it was radiating up her arm like some kind of gangrene, and the day was only just beginning. But the feeling beyond even the pain as she closed the Rift… no one else could do that. If there was a way to give this Mark away she’d take it and run, but until then Alena had to play the hero. She started after the trio and caught up.
The trail led them back towards the frozen river but even as they reached wider spaces, more green meteorites collided into the ground, vomiting out demons. “Demons ahead!” Solas called out as if the rest hadn’t seen their arrival.

“Glad you brought me now, Seeker?” Varric demanded as he gleefully unleashed Bianca upon the Wisps, Lesser and Greater Shades.

The patterns that Alena and Cassandra had adopted for fighting with just the two of them easily adapted to the presence of a mage and a long rage rogue. Solas kept a magical barrier over them all, protecting the two bladed fighters while Varric pegged off the Wisp to eliminate flanking. As Alena slipped into and out of Stealth while targeting the Shades’ weak spots, she kept demons between her and her new ‘friends’ just to help eliminate some convenient ‘friendly fire’.

The path cleared and they pressed onwards. An abandoned house still had torches smoking and guttering. The family seemed to have survived, the food on the table undisturbed and all valuables cleared away, and most tellingly there were no bodies on the floor. They didn’t linger, heading on past the houses and up the snow encrusted trail towards another damn climb upwards.

When they encountered more Shades on the trail, this time they found them hovering over slaughtered bodies. Cassandra dove into that fight with a level of rage Alena had only seen in Berserkers, and yet the Seeker was utterly in control of herself. No one looked too closely at what was left of the bodies, Alena was sure she’d be haunted by a hand that was far too small, and instead she tore into the demons with vigor.

Varric seemed as rattled by the corpses left behind, and his solution appeared to be to talk until his brain was less dark. “So let me guess; surface Dwarf, maybe part of the Carta?” Alena’s head snapped around to look at him with narrowed eyes.

“What makes you say that?” Alena didn’t bother hiding her suspicion.

“I can tell a proper Orzammar Dwarf from twenty paces. Also, you have that shifty-smuggler look to you.” Varric explained with a careless shrug.

“I’m not the only one with a shifty-smuggler look.” Alena decided to deny and confirm nothing if possible. The less she actually said, the less they could accuse her of lying about later.

“Varric did not destroy the Conclave.” Cassandra spoke up in defense of the Dwarf she’d be trying not ten minutes ago.

“That you know of. We shifty-smuggler types can be tricky.” The storyteller grandiosely warned.

As Alena determined to ignore the other Dwarf unless necessary, the Breach over-head throbbed and she staggered in pain. At least this time she didn’t just fall right over. Solas instinctively sidled closer to try and help her but the pain passed before he even reached her side.

“Shit, are you alright?” the Dwarf had lost his annoying humour but Alena just grunted and continued onwards. They had to be getting close, that or something had to kill her soon; Alena hated all the damn walking up hill today required. “So…are you innocent?” Varric decided to ignore Alena’s ignoring him.

“I don’t remember what happened.” Alena spat angrily.

“That’ll get you everytime.” Varric chuckled as if this were a joke. “Should have spun a story.”

“That’s what you would have done.” Cassandra rejected.
“It’s more believable, and less prone to result in premature execution.” He argued.

More fucking stairs. Alena sighed even as she climbed, vowing that once this was all done she’d ask her Clan leader for a litter and four well-oiled men to carry her around. This was getting ridiculous, especially considering that the stairs seemed cut to no one’s proportions, and only seemed to funnel the demons down towards them. She missed sneaking around confrontations.

“I hope Leliana made it through all of this.” Cassandra panted after their latest batch of demons were eliminated.

“She’s resourceful Seeker.” Varric comforted.

“We will see for ourselves at the forward camp, we are almost there.” Solas suggested.

Of course before they could do that they came across another Rift. Solas shouted at her to seal it quickly. Cassandra charged in to battle and Alena tried waving her hand at the green thing again. A whip of green lashed out from her to connect to the Rift, sealing it shut. It was only after the danger was gone that Alena realized that they had reached more gates and the forward camp.

“Whatsoever that thing on your hand is, it’s useful.” Varric called out as the gates opened for them.

Alena kept her mouth shut, remembering the hatred at Haven, as she stared at the soldiers at the forward Camp. Cassandra led her ever forward, surrounding her with suspicious humans that were all heavily armed and angry already. She could hear pieces of conversation and the unique accent of the Nightingale pulled her attention onto the still alive Leliana. The Left Hand of the Divine was talking to a man in a funny looking hat.

“Oh, here they come.” The funny hat man said the moment he caught sight of the Seeker. Leliana was standing behind the man and for a second Alena wondered if she was going to see the Nightingale shank a man. Sadly she didn’t.

“You made it.” Leliana said instead, striding towards Cassandra. “Chancellor Roderick, this is…”

“I know who she is,” the man sneered. “As Grand Chancellor of the Chantry, I hereby order you to take this criminal to Val Royeaux to face execution.”

“Order me?” Cassandra sounded so offended that Alena had to bite back a grin. She may only have known the Seeker for about an hour now, but even Alena already knew that bossing the human around was a bad idea. “You are a glorified clerk; a bureaucrat!” her Nevarran accent made the scorn in her voice all the more cutting.

“And you are a thug, but a thug who supposedly serves the Chantry!” Funny hat Roderick insulted.

“We serve the Most Holy, Chancellor, as you well know.” Leliana countered.

“Justinia is dead! We must elect a replacement, and obey her orders on the matter!” Roderick argued, somehow seeming to truly believe that that was the only reasonable course of action.

“So no one here is in charge?” Alena couldn’t help but mutter, apparently not quiet enough.

“You killed everyone who was in charge!” Roderick spat out, addressing her directly for the first time. He looked away, as if acknowledging her existence were somehow beneath him. “Call a retreat Seeker. Our position here is hopeless.” He begged.

“We can stop this before it’s too late.” Cassandra argued right back. At least that temper was being
useful off the battlefield too.

“How? You won’t survive long enough to reach the Temple, even with all your soldiers.” Roderick sounded tired and Alena enjoyed his failure a little less. It’s all well and good to hate someone who wants you executed, but it’s hard to hate someone who has lost all hope; she’d been there a time or two herself.

“We must get to the Temple, it’s the quickest route.” Cassandra ignored his hopeless exhaustion.

“But not the safest. Our forces can charge as a distraction while we go through the mountains.” Leliana added in, for the first time offering argument against the Seeker’s course.

Alena already knew what path she’d rather take; assassin’s don’t do head on charges. That was a good way to die young. “We lost contact with an entire squad on that path; it is too risky.” Cassandra countered without vitriol.

“Listen to me, abandon this now before more lives are lost!” Roderick demanded and Alena could hate the man a little less because he was actually concerned about the lives lost. Most self-important people didn’t care at all.

The Breach roared out, a horridly unnatural tearing sound as it crawled ever larger. All eyes turned to stare except Alena, who once again felt a corresponding pain burning through her hand. She must have let out some sound of pain though as the others turned from the Breach back to her.

“How do you think we should proceed?” Cassandra asked Alena once the Breach settled again.

“You want my opinion?” Alena demanded, unable to fathom what other surprises the day wanted to throw at her.

“Well it is your neck on the chopping block.” Varric piped up.

“You are the one with the Mark, and only the Mark is able to affect the Rifts. So which path did you want to take?” Cassandra explained impatiently.

“The mountain path.” Alena stated plainly, seeing the tight line of the Seeker’s mouth as disapproval. “Work together. You all know what’s at stake.” She added in lamely, wondering just what her expected rate of survival was at the moment.

“Leliana, bring everyone left in the valley. Everyone.” Cassandra turned to the other Hand, and the Nightingale didn’t argue.

“On your head be the consequences Seeker.” Roderick tried railing one last time.

Alena led the party forward, ignoring the man’s words. Cassandra was once again walking behind and to the right of her, and Alena was amused to realize that Varric was mirroring the position on her left. Solas brought up the rear point and Alena had to briefly wonder just what Ancestor she pissed off to end up in this situation.

To her utter disgust, Alena of course had picked the route that involved more climbing. Not that the charge up with the soldiers was any less of an incline compared to the trail she was currently on, but Alena could spy ladders to come and knew that sometime in the future she would be cursing herself; if she lived that long.

Her companions remained silent as they got ever closer to the ladders, and she started up the lowest of them before the Seeker spoke again. “The tunnel should be just ahead. The path to the Temple
lies just beyond it.”

“What manner of tunnel is this?” Solas’ cultured voice called out. “A mine?”

“Part of an old mining complex. These mountains are full of such paths.” The Seeker explained.

“And your missing soldiers are in there somewhere?” Varric sounded skeptical that they would find these soldiers at all, let alone alive.

“Along with whatever has detained them!” Solas warned.

“We shall see soon enough.” Cassandra brought the conversation to a close and Alena just climbed.

Finally they reached the top of the ladders and she waited for the others to finish ascending before heading in. Torches were lit at the entrance, but steps within it Shades were waiting. Varric targeted the Wisp, Solas shot fire at the Greater Shade while Cassandra tore into the Lesser Shade. Alena danced around all of them and tore their defenses apart.

The mining pathway was beautiful, abandoned, and littered with interesting items. Some of which made their way into Alena’s pockets. They had not found any sign of the soldiers, but they had encountered several groups of demons wandering the tunnels. It was getting almost easier for Alena to target their weaknesses, some instinct helping guide her strikes. They stumbled out of the tunnels onto a scene of slaughter.

“These must be your soldiers.” Varric sorrowed for them.

“That cannot be all of them. There are not enough parts.” Cassandra sounded coolly professional; a warrior on alert.

“So the others could be holed up ahead?” the optimistic Dwarf suggested.

“Our priority must be the Breach.” Solas emphasized. “Unless we seal it soon, no one is safe.”

“That’s a task for the other Dwarf in our party.” He gladly threw her off a proverbial cliff.

She ignored their commentary and focused instead on walking towards another fight. Only there were still living soldiers, also battling against the demons that poured out of the Rift. Seeing the soldiers and her team take care of the demons, Alena focused on connecting the agony in her arm to the impossibility in the air and cancelling the two out.

“Lady Cassandra!” one of the soldiers cried out once the danger was past.

“Lieutenant! You’re alive!” Cassandra’s voice was so thankful that Alena had to blink in shock. The woman certainly was a lot more emotional than she first gave the impression of being.

“Sealed, as before. You are becoming quite proficient at this.” Solas remarked to her while the Humans fussed over each other.

“Let’s hope it works on the big one.” Varric interjected before anyone could be accused of positive thinking.

“Thank the Maker you finally arrived Lady Cassandra. I don’t think we could have held out much longer.” The Lieutenant stated, drawing Alena’s attention back.

“Thank our prisoner, Lieutenant; she insisted we come this way.” The Seeker deflected.
“The prisoner? Then you…” the Lieutenant trailed off.

“Closing Rifts and saving soldiers, it’s what I do.” Alena shrugged awkwardly. She was never any good with attention being paid to her; that was the exact opposite of an assassin’s typical goal.

“Then you have my sincere gratitude.” The Lieutenant saluted her, fist to heart as if Alena were a higher ranking officer.

“The way into the valley behind us is clear for the moment. Go, while you still can.” Cassandra directed the soldiers.

“At once.” The Lieutenant agreed. “Quickly, let’s move!”

Alena and her companions watched as the battered soldiers retreated back towards hopeful safety, and it properly sank into Alena’s awareness that if she wasn’t able to seal the Breach, no one was safe. Before she could get too bogged down in that morose line of thinking, Solas spoke up.

“The path ahead appears to be clear of demons as well.” The bald Elf looked to her as he spoke.

“Let’s hurry, before that changes.” Cassandra suggested as well, also looking to Alena to lead.

Not wanting to be the defacto leader, but not wanting to argue about it even more, Alena kept her mouth shut and headed onwards. This time at least she got to go down a ladder as opposed to up it. Though the trail decided to take a damn near eighty degree incline downwards so she had to focus or else become a Dwarf shaped avalanche.

“So…holes in the Fade don’t just _accidentally_ happen, right?” Varric pestered Solas.

“If enough magic is brought to bear, it _is_ possible.” Solas informed in response.

“But there are easier ways to make things explode.” Varric sounded as if he were mostly talking out loud to himself but still the Elf answered.

“That is true.” Solas was sure footed in the snow despite not having any sensible foot coverings one and Alena wondered if it was an Elf thing or just a Solas thing.

“We will consider _how_ this happened once the immediate danger is past.” Cassandra called out in annoyance.

They fell silent as they continued down the trail to the ruins of their intended destination. “The Temple of Sacred Ashes.” Solas stated and the taste on Alena’s tongue matched the name.

“What’s left of it.” Varric spat.

“That is where you walked out of the Fade and our soldiers found you.” Cassandra said softly to Alena, indicating a specific spot that looked absolutely no different from the rest of the destruction around them. “They say a woman was in the Rift behind you. No one knows who she was.” The Seeker’s voice was wistful.

They continued to explore further in, seeing fires sputtering as they slowly died in the snow, rubble strewn further than any reasonable explosion could have managed, and the bodies. She was steps away from the Temple entrance before she realized that the destruction had taken out the entire Camp she’d been living in. Mages, Templars, Nobles… not a single section was spared the utter and complete devastation that had occurred. She was an assassin and very familiar with death in all its forms, and still this was too much. Alena swallowed bile back down and focused on the vein of
cold iron running through her soul, letting her step away from the urge to vomit.

Entering the Temple of Sacred Ashes was akin to waking into a mausoleum where the dead were murdered before being prepped and laid out. Beyond all the bodies and despair Alena spied a massive Rift, twisting and churning, anchored to the Breach far above them.

“The Breach is a long way up.” Varric said out loud what Alena was thinking.

“You’re here! Thank the Maker.” Leliana’s accent trilled as she jogged into view with her scouts.

“Leliana, have you men take up positions around the Temple.” Cassandra directed, the relief in her tone at seeing the Nightingale alive not at all expressed in her words.

The Nightingale nodded and turned back to her scouts, Alena only just noticing the bow and arrows strapped to her back. She would be fighting along with them it seemed, and Alena could only feel giddy at the opportunity to see the legendary Bard herself in action.

“This is your chance to end this. Are you ready?” the Seeker brought Alena’s attention back to the Rift at hand.

“I’m not sure how to even start getting up that thing.” Alena remarked as she stared upwards, the usual crick in her neck twanging.

“No. This Rift was the first, and it is the key.” Solas directed. “Seal it, and perhaps we seal the Breach?"

“Then let’s find a way down. And be careful.” The Seeker had no trouble directing on a battlefield it seemed.

They stared to move along the destroyed walkways Alena vaguely remembered. **NOW IS THE HOUR OF OUR VICTORY.** A voice rang out, startling everyone into tense stillness. Alena was crouched low, both daggers drawn and Stealth already protecting her as much as it ever could. But there was no body to match the voice, it seemed like an echo. Alena looked at Cassandra and the Seeker indicated with her chin to continue on. **BRING FORTH THE SACRIFICE.**

“What are we hearing?” the Seeker wondered as they circled closer to the center and the Rift.

“At a guess? The person who created the Breach.” Solas chimed in, seeming far too at ease with this entire situation for Alena to feel comfortable with.

There was a ruddy red glow that drew Alena’s attention, the weird song she’d associated with Lyrium all too present but twisted. She went to investigate, seeing instead of the blue crystals she was used to, instead they were an angry, inflamed red.

“You know this stuff is Red Lyrium, Seeker.” Varric’s voice held a surprising note of anger as he spoke but it wasn’t directed at anyone present.

“I see it Varric.” Cassandra all but rested a hand on the Dwarf’s shoulder in comfort and grounded. There was a history there that Alena would have to ferret out later.

“But what’s it doing here?” Varric asked through clenched teeth.

“Magic could have drawn on Lyrium beneath the Temple, corrupted it…” Solas theorized.

“It’s evil.” Varric spat angrily. “Whatever you do, don’t touch it.”
Alena led her group past the Red Lyrium and closer to the center of the spiral they were trekking. 

**KEEP THE SACRIFICE STILL.** The ghostly voice boomed. **Someone, help me!** A woman’s voice rang out and Alena had the strangest sense that she remembered hearing it before. She just couldn’t remember when she’d heard it.

“That is Divine Justinia’s voice!” the Seeker identified with a choked voice.

Alena stood on what had once been the top of a flight of stairs, but neither stairs, nor the level they had led to were present any longer. Probably part of the rubble she’d been circling around. With no other option, Alena dropped down to the dirt floor, rolling to spread the impact out. She came up with daggers drawn and ready, holding the position as her team dropped down behind her.

Nothing jumped out at them to stop their progress, and the Rift itself snapped and crackled like jade lightening. Alena’s palm crackled in response but this time the pain was more tolerable. Either she was getting used to the sensation, or her nerve endings were starting to die. **Someone, help me!** Echoed from the Rift again. **What’s going on here?** Alena’s own voice demanded, though she hadn’t uttered the words. The Seeker, the Elf, and the talkative Dwarf all stared between her and the Rift, as surprised looking as Alena felt herself.

“That was your voice. Most Holy called out to you.” Cassandra sounded astonished.

The Rift cracked again and a bright flash of light blinded them all. In the negative images left in her watering eyes, Alena saw the scene of Divine Justinia begging for help as Alena ran into view. **Run while you can, warn them!** The Divine begged. **WE HAVE AN INTRUDER.** The booming voice was back, though the scene didn’t reveal what he looked like. **SLAY THE DWARF.** It commanded and the flash broke, allowing Alena to see again.

“You were there! Who attacked? And the Divine, is she...? Was this vision true? What are we seeing?” The Seeker seemed desperate for answers Alena honestly did not have to provide.

“I don’t remember!” Alena let some of her frustrated anger to the surface, far better that then the fear in her guts.

“Echoes of what happened here. The Fade bleeds into this place.” Solas explained, a calm voice of reason amongst the angst and confusion. He stared at the Rift in silence for a moment before turning to face them again, his body language identical to teacher’s Alena had had throughout her life. “This Rift is not sealed, but it is closed...albeit temporarily.” He warned. “I believe that with the Mark, the Rift can be opened, and then sealed properly and safely. However, opening the Rift will likely attract attention from the other side.”

“That means demons, stand ready!” the Seeker called out to the scouts and soldiers scattered around them.

Alena suddenly wished that she had taken the head long charge with the army. At least then maybe she’d have more than a handful of people with her to face off against whatever it was they were going to face. But since she was about as likely to time travel as she was to walk in the Fade, she focused instead on doing what she could with the situation at hand.

So Alena held her hand out to the Rift and felt that connection form. Now that the pain had become manageable to her, Alena wondered if this was how a lightning rod felt in a storm. Before Alena could wax poetical about the idea though, the Rift spat out a giant, hulking demon.

As Cassandra rallied the soldiers into the attack, Alena slipped into Stealth. The Seeker was calling out battle strategy and suggestions to take down the demon’s barrier, Solas was launching fire
attacks at the Greater Pride demon, and Varric was pecking off the smaller demons from a
distance. As lightening whipped around and demons shrieked in the air, Alena tried to pull the Rift
shut. She’d get it close to closing and the Pride would stagger, but then more demons would spill
out and chase her back.

Finally Cassandra struck the Pride down and called out for Alena to close the Rift. With the field
temporarily cleared, Alena dropped her dagger and pushed her will out of her hand, grabbing the
Rift in her not grip and slamming it shut. The force rippled up towards the Breach and Alena hoped
it was sealing it shut. She didn’t get to find out though, as the backlash from the Breach and Rift
closing chased back down the tendril and into Alena’s palm. The pain tore into her body and out of
her throat in a bellow of agony even as she dropped into unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

SO MUCH DIALOGUE.
Alena is not a big talker, and she knows a lot more than she tends to say.

I won’t always stick to the game script as closely as I have here, but when I can I like
to include these familiar little segments.
A Templar's Keeper

Chapter Summary

In the three days that Alena Cadash is unconscious for, the rest of the world certainly does not sleep easy. The Valo-Kas retreat to find a safe fall back point, the Keeper values survival over xenophobia, the Templar has to decide if the moral high ground is worth dying on, and the Terran speaks.

Chapter Notes

Qunlat translation is my own efforts using Casijaz's Qunlat so any and all mistakes are my own damn fault.
Also, thank you Casijaz for putting the Qunlat together in the first place because sweet googamooga is it handy to have all in one place.

Cedric Lavellan was alive and he knew he shouldn’t be. As a mage, he had felt the explosion that had chased them away from the Conclave, and he knew that there was not a single thing he was capable of that would have saved him. His continued existence on this side of the alive-dead line was entirely due to the strange Shemlen that had appeared out of nowhere. One moment he was enjoying the chance to surprise a Gray One, and the next every fiber of his being was screaming out at the wrongness that was only the leading edge of the explosion. As he watched a shockwave of green Fade energy tidal wave towards him, Cedrick could only stare in terror.

And then the green washed around them all, some unknown barrier keeping it off of them. The air within the barrier screamed and spun, tearing the sounds of anything else away and nearly robbing him of breath even as it drove him to his knees. If he could have seen it, outside the barrier reality was being peeled and warped by raw Fade energy.

With tears streaming down his face, Cedric had watched as two humans were unceremoniously dumped out of a ragged green portal. The barrier that had protected them shattered apart the moment the portal closed and the effects of the explosion washed over everyone present. The Grey Ones Cedric were with had weapons drawn and an attack route planned but the two new Shemlens were dozens of yards away; even with the wind dying down to allow thought and sound Cedric knew that they were unaware of the demon coming towards them.

“Look out!” one of the Gray Ones called out and the female human’s head shot around to stare at them.

From that distance Cedric could see the wide eyed terror that was painted plainly across the woman’s face though it was directed at them instead of the demon behind her. But the warning was too little too late, the rage demon had already killed the male and was going for the female. Cedric was about to shrug it off as tragic but expected when the human female let loose a sound he’d never anticipated a living soul could make. And to add to his utter astonishment, she’d grabbed a
broken mage’s staff (his he would later learn), and beat a demon to death using nothing more than heartbreak and rage.

The Gray One he’d surprised before the world went screwy was watching him, the halberd in her hands not at all fooling Cedric into thinking she wasn’t a mage too. With a toothy smile, Cedric raised his hands in the air to show he was ‘unarmed’.

“Try any magic and I’ll spit-roast you like a fat nug.” The Gray One warned.

“Charming, how could I resist a proposition like that?” Cedric teased easily, the rest of his witty repartee cut off by the apparent leader of the Gray Ones.

“Valo-Kas, Calamity mode now!” The pregnant one bellowed out while another lifted the unconscious human over his shoulder.

“You’re coming with us Elf. Any trouble or shady business out of you and I will kill you with a clean conscious.” The Gray One all but jabbing him with her Halberd commanded.

“Be still my heart, I would rather pluck out my own eyes than disappoint you in any way.” Cedric coyly batted his eyelashes for added effect. The Gray One gave him such a disgusted look that he couldn’t help but laugh even as he moved ahead of her without argument.

To Cedric’s surprise the unconscious human over the shoulder of one of the Gray Ones wasn’t the only human along for the trip. The dead body didn’t count, but the Warrior stomping along definitely did. She looked livid too; hands bound behind her body, weapons removed, and a lead rope from her bound wrists to the Gray One marching behind her. He’d much rather his irritable but ultimately easy going Guard, but Cedric also suspected that maybe the Shemlen Warrior had earned her treatment. He rather liked seeing a Human as the one tied up and mistreated for a change, though by the furious look on the shems’ face she didn’t share his amusement.

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Emma Trevelyan was plotting slaughter. Not escape, not justice, not even vengeance; slaughter. She wasn’t sure how, but these inhuman beasts pretending to be Guards were responsible for this. She’d seen them survive something that no one else had walked away from without losing a single member of their party. The Templars, the Mages, the Chantry, and even the visiting nobles could not claim that; they all died while somehow these beasts lived. As they dragged her further and further away from where there should have been survivors, Emma vowed that she would take her pound of flesh from each of them for the lives lost today.

The guard that had somehow managed to circle back and grab her as the world shook walked behind her now, holding the end of the lead wrapped around Emma’s wrists. Despite her Templar training, Emma had to fight against the churning rage in her guts, her teeth clenched so harsh over the snarl in her chest that her entire face ached. Her shoulders were getting painfully sore as they walked; a combination of the awkward angle they were tied back in, and her instinctive attempts to use her arms to counterbalance as they stumbled through the woods and snow, further and further away from the Conclave.

To add insult to injury, her guard had thought it necessary to gag her. The cloth tied across her mouth, but thankfully not stuffed into it, kept her from trying to call out and bring reinforcements to her. Though Emma refused to think about it too hard, because then she’d have to admit that in all likelihood there would be no one around to hear her anyways. She choked on a cough, bile rising in her throat and Emma’s body took that as a sign that she was dying. Her breaths suddenly went erratic, the sound of her sucking in air through her nose obscenely loud as her vision started to haze
out on the edges.

Hands were on her, a large one on the back of her neck and Emma tried to thrash loose of the grip. Her feet were kicked out from under her, the grip on her neck forcing Emma Trevelyan to her knees under their unrelenting might. The gag was torn from her face even as her hands were cut loose, and despite all of her desires to fight and kill and run, Emma did none of those things. Instead she tried to steady her breathing, failed to do that, and promptly threw up into the trodden snow. “Ashaad One, manacle yours to Kasaanda’s. No gag, we can’t keep stopping.” The pregnant one that appeared to be in charge commanded as Emma spat the last of the filth from her mouth.

A canteen was handed to her and despite the giver, Emma was smart enough to take it and rinse her tongue clear. A few shallow, delicate sips helped settle her stomach back down and she chanced a bigger swallow.

The pause gave Emma a chance to properly look at and try to assess the Qunari that had her captive currently. The pregnant one was massive even without the bulbous belly in front of her like a battering ram, though her gravid state didn’t seem to slow her down or gentle her any. The guard that had been silently in command of her thus far was heavily scarred, their paler skin looking almost sickly in contrast to the richer hues of the rest of the Qunari. And so far this ‘Ashaad One’ had not said a single word and Emma wasn’t even sure if the creature could speak.

The Qunari might be called Ox-men and Gray Ones in conversation, depending on how insulting the speaker wanted to be, but the reality of them was definitely less homogenous than that. Her guard had graceful horns that curled along their skull and protected the back of their head, while another one had horns that were more like a Ram’s and heavily carved with designs. Another capped their broken horn with a sleeve, and even another seemed to have spread the paint from their body up along their horns. And only two of them were a real gray colour; others were bronze, the necrotic pale one, one was more lavender looking than proper gray, and so many other colours besides. Add in the paint that these beasts seemed to enjoy smearing on each other, and Emma wasn’t entirely sure any of these current colours were actually their skin.

More hands on her again, were helping her to her feet. Her wrists were bound again, this time in front of her, and she was led over to the knife-ear that had been taken prisoner at the same time Emma had been. She wanted to argue against it, tell them to release her, threaten to be a problem but one of them had already warned that if she persisted in being a problem, they would just kill her for expediency. Survival right now meant she would have the chance to seek her satisfaction later. So when the silent guard attached a manacle from her ankle to the Elf’s with a small distance of chain between the two, Emma said nothing. It wasn’t that these Qunari were unaware of her anger, it burned too brightly and too close to the surface for even these beasts to miss, but as long as she wasn’t directly impeding their progress, none seemed to care about her rage.

That would be their mistake. Let them assume that she’d just passively go along, cowed by their threats. Eventually Emma would get to be the sword of justice, and she would savagely enjoy showing them why they should fear her wrath.

The knife ear seemed just as unimpressed at being bound to her as she felt in return, and neither spoke to the other as their guards growled out for them to move on. Her skin was crawling though, that familiar uncomfortable prickle that screamed that he was a mage, and at least two of the beasts seemed to be as well. Smite was sitting on the tip of her fingers and tongue, but Emma kept having pull herself back from the edge of using it. She suspected that the moment she tried, it would be the last moment she ever did anything on this side of the Maker’s bosom.

The strange woman that had fallen out of the Fade had been spelled unconscious for the first
couple of hours, but as they stopped for another break (to allow the scouts a chance to range out ahead Emma noticed) the newcomer was set down and allowed to wake up. As the strangely dressed woman became more aware of the world around her, one of the beasts seemed determined to get her talking. It was plainly obvious to Emma that the woman didn’t understand basic Common, so the idiot Oxman tried to see if the human understood Qunlat. There wasn’t even a little glimmer of recognition in the woman’s eyes and Emma scoffed at the beasts’ attempts.

Emma was so closely focused on the scene in front of her that she didn’t even realize what it was she was hearing at first. Distantly there were voices shouting, indistinguishable but still audible. And if Emma could hear them, then there was the chance they could hear her. Even as the thought occurred to her, her mouth opened to shout and a blade scraped against her throat. Emma bared her teeth in a silent snarl, the knife-ear the only witness as her silent guard from earlier once again assured her obedience without uttering a single sound. The Elf had a broadly amused expression painted on his face, and he gave a small round of applause at the show she’d put on.

Templar trained and toughened by experience, even if only briefly, Emma still found the next few days to be a trial. She was not satisfied to be a prisoner to these beasts, especially not when she knew now that there were others out there, scouring for survivors and the guilty alike. But her damn captors thwarted her at every turn. No longer trusting that she would stay silent now that there were others around, her captors had once again gagged her unless they were actively eating. When she’d been handed a stamina potion on the second day after the beasts decided that resting was for the weak, and that they needed to press on through the night to get more space between them and their evil deeds, she started to plan. Instead of using it entirely, she had saved half and fouled it, managing to covertly pour the now poisonous fluid into the meal when they finally did stop on the third day. But before any of the beasts could eat it and perish, Emma was taken to the side and beaten by her silent guard, the spoiled meal being poured off to the side without a single nibble taken.

Spitting a gob of blood out of her mouth, Emma once again fell in beside the knife-ear. Her nose was broken and she couldn’t breathe out of it anymore so they had to forgo the gag just so that she could breathe.

“I thought the Dalish were supposed to be all about independence and wild freedom?” Emma snarled lowly. Her captors glared at her and she knew that if it looked for a moment like she was about to start shouting the knife would dance across her throat once again.

“I don’t expect a Shem like you to know anything about the Dalish, but I’ll bite. What are you blathering on about?” Cedric asked, tone remaining blandly calm even as his eyes gained a sadistic gleam.

“You follow them around like a lapdog,” she gestured at the Ox-men that were quite obviously listening in.

Cedric grinned at her, all teeth and no friendship. “As opposed to constantly insulting them, trying to escape, trying to poison them…. Hmmm it’s almost as if I knew better than to piss off those that have kept me alive for the last three days because they clearly don’t know what’s going on any more than I do.” His smile faded. “I’m not the one they tie up and pull around like a pet, or a particularly bothersome child.”

“If they didn’t know what was coming then how exactly did they all survive when everyone else died?” Emma Trevelyan demanded, anger and hatred barely even disguising her own feelings of guilt for surviving what had killed so many.

“By the Creators….If they’d known the Conclave was about to explode, do you think for a single
moment they would have gone *closer* to it?” The knife-ear sounded flatly unimpressed with her deductive reasoning.

“So what, they survived thanks to blind chance? That this useless harlot mysteriously showed up right where the Ox-men were, saving all of them and us in the process, and that it’s entirely accidental and we all should have died in the Conclave with everyone else.” Emma tried to sound offended but there was too much despair in her voice for anyone listening to believe it.

“Yes.” The Elf stated plainly.

“I don’t know what you leaf eaters believe, but the leader of the Chantry, the Most Holy herself was at the Conclave. She was within the Temple of Sacred Ashes when it exploded. I do not believe that the Maker’s voice here on Thedas herself would be just as expendable as everyone else. No, something evil occurred here.” Emma rejected the idea but a small kernel of doubt was slowly sprouting in her mind and she hated herself for it.

“The sky bleeds demons; of course something evil occurred here. But look broader than your narrow, self-centered Shemlen issues.” The Elf had lost his humour and now spoke seriously. “Fuck the Creators, the Maker, and the Void itself. I am alive right now because that poor thing there,” he pointed at the shuffling human from the Fade, “showed up at the right place at the right time. You might not want to admit that you know better, but I have no trouble saying that if she hadn’t shown up, I was going to die. Even three days later I cannot think of a single thing I would have been able to do to save myself. So until I get a better idea of what is going on, I am not going to hinder the people that are tearing their way through the demons being spat out of the sky. Not when they are doing everything they can to keep me as alive as they are themselves.”

“So you’re just going to go along to get along?” The youngest Trevelyan demanded.

“I will do what I have to, to live. I will do everything in my power to fulfill my duty to my Clan. And I will do what I can to see to it that whatever future my Clan might have will not include a green tear in the sky that vomits corrupted spirits at us.” The Elf sighed as he fell silent. “You’re young Shemlen, and I don’t mean that as an insult this time. It’s the duty of your Elders to make sure you’re equipped to handle what challenges are placed before you in life. Right now you are best served by working with these Gray Ones instead of against them, because they are searching for answers too.” His words were at odds to the jovial attitude he’d been displaying thus far.

“I have a Family I need to go back to; *my* duty is to be with them.” Emma stated plainly.

“You have to be alive to do so. Right now you fulfill your duty to your Family by keeping yourself alive.” He prodded.

“Why should I trust a knife-ear that keeps calling me a Shemlen?” Emma asked, aiming for wary but instead sounding weary.

“Normally you shouldn’t, I wouldn’t piss on you if you were on fire. But right now I would rather have you stand as a meat shield between me and the next wave of demons. It’s time for your temper tantrum to wind down so that we can focus on the threats from outside of the camp instead of having to worry about you too.” The wry humour was back.

“I will consider what you’ve suggested.” Emma reluctantly decreed.

“Wonderful, maybe I won’t have to kill you in your sleep just to improve my chances of survival after all.” The Elf joked. At least Emma sincerely hoped he was joking.
“So if you believe she’s your current literal life saver, where do you think she came from?” Emma reluctantly asked, all the questions that had been clamoring inside her skull demanding answers now that she was allowing herself to talk to the others.

“Far, far away.” The Elf shrugged. “She feels strange to my magic, not a mage but not like anything I’ve encountered so far.”

“And you think that she has some answers?” this time the ex-Templar sounded dubious to even her own ears. The shambling human woman in question looked no different than any of a dozen Fereldan’s or Free Marchers that Emma had seen throughout her life. Paler than the Rivaini tended to run, darker than the mountainous Avvar, she had the soft bodied look of a Noble.

“I think that she got as wrecked by that explosion as the rest of us did. Without her we wouldn’t have survived. Without us, she wouldn’t have either. For now I’m willing to overlook the things I dislike in the pursuit of answers. If that changes, I’ll adjust my plan of survival.” The Elven Mage turned his full attention back to her.

“I want to live.” Emma didn’t look at the Elf as she spoke, the words coming out despite her intentions to not admit it to anyone. “I want to know what happened to Divine Justinia. I want to see the tear in the sky close.”

“Then you need to stop making this harder on the rest of us. You’re a warrior, and that shield of yours tells me you want to defend as much as attack. Do you see any non-combatants here that could use your protection?” the Elf prodded in such an unsubtle manner that Emma turned to give him an amused yet irritated look, one she’d aimed at her elder siblings an incalculable amount of times in her life.

“You just want to be able to stand behind my shield as well don’t you?” she might not believe that these beasts were entirely innocent, not yet, but she was willing to admit that the human at least was harmless and worth helping.

“I’ve already admitted to that Shem. You let me stand behind your shield and I’ll fry anything that tries to sneak up on your flank, how is that for a trade?” the humour was once again laced into the knife-ear’s tone.

“My name is Kni… Emma Trevelyan, and I will stand as shield for you.” She agreed with a bow of her head, belatedly remembering to not include her Templar rank. She wasn’t a Templar any longer.

“And I am Cedric Lavellan. Ceddy to my friends, Cedric to outsiders, and knife-ear to those I’m about to eliminate.” He introduced with a flourish.

Emma was about to continue the almost friendly banter when a shrill whistling sound ripped through the air. She threw her hands over her ears instinctively and saw that the Elf and the Qunari all did the same. Even the human that seemed more asleep than awake flinched at the sound, her eyes wide as she stared up at the green tear in the sky. The whistling climbed towards a crescendo that was outside of hearing range but still felt in the skull, and it cut off with a dissatisfied rumble that left a lingering echo of sound in the air. The tear in the sky shuddered, the edges seeming to creep closer together but never actually sealing closed. The Qunari were on high alert for an attack that did not come.

"Bas in ebasit, asaam merash!" One of the Qunari seemed to be arguing with another, the pair of them nearly identical despite the gender difference.
“Bas.” The human spoke for the first time, silencing everyone even as they turned to stare at her.

Emma stared at the other human in shock, seeing life swim back into her eyes after three days of stumbling silence and wooden movements. She hadn’t expected the woman to recover her faculties, there were those that just could not be entrenched in violence without it wounding their minds and souls, but here this woman was.

“Bas.” The strange woman sounded more confident as she said it, though the other words that came out of her mouth sounded nothing like the Qunari word she seemed to recognize.

“Well… maybe we will get some answers afterall.” Cedric commented off hand to Emma.

“And maybe we’ll all survive this. If you’re going to ask for a miracle, take it from an ex-Templar, go big or go home.” Emma offered back. Nothing had really changed, she was still a prisoner to paranoid beasts that were probably innocent of wrong doing, but the only way Emma could determine that would be to stick with them and get answers. So that would be her Duty, for now.

Chapter End Notes

Qunlat translation:
“Bas in ebasit, asaam merash!”=“We don’t know what that thing is!”

Eventually a few characters are going to have some dark and nasty thoughts that may or may not be triggering for some people, and will likely be offensive to others. I’m doing it deliberately and intend to address it in the story. I will include warnings before those sections come up however, as I do not want to surprise someone with that sort of thing.
The Threat Remains (part 1)

Chapter Summary

Alena wakes up, again, and is confronted with being the Herald of a Crispy Dead Lady. She is not amused.

Alena was distantly aware of two very important things, even as she started to slow crawl back to consciousness. The first thing she was undeniably aware of was that she was not waking up inside a dungeon this time. A quick sniff gave no scent of musty rock or mildew filled straw, and there was no ache inducing dampness to the air. The second thing that filled her consciousness was the simple fact that she had to pee so badly it was either wake all the way up and deal with it, or wet the bed.

Forcing open eyelids that had sealed shut with gummy residue, Alena blinked and reassessed whether or not it was worth it to keep moving. Being awake sucked. The arm with the Mark on it was somewhere between the pain of pins and needles and hot water scald, but no matter how much Alena wiggled her fingers to shake it loose, the sensation remained. With a silent, yet irritated sigh, the Dwarven assassin shifted to sit up and finally discovered that she wasn’t actually alone in the room.

The young looking Elf dropped everything in her arms with a startled gasp. Up until Alena had laid eyes on her, the Dwarf hadn’t even heard the Elf in the room, and that was impressive. Except for the part where Alena’s mere existence seemed to terrify the poor girl into incomprehensibility.

“I didn’t know you’re awake, I swear!” the startled Elf stammered.

“Don’t worry about it, I only—“ Alena tried to wave it off but before she could, the damn woman had dropped to her frigging knees.

Bowing her head to the floor, the Elf didn’t have a trace of sarcasm in her voice as she spoke. “I beg your forgiveness, and your blessing. I am but a humble servant.”

“And I am but a slightly less humble Dwarf.” Alena admitted as she carefully shifted to the edge of the proportioned-for-humans bed.

“You are back in Haven, my Lady. They say you saved us. The Breach stopped growing, just like the Mark on your hand.” The nervous Elf explained in a rush while Alena looked around the room. “It’s all anyone has talked about for the last three days.” Finally the Elf looked up from her veneration.

“Then the danger is over?” Alena sounded doubtful even as she asked, purposefully ignoring the three days comment. If the danger was truly over with, she suspected that maybe her hand would look a little different than it currently did. If she even had a hand at all once she got rid of the painful, weird wound in it.

“The Breach is still in the sky, but that’s what they say.” Her tone was more confident, but the damn girl was still kneeling on the floor and not looking at her. As much as Alena enjoyed being taller than someone for once, this was not exactly helping her feel any less weirded out by her life
lately. “I’m certain Lady Cassandra would want to know you’ve wakened,” she scrambled to her feet as if someone were about to burst through the door and whip her, “She said ‘at once’.”

“And where is she?” Alena stood up, surprised to find that outside the pain in her hand and arm, the rest of her body felt marvelous. And too clean. Someone had been taking care of her while she was unconscious and she wasn’t wearing the exact same clothes as she had been on the mountain.

The Elf backed away even as Alena took a step forward. “In the Chantry, with the Lord Chancellor. ‘At once’ she said.” She bolted out of the room with that, leaving Alena alone, confused, and more than a little bit flabbergasted.

A quick look around the room she was in revealed a note left by whomever had been her caretaker, detailing the first day of her treatment. And it was definitely a little eerie to read how hopeless her condition had been and yet she felt fine now. Other than the note, there was a heavier coat and boots cut in Dwarven sizes that she pulled on before heading out.

Only to be greeted with a crowd of people. Her mind flashed back to the anger and violence simmering under the surface as the Seeker had walked her through the camp the last time, and Alena took an instinctive step back. No one seemed ready to pounce on her and rend her limb from limb; in fact they all stared at her with reverential awe. Somehow that was worse. The guards were stationed around, salutes clanging as she walked past them, but the people were all staring and whispering. She scurried past them, resisting the urge to hide in Stealth. But then she heard one of them whispering about her ‘being the Herald of Andraste’, and Alena decided to forgo calm and jump right into wildly discomforted. Short legs had never moved so fast in her life.

The crowd by her door was the thickest, but no matter where she looked, others were already staring right at her. In fact, there were enough eyes actively on her at the moment that Alena doubted that Stealth would even work; no matter how desperately she wanted to try it. Keeping her anxiety off of her face, Alena walked a little too quickly to be considered calm and aimed right for the Chantry doors.

One of those watching her walk asked another about why Lady Cassandra had had Alena in chains if the Seekers were supposed to know everything and Alena had to bite back an inappropriate laugh. If these humans thought that she had any better answers to offer them than Seeker Cassandra and the Nightingale had, they were going to be so disappointed when they realized that Alena knew less than even they did.

She only let the breath out once the heavy doors closed behind her and cut off all those eyes. A shudder crawled down her spine as her subconscious pinged off of too many eyes, and yet she couldn’t remember where that thought had come from.

There seemed to be no one else in the Chantry at the moment, as if people were avoiding it instead of flocking in for spiritual comfort. And as Alena approached the back rooms, she understood why. Even through a closed door she could hear them shouting at each other.

“What have you gone completely mad?” that had to be Chancellor funny hat. The lack of witnesses lingering around the door suddenly made a lot more sense. Plausible deniability if one of the other decided to accidentally ‘off’ the annoying hat. “She should be taken to Val Royeaux immediately, to be tried by whomever becomes Divine!”

Alena figured she didn’t need two guesses to determine just who it was the Chancellor wanted carted off, so she thoughtfully saved him some time and opened the doors. As expected this cut his tirade right off, for about a half of a second.
“Chain her,” he demanded of the guards standing inside the room, “I want her prepared for travel to the Capital for trial.”

“Disregard that, and leave us.” Seeker Cassandra sounded annoyed as she countermanded the Chantry clerk. The Nightingale was standing close beside her, visually supporting the Seeker even if she didn’t say anything in the argument. The guards obeyed the Seeker.

“You walk a dangerous line, Seeker.” Funny hat warned, though Alena was surprised to realize he wasn’t being unkind about it. The man might hate her guts on blind principle, but he seemed to less of an ass when he focused on helping people instead of trying to get her killed.

“The Breach is stable, but it is still a threat. I will not ignore it.” The Seeker stated plainly.

“So I’m still a suspect, even after what we just did?” Alena had no trouble believing that, expecting nothing less.

“You absolutely are.” Hat man all but snarled.

“No, she is not.” The Seeker rejected and Alena wondered if Cassandra was actually on her side, or just enjoyed pissing off bureaucrats that much.

“Someone was behind the explosion at the Conclave. Someone Most Holy did not expect.” The Nightingale spoke up; the whole tableau showing the Dwarf far more than any of the humans seemed to be aware of. “Perhaps they died with the others—or have allies who may yet live.” That was a less than subtle redirect.

“I am a suspect?” the Chancellor demanded theatrically.

“You, and many others.” The Nightingale confirmed.

“But not the prisoner?” he seemed so stunned by the revelation.

“I heard the voices in the Temple. The Divine called to her for help.” Cassandra argued, probably not for the first time. Alena kept her mouth shut over commenting on how much good asking for help seemed to have done.

“So her survival, that thing on her hand—all a coincidence?” he scoffed.

“Providence. The Maker sent her to us in our darkest hour.” She sounded so confident that it made Alena actually want to meet this Maker of hers, just so she could see what kind of god could earn the Seeker’s loyalty so completely.

“Five minutes ago you wanted me dead, and now I’m your savior?” the dubious words spilled out of Alena before she thought better of remaining silent.

Cassandra seemed annoyed by her attitude but didn’t actually say anything about it. “I was wrong, perhaps I still am. I will not, however, pretend you were not exactly what we needed when we needed it.” That was probably supposed to be complimentary, and yet Alena found herself resenting the sensation that she was now a tool for this Seeker to use instead of a person in her eyes.

“The Breach remains and your Mark is still our only hope of closing it.” The Nightingale addressed her directly.

“This is not for you to decide.” Funny hat once again pushed his opinion.
Seeker Cassandra slammed a fist thick book onto the war table, shutting the argument down and making the Chancellor flinch. An eyeball in a stylized sunburst was on the cover, and Alena had a vague sense of recognition; she’d seen that image somewhere before. “You know what this is Chancellor,” her finger jabbed the book, “a writ from the Divine, granting us the authority to act.” She stepped back from the table and looked to Alena, and then the Nightingale. “As of this moment, I declare the Inquisition reborn.” The Seeker stalked towards the Chancellor, backing him up step by step as she spoke, “We will close the Breach. We will find those responsible, and we will restore order. With or without your approval.”

The Chancellor couldn’t maintain eye contact, looking away under the Seeker’s intensity, though he did not look convinced. Alena could see the muscle of his jaw tick as he must have bitten back more commentary, but instead of verbalizing it, the funny had just stiffly stomped out of the war room.

With no one to fight, the Seeker seemed to deflate and the Nightingale took over. “This is the Divine’s directive; rebuild the Inquisition of Old. Find those who will stand against the chaos. We aren’t ready. We have no leader, no numbers, and now no Chantry support.” Despite the downright depressing monologue, the Bard didn’t sound at all beaten. As if she lived for odds like this.

“But we have no choice: we must act now. With you at our side.” The Seeker jumped in to add, looking earnestly down at Alena.

It was a masterful performance, the Nightingale’s words had set the stage and the Seeker had done an admirable job of selling it to her, but Alena wasn’t buying. Not yet. “What is the Inquisition of Old exactly?” she wanted answers and these two humans were going to give her some, and only then would she think about working with them.

“It preceded the Chantry. People who banded together to restore order in a world gone mad.” Leliana briefed.

“After, they laid down their banner and formed the Templar Order. But the Templars have lost their way.” Cassandra expanded and Alena nodded. Lost their way was a very polite way of saying that half their numbers seemed to have gone off their rockers entirely. “We need those that can do what must be done under a single banner once more.”

“But aren’t you still part of the Chantry?” Alena felt compelled to ask. Their base of operations was currently IN a Chantry, in a town built for the sole purpose of supporting the Temple of Sacred Ashes, basically a Holy site for the Chantry.

The Seeker snorted. “Is that what you see?” a real glimmer of the woman’s personality was evident finally.

“The Chantry will take time to find a new Divine, and then it will wait for her direction.” Leliana kept it simple.

“But we cannot wait. So many Grand Clerics died at the Conclave. No, we are on our own. Perhaps forever.” Cassandra stated morosely.

There really was only one thing Alena could say in response to all of this. “We’ll see how this goes.”

“That is all we ask.” The Nightingale confirmed.

“Help us fix this before it’s too late.” The Seeker requested, not begging but clearly willing to if she
thought it would help.

Alena wasn’t going to make her do that, this time at least. She shook the Seeker’s hand and then waited as the Nightingale sent Runners out for the other Advisors to come. Introductions were brief, she’d already met Commander Cullen on the mountain, but Lady Josephine Montilyet was new and delightful. She didn’t have much to add to their discussion, mostly just witnessing it as they divided the next tasks to be taken. Cullen was to focus on the soldiery, while Leliana broke off to send ravens out. Josephine started the process of contacting her nobles and Cassandra headed off to alert Haven to the changes made. None of her new human allies seemed to know what to make of her, and Alena was reluctant to tell them exactly what it was she did before developing a green hand, and so they awkwardly shuffled around each other.

The moment she could, Alena slipped away from the Advisors and pulled Stealth over her. As the familiar weight of Stealth shielded her, Alena finally felt like she could breathe. No one could see her, no one knew where she was, and if she wanted to she could walk out the gates and never return. It was an option. Maybe not the best one, or even one that was entirely viable, but she could do it. She just wasn’t going to at this time. Instead, right now Alena just needed to talk herself into the idea that she was an assassin leading a quasi-religious possible cult against a demon spitting hole in the sky.

She spun on her heel and headed back through the gates into Haven. Stealth fell away as she pushed open the door to her destination, the pub. Alena had never needed a drink as badly as she currently did. The other Dwarf was already in there and she headed to his table after he gave her a welcoming wave.

“I never did catch your full name.” Varric Tethras fished for information blatantly as she sat down.

“I never did give it.” Alena danced around the topic, not bothering to hide her amusement.

“You’re gonna be like that then?” he laughed, not at all offended.

“For as long as I can. Let me just say this, my fine Dwarven friend, when the rest of the world finally figures out who I am, Herald of Andraste will be the nicest title they’ll ever call me.” She obliquely indicated.

“That bad?” he sounded intrigued and Alena let a smirk start to tease across her lips.

“Maybe.” She shrugged and thanked the barmaid for her ale.

“You’re not going to tell me anything Slick?” he didn’t pout but she still laughed at him.

“You may call me Alena, it’s even my actual name.” she offered with a carefully unstated offer of friendship.

“That bad?” he sounded intrigued and Alena let a smirk start to tease across her lips.

“Nice name Slick, too late though.” He teased.

Alena just shrugged and drank her shitty human beer. It had to be Fereldan, it had that weird cheesy after taste to it; if it had been Orlesian then the beer would have tasted like Druffalo piss. Sadly cheesy beer was a step up the palette ladder. She still made a face as she set her cup back down.

“Not a beer drinker?” Varric asked at her expression.

“This isn’t beer, its cheese water with alcohol in it. But it’s wet and will do what I need it to if I drink enough of it.” Alena dryly critiqued.
Her left hand was casually left resting palm down on her thigh. The Mark didn’t seem to hurt her all that much now that it wasn’t crackling every fifteen steps, but she wasn’t exactly comfortable waving it around out in the open. At least not until she understood what it was capable of a bit better, starting with what exactly the shit it was and why it was in her hand. With her Mark hidden, no one at the pub was so much as giving her a second glance, not when the infamous Varric Tethras, and his even more famously infamous chest hair, was right there.

It would probably be the last chance she had to be anonymous and ignored and she reveled in it. By this time tomorrow the world would know about the Inquisition reforming and the reports of who she was and what she thrived at doing would start to trickle in. Even if the Seeker and the Nightingale couldn’t kick her out because they needed the Mark on her hand, they would treat her differently. With an internal sigh Alena just accepted the suspicion that would follow her every move shortly. But today she was just another Dwarf in Haven.

“Would you be willing to spin a yarn for a weary Dwarf?” she asked Varric, settling back into her seat even as he launched into one of the many stories of his friend Hawke. Tonight she could be a woman shaken by the chaos of the world, seeking refuge in stories already concluded, for tomorrow she would once again be the knife in the dark. The tool used in the name of expediency, even if this time her blades would be working for the good guys instead of the Carta.
The Threat Remains (part 2)

Chapter Summary

Alena meets the key players of the newly formed Inquisition, and wonders how anyone has survived as long as they have.

Chapter Notes

You'll notice where I gently, lovingly deviated from the game conversation canon. Brace for more.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Quartermaster was a racist asshole, the Healer was an elitist asshole, the Merchant was a money grubbing asshole, but at least the Blacksmith was a decent man. A bit gruff, but he had a lot of work to do, shit supplies to do it with, and less hands per task than anyone could tolerate. Alena wasn’t going to pester him outside of the brief introduction she’d done to all the primaries of Haven, but she left the meeting with him wondering if there was a chance in the Void that these people would live to see another day let alone the end of the demon spitting Breach.

Despite the Seeker having a rather poor opinion of Alena at best thus far, she had no problem then turning around and leaving Alena to wander around without so much as a discreet guard. She stayed within Haven, tackling the problem of putting faces to names while out in the world there was still goings on. No one seemed willing to straight up approach her outside of the Advisors, and the Dwarf/Elf pair she met with the Seeker, and just watching the rest of the humans left Alena wondering just how, exactly, they as a species managed to become the leading force in this world. She was running back and forth between all the ‘best and brightest of Haven’ and being sorely disappointed in what bodies filled those titles. It was enough to drive her into the Chantry, though not for solace.

Walking into the Chantry with the Seeker at her side, it caught Alena by surprise when the human asked, “Does it bother you?”

Alena looked up at the Seeker and then at her glowing hand, giving an artfully careless seeming shrug. “I just wish I knew what it was. Or how I got it. Or how to get rid of it.” She admitted that part easily enough.

“We will find out.” The Seeker promised with that same intensity she brought to everything. As if every utterance out of her mouth had to be a stirring speech, a declaration of war, or an act of piety. “What’s important is that your mark is now stable, as is the Breach.” The human clearly didn’t realize just how calculating she sounded. “You’ve given us time, and Solas believes a second attempt might succeed –provided the Mark has more power.” Alena thought that sounded suitably ominous but the Seeker kept going, “The same level of power used to open the Breach in the first place. That is not easy to come by.”

“What harm could there be in powering up something we barely understand?” Alena all but
dripped sarcasm from her pores.

“Hold on to that sense of humour,” the Seeker smirked in amusement before gesturing for Alena to follow her into the War Room. The other three human Advisors were already in there and waiting. “I informed Alena about the Mark needing more power to close the Breach for good.” The Seeker informed the other Advisors so they could commence with the plotting.

“Which means we must approach the rebel mages for help.” Leliana interjected easily.

“And I still disagree,” the lone male in the group spoke up, “the Templars could serve just as well.” He seemed confident in his statement.

The Seeker just seemed annoyed by it though, sighing in response before speaking. “We need power, Commander. Enough magic poured into that mark—”

“Might destroy us all.” He interrupted somberly. “Templars could suppress the Breach, weaken it so…”

“Pure speculation.” Leliana interrupted this time and Alena wished she had some soapstone in hand to carve while she watched the spectacle before her.

“I was a Templar, I know what they’re capable of.” The Commander’s words had Alena’s immediate but careful attention. She didn’t want the others to catch on to her sudden interest. But the Commander was not one of the names Alena remembered her fellow Cadash Clan smuggling Lyrium to. And he didn’t seem to have the perpetually twitchy movements of the addicted and experienced Templars Alena had seen. Either he had a natural resistance to Lyrium (he was too tall to be half Dwarf), or he had some seriously impressive acting skills.

“Unfortunately neither group will even speak to us yet.” Lady Josephine diplomatically broke up the verbal sparring. “The Chantry has denounced the Inquisition—and you specifically.” The Ambassador turned to politely indicate Alena. The others almost seemed to have forgotten she was still there.

“Can’t you simply ignore them?” Alena asked, not understanding how they could have an ex-Templar, ex-Seeker, ex-Bard, and an Assassin all in a room together and still have to worry about offending someone’s sensibilities. At this point of time maybe those screaming the loudest at them should take it up with the Breach directly. Maybe all that hot air would make Haven more comfortable to live in?

“If only that were possible.” Leliana smoothly drew Alena’s attention to her, shifting her body without actually moving anywhere. It was lovely and hypnotic and Alena wasn’t even going to start to fall for it.

“Some are calling you –a Dwarf- the Herald of Andraste. That frightens the Chantry.” The Ambassador explained. “To be fair, it frightened Alena too so she didn’t hold a grudge. “The remaining Clerics have declared it blasphemy, and we heretics for harbouring you.”

“Chancellor Roderick’s doing, no doubt.” The Seeker sounded both disgusted and frustrated at the same time and Alena wished she knew if it was the woman’s eyebrows or accent that let her do it.

“It limits our options. Approaching the Mages or Templars for help is currently out of the question.” The Ambassador once again hauled them back onto the topic.

“Just how am I the Herald of Andraste?” Alena couldn’t help but demand. Maybe if she’d been some blue blooded, high assed human, she could understand them calling her that. But a Dwarf?
Did these humans really not realize that Dwarves cared very little about Crispy Dead Women?

“People saw what you did at the Temple, now you stopped the Breach from growing.” The Seeker explained. “They have also heard about the woman seen in the Rift when we first found you. They believe it was Andraste.”

“Even if we tried to stop that view from spreading…” Leliana inserted herself.

“Which we have not.” The Seeker was used to working with the Nightingale and this kind of interaction showed it.

“The point is, everyone is talking about you.” Leliana stressed.

“It’s quite the title, isn’t it? How do you feel about that?” the Commander added himself into the conversation.

“I’ve certainly been called worse things.” Alena once again shrugged, not sure if they wanted her to be boasting about how amazing it was that these crazy ass humans were idolizing her on par to a deity, or if she should just start running now and hope that short legs could take her away, but Alena suspected that her answer was not at all on the list of responses they had been prepared for.

“People are desperate for a sign of hope.” Leliana recovered the fastest. “For some, you’re that sign.”

“And to others, a symbol of everything that’s gone wrong.” Lady Josephine cautioned.

“Will the Chantry attack us?” Alena wasn’t sure if humans went for a warrior priest kind of religion but she wouldn’t be surprised. Her own people had the Provings for a reason.

“With what? They have only words at their disposal.” The Commander dismissed the idea.

“And yet, they may bury us with them.” The Ambassador countered.

“There is something you can do.” The Spymaster focused on Alena. It wasn’t even a little bit subtle, but that made the multiple layers of manipulation in her words all the more poignant. Alena simply raised her eyebrows at the Spy and waited. “A Chantry Cleric by the name of Mother Giselle has asked to speak to you.” Alena wondered at the humans calling random women Mother, didn’t it ever get confusing? “She is not far, and knows those in power far better than I. Her assistance could be invaluable.”

“I’ll see what she has to say.” Alena was making no promises.

“You will find Mother Giselle tending to the wounded in the Hinterlands near Redcliffe.” The Nightingale directed.

“Look for other opportunities to expand the Inquisition’s influence while you are there.” The Commander suggested and Alena had to smile a little. She was not used to playing the figurehead; this was going to be a rough and ugly ride for everyone involved.

“We need agents to extend our reach beyond this valley, and you’re better suited than anyone to recruit them.” The Ambassador added on and the not-quite-just-an-assassin bit back a laugh. Alena was, without a doubt, the last person that was competent at recruiting others. Everything about her work was designed to keep her separate and alone.

“In the meantime, let’s think of other options. I won’t leave this all to the Herald.” The Seeker took
control of the Advisors. Oddly enough Alena got the feeling that maybe the Seeker had picked up on the Dwarf’s discomfort.

Not wanting to revel how absolutely not prepared for this she was with the plain panic in her eyes, Alena looked down at the War Table and tried to make heads or tails of it all. The table itself was painted directly with a map of the entire charted world from the Free Marches to the Fallow Mire in Ferelden, and from the edge of the Blasted Hills to the Arbour Wilds on the Orlesian side. However there were more detailed maps laying across that painted surface, with mobile markers to lay out the Inquisition positions. Clearly someone somewhere had prepared for this, at least.

“What have your ears heard, Leliana? Anything new we don’t already know about?” the Ambassador asked the Spymaster in a relaxed manner as Alena stared down at the Marker labeling where Redcliffe was and where she could find this Mother Giselle.

“No. Nothing.” Leliana’s answer was short but not unfriendly.

“So who do I need to take with me to meet this Mother Giselle? I am assuming, of course, that you’re coming with me Seeker Cassandra.” Alena looked up at the dark haired human.

“That is correct. I will accompany you, and I would recommend the apostate Solas, and even.. ugh Varric.” The Seeker even rolled her eyes as she admitted to it being a good idea to work with the other Dwarf.

Alena felt her lips quirk in amusement because she suspected that by the time the Seeker learned about Alena’s own sordid past, the human was going to have an instinctive lip curl whenever she spotted a surface Dwarf. “Since time is the issue here, I say we get on the road as soon as possible.” Alena figured that if she wasn’t actually on hand when they finally learned about her history, it was less likely that she would find herself back in that damn dungeon.

“Agreed.” The Commander all but grunted, seeming relieved that their supposed Herald wasn’t going to pitch a fuss.

“Head out at dawn, the trail to Redcliffe is marked but rough going. Scout Lace Harding is already prepping a campsite you can drop your traveling gear off at if the village by the crossroads is overrun.” The Nightingale informed.

“Has Varric met this Scout Harding yet?” Alena mused as she remembered his Hightown action serial.

“Not yet.” The Spymaster seemed to read her mind with how much laughter her words contained. That humour was nowhere to be found when Alena swung by the Nightingale’s tent later on though. Instead Alena walked in to see the Bard curled in piety, whispering the words of her faith into the cold winter air. And when the ultimate Spy started to question the gruesome demands of her god, apparently it also made sense for the human woman to turn to her demanding if she spoke for Andraste. “What does the Maker’s prophet have to say about all of this? What’s his game?”

“Awful things happen every day, get used to it.” Alena bluntly retorted. She was an assassin that worked in a family of smugglers, and no matter how much good she sought in the world, it was always to walk away disappointed, and her expectations were already set low. The fact that the Nightingale was beseeching her for answers left Alena more than a little unsettled about this whole thing.

“Get used to being a pawn, to be discarded when the Maker’s done with you?” Leliana demanded.
“As if the Inquisition will do no less to me when the time comes.” Alena didn’t mean to say that bit out loud but thankfully the Nightingale didn’t try to ply her with false comfort and lies.

“The Chantry teaches that the Maker abandoned us. He demands repentance for our sins. He demands it all. Our lives. Our deaths.” The Nightingale started to explain.

“He sounds like a nughumper.” Alena remarked, derailing the tirade that Leliana was about to go on.

“Justinia gave Him everything she had, and he left her to die.” The Bard finally stated the source of her malcontent.

“I’m sorry you’re grieving the loss of your friend.” Alena awkwardly tried to comfort. She wasn’t built for the emotional side of death, merely causing the physical side of it.

“Not just me. All of us. She was the Divine. She led the faithful, she was their heart!” Leliana argued. “If the Maker doesn’t intervene to save the best of His servants, what good is he?”

“I’d personally be more pissed off if he did randomly save some people but not others.” Alena offered philosophically.

“I used to believe I was chosen, just as some say you are.” The Nightingale continued without segue. “I thought I was fulfilling His purpose for me, working with the Divine; helping people. But now she’s dead. It was all for nothing. Serving the Maker meant nothing.”

“Well that’s a load of self-pitying nugshit.” Alena bluntly stated, making the Spymaster stare at her. “You’re the one that said you were helping people. As if you need some higher power to see you do that and give a flying shit over it for it to matter. It mattered to the people you helped. It probably matters to them more now actually. Maybe your purpose then is the same as it is now; help people that will find no help elsewhere.”

Leliana stared at her for a moment longer before giving a curt nod, not agreement but a dismissal of the topic. “Come, to work then. We will speak more later.” Alena didn’t need a written invitation to see herself out; she left.

The cold, early light of dawn was a lot less humourous for Alena’s travelling companion, mainly because Varric Tethras was a city boy, through and through. Even though he was already awake when Alena scratched at the outside of his tent, he grumbled about being too old to be roused this early. And then once they were on the road and away from Haven, she caught him grumbling some more about basically everything they came across. Until the Seeker got annoyed with the litany of everything wrong and all but told him to shut his mouth.

Thankfully the rest of the trip to the Hinterlands was blessedly silent. Right up until they heard an explosion and screaming. The Seeker’s sword was in her hand almost as fast as Alena’s daggers were, and both women were slow compared to the tingle of barrier washing over them from the Elf. None of the newly minted Inquisition spoke as they rushed the crest of the hill to try and make sense of the sounds of carnage below.

A mage was facing off against a warrior, no outward signs of Templar on him but his movements broadcasting his training nonetheless. But before the not Templar could charge the winded mage, arrows whistled through the air and sunk into the weak spots of the warrior’s gear, bringing him down in a second. A second arrow targeted the now panickeed mage and brought him down just as easily.
Alena’s eyes tracked the trajectory back and still she had to focus hard to spot the scout camouflaged in the bushes. Here eyebrows felt like they eloped into her hair line as she spotted yet another surface Dwarf. Her people were like mushrooms after the rain it seemed, underfoot and unexpected. More Inquisition scoutsghosted through the forest, sweeping over dead bodies and removing the useful items before silently creeping onwards. It was impressive to watch, an efficiency and economy to their actions that Alena appreciated while others looked away in discomfort or disgust. Her eyes met those of the other female Dwarf and she saw the intense scrutiny as the other one assessed whether or not Alena was a risk. And Alena could see in this Dwarf’s eyes that yes, she came across as a threat. It felt kind of good to be recognized as dangerous. The scout’s eyes scanned the others on the top of the hill and must have recognized the Seeker, because the scout immediately disengaged and gestured for them to come closer even as another scout brought her a raven.

Around the next bend, the crossroads were revealed and it was not even a surprise to see most of it on fire. Smoldering, but still flaming. The adorably competent scout from earlier approached them, eyeing the group with blatant curiosity.

“Seeker,” the scout greeting the one person of authority she clearly recognized and squinted at Alena for a moment longer, “The Herald of Andraste? I’ve heard the stories. Everyone has. We know what you did at the Breach. It’s odd for a Carta Dwarf to care what happens to anyone else, but you’ll get no back talk here. That’s a promise. Inquisition Scout Harding, at your service. I…all of us here, we’ll do whatever we can to help.” Scout Harding dove into the introductions without fanfare. “We avoided the fighting as best we could but it’s as bad as we were told to expect. The apostates are lashing out at everyone and the Templars are going on a slaughtering rampage. We’ve located Mother Giselle and allocated most of our forces to protect her and those she’s refusing to leave behind at the crossroads but it’s not a maintainable position. There’s just too much fighting going on in all directions and the civilians we’re guarding are losing out no matter what.”

“We will see what we can do to help,” Alena agreed for the group and none of the rest argued.

“I grew up here.” Scout Harding informed. “If you can make it through the fighting, Commander Cullen wants you to try and read Horsemaster Dennet. People always said that Dennet’s herds were the strongest and fastest this side of the Frostbacks. But with the Mage-Templar fighting getting worse, we couldn’t get to Dennet. Maker only knows if he’s even still alive. You best get going; no time to lose.”

The Crossroads were even more depressing up close than they had appeared to be from a distance. The smoldering fires were pretty alarming, but the real issue was the roving groups of murdering mages and terrorizing Templars that were both attacking everything that dared breathe. Alena and the others all engaged in battle once it was clear that neither side was going to be talked down from fighting, and without talking about it they all seemed to agree that if the force wasn’t civilian or Inquisition, they were hostile. Such a waste of life though.

Working with other professionals was quite the thrill for Alena because she’d never really had the opportunity to see others work their skills in battle. Fighting the demons up the mountain in a desperate push to not be overwhelmed by the demon hoard had left little time for standing back and watching. Seeker Cassandra was an absolute brute, her sword and shield combo drawing the most aggressive attacks and she never once flinched in the face of them. Solas was all graceful poise, a smooth economy of movement and yet despite being a mage Alena swore he moved like a Rogue. Varric stood at a distance and laughed as he unloaded Bianca at them. Neither the Templars nor the mages stood a chance, but considering that neither side was going to back down despite the Inquisition identifying itself as non-hostile… their deaths left little burden on Alena’s conscience.
Slaughtering their way into the civilian camp at the Crossroads didn’t even stir a fuss from those
collect there, which said louder than words that it was an all too common experience anymore.
Alena walked in with the Seeker, the Apostate, and the Other Dwarf at her back and was impressed
to see how much the limited numbers of Inquisition scouts managed to do with supplies that were
even more limited. As she walked through the people, the weight of their eyes on her was only
slightly lighter than the expectations resting on her shoulders.

Mother Giselle was tending to wounded soldiers, one of whom was protesting the mage healers.
Stupid, superstitious and backwards, but the Mother was able to talk the man around into accepting
the help. Alena watched the whole exchange and promised herself that she would weight each
word of this human’s mouth carefully. She was clearly skilled at manipulation, and had no trouble
ignoring someone’s decision or personal desires if she felt she knew better.

“Mother Giselle?” Alena was going to play it as ‘dumb and harmless’ as possible for as long as
possible.

“I am. And you must be the one they’re calling the Herald of Andraste.” The human woman was
good, but Alena still caught the very deliberate word choices. If she wanted to play it like that,
Alena was more than game; she was the heir and daughter of House Cadash.

“I must be. I was told you asked for me.” Alena smiled as she said it, all big eyed and gap-toothed.
Alena knew exactly how she looked to most humans, and she played up the simpleton routine if
needed. Her pride was never as strong as her pragmatism.

“I know of the Chantry’s denouncement, and I’m familiar with those behind it.” Mother Giselle
started to walk and never looked to see if Alena was following. Alena gave Varric a quick glance
and found him already watching her, picking up on the attitude as well. “I won’t lie to you: some of
them are grandstanding, hoping to increase their chances of becoming the new Divine.” The
Mother started to explain. As if she were not doing the exact same thing, maybe not to become the
Divine, but to align herself with the side she believes will become the next powerhouse. “Some are
simply terrified. So many good people, senselessly taken from us…”

“What happened was horrible.” It’s hard to tug on the emotional heartstrings of a woman who is
paid to murder for a living and Alena wasn’t going to be so easily played.

“Fear makes us desperate, but hopefully not beyond reason.” This Mother Giselle continued sagely.
Alena wondered if she would be this condescending and pedantic to a human, or if this was just the
woman’s personality. “Go to them; convince the remaining clerics you are no demon to be feared.
They have heard only frightful tales of you. Give them something else to believe.”

Alena had to fight a very real urge to cackle. Sadly there was going to be absolutely NOTHING
comforting for them to learn about who she actually is and what she can do with very little effort.
“That won’t just make it worse?” she asked, trying to keep the amusement out of her voice but the
smirk flashing across Varric’s face warned that she was failing.

“Because you are not human?” Mother Giselle finally dropped the shoe.

“That too.” Alena nodded, finally quashing the need to laugh.

“Let me put it this way; you needn’t convince them all. You just need some of them to doubt. Their
power is their unified voice. Take that from them, and you receive the time you need.” That was
actually good advice, and the Mother-lady had dropped some of the smarmy attitude.

“It’s good of you to do this.” Alena needed to try and suss out this woman’s motivations if she
wanted to stay ahead of her.

“I honestly don’t know if you’ve been touched by Fate or sent to help us… but I hope.” The human looked out over the civilians under her current care. “Hope is what we need now. The people will listen to your rallying call, as they will listen to no other. You could build the Inquisition into a force that will deliver us… or destroy us.”

“Not like you need much help with the destroying part. Seems that the humans definitely have that down pat.” Alena quipped in with a smile, as if her words were a joke instead of the flat out truth.

Mother Giselle held the silence for a beat longer, then forged on as if Alena hadn’t spoken. “I will go to Haven and provide Sister Leliana the names of those in the Chantry who would be amenable to a gathering. It is not much, but I will do whatever I can.” She promised before allowing one of the Inquisition soldiers to guide her away.

Alena actually found that last line from the human to be a little ominous, but she kept her teeth locked around a parting comment. No need to annoy and alienate one of the few humans in a funny hat that was willing to work with her still. Her companions took their cues from her, remaining silent on the matter even though they’d clearly overheard all of it.

The Inquisition had only spent a mere handful of days as an active force in the Hinterlands and already Alena got the impression that people were hanging all their hopes and prayers onto them. It was more than a little daunting and left her wondering about the Maker, the Ancestors, and any other higher power that should have been the qualified person to step in and take over. Why everyone was so certain that Alena could help, let alone that she would; even Alena herself doubted just what one violently capable if not naturally inclined Dwarf with a green hand could do.

Chapter End Notes

Did anyone else ever find that as much as you liked Mother Giselle, you also wanted to throttle her on several occasions?

Also, forgive any issues with this chapter. This has not been a kind week on my life and this chapter got the short end of the stick because of that.
Red Sky at Morning

Chapter Summary

The Valo-Kas flee North, scrambling for answers even as Dawn scrambles for sanity. She starts to get a grip, as well as some nuggets of information that will leave everyone very unsettled.

Chapter Notes

This chapter feels like so much filler for me, but it's allowing me to shove the rest of the story into 'get on with it!' mode.

Blood dripped from a small gash in Dawn’s forehead, the worst physical wound she'd received since arriving here. A frozen projectile launched from a demon had ricocheted off of a shield and nicked her, and it was so cold that it burned. But even as the deadly chill faded and the blood dripped more freely Dawn dabbed at it while the giants protecting her tore through the demons. Her large, horned captors hustled everyone forwards even as they provided protection, and there was efficiency to their movements that screamed of competence. The pregnant one scanned the entire group for injuries, grunted at the blood on Dawn's face and then muttered something. Ever since Dawn had thought she recognized one of their words, her apparently not demonic captors had been trying to communicate with her but it was not a success. Everyone was getting frustrated with it, it seemed. Not that Dawn really felt much around her grief.

If she’d been able to concentrate, Dawn would have marveled at the fact that they'd been on the move for over twenty hours and no one looked tired yet. But she was still finding herself suddenly snapping back into focusing on what was going on; it wasn't that she was deliberately trying to space out, but shock still had its clammy fist wrapped around her brain. The best example of that was that Dawn didn't know how long she'd been here for; and it was an alarming realization after one of the horned giants had patched her face up with a weird sticky sap. She was utterly at their mercy. The giant was her care taker and guard it seemed; at least he was always the one watching her for those moments of lucidity and whenever he saw them, he tried to interact with her. She also suspected that if she were to suddenly turn dangerous he'd be the one to deal with that. Not that she'd proven to be much of anything except a burden thus far.

They weren't going to let her die, Dawn realized that thoroughly. These...Qunari, she reluctantly allowed herself to ascribe the name, were deliberately keeping her alive; even from herself. It wasn't that Dawn was suicidal even, she just had no appetite. Her moods were running the gamut from unendurable grief, to exhausted numbness, to angry denial, and back to exhaustion. Sleep offered no respite either; Larry’s murder replayed inside her head with all the little details she had witnessed but not truly take in before. Like how it sounded, that pained gasp that tore her world apart. All too often Dawn would jolt awake from her nightmares to scramble outside and retch. Occasionally the pregnant Qunari would be her miserable companion.
It left Dawn shambling in a fugue most of the time, and she barely touched any food. Of course, the giant that seemed to have adopted her noticed. And when she refused to eat the soup he brought her, he recruited the Qunari with the same colouring as him to hold Dawn bodily still while he poured the soup down her throat. It wasn't malicious, just utterly mercenary. And it was particularly effective, Dawn dutifully spooned whatever food she was handed into her mouth. Except one type of dried fruit; it was the horrid evolution of grapefruit and pineapple and Dawn spat it out after the first bite. The others laughed at her disgusted noises. Thankfully they seemed content to let her skip out on that delicacy.

The friendly giant approached her and handed her a water skin, to which Dawn instinctively said Thank you in a language he couldn't understand. And yet she knew that he meant you're welcome when he replied. He flashed a broad smile that was comforting despite the teeth that were more fang than not. Now that she was trying to listen, more and more often the context would help her interpret the languages. It was just her pervasive fatigue that kept her from really trying to pay attention to the world she was being moved through.

She was so tired of being wrung out, emotionally and physically, and yet there seemed to be nothing for her to do but endure because the moments she felt clear headed enough to think, inevitably the memories returned. Her spine felt rigid, a tenseness that she couldn't relax no matter how much discomfort it caused, her hands were almost always curled into tight fists, and her jaw ached from how hard her teeth were clenched. Dawn had to compulsively swallow the sour in her mouth down, and found it useful to count her steps to keep track of her timing and fill her head with noise. But still sometimes she would be haunted by the reality that she was living.

It was hard for her to accept that any of this was real; landing in a world that disturbingly resembles a video game and having her husband murdered by a demon right in front of her eyes both made denial a very tempting place to set up camp and live. But Dawn's own brain tore that delusion apart with ruthless logic: there was no schizophrenia in her family, it had been too long and recallable for it to be a dream, and the last time Dawn had ever actually played the game, none of the characters had been pregnant. Maybe she could believe that she was insane and delusional, if she couldn't also see the misery in the Qunari's face when she was vomiting in the early morning hours. She had never once even heard of someone imagining another person, let alone a person of a different species, being in the family way during a psychotic break. It was the incongruous detail that slapped her in the face every time. This wasn't perfectly the Thedas of the games she played, but neither was it a mere brain malfunction disguising her home. If this world was real, and not a simulacrum of her video game, Dawn was very much screwed and that fear did not help her settle any. And if she wanted to begin to understand the world that was actively trying to kill her, she had to find a way out of the mire of her emotions.

So Dawn counted her heartbeat until the sound of it had no meaning to her any more. Her breathing too was tallied into oblivion. Footsteps were endless though and never failed her, her body however did. Her legs gave out as one leg cramped tightly, her knee lifting in towards her chest instinctively. Dawn tried to muffle her cry of pain but the healer giant scooped her right off the ground, revealing his strength. Dawn was never light, and with married life being sedentary, she'd packed on some extra pounds. The last time she'd checked, she'd been 93 kilos and the Qunari mage carried her easily.

It was a literal magic touch that helped ease the over strained muscles in her leg and her feet were back on the ground moments later. But her body had just been healed by magic. Which was real here. The static inside Dawn's head swarmed up and overwhelmed her.

It was night time when Dawn was able to resurface from inside herself. Night time and they had set up camp already. Night time, camp was set up, and Dawn was seated in front of a fire with a bowl
of food in her hands. No one was watching her directly, but they were all so carefully not staring at her while they watched her that she knew she had been acting strangely.

She had to stop that, or else Dawn was severely hamstringing these people who had put a lot of effort into keeping her alive so far. She did not want to die, she did not. No matter how much it hurt to think of living with Larry gone, Dawn also knew that she was capable of surviving even this. She just had to focus, to stop letting herself sink into the despair. It could sit there inside her until the pain became nonsensical, but she would not allow her weakness to condemn these people too, even if Dawn was not too sure what to make of the non-Qunari companions being dragged along with her.

She could not quite call them allies, especially not when the only other human spent so much time glaring at everyone and everything, but the Elf certainly seemed curious about her. Like her captor/saviors, they did not know how to communicate with her in a language she could understand, but it was clear even to Dawn that the Elf was a mage. He had no staff but it was hard to overlook the man occasionally flicking bits of Fade energy off of his fingertips and winking at her as he caught her staring.

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Cedric thought it was the most fascinating thing to see the woman from the Fade swim up from the depths of her madness. Between her nightmares, vomiting, and all the over exertion, her fragile mental state was understandable. He just happened to be watching at the right moment to see her decide she was going to live. “Lanun’ven’ur’ alas! Satham ma vegarem.” Cedric softly called out to her when her eyes focused on his.

The human stared at him for a moment and a thoughtful frown crossed her face. “Ah… Ander… Andaran….Ahti… atish’an.” she struggled through, trying the words a couple of times before he started to recognize his own language in her terrible accent.

“Andaran atish’an! You speak Elvhen?!” his excitement drew everyone’s attention and he could see the human woman’s alarm.

She immediately started to shake her head. The words the poured out of her mouth were once again unintelligible to him, and he felt disappointed that her Elvhen was a poorly enunciated greeting only. Although if he were being fair, it was still absolutely astonishing that this human knew a phrase in Elvhen but understood nothing of Trade.

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“How in the void did she understand that?” Emma Trevelyan demanded of him.

He gave the young woman an amused look. “She said the equivalent of hello in my language. I’m guessing that wherever it is she is from, they have basic polite conversation. At least in a civilized language.” He couldn’t resist teasing.

“She knows a word in Qunlat, and a phrase in Elvhen, and nothing of any of the human languages? You might be a leaf eating root brain but I never took you for stupid.” The human insulted with ease. Cedric grinned at her, it was as much fun to hear her try to use insults other than the standard ones for Elves as it was to then return the favour.

“Either she grew up very isolated, she’s a brilliant liar, or isn’t from anywhere near here. Or did you have some other conspiracy rattling around that tin can you call a brain?” he lightly teased back.

“Oh, ouch, I am cut to the quick. An Elf that can’t figure out shoes is insulting my intelligence.”
Trevelyan countered.

“If you honestly believe an entire species cannot figure out shoes, you’re dumber than you look and that’s just sad.” Cedric waved off her attempt. “Unlike some people who insist on wrapping themselves up in layers of metal, my People like to feel the world around them. We get a lot of input about the earth beneath our feet through our feet.”

“Things like ‘this is disgusting’, ‘that is cold’, ‘ow sharp’?” Emma asked pointedly.

“Occasionally. Though right now my cold, dirty feet are telling me that there are others nearby.” Cedric’s words acted as a warning for all of the Grey Ones still listening in.

“Maferath’s Mistake, how do you know that?” Emma demanded even as the beasts jumped into formation around her.

“I just stepped on still slightly warm gob of spit.” Cedric announced gleefully even as Fade energy danced down his arms to coat his hands.

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Emma snarled but not at his words, her wrath was directed towards the sudden lurch inside her gut at the sensation of magic close at hand. She was once again wearing her armour, and was even allowed her shield, but no blade was entrusted to her hand. The Elf was not as restricted in ability as her, since there was no way to leash his magic. Emma was still a trained Templar even if she wasn’t powered by Lyrium any longer, she could Smite. Once. And then lie down for a day, but it would work. But there were three mages on her side alone and Emma knew that as much as she disliked her current situation, it was not at all the worst one she could have found herself in. And the damn Elf was right, in that the one non-combatant they had Emma felt duty bound to protect. Just like everyone else in this motley group it seemed.

At least the strange human wasn’t as useless as she had been the last few days. Emma wasn’t entirely sure how long they’d all been on the move as these Qunari beasts had a truly impossible ability to keep moving, but the other human had spent the majority of that time being led around like a Tranquil; only she had the distressing tendency to sob in her sleep. Now though, Emma could see the whites of the woman’s eyes flashing as the attackers targeting their camp charged into view.

The Qunari had been leading them North from the Conclave, up into the Frostbacks and towards Orzammar, and these attackers reflected that remoteness. Men that had been driven away from even the shady fringes of trader society boiled out on the attack, their faces were haggard, usually covered in matted and unkempt beards, and Emma could smell them even with layers of Qunari between her and the attackers. It wasn’t a fight; even with multiple non-combatants the Qunari tore through their opponents with a brutal efficiency that would haunt Emma’s nightmares. There was just something about seeing a dead body come back to life and act under another’s commands that just drove the collywobbles down Emma’s spine. Thankfully the attacking men were driven back quickly, their desperation not strong enough to flog them onwards, and the attackers broke and fled without much effort.

The dead on the floor were none of their own, and Emma watched with dispassion as the Qunari beasts quickly throat cut to ensure their stillness. Her eyes tracked their efficient movements, and then would inevitably search out the other human, seeing the woman staring down at the dead. But she wasn’t brain dead, at least not like she had been the last while. The woman was wide eyes, trembling, and breathing too fast, but she seemed to be forcing herself to stare at it all. And the Elf’s words from earlier still sat unsettled within Emma’s breast. Either this human was utterly
unfamiliar with any of the things she should have been familiar with, or there was an explanation only the Maker Himself knew, and Emma was going to have to have Faith that He knew what He was doing.

“Though all before me is shadow, Yet shall the Maker be my guide. I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond. For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost. I am not alone. Even As I stumble on the path With my eyes closed, yet I see The Light is here. Draw your last breath, my friends. Cross the Veil and the Fade and all the stars in the sky. Rest at the Maker's right hand, And be Forgiven.”

Emma didn’t even notice the others watching her as she spoke; she simply said the words of her Faith. Yes these men had been bandits. Yes, they would have dealt unspeakable horrors upon her body if the situation had been different, and yes she still wished them on to the Maker’s side. When Emma Trevelyan looked up, it was to the realization that for the first time in her life, she was the only Andrastrian. Cedric was Dalish with their Creators if the way he swore was evidence, and these Qunari followed whatever edict or faith that their beastly brethren preached in all likelihood. But it was seeing the human watch her with blank curiosity that really drove home the fact that she had no familiarity with Emma’s Faith. Suddenly it became very easy for Emma to decide that she was going to have to take this woman under her protection; her Faith and her Family made her duty clear.

“Emma Trevelyan.” She offered her hand to the other human woman and was surprised when she didn’t hesitate to take it.

“Dawn Wesson.” The introduction was clear, without hesitation, and followed by a sentence that Emma understood nothing out of except for the word Templar.

“She understands the most nonsensical words of Trade. Cedric Lavellan, my curious little Shemlen.” Cedric inserted himself into the exchange smoothly, going so far as to kiss the back of Dawn’s hand as if he were a courtier instead of a Dalish Elf on the run with a bunch of Qunari.

“Trevelyan….Lavellan….” the human apparently named Dawn tried out their Clan names with a concerned look on her face. Her eyes scanned over the Qunari and she said something in that weird language of hers.

“Did she just say Adaar?” one of the Qunari beasts demanded.

“Yes she did.” Another one answered and Emma could see the tenseness of their muscles.

“How the hell does this thing know our name?” one of the female beasts demanded.

“Because any of us know the answer to that.” The Elf mouthed off lightly.

“She knows something, gibberish language or not.” Another Qunari spoke up, ignoring the captives entirely.

“So far she knows my name, the Elf’s name, and a last name for one of you.” Emma found herself speaking up, surprising everyone with the lack of anger in her voice. “How about we try to increase the amount of words she knows, and then we can focus on figuring out what she knows.” The ex-Templar suggested, unconsciously moving her armoured body to stand closer to the unprotected human.

“Kaaris add that to your duty list as well. Keep her alive, keep increasing her vocabulary, and find out what you can of what she knows. Everyone else, pack up and let’s move out.” The pregnant
Qunari commanded and everyone jumped into action, even Emma.

Although now she wasn’t merely satisfied to endure her captivity and entertain vague ideas of duty and honor; Emma Trevelyan was going to be a living example of the Canticle of Benediction. She would stand before the corrupt and the wicked and not falter, she would be the champion of the just, the righteous light in the darkness. And Emma Trevelyan was determined that if this Dawn Wesson was not currently Andrastian, she would want to be based off of Emma’s own demonstrations.

Chapter End Notes

@Eisen- I tried to address the issue you brought up in a previous chapter, so Dawn and the other's aren't using proper names that they wouldn't know unless asked. I hope that helps make this read more fluidly.

Elvhen
‘Lanun’ven’ur’alas! Satham ma vegarem.” = It's a gift from the Creators! I'm glad that you came back!

Andaran atish’an! = customary Elvhen greeting

*Prayer for the dead is from the Chant of Light, Trials 1:1-1:16
Alena stared at yet another bear’s furry back end and wondered if maybe it was just the Mark in
her hand that was summoning them. There had to be a reasonable explanation for the neigh endless
stream of bears, because Alena had gone through the Hinterlands many times before and had never
encountered that many of them. Maybe because they were all lying in wait for this very moment.
Alena actually growled as the latest bear groaned as it died.

“Any other furry thing needs me to rip it apart?” Alena shouted out at the world, no one voicing a
response.

Of course the look on Solas the Elf mage-I’m-hiding-something’s face was both amused and
exasperated. The Seeker was too busy scraping more bear guts off of her sword, and Varric was
cheerily whistling as he yanked his bolts back out of the dead bear.

“Herald?” one of the scouts hesitated to approach while the Dwarf was seething mad, but Alena
turned a harmless smile to the human.

“Yes Scout Fonesca?” Alena had made a point to memorize names to faces as much as possible.
She knew how she worked and all too often it was superiors not paying attention to their people
that allowed her to sneak in.

“Word’s in from Haven for you Ser. Corporal Vale sent word up from the Crossroads, the supplies
you marked off have been located and distributed.” The Scout saluted even as they handed over the
packet of papers.

“Thank you Fonesca, we’ve gone through enough sodding bears this past week that if you want to
lay claim to one of the pelts, I’m making sure the Scouts get first grab.” Alena offered. Only about
half the Scouts had gone in for a bear pelt, and likely even less than half of that were intending to
use the pelt for their own purposes. Without a word but with another salute, Scout Fonesca fell
back to let Alena read the papers handed to her.

A quick scrawl from the Nightingale on a torn scrap set the mood. All it read was Alena Cadash-
53 confirmed. A smirk twisted Alena’s lips into a haughty smile. So the Nightingale had figured
out who she was, as evidenced by her full name, and more the Bard had discovered what Alena did.
53 confirmed kills, at least those that could be tied back to her in any way shape or form. The
number of those she had actually taken out on the Carta’s command was definitely higher than
that. But it was nice of the Bard to give Alena a heads up on the fact that her anonymity was
officially gone. The other letters were more verbose but far less interesting to Alena’s direct
entertainment and by this point of time, entertainment was all Alena had to look forward to.

Alena, the Seeker, Solas, and Varric had been kicking around the Hinterlands for nearly two weeks
now putting out metaphorical as well as literal fires. Horse Master Dennet was still alive, but
wasn’t willing to relocate until he felt his home and family would not suffer in his absence. It was
teeth gnashingly time wasting and yet none of Alena’s companions said anything in askance about
it. Taking out demon-possessed wolves and marking off locations for watchtowers were not the
worst things Alena had ever been asked to do; it was no bones to improve lives instead of end them.

Cullen’s report had information on the Winterwatch Tower cult but unlike the planned assaults on
both the Mages in the Witchwood and the Templars off the Westroad, this one left the approach
planning up to Alena. That was probably for the best because she’d promptly ignored the
‘recommended’ plans and had gone with the direct input of her team in those instances anyways.
Solas had made recommendations for handling the rebel mages with the least amount of lives lost,
and Cassandra had done the same for subduing the Templars. According to the carefully penned
parchment in her hand though, Alena saw that the cult in the Tower wasn’t overtly hostile.

There was a note not from her Advisors though, one of the scouts had found it on a dead body and
passed it on. With a snort of wry amusement, Alena handed the note over to the politely curious
Cassandra. “Apparently we should hack the claws off of the bears we’ve been killing; they’re
useful in some of the crafting we need for supplies.”

“We’re already butchering the bears for meat and furs, why not claws as well. Is there any worth
for other parts?” Varric asked easily, seeming as ready to sell to the black market as he was using
the goods himself.

“You tell me, I’m not that kind of Carta Dwarf.” Alena winked at him as she shuffled to the next
note. This one was from another scout, Belette this time, warning of the ‘bandits’ on the East road,
while another scout was reporting in about the mercenaries in the Grand Forest Villa. Since they
were already at Dwarfson’s Pass in the camp, the Grand Forest Villa was closer and would get
handled first. Probably for the best, Alena remembered the poor fellow at the Crossroads freaking
out over his wife’s breathing troubles.

“So what are our plans?” The Seeker asked in her distinct accent.

“We get to go play with a cult in the mountains and then tackle a Villa full of mercenaries stirring
up trouble.” Alena kept it succinct, handing over the page with information for expediency’s sake.

“Is that all? We’ll be back in time for late morning tea, your favourite time Chuckles.” Varric
teased the taciturn Elf.

“Now if only we had a storyteller with actual talent, we could make a party of it.” Solas quipped
back, but Varric just laughed at the insult.
“Maker give me strength.” Cassandra sighed under her breath and Alena kept her snigger to herself.

The map said that getting to this Winterswatch Tower was a Southerly wander, and there were several other things in the general area that Alena wanted to check out too, so they packed for literal bear, metaphorical bear, figurative bear, and then imaginative bear. Alena was seriously considering moving to the desert just to avoid seeing any more Ancestor’s Blasted bears.

A nervous looking scout approached Alena and her crew of taller misfits as they travelled the ‘safe’ route. “Excuse me? Have you seen another scout, an Elf?”

“Young friend hasn’t reported back?” Alena asked, having already picked up on the fact that scouts were sent out in pairs that kept tabs on each other.

“Ritts was supposed to be checking on some apostates. I’m on duty here, or I’d go look for her.” The scout’s country accent revealed that he was a local.

“I’ll send her back once we come across her.” Alena comforted, not wanting to point out that likely his friend was already dead. Alena had no problem being brutally honest, but there’s a line between being an honest person and being a cruel asshole and claiming it as honesty.

“Thanks. She should have been back by now.” He continued to fret and likely would until she came back with news.

“Over here. A Templar, I believe.” Cassandra called out from further up the trail, a hint of sorrow in her voice. Alena figured out why when the Seeker handed her a goodbye note for the man’s mage lover, and her phylactery. Basically the ultimate demonstration of loyalty he could have ever given, if Alena understood the tin suited Templars well enough.

“Lyrium withdrawal.” Alena spat the words out after reading about the man’s unending ‘terrors’. Poor bastard left a corrupt order and paid for his integrity with his life.

Sadly she expected this to be the first dead body they crossed; Alena was expecting Ritts the scout to be the next one. However, Alena’s pessimistic view was quickly belied when they heard fighting up ahead and she spotted a Scout in Inquisition uniform. Her companions didn’t hesitate to rush to the Scout’s aid.
Varric rained down a hailstorm of bolts, chasing the attackers back a few steps and buying time for Cassandra to charge in with her shield, drawing their attention to the more aggressive fighter. The Scout danced back, retreating to a safe distance to unleash her arrows on a retreating attacker. Alena was impressed with the woman’s accuracy even while panting for breath. Alone she hadn’t stood a chance, but with Alena and her companions to back her up, the Scout had the Templar deserters running for the hills quickly.
“Thank you, if not for you, I’d be dead. I guess I should go report back in?” Ritts suggested nervously, eyes darting everywhere in a blatant display of guilt. Alena scanned the area quickly and figured out in seconds just why exactly this Ritts looked like a cat caught hunting the canary. There was a romantic picnic set up with places for two, although the dead mage at their feet was on her own. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that Ritts was the other lover here.

Alena met Ritts’ gaze and tilted her head down to indicate the corpse. “She got a name?”

“You were trying to find a moment’s peace in the midst of this war.” Alena understood the appeal easily. She’d had her own string of lovers that could only be explained by a weird combination of adrenaline, stress, and a little insanity.

“We were… yes. At first she was just a mage who saw me and didn’t attack, but later we…” Ritts started to explain but cut herself off. “So, are you going to report me?”

“Look kid, if you can talk an apostate out of her pants in the middle of a war, you’ve got a gift. Use it.” Varric spoke up before she could and Alena almost ruined it all by laughing. “Make contacts, get information, and help the Inquisition. Do that, and our lips are sealed.” All because hers hadn’t been.

“All right, I can do that. And… thanks for going easy on me.” Ritts at least sounded sincere.

They didn’t tarry much longer, simply gave Ritts the information she needed to be in contact with the Nightingale’s other agents and then they were back on the road. Or more accurately, what had started as the beaten trail of animal pathways and has grown to be a battered human footpath. Enough wild animals scampered away from them that Alena felt comfortable walking down the only marked trail without constantly looking over her shoulder.

A low stone wall with lit braziers drew the eye up the trail and towards a closed gate in a mountain cliff. This must be the infamous Winterswatch Tower, though Alena didn’t see an actual Tower so much as a small fort built into a mountain. Even more than that, she was surprised to see someone standing outside, seemingly waiting for her.

“I know you. They call you the ‘Herald of Andraste’ for what you did at Haven.” The well-dressed Lady called out with disbelief and accusation in her voice. “But are you? The Maker has not told me.” As if it were absolutely reasonable for this Lady to expect a god to come give her news updates personally. Why was it that those already in a position of privilege and power always seemed to seek out ways to have even more power over others? Alena would bet good money on
the fact that this lady was using fear and confusion to bully others into going along with her plans. It made Alena’s knives itch.

“I am the Herald of Andraste.” Alena said confidently, lying with a skill honed over decades. She may not actually believe it, but any other response would have this woman acting even more condescendingly haughty.

“And do you claim to hold power over the Rifts the Maker has opened in the sky?” sharpened doubt laced the woman’s words, scorn a subtle rejection if one listened for it.

“I can seal Rifts, yes.” This time Alena didn’t have to lie.

“Then prove it.” The Lady sounded smug; as if she would joyously dance a jig were Alena to fail. “Show me that the Rifts bend to your will, the Will of the Maker. Show me the power you wield.” She demanded, as if it were her right to demand proof from anyone. Alena really, truly wanted to feed this Lady’s liver to her knives. “This cult… what are you doing here? What is it you think is happening?” Alena didn’t succeed in hiding how unimpressed she was.

“The Chantry has fallen, and shown its imperfection in doing so. The Chant of Light was a lie. It was arrogance to think that mortal lips could frame the Maker’s will, and so we wait in silence.” Like sacrificial lambs from old barbarian tales. “The Maker has opened the sky. Soon He will call His chosen back to the Golden City.” The Lady stated it all as if this were indisputable logic, though Alena could see a few flaws and holes in the human’s reasoning. But why let a little sanity ruin a perfectly terrible plan?

The Seeker shifted slightly closer to Alena, a small reminder that technically Alena was supposed to be building rapport with people instead of insulting them. Her original response, as well as the second one that came to mind, were kept to herself. “I’ll get cracking then.” Alena finally settled on saying.

“Until the Maker brings you back to us.” The Lady nodded and let them pass into the now opening gates.

“I suppose it only natural that some would turn to worshipping the Breach.” Solas sounded oddly sad by this fact.

“Says the guy whose pantheon includes a deer.” Varric warningly teased back. Alena found it interesting to realize that maybe her fellow Dwarf was far more surface than she had first assumed.

“What gods I may worship are not of your concern, son of Stone.” Solas snapped back, shutting down that lighthearted banter.
“Let’s find the kid for that breathing spell.” Alena refocused her people, too annoyed to handle squabbling.

Up a flight of stairs, through several weirdly laid out rooms and then finally up an Ancestors forsaken ladder AGAIN (Alena’s shoulders still ached from the day of endless climbing), and finally they found the specific young Elf they were searching for. He seemed as startled to see them rush into the room as they were to nearly run over him.

“I greet you, my name is Hyndel.” He offered as everyone recovered into order.

“Hyndel, your mother can’t breathe. Your father sent me here for potion.” Alena didn’t bother with pleasantries.

“What?” his immediate concern was gratifying at least. “She was fine! She hasn’t had the breathing trouble in… all right. I can help.” He rushed. “Here, I have some already made. Go; take it to her now please! And tell them I hope they find the Light in their own way.”

Alena grabbed the vial and pocketed it swiftly, but caught the pinched expression on Solas’ face in her peripheral vision. “Solas?” she turned to face her companion, but he seemed to take it as a prompting for something else.

“You have the ears of the Elvhen People, boy, but not the Soul.” Alena felt her eyebrow twitch at the bald Elf’s harshness. “You can feel the effects of the Breach anywhere in the world. You can only help your family by going to them.”

“I…” the boy was clearly taken aback. “Perhaps you’re right. Even if this world is just an illusion soon to be cast off, I should make my parents comfortable. I’ll gather my things and go directly.” Alena kept her commentary behind her teeth where it belonged. Solas might be an actual ass half the time, but his methods did get results.

One idiot handled, Alena walked with her group further into the Tower, ignoring the overt commentary about them as they passed cultists by. At least people were generally staying out of their way as they explored and Alena tried to find a way down to the ground level again that didn’t just involve hurling herself over a railing or using another bleeding ladder. It should not have surprised her to find herself in an area clearly set up to be a drinking zone before she found her stairway down. Never trust a drunk on a ladder.

Before Alena could escape to solid ground again, someone politely stepped in her way. “Excuse me, while you were coming up, did you meet a young noblewoman with blond hair and pale green eyes? Lady Vellina should be here. We need to be together when the Maker comes.”

“Where would your friend be?” Alena hesitated to ask, already knowing the likely conclusion to this story.
“She is my love and she should be here. I wrote to her weeks ago.” He sounded so hopeful still. “I know the path up the hills is dangerous, but surely the mages and Templars would not trouble a young Lady.” Oh how sweet and innocent this grown man managed to be.

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you.” Alena shrugged, not actually knowing for sure what had happened to his lady Vellina; though she could suspect.

“Please, if you meet my beloved, tell her I am waiting.” He requested and Alena gave him a nod. What was it with people thinking she had time, or the ability to care, about finding the people they’d lost. Sadly, as bitter and cynical as Alena liked to pretend to be sometimes, it seemed that people saw right through that.

Finally Alena got to use a staircase, and she gladly explored the ground floor. She grunted as her left hand flared with pain; a Rift was close by. Guess it was time to prove to the gate Lady that she was at least capable of ruining her cult. Seeker Cassandra roared as she charged forwards into battle, her shield glinting in the green light of the Rift. A barrier tingled over her skin, a negligent seeming gesture from Solas belying how powerful that protective layer was, and Varric whistled a counterpoint to Bianca’s song. With an amused roll of her eyes, Alena decided to slink around the edge of the fight and target one of the Lesser Terror’s exposed flanks. It sank into the ground to avoid her assault and she shifted tactics to try and pull the Rift closed.

That always seemed to really work up the demons and they circled around to attack her again but Alena pulled Stealth over her even as Cassandra bellowed out another challenge. Barely shifting spots, Alena once again focused on pulling the Rift closed, though that rendered her Stealth useless. Hard to overlook the woman with the glowing green hand, but thankfully a rampaging Seeker, a pissed off Elf mage and a Dwarf with a dance in his step proved more than enough to handle them. It wasn’t a hard fight, though it wasn’t something Alena would carelessly approach, and her companions all followed her out of the lowered area in high spirits.

Only for Alena to stop dead in her tracks as she realized that all the cultists had watched and were now all but genuflecting towards her. It was discomforting in the least. No one spoke as they passed by this time, and her companions hurried after her as if they were as unsettled by this as she was.

“Maker’s tears! I was a fool to have doubted you.” The gate Lady seemed to have no problem breaking the silence of the other cultists. No one in the crowd even bothered to pretend to not be watching now. “How may we serve you, Herald of Andraste?”

And apparently just like that Alena had found herself an army of followers. Mostly useless, but still an army. “I am assuming that not all your people here are suited for the exact same tasks, so why don’t you collect volunteers for three separate groups? One to help the refugees, one to gather information, and the last to help spread the word about how the Inquisition is taking in those that needs protection and help.” Alena suggested as diplomatically as possible and could swear she felt the Seeker’s approval even if she couldn’t see the woman behind her.
The Lady nodded her head in acceptance. “When the Maker calls you to your great purpose, remember that we served you.” Her words all but chased Alena out of the Tower.

“Did anyone else find that creepy and uncomfortable?” Varric questioned when they were barely out of hearing.

“Immensely.” Surprisingly it was the Seeker that agreed first.

“I’m an assassin; I am not built for this shit.” Alena made it an offhand comment and ignored the startled looks from her companions. Better that they find out from her than hearing about it once they got back to Haven. Alena might only be a few hours into her day thus far but she already wanted to crawl back into her bedroll. Maybe sleeping for a week wouldn’t actually solve anything, but she wouldn’t know for sure unless she tried, right?

“Missing Scouts that turn into reckless lovers, a cult of idiots in a mountain, and potentially a noblewoman wandering the hills. I’m starting to suspect that this Villa of mercenaries we’re tramping towards is going to be underwhelming.” Varric easily called out, bypassing Alena’s job confession completely; as if it didn’t matter at all. She could almost kiss him for it.
Odds of Survival

Chapter Summary

The Valo-Kas are unable to avoid conflict and find themselves having to mobilize, and the gods are questioned. Or at least the odds of surviving are questionable.

Chapter Notes

It's almost holiday time and this chapter fought me up until today. Not sure why, but I'll take a holiday miracle in a flat second so I will not question the almighty muse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They should have been safe. The Valo-Kas mercenaries had retreated with their prisoners up into a defensible position, no one knew for sure where they were, and no one should have been looking for them. Somehow a large group of violently minded humans found them anyways and Cedric Lavellan was handed a mage’s staff by one of the Grey Ones without any hesitation at all. Not that he was actually unarmed without one, but the gesture certainly went a long way towards making him more inclined to help. Of course, even if they hadn’t of armed him, Cedric planned to survive so that meant expending at least a little bit of energy.

The Fade Shemlen was beyond oblivious to the warning signs building up; she didn’t notice the sudden silence of the wild life, the scent of sweat in the air, or even the strange creak of footsteps in snow. But at least she didn’t scream when the bandits attacked. Cedric smirked as he saw that these ragged Shemlen stumbled out of the snow, roaring at them as if they were a mighty force. It was almost comical how quickly the Valo-Kas cut them down, except for the fact that more seemed to writhe out of the snow and take up the place of the fallen.

Lightening danced from his fingertips to skip its way between the humans, their shrieks of pain audible indicators of how far the chain lightening managed to go before grounding out. He would unleash more but for the fact that the ex-Templar in his own group was still wrapped in metal like some sort of ship’s anchor, and it was considered rude to roast your allies.

“Shorty, behind you!” the metal wrapped human shouted out and Cedric dropped to the churned snow, a whistle of metal passing overtop his head. The bandit stumbled as their swipe missed, the momentum pulling her off balance while Cedric wrapped Fade energy around her lower half and ‘Stepped’ her body into two different locations. Gruesome but effective, and not what he had been intending to do. Ever since the Breach, all his Fade magicks had become erratic but powerful, and eventually Cedric knew he’d have to devote some serious effort into figuring out how to control it.

A pain-filled grunt tore his attention from the steaming offal and carcass in the snow he had created, and Cedric turned to see ‘Lady’ Emma Trevelyan recover from blocking a sword stroke with her metal wrapped arm, and then grab the man by his jerkin, pull him close, and bash her helm into his face. The man stumbled backwards after his nose crunched, blood gushing down his lower face even as Emma followed his movements. Despite Cedric thinking that humans are
generally ungraceful, ugly, impatient assholes, he had to admit that there was a definite finesse to how she moved just close enough to bat the sword out of his loosened grip, pick it up herself and skewer the bandit with it all before the other human had even properly recovered from the head butt.

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Finally armed with a sword, Emma snarled in dark triumph as she turned to the next bandit and finally got to vent some of her simmering rage into violent action. She hadn’t become a Templar because she enjoyed hurting people, but her mentor had taught her that there is no sin in enjoying the work she does, and right now it was very enjoyable to be able to hurt the ones trying to hurt her. She would examine what that meant for her soul later.

The wave of bandits broke, the few left alive scattering and scampering away, leaving trails of blood in the snow that even the strange human could likely follow. Emma cleaned the edge of her new sword with habitual ease, and retrieved the battered looking sheathe for it from the corpse. With precise, deliberate movements she belted the ill-treated sword and sheath to her armor and looked at the Valo-Kas that had been her guard thus far.

“I would much prefer my own sword, but this will do for now.” Her words were courtly, polite, and dripping with unspoken challenge.

"Venak Hol. Valo-kasara, ebassam varmer." The one called Shokrakar called out in their strange language, and Emma’s silent guard simply shrugged and retrieved the ex-Templars battle sword from where they had stored it.

Emma hadn’t expected that, she had expected to have to fight for the battered sword she’d claimed. Instead her silent guard offered her her battle sword silently. “Thank you.” Emma inclined her head in a noble bow as she took her sword. Maybe these beasts wouldn’t recognize the honor she had just given them, but it helped settle something in her own gut to do it. With well-practiced movements, Emma removed the bandit’s sword belt and replaced it with her own. She’d given the other human woman her shield when the bandits attacked, and the other woman handed it back without a single mark on it. Having her own sword and shield back helped Emma feel like her balance was back, she could fight with many weapons, but she made a point in practicing in her equipment frequently, wanting to work the weights of each piece of gear into her muscles as well as her mind.

“Maybe if we ask mae and bae very nicely, they’ll let us go out and play.” The Elf piped up, ruining whatever goodwill Emma was starting to feel about her day.

“You’re tacky and I hate you.” Emma stated flatly and Cedric just laughed at her.

“Come my little sunny Shemlen, let us wander and be brother and sister for our strange new, gray parents.” Cedric had as much self-mocking laughter in his voice as he did pure amusement so Emma just sighed and ignored him.

Instead she turned her attention to the other human, and gave her a quick eye over. One of the beasts seemed to be a Healer, so she didn’t worry about the woman’s physical state, but it was her emotional one that left everyone around her on edge. Despite the violence she had just witnessed, this time the woman seemed to still be mentally present. Time for Emma to be the example she wanted to see this other human emulate.

“I wish to pray for the fallen before we move on; do we have time to allow that?” Emma demanded of her captors comrades.
Once again it was the pregnant beast that made the decisions for the group and Emma vowed to try and discover the leader’s name. “You have until the equipment is ready to move.”

Emma nodded her thanks, and then surprised everyone by approaching the other human woman and gesturing for her to come with the ex-Templar. The strange human went wide eyed in surprise, looking around to see if anyone was going to object. The beast that had been handling her thus far even seemed to encourage her to go with Emma. Since no one stopped either woman, Emma led her silent companion over to man Emma had killed. They didn’t have time to collect all the dead, build a pyre, and given them the sendoff Andtrastrians deserved, but then again if they had wanted rites and dues they should have obeyed the rules. So instead Emma would let this one serve as stand in for them all.

With careful hands Emma laid out the man she had slain, settled his body so that he looked in repose, and then she began the rite Trials. “Though all before me is shadow, Yet shall the Maker be my guide. I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond. For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost. I am not alone. Even as I stumble on the path with my eyes closed, yet I see The Light is here. Draw your last breath, my friends. Cross the Veil and the Fade and all the stars in the sky. Rest at the Maker's right hand, And be Forgiven.”

Emma Trevelyan felt settled by her own words, the Canticle having played a large role in her formative years, and yet she couldn’t deny that there was a little bitterness to her words. She believed in what she said, absolutely, but it did feel as if the whole world was covered in darkness, and they were begging for a little Light. She looked up from the dead body to see the strange woman watching her with an intensity Emma wasn’t ready for.

Blood shot, shadow haunted eyes caught hers and would not let go. The other woman didn’t speak, though Emma realized it wasn’t because she had nothing to say, she had just realized that there was no point because no one would understand. And just how alone that had to make her feel. “Even as I stumble on the path with my eyes closed, yet I see The Light is here.” She repeated, compelled to say something to try and break the other human’s strange fascination with her.

“Dah laheight.” the words were butchered by her strange accent, and yet Emma smiled, recognizing them anyways.

“The Light.” She slowed her words down, remembering how her sisters would speak to their children.

“Dah liet. Dahlight… dah light. Tha light.. the light.” She fell silent as surprisingly as she had spoken, clearly not satisfied with simply echoing the words back. Whatever had energized her to reach out and try faded away and Emma watched the other human step away from the dead body and wander back over to the beast that had been her caretaker.

“Proselytizing the heathens?” Cedric leaned on his new mage’s staff in an aggressively casual manner. Emma had witnessed enough mages adjusting to new staves that she recognized how he was channeling a low level of energy through the staff and into the ground, cycling it through himself in a loop until his magic and the staff resonated as one. And it took a deliberate piece of willpower for her to ignore it as casually as he was.

“Educating the barbarians.” Emma countered but the smile she tried to hide slipped out anyways.

“My Gods are capricious, imperfect, and currently unavailable. But your god demands pain and
suffering and yet withholds love and forgiveness, and then demands that you spread his supposed
word by sword blade. Really might want to reconsider which one of us is the barbarian.” Cedric
didn’t even bother sounding offended as he spoke.

“The mistakes of my ancestors is not my burden to bear. I am responsible only for my own soul
and my own actions.” Emma actually meant it, her assurance as much a surprise for her as it was to
Cedric.

“No lingering Templar habits? No ticklish urge to Smite?” the Elf teased, deliberately curling
snowflakes out of the air to dance around her before falling to the ground.

“Plenty of those, short stuff, but if an old dog like you can learn new tricks, a young pup like me
still can too.” Emma gave a conspiratorial wink.

“So Pup, are you going to do a runner while the rest of us move on?” he bluntly asked, seeming as
uninterested in the answer as he could be, despite being the one that asked the question.

“I don’t much fancy being shot in the back by an arrow, so no I’m not leaving you behind just yet.”
Emma scoffed but her focus was still mostly on the retreating human and how she seemed to
absolutely not belong in this world.

If this human wasn’t from this world, didn’t speak a word of any of the languages they’ve tried
thus far, and seemed to have absolutely no understanding of how this world worked, did the Maker
send her? Emma believed that all people, even these gray skinned beasts and the misguided Elf,
were created by the Maker, in His Light. Sadly the world seemed to be cloaked in an awful lot of
Darkness at the moment.

“How bad do you think it is out there?” Cedric seemed to be on the same thought path as her.

“I don’t think a group of bandits grows this large in this remote of a location if the situation is
anything less than a six on the ‘oh shit’ scale.” Emma judged and actually got a real bout of
laughter out of Cedric.

“One day I will have to have to explain to me how bad a six is. But I do believe you’re right. I am
unsure what your Templar sensibilities are telling you, but as one that can hear the spirits
screaming as they’re pulled through the Breach against their will I can tell you that unless
something is done, and soon, it is only going to get worse.” His humour slid away as he spoke.

Emma sighed, not bothering to argue with him. She couldn’t hear demons being birthed into the
world like he could, but she didn’t need to. Her eyes flicked upwards and traced that malevolent
green tinge back to its source. “Definitely a six.”

“We’re moving, time for talk later Basvaarad.” The pregnant Qunari called out, pulling Emma’s
attention back to where it needed to be. If they were all very, very lucky, they would never
discover what a ten out of ten on the ‘oh shit’ scale was. Emma had heard stories of Kinloch Hold,
and she never wanted to experience that for herself, let alone put anyone else through it. If the
Maker thought she needed to be with these things to do His work and help the world, then she
would do it. The Valo-Kas were on the move and ex-Templar, Lady Emma Trevelyan was going to
keep moving with them. It would take an army to stop her now.

Chapter End Notes
All Qunlat translation thanks to Casijaz but all mistakes are my own! All Elvhen thanks to FenxShiral, once again mistakes are all mine

Qunlat
“Venak Hol. Valo-kasara, ebassam varmer.” = “Wearying one. Take your sword; we will not hold you back.”

Elvhen
Mae= mom
Bae= dad
Collector of Peoples

Chapter Summary

The Herald returns from the Hinterlands only to be all but cast out again. And like a net thrown into the ocean, she comes back with far more than anticipated.

Chapter Notes

I compressed events down a little, I know. Normally I am all for diving into those cut scenes and mining them for character growth GOLD, but I am also trying to get this story ROLLING.

So, if at the end of this chapter you guys feel like 'nah, I need more cutscene mining' feel free to let me know. I can come back into this chapter and put in those sections.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Returning to Haven after finally dealing with everything she could handle in the Hinterlands, Alena rode in less like a celebrated Victor and more like a mud soaked, weary pilgrim. There was no fanfare, no hoards of faithful waiting for their supposed Herald to return. Much to her relief, Alena realized that despite her auspicious beginnings with the Inquisition, she was still rather anonymous. At least to the civilians; her keen eyes spotted a scout already scrambling to bring word to the Nightingale no doubt. The assassin didn’t begrudge the Bard her little birds; it was all a part of the Game after all. That had always been Nesbitt’s forte, Alena ghosted by unnoticed.

“Thanks for the company salrokas.” Alena wearily bade the others to rest and trudged onwards with a silent Seeker towards the Chantry. Time to do a quick briefing and hit a bathtub. If Alena didn’t scrub the smell of mud out of her hair soon she was going to start to be mistaken for a golem.

“Herald, glad to have you back.” Commander Cullen slid in on her other flank, smoothly adjusting his stride to her shorter march. For a dangerous moment Alena thought it was an escorting maneuver, as if she were still a prisoner, but she re-evaluated and realized he was reporting in line. Old habits die hard for the fallen Templar.

“Hullo Commander. I’ve got reports ready for you.” She pulled a leather wrapped stack out of her travel bag and handed it to him.

“Ah… thank you.” He sounded so surprised that she had them already ready.

One of the perks of growing up Carta is an almost obsessive requirement to keep records. Details are the key to good smuggling business, and the absolute lifeblood of the blackmail business. All the important reports were in a cipher she’d have to teach to the Advisors, but there were a lot of notes in there that were of not significant importance so she’d left those in Trade.

Thankfully everyone stayed awkwardly silent until the War Room. Ambassador Montilyet was talking quietly with the Nightingale as Alena entered with her entourage. Then the awkwardness
dialed up to ‘hide in wash closet until people go away’ levels.

“Yes I am an assassin; no, no one here is a target. No, I will not divulge Carta information to you; no I will not continue to work for the Carta or as an assassin while representing the Inquisition. Any other issues need discussing?” Alena wanted to keep the conversation short and simple. She could almost hear the Stone again, it was so quiet. Leliana was coiled, ready to strike if it so much as looked like Alena was about to go rogue, and Cullen was tensed; prepared to shield Josephine with his body if necessary.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” The Nightingale demanded her body language calming down the rest of the room as she relaxed.

“I woke chained in a cell, being told I was guilty.” Alena stated bluntly. “You all needed the time to see me prove myself before you learned my past, or else you’d never trust me.”

“We can appreciate your caution,” Lady Montilyet smoothly interjected, “no one faults you for wanting to survive. But if we can uncover your history, then so can our enemies.”

“So spin the story first.” Alena shrugged, knowing that the Carta would disavow her no matter what story spilled.

“Tell the world that you’d abandoned your ways, turned to the Chantry for salvation, and then you happened to be at the Conclave searching for redemption?” the Nightingale scoffed acidly and Alena smirked. Hitting a little too close to home for the Bard it seemed.

“Romantic enough that people might buy it, however it becomes harder to believe if your habitual invoking of Ancestors instead of the Maker gets out.” The Seeker grunted critically.

“I’ll start censoring myself then.” She shrugged, not letting a little subterfuge bother her.

“Any other disastrous secrets that we should be prepared for?” The Bard teasingly demanded.

“Not yet.” She couldn’t hold back the wink as she said it either. Perhaps provoking a fellow assassin was a bad idea, but they were both technically ‘off duty’ as assassins.

“Maybe we should focus on the matter at hand? None of us, excepting Lady Montilyet of course, has a history full of things we’d like to have exposed to the world.” Commander Cullen broke in diplomatically. Alena pulled a face but nodded.

The Storm Coast, they were sending her to the Storm Coast. The ‘it actually only ever sodding rains and everything smells like must’ Coast. The Storm Coast was the physical representation of the words moist, damp, and unpleasant. And she got to go play ‘find the Warden’ in it. Fan-fucking-tastic. Oh, but first, before she could have the pleasure of that little scavenger hunt; they wanted her to go to Val Royeaux to take advantage of Mother funny-hat Giselle’s connections. And then she could track the trail of the suspiciously absent Wardens on her way back from charming the Chantry, even though Val Royeaux and The Storm Coast were in two opposite directions of each other from Haven. At least there were no ladders. Or bears.

“There are no bears in Orlais right?” Alena ended up demanding of Varric as they endured the ghastly weather off the coast and towards Val Royeaux.

“No Shivs, there are no bears there. You should be safe. What was our final bear count, Solas never did share?” the author eased her concerns.

“Almost a solid score.” Alena grumped.
“Andraste’s silken skirts, that’s a lot of bear skin.” Varric swore.

“The crossroads ain’t cold no more.” She faked a low country drawl.

“You seem as displeased with our intended destination as I am.” Solas joined them at the dreary railing view.

“I hate politics and religion. The only thing I hate more are speeches and being the center of attention. Consider this trip my own personal nightmare come true.” All emotion had been stripped from her words.

“We all must endure our trials and do what we has to be done to fix the Breach.” The Seeker finally joined their misery.

“Anyone up for some Diamond Back?” Varric subtly redirected the conversation away from wallowing.

“You’ll have to teach me the process of the game Master Tethras.” The Elf requested as he agreed to play and even Cassandra came along, grunt almost perfunctory by now.

Alena ate a pomme vie et mort, beyond chuffed at the irony of it all. The crowd of people collected had been angry and shouting even before they had arrived, and if it were up to Alena, she would have simply pulled Stealth over her head and slipped away. But that was the exact opposite of what she had actually been here to do. It occurred to her then that maybe she should have told one of her fellow Inquisition Advisors that she has a slight fear of public speaking. And by slight she meant that they made her so anxious she usually felt like throwing up afterwards. But she hadn’t told anyone, and hadn’t actually thrown up on herself either.

No, instead it had turned out that one Lord Seeker Ludicrous was taking command of the Templars and were abandoning the Chantry entirely. That made no reasonable sense so really they should have been expecting it, especially when Alena could feel wrongness radiating from the man. Her hand had ached at his proximity and Alena had nearly stepped back and away from him except that her pride would never allow her to concede space to that asshole. But no one else in her little group at all reacted to him, so Alena had shrugged and figured that it was that damn Lyrium song and the new thing in her hand was screwing with her perceptions.

As Alena tossed her now finished apple core aside, an arrow neatly bisected it and nailed into the floor right by her feet. Instincts kicked in and Alena disappeared under Stealth even while Cassandra searched for the archer.

“It has a message on it.” Varric sounded amused.

Admittedly intrigued by the almost childish cloak and dagger nature of it, Alena had led them on a merry chase following these red marked hints. The first arrow started with a message written in a large flowing hand and bordered with doodles and targeting them towards the market, the docks, and the café. It was a pleasant little chase, nothing actually threatening jumped out at them. Though the stench at the docks had been enough to nearly take Alena out, she hated the stench of rotting fish. And when they had gone towards the café a courier had interrupted the Red Jenny hunt to offer an invitation to Madam de Fer’s soiree that night.

Which was how Alena managed to collect a mage that seemed to hate mages, and an Elf that definitely hated Elves, and last but not least an invitation from Grand Enchanter Fiona herself to come visit the rebel mages in Redcliffe once she got back to Ferelden. But before she could do that, Alena finally got to go play in the mud and muck of the Storm Coast.
Baron Plucky stared at Alena with his angry, beady eyes and she fed him strips of bloody meat. The messenger scout was staring at the pair of them in stunned awe; Plucky had a nasty reputation and yet he was as close to meek as any had ever seen him.

“How’s my handsome Baron?” Alena softly crooned, carefully scratching her nails into his plumage. As the bird settled she inserted the parchment note. After decryption the note would read:

Returning with entourage: Madam de Fer (mage loyalist), Sera (Red Jenny?!), The Iron Bull and his Chargers (mercenary crew worth the $ warning: he’s a spy but is not an issue). Found a Warden and I’m keeping him.

And here she’d thought it would be hard to top how dramatic her last return home had been.

Chapter End Notes

Dwarven Translation:
Salrokas= friends
Haven-bound

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition confronts crazy, and then recruits it.
The Valo-Kas finally make their way towards Haven and Dawn gets hit with an uncomfortable fact.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Ben-Hassrath working as a mercenary in the employ of the Herald of Andraste, ex-assassin; bad jokes have started with less but Bull was not ready for the punch line just yet. His absolutely terrifying yet itsy-bitsy Boss was taking him, a Tevinter mage named Dorian, and a Warden called Blackwall into a nest of mages. What the actual shit? It was definitely something he was supposed to keep his eye on, so Bull didn't bitch but seriously?

Mages might be crazy and creepy, but generally they followed a predictable range of actions, and Bull could figure out how to kill what or who needed to be killed. Except that now it seemed that this shit included Time magic, because that wasn't a bad idea at all. The batshit Magister Alexius tried to do something evil and stupid and Bull’s little spitfire Boss went into a portal and came back the next moment covered in gore and all but actually spitting fire. And then King Alistair Therein himself shows up, because this whole mess hadn’t gotten complicated enough. Somehow Boss Cadash managed to talk a King into friendly banter, and smoothly took possession of the rebel mages all while everyone around her grumbled and groaned. Only Bull seemed to notice the nearly manic gleam in Alena Cadash’s eyes as she tried to wrap up Redcliffe as quickly and with as little bloodshed as possible it seemed.

Considering the story he heard her tell about what had happened to her and the pretty mage while in the future, Bull decided that he could understand her attitude change. He might not entirely have his head wrapped around Cadash’s ‘Elder One’s’ future, but he understood what seeing all your friends and allies tortured and slaughtered can do to someone. Let alone having to address the fact that apparently this Elder One was building a demon fucking army and plotting to assassinate the Orlesian Empress. It’s all well and good to be warned of those things, but Cadash and that Tevinter had gotten the warning from a world where Venatori ruled, demons roamed, and hope had fallen; that takes its toll.

Maybe it was time to share some good news with her. “Boss, I got something for you. Old contact of mine runs a fellow mercenary band and is going to offer their services at Haven. Shokrakar is saying that she has someone that you need to meet.” He offered the tiny Dwarf the brief note from his Tal-Vashoth contact.

“If you think it’s legitimate, I’ll add it to my schedule.” Cadash shrugged and gave a tired sigh. She was proving to be a decent leader, but it was clearly not a role she relished. It would be interesting to see just how this Inquisition and it’s Herald were going to try and address this issue of the Breach.

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Haven was a lot uglier than Dawn had anticipated. In the game it had been idyllic; doomed and beautiful. Reality was a smelly, muddy let down compared to that, though by now Dawn had grown numb to such things like sleeping outside or taking a crap in the woods. In the time since the Breach, Dawn had travelled with the Valo-Kas and learned as much as she could, which was why they were here now. She finally spoke enough of the language to go warn them of what was coming.

Her Vashoth allies hadn’t believed her at first, understandable as her language skills were from Earth, not Thedas. English wasn’t secretly Qunari, or Elvhen, or even ancient Tevinter. Dawn was stuck on a planet where no one spoke the same languages she did, and nothing worked by the rules Dawn had grown up living in. So she had listened and learned, watching much more than she ever had before. Life in a first world country had prepared her for nothing of what she had lived through in the last few weeks, but it had given her a unique understanding of the world she’d been thrown into. Kaaras had gotten basic vocabulary into her, and Emma tried to communicate with her throughout the day. And once Dawn had realized that Common wasn’t actually a separate language but a combination of all the languages, she understood the disjointed sounds so much better. Some of it was different human dialects, some of it Dwarven, a few scattered bits seemed to be Elvhen sounding though no one acknowledged that fact. And as Dawn picked up the Common, it became second nature for her to just learn the languages her allies were speaking. Since the vast majority of the group was Vashoth, Qunlat was spoken primarily amongst them and Dawn actually learned that quicker than Common. Emma Trevelyen walked Dawn through her daily prayers, or chants, and was trying to help Dawn gain more words through that while the Elf Cedric seemed to revel in teaching her how to swear at them all in Elvhen so Dawn picked up a handful of phrases from the Dalish as well.

After she had explained, brokenly, that she knew how to help and needed to go to Haven, Shokrakar had pulled her aside to demand more details. Being all but voiceless for over a month had left Dawn with plenty of time to realize, and even accept, the fact that she was really here and this was really happening. She was in Thedas and she knew what was coming, even if she couldn’t explain how she was here or why this video game in her reality was actual reality here. Worse yet, she couldn’t just tell people everything that was to come either, because then some of it would inevitably change and she might be why the Inquisition would fail. After Shokrakar’s scouts had come back with details supporting Dawn’s claims, they had started the trek towards Haven.

“I see many….maybe yes maybe no to come.” Dawn tried to explain as they all stared down at Haven. “Down there, people that need to know. Down there chance for Valo-Kas to work. Valo-Kas to be give paid, food, happy yes.” She offered as an enticement and heard Kaaras laugh as his sister shoved him.

“We’ll take you down there, and even try to help you explain what is going on.” Shokrakar nodded solemnly. Thankfully Dawn understood Common much better than she currently spoke it.

“When you take me down there, and even try to help you explain what is going on.” Shokrakar nodded solemnly. Thankfully Dawn understood Common much better than she currently spoke it.

“Thank you.” Dawn repeated the phrase in both Common and English, though only Cedric and Kaaras seemed interested in learning pieces of her language in return.

They walked towards Haven openly on the road but wary. Shokrakar sent Taarlok ahead of them a little so that he could do the talking for the group and it wasn’t until their most sociable member came back with an invite to enter Haven that they moved forwards. Shokrakar put a hand on Dawn’s shoulder, guiding her away from the group as Taarlok led them to set up camp near the gates. All of the Vashoth had gotten into the habit of doing that to guide her around, though it was the talkative Kaaras that had explained to Dawn that Shokrakar started to do that when her belly got big enough to bump into people when she wasn’t paying attention while walking with them so they all adopted the habit to keep their leader from feeling singled out.
Being inside Haven only brought Dawn to the awareness that this many desperate people piled together stank. Her nose had long gotten used to the scents of sweat, leather, smoke, even that cloying smell of shit and piss from temporary latrines. But this was a different rank altogether, almost as if desperation and despair had gained a smell signature. A painfully sad part of her realized that Larry would have hated this even more than she did; he’d always had a more refined palate for tastes and smells than she did. With a shuddering sigh Dawn shoved that line of thinking out of her mind and counted her footsteps forward instead. Counting things helped; steps until she stopped moving, stars in the sky when she couldn’t sleep, counting backwards from 999 when things were too overwhelming. Numbers were safe, predictable, and never failed her.

Shokrakar led her forwards under the suspicious and weary eyes of Haven’s defenders and stopped with her near who had to be Commander Cullen. Thanks to video game graphics and a low budget for such things, Dawn had only ever seen the man as a shiny, plastic looking potato with a lip scar; she was not ready for the reality of him. He was Jake Abel adorable, less handsome than he was astonishingly innocent looking and Dawn knew how far from that he truly was.

With another unsteady breath Dawn realized that this was the first time she was meeting someone she knew even if he didn’t know she knew him. It was a linear conundrum that Dawn refused to sink into any more than she already had.

“I was told to speak with you.” Shokrakar didn’t bother with a frivolous introduction.

“Yes, yes. Mercenary bands that want to work for the Inquisition can petition in writing. You already have a strong recommendation, albeit from a questionable source. If you wish for a chance to prove to my command why you should be hired we can settle on a time during the next couple of days. If you’re hired on, your people will be expected to conform to the rules of the Inquisition and will report to Lieutenant Killeen.” Commander Cullen spoke without looking up from the note board in his hands. “If you are not hired on, unfortunately we do not have the room to house your troop, but we could see if there are those associated with the Inquisition that would be interested in hiring you on.”

Shokrakar didn’t look offended by any of this and Dawn truly didn’t care about it much. Before her Tal Vashoth compatriot could comment on how Dawn had information that he needed, there was a commotion from the training grounds and Cullen left them with a half muttered curse.

“Later, let us see to the kith first.” Shokrakar decided and Dawn didn’t bother trying to argue.

The amount of suspicious eyes watching them as they moved around the camp unsettled Dawn. It made sense, if she was trying to be logical; these people had already survived one seriously traumatic event, but in the game there had never been this breadth of realism to how angry people were about everything still. By now the game had given a captivating cut scene of flags unfurling, ravens flying off, and the pious starting to roll in. There was no moving swell of orchestral sounds to smooth over the rough edges of the refuge Haven truly was now though, and Dawn perhaps was a little more jaded than she’d been while playing the game last. Or maybe she was still bitter. It didn’t matter, Haven had an expiration date, and Dawn was going to do what she could to help save these people despite themselves.

Kaaras was getting a cook fire laid out and started when they wandered back. The tents were already pitched and placed, and the Valo-Kas were as settled as they ever seemed to get. Mutely Dawn went about helping the Healer get the foodstuffs ready for the meal. He’d hand her herbs or spices and she would chop, dice, pinch, pulverize or whatever treatment needed to be done to them, then hand them back and watch them go in the pot.

Even as she helped her eyes couldn’t help but dance over Haven, picking out the details she
recognized and trying to assimilate to the ones that were entirely new. They were outside the main
gates, lumped in with the rest of the soldierly and Dawn felt oddly comforted by that fact, even as
she nervously spied where The Iron Bull and the Chargers had already staked their tent. She
needed to tell the powers that be about her knowledge and get them thinking about solutions, but to
do that she needed to know what has already happened. If The Iron Bull was already here, then so
too must Sera and Vivienne; if they were recruited. Dawn wondered if the Inquisitor had already
decided to meet with either the Mages or the Templars, she only knew what Shokrakar had passed
on to her about world news, and Dawn doubted that she had been told much at all.

Ready or not it was Dawn’s time to do what she had begged her allies to allow her to do. Kaaras
was busy slapping his sister’s hands away from the food before he declared it ready, Shokrakar and
Taarlok were discussing how the Valo-Kas could best ‘prove’ their worth to the Inquisition, and
the rest of the Valo-Kas were busy with the routine Dawn had witnessed every single time they
settled at a camp site. Weapons were cleaned and sharpened, gear was checked and mended as
necessary, and dice or cards were pulled out to whittle away the time. She even spied one of the
Ashaad’s digging into their horn balm as she stood. Only Cedric and Emma looked as
uncomfortable or out of place as she felt, thought for vastly different reasons. Emma because she'd
be flat out told by one of the Inquisition guards that they straight up did not care that she ‘claimed
to be Noble’, and Cedric because there were about three Elves around and only one of them wasn't
a servant. Solas was not about to treat Cedric well, but only Dawn knew that.

Dawn stood and her movement pulled Shokrakar’s attention to her and Dawn tried to smile
reassuringly even as she pointed at her own chest. “Human, no one watch.” She pointed gently at
the Vashoth leader. “Kith watched. I go say what I need must say. I come back.”

Shokrakar stared at her for a silent, assessing minute. The Tal Vashoth mercenary leader didn’t say
anything though; instead she gave a firm nod and then promptly turned back to Taarlok. It was as
much a blessing as it was a dismissal and Dawn left without another word. The Valo-Kas watched
her trek through the gates of the city without a single person stopping her or even properly seeing
her.

It felt weird for Dawn to walk alone and unescorted for the first time since arriving in Thedas, and
she came to a painful and likely inevitable conclusion as she tried to listen in to conversations as
she walked; she was absolutely useless in Thedas. She knew what was coming, but sadly still did
not know enough of their Common language to warn people properly. The Valo-Kas were patient
and curious enough to listen and parse out her meaning but the Advisors of the Inquisition all had
far better things to be doing with their time. So that left Dawn with very little in the way of options
to get her meaning across to those that needed to hear it, and no time for her to take to learn to
speak properly.

In the game the Chantry was a box with weird room layouts but in reality the floor plan was so
much more sensible. The pulpit for preaching, the general standing room only for worshippers,
nooks and crannies for more private ejaculations of worship, all were towards the front entrance.
Kept further away from the turbulence of outside weather the candles and tapestries of faith started
to line the walls, and rooms with actual doors all started further away. The Chantry itself seemed to
be built into the mountain, with only a small protrusion on the surface to give away its
location. There were no guards repelling the curious from the War Room, so Dawn simply
wandered towards the back of the Chantry. She could hear an argument going on, though the
language barrier as well as actual physical door barrier kept her from understanding what the
shouting was about. Still, there were enough voices that everyone she wanted to be there was so
Dawn steeled her small courage against the fear of confrontation she was about to provoke.

The door opened astonishingly easily for something that felt that heavy and Dawn nearly slammed
it into the wall by accident with her forceful opening. The arguing shut off immediately as they all turned to face the interruption and Dawn saw the Herald for the first time. She was a Dwarf, So-and-So Cadash if Dawn remembered her game lore well enough. When Cassandra, Commander Cullen and Josephine all tried to talk to her at once, likely variations of please go away, Dawn felt as overwhelmed as she must have looked.

“Slow. Not lots good in Common.” Dawn pleaded, her emotions ratcheting up as they all stared at her with poorly disguised annoyance and irritation. Dawn automatically started to count the number of freckles on Leliana's face to help combat the static in her head.

“Are you more comfortable in your native language? I am sure we could find someone to help.” Josephine took immediate charge of the situation and Dawn remembered to give her a grateful smile.

“No help. No be speaker here. Shokrakar of Valo-Kas brought…” Dawn started to explain but Cullen interrupted her.

“I told Shokrakar that if she wanted to apply to work for the Inquisition to go through my second in command.” The Commander sounded frustrated, exhausted, and angry. The Herald and Cassandra started to argue with him almost habitually, while Josephine tried to smooth it out and all the noise was more than a little overwhelming after the oiled machine of Valo-Kas hierarchy.

“You did not come in here simply because a mercenary party arrived.” Leliana finally spoke up and Dawn all but jumped from where she was standing, staring at the arguing Inquisition.

“Oh fuck me bald, don’t sneak up on a girl like that.” Dawn clutched a hand to her chest, feeling her heart rate skydiving back down to normal.

Leliana arched one perfectly plucked eyebrow upwards at hearing the unfamiliar language spill out of Dawn’s mouth. “I most definitely want to hear what you have to say.” The Spymaster was even more hypnotic in person, though Dawn got nothing birdlike out of the Nightingale.

Dawn tried to keep what she was feeling off of her face. There was no need to let everyone in the room know that Leliana scared the daylights out of her, though it probably wouldn’t surprise any of them. Still it was hard not to back away from someone that the fandom generally agreed was able to slit your throat with your own hand and you’d thank her for it.

Now that it was time to talk though, Dawn had no idea how to go about starting it all. She should have brought Shokrakar along even if it would have made things more tense and difficult. With no other recourse Dawn dove in as best she could. “Dawn Wesson.” She pointed at herself, then at Leliana. “Leliana. Commander Cullen Stanton Rutherford. Josephine Montilyet. Cadash. Cassandra Penteghast.” Each name had her pointing at the correct person and served to have their complete attention. Dawn’s hand gestured towards the door. “Haven. Fereldan. Thedas.” Her palm rested on her sternum. “Thedas no home. Home be…” Dawn threw her hand wide, trying to explain. “Many many away. But I know, I see past. And I see maybe yes and maybe no to come.” Dawn fought against her nerves and started signing her words a little, an old habit that she needed on Earth but no one seemed to recognize the hand gestures; no surprise as ASL was as far from universal on her own planet let alone a whole new one.

Leliana was staring at her intently; no doubt a lifetime of speaking in codes helping her decipher the broken Common Dawn was speaking. Commander Cullen was looking frustrated at her while everyone else looked bored, annoyed, or confused. Dawn huffed a breath in and stepped closer to the War Table, not able to read a single letter of their alphabets. The images were in pretty much the same locations, though there was so much more here. And there were maps of specific cities
and terrains, and the fandom would give its collective right arm for a chance to peruse these
details. Dawn ignored it and pointed at the areas she remembered.

“Haven.” Her finger dragged towards Val Royeau. “Orlais. Templars walk away.” Her finger
dragged over to Ferelden again. “Redcliffe. Mages. Tevinter.” A small move but she hesitated,
having no clue how to say the actual location name in Common. “Templars. Demon. Sampson.”
She looked up and had four sets of slightly hostile eyes on her. “I know. More and more and past
and past.”

A blade rested gently against her throat as Leliana ghosted from behind her. “Who do you work for
spy?” her accent managed to keep the words friendly sounding and yet there was no warmth in the
Bard’s voice.

Despite the situation, Dawn sighed. “No spy.” She reached up and wrapped her fingers over the
knife edge, careless of how sharp it was. Her fingers started to bleed even as she kept a hand over
the blade. “No spy.” She repeated and actually pulled the knife away, and Leliana let her do it.
“You spy.” She pointed bloody fingers at Leliana. “Others spy. I no be spy.” And she had no real
way to prove her assertions either, not unless she was willing to divulge some information. “I
know. I know what past and past from Oss-tag-ar. I know past and past here. I know more.”

“Are you saying that you know the past? Like any well-educated child should?” Cullen demanded,
pinching his brow.

Dawn flipped him the bird even if it wouldn’t mean the same thing here. “I know you no Lyrium.”
She spat out and he stared up at her in silenced shock. She turned to look at Leliana. “You home no
Orlais. You home be Ferelden.” She looked over at Cassandra, the Herald, and Josephine. Their
secrets were easier but more embarrassing. Josie still played with dolls, Cassandra loved smutty
literature, and the Cadash was from the Carta and none of those were words she had in Common.

“I’ll take you at your word.” The Herald cut off any secret Dawn could have tried to reveal.

“You can’t trust her; at best she’s a terrible spy.” Cullen started to argue.

“How is Mia? Write sister?” Dawn tried to ask and when Cullen shot her a dark look she just
shrugged. “I know. I here I help.” She tried to promise.

“I believe you.” The Herald walked around the War Table, somehow able to all but disappear to
Dawn’s attention if Dawn wasn’t looking right at her. She had to be a Rogue.

Dawn felt equal measures relief and suspicion. “Why?” they always say don’t look a gift horse in
the mouth but Dawn couldn’t help the plaintive question.

“Because slightly over a month ago I got spat out of a rift with this in my hand.” She flashed the
Anchor at Dawn, and it looked like a fresh wound bleeding emerald green. “And everyone
assumed I was the bad guy. I’m not going to blindly trust you, but I’ll take all the hands I can to
help put out this fire.”

“What be blindly?” Dawn wanted confirmation of the word she didn’t recognize.

“Blind is unable to see; could be obstruction, darkness, illness, injury, or defect. Blindly is to do
something while blind.” Leliana explained succinctly.

“Thank you.” Dawn allowed some of her carefully ignored emotions to saturate one of the few
phrases she felt fluent with.
“You’re welcome.” Leliana turned gracious again, handing Dawn a handkerchief for her fingers.

“You mentioned Redcliffe and Therinfall Redoubt in particular,” Cassandra brought the matter back in hand and Dawn mouthed the words for the Templar hold after finally hearing it in Common. “Would it have made a difference between going to the Mages or the Templars first?”

Dawn frowned because there were a lot of complex concepts to get across and she had a small handful of words to do it with. “Good Lord and Lady I need more words.” She breathed out in frustration. “Mages show Tevinter. Take Mages, make Mages friends; stop Tevinter. Templars enemy.” She held up one hand as if containing all of that within her palm. The other hand she lifted now. “Templars show Demon. Take Templars, make Templars friends; stop Demon. Mages belong to Tevinter. No choice, no hope. Templars bad by leader. Poison and hurt. One on side mean other is enemy. Samp-son leads Templars, Cal-per-nya leads Mages.” She dropped both hands. “One or other, Breach will close.”

“We know that Tevinter had found a way to claim the mages, but there’s a demon at Therinfall?” Leliana asked, the fastest at deciphering Dawn’s broken words.

“Yes.” Dawn nearly barked out with relief that someone understood. “Demon of want what other has.”

“Envy?” Cullen narrowed it down.

“Yes!” Dawn turned to Cassandra. “You leader not be leader. You leader be Demon, not real.” Her head was starting to hurt with trying to figure out how to say things, let alone trying to filter out what she shouldn’t be trying to say at all.

“You did say his behaviour was odd.” The Herald directed towards Cassandra.

“It was, but a Demon masquerading as Lord Seeker Lucius?” Cassandra shook her head.

“Yes. Bad things.” Dawn should try to tell Cassandra to summon her old apprentice Seeker friend but no one in the room seemed to understand her concerns as it was and Dawn simply didn't know how to express the issue. Her frustration was robbing the few words she had. But something that Leliana said finally sank in to Dawn’s awareness. “Wait…pick done. Mages or Templars?”

“I chose to offer the Mages an Alliance.” The Herald spoke up. “Though I had hoped to talk the Templars into an Alliance as well…”


Leliana’s eyes narrowed as she tried to piece out Dawn’s words and it was a quiet moment before she hazarded a response. “I believe you are looking for the word inevitable. When no matter what you do, the outcome is inescapable.”

Dawn’s head tilted as she ran the sentence through her internal translator. She turned to face the irritated seeming Cullen. “Plan away. Here come enemy. Here come big bad. Haven fall be inevitable.”

That seemed to get the Commander’s back up though. “My soldiers are well trained and capable of repelling an assault, especially if they know one is coming.” He sounded offended.

“No!” Dawn huffed fighting her temper back down. “Soldiers good. Bad still come.” What was the

“Perhaps Solas would be able to narrow down her language?” Cassandra suggested to Leliana softly as the Seeker watched the strange woman.

“Perhaps.” Leliana parroted the word back. While Dawn was trying to express some concept to Commander Cullen, Leliana slipped out the door to have a Runner fetch the apostate Elf.

As Dawn turned from Commander Cullen back to the others in the room, there was a muffled knock at the door. None other than Solas entered the room, looking haughty and yet helpful. “I was summoned?” his inflection made it both a question and a generosity from the Elf.

“Yes Solas, thank you for coming.” Leliana prowled forwards slightly. “Our…guest here is unable to speak Common. I was wondering if perhaps you might have come across her language as you studied the Fade?”

Dawn was frowning slightly, looking back and forth from the Spymaster to the Elf. “I highly doubt that he’s ever heard English before.” she offered; glad to be able to speak a grammatically correct sentence.

Solas stared at her, only the widening of his eyes indicating that anything was amiss. “I do not know that language personally no.” Dawn nearly rolled her eyes. “But I may have heard something like it. I will meditate and try to retrieve the memory.” She stared at him in shock. There was no way he had ever heard English on Thedas before. Oh but Dawn remembered that at one time Fen’Harel controlled the Eluvians, and Morrigan flat out says that the Eluvians don’t all lead to places on Thedas; he might actually have heard English before.

“Isenatha.” Dawn blurted out the Elvhen word before really thinking about the consequences. Solas’ eyebrows shot so far up that it looked like bangs on his bald head. “Big bad isenatha come here.” She tapped down on the map.

The Elf stepped closer to her and said a string of words that sounded much like German. Dawn looked from the Elf to the others in the room and back with confusion plain on her face and shook her head. “No speak. I know little. Ma abelas.”

"She is trying to warn that a dragon is coming here." Solas explained without trying to remove the doubt from his voice. Maybe trying to tell the person that had GIVEN Corypheus the orb in the first place that Corypheus is coming with a dragon was a bad idea.

"So you know the future and the unknown enemy has a dragon. Can someone please get her out of here?" Commander Cullen demanded to the room at large.

Now Solas was looking at Dawn with analytical intensity even as the Herald tried to explain the situation to him. “She claims to know details of the past, and supposedly of the future if we’re to believe her.”

“The Valo-Kas brought her in; perhaps we should ask the leader how Dawn came to join them.” Leliana suggested.

Dawn felt everyone look at her at the statement, as if expecting her to object somehow. No one believed her right out, everyone was focusing on her instead of the situation they needed to focus on, so Dawn wouldn't stop the Val-Kas from explaining that first day. Not that Dawn exactly
wanted to relieve the worst moment of her life through recounting it but they would constantly doubt her if they didn’t get that information so instead she shrugged, counting how many markers there were on the table for a distraction. “Shokrakar baby. Taarlok move more fast.” Dawn tried to direct them to let the pregnant Vashoth rest but no one would likely listen to her.

“Might I suggest that I pursue this avenue of information and return once we know more?” Leliana suggested to the collective whole.

“Keep an eye on her.” Cullen commanded bluntly.

“I’m kind of hard to miss, how many other plus size women with perfect teeth do you have running around here?” Dawn just sounded tired, knowing that the words would mean nothing to the room at large but that tone of voice needed no language to translate.

“If you don’t mind my company, I would like to assist in this matter.” Solas suggested, gesturing for the Spymaster and strange woman to leave ahead of him.

“I gather that you understand spoken Common to a degree?” Solas asked politely.


Solas frowned slightly and Dawn wanted to laugh. She knew one phrase in Elvhen that would get his immediate and unrelenting attention, but saying ‘Ar-melana dirthavaren. Revas vir-anaris.’ To Fen’Harel himself was probably a bad idea at this stage. It wouldn't take much for him to eliminate her and no one would question it. As they approached the camp of the Valo-Kas, Dawn got her first glimpse of the infamous The Iron Bull and forgot to worry about Solas at all.

Shokrakar had said she had a contact within the Inquisition she could talk to, and it turned out that the Qunari had known each other for years now. It shouldn’t have surprised Dawn, and yet she admitted was shocked to realize it. None of the Valo-Kas were small; Vashoth were not by nature or temperament miniscule creatures, and their two handed warriors Katoh and Kaaris were rather on the hulking large side. The Iron Bull still towered over them in sheer size.

“Big.” Dawn blurted out, looking up at the height of The Iron Bull and then looking with surprised eyes over at Shokrakar.

“That I am.” The Iron Bull laughed easily though his eye held no real humour as he studied her carefully. Dawn was left wondering what Shokrakar had told him about her, and in return how much he had passed on to the Qun.

“I hate to interrupt your conversation,” Leliana smoothly inserted herself, “but we’re trying to figure out exactly what it is Dawn here is trying to tell us. And it seems that this is the kind of story that requires a proper beginning.”

Shokrakar grunted, entirely unimpressed by the Bard’s flowery language. “Sit down then. I’ll feed you hairy eyeballs once though.” She warned, thrusting a bowl of stew into Dawn’s hands. “Don’t think I didn’t notice you not taking a bowl earlier. Eat.” She commanded and Dawn didn’t dare argue.

“Now this I gotta hear. You don’t mind if I stay and listen do you Red?” The Iron Bull asked almost tauntingly.

“Might as well, that way we can make sure our separate reports contain all the right information.” Leliana teased right back.
“The Valo-Kas were hired as Guards for the Conclave.” Shokrakar started to explain what she knew. Dawn hadn’t heard this part of the tale so she listened as well as she could, several of the words too complex for her to parse out even with context. “And as we were about to engage with the humans sneaking in, the world exploded in green.” Dawn stared down at her half eaten stew, no longer hungry. She knew the next part and didn’t want to listen to it, didn’t even want to think about it. She stared down at the spoon in her hand, trying to sink into the grains of the wood itself as she ran her thumbnail over a rough spot on it and counted how many controlled breaths she could take before Shokrakar stopped talking.

“Do you believe that she knows the future?” Leliana asked straightforwardly.

“No clue, but the clothes she had on when she came here are like nothing I have seen. And I’ve travelled from one end of Thedas to the other in all directions.” Shokrakar stated almost blandly.

“What are you trying to say?” This time it was Solas that spoke up, disbelief heavy in his tone.

“If this world cannot explain it, maybe another can.” Shokrakar tapped Dawn’s bowl. “Eat.” Dawn finally looked up at the Vashoth. “It’s not like I’m going to starve to death anytime soon.” She rejected in her own tongue, tired of playing charades.

“Do not give me attitude.” Shokrakar growled and Dawn hastily spooned food into her mouth, having lost this argument in the past even without using words. The Vashoth had no trouble forcing soup broth down Dawn’s throat and she knew it.

“What be attitude?” Dawn finally asked after swallowing her spoonful.

“Attitude is the tone of voice, or body language, or way of expression yourself in a sarcastic or flippant manner. Can be good or bad, happy or sad.” Leliana offered, already used to the role of dictionary it seemed.

“Ah-tit-ew-d.” Dawn sounded the word out carefully and tried to ignore the three very curious eyes watching her digest their language a word at a time.

“We should be teaching her to speak like a sensible being.” Cedric piped up, sauntering in and sitting down next to Dawn, ignoring the plain faced Solas as if he didn’t exist.

“Fenedhis lasa.” Dawn offered in rejoinder, making Cedric guffaw and Solas merely raise an eyebrow.

“As amusing as it is to hear someone cursing, it is perhaps not the most effective language training.” Solas countered politely.

“Especially when I basically told him to suck your cock.” Dawn said in English, failing to keep the laughter out of her tone. Some of the Valo-Kas looked astonished at her humor. She’d have very little reason to laugh before and no one here had ever heard even a trace of humor from her.

“I suspect that once she learns the language it’s going to be a lot more fun to hear what she has to say.” The Iron Bull grinned.

“Are you from another world Dawn?” Leliana asked, shifting in her seat to face Dawn on more fully.

“Yes.” Dawn kept it simple. Silence met her admission. “Home be Earth.” She carefully pronounced the English term. She was a long way from home and she tried to keep the loss from
her face at the thought.

“So you know the future?” Leliana pressed.

“I know future maybe yes maybe no. Many future, many maybe.” Dawn looked down at her stew. “Stew have meat?” she held the bowl out. “Maybe. One future,” she scooped up a spoonful and it had a chunk of some kind of meat, “yes meat. Another future,” she scooped up a different spoonful, “no meat. I know both meat future and no meat future.”

“You know possible futures?” Leliana queried.

“Possible! Good word! Yes. I know possible future. I know possible past.” Dawn finally explained.

“That’s a little hard to believe, especially since you are unable to converse with us.” Leliana started plainly.

“No plan be here. No believe possible be here. I no be possible here. Here I be.” Dawn raised her hands as if to say ‘what can I do?’

“You didn’t plan to come here?” Solas figured it out first.

Dawn shrugged but nodded yes. “I no plan. I no plan come. Bad here I be.” She looked down at the bowl in her hands. She’d always wanted to be able to explore Thedas in the flesh, but never like this; never at the cost she’d paid already. “I sleep now.” She stated and stood up, retreating to the tent she shared with Kaaras, Kasaanda, and Kaaris. It was not even close to dark out yet but Dawn needed to be away from them all for a moment, her grief spilling over and she wanted no witnesses for it.

“Thank you for the information, I will relay what I have learned to the others and see what we come up with.” Leliana thanked, bowing in gratitude. The Nightingale rose gracefully to her feet but Shokrakar carefully stopped her with a hand on her arm.

“She wants to help you hairy eyeballs, but that little girl isn’t alright. If you accept her help, you owe it to her to see that she doesn’t come to more harm.” Shokrakar warned, not caring about the dangerous glint in the woman’s eyes.

“I will keep that under advisement, thank you.” Leliana once again graciously bowed her head, this time she did not break eye contact with Shokrakar though.

The Elf apostate Solas had already slipped away, silent and contemplative, but The Iron Bull sat with his one time besrathari and caught up with her on the details of what the Valo-Kas endured after the Conclave exploded.

Chapter End Notes

Elvhen:
Isenatha= dragon
Ma Abelas= I’m sorry
Andaran atish’an= Dalish greeting phrase
Ar-melana dirthavaren. Revas vir-anaris.= the code phrase used in The Masked Empire to activate the Eluvians
Qunlat:
besrathari= a recruiter and trainer of Ben-Hassrath
Dawn has arrived at Haven in time to warn them, but will anyone actually listen and believe her? Not everything she knew from the game was true or real here, details were different so she could not trust that the timeline presented from the game would hold reliable now.

The War Room was actually starting to look like it was going to live up to its name. At least Alena had to assume that the endless lists of troops, the ‘theoretical’ maps for ‘potential troop or civilian movements’, and the Commander’s scattered notes on preparations were in response to Dawn and her strange warning. If the new human was to be trusted, they were going to succeed in closing the Breach but then had to brace for attack. If the new human was to be trusted. That was a pretty hefty IF. Though, honestly, Alena found herself wanting to trust this strange woman with a broken language, and not for any reason she wished to discuss.

Alena was inclined to trust Dawn because there had been no trace of this Dawn in the Red Lyrium Future. She did not exist in a world where the Venatori controlled everything after the Conclave, and that fact alone made Alena want to give this girl some slack. Added to that was the story of her origin according to the Nightingale, and it was heartbreaking but not contrived. Still Alena had not survived to her age as an assassin by being naïve, so she was listening to her Advisors. Or she would if they could stop arguing.

“I don’t care if there is no reasonable explanation, we cannot trust the word of a random woman who claims to see the future just because she happened to know some secrets! I can’t believe I have to be the one to point this out.” Commander Cullen fumed and Alena listened to his concerns.

“You’re mistaking preparations based on reports for blind trust; Leliana knows what she is doing.” The Seeker now argued and Alena heard her frustration.

“I’ve already sent a pair of scouts to search the area described by the Valo-Kas for signs of this ‘disruption’ they attributed to Dawn’s arrival. We should hear back from them shortly.” The Nightingale soothed and Alena was impressed by the foresight that woman had. Alena could plot and plan and think ten steps ahead but Leliana seemed to be able to do that while also juggling geese and idiots. If nothing else Alena was going to enjoy the opportunity to see another professional at work; maybe she could pick up a few new tricks because Ancestors know how badass Leliana had been in that failed future.

“I can also contact any known Wesson families to see if they have a daughter named Dawn missing. Maybe she was injured at Haven and needs help finding her way home.” Josephine offered kindly.

“And it won’t hurt to prepare for the things she’s warned about, if we are attacked by the Templars after closing the Breach, I’d rather do it while prepared for it.” Cassandra pointed out logically.

“Yes, because there is a way to prepare for a dragon.” The Commander shot back sarcastically. “If our enemy had access to a trained arch demon, why is he waiting to attack? Why hasn’t he already run us out of Haven?”
“Because we aren’t a threat yet.” Alena stated simply, enjoying the surprise that her Advisors tried to hide. They’d forgotten she was still here with them, and Alena had to hide her amusement at that fact. “Why would you waste resources attacking a small refugee camp when you believe that you are a god about to reclaim your throne? But we close the Breach and that might just get some attention.”

Her mind flashed back to seeing her friends sickened with Red Lyrium. Blackwall, proud and tall with his magnificent beard, brought stooped and low by the poison the Venatori sought to break him with. The Iron Bull, simmering with rage and Lyrium, his bulk only added to by the sickness growing under his skin. She had failed them, these men she had recruited to her Inquisition, her team. She had led them here and look what she had let be done to them. The Nightingale, beautiful and haunting, tortured until she was barely recognizable. And yet still alive. Still defiant. Still the Nightingale until the very end.

Alena had watched them dig into the deepest sliver of their own souls to find hope once again, to find the strength to fight and give her the chance to change their fates. To make it right. To do something right for the right reasons for a change. Alena just wasn’t sure she was the best person to do that. She had so much blood on her hands, and it had never bothered her until the blood of her friends and companions had been added to it. If she could take any action now to help wash that blood off, Alena owed it to herself and to them to at least try.

“Start sending soldiers out to set up fall back camps. Check north, but also check around. Set up supply dumps further away from Haven than we have been. If no attack comes, we can always pull those supplies back in.” Cassandra suggested, looking at the Commander even though her words were for the room at large. “There’s no reason not to prepare for everything she warned of, even if it sounds ridiculous. The enemy has a dragon? No less believable than them trying Time Magic.” No one had an argument to counter the Seeker’s statement, and even if he looked frustrated, Commander Cullen let the issue go. “If Haven needs to be evacuated, we should start before a possible attack.” He sounded tired but was offering a solution to the problem at least. “We can establish a second base camp, to the North if you insist, and move families and larger units out there. Haven is already crowded as it is, and with more and more people making pilgrimage the situation will only get worse.”

“I’ll send my scouts out to the furthest towers and increase the frequency of check in, we’ll know the moment they spot anything.” Leliana added.

“I want her watched at all times.” The Commander finally spat out the kernel of his anger.

“She will be.” Cassandra promised, as untrusting as the ex-Templar.

“She is not the current issue. The Breach is. I’m about as far from a mage as a body can get, why don’t we call Solas in and start planning to close the damn thing?” Alena redirected the Advisors.

This time the trip to Haven would not require ladders, maybe finally convincing Alena that there was in fact a god and she, he, it, or they wanted her to be happy. Or at least they didn’t want her to be in pain; it’d taken a week for the ache to finally fade from her shoulders the last time.

The plan her Advisors had cooked up was simple, straightforward, and entirely contingent on Alena and the mages actually being able to close the Breach. Outside of that, no one knew what to expect except maybe Dawn, and no one was willing to trust her just yet. The mages, plus support from Inquisition soldiers and a few Templars that had voluntarily joined them, Alena and her team, the Commander, Leliana, and Cassandra were all going to take the trail up to where the Conclave had been and then close the Breach. It made for a quiet, tense climb to the Breach.
Although Alena had closed the Rift that had been at the base of the Breach, the Mark in her palm still crackled with ferocious life as she approached where it had once been. Solas muttered about thin Veils and Spirits being forced through, but she couldn’t afford to split her attention to worry about that just now. It was time to close the Breach and finish her role in this strange series of events. Solas and Cassandra stood with her, silently waiting for Alena to indicate that it was time to begin. Both had been with her the first time she’d ever used this damn thing to seal a Rift, and there was certain symmetry in them being here now to see her use it for the last time to seal the Breach.

Stepping forward on her own, Alena faced the Breach while Solas and Cassandra addressed the crowd waiting for the cue to start. “Mages!” Cassandra called out, drawing their eyes onto the Seeker and the Apostate.

“Focus past the Herald!” Solas cried out instructions. “Let her will draw from you!”

With her Mark raised towards the Breach, Alena took a struggling step forward, having to pull energy into the Mark and then push it right back out into the Breach. For some reason her mind pictured the complicated pulley systems she’d seen the Mining Caste Dwarves use when hauling heavy loads. The laws of nature wanted to fight her, keep her rooted to the spot and yet Alena took more deliberate, hard won steps forward.

Her final step was unexpectedly easier than the others and Alena didn’t need to turn around to know that the mages were doing their part. As a Dwarf she’d never felt magic moving through her before, had never been able to touch the Fade to utilize it. That didn’t seem to be an issue at all now though, some latent instinct in her very blood awoke and pulled on that magic, that effort of will that the mages were giving to her now. Green energy seemed to pour out of the Mark and up into the Breach, the pressure building inside Alena almost too much to bear but she refused to let it stop her now.

The crack of sound and blast of light that tore through the air floored everyone and Cassandra climbed to her feet first. The Seeker took no time to see to her own hurts, instead she immediately rushed to Alena’s side, helping her settle her breathing and regain her ground.

“You did it.” The Seeker breathed in relief and finally the others cheered in triumph.

Only Solas and Alena made no move towards jubilation. The Elf remained mysterious as always but all Alena could think of was the strange ‘Offworlder’ that had promised that they would succeed here, but then they would face an attack soon after.

“Let’s get back to Haven and see just how good our prophet is.” Alena muttered to Cassandra and turned to trek back down the mountain. She should be tired, but felt energy still crackling through her system like lightening looking to ground. Her fingertips all but buzzed with it and she had to wonder if this was how mages felt all of the time. If it were, no wonder they hated having the world tell them that they weren’t allowed to use it. Alena had barely any exposure to how magic use felt and this sense of endless energy was definitely addictive.

Music was already sounding from Haven, the cheers and cacophony of celebration echoing up the trail even before the Breach crew made it within sight. Success had announced itself; all anyone had to do was look up for proof of triumph. And yet Dawn was sitting amongst the Valo-Kas, utterly miserable and sullen.

“No dance. Chantry. Need to go Chantry. People need Chantry.” Dawn insisted to Kaaras even as
he tried to cajole her into celebrating.

“You still believe there’s danger? You’re in the middle of an army, inside a fortified town.”
Kasaanda dismissed.

“Look the Herald returns!” Emma interrupted the likely insult laden commentary that was about to follow.

All the peoples of Haven were crowding around the returning party, celebrating and trying to touch the Herald of Andraste. Right now everyone here believed, even if they weren’t religious. They believed in Alena Cadash, Herald of Andraste. And eventual Inquisitor, but no one but Dawn knew that just yet.

“Big bad come. People need to go Chantry. Now.” Dawn tried to insist yet again.

But Commander Cullen and Leliana had pretty much told her in no uncertain terms that she could stay with the Valo-Kas, without a guard and escort, as long as she sat quietly and waited for them to act on her warnings. She was supposed to do nothing. Not that Dawn had an idea about what it was she could be doing to help. The layout of Haven was entirely different than the game revealed, so she couldn’t tell them where the attacking army was coming from, or where the dragon would come from, or even WHEN they were supposed to be coming. In the game it all seems to be happening within the same night. But it’s never properly explained to Dawn or anyone else how Corypheus and Sampson got the timing down to that. It was always just ‘yay you succeeded—oh shit run for your life!’

Turns out the answer to the question of when was: long enough that no one believed Dawn’s warning anymore. The first hour after success and she could see that the guards were still on alert. The second hour they were starting to flag a little bit, but the music and cheering were still going strong. But after that there were fewer guards, and while no one was looking at Dawn and saying that she had been wrong, she knew what they were saying when they whispered behind their hands.
She’d tried to warn people. She’d tried to get here in time to help. But she hadn’t been prepared to get here, warn them, try to help, and for everyone to blow her off. She had watched Larry die and now she was going to watch most of these people die too.

“Why don’t we go to the Chantry and pray, maybe it’ll help.” Emma Trevelyan suggested kindly, oddly friendly.


“Dawn, there’s no attacking army. Whatever it was you’ve been through, it’s alright. Sometimes people get a little confused and they need help finding reality again. My uncle was like that, so I want you to know that it’s ok; you’re not alone.” Emma tried to tough love her but this was not one of those things she could fix.

“Why are you still here, worrying over us peasants? Don’t you have a super-rich Family you were all eager to get back to?” Cedric asked, not unkindly as he deliberately sat on Dawn’s other side.

“Believe it or not, I had a dirty, leaf eating heathen point out to me that my duty is to protect the innocent. I’m still here because I see nothing BUT innocents that need protection.” Emma actually tossed her head, like a proud horse.

“I bet this font of wisdom was just as handsome as they were smart.” Cedric winked as he said it and bumped shoulders with Dawn. “She’s talking about me by the way.” He fake whispered to
And then the warning trumpeted from one of the watch towers; Leliana had remained paranoid and vigilant and Dawn would find a way to thank her for it later. Because the alarm meant people were reacting. A louder bell started to ring out, the civilians crying out in fear and milling around in confusion.

The camp the Valo-Kas had erected for their needs was completely collapsed and put away in blindingly fast movements, no one speaking as they gathered their gear. Dawn had been wrong; many others hadn’t believed her but Shokrakar had and it showed with how ready her people were now. Kasaanda and Karaas were in the middle, guarding Dawn, while Cedric immediately cast barrier over their group and Emma pulled her sword free.

“Valo-Kas, stage one: get civilians inside. Stage two: engage with enemy. Stage three: fall back when Ataashi arrives. Chantry is our fall back point. Adaars, keep her alive she knows the future. Valo-Kas, move out!” Shokrakar called out and Dawn was pulled away from her companions for the last month.

“You’re finally getting what you want, your ass into the Chantry.” Kasaanda made a face even as she flanked Dawn.

“No want. No want this.” Dawn shook her head even as the first line of attackers reached Haven’s defensive line.

The problem with Haven having become a pilgrimage site was that there were far too many people to keep within the walls they had originally fortified. So the small town had grown outside the gates, and that meant now that a lot of civilians were on the wrong side of safety. Dawn froze on the spot as she saw the first of the hulking Red Templars juggernauts stomp into view.

“Move!” Karaas suddenly barked at her and Dawn flinched, scrambling forwards.

Unfortunately it was complete bedlam. In the game as the Herald, Dawn knew that Cullen had given a stirring speech, and then set her loose with her crew. But Dawn wasn’t the Herald, wasn’t a fighter at all. So instead of being the team running to the trebuchets, the Valo-Kas were trying to hustle her inside. “Wait! Ataashi! Ataashi attack…” she tried to mime the trebuchet because there was no way she knew the word for it. Karaas frowned in confusion but Kasaanda ignored her entirely, all but throwing Dawn over her shoulder even as the mountains around them rumbled.

The first wave of the attack was already over, too fast, way too fast. There were still too many civilians trying to pile in through the gates, though the ground was littered with dead bodies, and then everyone was cheering as the Red Templars juggernauts stomped into view.

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“See? It’s already over…” Karaas tried to comfort but Dawn wasn’t listening.

“No! No! RUN!” She tried to bellow over the sounds of soldiers and civilian alike cheering in mistaken victory.

Too late. The Lyrium Dragon screeched and the trebuchet exploded. Even from far away Dawn could feel the heat radiating off of the fires scattered before the Dragon’s assault. This time Kasaanda really did throw Dawn over her shoulder, the Valo-Kas mage shamelessly legging it towards the gates with her charge. From her upside down vantage point, Dawn could see Herald Cadash helping the blacksmith but Kasaanda didn’t slow down at all as she ran through the gate.

Having a hard, armour protected shoulder digging into her solar plexus made Dawn want to puke.
all down the Tal Vashoth’s back, but she thankfully had very little in her belly to vomit. And adrenaline had flooding Dawn’s system with all kinds of silly fight or flight responses. “FUCK YOU!” Dawn hollered out at the dragon in English even as the gates slammed shut behind the Herald.

The Valo-Kas were divided into the two groups: Taarlok and the fighters were helping the Inquisition soldiers, while the mages hurried their charges towards safety. Emma Trevelyman seemed to resent being pushed along like a helpless civilian but Dawn was unfortunate enough to see that change. Between one heart beat and the next Dawn heard someone bark out ‘GET DOWN!’ and Kasaanda dropped to the floor even with Dawn on her shoulder.

Emma had no such luck. The Lady Trevelyman, armed with her one time Templar sword and armored in the crest of her Family, turned and slashed out with her sword but there is surprisingly little even a well-made sword can do against Dragon claws. Dawn gasped as blood splattered against her face, eyes wide as she witnessed a Dragon Claw spear Emma through the breast plate and lift her away from them. And the sound Emma’s corpse made as it crashed back down a moment later nearly made Dawn throw up for real this time. Metal had twisted and torqued, pinched around limbs and parts even as blood and gore leaked out.

Karaas picked her up this time, the Healer knowing that Emma could not be saved now and not bothering to try. Dawn wasn’t thrown over a shoulder this time, she was carried like a small child, and her eyes stared sightlessly out at nothing as her head replayed Emma’s death over and over. Just like with Larry she had been useless to help save Emma. Even when she was doing everything she could to help it wasn’t enough. If she hadn’t of been here then Emma would have left to be with her Family already.

They were inside the Chantry before Dawn realized it, hearing Roderick say his piece about the Chantry being everyone’s refuge pulled Dawn out of her pity party. The Herald was the last one in and then Roderick collapsed into Cole’s arms but Karaas carried Dawn further away, into the Chantry where the bulk of the survivors huddled.

“Valo-Kas sound off.” Shokrakar demanded, blood soaking into her armor and her pregnant stomach doing nothing to diminish her ferocity as her team counted off. Despite the loss of Emma, the Valo-Kas had come through unscathed.

“Here she is.” Cassandra cried out, approaching the Valo-Kas. “The Herald and the Commander are discussing plans and you should be there for it. You’ve been right so far.” The Seeker commanded.

Dawn felt Karaas hold onto her for a moment longer. “I’m coming with her.” He spoke for Dawn. Cassandra didn’t even bother arguing, she just turned and walked away to tackle the next problem she could solve.

Cullen was with the Herald and Dawn knew that he was telling her to bury Haven. Cole and Roderick were providing their piece of the escape plan as Karaas stopped with her next to Cullen and the Herald. “But what of your escape?” Dawn heard Cullen demand softly of the awfully tiny looking Herald Cadash. Cadash said nothing, looking away and everyone got the point. Uncomfortably so. “Perhaps you will surprise it, find a way…” the Commander reached for hope even as he turned to direct the Inquisition to retreat after Roderick.

“Put down please.” Dawn tapped Karaas and thankfully the Healer listened to her. “One time.” She held up a finger, asking for a single minute but Karaas frowned at her.

“Cadash?” Dawn turned to the Herald and the Dwarf looked up at her with flat, dead eyes. This
woman did not expect to see the sunrise ever again. So Dawn said the only thing she could think of to help. “You survive. Not because you Herald, or Mark. You survive because you be you. Never give up you and we see you again.” She promised.

The Herald frowned at her for a moment but then gave a decisive nod. Without another word, the Herald and her team left the Chantry to load and fire the final trebuchet. “Time to go, unless you have any other news that needs to be delivered first?” Karaas cajoled gently.

“Want to go home.” Dawn replied instead, voice soft because she hadn’t meant to speak out loud.

“I think we all do. Let’s try to keep as many of these people alive as possible so they can do just that.” The Healer suggested kindly and gently took Dawn’s hand to lead her back towards the Valo-Kas.

“Is there anything else you can tell us? Something more useful than just North?” Commander Cullen demanded harshly, his face twisted in pain at the emotional loss of the Herald. He still believed that she had just walked out to her death.

“She live. Leave fire, she follow.” Dawn replied hollowly.

Cullen just stared at her with plain distaste on his face. But it was Karaas that answered. “She could follow and so could any army that comes after.”

Dawn shook her head no but didn’t even begin to know enough to translate the blizzard that would start shortly, and how the Inquisitor will only be hours behind but the snow storm would bury all trail before dawn.

“I don’t have time for this. Try to be useful, and don’t stir up trouble.” The Commander insisted before marching off to handle organizing this rabble into a viable escape.

Dawn let Karaas guide her back to the Valo-Kas and out through the small door leading to the Summer Pilgrimage. The game never got to see the civilian escape, but the game had already proven to be unreliable as a reference. It turned out that the Summer Pilgrimage started through the modest vegetable garden. Where fruits of their labors literally fed the faithful one would assume. The symbolism was entirely lost on everyone as they fled past history.

The snow started almost as soon as they made it onto the mountain trail. Whatever markers there were during the summer had already been buried under snow, and as more now fell it promised to become a miserable climb. Dawn didn’t complain at the weather as they walked, although it was a topic muttered about by the others.

She didn’t make a sound of protest as everyone was tasked with carrying either supplies, the injured, or each other as they walked. When they reached a secondary camp that Dawn hadn’t even realized existed and found Brontos, wagons, and large groups of unharmed pilgrims waiting for them, Dawn realized that her warnings might not have done much to save lives at Haven, but at least it had done this. This second camp was still far too close to Haven for the Commander to deem it safe, so the collective whole kept moving into the unknown, headed North. Dawn had actually lost count of her steps, too cold and drained to run the tally, before they stopped for the night. Dawn had carried Karaas’ bags as well as her own so the much larger Vashoth could haul heavier supplies, and she helped set up the camp while he delivered the goods.

Being the only human in a group of Qunari drew a lot of stares and attention, at least one story of who or what she was had to have gone around because Dawn heard a word repeatedly said as someone pointed at her; ‘Offworlder’. Even if she didn’t know what the word actually meant, there was no mistaking the tone of voice being used.
“I’m going to go offer my Healer skills at the Medic tent. Dawn, I’d like for you to come with me please.” Karaas announced, all but holding Dawn’s hand now that the habit had been established. It made Dawn feel like a little kid, not at all helped by how huge his hand was compared to her own.

“Stay armed.” Was all Shokrakar said as she waved them both off.

“I’m coming with.” Kasaanda announced, settling her halberd in place.

“Stay close to me, and keep quiet. I don’t like how people are looking at you. I should be drawing the agro, not you.” Karaas warned in a low tone.

Dawn looked into his blood shot, exhausted butter yellow eyes and nodded. People in a mob scared the shit out of her; no use acting brave when smart was the better option. So she actually did reach out to hold Karaas’ left hand, his right left free if he needed to go for his spear. Behind them Kasaanda snorted. Luckily there was no incident on the way to the medic tent, and once there Karaas set Dawn as his aide, sending her to run and bring water, towels, or bandages as needed. And he did what he could to save the worst of the wounded. He went after those on death’s door, but once or twice his twin would step forward and draw him away and take his place; quickly ending their misery. The Necromancer would certainly know when a body was beyond a Healer’s help. Unless they were a Spirit Healer, Dawn remembered that there was some kind of power level difference between even a great Healer and a Spirit Healer.

Eventually though even Karaas ran out of mana reserves, and he’d already maxed out his Lyrium potion amount. His skills extended to those of surgeon and doctor though, so Dawn helped as a deputized nurse. “Wash. Lots wash.” She commanded and Karaas actually grinned at her.

“You know germs.” He sounded thrilled.

“Little yes.” She smiled briefly, unable to get excited about basic hygiene practices.

“Well, I have special soap for this but I left it in my bag.” He complained.

“I go. I put bag.” Dawn didn’t wait for his permission, glad to be doing something useful. She jogged to the Valo-Kas camp and ducked in, one of the Ashaad’s waving hello to her. Dawn dropped in front of Karaas’ bag and quickly dug through the carefully wrapped and labeled parcels. Too bad she couldn’t read, but the smell of lye soap was pretty distinct. To be safe she grabbed the most likely package and brought it to Ashaad. “Wash safe yes?” she tried to remember the word Karaas used for soap. Thankfully they understood her question and nodded yes, so she smiled and headed back towards the Healer’s tent.

It took Dawn a moment to figure out that the crowd around her was angry as she was jostled along. She stopped, realizing that they’d surrounded her and were all trying to talk to her at once. She tried to listen, to understand but too many people were demanding answers or asking questions at the same time. “Sorry, no know words.” She tried to explain, holding up the soap to show she was helping. But a rock smashed into the side of her head, staggering her and sending a flash of white across her eyes.

As Dawn collapsed to the floor, disoriented and bleeding, someone’s kick collided into her back, driving her face first into the dirt. Another kick landed against her abdomen and she suddenly couldn’t breathe. A cool wash of blue shimmered over her skin and the next series of blows were absorbed by the barrier protecting her.

“THAT’S ENOUGH!” Kasaanda bellowed out, startling the mob into stillness.

Karaas stormed through and people melted out of his path. “You people call us barbarians and animals but look at you. Disgraceful.” He chastised even as he scooped Dawn up. She let out an
inadvertent whimper as that jostled her tender parts. A little trickle of Healing tended to the worst of the pain but he could do little more than let her sleep and monitor her for concussion.

The Valo-Kas all took the attack on Dawn with professional equanimity but Cedric Lavellan looked murderous. And even though Karaas was the Healer, Cedric insisted on washing the blood off of Dawn; both her own and the dried blood from when Emma had been slain.
Whispers to Shouts

Chapter Summary

There is no rousing orchestral music heralding the Inquisition into Skyhold. This is not a conquering army, but a fleeing last leg. At least that's how Thedas feels post Haven.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Iron Bull wasn’t particularly religious; the Qun wasn’t about worshiping gods. But it was still something else entirely to see his diminutive Boss sloughing through snow damn near up to her neck. He’d heard what Shokrakar’s Offworlde had said to Cadash, and he had stationed himself near the perimeter of the camp, and saw Cullen and Cassandra out there too, all in the hope that the strange human was right. He had been placing bets with himself before Cassandra cried out, spotting the boss. The humans were closer, scooping up the frozen Dwarf and rushing her into a heated tent. It did not take very long after that; word was already spreading that the Herald had come back from the dead. He left the Herald to her Advisors and retreated to his own tent to draft a letter.

So far that Offworlde’s predictions had been spot on, if not as useful as people could hope. His handlers were going to shit themselves when he tells them she even got the dragon right. How much more did she know but couldn’t say because of the language barrier? Bull didn’t need to hear back to know the Ben Hassrath would want him finding the answers to those questions. With an annoyed grunt he hauled himself up and out towards where the answers lay.

“Hello the camp.” The Iron Bull called out, approaching the Valo-Kas. Despite the good news buzzing through the civilians, he quickly picked up on the tense atmosphere near the Tal Vashoth; distrusting glares from inside and outside of the mercenary tents. And then he caught sight of the Offworlde herself; there was a nasty, ragged gash across her temple and forehead, and the resulting bruising had swollen half her face. “Some action then?” he indicated the injury.

“These so called civilized humans decided to attack her the moment one of us wasn’t with her.” The feisty bronze one snarled, her eyes scanning the humans surrounding them.

“Heard a few trying to demand that if she knew the future, why she didn’t stop the attack from happening. Others were calling her a murderer or a heretic. Some of these people she’d just helped me Heal too. Ungrateful worms.” The handsome Healer sounded outraged.

“Well from what I heard in the Chantry, she promised that Cadash would come back. And I know the Boss is back. She damn near froze to death, but she’s back.” He informed.

“Good. Glad live, we need her live.” Dawn spoke up.

Before the conversation could continue, they all paused at the unexpected sound of singing.

“Herald awake. People sing of hope.” Dawn explained even as the crowds all joined in. The Valo-Kas seemed unfazed by her proclamations, as if already accustomed to her little pronouncements. Once again she wasn’t wrong, but once again it wasn’t exactly the kind of information one could reasonably react on.
He studied the Offworlder’s face boldly, seeing exhaustion etched into the lines of her mouth. The bruising and injuries helped her overall appearance look more vulnerable, more pitiable. Her height and Noble-fed girth were easier to overlook for her wounds, which was probably why the Healer had left the superficial evidence but reduced the pain.

The humans had concluded their creepy little chant and The Iron Bull spied Cadash walking off with that Elf Solas. Even though the duo didn’t leave sight of the Camp, no one approached the pair. All too likely the people that had survived Haven considered Alena Cadash to be holy or some shit like that.

“He say go North; she take North. We find safe.” the Offworlder quietly warned and Bull happened to overhear.

“You’re telling me that a Dwarf that everyone is calling the Herald of Andraste, a human religion, is going to listen to the advice of a flat-ear apostate?” the lone Elf in the group scoffed.

“Yes. Solas not…” the Offworlder tapped her ears, clearly understanding the insult, even if she didn’t understand the words.”

“My darling little Shem, that one is DEFINITELY a flat-ear. I know because everytime he sneers down his nose at me, all I see are his big, flat, ears.” the Elf grinned viciously.

Bull left before anyone questioned why he’d come to the Valo-Kas in the first place. This Offworlder definitely seemed to know details about events to come, he didn’t understand how but his job was just to report back anything of interest. Bull was fairly certain that Red would consider anything pertaining to the Offworlder as being too sensitive to share, but the little bird didn’t know how code layering worked with the Ben-Hassrath. The Isskari weren’t going to interfere with his position yet, but the Offworlder had their attention. Especially if Bull understood that little scene about the Elf. The Offworlder hadn’t understood the words of the insult, but still figured out the meaning of it. And she defended Solas, and not because she liked the Elf; but her confidence in speaking of him warned that she knew details about him.

“Bull!” Cadash caught his attention, moving quickly over the tromped snow.

“Yeah Boss?” he turned with an easy smile.

“I want you to take your Chargers and start breaking trail North. I’m fairly certain I won’t lose you in a snow drift.” the humour she used was at odds to the haunted look in her eyes.

“You could always ride on my shoulders, see the world beyond the asses of the masses.” he joked, working on an idea.

Cadash laughed for real this time, a quiet little snicker. “Did you just ask me to ride you Bull? Gotta buy a girl a drink first.”

“Heh, that’s an entirely different conversation Boss.” he wouldn’t burn that bridge. “Can I drag the Tal Vashoth along, they’ll help break trail faster.”

“Sure. The civilians will start crawling up your trail after breakfast; if you find a good campsit anywhere close to sunset and we’ll stop there.” Cadash summarized what must have been a longer plan.

“You got it Boss.” Bull waved her off and quickly wrangled his Chargers into action.

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It only occurred to Dawn after The Iron Bull left that maybe broadcasting her knowledge in front of him while he was still drinking the kool-aid was a bad idea. But it was too late to worry about it now. She’d try to watch it around him from now on though. Not that the game gave a lot of details about the trek to Skyhold.

“Tarasyl’an Te’las.” Dawn breathed the name softly, not wanting to immediately fail in her attempt to be more discreet.

“North?” Cedric ambled over to stand near her.

“North.” Dawn agreed, getting a closer look at the Vallaslin on his face. It was a surprisingly vivid shade of yellow but Dawn couldn’t even hazard a guess as to which Evanuris it belonged to. If it was Mythal’s that might offer a solution to the Well of Sorrows issue in the future. Guilt flooded Dawn a heartbeat after the thought occurred to her and she tried to just shove it aside to deal with later.

Thankfully Kaaras interrupted her awkward, sullen silence by tossing her bags at her as camp was torn down. Apparently they were heading out early. “Someone’s here to speak to you.” the Healer warned and Dawn followed his indication to see Cassandra. “Hurry, Shokrakar wants us to work with The Chargers to break trail.”

Dawn followed him back to meet Cassandra’s impatient gaze. “The Herald was hoping to speak to you while the Valo-Kas work.” her words were brisque.

“Not alone.” Kaaras immediately interjected.

“Excuse me? Is she a prisoner?” the Seeker demanded hotly.

“The bruises on her face were put there by your people, not mine.” Kaaras’ words shut her anger down.

“I did not know that, I had assumed they occurred during the fall of Haven.” Cassandra apologized without a trace of false humility.

“No, she was jumped by a crowd of people, so you can understand why I want to stay with her.” Dawn stared at Kaaras; she’d never heard the usually jovial Vashoth so harsh before.

Cassandra just sighed in the face of his insistence. “Of course, I would expect no less. And for what it’s worth; I am sorry that she has to be protected still.”

It should have bothered Dawn to be spoken about like an errant pet but she was just quietly grateful to not be without someone watching out for her. She was entirely useless on her own still; she’d not entirely figured out all the skills to survive yet. “Thank you.” she managed.

“I’ll let Shokrakar know and be right back.” he was already striding off.

Dawn looked at Cassandra and figured this would be her only alone time with the women so she blurted out, “Sorry for loss of Regalyan. I know you pain.”

The Seeker looked like someone had slapped her a flash of raw emotion on her face before she spun on her heel and stormed off without a word. That went just about as well as Dawn should have expected.

“Making friends?” Cedric lightly teased, his gifted bag of supplies strapped on already. “I’m staying with this bunch of riff raff. I’m no mercenary and I can do more for my People here.” he
offered as she eyed his gear.

Dawn just nodded and waited with the mage until Kaaras returned. He made no comment on the Seeker’s absence or the Dalish addition, just guided Dawn to the Herald’s tent.

Dawn felt bad that she didn’t even notice when Cedric stepped from their sides; he was just gone without a word. And it was just dramatic enough that Dawn was left feeling like it was deliberate.

No one in the tent seemed surprised to see Kaaras with her, and Josephine immediately turned to the newcomers. “Thank you for coming Dawn, Kaaras.”

Kaaras executed a curt bow, simple but polite. “Thank you Taarbas.” he greeted politely.

Dawn noticed that Cassandra was suspiciously absent, but Solas and the Advisors were here, as was the Herald. Alena Cadash looked exhausted still, her already lined face sagging with fatigue. Her feldspar eyes met Dawn’s with open assessment at odds to her physical state.

“You were right, I survived.” Alena stated it simply, ignoring everyone else for a moment.

“Yes.” Dawn agreed, not knowing what the Carta Dwarf wanted from her.

“Solas says that we’ll find safety to the North.” Alena indicated the bald Elf.

“I have been investigating whispers in the Fade of a fortress to the North. It is abandoned by Time, but the spirits all say it is waiting to be claimed.” the mage easily took over the narrative and the Herald seemed relieved.

“North is a little vague to march an army on we were hoping you might have more information.” Josephine gently fished for information.

Dawn could only shrug. “I know North good. Find safe. Find home. I know name of home. I maybe point map. Sorry, never show very yes of home.”

“This isn’t some kind of game to maybe point at a map. These people are trusting us with their lives.” Commander Cullen stressed.

“Her information supports my own Commander. Herald, send your scouts out North, you will find refuge.” the apostate urged.

“The Iron Bull has already left with the Chargers, the Valo-Kas and some Inquisition scouts to break trail.” Cassandra announced as she strode into the tent. “As per the Herald’s request.” the Seeker’s eyes were red and puffy, but there was no trace of tears in her voice even if she wouldn’t look at Dawn.

“We can’t stay here. I don’t need to explain why, you’re all smart. Let’s get our people moving.” she sounded so wrung out that Dawn had to fight a ridiculous urge to hug the other woman.

“It would greatly help morale if we could tell our people where we’re going to.” Cullen admitted plainly.

“Tarasy’lan Te’las.” Dawn blurted out without thinking and then honestly face palmed. She didn’t even want to know what the faces of the others were saying. She was an absolute idiot; she’d meant to call it Skyhold but she’d looked at the damn Egg and out popped the Elvhen. She finally looked up to see blank curiosity, mild amusement, and intense scrutiny. “Skyhold. Old, safe, good, North. Solas right.”
And boy the mage was staring at her; he dialled down the alarming intensity when the others focused back on him. “You seem to know the most interesting bits of Elvhen. If I recall there was mention of you knowing history from this world, I would greatly like a chance to confer with you about what histories you have learned. On our own time of course.” the mage expertly maneuvered.

Dawn could give nothing away about how much the idea of being alone with Fen’Harel himself filled her with terror. If she were smart, she could recruit and convince the rebel Elf to join the Inquisition instead of turning psycho Elf Lord. Sadly, Dawn knew that the best she could do would likely be convince him not to kill her, and maybe try to make friends. Since everyone was watching her trying to read her reactions, she shrugged and nodded in acceptance.

“Does your sense of the future tell us how long it’ll take to get to this Skyhold?” Leliana switched topics, probing for information.

Dawn shook her head no and once again tried to redirect the attention away. “Solas know more, Fade talks.”

“Perhaps focusing on her language development will help unlock the details we all want.” Solas suggested kindly.

“Considering the fact that she spent her first week almost catatonic, her language skills are remarkable.” Kaaras finally spoke up and Dawn had a flash of amusement that some had started to overlook a freaking horned Qunari. She hadn’t understood several of the words that Kaaras had used but she certainly understood the effect they had on the assembled group.

“I want help you. I want Ink-wa-zish-on win. Stop Cor-if-he-us.” Dawn struggled with the longer words.

“It would help if you had information we could use.” Commander Cullen blithely interjected.

“And it would be great if you could stop riding my ass.” Dawn sighed back in English. “No?” She switched back to Common. “You learn my words good I talk all. If no, stay, wait, I speak what I know.”

“If we could focus.” Alena interrupted the argument brewing. “We’re going North. Dawn, I want your entire focus to be on language growth. Solas, if you want to ask her questions, first teach her Common.” there was authority in the Herald’s voice; either she was used to leading or had adjusted to it beautifully. “Commander, I’m entrusting the movement of supplies and troops to you. Josephine, you know the most about moving people, if you need to grab someone for help they’re yours. Any arguments?” None were voiced.

“You ok with all of this Dawn?” Kaaras’ question was a low voiced rumble.

Dawn nodded her head yes and no. “No choice, must do. I be good.” she compromised.

“It seems I am to be your travelling companion for the next while.” Solas managed to sound both annoyed and yet pleased with this fact. Dawn wasn’t sure if he was irritated with the company or language barrier.

“We just got rid of our superfluous Elf.” Kaaras teased.

Before Solas could utter a rejoinder, Seeker Cassandra approached; this time actually looking at Dawn. “I will accompany you as well, to remind the people of this camp that mob violence is not tolerated.”
Dawn was fairly certain her frank disbelief was plainly written on her face. Kaaras raised his eyebrows at the Seeker while Solas gave a smirk. “She might be new Seeker but I’m fairly certain even Dawn doesn’t believe you. It’s alright, you’re our guard. Just don’t piss on me and tell me it’s raining.” He said it with a smile.

“You are not prisoners, I am not there to guard the people from you.” she was honestly offered.

“Argue on the road.” Alena chased everyone out.

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Being alone was both a blessing and a curse, Alena discovered, because alone meant no distractions. And no distractions meant dealing with the conversation she’d been promising herself since she woke up in a dungeon. Only now she had a lot more to scream about than calmly figure out. Her shoulder and rib cage still ached from where Corypheus nearly yanked her arm out, and her Marked palm seared where the Magister tried to pull it free.

She had been ready to die, resigned to it even, but the words of the Offworlder kept urging her to not give up yet. So she faced a red lyrium infused monstrosity, and Alena had defied him. Once the flair had gone up she had lashed out, using a sword that was probably heavier than she was to release the trebuchet. And as soon as the Magister had turned to see where the impact was, Alena had pulled Stealth over herself and ran for her life. She never even saw the broken boards she fell through, but that fall had saved her life. And broken a couple of ribs.

Once she’d regained consciousness Alena had gotten angry. So she had this Mark in her palm, and it was an accident. And this asshole Corypheus just thinks he is allowed to kill her? She might be an insignificant little ex-Carta Dwarf, But Alena Desdimonda Cadash was an assassin and had been for nearly thirty years. She has survived capture, torture, bodily violation, and accidental poisoning, she was going to make it through this damned blizzard too. Fuck the Silent Maker, the Absent Elven Pantheon, and the Forgotten Ancestors all. Where were they now? Why was it upon a mortal’s shoulders to deal with this? And Alena’s fury had helped her push through the cold. When wolves howled in the distance, Alena had howled back. She was splattered with blood already; hers, friends, enemies, what was a little wolf blood to all that? They had never approached though, and now Alena could wonder if it had been a testament to the Token of the Pactmaster Solas had gifted to her, or her own fury had kept them at bay.

That anger still simmered under Alena’s skin, helping her move forward when her body just wanted to sleep. But it was hard to keep the massive army of people looking to her. They believed she was someone Holy, and even if she never believed that she had to act as if their expectations were right. But if she happened to be extra vicious to her opponents for the next while, none of her companions would ever remark on it. Alena’s movements were crisp as she packed her gear and got out of the way so the soldiers could tear the command tent down.

“It’s good to see you up and moving, Herald.” Warden Blackwall called out as he approached her.

“It’s good to be up. How was the retreat?” she fell into step with him.

His face went hard. “More costly than you can imagine. Don’t ever tell me to leave you behind again though, because I’ll disobey that order next time.” he warned.

Alena watched him silently as they walked, not arguing his words. She knew he was lying about something, though not right this instant. It was more about how he carried himself, his constant sense of ‘I have a secret’ paranoia that she had seen too many times to ignore. She didn’t care though, he could have his secrets.
“Blackwall, when we get to our destination and have a moment of proper privacy, I want you to know that I plan to do some vile and fantastic things to you.” She’d almost died and while their mild flirting had been sweet and fun, she needed something a little more visceral now. “I’ve figured out that you’re hiding something. I don’t know what it is, and I don’t care. I was literally paid to kill people Blackwall; you can keep your secrets. We’ll deal with it if it ever comes out. But I want you, and I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give for as long as you can.”

And the man stared at her frankness in plain shock, forced to keep walking to keep up. “Well that was certainly direct enough.” he laughed a little nervously. “I accept. And thank you.” he awkwardly and endearingly replied.

Life was literally too short to sweat the small things. There was a demon spitting hole in the sky not too long ago, now there’s a crazed Tevinter with an Archdemon at his command. There was going to be a demon army and all out civil war in Orlais if they didn’t find a way to stop it. Blackwall could have his secrets, Alena still had parts of her past she didn’t want too closely looked at. He was here now when she needed him; and he never seemed afraid of her rage.

Chapter End Notes

Translations
Qunlat
Isskari= rank; retrieval of artifacts division
Taarbas= recording or clerical rank/title
Behold Skyhold

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition comes home.
Cedric Lavellan stands where the gods of his people were banished.
The Valo-Kas stand ready for deployment.
An Offworlder settles.

Chapter Notes

I have no editing process, as always, so please feel free to gently point out my mistakes in the comments!

Tarasy’lan Te’las. Skyhold. Where the Veil itself came violently to life. Cedric could hear the spirits whimper the echoes of that history as he marched into the new home of the Inquisition. He’d heard the Offworlder breathe that self-same title when she thought no one could hear, so he knew to expect it and still his skin crawled with all the implications. That strange Shem had secrets in her skull that Ceddy suspected should never see the light of day.

Like the fact that this new home reeked of the Pantheon he’d desperately believed in all his life. If the Fade haunted with the fact that this was where the Veil was born, then that meant spiritual proof that Fen’Harel at least, was real. Was Cedric prepared to live in a world where his gods were real? Would he survive it?

A part of him felt like he was coming home as he followed the masses of the Inquisition in. The insufferable, plain faced Solas had guided the mostly human army to a point of Elvhen history; it rankled. But thankfully being immersed in mages of all calibers quickly soothed that burn. Cedric listened to Circle Born mages that tasted true freedom for the first time. He mourned as he found young Dalish mages that had been turned out by their Clans because too many mages meant demons. In Clan Lavellan, custom was for the Keeper’s First to leave if it was at all possible for the Keeper to train the new mage. That was why Cedric had left to the Conclave; his own son had shown mage abilities. He was so proud.

Now though, Cedric was enjoying the chance to trade barbs with a Tevinter mage. The man was painfully pretty and his brittle ego was too tempting a target to pass up. “Good morning gorgeous. Ready to violently colonize another Elvhen historical monument?” he cheerily fell into step with the younger man.

“Why we can’t do so at a civilized time is beyond me.” Dorian Pavus, late of Minrathous bemoaned.

“Would you prefer to be carried in on a litter, like those my People use for our weak, elderly, and infirm?” Cedric teased as they slowly moved in the mass of people.

“Truly. But let’s be honest, that requires a very specific set of bearers to make it worthwhile.” The
Altus played along easily.

“I can see them now; four big, brawny types. Don’t think my time amongst the Valo-Kas did not inspire me. Sometimes a little brute force has its distinct appeal, on both ends.” Cedric shamelessly flirted and he saw the pretty Tevinter flustered for the first time. “Don’t bother denying it Princeling, I’ve seen where your eyes wander.” He enjoyed ribbing the human.

“Are all Dalish as tactless and abrupt as you?” the man demanded.

“We’re generally a direct lot. Our hunters see something worth pursuing; they are relentless. Our mages see something curious; we are persistent. Our rogues see something unusual; they are fantastic.” He didn’t elaborate.

As much as Dorian tried to huff, he didn’t storm off either. So Cedric was willing to play the long game. If he was going to live where Fen’Harel had sealed away the Evanuris and the Forgotten Ones, then Cedric was going to take heed from the Dread Wolf’s Slow Arrow.

“Found you.” The strange Offworlder intoned as she slid in beside Cedric’s easy march. His pretty mage didn’t move fast. With her came the bald flat ear, the sullen Seeker, and the jovial Gray One.

“You sure did.” He grinned at her. She might have no idea as to why she was here but that didn’t change the fact that her arrival had saved his life; that sort of demanded his cordiality.

“Seeker Pentaghast, what brings a woman of your esteem to a place such as this?” Dorian joked.

The Seeker just gave her disgusted sigh and ignored Dorian. “The mages have been helpful, melting snow and widening the trail the Qunari made.”

“See Seeker, it’s almost like magic has practical purposes once you unchain the mage.” The Tevinter snidely suggested.

“Instead you just like to chain up anyone that looks like me, mage or no.” Cedric easily grinned despite his words. When the Tevinter spun to angrily to tirade him, Cedric derailed him by blowing the mage a kiss. “If you ask nicely, I don’t mind a little bondage.” He teased the younger mage.

“Ugh.” The Seeker rolled her eyes and the Gray One cackled.

“I don’t appreciate being the butt of a joke!” the Tevinter hotly contested.

“I wasn’t joking.” Cedric all but purred and the Gray One actually laid hands on the shoulders of the women to steer them away. Smart man, Ceddy didn’t need an audience.

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The Seeker was all but sputtering her embarrassment at witnessing such a direct seduction. Kaaras was mostly amused; he’d seen Kasaanda’s approach to wooing and it was surprisingly similar. If properly motivated, she could be halfway romantic, but his twin much preferred the direct approach. Kaaras probably had absorbed all the romance in the womb.

“So this is the safe North you kept telling us about?” he queried the Offworlder.

“Yes. Skyhold. Broken but good.” Dawn was staring at the castle they were walking into.

“So many things are.” He replied, looking at her instead of the castle. As a Healer he could still feel the pain radiating from her, but the woman was moving and talking so he let her be. Some
things took longer to recover from.

The Commander had arranged a series of filter check points; officers were helping direct people based on their skills. As a Healer, Kaaras was given a choice to bunk down in the broken but functional Healer’s wing, or stay with the Valo-Kas as they camped outside with the rest of the standing army. The Seeker swept Dawn up, taking her past the checkpoints without stopping, and Kaaras actually lost track of her. Shit. It would be easier for Dawn to find him if he were with the Valo-Kas; she wouldn’t know to look for him at the Healer’s Wing.

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Cassandra marched with her past the checkpoints and no one dared stop the Seeker. Dawn would have been impressed if she wasn’t already overwhelmed with how different Skyhold was compared to the game. In the game it was a castle, in reality it was a veritable Fortress. It had more towers, fall back points, and was on a much greater scale than the game ever showed. Tarasy’lan Te’las had never fallen to any enemy but Time. And Dawn wasn’t entirely sure, but as they crossed the bridge into the Keep proper, she’d felt an almost caress across her even if nothing was touching her. Fanon always did like to make Skyhold slightly sentient, maybe they were right.

“Seeker Pentaghast, might I have a word?” Ambassador Montilyet approached them easily, nodding in greeting at Dawn even as Cassandra stepped over to speak with her.

So Dawn found herself alone in Skyhold, a brief moment to marvel and wonder at the details she had only ever seen on screen. The lower Bailey was still rubble strewn and waterlogged, but it was useful to help organize civilians through. The upper Bailey was filled with volunteer crews being assigned section to clean, and if Dawn’s basic language skills were up to snuff, they were clearing out assigned sleeping quarters. But when she spied the board detailing the information Dawn was forced to accept that she was functionally illiterate; not a single symbol made sense to her. Not that they would have included her on the list, she’d been camping with the Valo-Kas. Still, with nothing better to do, Dawn tucked her bag away and approached on of the clear up crews.

“Hello, I help.” She cautiously joined a group that was moving rubble away from where Cassandra usually lurked in the game.

“Sure, more hands mean faster work.” The leader cheerily accepted, and put Dawn to work.

At first her language barrier wasn’t even an issue. She understood enough to follow basic instructions but if someone questioned her, she was lost. After a couple of hours, the crew she was with all just thought she was a bit slow mentally, and kept her instructions simple and with lots of hand gestures. It wasn’t ASL, but Dawn could understand a surprising amount of their gestures. It helped that the tasks were simple still. They stopped for a break and several of the work crews gathered to gossip, but Dawn couldn’t follow any conversation when there were that many of them going on. If she had tried though, maybe she would have been more prepared for what came after they went back to work. None of the crew she was working with would talk to her now. And when she tried to approach anyone to ask questions or for help, they all stormed away from her. So she finally went to the first person she’d talked to when she joined their cleanup crews.

“What bad? All no talk, all angry. What do?” Dawn tried to ask what was wrong.

“We know what you are murderer, and no one wants you here. Get away.” He spat and actually shoved her away.

Dawn hadn’t understood some of the words snarled out at her, but she knew to retreat away from the violence and tone of voice. Adrenaline washed uselessly through her system, souring her
stomach and leaving her shaky as Dawn grabbed her bag and tried to think. People were confusing and scary, but the Valo-Kas hadn’t treated her poorly so she would rather stay with them.

Only there was a problem with that; the Valo-Kas should stick out and yet no where did she see hide or horn of them. They were a mercenary crew though, so they were probably stationed out of the Keep with the army. A pair of irritated looing Guards stopped all that tried to exit though.

“Are you soldier or civilian?” A guard would demand while the other watched. Soldiers were allowed out, but civilians had to stay and join a work crew. Dawn had tried that already, and it hadn’t gone so well.

“Valo-Kas.” Dawn gave as her answer, hoping to avoid any other issues.

“Mercenary troop.” One guard grunted, looking at a checklist of some sort. “Wait…” the Guard frowned down at the list and looked up at her with an angry scowl. Dawn was still on a hair trigger thanks to the work crew though, so the moment she felt the spike of fear she scrambled away, not wanting to stay and see a guard turn hostile too.

Blind panic had her scrambling past people, up a short flight of stairs and through a door into a cold, dusty room. Somehow the door and latch still worked, so Dawn barred the world out, just for a moment. Each breath was a struggle to take in, her body trying to rush the process and only making it worse. Her bag dropped to the floor when her legs started to shake, and she leaned up against a wall for support only to slide down as her strength fled. Dawn had both hands pressed over her mouth, muffling the sobs that were wracking her body. She really didn’t want anyone finding her here, like this; she wouldn’t be able to flee.

“Stop it.” Dawn brokenly whispered to herself eventually. “Stop it you whiny baby. Oh its hard, oh no one likes me. Get up and be useful.” She mocked herself quietly in English. Dawn ignored the tears still dripping down her face to push up onto her feet. It was an act of will that kept her spine straight and shoulders back despite every instinctive urge to curl up and hide.

The room she’d fled to have an archer’s loop, a table that was easily older than everyone in Skyhold (excepting for Solas), enough spider webs to host a colony of crawlers, and some inexplicable rubble. Nearly lost in the dim evening light, a smaller door led away from where she’d come in. Not ready to go back the way she came, Dawn opened the second door.

She was in the gate house, a small holding room for archers waiting in battle. The smaller door gave access to the barbican, which was likely as far as the Advisors would let her go now that Dawn thought of it. They would want her close so that they could mine her for information, and the Valo-Kas would be sent out on jobs so she couldn’t stay with them.

Well, if Dawn couldn’t work with a crew, she’d just take care of this room. It would work as a bedroom, and if she did all the work, no one could say that she had done nothing to try and earn it. With even a vague plan outlined, Dawn felt capable, and set about moving the rubble. The table fell apart the moment she touched it, and she did not enjoy wading through the spider webs.

It was all but dark out when Dawn finally felt safe enough to unbar the door and poke her head out. Most of the cleanup crews were now camped together, as many tucked inside safe structures as possible. She pulled her hood tighter to her head and kept her gaze down. Hopefully there was enough grime on her face and cobwebs in her hair to help disguise her; because she was starving. Meals at Skyhold were still set up as they had been at mobile camps, basic fare offered from cooking pots, doled out by the bowl regardless of contents.

The absolute extent of her confidence ended once she’d eaten and drank her fill, after that Dawn
simply retreated to her little room. She turned her pack into a pillow like Kaaras had shown her, and then curled up to sleep on the dirty stone floor, feeling as alone as she’d been since Larry’s death. What Dawn failed to see was Compassion draping a repeatedly repaired blanket over her while she slept. Cole stayed silent watch over her until the first colours of sunrise started to leak through the loop hole. He didn’t want her to face the Nightmares alone.
Wolves and Oxen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kasaanda was both annoyed and impressed, not as unusual a combination as some would assume. Her twin liked to joke that Kasaanda’s default state was annoyed, so really it was just impressing her that was the task. And these hairy eyeballs were certainly doing both.

For one thing; she was flat out, full applause astonished to see just how much grunt work had gotten done. Even if all the Inquisition had were unskilled labourers, they had enough numbers to just throw more bodies at a problem until it got solved. And by her curling horns, these humans had a lot of bodies to throw. Worst yet, they all sort of looked the same to her; varying shades of beige, brown, pink, and black. It made it teeth gnashingly frustrating to try and find one specific human amongst a sea of them. Even Kasaanda’s keen nose couldn’t help her in the mass of scents. All her senses could tell her was that she was rib deep in humanity; and they were eating porridge.

Kasaanda grimaced as she stomped around, looking for Kaaras’ little pet Offworlder. He had spent the whole night fretting about her when she didn’t show up at the Valo-Kas camp, and Kasaanda couldn’t wait for her twin to fuck the human already and get it out of his system. They were mercenaries, not Tamassrans. But when she’d pointed that logic out to Kaaras, he’d given her that disappointed look their mother had perfected.

“You’re bored stinkweed, go find Dawn and see what kind of trouble she’s gotten into. Maybe you won’t be bored anymore.” Kaaras had suggested.

Kasaanda spotted the pale, bald Elf that had hovered around the Offworlder when they marched and went straight towards him. “Baldy, where is she?” her voice easily crossed the distance even as she strode closer.

The Elf (Solas! Kasaanda finally remembered) looked as irritated as Kasaanda felt, but he did turn to look up at her. “Where is whom?” he eloquently queried.
“Thick bodied girl, perfect teeth, not from around here.” She kept scanning for the human even as she described her.

“I have not seen the Offworlder since yesterday. Is there a problem?” he was perfectly casual but Kasaanda saw a flash of something predatory in his eyes; she kept mental note of it.

“Most likely. She’s already been mobbed once, and she never came back to the Valo-Kas last night.” The Necromancer shrugged.

“You do not seem concerned.” Solas remarked lightly.

“She’s gotta learn to take the knocks.” Kasaanda admitted. “Girl came out of the Breach swinging, I’m wondering where that fight went.”

When the Elf frowned, Kasaanda remembered the edited version Shokrakar had told Red. “Eh… after the demon killed her male, she beat it to death with a broken mage staff.” Ari didn’t tell that part because Red already looked ready to slit the Offworlder’s throat. They weren’t ready to know that she’s capable of violence so it felt conspiratorial to be telling the Elf this, but Kasaanda could always just rip his head off if he annoyed her.

The Elf mage studied her with a slightly amused quirk to his lips and Kasaanda knew he assumed
he was a lot smarter than she was. She didn’t care, playing dumb had kept her hide alive a lot longer than acting smart would have. So she let him think whatever he wanted to, it made no difference to her. “It is unlikely that she had come to serious harm; else we’d have heard about it already.” He gestured to the gossipy humans.

“And they’re stopping the soft ones from trying to skip out on their share of the labour,” Kasaanda indicated the guards that were manning the gates. “So she’s around here somewhere.”

Where Dawn was was in the bowels of the Keep. After freaking out over a magically appearing blanket, logic had helped Dawn figure out that it had to have been Cole’s doing. She’d thought ‘Thank you’ as loudly a possible, packed everything up in her bag, tucked it aside, and then followed her nose to the kitchen. Food eaten, some tucked away for later, and a cold coal taken from the fire; Dawn had gone exploring. With the coal Dawn left herself a way back; a proverbial breadcrumb trail.

The room that would eventually hold ‘the bottles of Thedas’ was filled with rotten wood, all cluttered in with dust and cobwebs. The ballroom echoed with her steps and Dawn couldn’t help the twirl she left in the grime as she spun once. It would be absolutely lovely once cleared and filled with light, but it left her wondering about why they built the ballroom so…fortified. Maybe the original inhabitants had really wild parties.

Unlike the game, these catacombs connected to so many more rooms and alternate hallways, branching out to the other side of the Keep. Dawn didn’t want to risk the upper levels where work crews had started the top down restoration, but her desperate curiosity was strong enough to set her seeking out the Undercroft. And it was properly awesome. Her heart hammered in her chest as she approached the railing, cautious on the floor despite her solid footing. Nothing gave under Dawn’s weight and stared down the plunging cliff the Undercroft overlooked. She couldn’t even see the ground below, the mists raised from the waterfall obscured everything and left an image of Skyhold in the clouds. She wished she could take a picture of it and show her family.

Cole appeared beside her and Dawn almost screamed. “They searched for you.” He warned.

Since her system was already geared for fight or flight thanks to his sudden arrival, Dawn was ready to leg it out of there. “Who?” Dawn demanded as she scurried towards her exit.

“Your family. They searched for you.” His words drove the breath from Dawn’s body, her legs giving out in shock.

“How…” broken croaked from her, unable to speak around the emotions bottled in her chest.

“Your pain touches their pain. But telling you didn’t help.” Cole was upset. “And I can’t make you forget. You don’t forget me, even if you can’t always see me.” The spirit crouched in front of where Dawn huddled in on herself. “Your pain is so loud, but I can’t touch it. I can’t help it. I’m sorry.” Compassion fretted.

“Not your fault Cole, I’m the one that’s broken.” Dawn finally choked out only to realize that they were speaking English. And then everything in her head was static again.

“She’s down here.” Solas’ voice brought Dawn back to the world around her.

As Dawn blinked back into awareness, she realized that she’d had another shut down. She was still curled up on the ground of the Undercroft, shivering from cold and shock but not having a clue how long she’d been down here for. Cole had disappeared but Solas and Kasaanda were storming
into view. The Valo-Kas mercenary spotted her curled up first.

“She looks qamek again.” Kasaanda remarked callously.

“No, I here. Sorry.” Dawn rasped out, curious at the lack of tears on her face. Maybe she was finally all cried out?

“Excellent, now I can go back and tell Kaaras. Do me a favour Dawn, wear a freaking bell or something.” Kasaanda huffed in mild irritation.

“What be bell?” Dawn asked Solas as the Vashoth spun on her heel and left.

Instead of simply answering her, Solas surprised Dawn with magic that had never made it into the game; illusions. With an almost negligent gesture, Solas made an image of a bell appear. “Cole directed us here to you.” He explained as he walked closer to her.

Dawn knew she should stand up, face Solas on her feet, but she just didn’t have the energy. She’d read dozens of fanfiction where Fen Harel could be won over, convinced, romanced, or even neutralized. Sadly, Dawn also knew she was not smart enough to pull off any of that, and she definitely didn’t have the energy to try just yet. Solas’ solution to her silence was to simply sit on the ground near her.

“Do you have blackouts often?” he prodded gently.

“Blackouts?” Dawn tilted her head in confusion and Solas grimaced. At least this language barrier was useful for something; it kept the others from being able to pump her for information. Instead of grilling her for what she knew, Solas was forced to focus on increasing her vocabulary.

“When your mind stops being aware of everything, especially what your body is doing.” He explained carefully.

“Sad yes, bad many blackouts. I try hard to no blackout more.” She tried to promise to work harder at controlling her emotional reactions.

“Maybe teaching you Common would be easier if I understood how your language works.” He theorized.

“Good fucking luck with that. English isn’t a language, it’s a hooligan that bashes other languages over the head and rifles through their pockets for loose grammar.” Dawn had meant to sound joking but even in English she just sounded bitter. “Ma abelas.” She immediately apologized.

“Maybe it’d be easier to help fill out words and grammar that you are missing.” He suggested instead of trying to tackle her language.

“I missing many words.” Dawn kept to Common this time.

“Am. I am missing many words.” Solas immediately corrected with a soft smile. “I am, you are, they are, we are, he/she/it is.”

“I am wrong when I talk, ‘I be’.” Dawn tried to understand. And her lesson progressed from there. He corrected her on the parts she hadn’t quite understood, and helped to start filling in the rest. Which, of course, only led him to feeling comfortable in her ability to divulge information should he ask it.

“From how I understood your statement to the Herald, you know many different versions of the past, present, and future.” He carefully proceeded.
“Maybe. Depend on past, depend on present, go future.” She enjoyed the new words.

He understood her meaning well enough to intensely study her face. “You called this keep Tarasy’lan Te’las before calling it Skyhold.”

Dawn nodded, already having anticipated that that little slip would bite her in the ass. Apparently with wolf teeth. “I know because you call it.” She retorted carefully.

“So in your world, you’ve met me before?” he sounded intrigued.

“No. My home tell… story with many maybes. But is story, is not very yes. People are same, story is not.” Dawn tried to explain.

“I think the word you wanted is real.” He supplied. “So depending on what has already happened, you know what will likely come.”

“Little yes. Story not story. Story in home is real here. You are real, no story. In story, I am no here. But here I am. Other wrongs I no know?” she shrugged. It would be easier if she told the truth as much as possible, so she didn’t bother lying yet.

“And if those details are wrong, then what else has changed? And if you alter too much now, your future knowledge becomes obsolete. Quite the predicament.” Solas mused.

“Big words are just noise. No know.” Dawn reminded and Solas refocused on the task of teaching her. By, of all things, coaxing Dawn out of the Undercroft to eat.

He didn’t bring her to where crowds of people were, instead he led her along newly erected scaffolding to sit at the top and eat. It was a simple picnic of her morning leftovers and his own offerings, but Solas started to narrate everything he was doing so Dawn could associate words to actions and concepts. It made Dawn wonder if he’d helped someone learn to speak a new language before. But before she got too comfortable with the Old Wolf, he steered the conversation into dangerous waters again.

“I’m curious as to what your home story says about our psats, and how much of those details are correct compared to reality.” He admitted without deception. “You speak random bits of Elvhen, and yet that is more than even most Dalish can claim. How much of my People’s history do you know?”

“No many. Little pieces. Evanuris no gods, maybe yes strong magic.” She waved her hand over her face. “Val-las-in blood word, Evanuris own.” He was watching her intently. “Fen Harel, make place no awake no sleep.”

“Veil, he created the Veil to hold the Fade back. Your world already had a more accurate account of what happened compared to the legends from this world.” He almost sounded wistful.


“What else do you know of my language?” Solas left the painful topic behind.

Dawn hesitated here, though not to obfuscate her words. She knew quite a few Elvhen phrases; sadly the majority of them were from smut stories. So unless she wanted to talk porn with the Egg, she had to filter a little. So she leaned forward and tapped his necklace. “Fen.”

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“Wolf.” He nodded, but his curiosity wouldn’t let him continue the lesson. “So you know the gods of my People weren’t gods. You know that vallaslin are slave markings. You know Fen Harel didn’t betray but did what was necessary…” he narrowed his eyes in scrutiny but Dawn just nodded, not bothering to lie. “What does your world think of Asha’bellanar?”
“Flemeth scary.” The name felt strange in her mouth but was still easier than trying to pronounce the longer term. And far, far safer for Dawn to admit to knowing than calling her Mythal would be.

“Your presence here discomforts me, and I don’t mean that as a disservice to you;” Solas continued earnestly. “But no matter how I look at it I don’t understand how you came to be here.” He worried.

“Preach to choir.” The phrase painfully reminded Dawn of her dead ex-Templar companion Emma. Lady Trevelyan was gone but not forgotten.

Her phrase made Solas give his soft laugh. “I can only sympathize with your situation Dawn. It is hard to be alone in a world you only recognize by story anymore.”

It would be the perfect segue for Dawn to let Solas know that she understood just how well he knew her pain. But she took the coward’s way out, compromising with herself to discuss it with him once she understood how to converse better. She’d only get one chance to convince him to not kill her.

“We should head back inside.” Solas recommended and Dawn didn’t argue. It was turning into late evening and she head was full already. She needed to go somewhere quiet and digest her day.

“Thank you Solas. I want to learn.” Dawn carefully figured out her grammar.

“It was a pleasure. I look forward to plumbing the depths of your knowledge.” He said it in such a friendly tone that Dawn almost didn’t catch the subtle threat.

“Darling, are you slumming it again?” Cedric surprised Dawn with his sudden appearance. The Dalish mage didn’t wait for her to reply. “Your Gray One has been looking for you. Something about not wanting to leave you alone amongst the barbarians.” He stared right at Solas as he said it.

“You have no idea who you’re taunting, for your own sake shut up.” Dawn blurted out in English. When the Lavellan mage raised his eyebrows in amused befuddlement, Dawn rolled her eyes. “Good evening Solas.” She carefully used the proper phrase.

“Good evening Dawn.” He nodded and left without acknowledging the Dalish Elf at all.

“Edhis.” Cedric muttered in Elvhen and Dawn coughed to cover her laugh.

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While Cedric had located Dawn, Kaaras was storming around the lower bailey still searching for his patient. “Seeker Pentaghast, I am searching for Dawn.” He wasted no time on small pleasantries.

“I escorted her in yesterday but have not seen her since.” The Seeker’s accent gave her words a clipped, annoyed edge.

“My twin already found her once today, saying that she was with the mage Solas. I don’t feel comfortable leaving her unattended until she’s more capable of defending herself, can you help me find her?” surely a Seeker would be the best person to help.

“Of course.” She only hesitated for a moment. “Solas has indicated that he would like to use the room under the library, we can start our search there.” Her suggestion made sense. They walked silently up the stairs to the upper bailey, making their way inside one blasted stair at a time; they
were not cut for Vashoth strides. “You seem… very protective of the Offworlde…” her tone held unspoken implications so he stopped in his tracks, forcing the human to turn and face him.

“She is my patient, first and foremost. I don’t take advantage of those in my care.” His tone turned curt.

“That is not how I meant it.” Cassandra almost growled up at him, easily meeting his anger with her own. “You have been travelling with the Offworlde for a while now, teaching and protecting her. Has your friendship offered any special insights into what she knows?”

The Healer gave the Seeker his best unimpressed expression. “I know that the moment she could string two words together, her first concern was getting to Haven to help save as many lives as possible. I know that I had to have my twin hold her still so I could pour soup down her throat because she wouldn’t eat for her grief. And I know that she is still suffering panic attacks even if she hides them so as not to be a burden to anyone.” He stepped closer to the Seeker, his size intimidating to most but never enough to intimidate her. “But most importantly, I know that if I were ever in a position like hers, I would want to meet someone like me, and not like the people of your Inquisition.” He strode past her, but she wasn’t done either.

“That’s not fair!” her accent added fervor to her words, “We’re trying to do good in the world but the Inquisition is made up of people. People who are hurt and scared and they lash out in fear. Remember, even the Herald herself was first held suspect.” She argued passionately.

“Seeker, she is a victim. So many lost someone it seems, but that does not excuse their behaviour. If you don’t want her help, I’ll gladly take her away from here. But I suspect that she’d insist we stayed to do what we could. That’s what I’ve learned about her. And stop calling her the Offworlde, her name is Dawn.” Kaaras turned and ducked into the room the Seeker was leading him towards, leaving her sullen and silent.

Varric gave a low laugh, pulling the snapping Seeker’s attention to his presence. “I have to say Seeker, I never expected you to be so angry you went quiet. And here I thought I’d gotten to see all your flavours of anger. Or is this one especially reserved for tall, horned types?” When Cassandra gave an empathetic grunt of disgust and stormed off, Varric just laughed again.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
ELVHEN

Edhis= cock, penis, prick
Vile and Fantastic

Chapter Summary

Alena Cadash may be an assassin, and now the Inquisitor, but first and foremost she is a woman. And she has a promise to keep.

Chapter Notes

SMUT DEFINITELY SMUT

In all honesty, a part of Alena saw the damn promotion coming. An Inquisition needed to have an Inquisitor, and she’d pretty much become the default leader the moment her hand could close a Rift. Still, Alena hadn’t expected their little demonstration less than a week after finding Skyhold. And when they presented her with an Ancestors Blasted sword, she had a nasty flashback to facing off with Corypheus. It probably made her more than a little curt to Cassandra and the Nightingale afterwards, but neither woman commented on it.

Either in an attempt to shamelessly bribe her, or in a realistic acknowledgement of the perks, as Inquisitor she got the best room in the main tower. It was huge. And there was a bed she could actually get lost in. And a writing desk with a customized chair designed just for her Dwarven proportions. But most importantly, Alena stared at a small fortune of books contained within her personal, private library. That was a luxury she had never known before. Opening the balcony on one side gave her a mountain view like none other, while the other side let her oversee her new domain.

But Alena’s pristine room could not at all be divided from the title of Inquisitor, so it wasn’t where she wanted to be just now. Alena quickly skipped down the stairs, moving past the evening work crews, and out to the upper Bailey. She planned to take to the battlements, get out of sight, pull Stealth over herself, and the drop down over the side onto the roof of the barns. Partly to keep in practice, but also because she knew Blackwall haunted the barns until the early hours when he sought his room. She had made that man a promise she eagerly wanted to keep.

As expected, the magnificently bearded human was in the lower barn, carving something out of wood. “Soapstone polishes up to a nicer gleam.” She admitted quietly, sliding into his line of sight.

“Inquisitor! Shouldn’t you be out celebrating your promotion?” Blackwall only startled a little at her unexpected arrival.

“I plan to. Vile and fantastic, Blackwall. Think there’s a convenient hay bale upstairs we can sully?” her voice nearly purred. She didn’t wait to see if he was going to answer, instead she turned to climb up to the next level.

A wicked smile stretched across her face as she heard him swallow and then follow. As luck would have it, hay bales are neigh identical regardless of geographical location and Alena spied several that would do nicely. So she spread a soft blanket down and turned to see Blackwall staring at her,
looking like a hunted man finding haven. Alena sat on her little bed and met his gaze straight on.

“Strip.” She demanded in a low voice and the man’s breath went ragged. She’d seen him charge into a pack of terrors and never get winded, so it felt like a victory to see his chest heaving as he pulled his belt loose.

Blackwall didn’t talk as she boldly stared at him disrobing. His dark eyes gleamed with arousal even as they hid in the shadows his brows cast. His outer tunic came off easily and revealed the thinner undershirt, practical and ugly as always. He pulled it off to reveal the breadth of his muscular chest. As expected, Blackwall was a hair covered man, a grizzly bear of a human from his beard to his chest, and as he peeled off his trousers, Alena stopped caring about hair at all.

He was wonderfully erect, thick and flushed, bobbing with his own heartbeat. The sight of his cock, ready and waiting, sent a delicious flood of arousal through Alena and she crooked a finger at him to approach. Even his bare toes had hair on them she noticed, but didn’t care.

She stopped him by getting onto her knees, and without a word of warning Alena wrapped her calloused fingers around his cock, reveling in the weight of it in her palm. Her hands were her life, and they remained exceptionally sensitive despite the scars and rough spots, and she enjoyed the silken feel of his skin. He gasped at her possessive touching, but didn’t pull away or object. His shaft was too thick for her to wrap her fingers all the way around at the base but Alena’s goal was just to hold it still. She swiped her tongue against the bead of precum on the tip, tasting salt and skin before she sucked down further.

Now Blackwall cried out, a pleasured groan as she suctioned up off of his cock, licking the taste on her lips. His eyes flew open as her mouth came off him. “Undress me.” She demanded now, laying back on the blanket.

He growled down at her, fists against his rigid thigh muscles as the men struggled with some inner battle. Blackwall’s chest heaved, the scars hidden amongst the hair, but the strength not at all disguised as he stared at her like he was fighting the urge to fall on her as a depraved animal. She loved to see it, wondering if there was a way to push the men into losing control. He finally dropped to his knees, straddling her body but not thrusting his groin into her face. The man had class, and he carefully brought his hands up to slowly pull her belt open and slide it off. Then he plucked at the buttons of her tunic, spreading it open to reveal that Alena didn’t wear a breast band.

Blackwall ran his fingertips down the lapel of her open shirt, across the edge onto her breasts to stroke across her dark nipples. He eased down her body to pull off her boots and socks, and finally her pants. Once he had her as bared as he was, Blackwall needed no other promptings. His hands swept down her thighs, pulling them apart as he lowered his face down. Now it was Alena that gasped, low sounds of pleasure as he swirled his tongue across her.

His face was buried between her legs, mouth teasing ecstasy into her even as his arms braced around her body. Blackwall lifted her up off of the floor, his powerful legs supporting them both as he stood up with her. The Warden walked her over to a hay bale, resting her back onto it and once again going to his knees. As Blackwall dragged a fingertip along her, pressing his tip into her ever so slightly, Alena cried out. The broad laps of his tongue were balanced by the delicate trailing of his fingers, coiling the knot inside Alena tighter. She wanted to scream and growl and yank his hair until he gave her the release she needed. She did none of those things. “You can use your teeth.” She gasped out, body writhing a moment later as he followed instructions. To counteract the sting of his teeth, Blackwall slowly pressed his finger into her, the slick wet sounds of penetration harmonizing with Alena’s throaty whine. Alena’s toes curled when he sealed lips and sucked on her clit. But she wasn’t ready to come just yet.
“Lay on your back and keep one leg propped up.” Alena rasped out, forcing her thick tongue to move.

Blackwall’s head lifted, his eyes looking up the line of her body. One finger was still buried deep into her. “Are you sure?” he lightly crooked his finger and Alena nearly whimpered.

“Yes dammit. I promised vile and fantastic and I plan to deliver.” She growled out and he chuckled.

“As you wish, Inquisitor.” He playfully submitted, laying onto the blanket, leaving one leg propped as instructed.

Alena took a breath before climbing off of the hay bale to approach him. There was a ruddy flush to his skin, not just his face but also tracing down his chest, but paler than his cock. Alena licked her lips purposefully before sealing them around his length again.

This time though she sat on his chest, body too short to allow for reciprocation but she didn’t mind. Her focus was on the taste of his skin, every inch and swallow deliberately slow. One hand gripped as much of his cock as she could, the other stroking gently against his ball sac. Unable to stay still through the pleasurable torment, Blackwall’s hands stroked against Alena’s body; a ticklish caress that turned carnal as he followed the lines of her body to once again slide his finger into her. Alena moaned, the length of his cock in her mouth muffling the sound.

For every swirl of her tongue, Blackwall delicately stroked his thumb across her clit. Deep suckles were traded for deep strokes, and when Alena tested his response to teeth she received a sharp pinch that had her shuddering. That tightly coiled know in her gut was at a breaking point so Alena dropped her hand from his balls to stroke her fingertip against the tight pucker of his anus, and Blackwall snarled. His finger left her as his hands pulled on her body. The seal of her mouth released with a little pop as Blackwall pulled her upright, taking only a moment to align himself before he sank into her with a powerful thrust.

Alena cried out in triumphant pleasure at the sensation of being stretched out so quickly. Blackwall’s hands gripped the muscles of Alena’s torso, one to steady her as he thrust into her with a relentless pace. The other teased and pinched her nipple. He pulled her body tight to his and Alena felt that coiled knot inside her tear apart. Alena cried out as her body shuddered out of control. Blackwall lost his steady rhythm as he felt her orgasm, his body chasing hers to completion.

Even after he slipped free from her, Blackwall’s hands still carefully cradled her body. She had the happy glow of a good orgasm, and she felt on the edge of sleep even as their bodies cooled from fervor. “Vile and fantastic indeed.” Blackwall’s voice roused her slightly.

“I live to serve.” She mumbled back and felt his laugh.

He pulled one side of the blanket up to cover them from the evening chill, not relinquishing his hold on the slumbering Inquisitor. Guilt tried to rob him of this moment of happiness but he held it at bay. Alena Cadash was an impressive woman, and not just for the thing she did with her tongue. She might not know his secret, but she knew he had one and said she didn’t care. If Andraste chose an assassin to be her Herald, then maybe second chances could truly change a person. As he looked down at her dozing face, Blackwall wondered if he could ever truly be worthy of the woman in his arms, secrets or no. She was an assassin but he was a monster. And for now, this monster promised to fiercely protect the pint sized killer, no matter what.
From the Ashes

Chapter Summary

As Skyhold turns into the Inquisition's home, life continues on. For the Inquisitor, that's handling Inquisition business. For the Valo-Kas that means finding work. For Dawn, that means doing whatever it is she's supposed to do with her knowledge.

Alena stared down at the War Table and all the tasks her Inquisition had to accomplish next. The weight of these duties pressed down on her shoulders, churning the anger in her blood for a hot moment. But with no target to take out, or any healthy way to vent her rage, Alena had no choice but to swallow it down and deal with her peoples’ needs. Commander Cullen was requesting permission to send a small contingent back to Haven to start the recovery process and confirm the missing dead. Ambassador Montilyet wanted her to rub elbows with some nobles slightly sympathetic to their cause and find a way to make amends to Ferelden for the incident with the mages. And Leliana was giving her all sorts of covert reports about the ripple affects her people were having in the world around them, and thus the consequences of that.

The Trevelyans were screaming for blood thanks to the loss of their youngest daughter at Haven, even though the family had already ‘grieved for her loss’ after the Conclave. Only Alena knew that she had been supposed to kill that woman, though she felt no qualms in reporting to Leliana all the information she’d retained from the Carta; small details like the Lyrium smuggling, small dabbling in the slave market, and the particulars around why Alena had been released after Emma as a target. More difficult to handle were the reports coming in from Wycombe and since the Offworlder had come in with a Lavellan Elf, Alena gladly suggested that they make finding a solution his problem. It’d probably still come back to hound her later. She could throw a little work at her friend Lantos since they needed the Lyrium for mage potions as well as supporting the Templars that had joined them. The Valo-Kas had officially requested assignment, and she really couldn’t fault them for wanting to get busy.

“Alright. Send the Valo-Kas to Haven, Cullen task them with whatever it is you need them to do. They proved more than useful on the way here, and I am certain they’d gladly take on whatever demons are left hunting through the ruins.” She scribbled as she spoke, sliding the report back to her Commander.

“Madam de Fer should handle some of that noble schmoozing, she is far more capable than I am.” Her comment brought out a small smirk on Cullen, a wink from the Nightingale, and Lady Josephine rushing to her defense. “Oh, but keep her away from the mage issue, we already have to contend with one civil war, let’s not stir up another.”

“I’m going to take Blackwall, Sera, and Dorian out to The Storm Coast to get started on those Red Templars we’re getting reports in from. I’ll have a few birds with me, so if you need me to alter expectations or routes, send bird.” She concluded simply. And none of her Advisors argued with her on this matter. They’d likely make up for that lack of arguing now with full stonewalling later, but Alena was glad to take whatever victories she could get.

Her anger followed her out of the room like an agitated shadow. The long trek ending in a brisk fight would do her a world of good, and Alena just accepted that she was a part of a team now. She
was not a lone assassin in the dark, and her methods of fighting were adjusting to the presence of her companions. That was why she kept cycling through all of them in different configurations; increases everyone’s adaptability. And hopefully it would help keep prying eyes from noticing whom she’d like to spend all her time in the company of.

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Alena Cadash was officially Inquisitor, the Valo-Kas had been sent out on assignment, and Dawn haunted Skyhold, as ghostly as Cole. After a week of hard work, strange hours, and several language lessons with Solas and Kaaras, Dawn was left feeling unbalanced and confused. Kaaras had been trying to help protect her and keep her sane but too many people knew that the Offworlder belonged with the Valo-Kas. Even if people would never attack a Qunari, she always seemed to draw so much more aggression by his side than on her own. With her stalwart protector gone from Skyhold for an unknown length of time, Dawn found herself without a clear guide on what to do with herself.

Haven had fallen and her warning had been too little too late. If she wanted people to be able to act on her suggestions, she needed to give them a heads up much sooner. With that in mind, Dawn knew what she had to do next; it was time to get an unpleasant necessity over with. Dawn approached Varric at what would eventually become his permanent location in the Main Hall. “I need to talk to you, if you have a moment.” She requested softly when he looked up from his paperwork.

“What can I do for you?” Varric gave her most of his attention.

“It’s about real yes coming and I tell you now I know it make different to outcome.” She was straightforward with her answer and saw that Varric had given her 100% of his attention now.

“Then let’s take this somewhere more appropriate. Please follow me.” Varric stood up, collecting his papers efficiently; everything packed away within seconds.

Dawn tried not to let it bother her when Varric was so damn polite to her. She knew the friendly, expansive version of him, but she should be used to the idea that he wouldn’t be treating her that way any time soon; especially not with what she was going to say to him next. He led her up a flight of stairs that did not exist in the game, and to a wing of the Castle Dawn hadn’t explored before. A whole other courtyard existed, this time with a pond with fish in it. Varric led her to his room and Dawn wasn’t even a little bit surprised to see that the majority of the space was taken up with a magnificent writing desk.

“I’m all yours.” Varric gestured for her to take a seat on one of the chairs.

Dawn sat down and regarded the Dwarf watching her; there really was no good way to ease into this. “Bianca Davri is contact you in future, telling you Bartrand’s Folly has been open and red Lyrium is moved from thaug through Valammar. She lying. It come out that she the one that say the location and she try say that done in your interests.” Dawn explained as succinctly as she could, and he did her the respect of not interrupting.

“Varric was staring at her with an unreadable expression on his face as he examined her words. His remaining poise and calm hid an excellent mind trying to decipher what she said for trick, trap, or lie. “You have absolutely no way to prove these suppositions and yet you come to warn me
anyways, why?"

Dawn drew in a deep breath, pushing aside all the emotions clamoring in her head to focus on getting things set up properly. “It hurt me see you hurt by person you love. No matter what I do, events are to happen, but now you no going blindly. You no believe me now, wait, you know to expect; you be ready.”

“You’re serious aren’t you?” Varric sounded sad instead of the disbelief Dawn anticipated.

“Yes. You worth person love you as many as you love them. It hurt see her betray you two time.” Dawn didn’t bother to deny. “That what I need to say you, so I do no take up more of you time.” She stood up and went to the door, Varric never stopped her. “When you write Hawke to be here, you should say Cassandra before she find out her own.” She threw out and closed the door behind her.

With no other immediate plans, and after a quick scanned revealed no hostile stares, Dawn allowed herself the opportunity to wander to the pond; intrigued to see something so plainly beautiful in such a fortified location. The fish were different than the Koi Dawn expected to see, they weren’t the gold and white beauties from Earth but instead were shockingly bright pinks and stunningly vivid purples.

Cole appeared in her peripheral vision but stayed silent so as not to surprise her this time. “You feel both there and not there at the same time.” Cole sounded confused by the dichotomy in Dawn. She tried to figure out what it was he was describing but couldn’t be sure without asking him to explain, so instead she tried to venture forward. “Maybe it’s because I just delivered bad news, but it feels good to have that burden taken care of?” She tried speaking English with him again but the spirit boy didn’t respond so she decided to let it go. “How you be feel Cole?” she switched back to Common.

He stared at her as if not realizing she’d asked a question at all. “Suspicion. Disbelief, denial, but then doubt. Now hesitation and suspicion again.”

They were clearly not his personal feelings so Dawn shook her head negative. “I want know Cole, Compassion, be feel lately.” She corrected gently.

“Well?” He hesitated for a moment and his inflection made it a question more than a statement, so Dawn simply waited. “I have been…well…” Cole concluded hesitantly.

“That good. Do you like to go out with the Inquisitor?” she walked and he followed her silently.

“Yes.” Cole drifted in and out of the visual spectrum as they wandered and Dawn didn’t push. He eventually solidified and spoke again. “Varric calls me Kid and tries to describe how things are for me when he thinks I don’t understand. His mind is full of words but they aren’t all real, and he says that what I do is ‘spoilers’. The Inquisitor has a past full of blood. Now she is also learning to be more than a knife in the dark.” He matched his pace to hers after falling silent, his gauntness hiding an indomitable strength.

“I happy you finding you place here.” Dawn smiled at him.

“You are still looking for yours.” Cole stated plainly.

“Yes. I am still look at what I need to be here.” She didn’t bother trying to lie; he was the only one here that knew what was inside her head.
“The pain isn’t gone just because you’ve silenced it.” He continued as if it were a friendly warning.

“I know. But I no know other way to be.” Dawn tried to talk through the uncomfortable feeling in her chest.

“You are trying to make yourself forget what it feels like to not have the pain so that you can endure with it always there now.” Cole sounded surprised. “I need to go.” Cole vanished before she could respond to anything he said though.

She’d tried to warn Varric about Bianca’s betrayal, whether or not he believed her didn’t matter because at least he was forewarned. Dawn refused to feel guilty about not doing more; she literally had no way to prove it was coming. He’d be writing to Hawke soon, so he/she/it/they would be arriving whenever, and Dawn had to decide if she was going to warn Cassandra or not. Ultimately it was on Varric, some secrets weren’t hers to expose. Which reminded Dawn that she’d have to try and talk to Blackwall about old Thom, but he was off gallivanting with the Inquisitor’s team.

Dawn’s attention was drawn back to the courtyard she wandered through as others started to mill about, gossip and friendly chatter slowly resolving into a curious discussion on the new Arcanist. She didn’t know the word they were using, so it took some silent skulking and eavesdropping before Dawn could figure out they were discussing Dagna. If there was every anyone likely to be excited to meet her, the cheery Dwarf would probably be the one; Dawn’s Offworlder status was going to excite her at the very least. Maybe she should go introduce herself.
Haunted Haven

Chapter Summary

They Seek the lost in the ruins of Haven and find more than anticipated. Or at least the Seeker does.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The original trek to Skyhold had been an arduous slog through blizzard and mountain, breaking trail for the dozens of displaced civilian families stumbling in their wake. The return trip to Haven was a lot faster, but a lot more treacherous. There was no blizzard to hide them from whatever forces remained or reclaimed Haven after their escape, there were more than likely still demons trapped under the snow they’d be sifting through, and no doubt that looters and bandits were already trying to capture whatever treasures had been abandoned. Kasaanda was looking forward to it.

Seeker Cassandra was travelling with them, the most familiar with the original site of the city, and she proved her presence necessary when they arrived; because almost nothing was left to be familiar enough for the Valo-Kas to identify. The Chantry that had offered them sanctuary and then escape was wiped off the map, buried under so much snow that it wasn’t until Ashaad Two grunted from tripping over a flag pole that anyone realized they were on top of it. But the Seeker had an almost uncanny awareness of where everything in the Camp had been, even without a map.

The Human marked out the relative dimensions of how the Chantry had been laid out, and the Valo-Kas fell onto the task of digging down through ice and rubble to reach it. They’d been hired once to help reopen a collapsed mine, not at all in their regular purview but money was money and no one complained too loudly. Those learned skills helped here and now.

“Kaaras?” Kasaanda called out to her twin, knowing that there was at least one fast way of doing this, it would just render them useless for a few days.

“Not yet.” He called back, sending their Ari a searching look first. There would be a time and place for the Storm, but it wasn’t now.

The Seeker was slowly moving through the snow, her lighter weight helping to keep her closer to the top instead of sinking as deeply as the heavier Vashoth did. The down side to that was that she got further and further away from their protective numbers, and the first Lyrium infused monstrosity burst out of the snow almost directly under her feet.

“Move!” Shokrakar called out even as her crew burst into action.

Kasaanda couldn’t call Earth up to help, it was far too buried and even the dead were too deep to help, but she had no problem charging forwards with her Halberd. The Roguish Ashaads disappeared but Kaaras managed to assist the Seeker first. Fire curled around the woman, far enough to protect but not singe, helping drive the Lyrium Templar back into Kasaanda’s charge. The Seeker was engaging from the opposite side, and the two women caught each other’s eyes for a split second.
Neither one had to speak to anticipate what happened next; Kasaanda skewered the monstrosity, her Halberd digging into whatever flesh it could find between Lyrium spikes, and Cassandra rammed her shield into its front, driving the creature further onto Kasaanda’s Halberd. It’s shrieking was getting unendurably annoying, that strange echo driving shivers down her skin when Kasaanda saw the Seeker take a mighty swing with her sword and decapitate the thing, Lyrium spikes and all. It was only the first such attack to occur, but it certainly wasn’t the last. The Seeker, however, did actively stay closer to the group after that.

That first day they uncovered a solid dozen Lyrium monsters left behind to attack anyone coming back it seemed. There was no other reasonable explanation for why they were finding them close to the surface but still under snow, and there were too many fresher dead bodies that belonged to types that had never stepped foot into Haven when it had been the Inquisition’s stronghold. Bandits were slaughtered long before the Valo-Kas had been sent to recover what they could, indicating that the leader of Corypheus’ little army had no problem leaving traps that anyone could walk into.

It was collectively agreed upon that they would walk the entire perimeter of what had once been their headquarters, trying to stir up whatever shallowly buried hostiles they could. That had only been day one.

“We know that the Chantry still had supplies when we fled. Commander Cullen has suggested that we start our retrieval there and work towards the city. Once the city is cleared to the gate, it should be both easier and harder to find where everything is.” The Seeker shared her reported openly and easily, not seeming to play politics at all. It was surprisingly refreshing.

“Kaaras you’re our fire, Kasaanda call what dead you can, Kaaris you’re their guard with the hairy eyeball.” Shokrakar instructed before turning to the other Valo-Kas. “Taarlok take your team and start setting out stakes and ropes in a grid over where the soldierly were staying. Those that are alive deserve their keepsakes.”

“Yes Ari.” Several of the Valo-Kas intoned almost in unison, used to their leader’s brusqueness.

“I take it hairy eyeball refers to the Inquisition symbol?” Seeker Cassandra asked Kaaras as he gave a negligent gesture and started their fire.

“Yes, we were not sure what that symbol was the first few times we saw it and our leader is a straightforward woman. Even knowing what it is now, you’re doomed to be hairy eyeballs for eternity.” He warned jovially.

“Ugh.” She gave an annoyed grunt but didn’t seem all that perturbed.

Despite all of their preparations, the next few days held nothing more exciting than coming across corpses they didn’t make, and finding the door to the Chantry. They had buried it before it had been breached, so no dead were found inside. And the strange construction of the Chantry suddenly made a lot more sense; it had been built into the mountain and thus survived when the mountain reclaimed it. Most of the city of Haven was not so luckily fortified.

“Found Red’s little area.” Kasaanda barked out, a dead and mostly dismembered Templar soldier shambling out of the snow with the tent guide rope wrapped around its ankle exposing the location. She fell back, her shambling servant shuffling after her in the packed down snow.

Kaaras took her place, his job just starting now that hers was finished. Instead of the cool Healing blue, this time the sharp burn of red Fire coated her twin, and Kasaanda held all her magic tucked inside while he melted a controlled patch of snow. Too strong and he’d just set everything on fire,
and too weak would only make things worse as all the rest fell into the void. He’d have to burn until the snow was low enough Kasaanda could call Earth to help support the snow. It was slow. It was methodical. It was not how Kasaanda would have approached it. She just wanted to let loose the Storm and be done with this part of the mission. Fighting Lyrium monstrosities and demons? Super fun, she’d sign up for months of it. Working through snow to retrieve dead bodies? Still kind of her thing admittedly, but a lot less captivating. But digging out generally worthless supplies and proceeding at a snails pace? She’d rather let a man try to seduce her. Still, Kasaanda kept her bitching to herself, knowing that Shokrakar would not let her get away with that kind of lip. Especially not with the Seeker in their midst.

From the Nightingale’s tent, they quickly found what was left of the very dead Threnn mostly crushed under the body of a monstrously huge Red Templar. Her minimal supply cache was gladly raided and even Seeker Cassandra seemed to shed no tears over the woman’s loss. Callous but appreciated, if Kasaanda had had to deal with another weepy human she might have started screaming. She’d only just gotten Kaaras to stop worrying over the Offworlder, if this human broke down as much then Kasaanda was just going to give up on the female Humans altogether.

“Primary locations to reach next. Kaaris, take an Ashaad and an Adaar, grab the hairy eyeball, start working towards the Healer’s cabin. Taarlok, the other Ashaad and Adaar, and Sata-Kas. Go find the gate, from there we can find the Blacksmith. Katoh you, Meraad, Sataa, and Hisra are going to remain perimeter scouts. Nothing sneaks up on us, and we let nothing climb through the snow to get to you.” Shokrakar broke the work crews up, seeming as unsatisfied by their speed as Kasaanda felt. And if everyone watched the skies a little suspiciously, no one commented on it.

Despite the Seeker being a Warrior from noble birth, Kaaras was surprised to find that she never once objected to grabbing a shovel and helping dig out the snow whenever his mana ran dry. If Kaaras was honest, it would have been easier for him to simply raze this entire place to the ground than it was for him to control the Fire like he was. Good practice, but it left him maxing out his Lyrium potions almost daily and that always left him feeling jittery and unsettled. Something that damn Seeker picked up on by the third day. She kept watching him as Kaaris led them forwards, seeming to catalogue just how much fire he could produce before she had to grab a shovel. On that third day, Seeker Pentaghast had simply tapped him on the shoulder and handed him his own shovel before he could even say that he was wrung out mana-wise.

“Thank you.” He grumbled, trying not to sound ungrateful, but she didn’t seem offended.

“You’re welcome.” She answered back, just as short. Ever since he’d railed against her Inquisition, the Seeker seemed unsure how to hold a conversation with him, which only left this feeling damnable awkward.

“ON ME!” They heard bellowed from one of the other search parties, and no one hesitated to scramble.

Down by the gate Kasaanda and the others were circled around something Kaaras couldn’t see. But they parted to let the Healer and the short Seeker through to see. The mangled body of Emma Trevelyan had been found. Kaaras looked up to see his twin already watching him. She hadn’t used her necromancy on the woman because despite his twin’s callous nature, Emma had been one of theirs. No matter how reluctantly or briefly, the Valo-Kas had bled to keep her alive and that had made her theirs.

Even Seeker Pentaghast seemed to understand that the silence was respectful, and she kept her own mouth shut. Ashaad Two picked Emma’s War Shield out of the snow, the broken strap would need repair but Kaaras understood immediately why his silent friend had grabbed it. Even when they
had refused to give the woman a weapon, she had used her shield to defend. The Valo-Kas were going to gift the shield to the one she died protecting; Dawn.

“Look.” Shokrakar broke their silence, drawing attention to the jagged piece of bone and Lyrium that had broken off in the wound that had murdered Emma.

“Do not touch it.” The Seeker spat in warning but none had moved to touch it. “We should find a way to contain that. Maybe our creature specialists could examine it to find a weakness in the Archdemon.” She finally explained.

Kasaanda grunted this time, literally twirling her finger in the air. In response to her sloppy seeming spell work, the ground around Emma’s exposed corpse writhed. A horrid sucking sound slurped as the broken claw was pulled free by tendrils of her ground magic, and finally Kasaanda compacted the entire thing in layers of rock. It’d be heavy as a Bronto, but not a single piece of Lyrium was exposed. “That work gorgeous?” she asked the human archly.

“Beyond my wildest dreams.” The Seeker’s accent once again added a lovely layer of sarcasm to her words.

The body Meraad picked up, carefully cradling the armour wrapped woman as if she were as light as a child’s doll. “She was Andrastrian, we should burn her corpse.” Kaaras reminded, stopping the Valo-Kas.

When one of their own died, they had developed a small ritual of sorts, to say farewell and mourn the loss. Normally a Valo-Kas corpse, if it could be retrieved, was cleaned and laid to rest for a night while those that had to say goodbye had their moments to speak to the dead. After that the body was often left for the carrion scavengers to have, because the meat suit held no soul. Their weapon, or the tool of their craft was kept and given on to those that required the strength of the reminder. But even if Emma Trevelyan was enough theirs that the Valo-Kas wanted to treat her with their rituals, she would have wanted the trappings of her religion. Kaaras was just making sure her wishes were honoured; he remembered her praying over the dead bandits what felt like a lifetime ago.

“Would you mind showing us what to do?” the Healer turned to the Seeker, knowing that she was the only Andrastrian present.

The Seeker gave him an unreadable look as she searched his face for something, but he had no idea what. “A pyre will suffice, I can say the words. We must only burn her body so that she can return to the Maker’s side.” She offered a brief explanation.

“Do it.” Shokrakar commanded and Kaaras nodded.

“No pyre, not enough wood is available. But we have Kaaras, and that’s much more practical.” Kasaanda smirked even as he rolled his eyes at her. Maybe he had absorbed all the romance in the womb, but it seemed his sister had absorbed all the dramatics. She did love a good show of magical force.

Meraad handed Kaaras Emma’s body and he cradled her cold form gently. The ice had preserved her from the worst of the rot, but there was no mistaking her for anything but dead. This time when Kaaras called fire to him, he didn’t have to worry about controlling it.

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Cassandra didn’t know what to expect, and worse yet, she didn’t think that asking was going to be
replied to at all. The bronze skinned Healer was cradling the ex-Templar in his arms as if she were a small child instead of a young, but grown Warrior. The woman’s skin was that strange gray Cassandra had only seen in the dead, where the blood in the body was no longer flowing. As she bore witness, Cassandra could feel the Lyrium in the mage suddenly surge, little embers swirling into the air without a fire. An almost red shimmer started to stain over his skin, like light coming through stained glass, and suddenly Emma Trevelyan’s body was burning. While Kaaras held her, his magic curled around his body and the corpse in his arms, and Cassandra stood silent sentinel as she saw that magic just grown stronger, until the fire that lit the corpse was no longer the usual ruddy red light she was used to. The flames shimmered into brighter, hotter tongues, forcing everyone else to step back and shield their eyes as the Healer paid the last dues to the human woman they had encountered by chance.

The light had burned so brightly that even with her eyes closed Cassandra had to blink away the after image. Kaaras was entirely unharmed, even his clothing coming out impossibly unscathed even as the ashes scattered from his hands. She’d suspect Divine oversight when the wind picked up to help swirl and scatter the last traces of Emma Trevelyan across Haven, except that Cassandra felt the curl of magic helping direct it. It was a very weak surge, a bare trickle of wind but from a mage that had mentioned no skill with Air at all, it was still impressive.

“Though all before me is shadow, 
Yet shall the Maker be my guide. 
I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond. 
For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light 
And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost. 

I am not alone. Even 
As I stumble on the path 
With my eyes closed, yet I see 
The Light is here. 

Draw your last breath, my friends. 
Cross the Veil and the Fade and all the stars in the sky. 
Rest at the Maker's right hand, 
And be Forgiven.”

Cassandra said the words and tried not to wonder at how closely what she had just witnessed suited the words spoken. These Valo-Kas, these Tal Vashoth, had been more respectful of this entire process than she had ever expected. Not that she had believed them to be brutes and beasts, but she hadn’t expected the Honour they had just given to a religion that actively excluded those like them. It gave her pause for a moment; they rejected their own Qun, but were never allowed to embrace Andrastrian Faith. Maybe Kaaras hadn’t been so off on his denouncement of her Inquisition. She’d have to find a way to prove that the Inquisition was as worthy of respect as the dead woman they had just laid to rest had been. Somehow.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
QUNLAT
Ari= leader; used as a reference of respect in this instance.
Andrastrian Prayer was taken from Trials 1:1-1:16
Storming the Coast

Chapter Summary

The Inquisitor chased Red Templars on the Coast and as her anger burns away, she's worried there won't be much left of her at all. And someone has been keeping secrets that she didn't expect.

Chapter Notes

You will notice where I lovingly meander away from canon a little, though I do still like to tip my hat to it.

They were expecting a small Red Templar presence on the Storm Coast, easily tracked and exterminated. None of the groups they came across were huge, but there were a lot more of them than a 'small presence' could account for. Blackwall was the most familiar with the area, having roved his way through it before Alena had recruited him, and he had already briefed the scouts on what he knew. Which was primarily an obscene amount of caves and such along the waterline where even more forces could lurk.

What should have been a short trip to the Coast ending in a rousing series of skirmishes degenerated into a cluster-fuck of entrenched fighting. Alena had ultimately fallen back to the more fortified camps and sent bird to Cullen, letting him know to bring in heavier numbers.

It wasn’t just the incessant rains, ever increasing numbers of Red Templars, and obnoxious encounters with random Venatori; Alena decided that no matter how good she and her team were, she wasn’t going up against a giant AND a Dragon with anything less than a score of soldiers with her. That and Bull had made such excited noises when they spotted the last one, she’d break his heart if she went Dragon hunting without him.

The only threat it felt like she could help neutralize was somehow taking over the Blades of Hessarian. And if that was actually an accomplishment to be proud of, Alena needed to take a good hard look at her life.

Her anger was actually starting to fade, though that didn’t actually seem to be making things better because now she was settling into apathetic numbness. They get word that there are Red Templars here, and instead of just finding the Red Templars they also find Venatori, fucking darkspawn, a giant, a Dragon, and a cult. And here she’d thought dealing with the Avvar in the Fallow Mire had been weird. As each new obstacle reared its head to demand attention, Alena found herself less angry, less surprised, and more and more vaguely bemused that this was her life now.

Her friends tried to help, in their own strange ways. Dorian, with his flamboyant dramatics kept her regaled with tales of outrageous behaviours and implausible antics. Either the Altus lived a life of ridiculous extremes, or he had as much literary flare as Varric did. Sera was her gregarious, paradoxical self. Harmless pranks pestered the camp; boots tied in complex knots, a pair of smalls somehow added to the flag pole. And eventually Alena found a dead snake in her bedroll, courtesy
of the blonde.

But it was unsurprisingly Blackwall that had the most direct method to pull Alena out of her fog and make her feel again. Out here in the Wilds, neither of them felt the need for pretense and outside of anticipated ribbing from Sera, them sharing a tent raised no issues. And on the nights when their watch shifts allowed for it, he dedicated hours to overwhelming her senses with pleasure so that she didn’t have to worry about the apathy at all. The need for discretionary silence only seemed to add a playful riskiness to his sexual games; half the bruises on her body weren’t from battle at all, little embellishments of passion. It helped to keep her sane as she sent bird after endless bird back to Skyhold and received very little in the way of news back. For the Inquisitor, Alena felt very disconnected, grasping for answers to a question she didn’t even remember asking.

They were finally on their way back to Skyhold, her first time returning to the new Inquisition base, when Alena felt the urge to carve. She’d lost the old shaping set to Haven, but had quickly acquired a new one once back out in the world. So while her lover stood watch with the scouts, Alena rolled a hunk of serpentstone in her hands. It had literally been calling to her all day, a soft song of the shape within it that her hands could release.

Her calloused fingers gently dragged over the rough surface. Her gaze wasn’t staring at the stone, but seeing inside her head exactly what it could become. And finally her fingertips found where the first chunk could be gently chiseled away. It was a methodical process after that, the hours whittling away as quickly as the stone, both beyond the awareness of her focus.

The sharp cry of an animal tore her attention up and off of her handiwork. The sound was a pain-filled wail, losing the game of hunter and prey no doubt. But it had broken her concentration enough that Alena now uselessly spun her partially whittled stone around. The green glints of the stone only served to draw her eye and her mind to the wound in her palm.

She actively hated the damn thing; even if it had saved her skin it had cost her old life. Worse yet, using it gave her that sweet rush of any good addiction, and Alena had run wild in her younger days so she knew that feeling well. But worse, she couldn’t trust her left hand any longer. She was a dual wield assassin, but that damn Mark left her uneasy. It’d tingle or throb erratically, often warning of an impending Rift but also wrecking her grip strength. And her hilts were starting to discolour, the metal warping gradually on the left hand blade. She’d trained her whole life to be ambidextrous and now this damn Mark was threatening to take that from her.

Her shaping tools were still on her lap, the sharp edged pick familiar in her hand. Curiosity had her set the sharp point into the center of the oozing green. Swiping her fingers through it thus far had only ever numbed her skin, but the pick felt no resistance where it should have. At a depth that should have scraped past skin, flesh, and into bone, Alena finally hit something hard. There was still no pain even as her pick elicited a spine chilling grating sound from whatever was at the center of her wound. It wasn’t the sound of metal on bone, she’d hear that too many times to not recognize it. It had almost sounded like metal on stone.

“What’re you poking at tha’ thing for?” Sera boldly asked, throwing herself into a sprawl beside Alena.

“Trying to figure out where it ends and I begin.” Alena admitted quietly.

“Could always still lop it off for ya if you’d like.” The archer offered magnanimously.

“Once we butcher Corypheus, I might take you up on that.” Alena joked back.

“Issat hurting ya or some’n?” Sera lazily drawled.
Alena shrugged, unable to explain the range of sensations this thing caused. Not even to mention how it could make her feel when she used it. After Corypheus’ interference with it in Haven, Alena had developed a new ability with it. As if that wasn’t terrifying in its own right. She could now close Rifts with it, and summon scary ass balls of Fade Rift that caused assholes she trapped inside to be slowly ripped apart. Dwarves were not supposed to be able to do anything even resembling magic, so the implications of this only made Alena feel even more abnormal.

“Need me to take Beardy’s place so he can take you in your tent ’n you forget ‘bout it?” Sera offered, generously sincere this time.

“Oh his watch is over soon, we’ve got a handle on it.” Alena’s grin was true this time. The Elf might be odd, but she cared in her own, slightly invasive way.

Returning to Skyhold felt a lot less like a victory than she expected. The Valo-Kas had beaten her back from Haven by mere hours, and they brought grim reminders of the costs accrued. Cassandra seemed solemn and withdrawn, her attention 100 percent focused when they called on her, but definitely absent when she wasn’t. The Valo-Kas seemed unfazed by their time with the dead of Haven, respectful of the loss but unburdened by their memories, except for a quiet tale about how Emma Trevelyan was at last laid to rest. At first Alena thought it had been the recovery of the dead alone that had bothered the Seeker, but as the woman awkwardly failed to meet her gaze head on, it occurred to Alena that there was something more going on.

“Inquisitor, might I… have a word?” the Seeker requested as soon as Alena had handed in her reports to her Advisors. She generally let them mull over her final reports before calling a War Council to collectively go over the next steps, so she did have a brief moment to herself still.

Alena quirked her eyebrow at the Human Warrior, and waited for her to speak at her own time. It took a single lap around the gardens before the Seeker spoke. “Before the Inquisition was formed, I searched with Leliana for the Champion of Kirkwall. We were hoping that maybe… maybe we could talk her into being our Inquisitor. She’d known the perpetrators of the explosion, people within the Templars and the Mages, even the Guard. We were hoping… maybe she’d help fix the world she’d partially helped to break.” Now the Seeker pulled an ugly face. “It was not to be. Varric…” her tone slid into a snarl, “he hid the Champion, claiming that he had no ideas where she was or how to contact her. It was a lie.”

It was easy for Alena to remain silent, letting her friend work out the anger, betrayal and frustration in her system. “He approached me immediately on my return and informed me that he knew where Hawke was, and that he had called her in to help. It seems that the portions of his story regarding Corypheus are true, and Hawke feels a level of responsibility towards putting him in the ground, again. The Champion of Kirkwall is coming to Skyhold.”

“So why are you angry?” Alena struck at the heart of the matter.

“He lied to me.” Cassandra barked immediately, then coloured at her own outburst. “I understand protecting his friends but maybe if I’d explained to him why I needed her… but I didn’t do I?” the anger quickly fled, it’s role as self-recrimination’s body guard over with. There seemed to be a lot of that going around the Inquisition. Why was it the ones trying to do some good in the world were all filled with doubt, but the assholes tearing it apart were all lousy with confidence? “We tried contacting the Hero of Ferelden for the same reason, only to be informed that the Queen of Ferelden was not actually in Ferelden. She had vanished, with only her husband and a few select people aware of her intended destination. Even Leliana has said she hasn’t found her.”

The Seeker collapsed gracelessly onto a bench, Alena surprised to see such physical expression of despondency from her. “We could not have expected, or hoped, for a better leader than you have
been. You are exactly what this Inquisition needed to start dealing with the Breach, and you are exactly who we need to keep going. I believe that Andraste sent us you as her Herald, but I have to admit, I wish this wasn’t your burden to bear.

“I’m not bearing it alone.” Alena admitted simply. “I wear the hat, sit in the chair, sign the papers, but I am not alone.”

“It helps, to keep that in mind.” Cassandra admitted with a barely present smile. “I think having a Herald that is not what we would expect has left many people… uneasy. It was pointed out to me, that surviving a tragedy doesn’t excuse our actions afterwards. Travelling with the Valo-Kas to Haven, witnessing their handling of our dead… I am ashamed to admit that my own actions have not been the best representation of what the Inquisition should be. I wanted to apologize, not just for doubting you in the beginning, but for ever believing you weren’t exactly who and what this Inquisition needed.”

Alena nodded softly, accepting the apology even if she didn’t see the need for it. This moment really wasn’t about her, she recognized that. Cassandra needed to vent her spleen, and once she was done the woman looked like years had been taken off of her face. “Cassandra, never forget that you’re the reason any of us lived long enough to fight back. You did good then, and you continue to do good now. And if you need to take Varric out back to rough him up a little bit for lying to you, just don’t wreck his hands; I’m still waiting on the next installment on his serials.” Alena tried to alleviate the Warrior’s emotional burdens. This wasn’t at all her area of expertise, but she was learning.

“Thank you Inquisitor, I don’t think that will be necessary.” Cassandra looked down at her hands.

“I have to admit, I am a little excited to meet the infamous Champion of Kirkwall.” Alena fell back on safe humour. Her comment succeeded in drawing Cassandra’s eyes from her hands. “I wonder if the library has a copy of Varric’s book that I could get her to sign for me.” That actually got a soft snort from the Seeker.

“I… stabbed Varric’s book when I interrogated him originally.” Cassandra admitted. “He still carries that copy in his bag as a reminder.”

Now Alena gave an amused snort. “Bet that hurt his pride worse than if you’d just smacked him around a little.”

Cassandra actually laughed at that. “That I could believe.” She nodded. “I hate to admit it but… I am a fan of his works. Especially…” the Seeker looked around conspiratorially and Alena fought to keep her amusement off her face, “his romance serial. It’s terrible, smutty literature, but it’s also fantastic.” She admitted in a low tone.

“And how he left the last one makes me want to shake him until he writes the next chapter.” Alena agreed, knowing exactly what series the Seeker was describing.

“I need to know what happens next, but I cannot let him know I’ve read his work.” Cassandra jumped right into enthusiastic wringing of her hands, embarrassment fighting with enthusiasm.

“I could always make finishing that work the terms of his forgiveness.” Alena offered.

“No! You can’t tell him I’ve read it!” now the Seeker flushed so red Alena worried for aneurysms.

“I never said it was your forgiveness he was buying with it.” She winked and the Seeker gaped at her, making Alena laugh this time. “He sat on Hawke’s location up until now. We’ve been at
Skyhold for a month; I could very well be reasonably mad at him. She is a resource we need to combat our enemy.”

“You are a devious woman Inquisitor.” Cassandra actually sounded impressed.

“I’ve heard that a time or two.” Alena agreed with a smug grin. “Now, how much do you want to make my fellow Dwarf writhe?” They bent their heads together over the chance to torment the linguistically competent Rogue.
The Lion Provokes the Dawn

Chapter Summary

Confrontation occurs, and then good drugs are found with bad consequences.

Chapter Notes

Cullen POV as requested by Avalantia **** POV starts later in chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Iron Bull was settled into the Herald’s Rest, comfortable in the spot he’d already established as his own. Against the back wall he could watch all the entrances and possible exits, as well as any bodies going up the stairs. He couldn’t keep his eye on the upper levels, but between Sera and the Kid, he wasn’t too worried about someone sneaking in from those directions. Not silently for long anyways. It was too early for the Rest to be filled and still he never saw Cole coming until he had already arrived.

“Trouble, training field.” Cole gave no other warning before he vanished as quickly as he arrived. The Iron Bull wasted no time trying to figure out the meaning, he simply took the Kid’s prompting and hustled in a way no one ever expected a man of his size to be able to.

The Iron Bull was never one to waste a resource, and even if the Kid creeped him right the fuck out, it was useful to have someone keep an eye out for exactly this sort of thing. The Qunari took the route up the stairs of the Rest and along the battlements, it wasn’t a straight line to where he needed to be, but it was by far faster than trying to push through people without hurting anyone accidentally, or even “incidentally”. He’d shaken his head over the location of the training grounds the first time he’d overlooked the intended layout of Skyhold’s resources, but now he appreciated the fact that they were almost on top of the Healer’s Wing. If things were truly about to go to shit, he figured having healers around immediately wouldn’t hurt.

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Dawn had been sitting on her own watching the training of the soldiers occasionally as she struggled to teach herself to read Common, when she felt someone deliberately looming over her. She wasn’t exactly small compared to the peoples of this Thedas, a lifetime in first world conditions and a genetic predisposition to being built like a linebacker had seen to that, so for someone to come try and intimidate her by standing that close while that angry was quite the spectacle. It didn’t surprise her at all to see Commander Cullen standing just a little too close, hand conveniently already on the hilt of his sword, and he was grinding his teeth together hard enough that Dawn worried for the health of his continuing dashing smile. Just catching sight of Dawn usually seemed to shove the Commander into an immediate migraine of misery, and the fact that he had willingly come close to her told Dawn all she needed to know to brace herself. It still wasn’t enough.

“Do you enjoy coming to watch your future victims? Do you particularly like watching me train
them just so you can decide that their deaths are required?” he snarled out at her through his teeth and Dawn felt his hatred like a slap to the face.

“Excuse me?” Dawn forced the words from her body, carefully setting down the children’s book she’d been struggling to read.

“I don’t think I will. I may get shouted down in the war room because the other Advisors think we need your foresight of events, but you do not have me fooled. You don’t care about these people, these men and women who are fighting and dying while you stand back and make grandiose statements about how it’s inevitable.”

Cullen was seething but somehow managing to hold his body in such a way that anyone looking wouldn’t see his anger. Only Dawn could see that absolute disgust in his eyes, the hatred thrumming through veins that were bulging in his restraint. It wasn’t that she didn’t already know how the Commander felt, she had honestly done everything she could to help the situation once she arrived but it was too little too late. And with the way he kept throwing her words in her face she was betting he was real sore about her saying that ‘Haven falling was inevitable’. But the Commander Cullen Dawn had gotten used to in the games was a flat, half assed simulacrum of the real man; she had never once anticipated the fact that he would confront her like this.

“Good day, ser.” Dawn finally fell back onto an old adage that had served her well on Earth: kill him with kindness. It was particularly necessary here because if she tried to use a weapon to kill him, he’d kick her ass easily. And then be free to lock her up like he so wanted to do.

Dawn held her head high and went to move past the Commander but was flabbergasted when he grabbed her upper arm, refusing to let her past. His grip hurt in a way that she suspected he didn’t intend, because even pissed off at her Dawn refused to believe he’d be the kind of man that would hurt civilians. He couldn’t be so different from the game version she’d known. Distantly she could hear people around them starting to react to the Commander’s hostility, but Dawn didn’t trust that any of them were about to come to her aide.

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The Iron Bull skidded to a stop as he saw the source of the trouble the Kid had warned him of; he wasn’t even surprised to see that Solas had already been summoned out by the spirit boy. The Commander was standing aggressively close to the Offworlider, but nothing was actually happening yet. The Iron Bull barely even flinched when Cole reappeared on the battlements next to him, the Qunari and the Elf studied each other for a moment before Cole pulled their attention back to the standoff occurring below them.

“Alone. Of course I’m alone. Always now.” Cole was staring intently downwards, gripping the stones as if to bodily stop from hurtling over the sides to interfere. The Offworlider had a complicated friendship with the Kid and right now it was to Bull’s benefit to observe.

“You don’t get to just walk away from this. To act like their lives don’t matter.” The Commander’s angry hiss was barely audible even to those standing nearby but with Cole breathing the words in echo; they were all more than able to make out the exchange.

“Let go of me.” Dawn allowed some of the anger into her voice.

“How can she be so tired when she hasn’t been fighting for long?” Cole asked interrupting whatever the Commander’s response was to Dawn’s demand.

“Because her fight has never been the physical kind; her burdens are not ones we can see or even
measure.” Solas explained easily and not for the first time The Iron Bull wondered at what it was the Elf really knew about the Offworlder.

“I said let go NOW.” Dawn stopped caring about those others that would take his side. That would see her defending herself and just condemn her for it anyways. She had tried for so long to be smart enough, good enough to give the Inquisition whatever help it needed. She was the inconvenient Offworlder who knew outcomes to decisions they hadn’t had to make yet and she was tired.

“You heartless demon.” Commander Cullen spat out at her, loud enough that people around them gasped at the insult.

Commander Rutherford, who stood at slightly over six foot tall, had trained since before proper understanding to be a Knight, a Templar, and eventually a Commander. He was a brilliant strategist, and The Iron Bull would hesitate to play a chess match with the man because he was certain the human would win far more often than the Bull liked. And this was the first and only time The Iron Bull could say that he’d seen the man make a strategic blunder.

Dawn Wesson stood tall, especially for a woman, and her bulk was no longer just that of a well fed noblewoman, muscles were buried under the deceiving softness. So when Dawn exploded into movement, a perfectly executed punch across the Commander’s jaw, the man staggered under the blow. “How dare you!” Dawn’s voice had lost the measured control she’d always maintained thus far. For the first time Bull heard emotions tearing through the woman below them.

“You have no idea what I endure to get here. I AM NOT FROM THIS WORLD CULLEN! I was not born here, raised here, I was STOLEN. I had a life in my world. I HAD A HUSBAND! I was broken from my life and set here and I had to watch my husband have his heart ripped out of his chest by a demon. At YOUR Conclave, because you people could not figure out how not to SLAUGHTER EACH OTHER OVER STUPID DIFFERENCES! I lost EVERYTHING. My family has mourned my death, and I will never see them again. My mother, my father, my sisters….. The only person that knew I survive was my husband. And he died within minutes of arriving.” The anger that had propelled her actions had died and The Iron Bull could see the tears streaking down her face even as Dawn held it together a little bit longer. “I have done everything I could since I got here to save lives Cullen. Every time I open my mouth I have to make sure that the only things that come out are the things that can help, can save people. I arrived in this world unprepared, and even when I have been surrounded by an army I know I am utterly alone. And I am trying my hardest to help. So I do not care if you do no like me Cullen, at this point in time I really do not care anymore. But do not ever accuse me of being heartless. Not when you have no idea of who I am or what I am dealing with.”

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Dawn strode off from the spectacle her confrontation with Cullen had become, slipping into the Healer’s wing as the only escape route. They were all very determined to look like nothing had just happened, which said louder than words that everyone had witnessed that confrontation. It almost surprised her to find one of the younger Elf healers was willing to approach her with a wet wrapping for her bruising hand. She’d grown up more than willing to throw a punch as a child and knew how to throw one that counted, but it still HURT. Almost angry with herself, Dawn wrapped her hand up and wiped the tears off of her face. It was stupid of her to lose her temper, though if anyone here had known her from before they’d be complimenting her on holding it for as long as she had. She’d always been emotional, bounding between happy and angry, and sad, and back to happy like it was easy. But that had been before. Here no doubt her little outburst would shortly be condemned by a very smug Commander Cullen coming with the guards to clap her in iron or some other sordid response. She was just too tired to care.
“Is it alright if I help out in here for a bit?” Dawn was surprised to hear how rough her voice was.

“We are always grateful for the help. Here, if you could cut these into lengths this size…” the same young Elf Healer from before spoke up, leading Dawn over to unbleached fabric swaths that were being converted into bandages.

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The Iron Bull stayed on the battlements, watching as the Commander left the area without looking towards the woman that’d reprimanded him so thoroughly. The Qunari debated whether to follow the Commander or the Offworlder but instead stayed, watching the Kid. “Why did you want me to see that?”

Cole didn’t look at The Iron Bull; he stayed pressed against the battlements as if pulled towards the Offworlder by an actual force. “Needed to know.”

“Why did I need to know all of this?” The Iron Bull pursued, he could see the point in knowing all of this, but he wasn’t sure why the Kid would bring him here.

“Not you. Not him. She needed to know.” Cole almost whispered it, as if it were a secret.

“She needed to know what Kid? She already knew all of this.”

“That there was someone in her corner. But she couldn’t see you The Iron Bull.” Cole explained as if it were a problem that the Qunari could simply solve.

“You brought me out to witness that so that she knew there was someone watching that exchange?” Even as he said it The Iron Bull knew it was wrong, the Offworlder’s own words came to mind. “You brought me because I might understand what being amongst strangers that seem like they’re from another world is like.” But the creepy spirit was already gone. The Ben-Hassrath in him was still analyzing the situation that he had witnessed and was taking it apart from different angles. One thing was impressed upon him about the entire thing; before he had assumed the Offworlder’s detachment was a learned skillset like his own. She was making hard decisions with the Boss and the others, a little distance was expected. In this little exchange though, Bull had seen that she felt everything and carried it with her. But he knew better than anyone that just because the surface looked solid didn’t mean she wasn’t falling apart on the inside.

It was like having a keg full of gaatlok; it was perfectly safe right up until the moment someone got careless with a spark. The Offworlder was a powder keg waiting for the wrong conditions to just explode, and the Commander had just thrown a torch into the room where she waited. The Qunari regarded Solas for a moment, waiting to see if the Elf had anything to say on the matter. As always Solas seemed to keep his own counsel, but The Iron Bull knew now that he wasn’t the only one watching Dawn with more than just suspicion. And for the apostate Elf to show interest in a mere human warned louder than words that the Offworlder held some unknown variable that Solas was interested in. The Iron Bull would have to watch that development carefully. But first he needed to see to it that the walking talking gaatlok didn’t go off any time soon, he went to check on Dawn.

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It wasn’t hard to find something to keep busy with, even for someone with as few transferrable skills as Dawn had to offer. Mostly she tried to find somewhere where the people could tolerate her, or at least ignore her, and do something tedious and time consuming. Better for her to do it than someone who could be doing something more important; and the Healer’s wing had yet to turn her away when she asked to help. Dawn was never sure if that was due to their code of
conduct towards tending to all patients and thus somehow including her, or if they truly did not mind her presence, but she never questioned it.

Sitting in the Healer’s Wing afforded Dawn the chance to be near people without being the source of their ire and anger. She could help clear a used bed and reset it to perfect condition nearly as fast as the others now, and she had a knack for cutting bandages in nearly identical lengths. Meanwhile the others would all talk to each other, often the type of gossip that held far more nuggets of useful information than any of them ever realized, though sometimes they shared stories from their past, both happy and somber. She hadn’t dared to try and join in the shop talk, and felt like it wasn’t her place to try and join in the stories, but she loved to listen to it. However today there seemed to be a heavily technical argument going on between her friendly Elf Healer, named Elowyn, and one of the more senior Healers.

“The theory is sound, and the only thing left is application in a trial.” Elowyn sounded confident and annoyed, though polite.

“Experimentation you mean. Not on yourself and not on one of our patients either.” The Senior Healer commanded and Healer Elowyn seemed to wilt under her stare.

“It’s a safe experiment. I’ve researched all the variables and possible effects individually as well as combined, there is almost no risk. If this works, it’s an inhalable pain reliever. Just think of how it can help people.” Elowyn started to try and explain again only to fall silent as Dawn realized she’d walked over. Before anyone could ask what she wanted, or even what she thought she was doing, Dawn had snatched what looked like an honest to god joint out of the Healer’s hands and stepped over to a lantern to light it up.

“I give to you a running list of how it feels.” Dawn promised. She coughed on the first inhalation but the second was easier as she adjusted her technique. “Taste funny.” She tried to think of how to describe it properly. And just that easily she stepped away from her emotions and the pressures of the world outside that door. She’d done the best she could since being thrust into this world and it was never enough she knew that. But she was sick and tired of trying to keep going forward against the current, so this was a nice little reprieve from that struggle.

It should have surprised her when The Iron Bull strode into the Wing but it felt distant; instead Dawn continued to smoke even as she watched the Qunari stride closer. A frown creased his face, partially hidden under his eye patch as he took in the body language of the Healers and Dawn.

“What did you do?” he wasn’t agitated instead seeming simply curious, the living timbre of his voice so much richer than a video game could ever offer.

“I am testing Elowyn smoke.” Dawn waved at the friendly Healer she’d taken the smoke from. It felt so easy to just reply with the first thing that came to mind instead of the endless self-filtering she’d been forced to do as she was learning Trade.

The Iron Bull had what Dawn considered his Sherlock face on, where he was taking in all the stimuli he could at once to try and get a complete read on what was happening. “What is she smoking?” his voice was calm and there wasn’t an ounce of threat in his tone or body language, and yet the Healers flinched as if he yelled. They both started to rattle off the ingredients but outside of Elfroot Dawn didn’t care to remember them. “And why is she smoking it?” Bull’s voice was soothing even as he interrupted the Healers, and Dawn didn’t balk as he came closer. The Healers started to argue over each other while Bull just watched Dawn watching him. She finished the smoke and butched it out on the sole of her boot, seeing no reason not to lean on The Iron Bull for balance.
“She is smoking it because all usual reasons ‘why not’ do not apply to her.” Dawn wondered briefly if her speaking in third person was ironic or just asshole, and then realized she didn’t care either way.

“And what the hell is that supposed to mean?” Now she could hear anger in his voice.

“This help people; they need to try on someone to see about the effects. I am the perfect test; if this works they can help people not feel pain.” Dawn shifted her weight, seeing the moment The Iron Bull realized she’d lifted his belt knife. Part of her wondered if he’d realized what she was planning to do and was trying to stop her, but the realistic part of her assumed he was treating her as a threat. As he lithely moved backwards, out of reach and protective of the Healers, Dawn casually swiped the blade of the knife across the back of her hand.

A small smile bloomed on her face even as blood welled out of the cut, and she looked up at The Iron Bull. “No pain.” She offered to Bull as he snatched the blade back, even as Elowyn rushed over. The Healer pressed a dressing to the wound and immediately started to demand an in depth description of how she was feeling but Dawn was too busy trying to figure out the expression on The Iron Bull’s face.

To many a person’s surprise, Solas came rushing into the Wing, a frown on his usually collected features. Before anyone could question the apostate, Cole materialized right in front of Dawn, terrifying the poor Healers. “You disappeared! All the pain, the constant scream inside, it all stopped.” The spirit boy fretted.

“Cole came to me and said that you must have been attacked because you had been here one moment and silent the next.” Solas clarified poorly.

A brittle but honest smile flashed on Dawn’s face as she realized that Solas had come running to help her when he heard something was wrong. “I seem to keep alarm people today, that not my intention. Right now I am testing the pain free smoke.” She tried to explain but felt off kilter. “Feel light headed now, but not dizzy. Kind of pine taste too.” She tried to explain to Elowyn who took notes and started to clinically prod Dawn to gauge her pupil dilation and responses.

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The Iron Bull interrupted the inspection by demanding the ingredient list, coherently this time. And when he got it he groaned even as Solas swore. “I’ve heard of something similar being used, though it’s mostly seen in psychological deconstruction; renders the patient alert but numb, and leaves them in a receptive mental state. Bonus side effects are emotional blunting and total honesty.”

“Brainwashing you mean.” Solas sounded disgusted and angry.

“I’m sorry Healer Elowyn, but I have to put a stop to this,” Bull ignored Solas entirely, his voice tense, “she’s in no state to properly consent to any of this. I’m going to take her somewhere she’ll be safe.”

“Absolutely not.” Solas interjected, “Fenedhis if you think I’m leaving her alone with a Ben-Hassrath in an admittedly vulnerable state.”

The Iron Bull wanted to bristle at the implication the Elf made, even if his handlers would insist he do just that. Before he could properly rebuff Solas though, Cole proffered a distraction; by absolutely losing his shit. “I can see you, but you’re gone. I can’t hear you but I can talk to you.” And he was gripping his arms tightly to his body, as if his core was wounded. “No no
nonononononono. Don’t forget me. You don’t forget me even when I forget myself. You can’t be
gone.” Solas and The Iron Bull moved at the same time as Cole reached out to clutch at Dawn. He
didn’t intend to hurt her, but right now she was in no state for even regular handling. Bull scooped
Dawn up as if she were sun bugs he was catching in a jar, even as Solas carefully guided the Kid
away.

Bull needed to take her somewhere where she couldn’t hurt herself, by accident or on purpose; he’d
seen both responses and more before. Even done one or two of them himself. He shut down that
line of thought and carried the Offworlder to the only place where she’d be as safe as he could
possibly make her; he took her to the Inquisitor.

Since Boss had just gotten back, she would be most likely to be sitting in with Ruffles and the
others at that damnably big table of theirs. So he took Dawn up to the Inquisitor’s room, not
carrying Dawn any longer, but gently escorting her up there. And he noticed how many people
watched with suspicion, not just him either but the human with him as well. As much as The Iron
Bull didn’t trust her, so far she had actually done her best to help save lives. And yet there was
nothing better than neutral curiosity from these people towards Dawn, and something about that
didn’t sit well with him; especially after what he witnessed earlier with the Commander. If his
handlers ever wanted to try an recruit the Offworlder outright, this would have been the perfect
opportunity.

“Please sit on the couch.” He requested gently once they were in Cadash’s room.

The Iron Bull sat at Cadash’s fancy writing desk simply by kneeling down next to it; a Qunari’s
ass was never meant to be in a Dwarf’s chair.

Boss,
Long story short, I’m in your room. Problem with Offworlder. ASAP please
-Bull

He folded it over and scratched the Boss’ name to the outside, then went to the stairs. ““I would
greatly like it if you could stay put until I came back.” He carefully worded the request. It would be
so easy to get into her mind right now and he had to have a witness to protect his own ass too. So
he wasted no time going down the stairs to slip out the door and hurry over to the War Room.
Normally he avoided interfering with these things as much as possible but this time he didn’t even
hesitate to knock on the door and hand the note to whoever opened it. He turned away before the
door even fully opened, not wanting to leave Dawn alone for long.

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Dawn really didn’t care where she sat as long as she could still look around the room in casual
curiosity. She’d never seen the inside of Alena Cadash’s rooms before, and as always the god
dammed game had short changed the details. The tower wasn’t empty at all, there were three other
suites with the Inquisitor’s on top, and the others reserved for only the highest ranking guests. The
bottom level was a space for the guards to rotate through on break; an intentional move to ensure
there was always soldiers around to defend the tower should an attack occur. It would make sense
that each tower could fall back to defend itself like that; chances were that there was supplies out of
sight in each of them.

He had said to stay put but she forgot about that when she got curious about the books Cadash had
on her shelf. Dawn wasn’t at that level of reading yet; mostly due to lack of material instead of lack
of ability. To get to the library she’d have to go by either the Main Hall entrance, which meant
facing off with Varric, Solas, and Dorian; or go the long way which is risking Varric, Vivienne and
then Dorian. And if she tried to sneak in from the top than that meant possibly facing Leliana, and
Dawn still wasn’t convinced the Spymaster wasn’t about to slit her throat with her teeth. So she stayed away, limited to the children’s books mother Giselle had given to her. Alena favoured books with captivating titles mostly in Dwarven. Since Dawn could read almost nothing in Common, which used bits of every language, she could only admire how architecturally beautiful the books were.

“I asked you to stay put.” The Iron Bull’s voice was carefully neutral.

“I apologize.” Her response was automatic as she turned to face The Iron Bull. “I miss reading. I also miss music and dancing but those two are gone.” Dawn offered as an explanation, a distant part of her reveling at the chance to freely speak her mind; while another, equally distant part, waited at her to shut up.

“You’ve done so well with learning to speak Trade that it could be easy to forget that it’s not your native language.” The compliment made Dawn beam for a second before the emotion slipped away like all the rest.

“No, now is number… three on my list of languages. Mostly because sign language is not actually spoke or really written, and I am not suppose to let anyone know I figure out much of Qunlat while with the Valo-Kas.” Her response got away from her and prompted Bull to laugh a little.

“Dare I ask?” Alena Cadash drew attention to herself as she stepped into view. It was like a shadow detached itself from the wall and became a Dwarf with a soft smile. Uninterested in their conversation, Dawn studied the bookshelf some more, seeing one or two titles in Common that she could read but held no interest to her. “So you need me here to make sure your ass is covered?” Alena’s voice drew Dawn’s attention again.

“Exactly Boss. No one can be alone with her right now, and we need to interact with her as carefully as possible; for the next hour or so she’s extremely imprintable.” The Iron Bull summarized.

“How do we help her?” Alena didn’t waste words.

“Keep her engaged, the more we reinforce her awareness on her body and self, the more we strengthen her connections to both. And we focus on speaking very carefully.” He warned.

“I not want talk about my life.” Dawn interjected calmly, a placid smile even flitting across her face.

“Why not Dawn?” The Iron Bull carefully coached, settling himself onto Cadash’s couch casually.

“Because is nice to feel nothing now; I need this.” Dawn pulled herself up to sit on the fancy desk, running her fingers over the engravings worked into the sides in seeming unconscious mimicry of how Bull was sitting and petting the couch.

“You don’t want to feel anything?” Alena sounded concerned.

“There are times I want to stop being.” Dawn nodded in affirmation. “Just for a little while,” she corrected with a smile, oblivious to how both The Iron Bull and Alena Cadash looked at the easy admission. The Dwarf shot Bull a pointed look, and then edged closer to Dawn, eyeing the rather sharp letter opener sitting just behind Dawn’s hip.

Dawn, of course, followed their stares and spotted the blade, but she simply ignored it. “Oh, I not kill me in a messy way. Not fair to person that has to clean up. No, I to do write down everything I know and can remember first, and then I to go down to the Undercroft when Dagna and Harritt not
there and slip over the side. No mess, no fuss.” She explained brightly.

The Iron Bull growled the sound so low that it was more vibrations in his chest than audible noise. “Please, if you ever think you’re going to actually do that, or anything terminal like that, I need you to come find me first, okay?” he looked wounded as he spoke.

“Alright The Iron Bull.” Dawn agreed easily and Alena shuddered.

“There’s only way I’m not going to feel slimy about this…” Alena grumbled. “Okay, before this goes any further there needs to be some ground rules…”

“That usually his line,” Dawn interrupted, “but he usually means sex.” The Iron Bull raised an eyebrow, not bothering to confirm or deny. He sure found it interesting that she knew that kind of detail about him though.

“I don’t want to know.” Cadash immediately stated. “No, what I mean is that I can’t in good conscience walk you through this, I just don’t know how. And yes the assassin having a moral code is a wheeze. So I am going to trust the one who has the most experience here.” She regarded Bull solemnly.

“Shit.” The Iron Bull wanted to do more than just swear, but right now Dawn was basing her actions on his, so if he wanted her to remain calm he had to do the same. “I’m going to be as careful with you as I can. I need you to stay engaged if at all possible.”

Dawn shrugged and hopped off of the desk, wandering towards the balcony; not caring that both Alena and The Iron Bull jolted towards her. “I not want die,” she called out, “I can still do good; be useful, keep many alive as possible. Is just nice to be able to let go.” She smiled, staring out at the truly magnificent vista. “This real is beautiful view Alena, so much more than the one I saw. Oh and the air here,” Dawn drew in a large inhale, “so clean.”

“What don’t we take a seat?” Alena suggested, and The Iron Bull stopped breathing. Dawn took Alena’s suggestion and sat; on top of the railing around the balcony with the open air and a very lethal fall at her back.

“Dawn, I would be much more comfortable if you carefully got down from there and joined us inside.” The Iron Bull sounded strangled.

“Ok.” She once again agreed easily, doing exactly as he had worded. Cadash’s eyebrows went north in surprise at Dawn’s obedience, finally realizing just how vulnerable the Offworlder really was. Dawn sat on the floor and leaned against The Iron Bull’s leg. “Now you not have to get a crick in your neck.” She smiled at the Inquisitor.

“Thank you.” Alena responded after a surprised moment.

“You shrug your shoulders trying to loosen.” Dawn explained. “Same way The Iron Bull drag his foot when his bad leg starts hurting.”

“You seem to know a lot about us.” Alena tried to do like Bull was, making general statements only.

“I know nug shit.” Dawn interrupted bluntly. “I watch the story of your world from the fall at Ostagar to beyond events that do not happen for years; if we win. But it all maybe, if, should... I see the Hero of Ferelden be human, elf, dwarf, male, female, rogue, warrior, mage. I watch them do it as leader, lover, friend, or enemy. I know secrets of the Wardens.” Dawn stopped for a moment but neither Alena nor Bull dared break whatever train of thought she was on. “I see the Inquisition
win. Led by Adaar, Cadash, Trevelyan, Lavellan, mage, warrior or rogue... I watched as The Iron Bull kills his first High Dragon with the Inquisitor, and celebrate when you clear out the ten.”

“Ten High Dragons?” Bull jerked a little in eagerness.

“Bull…” Alena’s tone held warning and promises of battles to come, all in one word.

Dawn laughed. “Just wait until you go in the Emprise du Lion, there three.” Her humor faded slower than before, but she was still too under the influence to be safe.

“How’s your hand?” The Iron Bull felt it safe to query.

“Which one?” Dawn help up her hands for inspection. The right sported bruised knuckles that looked a little puffy, courtesy of Cullen’s chiseled jaw; the left was wrapped but he could see blood darkening the layers deeper in.

“That was a sweet right cross by the way. The Commander is going to be sporting quite the bruised visage tomorrow.” Bull laughed and Dawn twisted herself around to look up at him; basically laying her head on his knee while her body draped against his leg.

“You saw that?” her voice held a vulnerable edge to it.

“Yes Little Bas, I saw you. Cole said you might need someone in your corner so I came.” The Iron Bull had to fight a very strong urge to stroke her hair. “To be honest, Solas came as well.” And she just blinked as if stunned by this information. “You never answered my earlier question though.”

“No pain just tired.” She shrugged easily.

“Let me know if you start getting a metal taste in your mouth.” He instructed and she nodded.

“Ah…” Dawn stuck out her tongue and scraped a fingertip across it. “No metal.”

Cadash quietly laughed on her corner of the couch. “Every time I leave and come back, this whole Inquisition thing becomes less and less real to me and more of a big cosmic joke.”

“Phenomenal cosmic powers; itty bitty living space.” Dawn muttered in English, making sense to none of her couch companions, but cracking herself up a little. It felt good to laugh again.

“Blessed are they who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter. Blessed are the Peacekeepers, the Champions of the Just. Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadow. In their blood the Maker’s will is written.” Cullen finished his latest prayer and fell silent. The candles had guttered and burned low; a small reminder that time was not a luxury the Commander of the Inquisition’s armies had. The headache pulsed with his movements, ever present but worse now that he was moving. His eyes burned, leather-clad finger tips pressing starbursts through his eyelids; trying to chase the exhaustion away. And the unusual ache in his jaw was a reminder of his shame.

He’d…accosted the Offworlder. Part of his mind still vehemently defended his actions. The morning had started with the list of the confirmed dead from Haven, and Cullen had started the emotionally arduous task of writing to inform the families. When the heartache became too much Cullen had finally torn himself away from his desk, physically escaping to clear his lungs of too dreadful air.
The light had blinded him at first as he clutched the crenellations and his teeth gritted. Familiar sounds of life pulled his attention from the weight of the dead. He’d blinked rapidly to clear the blurred tearing and stared blankly down at the training ring.

It was a crude affair, desperate times called for desperate measures; the ring was marked off by low pegs and a rope. Feet had already trampled the tough grass into a hard mat inside. Two young soldiers warily circled each other, testing each other’s range lightly. He’d seen this dance a thousand times, instantly recognizable by anyone that had held a sword, and he’d danced those steps himself regularly. It helped to anchor him back in the moment, hollow recriminations about how he should have done better to save more left to fade in the wind.

And as his eyes scanned the training grounds, wanting to know which of his people took it upon themselves to run extra training, he spotted the incongruent note. The Offworlder sat on a bench, a small book held in her hands. Even from here he could see the concentrated scrunch on her forehead, those damnable lips mouthing out the words of whatever it was she read. Occasionally he’d see a flash of impossibly straight, white teeth or she’d lick and then bite her bottom lip. Cullen angrily tore his attention off of her, disgusted with himself for being distracted by such things. But in a brief moment of honesty with himself, he had to admit that his attraction to the Offworlder was part of the problem. He’d never seen hair that long gleam so temptingly; his hands itched to sink into it and see if her hair was warmed by her skin. And with how expressive her eyes were, he knew just how wide and glistening they would go as she looked at him. And Maferath’s balls he wanted to explore that condemningly demanding mouth.

But the things that came out of that woman’s mouth absolutely infuriated him. She hadn’t known much of his language but she’d still easily proclaimed Haven’s fall and his army’s failure as ‘inevitable’. And it wasn’t just his pride stinging from her words, his faith had been sorely tested too; she had been right. His army had been forewarned and was still overwhelmed. That Dragon had been their doom. She’d even tried to warn them about it but everyone had dismissed the very idea.

So when the Offworlder had told the Herald that she could survive, Cullen had hated himself for finding reason to hope in her words. He wanted to dare to believe he’d see Alena Cadash alive again, but the practical soldier also mourned the loss of her. He had wanted to believe but just couldn’t see how. It had made him sharp with the Offworlder and he’d been so consumed with keeping the survivors alive that avoiding her after that was easy.

If the Maker had a plan for this Offworlder, the only explanation that Cullen could find any sense in, then why was her information so vague? Was she deliberately playing dumb for some nefarious, demented purpose? A dark kernel in his mind wondered if she was a demon of some kind, but he’d dismissed the idea. But to see her sitting in the shade, reading and watching his soldiers train, it had filled him with rage. How dare she be sitting there, healthy and whole while the names of the dead screamed inside his skull? Why did she get to sit there, burden free after all but callously condemning so many to die?

It had surprised Cullen to realize that his anger had driven him from the walls of the Keep to stand over the Offworlder. She looked up at him and he’d seen actual alarm in her eyes for a moment. As if he was the malicious one. And that had set him off on a vicious, unfounded tirade. He couldn’t stop himself, all the heartache and tension inside had built to a painful boil, and now it spilled onto her. Cullen knew he’d been the one in the wrong even before she surprised him with a well thrown right cross. His soldiers had moved to intercept the retreating Offworlder, reading her as the aggressor but Cullen had waved them down.

His shame had driven him back into his office, mind buried into work and reports and heart
breaking letters. A Runner brought food he absently ate for hours while working, long ago having perfected the multitask. But in the late hours of the night, guilt screamed louder than duty and he’d sought solace at the small garden chapel. His time in prayer offered no ease to his guilt and shame. That poor woman hadn’t deserved his hatred and disrespect like that. No matter what his excuses were. But he didn’t have an actual clue how to go about apologizing. Or how to deal with his shame over his lustful thoughts while she was mourning her husband’s death. Sadly this confrontation would likely help him keep his musing more appropriate.

The Inquisition needed him at his best, but his demeanor today was anything but. Headache, heartache, and the persistent agony of his withdrawals; none of that was allowed to be his excuse anymore. If the Herald can be an assassin, survive the Conclave, survive the Time Rift, and survive the confrontation at Haven this ex-Templar could be the man the Inquisition needed him to be. Even if it killed him.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Qunlat
Little Bas= Little Thing, used as a nickname instead of an insult

Chant spoken by Cullen is taken from Benedictions 4:10-4:11 I do believe.
Inquiziting

Chapter Summary

Despite the world trying to end, life goes on. And the Inquisition keeps pressing towards salvation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the strange adventure that the previous day turned out to be, Dawn was surprised to see Kaaras looking around for her and then the Healer grinned and headed straight towards her. No one was ever that happy to see her anymore, it made her wonder what he was after. Which then flooded her with guilt because the Healer had been nothing but caring when it came to her well being.

“How’s my favourite patient?” Kaaras actually hugged her when he reached her. He didn’t know about her confrontation with Cullen, or the strange interlude with the Healer’s Wing afterwards or else he’d have gone full Healer mode.

“What does patient mean?” Dawn carefully and slowly asked with proper grammar.

Kaaras beamed at her, pride shining on his face. “Patient is someone who’s health and well-being I am actively working on.” He explained.

“I had an interesting time.” Dawn tried to explain obliquely, not wanting to get into it just yet. He’d likely find out about it soon enough, but thus far the Valo-Kas Healer had never pushed her to talk about uncomfortable topics.

“I can say the same thing.” As expected, Kaaras let it be.

“You feeling ok?” Dawn was trying to use the right terms. Odd slang sayings that were repeated a lot felt weird to actually use herself still.

Kaaras gave her a brief smile. “I’m holding up well, thank you for asking.” A frown creased his features. “Why is your hand bandaged?” Of course he’d notice even a minor wound.

“Long story.” Dawn sighed as she said it.

“Summarize.” He sounded annoyed.

Before Dawn could start to struggle through that explanation, a Runner charged at them. “Lady Dawn, your presence has been requested.” They waited, clearly intending to lead her to her meeting.

“Sorry Kaaras, will talk later.” Dawn apologized, grateful for the interruption.

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“I’ll hold you to that Dawn.” Kaaras called out after her, annoyed and concerned. He felt someone watching him; a quick surroundings check revealed the Qunari, The Iron Bull, watching him
obviously.

Once Bull was sure Kaaras had seen him, the older man beckoned the Healer over. This would be interesting, Kaaras knew exactly what Bull was; Shokrakar had been his Besrathari.

“How can I help you Bull.” He cautiously approached.

“So you and the Seeker huh?” The Iron Bull’s question completely threw Kaaras.

“Huh?” he eloquently wondered.

“Oh, with how the Seeker was looking at you, I figured you’d made a move. Didn’t mean to pry.” Kaaras stared at Bull in uncomprehending shock for a moment after his comment.

“What? No, I haven’t… Seeker Pentaghast and I aren’t…why did you call me over?” he flustered.

“I was going to let you know what happened yesterday to your patient.” Bull’s words got Kaaras’ complete attention. “Let’s get a drink.” The warrior’s hand was missing a finger, a strange detail to notice as he patted Kaaras’ shoulder with easy familiarity.

Slightly bewildered by this whole interaction, Kaaras followed The Iron Bull inside the newly renovated Herald’s Rest. When he’d left with the Valo-Kas this had been nothing more than drawings; now The Iron Bull led him to what was clearly the Qunari’s preferred seating area. A serving girl dropped off two drinks with a wink at Bull, sashaying off without ever looking at Kaaras. “So what happened that you think I need a drink to hear about?” Kaaras finally asked a halfway intelligent question.

Bull took a long drink before answering, Kaaras taking a much smaller sip. “Curly haired human that hired you, Cullen, had a fight with her. Nothing physical, except one beautiful right cross that Little Bas threw. She put him in his place, and then ducked into the Healer’s Wing.” Kaaras found himself leaning forward as Bull settled back into his seat, taking another drink before continuing. Kaaras wanted to ask why the Void Bull was calling Dawn pet names, but Bull started talking before he could. “Once she went into the Healer’s Wing, Dawn subjected herself to an experimental drug to try and help the Healers. I knew the detrimental effects of what she’d inhaled and stopped the experiment, then sequestered Dawn away with the Inquisitor.”

“Wait, what…” Kaaras started to demand but Bull cut him off with answers.

“Dawn smoked a combination of herbs and tincture that left her physically fine, though she did cut her own hand incidentally,” even as the damn Qunari gave answers, Kaaras was left with even more questions. “It was treated immediately, don’t worry, so you’ll probably not have to Heal it; unless Dawn asks of course.”

“Yes, but I want to know…” he started to press but the flood of information started before he finished.

“It’s a drug combination that left her vulnerable emotionally so I took her to the Herald’s private room and brought the Inquisitor to help her and keep her safe.” As Bull explained, Kaaras was surprised to find his drink empty and a second one being brought to him. His head was swimming with questions but he wasn’t sure if he didn’t already have the answers. “After it wore off, Little Bas felt embarrassed by the whole thing. But she wasn’t hurt and there’s no lasting damage, so when Dawn felt up to it she returned to her room to rest. Everyone’s already talking about her slugging Cullen, so almost no word of the second part of the incident has gotten out. But I figured since you’re her Healer, I should tell you.”
Kaaras finished his second drink, at an absolute loss on what to say. “I’m going to check with her for her side of events, just to be sure.” He finally felt compelled to say.

“Of course, of course.” Bull chuckled in agreement. “Wouldn’t expect any less, it’s your calling and all. Mine is just to hit stuff until it stops moving.” The Iron Bull saluted with the third, or was it fourth round of drinks?

“So…what did Commander Rutherford get at Dawn about?” Kaaras managed to ask and that tale took them through two more rounds, and a bowl of dinner.

Bull looked like he’d been drinking water while Kaaras felt like he was starting to blur around the edges. “That’s a shit day, no wonder she looked so rattled.” He only slightly slurred.

“Did you guys teach her how to fight?” Bull wondered.

“No. Despite being largely catatonic a first, the very first thing I saw Dawn do was scream at a Rage Demon after it killed her Kadan, and then she beat it to ashes with the Elf’s broken staff. It wasn’t pretty, she had only a basic understanding of how to use it as a blunt weapon, but she had enough grief to get the job done.” Kaaras shook his head at the memory. The scream she’d let out when they’d tried to move the dead body from her still unsettled him. “But then shock caught up with her and we were on the move. We never had a chance to teach her defense.”

The Iron Bull hummed in response, face thoughtful. The topic shifted to what Kaaras and the Valo-Kas had found at Haven. Kaaras found it easy to explain to his fellow mercenary the strange burdens of digging out dead that weren’t your own.

“Shit.” Kaaras slurred the curse. He should have stopped drinking a while ago. The Bull just raised an eyebrow at his outburst. “We had a human with us, ex-Templar. She helped bring Dawn out of her grief, defended her until she was killed at Haven.” His latest drink tasted sour. “We recovered her body and shield. Valo-Kas plan to give Dawn the shield.”

The Iron Bull’s face was sharply introspective for a moment before sliding back to casually at ease. Kaaras blearily blinked, wondering if he’d drunkenly imagined it. “Might want to hold off on that.” Bull suggested sagely.

“Yeah. I should… I should go. Drinking with you is dangerous Bull.” Kaaras waggled a finger at him and The Iron Bull laughed easily. “You’re not the type to get me drunk to take advantage of me are you?” he joked, slouching in his seat.

Bull grinned at him, shamelessly dragging an eye over his body. If Kaaras had been at all attracted to males, it’d have been more than effective; instead he snorted in laughter. “Nah short-tip, if you ended up in my bed it’d be because you wanted to be there. No tricks.” Bull promised.

“That’s reassuring.” Kaaras nodded. “I’m taking a hard pass, no offense. Not my tastes.” Bull shrugged and nothing was awkward.

“Go get some rest, Healer or not tomorrow is going to suck for you.” The Iron Bull dismissed him and Kaaras didn’t argue. He hauled himself up and made it outside without embarrassing himself. The cold air of Harvestmere helped clear some of the beer induced fog from his head. Snowflakes helped cool his skin and Kaaras just breathed for a moment, orienting himself. An almost rhythmic thudding brought his attention around the corner and to where training dummies were. Seeker Cassandra was practicing against one even in the failing light, and Kaaras remembered Bull’s comment.
She was a well fit woman, being a Seeker had definitely left its mark on her body and he wasn’t complaining. But although bad ass was sexy, Kaaras actually liked a little romance with his bedmates and the Seeker definitely did not seem like the type. He shook the thought out of his head, laughing at his own ridiculousness before wandering back to the Valo-Kas tents.

Dawn was politely escorted into the War Room, and this time she was aware enough to appreciate the beauty of the maps and the markers detailing the movements of the Inquisition. And her language skills were better so she could try to puzzle out the words.

When Dawn spotted Commander Cullen awkwardly scrubbing the back of his neck, body language screaming how uncomfortable he felt, she froze. He hadn’t retaliated for the punch yesterday and then Dawn had gotten too distracted afterwards to worry about it, now she wondered if this was revenge.

The Commander saw her hesitation and sighed. “I owe you an apology, Lady Dawn. I was completely out of line. There is no excuse for my behaviour yesterday, and I can only promise to never put you in a situation like that again.” He sounded earnest. The other Advisors were conspicuously absent so Dawn suspected this was deliberately private for both their sakes.

“You hurt me Cullen.” Dawn didn’t say it to be cruel; she was trying to make a point. “Yes you are forgiven.” She hesitated but there was no time like the present. “I… am knowing what happen to you at Kinloch Hold. I am knowing what Meredith and Kirkwall were.” Her words made Cullen go completely ashen. “You are strong. You will live without Lyrium. It will hurt. But watch you for attitudes from Kirkwall come back. Then you have big problem.”

The door to the room opened, Leliana and Josephine entering with Alena shortly behind. With how intensely the spy master was watching both Cullen and Dawn, it was obvious who had masterminded the plot. “Solas reports that your language skills have grown exponentially, that’s exciting news.” She enthused.

“Now you can ask questions.” Dawn nodded.

“I’ve been told to expect a visitor.” Alena Cadash made a bland statement in her own War Room. Her efficacy as a Rogue was clear with how easily she was still overlooked.

“Hawke.” Dawn confirmed.

“Shit.” Cullen using such a crude cuss surprised Dawn, she was so used to the Marker’s Breaths.

“Varric knew.” Leliana sounded impressed.

“That’s not all.” Josephine smoothly interrupted. “I have an interesting message from King Alistair of Ferelden.”

“Angry about the mages.” Dawn predicted.

“That was how the letter opened,” Josie confirmed, “but he insisted that we send word once ‘his wife’s cousin arrives’.” Josephine carefully stated the request.

“He means Hawke.” Leliana provided the information for those that didn’t know. “Siobhan was an Amell before she married Alistair, and Hawke’s mother was an Amell. He knew she’d be coming.”

“That is different from my world story.” Dawn warned.

“Have you noticed any other differences?” Leliana’s intensity was harrowing.
“Yes. In story are four possible Inquisitor, but only one lives past Conclave. Here Alena Cadash Inquisitor, but Cedric Lavellan, Kaaras and Kasaanda Adaar live.” She swallowed a knot of grief. “Emma Trevelyan survived explosion but not fall of Haven.” She explained carefully.

“So it was my bad luck?” Alena finally spoke.

“Yes and no. All of possible Inquisitor could be, but only you are. You are the right one to be Inquisitor.” Dawn tried to comfort without giving away Alena’s origin story. Learning to be a good leader could only help the woman actually be a good leader, and since Dawn had exactly zero in the way of a better plan, she let it be.

No one seemed to know what to say into the silence after Dawn’s pronouncement. Finally Josephine rustled some paper and broke the awkwardness. “The mayor of Crestwood sends requests for aid, there are dead rising from the lake and a Rift close by the town.

“We can send some reinforcements and supplies, but until they discover the source of the walking dead, it’s a holding action.” Cullen reported.

“A Rift in the lake is cause of the dead. They are the drown of old Crestwood.” Dawn slowly worked out the complicated sentence. She wondered about telling them of the Mayor’s vile secret but had no proof to back it up yet.

“Anything else you can tell us about Crestwood before I send a team out there?” Alena made eye contact as she asked, making it damn hard to lie to her so Dawn didn’t try.

“Other Rifts, not sure of locations,” Dawn didn’t even realize she circled the knuckles of her hand against her chest signing ‘I’m sorry’ without actually saying it out loud. She’d never been able to memorize the locations on the maps, instead relying on google and the wiki. “Bandits in the keep, need to clear to empty dam. Then get to Rift in lake to close it. Also, Dragon at ruins near town.”

“I’ll bring Bull with me then.” Alena just accepted Dawn’s report, surprising Dawn silent. "Anything else?” and Dawn’s mind went blank. Dragon, bandits, dam, Rift, mayor, she was forgetting so much useful details and despair wailed in her head for it.

“That I am remember.” She confessed with a helpless shrug. It’d been a couple of months since her last play through, a fact she could lament without shame now.

“Will Hawke actually be able to help us?” Cullen sounded exasperated.

“Yes. Hoping more than you ever know.” Dawn could answer this question at least, even if she hoped to never tell anyone about Hawke’s possible sacrifice. She needed to start trying to think of solutions for that.

“The Civil Ware is at a standstill in Orlais. There are Freemen of the Dales, deserters really, raising all kinds of trouble in The Emerald Graves.” Cullen changed the topic, doing little to disguise his irritation over the impending Hawke.

Dawn’s stomach let out a hideous dying whale screech and she felt her face flush at the attention it drew. “The Herald’s Rest is offering a hearty stew all day, since we have worked through the Common Hall luncheon.” Josephine politely offered, making no comment to embarrass her by.

“Thank you.” Dawn had nothing else to say really.

“Go ahead, once I have some plans you can review for comment, I’ll send a Runner.” Alena waved her off and Dawn left without argument.
It felt easier to breathe once she closed the heavy door behind her. Dawn hadn’t really sat and thought about the scope of the game she was now living within. She had to figure out what telling them would help with, and what plans they had to handle on their own. But the change in details with Alistair acknowledging Hawke bothered her. Her game knowledge was only good if this reality played by the rules. Otherwise she had no clue how to help save lives.

Hunger chased her into the Rest to avail herself of the stew just as Josie suggested. She was so focused on food that Dawn didn’t even notice Kaaras drinking with The Iron Bull right away. She was still a bit confused and thoroughly embarrassed about The Iron Bull having to babysit her the day before so she did nothing to draw his attention. And they seemed engaged so neither one noticed her quietly eating.

Homesickness hit her without warning. Somewhere between the taste of the stew, the background sounds of life, or even a vagrant scent, something made Dawn just ache to be home. To have Larry curl up with her on the couch, the radio on for her while he read. She would have given anything to eat pizza with her sisters while her parents bickered over movies. And it hurt to know that she would never catch up with her friends over drinks again. Mechanically Dawn finished her stew, appetite gone but she needed to eat. Everything now tasted of ashes and the sounds of the Rest turned grating, quickly driving Dawn away. Neither Qunari reacted her disappearing, though Cole watched mournfully.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
QUNLAT
Besrathari- trainer and recruiter for the Ben-Hassrath
Kadan= where the heart lies, my heart, can be romantic or platonic in nature
Champions, Heroes, and Kings

Chapter Summary

The Wolf hunts, A Champion arrives in Skyhold, and an Offworlder is confronted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Solas sat in silent meditation until he could no longer ignore the presence of an anomaly. Slowly collecting himself back to the moment, he wasn’t at all surprised to see that when he opened his eyes, the Offworlder Dawn was quietly waiting for his attention. They held to their customary language training from breakfast until well past luncheon, often interrupted as others needed Solas’ attentions, or even occasionally because they wanted Dawn’s. Mostly they were left in peace, as everyone seemed eager to have this woman master Common. Only then could they start having her divulge those delectable secrets.

How has she known to use the word Isenatha? He’d consulted the Dalish fool that had been brought in with her, and despite his disdain towards Solas Cedric Lavellan had recalled every word he’d used in Elvhen around the Offworlder. Isenatha had not been one of them. She had admitted that her world had a greater awareness of the true history of his People, but Solas had yet to confirm or deny if that meant she knew who he was, and his relation to this series of events in play. A part of him was greatly tempted to remove this unknown variable, yet another unintended victim to his plans. And yet he hesitated to, inherently curious about how she carried a Veil within her own mind. Solas decided to let this Offworlder have a little more time, at least until he was satisfied that she wouldn’t interfere with his own plans.

“How may I help you Dawn?” Solas inquired, watching her body language shift now that he was aware of her.

“I was hoping you could tell me stories of Fade.” She admitted easily.

He frowned lightly, surprised at the request. “Any particular reason?” he kept the suspicion out of his voice, instead sounding only mildly curious.

“Beautiful stories, useful words. And I like your voice.” Her answers kept surprising him, nothing at all like he expected.

“I…thank you.” He smiled slightly, deciding to indulge her request. “I assume you have already heard some stories I have, from this world story of yours.” He tried to use this as a chance to scope out her knowledge.

“In my world story, your stories are short. Of beautiful ruins, moving battle hymns, and a gentle spirit for love. But that is all I was seen.” Dawn explained briefly and Solas knew what stories she had heard from him already. He wondered if her presence here was a side effect of the Time Magic Alexius and his Venatori mistakenly tried to use; she did know of events to come. Maybe she was from so far in the future, history had forgotten the world had once been Thedas instead of this Earth Dawn had mentioned.
“Shown, that was all you were shown. To see, will see, have seen, was shown.” Solas immediately fell into his role of instructor and she smiled her thanks without interrupting. “What were you hoping to hear of?” he wanted to see where her curiosity lay.

“In Haven, you said maybe to knowing language like mine. In my world, many many languages all at once, but even so some die.” Dawn was clearly struggling to try and express her request. Solas did remember confessing his possible familiarity with her tongue, but more importantly he remembered the looks of surprise, disbelief, and then wary uncertainty. She hadn’t expected him to have any familiarity, a fair assumption, but she was willing to believe he might. “Do you have… stories of languages maybe like mine?”

Solas didn’t know how much of her hesitation and fumbling was linguistic translation issues, and how much of it was affected so he couldn’t read her intents off of her questions. But no matter how he looked at the request, he couldn’t blame her for asking it. Only marvel at the fact that she had. It had been such an inconsequential statement he’d made and then Haven had Fallen; Solas had honestly dismissed it as unimportant for now. And yet here she was, asking about his knowledge without wanting to reveal her own.

“We have the Elvhen People, they are alive but few today speak any of their own language.” Solas decided to play it safe, seeing if she would give away anything by pressing and prying for specifics. “From what I have overheard from Fade memories, the language of Arlathan was even more in depth than the few phrases still bandied about by the Dalish, or reverently hoarded by the Alienage Elves.” His distaste for the Elven kind left on this world was obvious, but she didn’t seem surprised by it at all. This then, held true from her world story to his. “But I cannot say if it is the same language. I have only heard small phrases in your own tongue. Maybe if I heard more of your language, some pattern or linguistic indicator will help us determine if the Fade holds any answers for you.” He suggested, interested in what she might give away by speaking.

Dawn shook her head but smiled. “Elvhen is not English you sly Wolf.” She said in her own tongue, still not comfortable with the fact that she was seeking out Fen Harel for help. Too many tales from this world warned that his help never came in the form you wanted it to. “I think Elvhen is not English.” She stated in Common, only using English for words that did not exist here. “My world… my tongue was formed by stealing from other languages. Like Common, only Earth has just humans, flora, and fauna.” She was excited to use some of the terms Solas had previously taught her. “We have no magic. No wonders. No mages, Elvhen, Dwarves, or Qunari. Just humans. And war.”

Solas looked at her sharply, seeing her eyes looking distant as some vicious memory played out in her mind. “Your world was hostile?” he would not pass up an opportunity to inquire.

“In my world… we fight against Peace. So many are filled with hate and fear. For stupid reasons, just like here.” Her tone was wry and Solas couldn’t help the smile quirking at his lips.

“So your world is no better than my own, where conquest is the act of culture for many.” He pointed out and Dawn actually gave a short bark of laughter.

“We have no mages, but we have the hatred to each other your world has for mages.” She was trying to explain something Solas understood around the edges. “We have people no different except for how dark their skin is naturally, like Vivienne. People paler than me hate them for this. My history filled with war, slavery, conquest, death. And hope.” She focused back on him, intense in a way he did not expect from the human Offworlder he’d been teaching. “We have touched the stars. Found a way to leave our planet and fly in the darkest reaches of the space between the lights.” She looked up even though the only thing to see was the higher levels of the rotunda.
“Stars were the way home, for so many lost travelers. But not, I think, for me.” She looked back down at Solas and he said nothing about the sorrow in her eyes.

“I do not understand how you came to be here. But I don’t think there is a way to get you home.” Solas quietly admitted, not even surprised any more to see how emotionally invested he was becoming.

“There is no me to go home for. I not who I was.” Dawn’s simple acceptance put his back up.

“Are you not even going to fight for it? Are you just giving up?” he demanded hotly, making the Offworlder look at him with big, surprised eyes.

“I have been changed, Solas. I cannot be who I was when I home last. I cannot.” She shrugged, as if tired instead of defending herself. “I go home now… part of me would always stay. Here I not good hero, not leader, not important. Still, I help. The mistakes of my world I will fight to keep from here.” She shrugged and broke eye contact again. “The past is the lesson. The future is the goal. Right now, is all I have that I can claim. I will not leave this story behind because it is hard, or it hurts. I here now, so now is what I have. What mark do you want to leave on the world?” she turned it around on him smoothly.

Solas narrowed his eyes at the Offworlder, not reading any manipulation into her words and yet somehow she had maneuvered him nicely. “I want to see the world be better.” He could admit to that much, at least.

“Then be better.” Dawn replied as if it were that simple.

“It is never that easy, and you cannot think it is.” He scoffed, ready to dismiss her words as childish fantasy.

“You are right. It is hard. But what good is better if it is easy? Me here first was lost; better was not lost in my head. Better was me aware. No?” Dawn’s insistence kept him from ending the conversation entirely.

“Yes, your situation was improved once you were no longer in shock.” Solas reluctantly agreed, already knowing where she was going with this, but allowing her to make her points regardless.

“But true better, was me LIVING. Now I here at Tarasy’lan Te’las, better is me learning. Me being better depends on me trying for better. And not just better for me.” She frowned and Solas wondered what had slowed her impassioned argument. “So much of what I know, NO ONE ELSE does. What if, to me it mean nothing, but to them it mean saving lives? What if I know history of Dalish, words they have lost, is better not returning their culture to them? To help them connect past to now? Would future not be better for them knowing?”

“And what do you know of Elvhen history that would change anything for the Dalish?” Solas layered scorn into his voice to hide his eager curiosity.

“Mythal murdered before Veil and not by Fen Harel.” Her words shut him up so thoroughly Solas actually felt his nostrils flare. “Arlathan fell to inside war, not to Tevinter.” She looked sad at the admission. “Fen Harel close Evanuris away to save Elvhen People, was Rebel not Betrayer.” Her face was losing its sorrow and becoming more determined. “The Veil can be undone, but none alive know what that will cause. Those that live in the world before Fade are so few, and so much has change. This world could be their but they hide. Change is scary.”

Solas had nothing to say to her. She was wrong, so very wrong, and yet he could not explain to her
how without exposing himself. “Do you think knowing any of this would change the plight of the Dalish? Would it make the humans treat them any less terribly?” he demanded instead of exposing her flaw in logic.

“If I stand on beach, surrounded by fish left by high tide I cannot save them all. What difference then can I make? To the few I throw back to the water, I make all the difference.” She caught his eyes and Solas was surprised to see more emotion there than the Offworlder generally allowed herself. “You may not ever see the mark you leave on the world, but if there is still a world after you so is your mark. I cannot go back and undo what done, so instead must choose to live. Must choose to believe that the mark I leave will be enough, that the world will be better for me have been here.” She frowned, looking so young and so lost. “Is it not enough to live for hope instead of fear?”

“You are asking an Elvhen apostate.” Solas tried to ease away from the suddenly uncomfortable topic.

“I asking the smartest I know.” Her simple answer held no empty flattery.

“I don’t know.” Solas was stunned to answer with the truth.

“Me either.” Dawn agreed and they both fell silent.

“Would you like to see one of the Fade memories I have found?” Solas offered without even thinking about it, curious to see how both the woman and the Fade would react to the other while under his control.

“Please.” She accepted and Solas set about arranging it. He led the Offworlder to the small couch where he often collapsed for sleep, indicating for her to lay down while he himself pulled his winged back chair over.

“It is easier to find you in the Fade if we are physically close. I will give you a potion that will help ease you into the Fade without you needing to fall asleep.” He took her hand, cupping it in both of his. “You will know I have found you and it is safe to come with me if I take your hand and you feel this,” he pushed energy into the Offworlder’s hand, feeling none of it sink into her as it should. She went to pull her hand away but he didn’t release it. “Spirits will approach you wearing the faces they think will allow them close to you. Pay attention to the details to help understand which are friend and which are foe.” He instructed.

“And eat nothing.” She gave a definitive nod as if her statement made sense. Solas let it be, swiftly moving to his desk to collect the few items he would need.

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Alena knew to expect Victoria Hawke, and still the Kirkwall Rogue managed to arrive without anyone being aware. Of course it helped that Varric likely snuck her in, but still, Alena wanted the other woman’s secret.

Varric simply knocked on her door one evening and told her to meet his ‘guest’ on the battlements. Even if he’d told Cassandra and avoided her wrath, Hawke was pretty fucking infamous and didn’t need to be mobbed. Of course, leaving her damn near white hair exposed meant Champion Hawke all but glowed under the setting sun. Since Alena actually glowed regardless of the time of day, it wasn’t as intimidating as it would have been a few months ago.

“Alena Cadash, meet Victoria Hawke. Hawke meet Stabby.” Varric’s introduction was brief.
Alena and Hawke sized each other up, professional assessment from an assassin to a Champion, but neither woman was judging the other. Just wondering how many hidden weapons the other had. It was the bags under Victoria Hawke’s eyes that gave away the other woman’s exhaustion. People had been hunting her in the time since the Kirkwall explosion. For vengeance, for distorted justice, just to see the Champion in the flesh. And still, she’d come when Varric had asked her. Alena could only hope to inspire loyalty like that one day.

Before Hawke, Varric, or Alena could break the slightly tense silence, one of the battlement tower doors opened and Dawn stepped out. Only to freeze in shock, clearly not having expected to accidentally intrude like this. Alena happened to be at the right angle to see Dawn’s eyes go wide and then all the colour drained out of her face and she ran like cave spiders were chasing her; a thought that sent a cold chill down Alena’s spine.

“Was that…” Hawke spoke for the first time, her voice roughly at odds to her aristocratic features.

“The Offworlder, yeah.” Varric confirmed an edge to his voice.


Now Varric laughed. “Yeah, yeah, I’m decrepit.” He waved the two bladed Rogues to talk, stepping away to give them space.

None of this was what Hawke had been expecting when she received a letter from Varric telling her to come to him. They’d kept in touch; Hawke hiding in plain sight with Bethany as her little sister lived as a Warden. Despite the failure of Victoria to protect Bethany making it into Varric’s Tales of the Champion, no one ever thought to look for Victoria with her sibling. Maybe if it had been Carver she could understand that but Bethany had forgiven Victoria; even if Vicky hadn’t forgiven herself. After the explosion at the Conclave, the Hawkes had encountered strange things and returned to more familiar stomping grounds. Even now Victoria had turned to Aveline for help before leaving Bethany behind. Her sister is a capable Warden, and an even better mage, but shit had gotten weird.

But with Corypheus clearly not as dead as last reported, Hawke knew that she was going to throw her lot in with this Inquisition. If for no other reason than the fact that her favourite Dwarf was staying too.

“Alright, spill.” Victoria finally cornered Varric after Inquisitor Cadash left.

“Spill what?” Varric asked warily, trying to laugh to cover up his unease.

“Offworlder?” Victoria’s voice was flat. “Why not just call the woman ‘the unwanted one’; it’s longer but more honest.”

“Ouch, that hurts.” Varric deadpanned right back. “I’m not the one that gave it to her, though to be honest it’s not like I’ve got a better one, I don’t know much about her. Though rumour has it she belted Curly across the jaw which should endear her to a few people.”

But Hawke was giving him that look she had; slightly disappointed but not willing to argue just yet. “Alright, alright, put Leandra’s unhappy face away, it was bad enough when she leveled that at me.” He raised his hands up in capitulation. “This story definitely needs a drink, and not in the Rest.”

With anyone else, Varric knew that Hawke would have pestered and annoyed until she’d gotten the story out of them immediately. But since it was him she stayed silent as he walked them to his
room, where he told Victoria Hawke the one story he’d promised himself to never tell.

“I wrote you only after she came to see me, the Offworlder.” Varric filled his mug again, the ugly jug on his desk sloshing as he put it down. “She knew Bianca’s name and I could tell… she knew the whole story. And then she told me Bianca was going to go on betraying me.”

“So you’re mad at the bearer of bad news more than the person actually hurting you.” Hawke put it bluntly.

“It’s convenient.” Varric finally admitted after a silent moment. “I still don’t know if what she told me is true.” He held up a hand, stalling Victoria’s question. “So far her ‘knowledge of the future’ hasn’t been much use because she didn’t speak any language from Thedas. So I don’t actually know if she’s legit or not.” He tried to logically argue.

“Nug shit.” Hawke refuted, making him look at her in surprise. “Your Tales of the Champion didn’t include a picture of me, and I’m betting she doesn’t read if she couldn’t even speak the language, so how’d she recognize me?”

Varric’s eyes closed a small flash of pain gone so quickly that Victoria wasn’t even sure she saw it. “You don’t bolt out as quickly as she did if you didn’t know what you’d walked in on.” He sounded angry so she didn’t pester him about missing something that obvious.

“You can’t trust your judgment, not if you’re calling her Offworlder and missing shit like that.” Hawke didn’t pull the verbal thrust this time. “Tell me everything you know.” It was going to be a long night.

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Alena called a War Table meeting the moment she’d finished with the Champion, sending a Runner to include Cassandra and the Offworlder as well. That had been some reaction to seeing Hawke, and Alena figured it was time to start prying information out of any resource available to her.

But right now she had much bigger issues to deal with. “The Champion of Kirkwall is within Skyhold.” Her blunt statement silenced her Advisors. “I’ll get into more when Cassandra and Dawn arrive.” Alena carefully watched Cullen’s reaction to Dawn being included but whatever was going on between those two wasn’t her issue to solve, yet. Everyone in Skyhold had heard about the confrontation between the Commander and the Offworlder though. Oddly enough it had actually garnered the Offworlder more tolerance; she wasn’t seen as so distant or untouched by it all.

“Lady’s Dawn language skills are up to expressing her opinions,” The Commander took the opportunity since they were all watching him anyways “as is her right cross. Which you very well know.”

“Yes.” Leliana agreed smugly. Her Spymaster was the most suspicious about the Offworlder, despite Cullen’s emotional reaction to her, but Leliana truly did enjoy her Games.

Any further pestering was cut off by the entrance of Cassandra and the Offworlder. Alena wasn’t the only one to notice that Dawn looked unusually exhausted for having been in language lessons all day. “As soon as Varric told me to go meet Hawke, I had Leliana send a Raven. Cassandra, I spoke with Hawke, she had a blind drop for communicating with Varric so you’re no longer allowed to smack him around for lying. Technically he really didn’t know where Hawke was.”

The Seeker gave a disgruntled grunt at the news but otherwise remained silent on the matter. “What you weren’t aware of was that Alistair was a part of this development and he requested to
know once Hawke arrived.” Leliana took up the narrative.

“To add to the cryptic shit pile,” Alena didn’t bother to hide her irritation, “Hawke dropped hints about something big but she ‘was waiting on a contact first’.”

Dawn was frowning, not sure if her internal translation was right on interpreting the Inquisitor’s last sentence. Hawke’s contact is supposed to be a Warden, but Alistair was King. He couldn’t be Hawke’s Warden contact. Just how different was reality to the game she’d played? She had to have misunderstood what was said. Her internal freak out was being scrutinized by two sets of eyes though, so Dawn tried to keep it from showing.

“Last time you said Alistair and Hawke knowing each other was different from what you knew.” Alena made it an open ended statement.

“Yes, in my world story Alistair not talk about Hawke in letters or at all. This is different.” Dawn confirmed.

“Our scouts have confirmed your reports about the lake Rift, the bandits, and even the Dragon. Has anything else occurred to you since?” Leliana pursued.

Once again Dawn hesitated but since they seemed receptive, she decided to risk it. “Yes. The… how do you say person in responsible for a town?”

“Depends on the size of the population,” Josephine answered promptly, “for a town of Crestwood’s size, they have a mayor.”

“Thank you.” Dawn tried to remember the explanation as well as the term. “The Mayor is responsible for flood old Crestwood. You will find letter saying so after draining the dam, but Mayor will have run. Once found, he argue that Blight sick was spreading and he had no choice.”

All of the Advisors stared at her in silence. “That… is a very big allegation to claim.” Josephine tried to diplomatically explain.

“Yes. I have no proof, so I not tell you before. Now you heard back that yes I said true reports, so you ready to hear this. Even if you not believe.” Dawn shrugged.

“So because you didn’t think we’d believe you, you said nothing about it before?” Leliana looked downright dangerous as she questioned Dawn.

“Yes.” Dawn didn’t let herself cower, no matter how intimidating the Bard really was. “I always have to think ‘how to save most lives.’ Sometimes that mean I have to wait to say things.”

“Why not just tell us everything?” Leliana kept Dawn’s focus on her.

“One- not all secret are mine to say; I will not say thing that are not mine to say.’” Dawn tried to keep her emotions out of her voice as she talked but she was not the best person for this job. “Two- what to tell when? I warned about Haven, lives were saved. But even if I not here, Inquisition always survive Haven; just not as many. But what I say changes what other do. I say too much, too much changes and I not know what is coming after and how I tell people would affect their choices.” Despite her slipping grammar, Dawn could see her arguments making sense to the Advisors, even Cullen. Though she was grateful that the Commander was staying silent on his side of the War Table. “Three- my world story not perfect, is not always right to what actually happen here and now. I do not exist here in my world story.” Dawn fell silent after her three arguments even if she could have added a fourth –Dawn’s memory was not infallible, she was sure that she’d already forgotten important details but that felt like a really shitty excuse. ‘Sorry I don’t remember
more but this was a game for me so I never bothered to memorize all the details.’ Even if it was the truth, it wasn’t something she could properly explain to them.

“So you’ll tell us what you deem important enough to share?” Leliana sounded a heartbeat away from violence, which was the most hypocritical thing Dawn had ever heard her say.

“Yes, because I am a monster.” Dawn agreed flatly, her attempt at sarcasm silencing the Bard. “I will not betray Inquisition; I will also not betray secrets that need be secrets. But I will tell all I can when I can. You ready to listen, to believe?”

“We’ll listen,” Alena cut in finally, “but even you have to understand that trust will come after proof. At least at first.” Dawn made a face but nodded.

“Dawn,” Seeker Cassandra drew her attention next, “When we have concluded here, I would like to speak to you.” She requested politely.

Dawn nodded her agreement, looking at the Advisors and Inquisitor to see if anyone objected. “Go for it, the rest of this is boring.” Alena waved them off and Dawn gladly escaped. The War Room was neat in the game but seriously claustrophobic feeling in person, which made no sense given the dimensions of the room.

She fell into step beside the pensive Seeker, neither woman speaking as Cassandra brought Dawn out to her much abused training dummy. No one else was around at the end of the day so it gave the illusion of privacy without the barrier of walls.

“I have talked with Healer Kaaras about your altercations with the Inquisition since arriving and I wanted to apologize for how our people have treated you.” This was not what Dawn had been expecting from this conversation. “I could offer you a dozen excuses but after what happened with Cullen,” Her tone took on an irritated edge, “you deserve better than people have been treating you. And I wanted you to know that.” she faced Dawn straight on.

“Thank you.” Dawn smiled but it wasn’t happy. “I do not hate people for fear and anger, but I not like how it feels.” She carefully admitted. Hell she’d had a crush on Cullen after playing as Inquisitor and romancing him, but reality was so very different to the game and sometimes Dawn had to let go of the things she’d ‘known’ to embrace what she was being forced to learn.

Cassandra seemed awkward trying to figure out what she wanted to say next, so Dawn just waited her out. If only her friends could see her now; verbose Dawn had finally found her mute button. “I wanted to talk to you about…” the Seeker tried again, “You’re the only one that knew. About Regalyan I mean. About who he was…to me.”

Dawn didn’t think about it, she simply took Cassandra’s hand to offer comfort. “I am sorry you lost your love too.”

This time Cassandra didn’t flee Dawn’s words, but she clearly fought to keep her emotions controlled. “Thank you.” Cassandra cleared her throat and squeezed Dawn’s hands. “What was your husband’s name, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Dawn hesitated a little; she hadn’t spoken about her husband since his death, and her outburst at Cullen hardly counted. “Larry, his name was Lawrence but he like Larry better. Less serious.”

Now it was Dawn swallowing uncomfortably.

“I am sorry for the death of Larry.” The Seeker was simple but earnest with her words. Dawn felt brittle but she breathed through it, counting breathes in the back of her mind until the static feeling
“You’ve seen us win?” The Seeker blurted her question out, seeming as surprised to be asking it as Dawn was to hear it from her.

“Yes.” Dawn confirmed. Even if she couldn’t tell them everything she knew Dawn had no problem trying to offer this woman that answer. “You started the ball rolling, the Inquisitor keep going. Have Faith, you can win. As long as there is life, there is hope.” Dawn shamelessly plagiarized Steven Hawking.

The Seeker stared at her and Dawn decided that she needed to speak up about it now. “You need write Daniel. Seekers in danger, Venatori have… hidden inside leaders.” She had no idea how to say infected or infiltrated in Common but thankfully Cassandra seemed to understand.

“I’ll contact all the Seekers I think will listen. Can you tell me anything to help convince them?” Cassandra didn’t hesitate or argue.

“Envy Demon is wearing Lord Seeker Lucius face.” Dawn was surprised when her voice held steady. She was certain she’d told them that before but just in case she said it now. “I know you are fear Cole, but is not ever a demon. He can maybe help you, maybe he know how to get demon to show self."

Cassandra’s face got a hard look to it but she didn’t reject the idea immediately. “I will… see if Cole can add anything to help. Thank you.” The Seeker gave a nod of her head and departed swiftly, leaving Dawn to contemplate all the plans she had to start making. She had told the Inquisition she would do what she could to save lives, now it was time to prove it.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
Elvhen
Isenatha= High Dragon
Chapter Summary

A Fade consult occurs and then an unexpected intervention. This occurred in the time between breaks in the last chapter of anyone is timeline confused.

Chapter Notes

So I got laid off on Wednesday. That sucks. I'm annoyed but not upset.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For Dawn, sleeping on Thedas was no different than sleeping on Earth. But dreaming, thus far dreams had been the bastion of nightmares alone. This was not dreaming; she could feel that difference immediately. Her body felt heavy, unwieldy and thick, and yet nothing at all stood as obstruction as Dawn sat up from the couch she’d been resting on. Gone were the walls and structures of Skyhold; beyond the couch she sat on there was nothing recognizable as sense.

“You must allow the Fade to pick an image from your mind before it can form into anything you would recognize.” Solas’ cultured voice sounded from nowhere and Dawn did not trust it.

Around her the landscape morphed from a nonsensical kaleidoscope to the beautiful expanse of the Emerald Graves. It hadn’t been her thought that had given it shape though. Dawn could almost feel her suspicion riding on her shoulders like a cape as she turned to face the footsteps cautiously approaching. Of course whatever it was wore Solas’ face, he had even warned her that would likely happen. So instead of greeting her teacher, Dawn carefully looked at him even as he studied her in return.

Fandom had a lot of theories about the Fade, and more importantly about the symbolism contained therein. Dawn couldn’t see herself, but she knew she looked different here because Solas looked like so much more than just an apostate Elf. There was a luminous sheen to his skin that had nothing to do with melanin and everything to do with his Power showing through. That had not been in the games, this obvious Otherness about him. Or else if it had then Dawn had no idea how anyone could believe he was a simple wandering mage.

“How would you like to test me?” This dream Solas wondered, opening his arms wide as if daring her to do her best.

“I do not have to, you are fake.” She dismissed and the apparition seemed surprised before it vanished entirely.

The Fade returned to its swirling, disjointed and impossible. This time Dawn didn’t wait, standing from the couch and letting it stop existing so she could wander. Solas had said it would be easier to find her because they had entered the Fade near each other, and yet she saw no sign of him. Only whatever spirit that had been waiting for her. Pessimistically Dawn wondered if she was so strange
to the Fade that Solas, the guy who MADE THE VEIL could not find her.

Around her the Fade shifted again, reacting to her emotions if not able to pick an image from her mind. The couch she’d started on was long gone now, and moving around really didn’t bring her anywhere, so Dawn stood still. She could not make the Fade do anything, no careful prodding with her mind resulted in any noticeable differences and finally she closed her eyes and tried picturing one room she could never forget.

On Earth, Dawn had heard that you can tell you’re dreaming because there are no smells. The Fade smelled like home. Carpets that needed to be vacuumed more frequently warred with the bitter tang of burnt coffee, and a slight waft of cigarette smoke from the neighbors creeping through the open windows. The breeze was likely making the curtains dance and Dawn opened her eyes to see the living room from her own home in the Fade. Her television was on but there was no sound, some rerun for Supernatural streaking across the screen. Her eyes shifted to the couch, that ugly monstrosity that they had bought off of kijiji empty of any bodies but still holding echoes of their shape. The coffee table was still in need of proper repairs, the duct tape job holding one leg on evidence of how tight their budget was. Dawn stepped towards the mantle place, the fire never lit but the space filled with pictures. She didn’t allow the Fade to fill in the faces, keeping the images blank and hoarding the memory of Larry’s face for herself. Instead she stared at the empty frames and thought about the Companions, the Inquisitor, even the Champion and the Hero. She would let the legends of this world fill those spaces, but never would she let them have Larry.

“You see us all as beautiful.” Solas’ voice once again drew her attention, the Elvhen mage suddenly standing at the mantle, peering at the pictures.

“You all are.” Dawn admitted with a negligent shrug, not wanting to get into aesthetics. The images on the mantel could never stay the same, shifting from images Dawn had seen of their concept art, to still screens pulled from gameplay. Even their Tarots made brief appearances, though the images there gave a bit away. Symbolism, every single thing here was a metaphor or a malaphor.

“You saw that spirit the same way.” He corrected her statement without elaborating.

“Spirits are just different form of existence. They are no less beautiful, no less dangerous than you are.” She argued with conviction.

Now Solas turned to her, leaving his perusal of her mantle to face her. He didn’t ask her to test him this time, simply reached a hand out to take one of hers, the caress of magic never sinking into her skin. This was the real Solas then, not a simulacrum. “You have a unique view of the Spirits that most from this world cannot share.”

“I come from world where people do evil things simply because it was more convenient. Spirits and demons are pure; it is people that are corrupted.” Dawn’s bitterness changed the Fade again. Her cozy living room was gone, replaced instead with the scenes of despair Dawn remembered from home. As a North American, Dawn had seen the films and images of terrible things even if they were far removed. And the Fade was willing to parade all of these in an aberration.

Instead of sinking into it, Dawn remembered a more pleasant scene. A carousel rose out of nothing, music and electricity not existing in this world but provided by the Fade regardless. As Dawn stared at the carousel, it became more vibrantly alive, more real. The creatures masquerading as seats remained beautiful but inanimate, dancing in the endless choreograph of all carousels everywhere. She didn’t bring forward the rest of the theme park, not needing the rattles and shrieks from rollercoasters to help give her mind a reprieve from this endless dark she carried inside.
“I come from world where people do good things simply because they are good. Spirits and demons reflect what we give them. And my world has so much to give. But no magic.” The carousel spun and sang and Dawn let her mind provide the laughter and chaos of people sharing the experience with their children. She wiped the Fade clean, letting it return to safer insanity.

“You did not come here to wallow Dawn.” Solas redirected her attention, taking her hand and drawing her away from the echoes of her Fade musing and towards his own.

It was simple for Solas to match paces to the human, her assumptions of his control allowing him to transition them easily to where he wanted them. He had been fascinated to watch her first conscious efforts in the Fade; the Spirit of Curiosity lingering around her the first to realize that she was different and pulled to investigate. And it had revealed a great deal about how the Offworlder saw Solas himself because Curiosity only ever offered a reflection of your own thoughts. This Dawn saw Solas as something powerful, though not someone violent. It offered him no firm evidence of what she knew about him though, and he was left trying to piece more disjointed information together.

“You wished to see the Fade memories I would share with you, simply touch the surface and bear witness.” Solas instructed, presenting Dawn with many captured memories. He deliberately let the Fade take their shape from her mind, intrigued to see that Dawn imagined them as small crystal balls floating.

Her hands gently cupped one, her mind seeking out a memory of his she wished to see. He was not expecting the first memory she chose to witness to be about **Isenatha**. Solas had not even remembered the scene himself, not until it started.

As Dawn ‘opened’ the memory the images within the bubble expanded out, placing her as observer within the memory. She had desperately wanted to see something good, something untainted by sorrow. She should have remembered to be careful what you wish for.

The Dragon Dawn was seeing was elegantly purple, with horns curving along the side of its face, roaring into the skies. The beast was massive, so much grander in scale than she every truly believed from the game. Dawn’s skin prickled as a light wave of electricity crackled in the air, warning her away even though this was a memory.

“Shhh… darling I will not hurt you.” Dawn didn’t even realize she was speaking, the English tumbling from her lips even as she stepped closer, hands raised to show she was unarmed. Of course her words had no effect on the Dragon, but then again the Dragon had no effect on her even as electricity crackled around her.

Finally Dawn saw what the Dragon was roaring about. Her body was twisted and turned, all so that she could protect her clutch of hatching Eggs. Dawn was getting to bear witness to Dragons being born. She even forgot to look for Solas as she circled around the mother, being respectful even though the memory could not see her. Ten opalescent Eggs shook and shuddered, mostly covered by their Mothers wing and tail. And she bellowed, roaring to the very heavens as her babies started to enter the world with no shell to protect them.

The skies overhead rumbled in response to the Dragon’s latest bellow, as if to give credence to her triumph a storm was called. Now the electricity crackling around was as much the cloud’s fault as the Dragon and even though rain started to pour down, splattering Dawn as much as anything else, she did not retreat from the memory. The first Dragonling stumbled out of its shell and onto its mother’s tail, Dawn gasping at the sight of such a small creature. Intellectually she knew that these
babies would get a lot bigger very quickly, she couldn’t help but worry for how very small they were right now. The other Eggs were hatching, small, squirming figures moving over and around each other in a sinuous nature that defied Dawn’s attempts to memorize each and every Dragon. Her eyes danced over the scene, the mother’s roars calming now that her children were chirruping and squeaking at her. Solas made her flinch by gently resting his hand on her shoulder and Dawn tore her gaze off the scene to look at him.

“Minutes before…my husband and I were going to start a family.” Dawn didn’t mean to say this out loud and yet couldn’t seem to stop the words. The memory Solas had gifted to her Faded out and in its place Dawn’s agony summoned the antiques shop she’d last been in.

She didn’t dare picture Larry’s kind face, his laughing eyes, but that damned baby’s crib came through in perfect detail. Almost sadistically, Dawn fleshed out the rest of the shop, astonished at how many of the pieces she could remember and so very angry. “The last time I touched my husband while he was alive was right here. And he had asked me to start a family with him.”

Static couldn’t overwhelm her here, or shut her down for her own well-being. And the Fade would gladly feast off of her rage as much as her wonder. She shattered the scene apart, mentally enjoying the act of tearing it to pieces even if she would never let go of the actual memory.

Solas watched the Offworlder change the Fade simply by existing within it, and even in her destructive pain he remained impassive and silent. But that memory, that flash of insight into the woman and her world, had given Solas a handful of answers. She had focused on the crib and the sorrow of its unfulfilled promises; Solas had seen the Eluvian hidden in the background. How did his People leave a passage to her world and why had he never known about it?

“Come back to me.” Solas called out only when he worried that Dawn would slip into actual destruction.

The human turned to face him, face ashen, eyes swimming with tears, and jaw clenched in determination. “Why am I here? Why were we taken?” she demanded of him, as if he had those answers.

“Why was Alena Cadash picked as Herald?” Solas turned it back on her, testing under the guise of helping.

“Right time, wrong place.” Dawn gave an ugly laugh.

“There is still so much to do. Time is grains of sand slipping through fingers.” She looked back out to the Fade. “Will you help me save your world?” she asked him, entirely earnest and utterly disarming as she looked at him again.

“You think I can help?” he pushed, starting to understand this human a little better.

The Fade turned into a garden, stretching as far as the eyes could see and containing every shade and hue Solas had ever dreamt of. And then she turned it into a strange wasteland he hoped to never see again. Gone was the grass and root underfoot, replaced by a hard yet spongey surface similar to mortar. The flowers and trees that were a riot of life were eliminated, replaced with strange metal contraptions rotting and rusted. And as he watched the scene the Offworlder was creating, he was astonished to see green shoots start to punch through the barrier. Slowly at first but in an ever increasing pace life returned to the desolation Solas watched. And for once he was not sure if it were the Fade reacting to Dawn or Dawn reacting to the Fade. He didn’t know what to
take as meaning because he did not know, and one thing Solas did not like was feeling unprepared.

“I think that life returns. Not like we demand, but as it chooses.” Dawn finally spoke, letting the Fade fall back into swirling meaninglessness. “I think you are capable of picking life, and more strong to protect it than any would guess.” Her compliment cut his heart. “I think you could be Good. And I think I need you to be.” Her emphasis confused him and he knew without asking that she wasn’t going to elaborate.

This time Solas picked the Fade memory to ensconce them into, not wanting to keep picking at this woman’s wounds because he was the one bleeding now. She’d seen the birth of Dragons, and shown him the death of her old life. Now Solas sought out something less painful for them both and gave them the library of Arlathan.

It wasn’t a memory he had planned to show her, not one he collected but had witnessed in his own life. She didn’t need to know that they were staring at the greatest library this world had even known from his own eyes as a child. Luckily the Fade was once again under his control, and Solas ensured that no hints of the bearer leaked through. He saw her hesitate to approach, a cautious look sent his way. With an indulgent smile Solas beckoned her forwards, knowing already the disappointment she would feel when fingers ghosted through the books. But it wasn’t sorrowful for him, the loss of Arlathan a weight he had carried long before his uthenera, so Solas could endure her pout as the books remained mysteries.

And then she smiled at him and Solas was left laughing as his library was replaced with one of her own. The Elvhen of Arlathan had much preferred scrolls and magic preserved pages, whereas the people of Dawn’s world favoured tomes and hard covers. But there was no doubting that her people were at least this similar to his. That thought, however, did cause him sorrow and Solas led her away from the deeper aspects of the Fade and back to where it was safer to dwell.

“I have much…enjoyed is the wrong word.” Dawn started to say but frowned. “This has been good. Thank you.” She was sincere and Solas wondered if that was a trait of Dawn, or of her world. So many people on this planet had no appreciation for the things that hurt as much as the things that soothed that hurt and Solas was leaving the Fade more confused about what this Offworlder would mean to his own future than when he’d entered.

“It has been,” Solas agreed with a sad smile, “but now it is time to wake up.”

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Waking up on Solas’ couch was a lot less comfortable than Dawn had expected, her neck stiff and her chest hurting. Solas was already up and moving, two cups of detested tea being poured out and delivered with brusque efficiency. “There can be gogginess after using that potion, but it’ll soon pass. I have found eating or drinking to be most useful at encouraging my mind to resettle into my body.” He offered as simple explanation.

“Thank you.” Dawn sipped cautiously, a strange lingering disorientation making her wonder just how long she’d been lying down for.

“I would like to try that again some time.” Solas’ comment surprised her; Dawn hadn’t really thought he’d gotten anything out of the trip except time in the Fade.

“When memories of your world do not pain you so much, I would like to remember them with you.” His soft words made Dawn’s spine shudder but she fought to keep the emotions squashed down where she wanted them. It was easier since the Fade, some of the turmoil burning out simply because of Time but Dawn still felt like a cork trying to keep champagne in the bottle after its been
shook.

“I do not know if that day will come.” Dawn hadn’t meant to say that in Common but Solas didn’t remark on her pessimism.

“Go walk around, it will help you feel more set into your own skin.” He recommended kindly, patting her hand in friendly dismissal.

Dawn concurred with a nod, draining the tea in her mug in one go. She carefully stood up, deciding to take the longer route out through the main hall instead of cutting through Cullen’s office. He had apologized but Dawn wasn’t comfortable enough with testing his temper yet; or her own after that trip to the Fade. She left the Old Wolf behind, not up to trying to decipher what he would have learned while in the Fade with her, and scuttled outside without anyone else trying to talk to her. The one advantage to being a social pariah was that no one really bothered her unless they needed something from her.

The Upper Bailey was lively with training and day work, and the Lower Bailey was bustling with the merchant stalls, so Dawn moved past all of them quickly deciding to spend time with the horses. They were, at least, identical to how the game presented them and just like horses from Earth. It was as painfully nostalgic as it was soothingly familiar, and Dawn just spent time petting them all.

“Miss? I’m about to take them out for exercise and paces.” Horse Master Dennet’s kind words startled Dawn.

“Ah… sorry, you need me leave?” her grammar slipped but he seemed to understand regardless.

“No miss, you can stay. I am about to take the horses out though so if you have never handled the Dracolisks, let me just show you how to approach them.” He kindly guided her through a brief handling regime for all of the mounts, not just the Dracolisks, and then quickly set about leading the horses out of their stalls.

The near lime green Dracolisk was the friendliest, the others content to simply lick her palm in greeting but the bright green one kept trying to nose into her pockets for treats like a horse would. She had nothing to offer it; neither sweets nor salt cubes and no awareness of if either were poisonous to the Dracolisk. Dennet gave her a friendly smile when he came back in, the horses brought down to the training fields outside of the main Keep. He let her wander amongst his charges, either not knowing who she was or not caring. She met the Nugalope next and even though everyone in the fandom went on about ‘hands’ she was more astonished at the sheer amount of aggression these things were brimming with. The nugs were always so cute and harmless in the game that Dawn would have more likely anticipated the Dracolisks being hostile; lizards and all. But no it was the giant, creepy ass Guinea Pig/Raccoon mix that wanted to try and head butt her into next week. She was not up for trying to endear herself to territorial animals.

Kept on its own was the Bog Unicorn, and Dawn found herself staring at it for a solid minute before approaching. She had no idea what type of horse it had been while alive, outside of the black coloured hide and disturbingly blood red mane it looked like a corpse not a horse. And yet the ‘unicorn’ was most definitely just a horse with a sword shoved through its skull and just like the other horses, the Bog Unicorn immediately approached Dawn to sniff at her and check her hands for treats.

Blackwall was helping Master Dennet with the barn and hadn’t noticed her amongst the animals yet, giving her a brief moment to watch the Warrior. He had been avoiding her, something she’d noticed a couple of other Companions doing but she really didn’t blame them. Sera probably
thought she was batshit crazy, Vivienne would likely treat her like a liar or a demon, and Blackwall had an actual secret he was hoping she didn’t know.

She knew how split fandom was over Thom Rainier cum Blackwall, but like all things this wasn’t a game anymore. He was a real, living and breathing man that was here and now trying to make amends. She was still uncomfortable with his lies, but maybe there was a chance to do something about that this time. Dawn sucked in a fortifying breath and stepped out from the Bog Unicorn’s pen to approach the Horse Master and the Not Warden.

Dawn tried not to take it personally when Blackwall spotted her and immediately looked away, face screaming his discomfort at being near her. He was scared for himself and yet refusing to run and hide this time, so she would treat him with the respect that he had earned as Blackwall.

“Ser Blackwall, may I have a piece of time with you.” She tried to ask formally and knew she screwed it up even as she spoke. The not Warden wasn’t the only one worried about this interaction; at least Dawn hadn’t ever actually killed someone before. She could see his face carefully kept hidden behind his beard but his eyes were giving away his desperate hope for an escape. “Please.” She added on carefully, wondering if this was going to be worse than she thought.

He finally gave a sharp nod and bade farewell to the Horse Master before stiffly offering her his arm like a gentleman. He didn’t flinch as Dawn set her arm through his, unfamiliar with this type of courtesy, and he seemed to know exactly where he wanted to have this conversation so Dawn let him guide their steps. And it was even odds over which one of them was more nervous.

Surprisingly, Blackwall led them away from the barns and up onto the battlements near the broken section. With a sheer drop off of a cliff protecting that side of Skyhold, repairs for this section were slated for later and only a meager safety rail had been erected. Dawn slipped her arm free of Blackwall’s and turned to settle against a sturdy bit of masonry a few feet away from the drop.

“Yes, I know.” Dawn decided to just jump in with both feet. Even behind his beard Blackwall’s face drained of colour and she let him take a moment before continuing. “In my world, I have saw all the possible outcomes. Your second in command will be find and brought to Val Royeaux for execution. You surrender yourself, give up your secret and Inquisition has to decide. Let you die there or take you to us for judgement. If we take you to us we do by asking, by secret, or by force and all have cost. And when Inquisition judge you that mean Alena has to choose: execute, give to Warden, imprison, or have you earn forgiveness by belong to Inquisition.”

The man stared at her as if she was a violent psychopath, and yet he didn’t utter a single thing in argument or defense. He just listened. So Dawn continued. “If you go to Wardens, in short years you die. If you earn forgiveness with Inquisition, you keep proving you are changed.”

“Why are you letting me know all of this?” he finally braved the question.

“I want you to tell Inquisitor now. I want to change that fate.” Dawn shrugged as if it were that easy.

“Why?” he pressed, accent hiding his emotions.

Dawn looked down at her hands, wondering how to express this without giving away too much. “In a future, there is a confrontation with a big evil. It know all fears and exposes them to everyone. Their name and their big fear listed for all to see. Even there, even that big bad call you Blackwall. Not Thom. Thom died when you took Blackwall name. I have seen you in all possible future and I know; you are worth saving. Not Thom; Blackwall. Be Blackwall and be honest about
when Blackwall became you. Not have to tell all. But tell Inquisitor, tell Leliana. Let them help you save second in command without losing Blackwall.” She urged.

He was taller than she was by a couple of inches, so Dawn was all too surprised when Blackwall slid down the crenellation across from her to sit at its base and look up at her. He looked like such a discarded marionette that Dawn felt bad for how she’d gone about this whole thing. She should have thought it out more, had an actual plan in place before screwing up this man even more than he already was.

“So you know everything?” his voice was wretched so Dawn slid down her own piece of stone and sat to look across at him instead of down. “Why not just go to the Inquisitor yourself?” he didn’t sound angry at her but there was a snarl in his voice.

“Not my secret to tell.” She answered honestly and he shot her a disbelieving look.

“You would keep something like that from the Inquisitor?” he demanded, actually offended on Alena Cadash’s behalf.

“Yes, because I have faith you will not.” She kept it simple and he gave her a hard look. And then Blackwall stood up and stormed away from her without another word.

She didn’t know if he was going to do what she suggested, if he’d gone off to think about it, or even just ran away from the woman tearing his little half-life apart, and Dawn didn’t bother watching him to find out. If she hadn’t had interfered Blackwall would have come clean on his own at the usual time, but now that she had muddled in his affairs his behaviours might change. But Dawn wanted to believe that even if she’d been tossed into this world like an afterthought she might actually be able to do some good. As Inquisitor she’d always kept Blackwall and then offered him either absolution or given him to the Wardens because otherwise Thom Rainier is the one that is remembered, not Blackwall. She had no idea what Alena Cadash would choose to do if he did come to her with this.

Dawn stayed seated at the base of the crenellation, staring out over the broken wall and the cliff below it until Cole appeared to walk along the top near her.

“Helping heal the hurts can hurt the healing.” The Spirit of Compassion warned and Dawn wondered if it were a good sign or a bad one that she kind of understood what he meant.

“Am I actually making anything better?” Dawn purposefully asked in English.

“Yes. You are better.” Cole answered in kind. Dawn felt her stomach heave a little, hearing someone speak her language after so long but she didn’t black out this time.

“I’m not here for me, Compassion. I’m not here by choice.” Dawn sighed, tilting her head back to look up at the Spirit.

He sat above her, legs kicked out around her shoulders, hands planted on the edge of the stone so he could curl over to look down at her. “Be the change you want to see in the world.” He quoted fucking Gandhi at her in her own language.

“The road to hell is lined with good intentions.” Dawn countered without any conviction.

“Yes. You are better.” Cole suddenly switched to Common, his own emotions turning insistent without explanation. “Roots tie you down but they also hold you together. Splitting, falling, fracturing. What is left if I am not who I was? You remember even when the memories hurt.” He insisted.
“Does it bother you, that I cannot let go of the hurt?” Dawn worried.

“You are not your pain.” Cole said as if that helped and Dawn sighed, looking back out over the broken wall. Broken things could be mended, she knew that. But just right then Dawn wasn’t sure if it was worth the effort.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Elvhen
Isenatha= Dragon
Uthenera= long sleep, magically induced and can last of Eons if uninterrupted.
Crestwood was even worse than the initial reports, and the Offworlder’s warnings, had led Alena to believe. Like the Storm Coast it was dreary and raining, but Crestwood had a pervasive stench of rot permeating everything. Vegetative, animal, mineral; it was a putrescent stink that coated the nostrils like an oily film. Yes Alena adjusted to it, but it left her feeling oddly nose blind, like she couldn’t smell anything at all now.

“Are you really sure you require my attendance to this wretched cesspool?” Dorian demanded dramatically.

“I was told walking dead, you’re a Necromancer.” Alena pointed out her logic and he harrumphed at her.

“Boss!” Bull’s excited shout had everyone flinch into defensive stances. Until the leathery thwap of a Dragon’s wing cracked through the air and drew all eyes upwards. “That Northern Hunter was aiming towards the Black Fens.” Of course Bull could identify a Dragon from its ass end, this shouldn’t surprise Alena anymore.

“Not yet.” Alena leashed her eager Qunari; and vowed to never let him know that mental image existed.

“Boss...” He actually whined and Varric laughed.

“I’m surrounded by Dragon nuts.” The Author complained. “Hawke wants to be one and I’m not entirely certain Tiny doesn’t want to be intimate with one.” He teased his friends easily.

Alena found it interesting to see her Inquisition adjust to the presence of the Champion. For a pair of women who were both Rogues, they were remarkably dissimilar. Victoria Hawke had made a name for herself and she dared the world to try and forget her. Alena had spent her life living as a
tool for House Cadash, disappearing into rumours only. They got along like a house on fire, neither one afraid to disagree with the other and having an acute understanding of the burdens that the other carried.

Varric had absolutely lit up with Hawke around. They fed off of each other’s presence; somehow all that back and forth, mostly friendly banter never got annoying. And they drew everyone into their good humour. Dorian complimented Hawke about handling the Qunari ‘infestation’, deliberately trying to provoke The Iron Bull, who just grinned in response.

But Alena found it most educational to watch the Dalish mage, Cedric, interact with Hawke. Cedric had several reputations muttered and whispered about; the most commonly upheld one being that he preferred the company of mages to anything else. Though some hinted that he was Dalish through-and-through, upheld by the condescending way in which he spoke to Solas. Victoria Hawke was neither Elven nor magical, though her sister was a powerful Warden mage. And still Cedric found himself as charmed by her as all the others did, a fact that amused Alena to no end. Hawke was brash, sarcastic, controversial, and absolutely willing to call herself out as anyone else. It endeared her to many; even Alena’s curmudgeonly Commander. As much as Cullen griped about Hawke, Alena had seen him share a drink with the blonde at the Rest.

“I’m being dragged along against my will, but why would you volunteer to join?” Dorian despaired at Cedric since he had gotten no sympathy from Alena. “Do the Dalish not know better than to get out of the rain?” he teased.

“Actually, Clan Lavellan spent a lot of time in the Free Marches, so we normally strip naked and dance in it; a much better way to enjoy a little rain.” He winked up at the taller mage. “I could almost believe that of you, and it has nothing to do with you being Dalish.” Dorian retorted and Cedric laughed, not at all offended.

“If Clan Lavellan was from up in the Free Marches, did you ever encounter Clan Sabrae?” Varric picked up a possible narrative thread.

Cedric smiled at the Dwarf. “Unlike the extensively connected merchant’s guild I’ve heard lauded about by surface Dwarves everywhere, Dalish Clans are more isolated. Clan Lavellan has often found itself closer to small human settlements than another Clan.”

“That was one of the more polite ‘one of my business’ I’ve ever gotten.” Varric laughed, admiration dancing in his flash of teeth.

Cedric gave a courtly bow entirely at odds with the woodland garb he still preferred. He had been a motley of contradictory evidence thus far and Alena wasn’t sure how much of his attitude was affectation because people had ‘expectations’, and how much was his honest personality.

“Don’t like sharing Dalish secrets?” Varric tried another tactic.
“Not at all, but in my own time.” Cedric lightly chastised.

“Less expansive then,” Alena decided to check something, “how did you get to the Conclave? I’ve heard how you survived it.” And according to the Offworlder, he really shouldn’t have. Thus why he was here, Alena had wanted to know the other ‘almost’ Heralds.

The Dalish Elf turned to look at her, his light coloured eyes assessing her quickly. He was older than Alena, but not by much. “This year my son Doshiel turned thirteen, and this year he demonstrated that he inherited strong magic.” There was pride in his voice, open admiration for his offspring’s skills. Alena was stunned to realize it was the first time she’d ever heard someone discuss a mage born child as a gift.

“Congratulations my friend,” Dorian was openly sincere, and it prompted the others into similar comments.

“Thank you. But as you know, too many strong mages together draws demons. So until my son is trained enough to defend himself, I had to be away. My Keeper, Istimaethoriel, sent me to observe the Conclave. Inevitably what you Shemlen do affects us greatly, so we needed to know what you were up to.”

Everyone hung on the Dalish mage’s words. Alena had heard once that the Dalish don’t read and write, instead they told each other history and stories. With how easy everyone had fallen to the cadence and timbre of Cedric Lavellan’s story, Alena could suddenly understand how his People kept their history alive. Her hands suddenly ached for the serpent stone she’d been carving, wanting to settle in and listen to the First tell stories.

“I had not actually reached the Conclave yet.” Cedric’s next comment surprised them all. “I came across the scene of several Templars surrounding several young mages.” His face didn’t change at all, but Alena knew that edge to his voice. “The da’lin surrendered. The Templars didn’t care.” He left it at that but none doubted those poor children’s fates. “I pursued them afterwards, the unseen terror in the dark.” Cedric blinked and turned his gaze to Alena’s, “It’s a very bad idea to anger a Rift mage, especially since I prefer Spirit attacks. Children are sacred.”

Alena smiled, not at all one to condemn someone for having blood on their hands. As she was learning, it was your actions now that spoke for who you are, not who you were. When Cedric saw the smile, he gave a less courtly and more sincere bow to her. “Inquisitor, you understand. I did what I could to reduce their overall numbers, but I was alone at first. As they started to scale towards the building on top, I spotted the Gray Ones coming. I had never met a Qunari before, I was most curious.” Cedric now peered at The Iron Bull openly. The Qunari met the Dalish Elf’s frank stare with one of his own.

“You were there when Dawn came through; you travelled with the Valo-Kas after.” Varric immediately chased the story.

Cedric broke eye contact with Bull with a wink and turned his attention to Varric. “I was dead, I know that. I could feel the immensity of the blast coming towards me and there was nothing I
could do to survive it.” All humour was stripped from his normally insouciant tones. “And then she was torn into this world, something dropping her here with her vhenan.” He shrugged, intensity gone. “Whatever brought her here, put her in exactly the right place at the right time to save my life. I will get to see my son again and it cost that woman her husband.” He was sorrowful but not melancholic, clearly glad to be alive even at the cost.

“And after?” Varric pressed solemnly.

Cedric smiled and Alena shivered; there was no warmth to it. “After I saw a soul break apart; held together by nothing and body alive thanks to Ladarelan Kaaras. At night you could hear Dawn cry in her sleep, as muffled as she could be, and still so heartbreaking. In the morning you’d see no sign of her in her own eyes, the battles of her nightmares taxing her completely.” He gave a short laugh. “When I decided to stand guard for her in the Fade, to keep any actual demons at bay, I discovered that both Dinathe’dirthelan and Ladarelan already there.” The Dalish was not letting anyone back down from his blunt description, holding everyone silent and attentive. “Did you know that demons can taunt and torment her, drawn to her even but they remain powerless to possess her? She feels entirely different to your magic than anything else ever has or ever will.”

Alena wasn’t the only one to look to Dorian after that. “Yes,” the Altus agreed, “but you also feel different to me than mages from Tevinter do.”

“The plain faced Solas,” Cedric’s clear dislike for his fellow Elf was obvious, “has a theory I agree with; that whatever world Dawn is from, they have no external Veil at all. They carry that barrier inside them at all times, so the Fade never truly touches Dawn.”

“Like a Tranquil?” Hawke demanded, alarmed.

Cedric shook his head negative, “Exact opposite in fact. The Fade ripples around her even if she’s unaware of it, an unseen observer. She would have to allow it to affect her, whereas your Tranquil are forcibly removed from it. Tranquility is a wall blocking access,” the Dalish mage searched for a description that worked best, “Dawn is a locked door.”

Alena kept track of how often this supposedly isolated Dalish mage used colloquialisms and human terminology. He was far worldlier than he wanted people to suspect simply by looking at him. It seemed that everyone around her had their secrets, as well as their reasons for keeping them. But when did it get to the point where she had to start demanding those secrets, just to help keep the world from flying apart? And with how The Iron Bull was watching the Dalish mage, Alena knew she wasn’t the only one wondering at what else this First was trying to hide.

Some of the answers to those questions were answered as they sloughed through Crestwood. Demons shambling out of Rifts; by now Alena had gotten fairly used to the experience, but Cedric seemed to relish their encounters. Solas was always bemoaning that demons were spirits that had been corrupted, Cedric had no such sympathies. Dorian’s Necromancy was only sometimes visible to Alena, a flash of purple smoke surrounding a target before they ran screaming. She could feel nothing of the presence of the spirits the Altus was calling, but even she could see the end result of
Walking Bomb. Gruesome but effective. Combined with Cedric’s Stone fist and Veil strikes, and Alena was officially glad to have both mages on her side of the battle because both men seemed to thoroughly enjoy the chaos their respective magics caused while Alena, Varric, Hawke, and Bull cleaned up the mess.

“Why did you insist on coming with us again?” Varric asked Hawke as they battled through the bandit filled Caer Bronach and the Champion just laughed as she tore through the bodies in her way.
“Are you sure this is a good idea?” he once again jokingly teased his friend as they approached the Norther Hunter.

It took until the Inquisition was all but done with handling the mess the Mayor of Crestwood had left to them before Victoria Hawke revealed why she had so vehemently insisted she come with them. “Inquisitor, there is someone I need you to meet.” Hawke approached on their last scheduled day in Crestwood.

On the battlement walls Hawke had hinted to Alena that there was something big coming. Their Offworlder had supported this, both verbally and with her visceral reaction to Hawke’s presence. Demons coming out of Rifts, the dead rising from the lake to seek revenge, a spirit of Command needing a favour, and even a Dragon guarding ruins; all of these Alena was prepared to deal with in the name of her Inquisition. She was not ready to walk into a smuggler’s cave and come face to face with King Alistair Theirin, one of the Heroes of the Fifth Blight.

Chapter End Notes

Elvhen translations:
Da’lin= children
Vhenan= heart
Ladarelan= healer
Dinathe’dirthelan= necromancer
Reactions ripple out and down, distorting as they go.

With the Inquisitor due back in Skyhold in the next pair of days, Cullen felt like he should have already accomplished more to get ready. The Ferelden King, his King, was coming here. As if that detail were not enough to contend with, Cullen couldn’t stop obsessing over the fact that it was Alistair that would be here. That man and his wife had helped rescue Cullen from the worst days of his life, and helped talk him down from traumatized homicidal rage. They'd kept him alive and kept his soul intact too.

Once again Cullen wrenched his attention back onto the reports he was supposed to be working on instead of agonizing over the past. There was a knock at one of his doors, the late hour making casual visitors unlikely.

“Enter.” He called out, grateful to have an external distraction for a change.

One of Leliana’s special Runners charged in; one of the orphaned children from Haven given a place and purpose. “Ser, the Nightingale has requested a ‘midnight rendez-vous’.” The child even had a small scrap of paper with the words written on it clutched in hand but not referred to.

“Of course.” He kept the amused smile off his face knowing how seriously the ‘Junior Runners’ took their duties.

Cullen made haste to Leliana’s Raven Tower, not surprised that the Spymaster worked even longer hours than he did. The mage Dorian wasn’t at his usual alcove, the Tevinter accompanying the Inquisitor still. And all the usual hustlers of literature were all reasonable people that had sought their beds ages ago. Only the mad and the desperate were up at this time.

Leliana, surprisingly, was not alone when he climbed the stairs into view. Lady Montilyet was also sitting in attendance. Cullen gave both Advisors a polite if brief hello.

“There you are,” Leliana’s accent curled around the edges, leaving Cullen endlessly wary, “here to save the day.”

“You sent the Runner to me, Leliana. How can I help you?” Cullen tried not to sound too dour.

“It is a matter of counter balance.” Lady Montilyet spoke up persuasively.

“Or any balance really.” Leliana added with an amused smile.

“Ladies, I will gladly help in whatever way I can but it does require one of you to stop speaking in riddles.” Cullen insisted, pinching his brow against the pulse of his ever present headache.

“We were conferring about the possible outcomes for Orlais and its civil war,” Lady Montilyet started to explain but Leliana interrupted her.

“And a discussion about the likely fashion trends if they call for a New Year peace talks.” The
spymaster insisted with a giddiness Cullen had honestly never witnessed before.

“Of course such things are always best discussed over a bottle of the current trends favourite wines.” The Antivan Ambassador was poised and dignified but the usually more stoic spymaster seemed to give no bothers about hiding her amusement.

“Bottles Josie, more than enough.” Leliana’s boneless ease suddenly made a lot more sense. “I think our fine Commander here has at last grasped the role of his rescue.” She cheerily deprecated.

“I told you not to fuss Leliana, I’m fine.” Lady Montilyet tried to scold.

“Commander,” Leliana ignored her friend with ease, “would you so kindly escort our Ambassador here back to her rooms. It wouldn’t due for an Advisor to be seen staggering.”

“Oh fall off your chair again Leliana, you’ve had as much to drink as I have!” her vehemence was reasonable and adorable. Cullen was ignored in a friendly way, their inebriation only visible in the small details they let slip. And the bottles discreetly tucked away. No wonder they wanted his assistance, he was more concerned with how they were planning on standing at all.

“I will see Lady Montilyet safely back to her room. Are you fine on your own Leliana?” he decided that the only way to navigate this with any dignity would be to keep things plain.

“Always.” Leliana all but purred and Cullen fought the urge to roll his eyes.

“Maker, you’re even a handful when you cut loose, Nightingale.” He teased without reprimand. “My Lady, are you prepared to retire for the night?” he addressed the Ambassador.

“And the Lion shows he has teeth.” Leliana laughed.

“Oh not this again.” Cullen groaned and was saved by Josephine.

“Goodnight Leliana.” Lady Montilyet took the Commander’s hand, rising gracefully. Her normally carefully pinned and coiled hair was slightly pulled free, small wisps of hair softening the usually calculating countenance. And her skin had a glow to it that Cullen assumed was the same alcoholic flush Leliana so clearly wore.

“Goodnight Josie. Thank you Cullen, keep that up and someday I’ll owe you one.” The spymaster bade them off.

“That sounds like a dangerous position to be in.” he couldn’t help but be honest.

“We’ll teach you the Game yet Commander.” Lady Montilyet complimented as they walked. Never had a stairwell felt so short nor so long before, and yet despite all claim otherwise, not a single stumble was taken.

It was easy enough for Cullen to lead the Ambassador across the hall and through a pair of doors, she was neither tottering nor slow, but for the life of him he couldn’t think of a thing to say. Put him across the War Table from her and he could shout out ideas as needed, even in the face of her wrath, but apparently walking one of his colleagues alone to her room left him floundering.

“Commander?” her question absolved him of the need to pick a topic.

“You may call me Cullen, Lady Montilyet. I’m only the Commander when I’m on duty.” His attempt to have a sense of humour failed. He should stick to calibrating trebuchets; at least if he failed this catastrophically there it’d just explode and kill him.
“Then please, Cullen, call me Josephine.” She smiled, a bright flash of honest joy in an otherwise dim evening. “But Cullen, this is my office.”

He blinked and looked up, eyes scanning the room. Her desk was exactly where it should be, the chair startling to him only because he almost never saw the delicate brocade patterning because this was one of the few times her chair was unoccupied as he came through. Adding to the eeriness, the night draped the room in soft shadows and concealing darkness, lit only by a gentle glow from the moon.

“Of course it is.” Cullen smiled, seeing traces of the Antivan Ambassador all over the room. The comfortable chairs with absurdly high backs near the fire looked like the height of uncomfortable fashion and yet had been downright cozy the one time he’d sat in them. The cold sterile walls were covered in thick tapestries, all in the warm colours she herself liked to wear.

Now she was laughing at him though. “Unlike some, I do not sleep in my office Commander.” She teased lightly and he flushed, ducking his head and rubbing the back of his neck.

“No, you’re right. I ah…” he trailed off, wondering how she was the one whom had been drinking and yet he was the one stammering.

“I doubt anyone has ever gotten you out of your tower long enough to give you a full and proper tour,” she easily offered him a dignity saving assist and he took it with a weak laugh. “Now, if we go back out to the main hall and go towards the pond courtyard, I take my repose in a room there.” She gently suggested, arm still carefully linked through his.

Even with his unfortunate misdirect initially, Josephine was still relying on him to help her get there safely. It both alleviated his social awkwardness, he’d already screwed up after all, and yet left him feeling off balance. She never stumbled, staggered, or lilted; absolutely no indication of her supposed inebriation escaped her and Cullen wasn’t sure how much of her weight to support. He was prepared to be pulled off to one side and yet it never happened.

“Is it seeing the fish, or the sound of water that told you to room here?” the question was out before he could think better of it.

Luckily Josephine laughed, “Both, actually.” She patted his arm in congratulation. “My room is the warmest and has the best corner view.” There was a conspiratorial tone to her voice.

“While my loft boasts a beautiful view of the night sky and a bit of a breeze.” Cullen felt compelled to share, just to hear her laugh again.

“One of these days I will sneak builders into your loft to fix that hole.” Her threats were somehow more sinister than Leliana’s. The Nightingale’s mercy could only kill you once.

“Only you could,” he smirked trying to imagine it, “though if you do succeed I would prefer a window. I quite like the night breeze.” He requested because it just seemed like that kind of night.

“That can be arragned Commander.” A yawn was barely contained despite her polite constitution. “My apologies. Thank you for delivering me safely Cullen, you should rest yourself.”

“I will, goodnight, Josephine.” He almost didn’t speak her name loud enough to be heard. Part of him still felt appalled at his impropriety.

“Oh and Cullen, you should consider who you would like to invite for Satinalia, with the King of Ferelden to be in attendance it would be quite appropriate to have them see what it is you do as Commander.” She even managed to close the door politely even without giving him a chance to
respond.

With an unpleasant new issue to pester his sleep, Cullen retreated to his drafty loft. It was cold but not unbearable, and being able to open his eyes and see the stars always helped convince him he was in Skyhold. None of his barracks had ever had a view like this. Hopefully it would be enough to help; there was no way that he wouldn’t be dreaming of Alistair, Siobhan, and Kinloch tonight.

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Theoretically Alena had understood that her role as Inquisitor would involve dealing with high ranking individuals, it was another thing to have the King of Ferelden surprise her in a bandit’s cavern in Crestwood. The man was just lucky she recognized him from the whole Redcliffe incident; this was a good way to get shanked.

“Your Majesty.” Alena tried not to bow ironically, never taking her eyes off of him.

He, likewise, seemed to be utterly aware of where her hands were in relation to her blades. “Inquisitor Cadash.” He was as jovial as if this were a state meeting in formal robes.

“Hawke, the fuck?” Varric demanded, annoyed.

“He played the family card Varric, you know me…” the Champion of Kirkwall whined.

“Andraste’s butt dimple, Hawke!” he sounded mildly annoyed, slightly amused, and entirely like he should somehow have seen this coming. Leliana was going to have kittens. The Offworlder had said that Alistair acknowledging Hawke was different, this could only be moreso. She could only imagine how disconcerting it would be to come to a world (somehow), that you thought you knew all possible outcomes to thanks to a story with multiple retellings (somehow), only to discover that somehow, there are new options entirely unknown to you happening. Someone should buy that woman a drink.

“What’s going on here?” Alena demanded simply, cutting through the flack and banter immediately. She tried to not let it go to her head that Victoria Hawke fell in line to her.

Now Alistair cleared his throat, drawing their attention to him once again. The man looked so apologetically abashed that Alena felt like she’d kicked a puppy. “After the Tevinter Venatori lost their mages at Redcliffe something strange started to happen. What I say to you next are Warden secrets that only desperate necessity could have forced me to share.” His solemnity didn’t match the Alistair of the Fifth Blight stories Alena had heard but it certainly suited the King Alistair had grown into being. “All Wardens carry… a connection to the darkspawn, but after long enough it… We endure something called the Calling right before we go to die.” Alena had actually heard of this before, she’d met a Warden Dwarf named Sigrun that was about to descend on her final mission. She had had the tattoos from the Legion of the Dead so Alena hadn’t questioned it at the time. “We descend into the Deep Roads and take out as many as we can until it kills us.” He paused for a moment, looking to sad. “The nightmares start soon after Joining, but they get worse, even without a Blight. But my wife and I… we Joined at different times, and yet we were getting the exact same progression of symptoms. That was off. So we reached out to my wife’s cousin who had Joined very recently. Again, the exact same description of symptoms and nightmares. Something wasn’t right.”

“So when Varric wrote me, I wrote Alistair and came right to you.” Hawke chimed in.

“And it’s easier to beg forgiveness than ask permission.” King Alistair grinned like those old stories said he would, painfully handsome and devastatingly earnest. “I knew Teagan and Eamon would object to me leaving but if this affects the Wardens, it definitely affects me.” His intensity
was compelling but not overbearing. “So I informed them I was doing a brief visit to Highever, saw my friend Fergus and Warden Cousland as well before they helped me smuggle myself to Crestwood.” He sounded so proud.

“Didn’t you think it would have been easier to sneak if you had included Red?” Bull’s voice boomed in, unexpected.

At Alistair’s confused frown, Varric got to pipe in, “He means the Nightingale, your Blight busting buddy Leliana.”

“Oh Evanuris, you wanted to see how close you could sneak up on her, didn’t you?” Cedric demanded, amused beyond all logic. And yet Alistair flushed his confession on his pretty brown face. Alena was glad her darker complexion hid such giveaways.

“I am informing Skyhold. Josephine will no doubt have a suitable spin story set up for your anticipated Satinalia visit.” Alena broke it down so that everyone understood. Their little games were cute and all but if it affected the Inquisition, Alena needed to be in on it. She hadn’t wanted this duty but by all the Paragons she was going to do it right. “You two get to deal with the Nightingale on your own time.” She warned without emphasis and neither one thought she was joking. “We follow the standard return policy, act like nothing is different. You left your guard behind so your safety is my concern. Bull, your body guard duties are temporarily shifted to King Alistair. I’ll see to my own security until we’re at Skyhold.”

“Boss.” He looked ready to argue it, but the look on her face made the Qunari fall silent. The anger was back, warm and familiar. She couldn’t help save these people’s lives if they didn’t stop acting like idiots showing off.

So a Hero of the Fifth Blight, the Champion of Kirkwall, and the Inquisitor all rode into Skyhold like some kind of punchline to the joke Alena felt her life had become. Hawke remained brash and loud, impossible to ignore; Alistair was charming but oddly naïve. And Alena was the quiet pragmatism that kept them from hatching a plan to try and raise tame dragonlings; at least not without discussing it with the animal handlers first. One of these days Alena really did want to find out what it was like to come home with no fuss at all; it certainly wasn’t this time though.
Rainier Days

Chapter Summary

In chess an unexpected move by the King could spell doom, Skyhold prepares for the same. But Alena's newest stress comes from an unexpected source.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The entire army seemed to be shitting itself, the gossip immediately spreading that the King of Ferelden had arrived to officially put his support with them against that Corypheus character. Kasaanda gladly volunteered to Shokrakar for the task of taking in how the bas of the Inquisition felt about this. Her Ari just didn’t need to know that she intended to do this by sitting in the Herald’s Rest, drinking, and playing dice.

A charmingly chatty Dwarf with a staggering amount of hairy, male-cleavage exposed spent a good part of the evening chatting to a human with white hair and an appealing smirk. If Kasaanda had a couple of more drinks and a little less sense she’d try to take up the challenge she saw in that Rogue’s eyes; might lose some teeth in the process though. Looked damn worth the effort still; that human was well fit.

A blonde Elf with hacked off, greasy looking hair and mustard at the corner of her mouth flopped down into the empty chair across from Kasaanda, snapping the Vashoth’s attention back to her own table. “Woof, you’re taller than I thought you’d be?” the Elf scrunched her face up as if it were Kasaanda’s fault she were tall.

“You’ve got sauce on your face.” Kasaanda didn’t bother trying to answer the blonde’s height comment.

“Shite.” She looked a little adorable, all pissed off as she wiped her face up. A small but vibrant stain of yellow still lingered in her skin. “Here I am making a right show of it innit it just?” she shook her head and offered her hand. “I’m Sera.”

“Kasaanda Adaar.” She shook the other woman’s hand with amused curiosity. The Elf might be Qalaba shit, but her hand was ridged with callouses and she flushed real pretty when Kasaanda kept hold of her for an extra interested moment before letting go.

“Heard about you,” Sera even sat in an graceless sprawl, “heard your lot came in with that touched in the head Lady. That’s just what all these shites need, thinking some crazy person can see the future, like wot?” she scoffed.

Kasaanda just smirked and drank, a shrug her only comment. “And now these shites get to deal with the King of Ferelden.” It was easy to redirect.

The Elf blew a raspberry, the rude sound drawing attention that faded as soon as the source was located; this one was a right brat then. “King of bloody Ferelden just shows up,” Sera sounded impressed despite his noble rank, “like you know, I think I met him once. Back before he was all High and Mighty like. Maybe. But that was a different me then too so yeah.” And while Kasaanda
was trying to follow that sentence to a logical conclusion (and not finding one), Sera boldly stole her beer and finished it.

“You believe their piss about him making it here for Satinalia?” Kasaanda probed, signalling the bar maid for two more drinks.

“Psh, right,” Sera’s laugh was more hapless giggle, “like he’d rather be here, with the likes of us for Feast Day than in his own castle playin’ court with muckity-mucks.” Her tone was doubtful.

“So what do you think really brought him here?” Kasaanda really tried to sound casual, taking a drink quickly to cover her terrible acting. Maybe one of the Ashaads should have done this instead, though the mute one might have found it a little one sided.

“His horse!” the Elf cackled at her own pun and Kasaanda found herself laughing with the blonde. “I know him being here wasn’t the plan, but I don’t know if that’s them not trusting me with that kind of detail.” Well there was a chip on that shoulder. “Wassat mean anyway, Kasaanda? Like is that a word or just a name? I like it, either way.” She started to babble and blush as Kasaanda grinned.

“My names, both first and last have individual meaning.” She decided to indulge Sera’s curiosity. It wasn’t unusual, but the Elf’s bizarrely convoluted bluntness was refreshing. “Kasaanda is the sunflower; carnivorous but beautiful. Adaar is weapon. My mother had interesting futures hoped for my twin and I.” she shrugged, not elaborating more than that. “I’ve heard some call you Jenny, not Sera.” She let it be a question.

“I’m not Jenny, I’m a Jenny.” Sera argued as if that difference made any sense to the Vashoth. “I’m a Friend, and that’s more important.” She nodded vigorously.

“Alright then, friend,” Kasaanda didn’t bother questioning the odd emphasis on the word, “if the Inquisitor is Skyhold bound until after Feast Day, what are the likes of us supposed to do for distraction?” that was about as subtle as Kasaanda generally managed.

Apparently it was too subtle; Sera once again started to giggle but it wasn’t in the ‘I got that innuendo’ kind of way. “Right before Stabby went to Crestwood, I talked her into running a few pranks with me. You heard about the bucket above the Ambassador’s door?” her excited grin and enthusiastic nodding prompted Kasaanda to nod along with her. As if that was the kind of distraction the Necromancer had been talking about. “Oh, you’d be perfect! Come with me.” The Elf grabbed Kasaanda’s hand and pulled her along behind, impressive considering the size difference.

Sera led her out of the Rest, across the Upper Bailey to the stairs, and Kasaanda gave it a quick thought to throwing the slender woman over her shoulder to get to the bottom faster. But not a lot of people liked that kind of bodily handling without permission first; so she let the blonde slowly lead the way down.

“What am I perfect for?” Kasaanda finally thought to ask as her new friend guided her through the closing stalls of the lower bailey market. Not much here yet but Kasaanda had no idea why Sera would need her at all. Except for what she really hoped Sera wanted her for; the Elf was still clutching her hand after all.

“Oh Quizzy and Beardy get up to knocking boots, and I am not going to mess with the Inquisitor’s room. Those reflexes are painful. But Beardy always needs a good giggle. Takes himself too seriously and I thought him popping his cork regularly would get him to be less of a grim dark.” Kasaanda smirked, staying silent but thinking about how appropriate that term was for so many
people. Like her own twin.

“Here, Beardy all but lives here when he’s not with her and I bet that some things happen here too.” Kasaanda was not going to complain if her new ‘friend’ wanted to pull her up into a hay loft; Kasaanda had used them in the past.

Only that’s not what Sera intended when the blonde led her past the pile of hay bales with a blanket even conveniently folded on top of them. Kasaanda looked forlornly at it as the Elf led her towards the railing free edge, staring up at a beam. “If I sit on your shoulders, I should be able to reach.” Sera tapped on Kasaanda’s arm in excitement. “What do you think, should I carve butts or cocks?”

“Why not both?” Kasaanda finally asked after speculating for a moment.

“Oh I like you.” Sera beamed up at her.

So that was how Kasaanda nearly gave herself an aneurysm by getting her head between the crazy blonde Elf’s thighs; it was definitely not the reason Kasaanda had been hoping for. Mindful of Kasaanda’s horns, Sera sat on top of her shoulders easily and carved to her heart’s content. Kasaanda couldn’t look up without dislodging her companion but all too soon the hot blonde was crawling off her shoulders so the Necromancer finally got to see the fruits of their labour. One was definitely a butt. One might be a cock, or a really badly carved blob, and surprisingly the words BEREDY + STABY. Kasaanda didn’t comment on the spelling errors, her father had insisted on them being highly literate but not everyone was that privileged.

“Thanks, I’m not dumb enough to wait for a reaction but they’ll have a laugh over this!” Sera was absolutely the right kind of crazy.

“Oh my little canary, the next time you call me perfect and drag me into a hay loft, you best be planning to use me.” Kasaanda cut through the bullshit, lightly tugging on a lock of Sera’s hair to emphasize her point.

Sera gave her nervous giggle, turning almost shy as she flustered. “I like you an all but I don’t move that fast.” She tried to make eye contact but Kasaanda’s grin seemed to break her nerve.

“I can, but if you want to head back to the Rest to roll dice instead, I can be persuaded.” The Necromancer wasn’t bothered either way, though she’d be lying if the idea of bedding the blonde wasn’t now on her list of things to do. But Kasaanda was the master of her libido, so heading back to the Rest without getting any wasn’t a hassle. Besides, she was technically supposed to be collecting general gossip, not trying to get her lady love on.

“You’re different than your brother.” Sera blurted out as they climbed the Bailey steps up.

“Well there are girl Vashoth, boy Vashoth, and-“ Kasaanda started to patronize but her feisty Elf friend was having none of that.

“Oy Tadwinks I’m not so little as I can’t put you in your place.” She was all electrical fury, sharp and spikey as she stood several steps up.

Kasaanda couldn’t help herself, her hands pulled the blonde in and the Vashoth mercenary planted a kiss flat on her lips. “Of course you know the difference.” Kasaanda smirked as she let the Elf have her personal space back. “Just because Kaaras and I share colouration and taste in women, and at one time a womb doesn’t mean we’re supposed to be the same. We are our own people separately, and I’m a lot more fun.” She jump back to casual ease after the kiss seemed to have left
Sera completely off balance.

“You’re a riot, you are.” Sera warned but the smile wiggling on her lips gave away that this was all play.

“Let’s go play dice Sera, get to know each other a little better.” Kasaanda suggested with a wink, matching her long strides down to Sera’s shorter scampering.

But while they’d been getting up to mischief, the Inquisitor had come down to the Rest. That always drew a crowd; so many wanting to be able to say that they sat with the Herald of Andraste. As if the quiet Dwarf was thrilled to be some kind of pawn to a crispy dead lady with too many husbands, no matter what the story of Cadash’s penitence and conversion said.

“Oiy! Stabby you came out for once!” Sera immediately abandoned Kasaanda’s side to go pester their boss and the Necromancer laughed. If the Inquisitor was like Kaaras when it came to letting loose, she understood the Elf’s enthusiasm. “Tadwinks come on!” Sera called out, surprising the Vashoth. Kasaanda didn’t have a chance to respond though, more bodies poured into the Rest as even the Commander sought out the Inquisitor at the pub. It was easier for Kasaanda to claim a dice table on the far side than it’d be to make it to the blonde.

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How could Alistair be Hawke’s Warden contact AND the King of Ferelden? They were mutually exclusive concepts in the game. When the Inquisitor had sent bird, word had quickly spread that the Ferelden King was coming. And even if there were others more directly stressed by that news, Dawn had actually had to take herself to her room so she could hide and plan. Everyone was so excited to gossip that people were actually approaching her to try and chatter and Dawn had no clue how to handle socializing anymore.

“What the actual fuck?” the English cuss felt satisfying as she paced around her makeshift room. “How am I supposed to help if the rules keep changing? How the fuck do I choose between Alistair and Hawke?” she kept her despair to English but forced herself to stop. She was being weak again, letting her emotions dictate her reactions. People were going to die if Dawn didn’t get her head out of her ass.

So how did she get them both out of the Fade alive? She didn’t have the authority or allies to try and stop a King from going where he wanted to go, and Dawn knew the man well enough to just accept that the lovable idiot was going to find his way to Adamant. Same thing for Hawke. Dawn had to sit down, skull weighing too much for her to remain standing suddenly.

Dawn had had to face the Nightmare as Inquisitor dozens of times; she knew her dream team had primarily been Cassandra, Varric, and Solas. Varric because the other two Rogues had super negative reactions to the Fade, Solas because he created the damn place, and Cassandra because she always seemed to have her Faith reaffirmed by the experience. Though Dawn often shuffled things to include the love interest too. But Dawn wasn’t the Inquisitor, she was just Dawn, just a misplaced Earthling amongst strangers wearing familiar faces. Even if she told the Inquisitor about the choice, there was no guarantee that it would change anything. No, if she wanted to save Hawke and Alistair both, then Dawn had to figure out how to get herself there. And how to stop a giant spider demon. If only she had a giant bottle of raid, or maybe some dynamite.

Dawn’s eyes snapped open as she remembered that she actually did know how to make black powder, so maybe that wasn’t such an impossible idea. Once Dagna got here Dawn would have to try and find a way to convince her to help. A pang of homesickness hit her; her scientist sister had taught her the formula of charcoal, sulfur, and salt peter as a joking survival tip for a zombie apocalypse. Max Brooks books had been a must for Christmas that year.
“Focus.” Dawn forced herself back into Common. If she was going to make grenades then she needed to experiment. So how could she do that without killing herself? Vivienne was the alchemist in the mages, but Dawn knew the Loyalist hated the very sight of her. The one time she’d tried to approach the mage, Madam de Fer had coldly said: “Do not bother Offworlder, I will not listen.”

Dorian might just be curious enough to indulge in helping her, but that was a very big maybe. Solas was just too devious to trust with that much fore knowledge, and Dawn was hesitant to let him know the secrets of her world. Sera was a tempest so she might have some suggestions, and she was crazy enough to consider the idea fun. But Dawn wasn’t sure if Sera would even talk to her. A big part of Dawn felt resigned to just waiting for Dagna, but that was the cowards way out.

Charcoal was easy to find, any fireplace had more than enough to offer, and sulfur was the same here as it was on Earth. She remembered the sulfur pits at the Western Approach so some could be found. But the potassium nitrate might be hard to replicate. Even as she tried to figure out what the Thedosian equivalent of salt peter could be, Dawn couldn’t shake the memory of the wrapping paper they’d used at Christmas that year.

Assuming best case scenario, Dawn would be able to create a ton of grenades and they would work as the Fade distraction. And it wasn’t something a demon would be able to defend itself from. Now Dawn just had to figure out how to get those grenades TO the Fade. If she was going to make a run through Adamant, Dawn needed to start getting her body ready. If she ran the battlements in the early morning or late evening then only the patrolling guards would witness it. Her first few runs were going to be ugly, and Dawn couldn’t help but feel she was already going to fail them both.

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Josephine was brilliant, weaving a story about Alistair’s arrival that was such a mastery of diplomatic crock that the King gleefully fed it to his own Advisors. Everyone knew that Teagan and Eamon would have to go along with it, but it was about saving face for them now. Alena had given Alistair full access to the Ravens to speed up communication, and soon after news spread evenly that the Ferelden King had come to show support for the Inquisition against Corypheus and his Arch demon. The Antivan Ambassador even already had Skyhold ready for the influx of nobles that would come to try and rub elbows with Alistair.

The Inquisition Advisors had also already started to tackle the preparations for Satinalia. There was a certain painful solemnity to Skyhold still, and for once her Advisors were in agreement that this celebration was a chance to make Skyhold a home instead of just a fortress for their people. Alena wasn’t sure if it were Leliana, Josephine, or even Cullen, but one of them had even presented the idea of having King Alistair preside over the feasting meal, including making a grandiose speech about the need of coming together and supporting the fight against a Darkspawn Magister. It was a struggle for Alena to not laugh at the devastated look on his face at his final surrender to the plan.

Both Alena’s Spymaster and her Commander had known Alistair before he’d become King, and it was interesting to see the effect his presence had on them now. Leiliana never, ever discussed what it was like as she helped the Wardens save the world a decade ago but now that Alistair was here, the Nightingale seemed like a younger version of herself. There was a joyfulness Alena hadn’t seen in the Spymaster before. Meanwhile Cullen looked a little pinched and pale, his continuing battle with withdrawal a constant weight on his body but this was different somehow.

“Siobhan says she misses you Leliana.” The King grinned and ambled over to the redhead for a bear hug of epic proportions, “and Warden Cousland says you need to learn to write more. Seems Zevran is up to no good again.” They shared a laugh.
“I’ll look into it. Somehow I doubt my Crow has been idle since the last time we caught up.” The Spymaster’s words stunned Alena, she hadn’t suspected that Leliana had a lover. “Cullen, it’s good to see you.” Alistair finally turned to the ex-Templar. “You look terrible but I hear you’ve done fine things with the Inquisition’s forces.”

Cullen actually laughed and seemed to relax a little at Alistair’s teasing remark. “Thank you, your Majesty.” He didn’t elaborate but there was a plethora of reasons behind his words. “Why don’t I show you your suite while you’re here?” Alena decided she’d had enough of this day. It was after luncheon, she could grab a drink, grab her lover, and try to find a way to ditch the stress.

Alena brought Alistair to the suite one level below hers, and hurried up her final steps to her room. But although she’d told Blackwall to move his stuff in, she saw no sign of the Warrior in the private suite. A little disappointing but he couldn’t know how long she’d be at briefing her Advisors, so he wouldn’t know when to wait here for her. She could send a Runner to find him, or she could avail herself of the hot bath the servants had left for her. Hopefully her magnificently bearded Warrior would find his way up to her.

Crestwood had lacked the overall scud and grime that the Fallow Mire had boasted, but it had that endless damp that always left her feeling mildew in her bones. She gladly stripped off her layers and sank into the ever so slightly too hot water. Round one involved scrubbing out any and all trace of road dirt, and then soaping herself for a second thorough scrubbing. She couldn’t stretch it out any longer, climbing out and towelling off in mildly annoyed frustration. She had scenarios all planned out in her head but they were no good if Blackwall never showed up to fulfill them. She dressed in clean clothes and slipped out to find her quarry.

He wasn’t in his loft, or the barn, and eventually she had to ask if anyone had seen him. Finally Alena was directed to find Blackwall at the small garden chapel. That sure as the Dusted Void wasn’t what she’d been expecting. And the look on his face only added to her sense of unease.

And then Blackwall told her about Tom Rainier, and Dawn’s deliberate interference, and how sorry he was for lying to her through omission.

Alena stayed silent through it all, listening and letting the man who shared her bed reveal himself utterly. He probably expected her to run screaming, he definitely expected her to kick him out of her life. But Blackwall didn’t expect Alena to just nod when he was finished. “Who else did you want to know? I’ll have to tell my Advisors, but it’s your secret.” And he looked so angry at her calm acceptance. “I’ve done terrible things Inquisitor. I may not have known that the man’s wife and children were in the carriage, but I had been entirely willing to let simple soldiers die for gold.” He started to repeat his self-loathing tirade.

“Blackwall, I’m not a Chantry sister no matter how loud people call me the Herald of Andraste; I can’t forgive your sins. But I can help you atone for them. I am proud of my skills even if I am always not proud of how I’ve used them, and now I have the chance to use these skills to help the world. Will that be penance enough for you?” Alena cut to the chase, leaving him staring at her in stunned silence.

“How could I ever be worthy of a woman like you Alena?” he so rarely used just her name that it almost hurt to hear it now.

“I told you I would take whatever you could give me for as long as you were willing, and I haven’t changed my mind about that. I’m going to the Rest for a drink; you decide what it is you want from me and come find me if you want to keep going.” And she left him sitting on the bench to go get her ancestors blasted drink.
Chapter End Notes

Translations
Qalaba – a particularly dumb breed of cow
Dawn was fine until the moment she wasn’t and there was no warning, no trigger to prelude her break. She was standing in the War Table Room, listening to the Ambassador going over the necessary planning of the Satinalia celebration now with King Alistair in attendance, when Dawn finally made the mental connection that this was their version of Christmas. And suddenly Dawn's hands were shaking. She would be here for Christmas. And she would be utterly alone for it for the first time in her life. No family, no real loved ones to celebrate with. She felt like someone had sucker punched her, the air rushed out of her in an audible sound that Dawn hoped no one else heard but with the way the Spymaster was watching her told her she was found out.

The shaking in her hands worsened even as Dawn fought to control her breathing, sucking in long, slow inhales to try and keep it together; even her habitual counting wasn’t going to help this time. And distantly she heard a high pitched ringing that told her that her control techniques were failing because her blood pressure was sky rocketing.

“No you have anything to add?” Leliana pointedly stared at the panicking Dawn, drawing everyone’s attention onto her. Commander Cullen was frowning at her, Seeker Cassandra looked politely curious but bored, the Inquisitor looked amused but interested, but it was Ambassador Josephine looking excited to possibly incorporate Earth traditions that broke the last wall Dawn had holding her together.

“I….I can’t.” The shaking had infected the rest of Dawn’s body and she felt like a leaf in a hurricane. A sob tore from her chest as she bolted for the doors, horrified to feel hot tears spilling down her cheeks. She ran, blinded by tears but guided by instinct, and bolted through the startled people in the Main Hall, through the door and into Solas’ sanctum.

The Elvhen scholar looked surprised to see Dawn barge in and even more alarmed to find her in such an emotional state. “Are you alright Dawn?” he queried, standing up to rush over to her.

“I cannot… I cannot do this… I can’t…. they are gone and I am here and how? How do you live with this? How do I live with this?” Dawn collapsed to her knees as a crushing weight filled her chest.
“Oh Ena’vun...” Solas soothed, kneeling down to hug Dawn to his chest. She couldn’t seem to stop the shaking or the tears, her breath hiccupping and harsh as she fought against her own emotions and failed. And her stuttering apologies were simply shushed away as Solas let her sob herself out against his chest, clutching to the rough fabric of his tunic. “You need not apologize for your emotions; you are allowed to have them.”

Solas contemplated casting a spell for privacy but as those that likely needed to see this side of the Offworlder rushed to see where her unexpected flight had taken her, he allowed them the chance to see what the cost has been on this one woman. They needed to see this collapse as much as Dawn needed to endure it. And if some part of him felt satisfied or smug about the fact that she ran to him for comfort and security at her supposed weakest, no one could truly blame him.

Dawn, unaware of the witnesses as she tried to battle her emotions, sobbed out. “No. Not here. Not when I know what is coming and I know what I need to be to help save the most lives.”

“You owe nothing, even knowing all the things you do. Especially not if it means tearing you into pieces every single day.” Solas didn’t look at the crowd at the door, not needing to look upwards to know that there were even more eyes witnessing from above. “I will always listen if you need to come here to talk.” he prompted, satisfied that he might actually get some answers out of her after this.

Cole ghosted closer, inevitably drawn to try and soothe her pain. “I miss my family.” He whispered, the acoustics of the room insuring that everyone bore witness to the emotions Dawn struggled to reject from herself. “How can I dare celebrate here when everyone that loved me is gone?”

Sorrow and Anger surged through Solas in a hot wave, directed at these callous humans that dared drive this woman to the brink with their constant selfishness. She had done everything conceivable to help, always with the intent of reducing innocent deaths, always pushing to support those that needed it, even when she had barely spoken their language. Within days of meeting her Solas had been impressed with her concern for people that were treating her with blatant distrust and disrespect. After he had been assigned to eliminate the language barrier, he had been astonished to find that despite the problems she presented to his plans; she offered him hope because her perspective was different, and her hints about knowing things she should not know had him curious to find out what she knew was coming. But some of the things she has let slip warned that her knowledge was more extensive than he likely wanted it to be.

None of this showed on his face as he offered what comfort he could. Solas had thought that she was handling the stress by simply not allowing the pettiness of others to touch her, but he was shaken to find how wrong he had been. Dawn was too naturally empathetic to others to not be touched by the harshness of how she was treated, and she has simply borne up under it for so long that everyone forgot the most important thing; she was afflicted by these events too.

“How can you believe you are not loved? I love you.” Compassion petted Dawn’s hair softly and his kind words shattered Dawn apart. The sound his words pulled from her was that of a wounded animal and Solas held her tighter against him even as Cole hugged her from behind, cocooning her between them in safety.

This time Solas looked up at the crowd in the door and he saw shame and guilt on their faces. Kind Josephine was trying to hold back tears even as she was supported by the Commander, who had the bearing of a military man in command of his emotions. Cassandra had chased the others away from the door, offering a semblance of privacy that was undone by the open air above them. If he looked up Solas knew he’d see no one untouched by this scene, and they had needed to witness it. But now his focus was on helping Dawn, and that would require privacy and time.
Not caring about the witnesses at all now, Solace adjusted his hold and stood to his feet, bearing her up as if she were as light as a child. Silently Cole stood and led the way forwards, opening doors and leading Solas-burdened-with-Dawn outside and to the battlements. The spirit didn’t hesitate to pass through Commander Cullen’s office and onwards, leading Solas to a part of Skyhold he had yet to visit in this day and age. No one had really noticed where Dawn slipped off to on her own, and even Josephine couldn’t confidently say where she took her rest; Cole revealed to Solas that the small room next to the main gate, what should have been a tiny archer’s nook was where Dawn had collected those few things that were hers. A straw filled pallet was on the floor, with a much mended pair of blankets and a sorry looking pack acting as a pillow. A crate near the bed acted as a table, holding both the lamp that Dawn must use for light, as well as an old children’s spelling book.

The room itself looked only partially cleared; a large pile of rubble was carefully stacked in the far corner supporting the outermost wall and yet the stones of the walls and floors were washed clean, right up to the highest level that it seemed Dawn could reach. Solas looked around the room with sad eyes, knowing that no one in the Inquisition had looked after the Offworlder after her arrival to the Inquisition, and it made sense that she wouldn’t have felt permitted to request aid. And he was as guilty of neglecting her as the rest; he saw her every day and had never looked deep enough to see how lost she was beyond the grief for her husband. He’d only cared about what her presence had meant to his plans. Solas carefully crouched down, still holding the emotionally exhausted Dawn protectively. Cole flittered around, agitated without something to do and still pulled by her pain.

“Cole, would you be willing to collect water and a clean rag please?” Solas gave the spirit a tangible task and he vanished from sight.

It was awkward trying to maneuver himself and his burden around, but Solas refused to release Dawn right now, not in the state she’d fallen into. If her emotional eruption had called to Cole so powerfully, with the Offworlder’s strange connection to the Fade Solas knew that it had spilled over there too. Tonight Dawn would be hunted by Demons across the Fade and he would not leave her alone to face that too. By the time Cole had returned, Solas had managed to sit on the pallet Dawn used as her bed with her curled against him. The jaw bone he wore around his neck was now clutched into Dawn’s hand like a lifeline even as she stared out at nothing in an exhausted daze.

The basin of water was quietly delivered as Cole watched Dawn with sad eyes. Solas simply wetted the clean rag and wiped gently at Dawn’s temples and brow, slowly washing the signs of her weeping away. And then, with only the spirit of Compassion and an Offworlder as witnesses, The Dread Wolf softly sung a lullaby pulled from his long forgotten youth.

Chapter End Notes

This was a MUCH longer chapter but my brain decided I needed to add even more in this one single night so I'm splitting it up a bit. It's for the best.
Fallout

Chapter Summary

Ripples are inevitable after an emotional cannon ball.

Chapter Notes

So this section is slightly different because these mini scenes refused to let me ignore them but weren't long enough for their own chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Healer Kaaras,

Sorry to send unexpected word through Inquisition raven, but you are her Healer friend. Dawn had an emotional collapse today, I suspect like the ones you saw her endure at first. It was heartbreaking. The apostate Solas and the spirit Cole were able to help her, though many witnessed her collapse. She is safe, and cared for. I will be keeping an eye on her, and I will update you on how your patient friend is.

Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast

Additional: The Nightingale will read any return messages, expect no privacy

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"The whole castle is buzzing about Lady Dawn's collapse." Blackwall didn't waste words, his disgusted tone explaining his feelings on their gossip.

"I did what I could but too late for it to help." Alena grumped at him, headache twisting down into her neck. It reminded her of Dawn's drugged awareness about Alena always looking up at people. Barely speaking the language and high off her tits, and Dawn still remembered to care about Alena's crick in the neck. And Alena didn't even know the name of the woman's dead husband.

"Bunch of fishwives, passing along tidbits of knowledge as if it means they actually know anything." Blackwall scoffed. "Love, it's not your fault that they won't give Dawn a bit of privacy." His easy words of comfort still left Alena speechless. Her stunned silence gave her away even though she kept her face from showing it. "I suppose it's too early to be saying love, but it's the truth. I have no more secrets from you, but if it bothers you to hear I don't have to talk about it." His voice was even and earnest.

"When I woke up chained in a cell with a green glowing hand it was because I was an assassin on a job to kill someone. I'm not an idol Blackwall, so when you say that to me, be very careful how you mean it." Alena kept her voice steady. If he was in love with the idea of the Herald of Andraste then she wanted nothing to do with it. Especially after seeing the raw reality of Dawn's emotions. Alena might be a slightly reformed assassin but she wanted the kind of love that would devastate
someone if they lost her. Not just what she could do for them. If that made her a bad person; at least she was honest about it.

Thankfully Blackwall wasn't a hurried man, he listened to her and gave thought to her words. "I don't want to be a better man because I believe loving you will buy me a place next to the Maker," he carefully expressed. "I am a better man for following you as Inquisitor but I don't love you for that." He admitted to Alena's surprise.

"I love you for playing pranks with Sera, and being brave enough to ask the mages to be our allies. For witnessing Dawn's pain and being upset that you couldn't prevent it." He didn't flinch from her searching eye contact. "For giving me the choice of telling my secret and trusting me when I say I've changed. You are a good woman Alena Cadash and I love you for sharing that with me. The hope I have in the future is due to you also being a remarkable leader. But I would love you even if you're not the Herald, I just needed you to come into my life."

Alena's entire survival depended on her being able to read a situation and react to it. Blackwall had managed to lie to her in the past by being as honest as he could and yet she believed he wasn't lying now. Maybe it was a little stupid and romantic of her to give him that benefit of the doubt and yet... Alena might get eaten by a Lyrium Dragon any day now. What was life without a little risk? "Then in that case I accept you saying it. I... care about you Blackwall, I don't know if it's love." She admitted painfully.

"That's alright Alena, I've learned not to be a greedy man." He smiled, not rushing her.

"You can be a little greedy," she needed to change the atmosphere, it was too intense, "you do steal all the blankets." She pointed out benignly.

"Says the woman who actively shoved me out of bed this morning." He teased back. But Alena saw him hesitate to reach out for her and she knew for the next while she'd have to take the initiative again.

"Well I'm not shoving you out of bed now." She pointed out, subtle as a rockslide.

"No, you certainly are not." Blackwall gave his slow grin, lips barely visible under the artfully dishevelled beard.

He'd shown up at the Herald's Rest the night she'd given him the chance again, and after that he'd finally started to move his own belongings in to their room. There were two armour stands now; his huge and bulky compared her hers, and their boots rested by the fire. Nothing of the life she lived now was what she'd expected even a month ago, and she knew next month would be the same. At least she was in good company.

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Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast,

Thank you for keeping me apprised. Sorry I am not there to help my friend and patient in need. I'll have to trust her in the hands of your Inquisition won't I?

If Dawn is talking still then it is not as bad as the start, and it might be what she needed. She wasn't healing before, just functioning. It is hard to explain, but I can try if you think it might help.

Healer Kaaras

P.S. I have a twin, what is privacy?
It was late in the evening, the day dragging long into the echoes of the night. But Josephine worked at her desk even as her second 'I'm working too late' candle started to sputter. She was tired but still felt too unsettled to try and sleep, fiendishly seeking the comforts of settling conflicts on paper to combat her helplessness in regards to Dawn. She was supposed to have helped Dawn Wesson settle into life with the Inquisition but it was confounded by the language barrier, and the usually efficient Ambassador was prevented from smoothing the edges she normally took care of. Leliana and the Inquisitor had assured her that when Dawn was able to answer questions then Josephine could determine her needs, but everyone had made the same mistake; assuming that just because Dawn knew how to communicate would mean that she felt she could reach out. That hadn't been the case clearly.

The shadows in the room jumped slightly, the flickering light adding to her tense unease. It was a silly, childish fantasy but sometimes Josephine felt as if the crafty old keep were watching her; when there were few others awake to distract it. Maybe lighting that third candle wasn't such a bad idea after all. A slight knock at the door actually made Josephine gasp and then scold herself as the Commander stepped in.

"Is no one in this blasted keep finding rest tonight?" His voice was soft to suit the hour but as unsettled as she felt.

"Leliana must still be awake then." It was easy to guess her friend, always so feverishly dedicated.

"Cassandra was up there too, sending a Raven out." Cullen came closer into the room, a small lantern in hand adding comforting illumination to her office.

"And Leliana agreed to that, must be an important message." Josephine couldn't help theorize.

Now Cullen gave a short laugh. "That's what I was thinking, and for some reason the Nightingale let me see that the seal was for the Valo-Kas." He looked confused instead of nosy but Josephine still recognized that the Commander was fishing for information.

"Lady Dawn came in with the Valo-Kas," she frowned, thinking of a different issue entirely now that he'd brought it to her attention, albeit incidentally. "They are currently finishing the sweep on Therinfall Redoubt for the injured Chargers. I thought Dawn was staying with them, seeking familiar faces, but currently she can't be with them."

Cullen clearly didn't understand her dismay, the wide eyed alarm she gave him only made the Commander look concerned and come closer. "Josephine what's wrong?" He was so worried for her that he even used just her name without hesitation.

"I need to find out where she's been sleeping. I need to ensure that we have a suitable accommodation and..." she started to list the entire frantic process but he cut her off with a gentle hand to the shoulder.

"In the morning Josephine. She has survived thus far wherever she found room, so it can do for one more night. Right now you can most help her by being at your best in the morning. Seek out Solas, he'll know where she's been staying or have the best guess." He suggested tactically, calmly already having a plan in place.

"Thank you Cullen." Josephine discreetly tucked an errant hair behind her ear.

"You're welcome." His smile made the candlelight shift along his small lip scar. "Let me walk you
to your room again; at least I know the way this time." He gave a slight laugh at his own expense, his lantern and company far more appealing to travel the midnight hallways by than going alone by sputtering candlelight.

"I will gladly take you up on that offer." Josephine blew out the nub of her own candle, knowing the Commander would light the way.

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Kaaras,

I'm sure I we the Inquisition will live up to your standards.

Dawn was talking. So that is a good sign, even if what she was saying was heartbreaking.

With the inevitable 'adjustments' Skyhold has with our new noble guest and the expected numbers to come, I almost envy you your chance to be away you will be returning to a much changed Keep.

Unless further emergency occurs, this is to be the last Raven correspondence.

Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast

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Cedric didn't hear about Dawn's emotional rupture until well after it was too late to help her. He'd been amusing himself with teaching some of the Circle sheltered Mages how to identify items in the wild; and the composite survival skills their tin prison keepers never taught them. There was an absolute dearth of experience for most of them, so despite the absurd age range Cedric taught them as he would his own Clan's da'len.

That meant he didn't return until after all the excitement had already died down. And the most referred to story going around was that it was Solas, plan faced and utterly dismissive of everyone, that had been there to catch the child as she fell apart. Hopefully for the last time. Choosing to survive wasn't the same as choosing to live, but Cedric wondered at Dawn turning to the flat ear. And why would Solas have chosen to help her? He'd been pretty avidly solitary since the beginning.

These were questions Cedric would have to shelve for later perusal; instead he quickly headed to the slowly evolving Mage Tower. Familiar ease had him brewing the tea he needed, and jittery instinct had him setting defensive wards even inside a castle. Maybe because he was in the heart of Tarasyl'an Te'las and about to go play in the Fade. All he needed to do now was tie a chunk of meat around his neck for the Dread Wolf himself. Not that he believed that Fen'Harel was any more real than most legends ever were.

The last time he tried to stand guard for Dawn in the Fade, he'd been confused by how she felt to him. She was like a becon fire on a moonless night; impossible to miss. But he couldn't get close to her, endlessly circling around where he felt her to be and yet never approaching. The Gray Ones had been watching over her then, as puzzled by her strangeness as he had been. This time it was different, and not just because he knew what to expect. This time Cedric was presented with an actual landscape to interact with; someone had been teaching Dawn Fade tricks. He could see Dawn sitting on the snow blanketed ground in front of a veritable conflagration that needed no fuel to burn. Thanks to the sometimes ridiculous demonstrations of the Fade, this scene told Cedric how isolated she had truly been feeling as well as showing her capacity for passion. With such tempting lures like that it didn't surprise the First at all to feel the lingering taint of Desire and Wrath trying
to find Dawn. But it was the wolf tracks in the snow that left Cedric's instincts screaming at him to run.

No, Cedric refused to believe that if Fen'Harel were real that he would be here hunting this shemlen from another world. There would be nothing in it for him, and if the creature were real then all the legends warn that his primary motivations will always be his own grand schemes. Dawn was human, had no position or power to trade, and would be rather easy to eliminate if she were in his way; so these weren't the Wolf's tracks, but that didn't mean a wolf wasn't hunting Dawn. Lots of predators in the Fade.

A crunch of snow had Cedric spinning around to face an amused looking Solas. "You have come to protect Ena'vun. That is not necessary, she is defended." The bald flat ear tried to dismiss him.

"Two eyes can be bested by four, or are you so soured by something my People have done to you that you'd reject help in the Fade?" Cedric asked even as he puzzled over the sense of AGE coming from Solas that the Mage normally hid more successfully in the waking world. It wasn't in the lines around his mouth, but the heaviness to his spirit that gave it away.

"I encountered Dalish soon after I started to wander the world, and even if I approached peacefully, that was not how it ended." Solas deigned to briefly explain.

"Unfortunately that happens. It's amazing how isolation can do that to an otherwise healthy mind." The First couldn't help the feint, trying to get a read on the other Mage's reactions.

Here it seemed easier for Solas to express things he otherwise held in reserve, stalking closer to Cedric and careless of his personal space. It was the first time that Cedric realized that Solas was taller than he was, and the bald mage's eyes glinted blue for a heartbeat. Cedric blinked that thought away, seeing the Elf before him smirking. "I believe Ena'vun has tried to warn you not to play with me." Solas didn't keep the threat out of his voice and Cedric was no longer sure he should be pleased to have gotten a rise out of him.

"What are you?" Cedric asked, feeling the inexplicably vast web of power Solas had to draw from.

"At this moment, not a threat." Solas flashed his teeth but it definitely wasn't a smile. Cedric had found his wolf after all.

"So I should go on my merry way then." Cedric prepared to Step away, willing to risk getting lost in the Fade to escape whatever it was Solas truly was.

The bald mage laughed, an oddly fond sound considering how often Cedric was appallingly rude to his face. "Oh it's far too late for that and you are too clever to waste." The teeth revealed in the grin were predatory. "You're going to live; but for now you will forget." This time when his eyes flashed blue it was too late to run, even for the clever First.

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Cassandra,

I expect that you'll impress me. I am not worried, thanks to you. Dawn is in good hands, and it's nice to be reminded that someone is on your side.

You should be aware that how the Valo-Kas celebrate is going to be different than how Skyhold is likely to. We'll keep our barbarian habits away from the nobles, no worries. Though if you need reinforcements against the nobles Vashoth make scary body guards. Not that someone that beats on dummies as hard as you do needs guards. I should stop writing now.
If Kaaris tries to offer to read his poems at your formal celebrations, say no. Do not be polite. You'll thank me later.

Kaaras

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Kaaras

So you are capable of compliments. With the King of Ferelden at Skyhold, all festivities will be fussier, inane, aggravating, decorative. I am used to much more religious celebrations as part of my duties.

I beat on the dummies because Commander Cullen says it's demoralizing when I constantly beat his soldiers. If you have a better suggestion, maybe some Vashoth barbarian secret, then I won't need the dummies anymore.

Cassandra, The Dummy Slayer

Chapter End Notes

This chapter broke up the mega-chapter of angst and wordiness. I'm not sure if I'm grateful for that or not but I'll let you, the readers, decide.
The Dawn Sings

Chapter Summary

Even Dawn gets a new day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dawn woke feeling like she’d been on a bender, and at first didn’t even bother trying to move. Her head hurt, her eyes felt grainy, her mouth tasted like battery acid, and she felt like someone had steamrollered her body when she wasn’t looking. Beyond all of that it was becoming increasingly obvious to Dawn that she wasn’t alone in bed. One of her hands was caught in a jawbone necklace, and that told her that she was tangled up with none other than the Dread Wolf himself. That wasn’t at all concerning.

She had a minute or two to look at him in repose; and she took shameless advantage to actually study his face. Although Solas was an Elf, she could see how he was Elvhen whereas Cedric looked Dalish; it had to do with the sheer breadth of Solas’ details compared to theirs. He was bulkier in muscle, frame, and feature, and Dawn was sure it was due to his particular heritage. However asleep he looked so much younger than she expected, softer and serene like she never would have guessed. His full mouth was pretty, soft with sleep instead of a hard line of seriousness and his black eyelashes were startling against his pale cheekbone. It reminded Dawn that in his original concept artwork, Solas was far more primal than he was now; the bald head was an affectation. And under her hands his body was as delicate as ironwood, and about as forgiving.

So of course that that’s what Solas wakes up to. His eyes flew open and for a moment Dawn could see the Wildness in them before he blinked and was Contained once more, focused on her with a soft smile even as he released the encaging embrace.

“Thank you for guarding my sleep last night Solas.” Dawn’s voice was early morning quiet as he looked at her; with them lying down it was surprisingly intimate feeling.

“I should be thanking you Ena’vun,” Solas’ cultured voice was rough with sleep, “it has been a long time since I shared the honor of holding someone and being held in return. It is good to be reminded of such things again.” Dawn flushed at his words even though she knows he meant them platonically. “How are you feeling?” he queried.

“A lot embarrassed but also refreshed, though I am lost with what to do next.” She admitted honestly. “You sang to me.” She added with soft wonder in her voice.

This time Solas smiled brilliantly. “I did.” He admitted and Dawn could see a glimmer of the less humble Fen Harel in his smile.

“I will have to return the favor sometime, though the songs I know are from my world so some things will not translate well.” Dawn promised.

“I look forward to it. But if that is to happen first we must quit your bed.” Solas was all teasing smiles now and Dawn couldn’t help but be a little awkward about extricating herself from him to
do as he said. “Steel your spirit Ena’vun, but please do not close yourself down. You are allowed your emotions, you are allowed to connect and to trust people.” Solas cautioned, all earlier playfulness gone.

“Will you?” she couldn't help the question, not meaning to reveal her awareness of his deliberate aloofness.

He stepped closer, the patient predator stalking agitated prey. “Dawn your emotions are necessary, even when they’re messy.” She wondered if he were just going to ignore her comment entirely but he continued, "And yes, I have often found it easier to remain apart from the world around me. Not only am I Elvhen, I'm an apostate. There are not many that would willingly open their doors to me.” He reminded. "But that does not mean I am not lonely for that effort." his admission seemed to surprise Solas as much as it did Dawn.

“Being alone sucks," she agreed bluntly. "And I am tired of keeping myself that way. I don't think I can do this entirely alone and stay sane.” Dawn warned, not entirely joking.

Anxiety started working its way under her skin before he could respond as she realized that her outburst yesterday had more than just Solas as witness. “Oh god… I made an absolute fool of myself yesterday.” She breathed, burying her face in her hands with a groan.

“No Dawn, you showed that you’re a woman who feels much and deeply, and you have endured too much alone.” The denial was simple but honest, as was the embrace he offered her.

“You would know all about that.” Her words were muffled. “I have the uncomfortable suspicion that yesterday’s emotional theatrics will not be ignored.” Dawn worried into his shoulder.

“You are always welcome to come to me if you feel overwhelmed.” Solas immediately offered, ending their embrace so he could see in her face that she understood.

“Thank you, hahren.” Dawn walked with him back out into the lower Skyhold bailey but parted ways with him shortly after. The apostate was to attend to his routine while Dawn knew it was time to face the proverbial music for her public spectacle.

Even with her delay it was still early enough she could slip by people without anyone really noticing, but she really was tired of living like a ghost. Avoiding people because it hurt wasn’t healthy. So she climbed the main stairs, and passed close enough by the training area to see The Chargers at work. It didn’t surprise her when The Iron Bull spotted her walking by his people but she wasn’t expecting the frown he directed at her. It drove a spike of fear into her until she realized he wasn’t frowning at her; without Dawn realizing it, Solas had managed to slip his wolf jawbone necklace over her head and The Iron Bull was frowning at that. She took a steadying breath and climbed towards the Main Hall determined to resolve some of the issues her outburst had likely caused.

The first person she knew she’d encounter was Varric, and there was no way he hadn’t heard about what she’d done the day before. The author himself was distracted, but once he realized it was Dawn trying to walk past, his focus zeroed in on her so sharply it was easy to remember that he was an excellent sharpshooter even without Bianca. “Good morning Dusk,” he greeted pleasantly with a wink on the nickname, “How are you feeling today?”

Like a switch was flipped, Dawn was horrified to find herself suddenly fighting tears. She gave Varric a startled apology even as he passed her a handkerchief. “I’m sorry.” She offered, unsure how to explain to him that she wasn’t emotionally ready for him to suddenly be friendly.
Thankfully Varric was a Dwarf of the world and between his lifestyle and his experiences, he wasn’t running away from a simple weeping woman. “If a little common courtesy was enough to set off shocked tears, just how bad have we been treating you?” he patted her gently and sat her down next to his usual chair.

Dawn was relieved that the need to bawl passed as quickly as it came, though now she owed him an explanation. “It is just that...ah...I got plastered with Offworlder, which is about as unwelcoming as polite people could be.” Dawn admitted before she could stop herself, and Varric all but flinched at having that behavior called out. His intent might not have been to hurt her, but he hadn’t done anything to include her either; a fact Hawke had argued with him about.

“You’re right, I’m an asshole.” He admitted more to the woman in his head than the one right next to him, but he didn’t mean the apology any less for it. “I am sorry that I ignored how hard all of this is for you; how alone you must feel.” He took one of her hands in both of his. “I’d like to make the effort to change that though, and I hope you can forgive me. I think we could be friends.”

Dawn got misty eyed again at his words, but was able to nod and laugh at herself. “I would like that too.” She managed to not actually cry but her nose snuffed now. “Do you happen to know who else I might need to address this with? I would rather get the uncomfortable conversations over with immediately but I was not paying attention to my audience yesterday.”

“Don’t worry about it too much; Stabby was on your side immediately. She berated everyone for their meanness; imagine that, an assassin having the moral high ground. Though you might want to expect people to start approaching you far more frequently now.” He warned adroitly.

“That is going to be interesting. I will try the Inquisitor next, thank you Varric.” Dawn rose from her chair, stopped only by a touch to the back of her hand.

“Your….warning about Bianca,” he paused but Dawn simply nodded, not needing to hear a question to be able to answer it for him. She had been telling the truth about Bianca, even if he didn’t believe it yet. This time she offered the back of his hand a comforting pat and left him alone to figure out his next move.

Dawn slipped away, heading towards Alena Cadash’s rooms. It was still breakfast time, and everyone knew the Inquisitor did not endure guests until after. Still, Dawn knew the Dwarf would be in her room at this time so she made her way up there and knocked loudly.

The door opened shortly and Alena glared out at her for a moment before wrapping Dawn in a bone crushing hug. “I’m an idiot for not telling you that I need you and not just the information you have.” The Inquisitor mumbled into the hug.

“Ah…” Dawn had no idea how to reply to that, and no real chance to as Alena peeled herself off and pulled Dawn into the room. The last flight of stairs up revealed a hastily covered and flushed Blackwall in the Inquisitor’s bed, and Dawn couldn’t help the approving laughter at the sight. “It was the beard right?”

Alena grinned in response, looking smug, which just set Dawn’s slightly hysterical laughter off even more. That eventually resulted in Alena falling into giggles too. Instead of being offended, Blackwall simply pulled some trousers on, walked over, and picked his lover up to carry her back to her bed. “Good morning Lady Dawn.” He offered politely.

“Good morning Blackwall.” She smiled, glad that she’d convinced him to tell the truth earlier and hopefully changed his whole storyline.
“I’m being serious Dawn, I am sorry I never made it clear to you how fucking glad I am to have you and get to know you.” Alena sprawled in bed. “Blackwall, did I ever tell you what she said to me at the fall of Haven?” Alena didn’t pause for him to answer, despite her usual reticence. “She came up to me and said: You survive. Not because you’re the Herald, or the Mark. You survive because you are you. Never give up you and we’ll see you again.”

“That’s quite a vote of confidence.” Blackwall ventured.

“Oh yah, especially when I had so many unspoken doubts.” Alena agreed then looked at Dawn. “You didn’t have to tell me that Dawn but you cared enough to realize that it would help me to hear it. And I repay the favor by ignoring all the signs that you needed help.”

Dawn felt a surge of guilt. “Be realistic. I got my feelings hurt; you however, were about to march out there and get into a fist fight with the big bad guy. All on the off chance that it might buy some time to escape. You’re an ASSASSIN; you live and breathe subtlety and enigma, not dramatics and direct confrontations. But you were going to do it anyways because it needed to be done.”

Alena seemed impressed by Dawn’s anger instead of offended by it. Still, this wasn’t any more healthy than not expressing herself at all was. “Oh man, I thought I was done with puberty.” Dawn groaned at her ridiculous emotional vacillations this morning. At least this world didn’t make a stupid joke about emotional women and menstrual cycles.

“Don’t stress out about it. A lot of what you’ve been through is our own doing, and I am just glad that you were strong enough to survive our stupidity.” Alena waved it off.

“Using the royal we now?” Blackwall teased lightly.

“If I’m stuck sitting on an Ancestors blasted throne and having to make Judgments, then I reserve the right to it, yah.” Alena retorted. “Dawn, I am sorry that you’ve gone through all of this with us and we purposefully treated you as Outsider.” She sat up from her relaxed sprawl and scooted off the bed to stand. “You have only ever acted in my personal best interests, and I should have reached out to you sooner, whether or not I was struggling with Inquisition shit. If anyone can understand what this is like it’s you and I was stupid for thinking that everything was fine with you.” For a Dwarf that was normally silent, this was a marathon of speaking. “Consider this formal from here on out; you are one of my people and if anyone tries to hurt you I may know how to kill them.”

Dawn couldn’t see through the tears again though she was laughing, and this time it was Blackwall that hugged her tightly, protectively. He had never been cruel to her, nor even said anything unkind. After he heard of her foreknowledge he’d avoided her as much as possible, but she didn’t shy away from his comfort. “Oh Blackwall, I’m going to make your beard all soggy.” Dawn fretted and his laugh rumbled right through her.

“Worse things have been in that beard girl.” He promised.

“Way too much information.” Dawn managed to tease as her crying abated. Alena laughed alongside Blackwall. “Thank you, both of you. This is my home now.” She gave an insecure shrug. “It will be interesting to see who I am once I find my level again.”

“Don’t worry Dawn; I’m glad to get to know you during the process, not just after it.” Alena promised.

“I will let you two finish the canoodling now.” Dawn smiled and waved herself out. Her presence in this world had altered a lot of things, but she could only be glad to bear witness to their love.
With a greatly improved outlook, Dawn descended the stairs and actually ran into Warden King Alistair. Because the universe had decided that if she was going to emotionally fillet herself, there was no holding back. Somehow Dawn managed to bash into him with full momentum. The King of Ferelden gave her a polite frown when she used just his name though.

“Do I…know you?” Alistair sounded pleasant but cautious.

Anxiety screamed in Dawn’s chest, stealing all coherent thought from her head. She was going to ruin this somehow; say the wrong thing, let something slip she shouldn’t, get everyone killed and ruin the future. She was in no way, shape, or form ready for this conversation. “I…. ah….no… uh…I am Dawn.” She stammered like a groupie meeting a rockstar.

“Oh the Offworlder. I was told you might have a few things to say to me, and that even if I don’t believe you, it’d be smart to listen to you.” It wasn’t exactly a ringing endorsement but it wasn’t a flat out ‘you’re crazy’ so Dawn didn’t argue with him. “Since we’re both headed that way, why don’t you join me for breakfast?” he bade and Dawn found herself falling in beside him for the rest of the walk.

King Alistair insisted that they eat before conducting business, so Dawn found herself enjoying his company. In the games he came across mostly as haphazard and a bit daft; in reality Dawn realized that he made himself as unthreatening as possible and had no problem abasing himself to avoid conflict. Here was a man who would not let his ego dictate his morals. He was also immensely charming, able to find a point of commonality with anyone it seemed, and Dawn could see how Siobhan Amell had fallen in love with him despite their rocky beginnings.

Finally satiated on food, Alistair gave her a piercing look. “Alright stormy Dawn, tell me your grave news.” He tried to be jovial.

Dawn was exhausted already by this point, trying to hold her emotions in check but actually allowing herself to feel them all the same. If she had managed to have this conversation on any other day maybe she would have gone about it more diplomatically. Instead she blurted out, “Your mother wasn’t a servant, and she is very much still alive. More than that, I can take you to her if you want. I truly think you should because she has answers to questions you are asking. Like how to break free after the Joining.”

Alistair just stared at her, not saying anything at all. “I know you do not believe me, and you have no reason to.” Dawn babbled on. “But that is not all I have to tell you, so the only way I can get you to believe me is this; you gave Siobhan a rose you found, the only beauty in a world ravaged by the Blight, when you were just beginning your relationship together.” He looked almost offended that she knew that kind of intimate detail, but he didn’t interrupt. “I know what it means that you and Siobhan survived; I KNOW.” She paused and this time she could see the threat he posed lurking underneath the hapless humour in his eyes. He was no harmless puppy, despite how daffy he liked to pretend to be. “I will never betray those secrets that I know need to be kept. But you need to know that after the Inquisitor attends to the Winter Palace, Morrigan and her son Kieran will be coming back here with her.” She fought to put no special emphasis on the son part.

Warden and King, Alistair sat back to stare at her in flat contemplation for a moment. He was silent like he never could be in the game, and she could see that he was far more intelligent than anyone ever anticipated. And of course the guilt overwhelmed her for a moment, the fact that she knew he might die at Adamant and couldn’t warn him. She didn’t know what it would change because he wasn’t supposed to be here at all in this incarnation. The food she’d managed to eat sat like a lead weight in her gut and she tried not to look like she was about to throw up on the King of Ferelden. He’d left his guards behind and took care of his own security while here in Skyhold, but Dawn was
fairly certain no one would look too kindly if she vomited on royalty.

“I have lived through so many improbable things, defied the term impossible again and again.” He sounded serious but not angry. “More important I can see the cost those things had on me and Siobhan, and I see that burden in you now. So I will do the smart thing, for once, and believe you.” He sat forwards, “What is my mother’s name?”

“Grand Enchanter Fiona.” Dawn breathed, stunned that he didn’t send her away, disbelieving like so many others had at first. “She is in the library here if you want to meet her.”

King Alistair stood up and walked with Dawn to meet his mother. Fiona’s anger at Dawn’s interference was understandable, but it was overwhelmed by Dawn’s own righteous fury. In every single outcome of all the different choices she could make, Dawn had never once seen Fiona actually connect with her son. But Dawn was sure, down to her very bones that they needed to meet. As soon as the emotions calmed down, Dawn learned why her instincts were spot on this time; Siobhan was a somniari and in nightly communication with Alistair. With her actively searching for a cure for the Calling, having Fiona’s input could only help. But now that her part in it was done, Dawn left them to discuss and wandered into the shelves, pulling random books down to look over while she recovered from her emotional morning.

“That’s an interesting selection.” Dorian’s voice curled from his domain.

“I’m still trying to master reading in Trade.” The emotion induced headache she’d been ignoring pulsed stronger even as she offered a small smile.

“You’ve got an excellent conversational level of Trade. Once you’ve got a grasp on its written systems, I would be more than willing to tutor you if you wanted to try learning Tevene.” His offer was genuine and generous.

“Ha, yah, it’ll be easy, so why not?” Dawn’s fake laugh betrayed her frayed nerves; she was officially done with socializing for today.

Thankfully Dorian took a good long look at her before answering; he seemed to pick up on her limited reserves. Before he could offer what would likely be great advice couched in suggestions of drinking wine and admiring his beauty, an argument between the stuffy librarian and another Mage broke out, drawing their attention. Despite her vow to stop avoiding people, Dawn used the chance to slip away, suddenly scraping the barrel emotionally.

Solas wasn't in his rotunda as she slipped through to the Main Hall. There were so many more people out and about now. The meals had all been concluded, lunch lost somewhere between Alistair’s familial revelations, book hunting, and Dorian’s kind eloquence. Dawn spotted Varric, but before she could go speak with him something caught her eye. A flash of light that Dawn followed back to the source, seeing a hand mirror in some noble’s grasp. Dawn nearly sprinted away and outside, trying to outrun the static in her head but came to a shambling halt a dozen steps onto the upper bailey because of how crowded Skyhold was this afternoon.

A tremor shuddered up her spine and down to her fingertips, never settling. She couldn’t do this. Her breath was sharp; each inhale slightly painful feeling but so necessary. She felt queasy, her equilibrium shot as her blood pressure tanked. Strong hands caught around her shoulders, their asymmetry telling her who it was.

“Just breathe Dawn. Walk with me and breathe.” The Iron Bull commanded, low enough only she could hear.
Seeming driven more by instinct than intent, Dawn managed to hook her hand onto the back of his belt and Bull shifted his grip on her, supporting her as much as he could. Gossip had been rampant all morning about the Offworlder’s collapse yesterday, and the Ben-Hassrath had coaxed the whole story plus the morning’s encounter out of the Author over lunch. He just hadn’t expected to see the Offworlder bolt out of the Main Hall like someone had been chasing her, only to come to a dead stop at the bottom. It’d been the wide eyed panic that had clued him in, and as the color drained from her face he’d reached her side. She had maybe thirty seconds before she wouldn’t be functioning at all anymore, if Bull had gauged it right, so he hustled her through the crowds and past Cassandra bashing a dummy to bits. If he didn’t literally have his hands full of woman already, he’d have stopped to offer the Seeker a different way to relive that stress. Instead he guided Dawn into the semi-secluded corner where the Herald’s Rest met the battlements behind it and the Healer's Wing offered a sort of concealment.

Just in time for Dawn to lose whatever food she had, letting go of Bull to angle away and throw up. He supported her easily, shifting his grip to around her waist even as she shook. She staggered away from his touch blindly, sliding into the darker corner, her back against the wall instinctively searching for safety. Her hands were covering her face now as she mumbled something in her native tongue, head thumping back against the wall in time to it. He didn’t try to disrupt her just yet, not knowing how well she’d react to more stimuli right now.

But one vicious snap of her head back against the stone had Bull cupping the back of her head with his palm. “No Little Bas, you do not get to damage the tool under the guise of fixing it.” He warned softly.

She shook in silence but stopped bashing her head at least. “I cannot stop crying.” She admitted into her hands, but at least in one of the languages Bull could recognize. “I am fucking emoting all over the place like a goddamned pimple faced, squirty dick teenager. I want to hit something as hard as I can. I feel guilt for things that happened before I even got here and I have absolutely no business feeling guilt over. I am falling apart and things are only going to get worse and I need to hold it together.” She was starting to hyperventilate as she spoke, more and more panic sliding into her tone as she scattered between language without seeming to realize it.

So The Iron Bull grounded her; he crowded in close to her, using his sheer mass to block out light and noise as much as possible and pushed one of his hands against her abdomen. Her hands fell away from her face as she tried to push his hand away from her; instead he caught one and placed it on his chest. “Breathe in time to me.” He instructed.

She didn’t pull away when he released her wrist, and her chest rose close after his own, so Bull considered it a win. And he breathed a long, slow inhale, paused, and then a controlled exhale. Dawn mimicked him, struggling at first but slowly managing to match the length of his breaths and her eyes closing to concentrate. The fine tremors that had her whole body shaking faded first, even before she managed to loosen her muscles enough to really breathe deep. Her hand still felt ice cold against his chest, but there was color returning to her face at least. Dawn had her eyes closed, really focusing on her bodily processes as he breathed with her and Bull could feel her heartbeat slowly start to settle out of terrified racing.

“Still feel the need to hit something?” he asked kindly and her eyes popped open.

“I am feeling better, thank you The Iron Bull.” Her voice was as haggard sounding as her face looked. This close to the Offworlder, he couldn’t help but see the stains of strain in every line of her face and how she held her body.
“That didn’t answer the question.” He chided.

Dawn stopped herself before she automatically apologized for that mistake, “I want to hit something probably most of the time.” She admitted honestly. “Right this moment I need…” she trailed off as nothing came out at the end of the sentence.

“You’re so tangled up and burned out that you don’t know which way is forward; let alone what you actually need.” He spoke with the painful weight of experience.

Dawn stared at him stricken at his empathy before she gave a wet sounding laugh that had no humour. “Seheron.” She choked out, and with that one word shut down his thought process for a heartbeat. The pain in her voice wasn’t too bad, but the hopeless resignation in her eyes was too familiar and resonated too closely.

“Yeah.” The Iron Bull stepped back, the outside world thrusting itself into the space he’d created as more light, noise, and cooler air flooded in. One of her hairs had come loose and tangled in his cuff, ticklish against his forearm.

“I am sorry.” She apologized after all and slipped by him, ascending the stairs quickly.

He wondered where she’d head to next; her rooms definitely weren’t up there. But Bull didn’t let his curiosity drive him to find the answer; instead the memory of hot sun whispered across his skin as he tugged the hair loose from his cuff, winding it around his finger absently. It was his business to keep an eye on things; especially a variable like the Offworlder, but as the strand of hair he was toying with snapped his body ejected into motion away from where she retreated to, the taste of sand and blood lingering in his mouth.

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Dawn scrambled away, struggling to get control of herself while there were others around to bear witness. Bad enough that she’d fallen apart like she had in front of The Iron Bull, worst that she’d hurt him. He had not needed a reminder of the worst times of his life but Dawn had still blurted out Seheron like an idiot. Her feet led her forwards along the battlements, head tucked down to try and hide her tear streaked face from the soldiers patrolling until she got herself under control.

It wasn’t until Cole appeared without warning and quietly walked beside her that she realized that ignoring the emotions didn’t mean that they weren’t still there. "You are so loud inside when you are alone. It hurts less when you are around others, and healing happens when you forget to stay back." he offered enigmatically.

"I'm hurting people I don't mean to." Dawn confessed in English.

"And they have hurt you." Cole nodded as if it were a fair trade instead of tragic.

"They don't mean to." Dawn argued, not believing that Compassion couldn't understand.

"Neither do you." he pointed out bluntly, all too coherent for a Spirit. It made Dawn take a moment.

If the Valo-Kas were here instead of off on a job for the Inquisiton, she would have turned to Kaaras. She might have been intending to stay apart while changing the course of this world, but now that Dawn was being honest to herself, she realized that she had already made connections. Now she just had to actually try to be a friend instead of just a burden.

"Solas would say yes if you asked him to try." Cole spoke up suddenly, making Dawn frown. "You
Dawn wasn't sure if Cole was trying to tell her that she could save the Wolf from himself, or if she could just help him as much as he was helping her. But either way it was almost intimidating to hear. "One step at a time." Dawn finally replied. And then her stomach gave a weird gurgle, reminding her that it had been a long day.

They had walked around the battlements in silence as Dawn tried to figure out her next step, but they had ended up back near the main hall entrance. It would be easiest to go in and get the standard meal offered inside. Instead Dawn kept her arm linked with Cole's and walked into Solas' rotunda to ask him if he wanted to have supper with his friends at the Rest.

After the day she had had it felt ridiculously awkward to walk into the Herald’s Rest with Solas and claim a seat, and yet despite her misgivings, Dawn did exactly that. She picked a spot that was a little more shielded, as removed from prying eyes as possible. Solas, for all his dressings as a homeless wanderer, seemed more at ease surrounded by the people than she did.

“Get comfortable Ena’vun, I will return shortly.” Solas promised and slipped away like a wish upon a star.

Dawn managed not to verbally object but she felt uncomfortably abandoned, eyes dropping to the table top to pick out the stains worked into the grain. Several rings of ale or beer added character while the spilled wine added interest. Before Dawn could work herself into an entirely tensed knot, Solas returned with a bottle of amber liquid and a pair of decent looking glasses.

“This is a bottle of Nevarran honey mead, as close to a civilized drink as I can procure on short notice.” Solas explained as he poured a generous glass for the both of them.

“Thank you Solas.” Dawn politely proffered and then took a sip. She was expecting a highly sweet, syrupy drink, like Sortilège from home. The honey mead was not that kind; it was the raw harsh edge of fresh honey, the sharp burn of alcohol, and a strange lingering after taste that was almost coppery. Dawn stared at her glass in surprise and a mild twinge of concern for a moment. “I have to say, that requires another two or three pulls before I can decide if I like it or not.” She confessed and looked up to see Solas looking amused.

“The Elvhen living in Arlathan had true honey liquor that tasted as if sunlight had become fluid.” Solas explained obliquely, staring down at the bottle almost wistfully. Dawn understood the homesickness at the core of his aloofness and felt a sharp stab in her heart as it resonated with her own.

“To those worth remembering.” Dawn tilted her glass to clink rims with his and they were both far too solemn for the attempt at relaxing and enjoying an evening. Worse yet neither one seemed to know on how to drag the moroseness out of the conversation.

“You promised to sing.” Cole popped into existence right next to Dawn and she jolted in her chair, all but falling onto the floor.

“What the fuck? Oh I need to get used to that.” Dawn panted in English, trying to calm her adrenal response back down. “I did promise Cole, you’re right.” She finally agreed once she felt more settled again.

“You do not have to Dawn…” Solas started but Dawn smiled and shook her head.
“It’s alright. I… loved to sing. Music was so much a part of my life growing up, and I… I think it would be good for me to embrace the parts that hurt; that remind me of home the most. Besides, it is good language practice.”

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Dawn looked down at the table top again, her eyes having that distant look of someone retreating into a memory.

Solas watched Dawn carefully, the lines of pain and fatigue still etched into the details of her face and yet something beautiful radiated from within her as her eyes drooped closed and a smile started on her face. Her voice started out low, husky but melodic and that pulled his attention in, even as she slowly increased her volume. And then her fingers started to sketch strange abstract gestures into the air.

When all the world is a hopeless shamble,
And the raindrops tumble all around…
Heaven opened a magic land.
When all the clouds darken up the skyway
There’s a rainbow highway to be found
Leading from your window pane
To a place behind the sun
Just a step beyond the rain

By this point her voice was loud enough for Solas and Cole to hear the words clearly, and the tables nearby were silent as her voice grew in strength. No one in the room had ever anticipated being around to hear the Offworlder sing but now that it was happening she had a rapt audience. The way Dawn’s voice rasped along the edge of her vocal range to add weight to it sent chills along Solas’ skin.

Somewhere over the rainbow
Way up high
There’s a land that I’ve heard of
Once in a lullaby

Dawn kept her voice rough layering in as much emotional content as she could, her body slowly swaying with a beat only she could hear. As her voice gained in strength and volume, all conversation on the main floor fell silent to watch. And Dawn, with her eyes closed, was oblivious.

Somewhere over the rainbow,
Skies are blue
And the dreams that you dare to dream,
Really do come true.

Dawn’s voice started to break around the edges as she sang but she held it together,

Someday I’ll wish upon a star
And wake up where the clouds are far behind me.
Where troubles melt like lemon drops,
Way above the chimney tops,
That’s where you’ll find me.

Despite the heartbreak saturating the words and the strength she put into it, the next refrain she’s already pulled her voice back under control,
Somewhere over the rainbow,
Blue birds fly.
Birds fly over the rainbow
Why then, oh why can’t I?

Dawn’ sang as if alone in the world even as her hands danced out a strange accompaniment to her words.

If happy little bluebirds fly
Beyond the rainbow,
Why, oh why can’t I?

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Her hands fell still as her final notes were absorbed by the poor acoustics of the Herald’s Rest. Dawn drew a slow, controlled inhale in to help settle her emotions back down before she opened her eyes to see not only Solas and Cole staring at her in silent awe, but the entire Herald’s Rest had been captured by her song. It was honestly a little overwhelming and Dawn dropped her eyes back down to stare at her table top.

"That was beautiful Ena'vun," Solas complimented easily.

"Your hands danced." Cole sounded as enthusiastic that Dawn couldn't help look at him.

"That's sign language from my world." she jumped on the conversation topic to help ignore the people still watching. "You could say I was singing in two languages." the realization made her smile even though her chest hurt. She would heal, was healing, and it was time she let go of trying to stay unattached to this world and these people. But that didn't mean shutting out her old life as if it didn't exist.

"Why did you pick that song?" Solas inquired after a pause.

"It's about rainbows." Compassion explained for her and Dawn smiled. That was a severe over simplification but she didn't want to explain.

"Then Ena'vun, to songs about rainbows." Solas saluted as if that were a perfectly reasonable explanation. The Nevarran honey mead was still as complex tasting; sharp and raw and yet oddly satisfying. It would likely be very easy to drink too much of it and Dawn did not want to risk a hangover. Still, as they ate the food a serving girl brought them the bottle halved in volume.

"I would like to show you a room I found." Dawn hesitated but decided to be brave after the meal ended. Solas quirked an eyebrow at her, elegant curiosity. Her days had mostly been language training thus far, but her evenings had been hers alone, so Dawn had wandered. She liked exploring the extensive labyrinth that was Skyhold, and had found an unexpected but treasured piece of home.

The room must have been intended for cold storage or something; the floor of the lower level was one giant slab of stone. Leading down into that level were cut steps, and the upper level had recessed shelves cut into the wall. It should have been unbreachable.

However, sometime in the past the waterfall course changed and part of it had rerouted through this room. Part of the ceiling and outer wall had fallen away, exposing the room to the elements. But as the waterfall filled the lower level, it continuously pooled and drained out. It was slightly above freezing, but it was a swimming pool. And even if it looked nothing like any pool she had
ever known, swimming in it let Dawn feel for a moment like she was home. And then she inevitably froze her ass off.

When Solas followed Dawn to her grotto, at first he said nothing and she fretted that he didn't understand. "You may see a bad room, no use," she decided to explain, deciding to trust Compassion. "I see a reflection from home, discovered in a broken room. It is not my world," she wasn't trying to make Thedas Earth, "but it is still good. Still worth saving." she concluded firmly. "Am I crazy Solas, to try and find comfort from my past in my current life now?" he had helped her so much, even if she'd never intended to expose such vulnerabilities to the Wolf before she felt like if she could help him too it was worth the risk.

"Ena'vun, you are not crazy to seek out the familiar in a strange world." he offered her after a truly thoughtful moment. "Even if it hurts, you are allowed to find comfort in good or familiar things." he tried to prompt.

"Am I?" her question didn't seem rhetorical but he had no clue how she wanted it answered. "If I am, you are too." she insisted, unsubtle and yet her long game wasn't something he could figure out yet. Solas turned suspicious eyes to her, jumping to conclusions based on her words but she spoke before he could. "You reject the Dalish as not your People. You barely acknowledge Alienage Elves. And you don't allow any one human, Dwarven, or Qunari to ever get close to you." she pointed out at his continuing frown.

"I would count you as one of my People." Solas didn't even realize he'd spoken until he saw her eyes go wide and her face look overwhelmed with emotion. His heart ached, not just for his own sense of isolation, but hers too. If the Spirit of Compassion was correct in warning Solas that Dawn would break if she didn't connect to this world, Solas would have to step into that role. She had come to him afterall, and Solas could not help but see his own plight in her struggles.

Once again Dawn hugged him, but this time it was as much for his comfort as hers. "We'll find our places in the world again ma falon, you can trust in that." she sounded so sure, so wholly confident that for a moment he let himself believe it.

Chapter End Notes

Translation
Elvhen
Ma Falon- my friend
**Tabled Missions**

**Chapter Summary**

The Inquisition gains extended Influence, connections are made, and Dawn plots.

**Chapter Notes**

Not gonna lie, I am eager to get to the next chapter after this. I am trying to get us through a few more important steps that help set up the rest of the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaaras,

She sings?! I wasn't even in the Herald’s Rest and I could hear her voice. Dawn is no Bard, but she was lovely. It was a song from her home, and even if it was sad it was happy? I wonder what it would have sounded like if she'd sung it in her native language?

Not even a day later and your friend has astonished me again. You should come home. When you return you may find more than just the decorations changed.

Cassandra

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Cedric woke in the Mage’s Tower with every single one of his defensive wards burned out. And for the life of him he couldn't remember why he'd gone to sleep in the mage’s tower in the first place. The last thing he consciously remembered was returning to Tarasyl’an Te’las and then suspicious nothing. His tongue tasted stale; whatever he'd consumed before sleep had left a bitter taste. If he had to guess, Cedric would assume he had been dream walking but he couldn't imagine why. The burnt out wards told him that he'd been concerned about attack, but the blank memory left him cold because he knew that meant that even paranoid and prepared Cedric had faced something MUCH more powerful. “Well that's annoying.” The First huffed as he stood up. His hand slipped to one of his pouches, fishing out a thumb tip sized tacky ball kept safe in a leaf. Demonsbane would make him sick later, but if he were actively possessed now his unwanted guest would reveal itself. These shemlen always assumed that when Cedric said he had human contact before that he meant Fereleden. But the astonishingly sweet and sour sticky mess in his mouth was a trick learned from the Avvar, as they believed in working with the demons as opposed to fearing them.

Despite ten minutes of aggravated chewing and swallowing, not a single sign of possession revealed itself. So whatever had swatted at him hadn't hurt him or tainted his mind. It had just woken him up with enough Power that he couldn't even remember it. He stopped pacing the small room he'd slept in, a plausible explanation occurring to him. Maybe a benevolent spirit had interfered with him; unlikely because even an optimist like Cedric knew that no one was ever that lucky. Besides, most spirits, benevolent or not had been driven away by the recently closed Breach.
If Cedric were religious he'd be thanking his Elvhen gods but since he was pragmatic, he was angry. Anger was always a good cover for fear.

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Cassandra,

Envy demons travel in packs. Messy. You'd probably love it, perfect for barbarian Vashoth or practice on.

I would never have guessed that Dawn would sing. Though at this point you've probably heard her speak more than I have. But it's a good sign I hope.

Brace for snow. If what we're getting here is any indication-----

Kasaanda pulled the letter out of Kaaras' hands, smearing the ink as his nib tip caught and dragged. "You're seriously talking about the weather?" His twin's voice was laden with scorn. "I've never seen you consistently write anyone," she actually looked serious for once, "and I'm including when we were young and dumb, and you listened to Kaaris about wooing women with poetry." A smirk started on her face, and Kaaras felt the pit of his stomach drop. "You really like this one don't you?" Her tone positively gleeful at this chance to pester and annoy him.

"I don't know if you would be throwing rotten eggs my way," he warned with a deceptively pleasant grin, "Tadwinks." His twin actively hated having pet names used on her, which is why he threw so many her way. For her to tolerate this Sera calling her a pet name meant she liked her.

The blonde Elf archer's nickname for her shut Kasaanda right up, the glee immediately replaced with a grumble and a scowl. "We both know I'm more likely to actually do anything about it." She tried to act superior, while holding his letter to the Seeker.

Kaaras didn't even need to say anything, he just held his hand out for the letter. Kassanda gave him an ugly face, about to hand it over when he couldn't resist saying, "I'd worn you about getting stuck like that but you're already ugly, this is an improvement." Kasaanda slapped him in the face with his letter, a cold smear of ink onto his cheek warned that it hadn't actually dried yet.

"When we get back to Skyhold, we'll see who has the better method of seduction." Kasaanda of course saw no issue with turning romance into a competition.

"I'm not trying to seduce Seeker Cassandra, she initially wrote to me remember?" This is what he'd meant when he told Cassandra about not knowing what privacy was. It didn't matter that the letters had been addressed to him, Kaaras knew his twin had read them. After accidentally perusing a very... graphic letter from one of Kasaanda's 'friends' Kaaras stopped trying to read hers. He just wasn't prepared to deal with that.

"Yeah, but you're still writing back." Kasaanda gave him a weird smile. "You're allowed to like her Kaaras, but for the love of violence have the horns to admit it." She scoffed at him, normal attitude returned.

"I'm not the one that got pulled into a hayloft and didn't get laid." He knew he had to go on the offensive or else Kasaanda could be relentless.

When she sputtered in indignation, he knew he'd successfully redirected her. For a Vashoth that channeled the dead and cool Earth, Kasaanda was all hot flash passions. "Well at least I've had the horns to kiss Sera!" She confessed without thinking.
Kaaras felt a huge grin split his face as Kasaanda's yellow eyes went wide in dismay as she realized her admission. The letter to Cassandra could wait, he had to pester his sister first.

Cassandra,

sorry for the messy top half of the letter; sister.

Sutherland and his crew arrived a few days early. If they handle the change over well, I may make it back to Skyhold before this letter does. When the Valo-Kas return, I would recommend no further missions until Shokrakar delivers. She is within the last eight weeks and could conceivably deliver at anytime.

Is there anything you want me to bring back to Skyhold as we return?

See you soon

Kaaras

----

Alena was not looking forward to this meeting, but more out of annoyance than any real dislike. There was very little love lost between herself and Madam de Fer; though both women respected each other immensely. But The Iron Lady had used the Cadash assassin in the past to eliminate a rival and they both knew it; made casual conversion difficult to say the least. What does an ex-assassin say to a past client now that she was their boss?

"Madam de Fer, I have a question for you." She knew how both Leliana and Josie had coached her to approach the situation but Alena would never win in the Game against the Court Enchanter and she knew it.

"I'm all ears my dear." She smiled beautifully, lips quirking in seductive allure but her eyes remained as dead as a dolls.

"I don't trust the civil war I know is coming." She barely ever discussed the failed future she and Dorian had witnessed, though they both got together regularly to drink in commiseration. "I've been told we can expect peace talks at the Ball." She hesitated as Vivienne's eyes narrowed.

"I'm not doubting the word of our Offworlder," she carefully interjected, tone of voice not even belying her words, "but do we have any substantial confirmation of that? She has admitted to being wrong about information before." Vivienne carefully didn't mention King Alastair.

Alena kept her eyebrow from twitching by stubborn will alone, Varric having told her about Dawn's emotions about nicknames before her visit to Alena. But right now an argument would be counter to her needs. "You spent the most time at Court," time to spread a little butter, "and you're by far the best suited; Madam de Fer, would you be willing to accept the title of Emissary for the Inquisition at Court?" Alena hated all he blather but she kept that out of her voice.

The Court Enchanter gave Alena a calculated, assessing look. She'd understand the need, and appreciate the respectability of the title. There was no reason for her to say no, but the Loyalist was always going to keep her own counsel. Even if Alena would never share a beer or a round of Wicked Grace with Vivienne, she could only ever respect the mind behind the machinations. "And what do you, the Inquisitor, really want to ask me?"

"Can I please equip you with the best resources and unleash you at the Court?" Alena was blunt and amused.
"Absolutely darling." Vivienne's smile actually reached her eyes this time. Maybe they would never share beers but Alena would gladly hold this woman's cloak while she rendered their rivals obsolete on the political field. Listening to Vivienne and Josephine discuss politics with Leliana was far more terrifying than even the worst memories of the Redcliffe future.

"Is there anyone you want to take with you as support?" Alena could think of some useful retainers.

"No one could keep up Darling." Vivienne declined and she likely wasn't wrong.

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Cassandra put down the letter from the Valo-Kas Healer, almost disappointed that the mercenary team hadn't actually made it back first. Which was ridiculous. Most likely she was just frustrated with the correspondence; Cassandra had never been all that enamoured with constant writing. Her reports were concise and to the point, no need for worrying over inflection and interpretation. But she'd been the one to initiate contact and now Cassandra found herself enjoying the sensation of receiving mail from someone. Especially since it wasn't just reports either. She merely detested the agonizing sensation of not knowing what to write back. Cassandra knew she was many things; an accomplished literary writer she was not.

A set of footsteps up the stairs nearby pulled her attention off a letter she didn't actually need to respond to, and none other than Victoria Hawke herself stepped into view. "Ah Seeker, you weren't bashing dummies or terrorizing Dawrves, I almost sent out a search party." The Champion of Kirkwall invited herself to sit at the table Cassandra was using. The sounds of the nearby blacksmith had always been oddly soothing to Cassandra, something she wondered if Hawke knew.

"Champion," Cassandra nodded her head, ignoring her actual excitement to be talking to a living legend, "are you here to tell me more of your companions are going to show up?" She referenced the Elf Merrill inviting herself to Skyhold recently.

"Both Fenris and Isabella hate the cold, so unlikely but not impossible. And Sebastian is busy being a Chantry Prince, so unless I say pretty please he'll stay put." Hawke shrugged with a wry smile. Neither woman mentioned the abomination Hawke counted amongst her friends.

"And Varric," Cassandra failed to keep the annoyance out of her voice, "is already here."

Hawke laughed, at both the Seeker and her friend. "You have no one to blame for that but yourself; you stabbed him in the book!"

And despite herself Cassandra almost laughed at the Rogue's easy humour. Hawke's charm was relentless and legendary and Cassandra could not help the what-ifs that plagued her. What if she'd told Varric why she'd needed Hawke, what she hoped to achieve? But no, she couldn't change the past; the Inquisitor's experience thanks to Alexius proved that bad idea. "Why did you seek me out, Champion?" Cassandra tried to redirect.

"I sought the Seeker." Hawke snorted instead. Of course that's what she took away from it. "Yes, no, sorry." The Champion refocused herself. "I came to you because I noticed that Cullen has the shakes." She held up her hand, forestalling Cassandra's objection. "I remember Curly from Kirkwall, and the Commander I see here is worlds away from the asshole that once told me that mages aren't people like him and me." Victoria Hawke turned deadly serious. "Now you and I both know only some of his issue was the red lyrium his leader had on her all times. As Meredith's second-in-command he was more exposed than most..." her concern made sense since Meredith herself had turned into a lyrium statue in the end, and now Corypheus...
"The Commander's business is his own, but your concern is noted. He... is not ill due to red lyrium exposure, I can guarantee you that." Cassandra hesitated to say, trying to respect both the Commander and the Champion.

Hawke nodded as if Cassandra had actually given her answers. "I'm glad someone's looking out for Curly, though I think he needs a Spouse more." Now Hawke laughed a little bitterly. "I used to tease Carver and Bethany about the same thing; sometimes we're better at taking care of others than we are ourselves."

"If you thought so little of our Commander, why did you come to enquire about his health?" Cassandra couldn't resist asking.

Hawke refocused onto her again, "I'm the Champion of Kirkwall and Second Chances, didn't you know that?" She teased and stood. "Oh, and by the way there was a tall, horned fellow looking for you." And she walked away. Cassandra's hand fisted around the letter, confused and annoyed, and wondering what her next step should be.

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Cedric still had no idea what had taken his memories or woke him out of the Fade, but he'd not had a single recurrence since so he had to focus on whether or not anything else was amiss. Step one would have to be acting as if nothing had happened at all, whatever else he was surrounded by a mostly human army run by an ex-Templar and owned by a Durgen'len. Even his own people would have a thing or two to say about his experience, so he had no one to bounce the issue off of.

He'd even gone back Fade Walking to see if the issue reoccurred. That time he'd encountered absolutely nothing more sinister than Command parading about as if it were once again leading armies. But returning to the waking world in the usual manner revealed all his wards intact and no gaps in his memory. Maybe there was one person he could discuss it with that might offer a unique perspective, and could likely use a little time focusing on a problem that wasn't her own. Cedric walked towards the where he'd last seen Dawn. The da'len was sitting outside the training grounds, watching the bouts avidly.

"How goes?" Cedric's sudden arrival startled Dawn visibly, her startlement quickly calmed as she recognized him.

"Andaran Atishan." Dawn smiled as she used the traditional greeting, angling herself so he could sit beside her. "I am well, and you?" Her speech was still formal sometimes but he could hear a difference in how she was speaking now. The child from another world seemed to have set both feet firmly in this one at last. Cedric let oddly proud of her. Now would be the time of her vallaslin if she'd been Dalish, one could not be an adult until they had that sense of self to find a purpose.

"I was wondering if you would be willing to tell me of what you know of me from your world." He remained, as always, straightforward with her.

"You were one of four possible Inquisitors," she started without preamble, "Lavellan, Cadash, Trevelyan, and Adaar." His head tilted at the familiar names. He missed the very young ex-Templar they'd lost at Haven. She'd actually been all by a child still. "But in the story only the Inquisitor lives, no one else." She sounded so cautious.

"I figure as much." He quickly smiled to show her that her news wasn't hurtful or alarming. "I've been around for long enough to know when something is too strong for me to beat."

"Ah, well, uh..." Dawn fumbled, not expecting his easy acceptance. "Was there something you
needed to know?" She seemed a little confused but still wanting to help.

"Do I ever get possessed?" He asked directly and saw surprise cross her face; like it had never even occurred to her that that could be an issue.

"No, not that I know of." She answered verbally.

"What do you know of the Fade?" He tried a different approach, losing hope.

"It used to cover everything before the Veil." She didn't answer right away, as if she were trying to figure out how to share her knowledge. "Spirits are embodiment of emotions and intent, when corrupted they become demons." Her cosmopolitan breakdown of a complex process left Cedric uncomfortable. No one should be that at ease about spirits and demons, even a First with decades of training had the memory gaps to prove how unpredictable the Fade could be. "Corypheus wants to physically enter it, supposedly again, to claim the Black City and that could be very bad."

"How has the Fade been for you since your collapse?" Cedric asked delicately, a kernel of suspicion in the back of his mind.

"Quiet; I do not rember my dreams." Dawn admitted with a shrug.

"Let me know if anything changes; I can cast wards that even a magicless shem can activate." He winked with a smile. Dawn smiled back but a loud clang from the training ring drew their attention. "Why are you watching them train and frowning so fiercely?" He decided to satisfy his idle curiosity since his urgent question was still unanswerable.

"I was trying to see if I could predict the moves or winner of the matches." Dawn still looked at the Warrior and Rogue making a ruckus. "The world I am from, it is unusual to need to fight, so I have no skill. No knowledge of how to protect myself. Yes I have friends that will defend me," she smiled softly, "but I need to learn to do it myself. I have to think about it some more first."

Cedric nodded, understanding the logic of that. In his Clan even the most peaceful Halla handlers were still taught how to defend themselves, and how to survive. But he'd been working with Circle born mages lately; it was painful how little some of them knew. Since his own defence techniques would be useless to her, Cedric decided to instead spend an evening entertaining Dawn with illusions of useful plantlife.

They landed in the Herald's Rest shortly later, Cedric bringing to the table a bottle of crisp white wine with a lovely creamy after taste. No one ever said education had to be a sober venture, but apparently Cedric showing off illusion magic that easily drew a few curious eyes. Only Iron Bull and Varric were bold enough to come over. First was Varric.

"Crunchy, Dusk, what's with the show and tell?" He sat at the table so smoothly that even Cedric looked impressed.

"Crunchy?" Dawn had to ask at the origin to that particular nickname.

"First and only time I've ever seen a force cage actually fold a body." Varric easily explained, gruesome mental image formed without need of additional adjectives.

"Eww." Dawn made a grossed out face. "Cedric is teaching me how not to poison myself." She decided to venture back to less squicky topics.

"That's probably a useful skill to have." Varric agreed easily. "What are you drinking?" He frowned at the pale yellow wine.
"Whatever he is drinking." Dawn shrugged with a smile. She had to admit to herself that this was all too similar to bar nights with her friends back home. Maybe pictures on a smartphone instead of illusions but the whole interaction felt wonderfully familiar. And Dawn didn't retreat from the sensation, recognizing that she didn't have to fear getting close or having friends.

"That's terrible. If you're going to drink anything vintage it needs to be Free Marches red, not that white swill." Varric insulted easily, a hand wave drawing a serving girl with two glasses of red as if he was the Mage.

Cedric laughed at the insult to his taste in wine. Dawn listened to them bicker over preferences as if this were an old argument. One they apparently shared with The Iron Bull because the Qunari Reaver interrupted by insulting both red and white wine entirely. Somehow Dawn found herself sitting at a table amongst a heated argument between a Dalish, a Dwarf, and a Qunari, and it made her start to laugh. They all stopped the friendly bickering to watch her try to stop laughing but only ending up giggling to the point of tears.

The Iron Bull slid his drink towards her, "Little Bas, take a drink and a breath." He rumbled at her helpfully.

Dawn sputtered after taking a large swallow, immediately regretting her decision to drink. Harsh coughs replaced her laughter for a moment and the damn horned bastard just grinned at her as if he'd expected that reaction; he was drinking Maraas-Lok. "What the fuck?" She wheezed at him in English and he just laughed at her.

"The second drink is better, try it again." He suggested with a broad, slightly malicious grin.

"Maaras-Lok does not get better, your throat just goes numb." Dawn countered seeing The Iron Bull's brows raise in surprise as she took a second drink despite her negative seeming words. Varric absolutely cackled at her second round of coughing and The Iron Bull just patiently waited for her to recover. "A Dalish, a Dwarf, and a Qunari sit down to drink." She finally clued them into her laughter source.

"It does sound like a fantastic impossibility." Cedric admitted easily, a sly grin on his face. "Especially when the tall and small ones are wrong." His comment left the table silent for a moment and then everyone was laughing. It rekindled the friendly argument and Dawn was asked to act as unbiased taste tester for a comparison between all of their favourites. Even being cautious and drinking water, Dawn did not remember the end of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Translate
Elvhen
Durgen'len= Child of the Stone; Dwarf
Josephine looked troubled still, although the discussion over the War Table this morning had been over nothing more devastating than the finalizing of Satinalia plans. Cullen knew the Ambassador never took the arrival of any guest lightly but this seemed a different type of bothered for his fellow Advisor. The Inquisitor seemed eager to escape the last official meeting until after celebrations were concluded.

"Lady Montilyet," he softly caught her attention even as Leliana vanished up the stairs, "is everything alright?" Cullen was probably just being paranoid.

She smiled at his concern, a brief little flash. "Nothing to worry about Commander, I just haven't had the chance to discuss rooming arrangements with Lady Dawn yet; the Champion's companion arriving unexpectedly caused a delay.

Of course the Ambassador would have a way to say it that placed no blame and downplayed the ruckus Merrill Sabrae had caused by arriving unannounced. Cullen hadn't seen the Dalish apostate since shortly after Meredith fell, and he could have gone a lifetime without having a known blood mage in Skyhold. The Inquisitor and the other Advisors had listened to his concerns and addressed as much of it as they could; on his part, Cullen avoided the friendly mage only slightly more proficiently than Lady Dawn herself seemed to. Not that Cullen was paying attention to what she was doing on the few times he caught sight of her.

"I walk through Solas' mural room on my way through, I could ask him to come speak to you." Cullen could at least offer to help.

This time Josephine's smile lasted longer. "Thank you Commander, but I should speak to him directly." she sounded decided so Cullen didn't argue.

"Then please allow me to enjoy your company as we walk to Solas' sanctum." He smiled, trying some of the diplomatic terms he knew he'd have to utilize with the King of Ferelden and other nobles in attendance. And Mia. Having his sister here did not do anything to help allay his nerves and discomfort. Why he'd let Josephine talk him into inviting his sister and her family here to attend he had no idea, Cullen loved his sister but he was all but a stranger to her husband and
Now Josephine laughed and this time her smile stayed. "Despite all your protests Commander, I suspect you will present yourself with as much grace at court as you do in battle." she complimented and once again hooked her arm through his.

"You've never seen me fight Lady Montilyet." He felt compelled to point out, amused more than flattered.

"That is true Commander, but I have watched you train." she admitted and for a heartbeat Cullen didn't know how to reply as they walked. "The Inquisition’s army has truly benefitted by your determination."

"If you keep complimenting me in public Lady Montilyet, my sister will over hear it and ask when I plan on proposing to you. We're from a smaller town than you are used to my Lady, and a certain level of familiarity has implications." He warned, not entirely joking.

Josephine kept her amusement off of her face as they passed through the main hall, but Cullen could hear it in her voice as she replied. "That would certainly help throw a stitch in the plans my family has to marry me off for riches."

"We certainly can't have that my Lady, the Inquisition would surely fall without your steady head to calm the rest of us," He played along with her joking and they both fell into friendly silence as they entered Solas' mural room.

"Commander Cullen, Ambassador Montilyet how may I be of service?" Solas seemed utterly unsurprised to see either of them.

"The Commander was just passing through, but I've come to seek your Counsel." Josephine started to work her diplomatic magic as Cullen nodded farewell. "I was hoping that you might know where it was Lady Dawn likes to call her own. I wish to make sure her needs are being seen to."

Cullen was at the exterior door when Solas' response stopped him dead in his tracks, for both tone and content. "It's a little late to start trying to concern yourself with that isn't it?"

"Excuse me?" Josephine actually faltered, Solas' almost hostile response completely unexpected.

"We all made assumptions about Dawn on her arrival," at least the apostate deigned to include himself in that comment, "and she has suffered for them. If Dawn has trusted me with the location of where she rests, I cannot betray that now."

"I mean Lady Dawn no harm Solas." Josephine carefully reminded. Cullen was all but seething, offended on the Ambassador's behalf.

"And I mean you no insult." The Elf's words stopped Cullen's angry comment before he verbalized it. "I just wanted to make my position abundantly clear."

"I think Lady Montilyet was merely trying to ensure that Lady Dawn was aware that we want to make Skyhold her home too." Cullen all but barked after Solas' comment.

Solas turned to look at Cullen, the assessment on his face leaving behind a sense of disappointment. "Isn't that a bit belated, coming from you Commander?" he asked so suavely that Cullen actually wanted to throttle him. Even if his confrontation with Dawn had been discussed and forgiven by the woman herself, he was still being penalized for that loss of control. It made it hard for Cullen to remain righteously angered by Solas' attitude though.
"Solas," Lady Montilyet spoke before Cullen could cause an incident, "we did no claim to be without fault." The Ambassador stepped beside him as if they were a united force; safety in numbers. "I realize how badly o have failed her and I want to do what I can to make it right." Josephine's simple honesty silenced Solas for a thoughtful moment.

Instead of criticism, Solas sighed. "Then trust Dawn to reach out to the friends she chooses at this time. Whatever space she has claimed for her own should be hers to stay in or leave." He urged.

Though no sign of it showed on Lady Montilyet's face, Cullen could tell that Solas' solution didn't set well with her. If she'd been the kind of woman whom could just let unfinished business sit, she wouldn't be such a formidable Advisor for the Inquisitor. "Thank you for your time Solas." Josephine inclined her head and Cullen politely curled her hand over his arm, escorting her out of Solas' suddenly unwelcoming rotunda.

She remained silent but in a way Cullen couldn't help but all pinched. Josephine's lovely face still looked polite and friendly but having stared her displeasure down too often Cullen knew when the woman still had a piece to say but knew she shouldn't.

One of the wall guards, probably Higgins, had stirred Cullen's hearth to life. Cullen guided Josephine right to one of his visitor chairs, letting her compose herself while he set about making tea. He had a bold spiced black tea he decided was perfect and Josephine didn't seem interested in adding anything to it. Probably for the best as he had no milk, and a solid crystal of reformed sugar. He assessed her careful, quiet composure and decided that the always proper Ambassador might need a little help venting her spleen.

"He might be smarter than me but sometimes I want to kick Solas in the ass." He deliberately chose blunt language and saw Josephine snap out of her mental ruminations.

"Commander..." she started with a disapproving tone.

"Lady Montilyet, I think by this time we can call ourselves friends, correct?" Cullen gambled, a ball of dread in his stomach wondering if this would offend her.

"I...yes Commander. Cullen. I would consider us friends." she seemed to physically relax with the words, drinking her tea.

"Then please feel free to speak frankly here." He encouraged.

Josephine hesitated and he wondered if she would actually follow through. "I found that conversation... Vexing." she admitted and looked up to see Cullen smile a little.

"That it was." He agreed, sipping at his own tea. The whole situation was made worse by Solas' arrogance and the fact that he was right.

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"What the Fuck The Iron Bull? Sit still or I will find a way to tie you to the chair." Dawn finally growled as The Iron Bull fidgeted for the umpteenth time, her English phrase probably familiar sounding to him by now.

"I would gladly let you tie me up; I just need to get this crick out of my neck first." The Iron Bull rumbled back at her, amusement obvious.

Dawn frowned at him for a moment then shrugged and stood up. "Lean a little forward and brace your hands on the table top." She ordered, finishing the tepid ale in her stein.
“I know what you’re thinking and it won’t work,” The Iron Bull still did as she said, bracing himself as Dawn stood behind him, “not that I think you’re not capable, but so far humans have….ugh.” the moan Iron Bull let out was one inflection shy of orgasmic as Dawn proceeded to massage his neck and shoulders with hard digging knuckles. Her face was flushed a scarlet that had more to do with the sounds he was making than the effort she was exerting.

“Whatever you’re doing, I want in on it next.” Varric demanded, staring at the Qunari in surprise as he groaned while Dawn worked.

“My…late husband was not a small man. And he used to get headaches, even worse than Commander Cullen. And working the tension out of his muscles often helped but it meant I had to go hunting for them.” Dawn explained, then went to work on a knot she’d found. “The trick is to work top to bottom, and then back up again.” She explained, moving to the side and working on The Iron Bull’s shoulders individually for a few minutes.

It felt heinously weird to have so many eyes avidly watching her massage someone, but then again with the sounds The Iron Bull was making she couldn’t really blame the watchers. “I feel like I should buy you dinner before you are allowed to make sounds like that, really.” She teased the Qunari carefully.

“Mmm… dinner and romancing later just don’t stop.” The Iron Bull grunted.

So Dawn focused on chasing the knots that spread from his neck, down his shoulders and spine, to his lower back, and then back up. Her hands hurt, it had been so long since she’d had a chance to touch anyone in this way and The Iron Bull was not small, but she was determined to finish it. “Hey Varric, did you get that thing I asked you about?” she asked and the Dwarf’s eyes lit up in excitement.

“Oh you’re just one big softie today aren’t you?” Varric teased but slipped away.

“Please don’t be plotting to slit my throat at least until after you’ve finished this.” The Iron Bull requested, not even opening his eye.

“I would not go through all of this to just slit your throat The Iron Bull. I would at least rifle through your pockets as well.” Dawn reassured as she spied Varric hurrying back.

“For you, my oh so generous and loving Dusk.” Varric offered with a courtly bow.

“You just want me to put my hands all over you next, Charmer.” Dawn winked at her friend as she took the jar from him. Ever since getting absolutely shitfaced with them, Dawn had the suspicion that Varric had adopted her somehow. Like with several of her friends back home, Dawn just rolled with it.

“Hey back there, less flirting and more touching.” The Iron Bull complained when she stopped massaging.

“That was mighty ambiguous Tiny; from the sounds of it you want her to shut up and start touching me.” Varric laughed.

“I will thump you little man.” The Iron Bull warned jokingly.

“I have finally found my purpose in life; I am here to witness the birth and death of the good ship SS Iron Dwarf.” Dawn cracked wise knowing that they wouldn’t understand a pop culture reference. “I should tell Isabella about you two, maybe she pen pal me and we can write friend fiction together.” She added in so at least Varric would get the joke.
“You know about… of course you know about Rivaini and her friend fiction…” Varric seemed impressed. He was a spy on occasion after all.

“If I remember correctly she was not writing those alone, Mr. I suck at writing romances if not based off my friends…” Dawn taunted as she smiled to soften the blow.

“Alright Tiny, I quit the field. Now that we’ve broken her out of her shell she’s uncontrollable.” Varric gave Dawn another courtly bow and then retreated, likely to go to his usual spot to continue whatever correspondences he deemed worthy.

“Oh good, now I almost have you all to myself.” The Iron Bull grumbled.

“Almost?” Dawn laughed looking around the crowded Herald’s Rest.

“Mmm… gotta convince one other that he’ll lose if he tries first, then yes, all mine.” The Iron Bull sighed as Dawn continued to grind the knots out of his neck.

“I am going to pretend that I understood what you mean because I like to pretend to be intelligent. But keep your expectations of me small.” She moved up his neck to the back of his skull and this was where all familiarity fell away.

Massaging a Qunari’s neck, shoulders, and back was not all that different than any other human she’d massaged, and she been doing this kind of work a while. Sure he was massive and far more muscular than she’d generally seen, but her late husband had in fact been a Strongman competitor so it wasn’t too outside her realm of experience. Horns, however, were which was where the jar she’d asked Varric for came in.

“In one of the futures I saw of you and the others, you and Varric had a little banter going. You know about the Qunari attack at Kirkwall, but before it occurred they had three years of… not peace but not open hostility either. Kirkwall is basically just lousy with jars and jars of this stuff now because of it though.” Dawn explained, placing the jar of horn balm down where The Iron Bull could see it if he cracked open his eye.

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It was the sight of the horn balm that answered a question that had been plaguing Bull; was Dawn trying to manipulate his emotions? A smile settled on his face and he relaxed. He hated the brand of horn balm she’d managed to get, it worked fine but had a scent he disliked; more importantly, if she’d been trying to manipulate him deliberately she would never have known to get this exact kind on purpose. She likely just wanted to be nice to her new friends. Discovering who Dawn was when she wasn’t deliberately keeping herself distant was a rare joy and The Iron Bull wondered when his Little Bas would realize she was being seduced. His smile grew a little feral.

“I do have something to ask you though, kind of a big thing.” Dawn had probably intended to sound less nervous than she succeeded in doing.

He laughed softly, “I think I know what you’re going to ask me Little Bas.” This was going far easier than Bull could have anticipated, and he wondered if it would make its way into his report or not.

“You do?” Dawn didn’t sound breathy or delighted like he expected though; she sounded straight up confused by his response.

“Well now I’m questioning myself, so go ahead and ask.” Bull admitted, holding his body relaxed so that she’d go on administering to his horns. The fact that she knew what to do at all was a subtle
reminder of her time spent with the Valo-Kas mercenaries and he wondered if Shokrakar realized just how much Dawn had picked up.

“I want you to train me,” he would have been less surprised if Corypheus’ Lyrium Dragon showed up asking to join the Inquisition. Apparently it didn’t show on his face though because she ploughed right on. “Consider me a tool you get to shape to a specific purpose.” She suggested brightly and Bull had to stifle a groan; that’d just hurt her feelings.

“You have to be very careful wording something like that to a man like me Little Bas; I might take it to mean something else entirely.” His suggestive tone brought such a furious blush to Dawn’s face that Bull almost laughed.

“That had not been my intent,” her response doused his ego a little, “but I will keep that in mind.” His Little Bas might not have been thinking about it before but it was definitely in her thought process now. “Mostly I meant that I was hoping that you could help me determine a fighting style that will give me a passing chance of surviving a battle.”

The Iron Bull sat up, giving her a right proper assessment. She looked exhausted still, but no longer haunted. Drawing the person back out of the ashes was a much more delicate process than for the Phoenix, but she was remarkable for more than just her recovery. He could read her insecurity and determination in equal measures; it had cost her a lot of agonizing to build up to asking him. “What kind of battle?” he asked suspiciously.

“I cannot tell you that. But I need to go with the Inquisitor when the time comes.” Her answer made his blood run cold. She seemed to anticipate his knee jerk rejection because she cut him off before he could voice it. “I can explain to you why but not here, and not all of it. But believe me when I say I will find a way to go with Alena whether or not I am battle ready when the time comes. I need your help, not your permission.”

Bull stood; torn between two very strong reactions. He wanted to kiss her for taking the hard stand for her own sake, she was stronger than anyone could expect after what she’d endured; but he also wanted to put her over his knee and swat her ass for the impertinence of basically telling him that there was dick all he could do to stop her. Thankfully for Dawn’s sake, his curiosity won out over all of that. “Alright Little Bas, I’ll listen. But if I don’t think your explanation is sufficient I’ll find a way to stop you,” and he decided to show his Little Bas why it was a dangerous idea to rub his powerlessness in his face like that, “or if not I’ll spent half my attention looking out for you instead of just keeping my own ass alive, and you might get me killed.” He could see the stunned shock and devastation on her face at the idea. The Iron Bull tipped her jaw closed with his knuckle, resting his thumb on her lower lip in a subconsciously much more intimate holding gesture. “I would worry for you Little Bas, get used to keeping that in mind. But right now I’ll need to see what you’re capable of, if I decide you’re not plotting a convoluted suicide run.” His hand dropped from her face and he strode away, absolutely confident that she would follow him. The way her pupils had dilated at his touch said that the body, at least, knew the game he was playing; now he just needed the mind to concede.

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“You either just got screwed or you’re about to. I’m not 100% sure based off of your facial expression alone.” Varric’s voice piped in and Dawn couldn’t hide her blush.

“Neither. Ever go forward with a plan you know is a bad idea, but is entirely necessary no matter how much it is going to suck?” Dawn asked rhetorically.

“Well Sweetheart, I wish you the best of luck with that.” Varric offered magnanimously.
Dawn fought to keep a smile on her face; he could never know that Hawke would be a possible sacrifice in a few months. She didn’t know who Alena would pick between Hawke and Alistair, and so far only a snow ball’s chance in hell of making sure that neither of them is in a position to have to be sacrificed. “Sweetheart?” she made the endearment a question.

Varric grinned, a flash of impishness in his eyes. “It’ll drive Tiny nuts.” His explanation made no sense to Dawn but she didn’t ask for clarification, wanting to catch up to where The Iron Bull took off to.

“If you think so Sugar.” Dawn rejoined and Varric crowed with laughter.

It wasn’t hard to spot The Iron Bull and she anticipated his speed, so it didn’t surprise Dawn all that much to see that he’d made it to the stairs up the battlements already. She lengthened her stride to try and catch up as he went up the stairs; with how wide his horns were in comparison to the narrowness of the climb it was the only place he slowed down enough for her to catch up at. Of course stairs weren’t exactly Dawn’s favourite thing but she was proud that she made it to the top without huffing and puffing, she’d improved greatly compared to her first few days in Thedas. She saw him enter one of the towers and followed.

The Iron Bull waited patiently, seeming satisfied that she’d come after him. And since this was the best he could do to offer her privacy, without just taking her back to his room, she owed him an explanation.

“I need to be by the Inquisitor’s side during a battle, if I cannot prevent something from happening, then Alena will have to choose between sacrificing one of two people. And yes, I know that it should not be too hard for Alena Cadash, assassin, but this time it really will be.” Dawn spilled out, wondering if she should tell The Iron Bull about what was coming, but sadly the less he knew until he was split from the Qun the better for the Inquisition, and the less likely he’d find a way to stop her from being there. But if he refused to help train her, telling him might be one of the few ways she could make him understand her need to be there. The old, familiar ache in her chest started again and she breathed through it.

“Why does it have to be you? Why can’t you tell me and let me do what needs to be done?” He was calm and rational and hard to not listen to.

“There is going to be demon-y shit happening all over the place. And then when you think things have gotten as bad as they possibly can get, add in more and then top it all off with a big serving of ‘oh shit no’.” Dawn regretting saying anything as soon as she finished running her mouth, but it hurt to hold it all on her own.

At least The Iron Bull looked like he was taking her seriously. She wondered what he was reading off of her face, but didn’t know how to set her expression at all to help convince him. “Is there any way to avoid the situation entirely?”

Dawn hesitated but shook her head no. Not how she looked at it anyways; Adamant HAD to happen. It was the only way to strip the Wardens from Corypheus, and the only way to succeed is to hit them with everything they could bring to bear. And the Inquisitor had to go into the Fade to retrieve her memories and discover for herself the truth of the Mark on her hand. It would help lead to asking the right questions later. “Every single time I go over it in my head, I cannot think of how to change anything without ruining things that MUST happen. And I have thought about bringing someone in to help me go over it, but there is no one I can tell things to without risking even more upheaval. Right now I know the solutions that bring around victory in that battle, but what if I change too many things?” she shook her head no. “It has to happen exactly as I remember it, but then I have to change one thing at the right time.”
“That sounds an awful lot like trying to cheat fate Little Bas.” The Iron Bull warned but it felt like he was dismissing her painstaking planning.

Dawn felt her temper flare up and she fought the urge to tug on her own hair. “I have to go or one of them dies,” she stomped up into The Iron Bull’s personal space, anger making her bold, “and if she dies that’ll break V...” Dawn slapped a hand over her own mouth, eyes going wide as she staggered back, realizing what she’d said.

The Iron Bull’s eye narrowed; of course he wouldn’t miss her slip up. “That was definitely a V Little Bas. Now chances are you’re concerned for the Inner Circle, at least for this level of worry over emotional fallout. Now you respect and admire Madam Vivienne, but you two are still distant. So that leaves Varric, which then tells me who she is at least.” He deduced easily.

“Mother fucker.” Dawn cursed in Common and The Iron Bull laughed in surprise.

“Are you going to tell me who could possibly rival Hawke as an option to save?” he prompted gently, probably still unsure how far she could be pushed before she’d crumble again.

“Vishante Kaffas.” This time Dawn swore in Tevene; The Iron Bull still laughed.

Her smile remained but the humour left it. If things had been like the game than most likely she’d be a lot less torn, even if admitting that made her a terrible person. But she’d never connected to Stroud the same way she had to both Hawke and Alistair. It wasn’t that easy though; Alistair was here under circumstances that were wildly outside of the narrative of the game Dawn had played.

“Someone we can risk losing about as much as we can risk losing Hawke.” Dawn finally answered, her pause acting as emphasis to the seriousness of her answer. She wasn’t sure if she was making things better or worse, so many things had already altered from the game canon.

“That’s not a real answer and you know it Dawn.” His tone was angry and that combined with the use of her proper name startled the thoughts right out of her head.

“Alistair.” Slipped out before Dawn could stop herself from speaking.

“Huh.” Was his immediate, concise, reply. “No wonder you’ve been up shit creek about this Little Bas.” His immediate empathy just churned Dawn’s already volatile emotions some more. “Tell me about what’s coming Dawn, let me help you prevent this tragedy.”

She closed her eyes for a second and seemed to almost sway slightly. He hadn’t split from the Qun yet and she couldn’t 100% be sure everything she had just told him wouldn’t immediately get back to his ‘masters’ and yet she trusted him. The problem was that Dawn knew if she let him slip this from her then she opened up the discourse about letting other secrets go. There were some things she knew she would NEVER say, secrets she would gladly keep even if no one else ever knew she knew, but Dawn desperately wished to be able to talk to someone about some of the upcoming events. And thanks to her unique situation, Dawn knew that The Iron Bull would be a brilliant confidant. But how could she do that to him? Telling him everything was not the solution, telling him only the key points she needed help with would be no better than just telling him everything because he would figure it out anyways, and trying to pick and choose only pieces to include his counsel on made Dawn feel like a pre-emptive asshole. And right now she shouldn’t tell him anything because he was still sending reports back to the Qun.

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“Think about it tonight Dawn. Tomorrow your ass belongs to me from sunrise at the training
grounds until I say otherwise.” Bull interrupted her introspection with instructions.

“Yes ser!” Dawn chirruped automatically, guilt and fear obvious in her eyes.

“Little Bas do not provoke my ire.” Bull warned mock threateningly and was pleased when Dawn’s eyes dropped instinctively from his.

“So you’ll help me get ready?” she verified.

“I’ll do everything I can to make sure you survive whatever battle is coming, if you insist on going. But Dawn, this is not going to be easy.” He felt the need to warn her.

“Thank you,” at least he knew she was taking it seriously, “I truly do want to survive it.”

“Thank me if we live. Get some rest Dawn.” He gave an expansive gesture for her to lead the way.

He decided to see where she slipped off to, and she never looked to see him steps behind. Dawn led him from the tower, away from the more populated wings of Skyhold, down to the lower bailey where the daily workers and servants tended to live. And still she walked on until she went up a mostly hidden seeming stair case and into door. It took him a moment but Bull recognized the archer’s galley at the gates and there was a frown on his face as she opened the door to the little round room that wasn’t actually inside Skyhold from a defensive standpoint.

“Does anyone even know you’re sleeping here?” he couldn’t help demanding and with how much she jumped at his voice Bull suspected Dawn hadn’t realized he’d followed her. He was too angry to apologize though, because he’d spied how barren her chosen room was. If the Inquisitor or any of the Advisors knew this was where Dawn was sleeping, he’d have loud angry words at them very shortly.

Dawn looked flabbergasted that he had followed her out here and was at a loss for words for a moment. “You now know… ah… Cole and Solas also know.” She finally admitted.

Her answer only helped settle some of his anger, though it might have provoked a different kind as well. “I will find you a more suitable room,” he could see her immediate rejection of the idea but talked over whatever objection she might have made, “non-negotiable Little Bas. I need to be able to monitor you carefully during training and this room is too out of my damn way. It’s an inconvenience to me, so pack up what you have and come along.” Even if his explanation was a lie, he slid the Command into his tone and saw her take a breath before doing what he said. Smart girl; this was not one of those fights she would have won.

The Iron Bull led Dawn from the forgotten little hole in the wall and towards more populated areas of the keep. He was going to present her with two options and let her decide which one was the right fit. The first room was bigger, in where the Chargers all took their rooms in the tower behind the Herald’s Rest. The second choice was still in the tower, just at the top of it. It was a smaller room, space for a bed, footlocker, and small table only, but it had trapdoor access to the turret at the top of the tower. Getting to the room was a pain in the ass climb upstairs, which was why no one had claimed it yet, but as soon as Bull saw Dawn’s reaction to the tower top access, he knew it was hers.

“Here, please.” Dawn breathed, looking out at the sunset off in the mountains.

“It’s all yours then Little Bas. But don’t stay up too late, sun rises early in the mountains and we have a full day tomorrow.” He kept the smug satisfaction out of his voice as he climbed back down the ladder.
“The Iron Bull, thank you.” She gave him her full attention once they were back within the room.

“You always remember the article in my name.” his comment was unexpected but he saw her smile in response.

“I learned from Cole. You chose your name, The Iron Bull, so I should do no less than respect and use the entirety of it.” She explained as if it were a much more serious discussion than his chosen name.

“Do you mind when I call you Little Bas?” he wondered out loud.

“No, I like it; Bas was the first word I recognized with the Valo-Kas.” She paused and he waited for her to add in what she wanted to say. “Bas became… a kind of anchor to me. No matter how crazy the world I had been thrown into was, if I could recognize even only the one word, I still had a chance. And if I have a chance, I am going to fight for it. So I lived.” Dawn flushed with the admission but didn’t back down, meeting his gaze head on.

“I’ll see you in the morning Little Bas.” He resisted the urge to lean towards her, wanting to leave her with him on her mind but walking away before he could push the issue too much.

“I don’t have any armour to train in.” she called out before he left her new room entirely.

The Iron Bull turned around and deliberately stepped into her personal space, unable to resist an opening like she’d just given him. She stared up at him with big, surprised eyes so Bull let the satisfied grin show on his face and he looked down over her body, assessing. She was clearly trying to not fidget under his regard, and just as clearly failing.

“I can find training gear to fit you, at least until we can have something more appropriate made for you.” He turned her around by her shoulders, taking a quick measure of her under his hands; it would be easier to cut larger gear down to work on her than to try and accommodate smaller gear up. He cupped his hand on the back of her neck gently, seeing how she’d react to such possessive handling. “You’ll be taken care of Little Bas.” He promised and he felt her shuddering breath suck in under his grip. But he’d definitely pushed the matter more than he had originally intended to in one day, so he backed off; leaving without another word.

Chapter End Notes

@Avalantia - was this about what you were expecting? Lol
Grind-quest

Chapter Summary

Dawn gets her ass kicked but she did ask for it.
A Wolf and a Bull have words.

Chapter Notes

So this chapter got edited to hell and back. And then three more times because I'm masochistic
@Avalantia- enjoy lol!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dawn was as ready as she could be, definitely nervous but waiting at the training field for The Iron Bull. He arrived with the Chargers for their daily training but only stayed with them shortly; she could hear him give a brief comment about training Dawn but didn't offer an explanation as to why.

The Iron Bull had a bag stuffed with gear in as close to her size as he’d been able to cobble together, and he passed it on to her without commenting about how tired she still must look. Dawn immediately dove in to the bag and started to pull on the few pieces she was vaguely familiar with, trusting that The Iron Bull knew what he was doing with her. The other Chargers were setting up at their usual warm up, a hideous combination of laps and burpees, but they were led by Krem so The Iron Bull could focus his attention on her.

“I’m going to set up weapons in an arc. You and I are going to go over basic moves and spar with each of them. Every time I say ‘Drop’, you lose what you’re currently fighting with and switch to the next. If I say 'Hold', you stay exactly put.” He explained with the serious tone of an experienced instructor.

Dawn nodded her understanding and examined the weapons, realizing that they were just blunted versions of the real thing; she was going to end up bruised no matter how careful she was. But before The Iron Bull would let her touch any of the weapons, she had to go join the Chargers in their weird ‘run a lap, fall on face, get up, fall on back, get up, repeat’ style of warming up. Despite how unpleasant it looked, Dawn said nothing and simply strove to keep up as much as possible. It wasn't pretty and she was a sopping mess despite her running and swimming every day. After they split apart for their real training, Dawn came back over to the small section The Iron Bull had cleared aside for them, wondering how much she was going to hurt later.

He indicated the dual daggers in his hands and Dawn picked up her corresponding pair. She held them awkwardly at first, but The Iron Bull didn’t move until she’d mirrored his grip and stance perfectly. He demonstrated a slashing pair of moves, one for each hand, and then waited for Dawn to try it. She stayed silent, too focused on learning to be bothered with conversation and The Iron Bull used quiet words of encouragement. After building up the moves Dawn could master with the
daggers, he finally engaged her in their first spar.

The Iron Bull moved slowly at first but increased his attack speed as Dawn started to get out of her own head and stopped flinching. The moves were basics but they were necessary.

“Drop.” His voice demanded and Dawn did as The Iron Bull directed releasing the daggers from stiffened hands. She worked her fingers and arms out for a silent moment before grabbing the Halberd.

It was an unmitigated disaster in her hands. Dawn had no natural grace or instinct with it and even having witnessed Kasaanda utilize one didn’t help; all Dawn’s habits left her treating it like an awkward baseball bat or an overly heavy pool cue. Whatever ability she'd had when beating a demon with a broken staff had been grief induced it seemed. The Iron Bull watched her trying to handle her frustration and master the movements as directed, but there was no natural skill, and in a few more minutes he called out “Drop.”

Dawn felt her temper flare up and she wanted to break the stupid Halberd over her knee. She swallowed that urge down, along with the need to swear loudly at everything in sight, and instead looked at The Iron Bull for her next directions. He had been watching her and waiting, but said nothing as she stared at him. It was too much to hold stoic through.

“Arming me with one of those makes me slightly more dangerous than harsh language and slapping, but I am still more likely to survive if I simply kick them in the balls and run.” Dawn finally spoke, needing to vent her frustration somehow.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself Little Bas.” He agreed with a sudden grin, and that somehow prompted one to blossom on Dawn’s face too. The Iron Bull jerked his chin out at the sword and dagger pairing, so Dawn went for it next.

She had fared better with dual wielding the daggers; something about the long sword and dagger combo threw her off and moves she’d shown natural talent with before were a struggle now. After a frustrating series of failures Dawn was nearly crying, and her jaw was clenched so hard against her internal diatribe that her neck hurt. It was clearly obvious that she was annoyed with herself and getting angry at The Iron Bull for not stopping it yet, but he didn’t call it until Dawn started to get careless.

“Drop, and take a break.” He barked at her and she dropped the weapons but gave him such a nasty look that he was probably glad Dawn wasn’t a mage.

Trying to shake the soreness out of her arms and the tension out of her spine Dawn moved around. She was controlling her breathing, knowing that half her problem right now was her own emotions, and yet she didn’t dare slip back into the painfully effective numbness she was still clawing her way out of. Her shoulders ached, her legs were dead, and she’d felt more than two blisters rip open already. Her back cramped, and it felt like a steel band had constricted around her diaphragm. But as tired as she felt, Dawn still didn’t want to give up the idea of learning to fight, so she continued.

“Sword and shield.” The Iron Bull thundered out, making her jump in surprise and scurry for the items he indicated.

Her hands shook as she picked the items up and even Dawn wasn’t sure if it was adrenaline, surprise, or exhaustion. She turned to face The Iron Bull and felt something inside erupt. She couldn’t stay silent any longer; snarls and growls, grunts and grumbles fell from her in a litany of effort. The detachment was burned away, cleansed by the inferno flooding her veins as The Iron Bull charged at her. His shield bashed into hers and Dawn set her shield to meet the assault, a
bellow of defiance tearing from her as they collided and she held.

The Iron Bull’s unexpected roar of pride stunned her and she staggered to her knees, all the energy from before just suddenly gone. Her chest hurt as she fought to get enough air in, and only her shield planted into the ground helped her not slump into the sand. “What the fuck was THAT?” she panted.

“Little Bas, you definitely have the makings of a sword and boarder.” The Iron Bull’s voice had a rough growl as he helped her to her feet again.

“Seriously?” she nearly sobbed when she lifted her shield back up, too tired to properly hold it.

“You’re too scraped to test two handed today, but I suspect even well rested you’ll be better with sword and shield. And now, in reward for such a hard morning’s work, a hot bath.” He promised.

The Chargers had cleared out a while ago but The Iron Bull had made Dawn endure a long first morning of physical exertion; as he guided her to a lower level never found in the game she realized it was worth it. There were hot baths in the core of the Keep. “Why the hell did I not know about this before?” Dawn groaned and immediately started to strip. Life in Thedas had already inured her to nudity, especially when there was a glorious soak just waiting for her.

“Only The Inner Circle knows about it.” The Iron Bull admitted with a shrug.

Determined to ignore the naked Qunari, Dawn climbed into the hot water with a hiss at the temperature. But she eased herself back and groaned as it started the arduous task of loosening her knotted muscles.

“Wash off quickly, you'll stiffen up soon.” The Iron Bull instructed and Dawn nodded, too tired to bother arguing so she just sank under the surface for a moment.

She resurfaced and bent to the task of scrubbing off the sweat, dirt, and general grime of life, but the real task was unpinning her hair to wash it out too. Normally she avoided getting it wet and left it pinned up and out of the way, but now she uncoiled it, unbraided it and once the great length of it was down, she finally scrubbed it out too. Her scalp felt relaxed and glorious for the first time in too long as Dawn finger combed her hair, working from tip to root. Long hair was a bitch to take care of in this lifestyle but Dawn refused to cut it. She finished washing her hair out but he was right and she hurt before she finished.

Thedas was very comfortable with casual, non-sexual nudity but Dawn had been raised in North America, she had a few socialized habits she still needed to break. She basically ignored the side of the baths that The Iron Bull was on and settled into the hot water to let it work on her battered body. The Iron Bull was entirely silent on his side, so it was easy for Dawn to relax and soon found herself almost dozing. He wouldn’t let her drown and she was so tired that she slumped back, out in seconds.

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“Little Bas wake up,” Bull cupped her head, fingers tugging her hair gently. Her eyes fluttered open but the pupils were still glazed. “Come on kadan, you can’t sleep in here.” He cajoled, getting her up and moving. He watched carefully as she climbed out of the springs; her body was already bruising or else was already bruised based off of the dark patches mottling her skin, and she wobbled as she stood on solid ground again but she looked more alert in the cooler air.

The Iron Bull wrapped himself in one of the towels left for just that purpose, and waited for Dawn
to finish dressing. “Go back to your room, change and eat before you sleep. I want to see you again at four bells; I’m not even close to done with you yet.”

“You lost me at sleep; thank you The Iron Bull.” Dawn gave him a sleepy smile.

“Impertinent.” He swatted her forward a step while she laughed. She waved and left, and Bull went about pulling his own clothing back on wondering how long before she noticed she was missing an item.

He hadn't taken the necklace from her; when Dawn had stripped to bathe it had fallen out of her line of sight. Bull just let her conveniently overlook it. The long leather string was actually a masterfully crafted cord, the bone was a real wolf's jaw, and Bull could see the age staining it. However Solas had gotten the macabre decoration, it had clearly been an important possession for a while. Luckily for Bull, Dawn seemed unaccustomed with wearing it yet and might not notice it missing immediately. He wrapped the cord around the bone carefully and tucked it into his pocket, knowing it wouldn't take long for Solas to notice its lack from around Little Bas' neck.

Bull rolled his shoulders, cracking his neck as a buzzing of discomfort pestered in his head like a fly caught under glass. It kept him on edge as he left the lower level hot baths and climbed to go report to the Inquisitor. The Chargers had started clearing out Therinfall Redoubt before hitting a nest of demons. None of his people had died, though Krem had come damn close. Thankfully Shokrakar's little Arividdath Kaaras was damn skilled. Krem still complained of body ache and a slight limp, but that beat having a broken back and being hamstrung. The forced Rest until after the official celebrations would give them all recovery time before they were sent out again.

He was going to have to figure out a replacement instructor for Dawn when the Inquisitor pulled him for missions, at least until she was at a point where she could survive. More frustratingly, Bull also had to figure out how to tell the Boss all of this without giving away the secrets Little Bas had let slip.

Alena was just leaving the War Table meeting, and the moment she spotted Bull waiting for her she came over with a frown. "You look serious." Was all she said, stepping along with him.

"Dawn has asked me to start teaching her how to defend herself." He rumbled at her carefully, aware of how delicate this situation was. "I have agreed, and it seems she has some natural skill with sword and shield." He offered some basic details.

"That's not ominous." Cadash muttered and Bull laughed. "What does she think she needs to get prepared for?"

"Whatever it is, whatever mission she insists on going on, I want in on it too Boss." He slightly deflected. He had told Dawn that she would be taken care of and he planned to be there to do it himself.

Alena gave him a suspicious, assessing look. She hadn't been an assassin for decades by being dumb, but whatever comment she wanted to make was kept to herself. The tense silence ended when a Runner pelted towards them, reporting about something called an Arcanist arriving. "Bull, you hurt her too much I'll come find you." Was all the Inquisitor said on the matter before leaving. He knew it wasn't an idle threat and one he never intended to test.

There had been no sign of Little Bas at the dining hall or in the Rest, but she still had time before the four bells deadline so he left it be. Instead it was time to focus on a much more unpleasant task; completing the reports to send to his handlers. It wasn't just the required code layering needed that always encouraged Bull to delay on his missives but if he delayed too long it would only invite
trouble. The first passage warned of the pockets of demons being found around Rifts, and how the Crestwood lake had the dead rising. He even found himself reporting on the dragon even though Cadash had already taken care of it. Anything to avoid working on the next passage.

As he started listing the stories of Dawn's emotional collapse, there was a knock at his door. To the untrained eye his letter was harmless, but still Bull turned it over. Not many would knock at his closed door; his reputation for sexual conquest offered him a surprising amount of privacy.

The Iron Bull let the smirk show on his face when he opened the door and saw Solas glaring at him. "It would seem, The Iron Bull, that you have something that's mine."

"I certainly do Solas." Bull's grin grew wider as he dug into his pocket to offer the Elf the necklace back. "Here you go. Dawn won't be able to wear decorations while training with me anyways, too likely to be used against her." He didn't break eye contact as the Elf took the necklace back and for half a heartbeat Bull felt possible violence radiate from Solas.

"King's Pawn to E4." Solas calmly switched topics.

"You're shitting me." Bull scoffed, knowing this was about more than just the necklace.

"Too complicated for a savage Qunari?" now Solas was smiling but it wasn't at all friendly. Smug little asshole. "If that's the case, better stick to obeying orders and writing reports." The Elf actually stepped closer as if he had a chance of physically intimidating The Iron Bull. "Dawn is one of my People. If your people want her, they will have to go through me."

His threat made Bull grunt. "How exactly does a human from another world become People to a bare faced apostate that won't even acknowledge the Dalish?"

"Tell your masters that you failed to corrupt her and leave her alone." Solas ignored Bull's question entirely.

"Little Bas came to me for help Solas, I will not let her down. Pawn to E5." Bull countered.

Solas stood statue still for a moment, anger visible but contained. But he smiled as if they hadn't been a hairsbreadth to violence a moment ago. "Pawn to F4, King's Gambit."

"Accepted. Pawn takes Pawn." But Bull wondered at Solas' motivations. He wouldn't have anticipated this level of protectiveness if it hadn't have been for the damn necklace in the first place.

"Take the time you need to get the pieces set in your head, I wouldn't want you to feel out played already." Solas offered and turned to leave.

"Dont worry, I'll tell Little Bas tonight that you've gotten your trinket back." Bull closed the door on that.

His satisfaction lasted until he returned to his report. "Smug little asshole." Bull growled as he tore up the report and started to burn the pieces. Bull had used Dawn's grief to convince his handlers that she was off limits for certain approaches. His interest in her had been his own impulse, but now Bull stared at a fresh report and hesitated. He had secrets from the Offworlder that he knew should be passed on; a battle was coming where demons were going to be rampant and the Inquisitor would have to chose between King or Champion. When The Iron Bull left his room to head into the Herald's Rest the page remained painfully blank.

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Dawn had eaten so much food that her rib cage ached in a whole new way. She felt like she waddled from the mess area to her new room, but no one had once looked askance at her plate of food so she didn’t feel too guilty. The climb to her room sucked but the moment she kicked the door closed behind her, Dawn was stripping out of the sweat caked clothes and she crawled into bed naked to finally sleep like the undisturbed dead.

Then she woke up from it to a body that felt like she’d crawled through a wood chipper somewhere between hitting the bed and waking. Even the smallest movements hurt, wiggling her fingers and toes cracked open scabs and blisters, abrasions that she hadn’t even noticed deciding that these movements were wholly prohibited. Still she knew she didn’t want to be late for meeting with The Iron Bull, even if her body begged her to call this idea off entirely, so Dawn forced herself out of bed. "What the fuuuuuck?" she whined in pain.

When Dawn had come into this world, she’d been wearing typical late summer clothes; running shoes, jean shorts, and an off the shoulder peasant shirt. She’d had few personal items on her; a cell phone that was now beyond useless with no way to charge it, a wallet filled with crap and garbage, sunglasses, and her house keys. Everything else she’d left at the apartment, figuring she’d be able to go back and grab it if she needed it. Here in Thedas, denim and rubber were alien, and her blood soaked, strange manner of dress had been immediately rectified by the Valo-Kas until she made it to Haven.

Once there she’d gotten a second set of clothes, better fitting as they’ been intended for humans, but still used cast offs. The Valo-Kas clothes were currently discarded on her floor, sweat soaked and stiff, and her human sized set of clothing was still dirty from wearing the day before; she’d never gotten the chance to wash them.

“Fuck.” Dawn groaned and did something she had yet to try; she focused very carefully and called out for Cole. *Not an emergency, I need some help though.* She broadcasted the thought as loudly as she could think of to do, imagining herself with an exclamation mark over her head like a goddamned Sims character. When she opened her eyes though Cole was right there in front of her, inches away and she jerked her head back as he peered at her.

“I heard you. You did that on purpose!” he sounded astonished that she would ever actually call for him deliberately.

“Yes, and wonderful man that you are, you came!” Dawn enthused. “I need your help; I am out of clothes I can wear, and I have to meet The Iron Bull at four bells. I was wondering if…” Cole vanished before she could actually make the request, and Dawn could only hope he wasn’t stealing someone’s clothing from them.

Dawn was left waiting for only a few minutes before there was a knock at her door. She hadn’t cared if Cole saw her buckass, he didn't register that her body had been bared, but Cole didn’t knock. With no other options, Dawn wrapped a blanket around her like a hideous toga and opened her door. Krem was standing out front looking mildly uncomfortable, but he had a pile of clothes in his hands. “Ah… Cole said you needed some things.”

“I really do, though I am sorry you got bothered about this...” but Krem shrugged her off.

“Oh don’t worry about it, it’s my own fault. I asked him why he was rooting through the pile of mended clothes. Everyone takes a turn at fixing something from the pile and then it gets tossed on the done pile and gets given to whoever needs it.” He explained and Dawn nodded.

“Then thank you. I did not know that was an option.” She felt relieved at the concept; now she had a few extra needed pieces.
“You’re allowed to ask for things.” Krem blurted out after a moment and Dawn looked at him, surprised. “It’s just that… Cole said you wouldn’t ask. And it upset him that you were afraid to ask for clothes, and now that I know you didn’t know it bothers me too.” He paused, as if unsure how to conclude his little spiel.

Dawn looked down at the clothes in her hands, hesitation souring her gut. “I am… learning. It was easier to just not ask anyone for anything if I did not have to.” She started to try and explain slowly, not wanting to get into it at all but knowing that she needed to talk about things instead of bottling them up and ignoring it while she rotted from the inside. “But I know that I can, and I am learning who I can ask for help too. Thank you Krem and I will thank Cole when I see him next.”

Krem gave her a crooked looking grin, “Don’t keep the Chief waiting, you have enough time to get dressed and go down to eat still. The big softie is in the Herald’s Rest when you need to find him.” Krem waved off and Dawn closed the door.

She looked at the pile of clothes in her arms and then dropped them onto her bed. “Well, it’s much better than naked.” Dawn egged herself on and went through what was available.

Trousers varying from leathers that were stitched up in such a way Dawn knew the original owner hadn’t made it, to fine wool that was woven so tightly together that it was basically water resistant. They all bore evidence of mending, but she’d never minded wearing rescued clothes before so she wasn’t going to start now. Dawn pulled on the grey seeming trousers and grabbed the one red shirt out of the pile. It was familiar looking but she couldn’t place why; with a shrug she pulled it on anyways.

Her hair was mostly dry and a tangled mess, but in the pile of clothes was a comb with only a couple of broken teeth. It was perfect and for the first time Dawn knew the original owner hadnt made it, to fine wool that was woven so tightly together that it was basically water resistant. They all bore evidence of mending, but she’d never minded wearing rescued clothes before so she wasn’t going to start now. Dawn pulled on the grey seeming trousers and grabbed the one red shirt out of the pile. It was familiar looking but she couldn’t place why; with a shrug she pulled it on anyways.

But the stunned looks she got as she walked to the common eating area said louder than words that people noticed. Cole drifted in as she ate and simply petted her hair for a silent moment before Dawn impulsively hugged him around the middle. She’d been affectionate and demonstrative once upon a time, but here she’d learned to police her touches as a way to protect herself. Now though she simply felt good to give and receive affection like this, and it reminded her of what Solas had said after she’d broken down. It was good to hold someone and be held in return.

“Thank you for being my friend.” She breathed against Compassion and he simply squeezed her tighter.

Cole pulled out of the hug. “And now you have to run.” His words were vaguely threatening, but Dawn’s eyes went wide when she realized he meant the time.

Dawn sprinted from the common eating area towards the Herald’s Rest, her hair flying behind her and laughter building inside her chest at the sudden crazy sensation of freedom. Her body still hurt, and despite all the sleep she’d gotten, she wanted to pass out again. But it was real and Dawn was finally allowing herself to partake in life again, so it was all good. Her enthusiasm had her nearly bursting in the door of the Rest but she managed to compose herself and suck in some calmer breathes before she went in.

There were enough windows and candles inside the Rest that she wasn’t completely dark blind inside, but she still took the customary pause to adjust her eyes. Past the stairs Krem was perched on the back of his usual chair, though it wasn’t off on its own. He was with the Chargers, in the part of the Rest that seemed to have been given over to them semi-permanently. With his vantage point, he even managed to spot her before anyone else did. “There she is.” He called out, a welcoming grin on his handsome face. “Andraste’s heaving bosom that’s a lot of hair.”
Dawn laughed and did a little spin, knowing that her hair would flare out around her in the process. “Thank you for the rescue earlier. I thanked Cole already too.” With the way Krem’s eyes snapped to look behind her for the spirit boy, Dawn realized he was disappointed that Cole hadn’t come with her. That was something she hadn’t expected but was glad to see. Cole would need friends and allies once Corypheus was defeated and Solas left them all behind.

“Get a drink and take a seat.” The Iron Bull instructed her and Dawn hesitated. Not because she didn’t want to, but because she had no actual idea what alcohol drinks were called here or what she liked yet. Seeming to read her mind or at least comprehending the expression on her face, he flicked a coin into the air at her and instinct had her snatching it. “Grab me one too and have the same.” He drained his currently full stein in one go.

With no other obstacle stopping her Dawn turn to the bar and made her way over to Cabot. “Two more of whatever The Iron Bull is drinking please.” She requested when the taciturn battended caught her gaze, spinning the coin on the counter top. Cabot gave a grunt and went to grab the drinks, smoothly delivering them and claiming the coin from her in one move.

Somehow in the last thirty seconds the Herald’s Rest seemed to have doubled in population. She’d have to push her way passed people to get back to the Charger’s corner. “This is The Iron Bull’s drink. If anyone makes me spill so much as a drop from it, they can explain to him themselves why his drink is not full.” She called out and a path was cleared for her. Of course it was due to the Qunari’s reputation and not out of respect for her, but Dawn didn’t care. She slipped through the evening crowd building up, and got back without spilling either drink.

“Alright, quick introductions.” The Iron Bull started and Dawn took a sip of the beer in her stein. She politely nodded as he went through the ones she knew; Rocky, Skinner, Dalish, Stitches et al, and was curious for the new. She wasn’t going to keep their names straight right away but two stuck out “Grimm is next to Spike, and the druffalo sitting silent in the corner is Mac.”

Spike was obviously named that because of the whole missing right arm she had, replaced by a nasty looking prosthetic that was a Lovecraftian amalgamation of a hook and a serrated blade. Other than the cruel weapon and the sadistic gleam in her eye though, Spike seemed perfectly cordial. Mac really was huge, and Dawn wondered if human/Qunari breeding was possible because she simply could not reconcile the man’s proportions with the standard humans she saw here. Maybe back on Earth she’d believe it as steroids, but here he was an anomaly.

“Hello Chargers.” She waved and gave a shy feeling smile. She’d been good at socializing, once. Seemed that it was a perishable skill though because she felt wildly out of her depth; lacking anything else to do, she drank again. The beer here was cloudy tasting, damn near chewable actually, but after the third deep drink, not that bad. And unlike last time she didn't plan on mixing drinks.

Thankfully she was saved from having to say anything by the arrival of more people. Varric came in and threw himself into a chair, groaning as if he’d been dragged all over the Frostbacks as opposed to coming here from the Main Hall. At least she suddenly realized why the shirt she now had looked so familiar; it was one of Varric’s cast offs. They both seemed to realize it at the same time, looking down at their near identical tunics and back up. “If I knew it was this easy to get into your clothes Varric, I would have done it sooner.” She joked.

“Any time you want Sweetheart,” Varric winked at her, “and I am all yours.”

“The moment I feel like fighting a crossbow for your affections, you will be the first to know.” Dawn countered easily and Varric laughed along with everyone else.
"As if I were that easy to seduce." He huffed jokingly.

"Oh no Varric, I'm just that good." she promised with a shrug.

“I definitely want to hear more.” Varric grinned.

“I'm the kind of girl that taught herself a new language to seduce the man that became her husband. If I wanted you, you'd be mine.” Dawn winked, only a slight wash of pain at referencing Larry. Actually that might be a strained muscle; she tried to stretch out her shoulders discreetly, but there was no way to work the knots free and not look like she was uncomfortable.

Conversation flowed naturally even when she had no clue to what was actually being discussed, and she was at the bottom of her first stein of beer but her body was saying nasty things to her; like 'ow', and 'this was a bad idea'. Dawn shifted as little as possible, figuring that no one would notice, but she forgot about how damn observant The Iron Bull was.

“Dawn, sit.” He commanded, setting a crate in front of him and pointing at it. Dawn immediately shook her head negative, smiling as she did so. There was no way she was going to sit that close to him, not while remembering naked Qunari.

“No, I am ok The Iron Bull, thank you though.” She politely declined when he frowned at her.

The look on his face changed only subtly but suddenly she felt her fight and flight responses go all screwy; he hadn’t even blinked yet. “We both know you need a good swat on the ass but this is not the time and place to provoke me.” He warned in Qunlat and she found herself on her feet.

Varric and the others immediately roared with laughter. “I don’t know what he said but by the look on her face I’d say it worked.” He remarked.

“Hey Sugar, shut it.” Dawn called out but didn’t dare turn away from The Iron Bull’s impatient stare. More laughter sounded from everyone but the Qunari.

“Little Bas I’m waiting.” The Iron Bull warned and Dawn’s feet betrayed her by moving forwards. She slid onto the crate in front of him, submitting her shoulders to his care.

The Iron Bull pressed his thumb into something along her spine and Dawn let out an aborted little gasp. The Qunari behind her froze for a second but then immediately dug his thumb into the same spot and Dawn wiggled to avoid the sensation. “Ah shit.” She whined a little and tried to bolt away from the necessary pain, but The Iron Bull had her hair wrapped around his fist faster than she could escape.

“Tactical disadvantage Little Bas.” He tugged her hair to reinforce his statement. So Dawn did the only thing that came to mind, she bit his hand. It didn't work; he just laughed at her in a friendly manner. “You’re already shaking with exhaustion Little Bas; I’m not going to chase you around and waste the rest of it. Hold.” He finally released her hair and Dawn pulled a mocking face where he couldn't see it.

Dawn was just settling when Victoria Hawke arrived with Merrill in tow and she couldn't help stiffening up. A light tug to some of her hair and then The Iron Bull leaned forward enough to whisper in her ear, "Don't be obvious Little Bas. Hold." And then he continued to massage at her suddenly very tense shoulders again.

"Are you going to sing again?" Varric asked easily but almost everyone within hearing reacted obviously.
Dawn smiled and flushed. "Do I owe anyone here a song?" she challenged, knowing the answer.

"Not yet." Krem cheerily countered and Dawn laughed.

She felt a little panicked, stuck in front of The Iron Bull and trying to act casual but wanting to run from Hawke. It had been hard to talk to Alistair, but Dawn had been able to mostly manage it. Because although in the games she could romance the Alibear, she had BEEN Hawke. Talking to Krem helped Dawn ignore the Kirkwall crew but the moment the Iron Bull stopped massaging her she was out of there like a shot. Her nerves certainly were.

Chapter End Notes

Translation
Qunlat
Arividdath= Healer

Happy #420 for those that are into that!
Hawke Tackles a Difficult Dawn

Chapter Summary

Dawn could only run for so long before Hawke would catch her, Cassandra finds herself still writing letters.

Chapter Notes

edited on Aug 27 2018

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the Champion had left her, Cassandra had wasted time trying to decide what to do. She finally folded the crumpled letter away entirely and took the stairs down to the exit. It was late evening and of course Kaaras wasn't still at the training grounds trying to find her. Frankly Cassandra felt ridiculous that she thought he might have for even a moment. But as a flutter caught her attention, she realized that he really had come looking for her.

There was a torn piece of parchment stabbed by a pin into one of her training dummies. Cassandra gave a huff after a slight hesitation and then approached, seeing the folded paper had Seeker scrawled on the outside in the Healer's familiar scrawl.

Seeker,

I missed you. Here. I missed you here.

Barbarians made it back a day later than hoped for.

Be seeing you,

Healer

Cassandra read the note twice, distracted by the scratched out passage. And then she carefully folded it back up, tucked it into her pocket and strode off to her rooms. No matter the mess of confusion the short letter had raised, Cassandra would have to deal with it in the morning.

An hour later she found herself penning a quick reply and finding one of Leliana's Junior Runners to take it out to the the camp for her with a coin as the reward.

Healer

welcome home

Seeker

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Dawn woke jarringly quick, an astringent smell under her nostrils shattering her drowsiness apart. Dawn's next breath gasped in as she saw a white haired woman with a dagger gleaming in low candlelight.

"Make a sound and I'll slit your throat." Victoria Hawke warned. The Champion of Kirkwall looked entirely at ease with both the weapon and the promise to use it. "You and I need to have a little talk, so get up, get dressed, and come along nicely."

Dawn swallowed dryly and carefully nodded. She'd honestly avoided Hawke and Merrill, but Victoria had clearly noticed and was making the next move herself. Dawn scrambled into whatever pants and shirt she came across first, boots getting pulled on but not tied. It was unlikely that this was a friendly visit but Dawn doubted that Hawke planned to kill her outright so Dawn grabbed the sword she barely knew on how to use and belted it on while Victoria watched in open amusement.

"Well you have guts, I'll give you that." Hawke complimented.

*You said no noise, not not weapons* Dawn used ASL even though Hawke couldn't understand it. Her bloodshot eyes narrowed, and a scarily intense look of suspicion filled Hawke's face. "That looks like Rivaini's finger words."

Dawn felt her eyebrows jump. "Basically, used by people that are hard of hearing or deaf." She kept her voice low, answering the unasked question.

"Or used by pirates and spies to communicate silently." Hawke countered. Dawn nodded her agreement, realizing she may actually have a practical skill from Earth finally.

Since Dawn wasn't actually putting up a fight Hawke put away her blade. Not that she couldn't get her weapons out before Dawn could blink anyways, but Dawn knew to keep a remark like that to herself. Red, blue, or purple, not a single Hawke would be able to resist a challenge like that. Victoria didn't speak as she led Dawn away from her new room, winding around the windy battlements until she ended up on the roof of the Herald's Rest with only the stars as witness.

"Drink this." Hawke thrust at her a small, cork stoppered vial that was a sinister shade of neon yellow.

"I promised The Iron Bull I would go to him before I did anything fatal to myself; I am not drinking your poison." Dawn carefully enunciated the sentence, utterly serious.

Again Hawke watched her with an intensity that was honestly hawk-like. Apparently satisfied with whatever she found on Dawn's face Victoria settled back, rolling the vial between her palms. "It's a truth serum. So far no one seems willing to do the obvious to verify your stories."

It wasn't hard to tell Victoria Hawke came from noble blood; the aristocratic nose and elegant mouth were the work of careful breeding but the sky smirk and humour were all Hawke.

"Problem with your plan Hawke." Dawn felt herself starting to smile despite the strangeness of her morning so far. A carefully sculpted eyebrow arched upwards and Hawke gestured for Dawn to explain. "This is not my native language. So truth serum," Dawn really hoped she guessed at that translation right, "can make me tell the truth but I can just do so in my language. You still get nothing." And then Dawn sweated like never before in her life as Hawke just glared at her.

"Oh you're good; I like you." Hawke's voice was warm and all the scariness from a moment ago vanished. So did the vial. "You can assume that Varric has told me everything, so I have a question for you. Is what you said about his Bianca, not the crossbow, true?"
"I maybe made her arrival sound closer than it is. Months, not weeks. But yes, she is going to betray him again." Dawn felt bad having to admit.

Victoria glared out at the early morning dark, mulling the information around. "I knew about her before all this, believe it or not." Hawke winked at Dawn's evident surprise. "Oh yes. See she made impromptu incursions into his life before. Though Varric didn't know I knew; he always thought he was being so slick. But I'm an elder sibling that had to deal with a sullen asshole and a fledgling Mage as they went through puberty; I snooped. So you having his back on this, on not letting her worm her way back into his life has bought you some good will. Now stop fucking avoiding me like the plague. Poor Merrill thinks you hate her."

Dawn stared at Hawke, head rushing with elation and apprehension equally. She'd never once dared think that Hawke, the Hawke, would like her let alone believe her. But she'd been avoiding the Champion because now that she was here it was hard for Dawn to not get attached to her and Alistair even more. At least the King was easier to avoid.

"Varric said you have that detailed oversight for the past too." The first glimmering of sunrise was starting in the mountains.

"Maybe, it depends on what lies Varric told to Cassandra after you ran." Dawn had to admit.

"None of those were your fault." Dawn started with the truth. "An ogre killed Carver, and Bethany is a Warden, not dead. Leandra was killed by a serial killer. None of that is your fault."

Dawn recognized the look on Hawke's face, she'd seen her friends give the exact same expression after being given advice; someone had told her all of this before. "No I didn't murder my family personally," her tone was curt. "But my failures led to their deaths."

"Maybe," Dawn shrugged, "By that reasoning my failure killed my husband." Now it was Hawke's turn to stare at her in surprise. "He was deaf; he couldn't hear the demon coming. I should have been watching his back."

"Weren't you literally dropped here right before that?" Victoria countered.

"Wasn't Carver a trained Warrior in the army before the ogre?" Dawn turned it right back around.

Now Hawke groaned and flopped back, seeming completely uncaring of the drop a foot away. "Aveline likes to point that out to me too." Dawn carefully settled into a more comfortable position to enjoy the sunrise. "And Anders always tried to remind me that a Warden Mage was a lot safer and more free than any other kind. But not a single person can convince me that Mother's death wasn't my fault. If I had taken Emeric's concerns seriously then I would have caught the son of a bitch before he could hurt her." There was a snarl in her voice that hid tears.

"I know." Dawn didn't try to argue. "In all possible stories, Leandra dies and you are a lone Hawke. The Arishok always attacks the city, and Bartrand always betrays you in the deep roads."

"The highlights of my life," she couldn't have slathered more scorn into her voice.
"A life in three parts." Dawn agreed. "But you are Leandra's legacy. Even if you think your failure caused her death, you represent the best of her left in the world. You and Bethany both."

Hawke was silent for a long while after Dawn's comment, pensive but not sullen seeming. "Shit." She finally broke the muted quiet. Down below the Upper Bailey was showing signs of life. "You know, no one's ever put it quite like that before. My mother's fucking legacy; a human disaster and a Warden Mage."

"Could be worse," Dawn pointed out, "You could be without your Kirkwall crew."

"And what would I be without my trusty Dwarf?" Hawke laughed off the serious topic.

"Forgotten." Dawn realized their time was up. "I need to go, I have training with The Iron Bull."

"I like at how my kidnap victim is telling me she's leaving." Victoria spoke to the open air.

"You make me late, you get to deal with The Iron Bull." Dawn warned.

"Considering the fact that he's been listening in on this whole thing, I suspect that I'll have to deal with the Qunari regardless." The smirk on Hawke's face was self satisfied.

"You and yours blew up Kirkwall, I got a little suspicious when I saw you sneaking around." His voice easily reached them, shocking Dawn. She'd honestly thought Hawke was pulling her leg. "Little Bas, you have five minutes or you're late."

"Shit." Dawn didn't think about arguing; she'd seen Skinner get mouthy about being late and then the Charger was stuck with cleaning everyone's gear, for a week.

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The Iron Bull didn't watch Dawn's rapid retreat, his eye never leaving the lethal blonde in front of him. Victoria Hawke, basalit-an Switched her focus off of Dawn and back to him. The human in front of him had killed the Arishok in single combat, he would not underestimate her lethality.

"So are you why she was so reluctant to approach me?" Hawke easily demanded.

"No." he didn't elaborate.

"Are we going to have a problem, Qunari?" She spoke as sharp as her blades were.

"No." his repetitive answer made her eyebrow twitch in irritation. Victoria Hawke wore every emotion on her face without hesitation. There was an orgy of indicators all screaming her inner thought process out to those that would just look. It was going to be interesting having the Champion around.

"Little Bas?" She asked as he turned away.

"Champion?" He shot back and she stayed silent as he walked away.

By the time he made it to the training grounds Dawn had already joined Krem's warm up. She hadn't gone back to her room to change, evident by the adorably mismatched light shirt and remarkably vivid blue plaid weave. It was closer to an outfit Sera would typically wear, but she was here on time so he didn't say a thing. Krem sent her over to him once she was ready.

"You did well Little Bas." He wasn't just meaning her getting here on time. He'd caught sight of Hawke sneaking into the Tower and he'd followed along as discretely as possible. Things had
almost gotten very messy when he realized she was confronting Dawn, but Bull had had to take that gamble. It wasn't likely Hawke would kill Dawn, today at least.

"I've never been kidnapped before, it was less scary than I thought." Dawn grinned up at him impudently.

She'd been absolutely right about her native language helping negate the truth serum; re-educators were known to speak multiple languages as a counter measure to that. And it left Bull wondering how hard it would be to learn hers; he'd heard the Kid use a phrase or two, and several phrases Dawn habitually used he could guess at already. But being smart wouldn't save her from enough determined opponents if her body wasn't ready too.

"Let's get to work." He couldn't take it easy on her just because he was proud of her. She needed him to get her battle ready, for what battle she wouldn't tell him, or when, or where; but he knew the scope based in the helpless terror in her eyes when she stopped to think for too long. Some nightmare haunted Dawn that she felt she couldn't speak of, but he was going to make her ready for it. Even if Bull wasn't even sure he would be.

Chapter End Notes

Translation
Qunlat
Basalit-an= term of respect used for non Qunari
Cedric sat on the railing of the library, bottle of wine dangling between his fingers. Even with the plain faced mage's rotunda doors opened for air circulation, this remained one of the quieter areas. There were so many humans around suddenly; Tarasy’lan Te’las felt uncomfortably crowded. And gaudishly human. He drank, tipping the bottle and his body carefully.

He’d witnessed Satinalia celebrations before; Clan Lavellan often shared space with human settlements more than Elvhen ones, but he had never been surrounded by so many of their nobility before. It didn't improve his estimation of the human ruling class any.

"Have we scared the crude pagan from our midst?" the pretty Tevinter came searching.

"Were you trying?" Cedric lazily countered.

Dorian plucked the bottle from Cedric's hands and drank. "Please, if I drove all the pagans from that party I'd be alone." He deprecated easily.

"A Prince like you surely stands alone always anyways." Cedric stayed on the rail while Dorian leaned back against a book shelf.

"The lone Tevinter amongst a sea of heathens and peasants." Dorian saluted with gold encircled fingers to his well groomed eyebrows.

Cedric smiled indulgently and with a curl of magic retrieved the wine bottle from the Necromancer. "Well you can share my company Dorian Pavus though I can't promise to not be a heathen." He felt it was only fair to warn the man.

"Clearly." Dorian agreed with a slight smile, "Though I have to admit watching these so called nobles try to manoeuvre around an ink covered Dalish," he winked, "is awfully entertaining."

"Should I really scare them and show what a First can do?" Cedric didn't move from his perch, recognizing the hypothetical nature of their game.
"I don't think I would survive that my friend." Dorian laughed.

"I've seen farmholders quietly gather and free cities celebrate, and now a defiant Inquisition entertains nobles like it's business as usual," Cedric's non-sequitor left Dorian frowning, puzzled but listening. "How did House Pavus celebrate Satinalia?"

There was definitely a tinge of bitterness to the Death Mage's smile, "House Pavus is no doubt either hosting or being hosted by the most in favour currently. An ostentatious display of piety and generosity disguising yet another feint for Power. Life in the Magisterium's ever watchful eye made for interesting lessons of how to ditch said parties." Back to coy and charming; Cedric hated to admit it to himself but he was enjoying the peacock's company and not just his pretty moustache.

"And what does Dorian Pavus like to do to celebrate?" the wine bottle floated into the air, supported by the First's curl of magic.

"I definitely approve of your choice in wine Cedric, and I commend your good sense to leave the bothersome behind." He smirked at the insult.

"I sense a but coming and not in the fun way." Cedric prodded when the Altus fell quiet instead of his usual chatting.

Dorian surprised him by laughed softly, actually seeming to capitulate under Cedric's relentless patience. "I feel crass complaining about missing home to a man who can't go home." His honesty caught Cedric entirely by surprise. "I'm choosing to stay away from my family while you have to be away from your family to protect your son."

Cedric nodded, understanding the man's words but knowing there was something else. Dorian clearly felt guilty for something, or else why wound he seem so conflicted? "What else?" Cedric pressed.

"My father tried to offer peace and apologies." Dorian finally admitted, physically taking the bottle of wine.

Now Cedric left the railing, stepping closer but not crowding. "Depending on his sins, that might not be simple." The First tested carefully.

Dorian's laugh was so bitter it bled. "Quite. He betrayed every good thing I ever believed about him because who I... Am offended him that much. I'm sorry just somehow isn't enough." He stared down at the empty bottle in his well manicured hands.

"And you're angry at yourself for ever believing in him in the first place." Cedric astutely guessed. Dorian looked at him in surprise. "The people we love are as fallible and prone to failure as we are Dorian. You're a grown man with a wealth of experience in the world, I don't have to reassure you of your judgement." Cedric tilted his head and shoulders, feet shuffling until he walked towards the exterior exit to the Library Tower, seeing Dorian following along in his peripheral. The Tevinter was missing home but Cedric guessed that the glittering party being held inside still felt too alike home but also too different for the Death Mage to ignore, so the Lavellan took the Pavus to the Valo-Kas.

"Hello the Camp!" Cedric called out absolutely ignoring all of Dorian's inquiries as the taller mage followed Cedric out.

"Yellow Elf, welcome back." Katoh intoned unironically. The female Warrior was painfully undiplomatic; it was quite bracing.
"May we join the Valo-Kas for Satinalia celebrations? I come bearing wine." He promised, hands absolutely empty.

"Cedric?" Dorian prodded, annoyed disbelief in his tone.

"Are you prepared to behave like proper Bas then, and do what you're told?" she demanded.

Cedric laughed as Dorian sputtered, neither man needing that word translated. "Never my fine stub horned friend," he deliberately referenced her lopsidedness. "But I am willing to shamelessly bribe you like the filthy heathen that I am." And suddenly he had an unopened bottle of Rivaini whiskey in his hands; behind him the Tevinter peacock fell silent, able to feel the curl of magic Cedric had used. The First wondered just many questions the Necromancer had about the impossibility he'd just done; Dread Wolf knows Istimaethorial had a dozen the first time he'd demonstrated it to her.

But Katoh had the magical sensitivity of most blunt weapons. She took the bottle without comment to Cedric's rudeness or attitude and waved them on in with a straight face. Right up until she slowly winked at Dorian and Cedric lost it, laughing. He'd dropped by the Valo-Kas camp, refusing to lose a contact like that and willing to trade stories for their entertainment. He and Katoh got along well.

"The food is done, dancing hasn't started yet. Get moving demon-bait." Katoh urged them on, remaining at their sentry duty. Even in the middle of an allied army the Valo-Kas remained ready.

"How in the name of the disgraced Old Gods did you carry that in the Fade with you?" Dorian hissed in a low voice.

"I didn't." Cedric winked and had two bottles in his hands without a single flourish.

"Vishante Kaffas." The Tevinter cursed, drawing attention.

"Did you see Dawn while you were carousing?" the Healer wondered, greeting them with a worried frown.

"The last I saw of the Offworlder, she was being entertained by Master Tethras." Dorian spoke up.

"I should invite them down to this too." Kaaras suddenly announced. And despite Cedric's expectations, Shokrakar actually encouraged it.

"The more the merrier?" he wondered out loud, looking to the pregnant Gray One.

"The Valo-Kas don't gorge like the squishy humans like to do; eating until they sleep. We face the longest night on our feet, keeping the dark at bay." She carefully instructed.

"I like the sounds of that." Cedric complimented immediately.

"It certainly isn't the worst way I've ever spent a night." Dorian remarked more obliquely.

"Are either of you musical?" Kaaris, the poet, drew their attention. The bottles Cedric had offered were already opened and passed around.

"Drums, pipes, I'm not a great singer." The First admitted with a shrug.

"I'm more of a listener than a music maker." The peacock declined. Cedric kept his face polite but he wondered if the human was lying. He was extremely well bred and expensively educated, Cedric suspected musical training was a part of that. But he didn't call the Necromancer out.

"Excellent, you can pick up the beat quickly and help set the stage for the dancing." The Valo-Kas
"So the goal is to make noise until the sun comes up again?" Dorian carefully asked.

"I would guess. What's wrong Ara galant, think you can't keep up? " Cedric flourished yet another bottle.

Dorian laughed, exasperated and amused; taking the bottle. And with a flourish of magic pulled the cork out. "My fine Dalish friend," the Death Mage's smile turned arrogant, "I'll show you how well versed I am at raging against the night."

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It didn't take a charming, neigh-genius like Varric to realize that the only person at his table more uncomfortable than Seeker Cassandra, was poor Dawn. He could see the need to run away from this party very quickly growing in her eyes; Maker knows he saw it anytime he tried to take Hawke to a fancy party. He did not understand that woman sometimes; she loved the feeling of rich fabrics and looked amazing in fancy clothes but hated the culture that called for their use.

Cassandra seemed to share Hawke's distaste for parties, though the Seeker seemed born to wear steel instead of silk. And the scowl on her face actually managed to be more disgruntled than even Broody could manage. To be fair, there were a lot of Orlesian fans in the room so that might bias his tolerance for the whole kaboodle.

Suddenly Cassandra looked startled, not alarmed but if she hadn't been clearly looking behind him Varric was going to think he'd spilled food in his chesthair. "Healer Kaaras, is everything well with the Valo-Kas?" the Seeker sounded more than just politely curious and Varric blinked. Huh.

The Vashoth mercenary grinned at them, body relaxed and easy so Varric didn't get worked up. "Seeker Pentaghast, Master Tethras, Dawn." He greeted in a friendly tone. "The Valo-Kas are celebrating, actually that's why I'm here."

Varric fought to keep the grin off if his face. Although the Healer was trying to turn his focus to Dawn, the kid's feet were still aimed at the Seeker. Wasn't that interesting?

"It's a tradition for us to celebrate until sunrise so I was going to invite anyone interested in sharing our traditions." The Healer even managed to include Varric.

See inside Tal Vashoth parties? They couldn't keep him from coming now that he knew they existed. "I would love to Fix-It." He readily agreed.

"I'm in." Dawn nodded with a smile.

Varric could tell right away that the Seeker was going to say no; she didn't know how to have a good time. And maybe he was a romantic fool afterall but if the Healer had a crush, he was rooting for him. "Don't be such a stick in the mud Seeker." He pestered.

Cassandra automatically rolled her eyes and gave her usual annoyed grunt but didn't reject the idea outright.

And then the Healer nailed it. "It's alright Seeker Cassandra, even if there are no training dummies to batter I think you'd still like it."

Varric was trying to remain invisible; absolutely gleeful to have an up close seat to witness the expressions on Cassandra's face. He saw singed offence, angry denial, disdainful nonchalance,
confusion, and just a touch of curiosity.

"I will be the judge of what I do and do not find enjoyable Healer Kaaras." she defied. "Let's see if your Valo-Kas celebrations measure up."

Varric’s laugh was barely caught in time. He couldn't write a scene this trite, no one would believe anyone talked like this. But when he snuck a look at Dawn, the absolutely stunned look on her face ruined him. At the first snicker, all eyes were shifted to him and Varric was laughing. Hawke was missing out; supposedly spending a quiet evening with Merrill but he knew she was still uncomfortable around Orlesians. Outside her duel with the Arishok, Prosper had come the closest to killing her slowly. If Victoria wanted to avoid Orlesian parties after that, he actually wasn't going to complain. He'd go to keep up appearances.

"What should we bring besides our marvellous selves?" Varric decided not to explain his laughter.

Kaaras smiled and his eyes flickered to the bottle of brandy Varric was presiding over. "Gutsy Fix-It, gutsy." Varric complimented and grabbed the bottle. "Anything else grab your interest?"

And Varric nearly dropped the damn bottle when he saw the Healer's eyes actually flick to the Seeker before he turned away without answering. And Varric wasn't the only one to see it. He grabbed Dawn's sleeve as they all stood, slowing her down so Fix-It and the Seeker could walk ahead together. She gave him another look that screamed 'did I just see that?' and Varric fought more laughter.

"Play it cool Sweetheart, I want to see what happens next." He advised quietly and she nodded her complicity.

Ahead Kaaras led them quickly out of Skyhold proper and took them to the camps where the sounds of erratic drumming tapped out. Varric could already tell he was going to like this party.

"When did this happen?" Dawn quietly asked him, indicating the adorably bickering Seeker and Healer. Something about training dummies and aggression. He wished he brought writing tools with him, this was a goldmine of material for his next book. Especially since he'd learned Cassandra was a secret fan.

"I have no idea," he reluctantly admitted, "but I definitely want to find out."

"It's good for her. She lost someone special at the Conclave too." Dawn spoke soft enough Varric knew she didn't think he could head her over the drumming.

"So Sweetheart, I hear you and Hawke are finally talking." Varric prompted, filing her odd comment away for later. Who had the Seeker lost besides the Divine?

"She kidnapped me!" for just a moment Varric felt the age difference between them; her sudden almost giddy exclamation had an innocence to it he'd lost a decade ago. "I'm not going to avoid her or Merrill anymore but I don't know how to apologize."

"Don't," Varric laughed. "Daisy'll just be glad to meet you and Hawke is... Hawke."

"She really is." Dawn smiled back as they entered the party proper.

Varric was surprised to find Crunchy here, but not surprised to find Dorian with the Elf. He'd definitely picked up on the flirting between those two in Crestwood but they were in a strange dance, and Varric had a bet going with Hawke and Tiny on how long before they gained traction.
The strange throbbing drumbeat proved to be one of the almost lavender Vashoth playing, a Rogue judging on the dart pipe belted at their waist. In the middle was a neatly laid but unlit box shaped fire with some scraps of paper thrown in the centre.

"Good timing, we're about to burn our sorrows!" Taarlok called out, chucking a small leather bundle at Kaaras.

The Healer returned his attention to include Varric and Dawn now, a shy seeming smile on his face. "Ah, we write down all the things in the last year that are weighing us down; failures, lost loved ones, things we meant to do and didn't, and then we burn them. The light they give off starts our vigil against the dark and let's us accept that the way forward starts by letting go of the past." He explained simply, unrolling the leather to show scrap papers and small charcoal pencils.

Varric could see Dawn frowning a little, but it wasn't a melancholic look. "Spit it out Sweetheart, I'm as confused by this as you are." He prompted.

"It's not a question Sugar, I was just realizing that I don't actually know as much as I sometimes assume." Dawn took her scrap paper and charcoal almost reverently.

"Welcome to adulthood; we're all actually clueless but we put on a good show of acting like we know what we're doing." Varric laughed, his humour putting a small smile on her again.

"And then you say something like that and I feel right at home." Dawn laughed softly, bending her attention to writing her sorrows.

Varric happened to be close enough to where Dorian and Cedric were to overhear the Tevinter remark, "Our very fine Commander and the Ambassador had an interesting conversation with Solas about just that."

Crunchy made a confused face as he passed around a wine bottle. "And why would the Commander and Ambassador go to the plainface about Dawn making Tarasy’lan Te’las her home?" those two were so oblivious to anything but each other for a moment that Varric actually got his hands on the wine without them realizing it.

"Solas was the one to help her after her collapse, hadn't you heard?" Dorian queried and Varric wondered if it were just the firelight that made Cedric look so concerned.

"I...had, just didn't wholly believe it." Cedric muttered as Dawn tossed her scrap of paper into the pile for burning.

Varric hastily scribbled his own sorrows and regrets to let go of and tossed them in too, hoping no one had noticed his casual overlistening. Thankfully everyone was too occupied with watching Dawn for signs of another break. Interestingly enough, she seemed aware of the scrutiny and consciously chose to ignore it.

"Alright Dawn what are you drinking tonight?" Varric challenged deliberately, seeing Cedric's ears all but perk up at the familiar conversation line.

"No." Dawn flat out stated and Varric laughed.

"You're not not trying to get her to drink that filth are you?" Cedric interrupted, actually leaning across Dorian to chastise Varric. "You're much better off with-"

"No." Dawn was clearly trying to look tough but he could see laughter bubbling up.
"What's this?" Kaaras settled nearby.

"The last time Cedric, Varric, and The Iron Bull had me try and decide what drink I preferred out of the ones they were drinking, I woke up on Cedric's bed with a hideous hangover and a vomit bucket." Dawn confessed and Varric felt a little bit guilty for laughing.

"Did you at least find something you like?" Kasaanda invited herself to the conversation. Varric had seen the Vashoth Necromancer getting cozy with Sera before the Valo-Kas had gotten sent out but the Archer wasn't here now.

"The Iron Bull was drinking Maaras-Lok, I'm not even sure I COULD taste anything after that." Dawn shrugged and several Valo-Kas actually flinched. Maybe next time Varric should steal a taste for himself.

"That just means we have to try again Sweetheart." Varric warned and she groaned in preemptive misery.

"That sounds like a marvellous plan my hairy chested Durgen'len friend." Cedric agreed and Dorian just laughed at the pair of them scheming over the miserable acting Dawn.

"No..." this time Dawn whined the word which just only made a few of the Valo-Kas laugh. "I really can't be hungover for training tomorrow morning. If I puke on The Iron Bull he'll make me do burpees." she used an unfamiliar word but that's not what Varric wanted to ask about.

"What are you training with that hulking Qunari for?" Dorian demanded with a scoffing tone.

Something about Dawn's return smile seemed a little strange; Varric wasn't the only one picking up on it either. "I asked him to train me to defend myself." If that wasn't a carefully worded answer Varric would eat his boots.

"Well don't worry da'len," Cedric piped up, "I can promise you won't be hung over tomorrow. You'll still be drunk." He promised and flourished a bottle of wine from an empty hand.

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None of the little or young ones had noticed Shokrakar leaving, Kaaras and the others all boisterous and settling in fine with the Valo-Kas. The Healer Adaar had surprised her by bringing not only their errant Dawn back, but the Seeker and Dwarf too. But as the little Elf had said, 'the more the merrier.'

When she had abandoned the Qun and the original title she'd borne, Shokrakar had found that the Vashoth she encountered didn't suffer the same issues the Tal Vashoth invariably did. Her people didn't know how to make choices for themselves, and the Vashoth born outside the Qun didn't know how to fit into a world not willing to accept them. For her Valo-Kas, Shokrakar had tried to give them the ritual and structure Qunari needed but with the expression and freedom the Qun could never embrace. It helped, at least she really liked to believe it did.

Shokrakar knew that being a Qunari drew a lot of attention at the best of times; the fact that she was clearly waddling with pregnancy didn't help. But thankfully no one wanted to be bothered leaving their own festivities to pester her; as long as she stayed away from the Main Hall. Not even on her best day did she want to go rub elbows with that many human nobles. Especially since her elbow was too temptingly forehead height. Instead she strode into the Herald's Rest knowing the one she wanted to speak to would be there. As soon as The Iron Bull spotted her, he was on his feet and following her back out the door. He knew well enough that she wouldn't seek him out for
nothing; she had taught him better than that. Shokrakar seeking him out was its own red flag.

"So you are training Dawn," Shokrakar finally spoke after they were away from listening ears.

His face went unreadable, as if the effort of maintaining facial expressions was too much for him with just the two of them. "I am." He confirmed carefully, body carefully angled as if this wasn't his first confrontation over his new hobby.

"That's a bad idea for you, you should get someone else to do it." Her statement clearly put his back up. It was only in how deliberately he blinked after her words, but it was still a tell. Shokrakar kept the smile off of her face, she might not have been his Besrathari for well over a decade now but she still knew him well enough.

The Iron Bull stayed silent for a precise moment longer. "I don't take orders from you any longer, Shokrakar." He rumbled at her, but Shokrakar just smiled. It was likely unpleasant looking.

"No, Hisrad, you don't. But you are still taking orders." she calmly pointed out but grunted as the little beastie in her belly shifted over. "You're not there yet Ashkaari. Soon, but not yet. I taught you too well for me to believe you're not going to behave in certain ways, you were already this way before they made you Hisrad." He gave her a dark look and she held up a had to forestall his arguement. "If I think for a second you're using skills I've taught you to hurt her though, being heavily pregnant will not stop me from showing you exactly what I think of that."

"If you're done with the lecture, I plan to spend the rest of the night with my Chargers. Goodnight." He turned to walk away but stopped for one last comment, "My business with Dawn is my own."

"I really wish you believed that Ashkaari."  she admitted sadly before watching him walk off. Her task completed, Shokrakar returned to her own mercenaries and guests.

The fire was already started, those that wished to share the burdens they were giving up having already done so. Currently Cedric was entertaining the Valo-Kas with a drum and a story about his missing Gods. Shokrakar had to pause, enjoying the sight of her people celebrating and stretching a cramp in her back. The Valo-Kas had been Vashoth and Tal Vashoth only because that was easier, but she could see how well her people adjusted to Dwarves, humans, and even the Dalish. And it would give them a greater range of jobs once they were back on missions; a thought for later.

"So wait, is that how this works? We all take turns until sunrise?" Dawn asked as Cedric wrapped up his tale.

"Some years." Kasaanda shrugged her answer, taking a drink but seeming a little low energy compared to normal, "but some years we get rowdier. Really depends on where we are and who we're with."

"I want to know what your definition of rowdy is." the hairy Dwarf demanded with a teasing laugh.

"No. No you don't." Kaaras suddenly interrupted, going so far as to jump on his sister to keep her from going into graphic detail.

"Now I have to know Fix-It." The Dwarf laughed and Shokrakar settled into her spot like she'd never left.

The Seeker gave a grunt and an eyeroll but didn't actually spit. "Varric sometimes your depravity knows no bounds."

"Ah shucks Seeker, and here I thought you hadn't noticed my depravity at all." Varric countered
and Shokrakar tried to remember his name this time.

But Kaaras and Kasaanda were devolving into their usual sibling scuffle and the Valo-Kas all pulled the new spectators back.

Kaaras had tackled Kasaanda soundly, muffling her comments successfully for now but she fought back quickly. For a pair of mages, they always remembered to keep their fight contained and non lethal. And it made a damn good show.

The frozen grown split and mud bubbled until vines lashed out, wrapping around Kaaras' neck. Suddenly Seeker Cassandra was on her feet and about to interfere.

"Looks like you girl is coming to save you." Kasaanda grunted in Qunlat. Before either Seeker or sister could react though, Kaaras had burned the vines away and twisted his sister onto her stomach.

"I'm alright Cassandra, thank you." Kaaras even managed to get out as the real fight started.

"You might want to step back through Seeker." Shokrakar suggested, her smirk hidden. It seemed the interest went both ways, so she didn't have to worry. If they all managed to keep living, maybe the kids would get somewhere with it.

Kasaanda bucked Kaaras off, somersaulting them further apart. Watching the twins wrestle could be damned difficult when they were in identical dress because their colouration was so close already. Generally it was only the extra forty pounds and two inches of reach that let Kaaras win these ground fights; at least until Kasaanda went back to magic, but for now the two were taking lazy swipes at each others hands as they crouched and circled.

"Rowdy often means grudge settling fights." Kasaanda actually started to explain for the Dwarf Varric.

"Shove off Tadwinks." Kaaras hissed and feinted. Surprisingly Kasaanda stiffened up obviously so Kaaras turned a fake into a real grab and ended up twisting his awkwardly unprepared sister into a throw. Kaaras made sure she didn't land bad, but he didn't pull the move, seeming to be as aware as Shokrakar that there was something up with Kasaanda. "For the love of good beer, what is wrong for you?" Kaaras smartly switched to Qunlat, using Kasaanda's clumsy attempts to get her in a solid pinned choke hold. Only way out was him letting go, and as stubborn as Kasaanda could be Kaaras could match it.

"Shit, does anyone understand what they're saying?" Varric complained in the background.

Kasaanda endured, slowly choking out while her vines flailed and Kaaras simply fried them to dust. He didn't always win their fights, but it was a forgone conclusion the moment Kasaanda got distracted; even Shokrakar knew her magic took total concentration while Kaaras' was all about letting go.

Despite the curious audience, Kaaras crouched off his twin and she sat up. "She didn't miss me." Only Kaaras and Shokrakar were close enough to hear; maybe the Dalish with ears like that.

"Oh Stinkweed, of course she did. You just need patience." Kaaras quietly cheered.

"And how do you know that?" She grumped back to Trade, not as used to speaking primarily in Qunlat.

Kaaras tilted his head and bumped their horns together, an oddly loud clack as she bumped back.
"I'm smarter and better looking than you; I just know these things." And he dodged backwards with a laugh as Kasaanda took an obligatory swat at him. "Go find her then; but you're rushing things." He gestured for her to go, but for once it seemed the volatile Adaar was going to listen to reason; she sat back down at her seat.

"Hey Sweetheart, how about a song now?" Varric called out after a moment of silence and Dawn rolled her eyes with a laugh.

"I still don't owe you a song Sugar." She shook her head negative with a grin.

"I heard your singing," the Seeker spoke up to everyone's surprise, "it was lovely." The simple compliment made Dawn flush an entertaining colour.

"Surely you can manage one song for all of us, you know; something we've never heard before?" The Dwarf was persistent. He was also lucky that Shokrakar wanted to hear little Dawn sing.

"Dawn, sing us your favourite song." Shokrakar spoke up and saw all her people eagerly shuffle closer. The only thing the Valo-Kas liked better than a good fight was a good song.

"Ah," she was taken aback but seemed to recover quickly. "Well its a love song so take of that what you will." She shrugged but stopped arguing.

Shokrakar could tell by how Dawn was holding herself that she'd done several training sessions with Ashkaari already; she looked sore. But still Dawn sat lit by the fire, closed her eyes, and sang; her voice rough from no proper warm up. Surprisingly Dawn sang in Common, able to translate the song that quickly.

What would I do without your smart mouth? Drawing me in, and you kicking me out. You've got my head spinning, no kidding, I can't pin you down. What's going on in that beautiful mind. I'm on your magical mystery ride. And I'm so dizzy, don't know what hit me, but I'll be alright.

Shokrakar tore her focus off Dawn, not at all surprised to see the Valo-Kas astonished and spellbound. It wasn't that Dawn's voice was all that amazing, but the rawness she sang with worked for her voice. Varric, the Dalish, the Seeker, and even the chattery Tevinter were also silent and still, so at least it wasn't just a Qunari thing.

My heads under water But I'm breathing fine. You're crazy and I'm out of my mind.' cause all of me Loves all of you.

Shokrakar, forced herself to look around instead of just stare. As her voice warmed up and her confidence increased it was obvious to the audience Dawn sang with everything she could. Not loud, though they could all hear her, but with all the mess inside her. Maybe her training with The Iron Bull wasn't such a bad idea afterall. And as if the thought had drawn him, Shokrakar spied the spy in the shadows. Katoh had waved him in but like all the rest he remained silent. Because it was obvious that Dawn's song had become a goodbye.

'cause all of me Loved all of you. Loved your curves and all your edges All your perfect imperfections. You gave your all to me, I gave my all to you. You were the end and my beginning, Even when I'm lost I'm winning. 'cause I gave you all of me, And you gave me all of you.

When she fell silent Shokrakar had already gotten up and over to The Iron Bull. Even as she watched the Dalish break the stillness by passing Dawn the wine and hugging her over the shoulders.

"Varric, I believe it's your turn to be the entertainment. Something upbeat please." The Elf's voice
had a whips crack to it so she focused them out.

"You've put yourself back together pretty well The Iron Bull," Shokrakar felt exhausted already. And a little gassy. The taller Qunari gave her an indiscernible look; waiting for her to continue. "And you're the best she's going to find to get her head as well as her body trained for whatever it is coming. I'm just not sure that's the best thing for you. Don't you dare forget this part here; your Qun has no place for this in their world." she frowned. "Wait, why did you come here?" she finally thought to ask, hating her absent pregnancy rendered her brain sometimes. Her little beastie was shifting around again.

Bull gave her an ever so slightly amused look but didn't remark on her earlier comments. He didn't say anything at all actually. He just showed her the small letter that had to have been dropped to him today, it had the official Ben-hassrath mark on it. That could only mean one thing; they were calling him to task.

Chapter End Notes

Dawn sings John Legend- All of Me. But she does change a little of the lyrics.
Translations:
Qunlat
Besrathari = recruiter or trainer for the Ben -Hassrath

Elvhen
Ara galant= my magnificent one

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I have a bunch of shorts for this world, scenes I love but can't include for story flow. But they are fun to write and cover fun bits on the side.
Defining Harbinger

Chapter Summary

The Plot Thickens, feeling somewhat like the last gasped breath of a drowning body. And maneuvers are made, both Pawns and Players feeling the Game.

Chapter Notes

I started a new job and it is a little CONSUMING. I'm going to try and get into once a week posting but depending on how wearying work is it might stretch a little.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dawn had actually managed to not get drunk during Satinalia, despite everyone's best efforts. She would lift the bottle to her lips and pretend to drink before handing it off to someone else. Not because she was against the celebration, and not even entirely to avoid a rotten morning, but because she wanted to remember every single part of the night. Even after her song turned sad, the Valo-Kas partied on. Varric had amused them all with talks of Hawke's irascibleness at parties, then Sata-Kas insisted on music and dancing. By the time the sun had risen, Dawn had participated in every single part of their celebration that she could and it felt astonishingly good to do so. Cassandra had even stayed longer than Dawn had anticipated, only begging off for duty's sake past midnight.

But it seemed that even the Valo-Kas called an end to their festivities at sunrise, sending the others to their bedrolls as dawn crested the horizon. A Runner came pelting to her before she could actually find sleep and requested Dawn's presence at the morning War Table.

"What can you tell us about the peace talks at the Winter Palace?" Leliana smoothly demanded of Dawn the moment she walked into the room.

Dawn was exhausted but felt good despite it; some of the others looked a little more ragged. Dawn had heard that Cullen's sister Mia was in the Keep with her family and she could see the stress on his face from it. And Alena actually still smelled like alcohol, though Josephine and Leliana were as pristine as always. Regardless, the business of the Inquisition had to move forwards.

Even if she'd figured that this would come up soon, Dawn hadn't anticipated it being this fast. "It was a single night for me. The assassin is Florianne, but you find out other useful information while you're trying to discover that, and I don't know it to tell you. Also, you find a man naked and tied to Celene's bed, her necklace from Briala's romancing, and that Gaspard would rather kill his mercenaries than pay them. While you're there, Leliana suggests that you really don't need to save Celene so much as ensure that the transition of power is smooth, not allowing Corypheus to take advantage of it. None of the options to run Orlais are actually good or decent people, and a triumvirate was always seen as the best option in my world but I don't even know how to go about achieving that. I think the most common set up is Briala and Celene as a team."

The Inquisitor and her three Advisors all stared at Dawn in unfathomable silence. They truly hadn't
been expecting that info dump. “So even with everything you can tell me, I still get to skulk? Pretty
clothes and sneaky shit here I come.” Alena grinned viciously.

“The Winter Palace is hosting the talks for three days.” Josephine cautioned an obvious change
from Dawn’s story but one no one seemed concerned over it. “It’s going to be very hard to discover
such information without people noticing the Inquisitor’s absence.” The Ambassador then
ventured.

“Maybe a distraction can be arranged.” Commander Cullen mused.

“It would have to be a convincing but authentic distraction to draw eyes away from the Herald of
Andraste.” Josephine delivered the line a little too quickly after Cullen’s suggestion; Dawn realized
they already had an idea and she had a suspicion for what it was.

“Perhaps we could give them someone as equally impossible to focus on?” Leliana’s statement
confirmed Dawn’s guess.

“Like a representative from another world?” Commander Cullen casually theorized.

“Someone like me you mean.” She didn’t try to play coy.

“Yes. To draw attention away from the Herald of Andraste, we give them the Harbinger for the
Inquisition.” Leliana took the lead. “There are already many rumours of your existence,” the
spymaster continued, “and of course even when we felt the need to deny such things that only
seemed to conflagrate them more.”

“So if we tease my existence, confirm my attendance, and then parade me out there Alena can do
her thing?” Dawn summarized succinctly.

“Yes.” Leliana confirmed, facing Dawn straight across the War Table.

Dawn saw the practicality of the plan so she shrugged. “I might have an idea about being a better
distraction but I need to talk to someone first. So yes, I am all in on Operation Look-at-Me-not-
Her.” Alena grinned at her words.

“Excellent, I’ll work with Josephine to decide which rumours we can discreetly confirm.” Leliana
looked pleased.

With a basic plan in mind, Dawn left the War Room and quickly went to Solas’ rotunda; he had
disappeared from Skyhold during Satinalia but of course had returned. “Hahren, can I steal a
moment of your time to have you help the most elegant of mischief?” Dawn cajoled as she caught
the Elvhen mage painting the top border of Halamshiral’s fresco.

“Your language skills have grown to quite an impressive level Ena’vun. What are you trying to talk
me into?” Solas complimented and chastised in one smooth phrase.

“I need to be a spectacle at The Winter Palace so Alena can do her sneaking thing. I happen to
know a lot of the history of Halamshiral and the fall of the Elvhen Empire, but I am sure your
experience in the Fade has shown you so much more than I could ever hope to understand,” she
carefully lied but she knew he had caught her meaning. “I would like you to help me first design a
dress in the style of Arlathan to show the heathens what real elegance is, and then I was hoping you
might dance with me on the first night. I know they’re going to leverage me into dancing, but I
would be honoured if you would be the first to dance with me.”

Solas gave her such a piercing, look that she felt exposed to her soul. And then he smiled and she
was reminded of the many tales this world has warning about Fen Harel’s teeth. “So you wish to throw the history they would deny in their teeth, and then defy their social structure by honoring me?”

“I aim to misbehave, and I have official permission to do so. Would you like to be a trickster for a night?” she deliberately worded the request and saw the flash of humour on his face.

“You court trouble Ena’vun and I will play along. If you wish, I could show you memories of Arlathan in the Fade.” Solas grinned down at her and Dawn felt an instinctive spike of fear, like a rabbit before a wolf.

But being hunted by a wolf might just be worth it for the sake of the dresses she got to witness. Fandom back home had taken the limited Dalish fashions and the few Elvhen style references to craft some beautiful art. Sadly it still fell short, because ultimately they were humans limited by a whole other world’s history. Arlathan was stunning, and the clothing worn by all was intimidatingly sensual and yet elegant and regal. But the line between teasing and straight up revealing was a lot more open to interpretation than Dawn was all that comfortable with, though she kept that to herself. Solas a la Fen’Harel would no doubt enjoy designing a dress to deliberately include details he knew she was uncertain about.

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He had known that bringing the Inquisitor to Tarasyl’an Te’las would also be putting it into the hands of her mostly human Inquisition, but Solas didn’t care for the company sometimes. He knew the others had all believed that he had absconded from the keep entirely during their Satinalia celebrations, larking about in the frigid cold but he’d simply barricaded himself into the lower Study, layering wards around it to keep the wandering humans at bay. Even if it was only for a day or so it was a gentle reprimand that would give him time to think. Or so he had believed. But hearing this castle once again filled with the voices of community, even if it was in the wrong language, had caused an ache in his guts that Solas suspected was long overdue.

Bringing Dawn to the Fade again after that was an interesting experience. Dawn had become aware of the Fade but not of her ability to manipulate it, lending to her an absolute sense of childish wonder as she explored that all the Spirits picked up on. At one time his own People had approached the Spirits with such openness that now only this strange Offworlder was able to display. Even his own approach to the world had had to change after he created the Veil. His world was entirely gone, borne on only in his memories and the faulty history left to this world, but it felt much less lonely to realize that he still had a People. Even if his People were currently comprised entirely of a human from another world entirely.

For now he watched as Dawn drank in the rich colours and decadent fabrics from his past, but the moment her ears picked out the distant strains of music it reflected in her body. She seemed unaware of the small movements rippling through her; slight swaying, wrists rolling lightly as the cadence of the music washed over her. It was the unconscious movements of someone who loved to dance, but lacked the discipline of a dedicated dancer.

“Would you like to see our dancers Ena’vun?” Solas had noticed her love of music from the night he’d sung her an Era Sulahn and ever since then he wondered if it was merely due to her singing or if dancing was an integral part of it as well. He had his answer now.

“I would love to see some dancers.” She breathed excitedly.

Dawn froze the moment she actually saw the dancers though, absolutely rooted to the spot as she saw the utterly divine grace in motion. Solas knew the music had to sound nothing like her world
and the dancers looked anything but human. “They dance like joy and beauty took flesh.” Dawn breathed, seeming to not want to ruin the tableau even if it was a Fade memory.

“They dance to celebrate. What it is they celebrate has long been forgotten, but this dance remains.” Solas narrated helpfully.

“I can see why the spirits of the Fade would enjoy this part; I can feel my feet dancing and yet I haven’t moved at all. It is mesmerizing.” Dawn complimented, her casual ease with the spirits of the Fade still exciting to him after the fear all the rest had shown.

“We will invoke this memory at Halamshiral. We will dress as homage to Arlathan and make them weep for the beauty that has been lost.” Solas promised almost darkly.

“Lost, but not forgotten.” She nodded almost solemnly. “I’m going to need a LOT of practice if I’m ever going to even approach being able to do anything like that.” Dawn warned him with a hesitant look.

“We have the advantage of practicing both here in the Fade as well as out in the woken world.” Solas offered comfortingly and saw the side of Dawn’s mouth quirk up a little.

“Now that sounds like a plan.” Dawn nodded and Solas curled magic around them both to wake them up again.

Solas would continue to guard Ena’vun, regardless of whether she wore the necklace or not. The Fade bent itself to welcome her, a Qunari was training her which meant the Qun was interested in her, and Dawn’s own dreams revealed far more curiosities than Solas had ever anticipated being exposed to again. The people of the current world may not feel real to him, but Solas couldn’t deny that Dawn existed in a way he could never control for. Wolves are renown for howling at the moon but this Wolf was far more interested in the waking sun and what chaos she would bring.

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As Alena left the War room she spotted Bull waiting and looking unsettled, and even with a throbbing headache she knew that was a bad sign. Generally Bull only ever looked like he was vaguely amused with everything going on around him. She rubbed at her itching, glowing palm and walked over to where he patiently waited.

“Who do we have to kill now?” Alena cut to the chase. She already had a literal world ending event happening about once a month anyways, what was a little more responsibility added?

“I got a letter from my contacts in the Ben-Hassrath. Already verified it with Red.” He rumbled at her.

“If I don’t trust the Qun?” she pushed.

“That just means you’re smart. My people have never made a full-blown alliance with a foreign power before. This would be a big step.” He shifted his shoulders and Alena could hear the
crackle. “They’ve found a massive red lyrium shipping operation out on the coast. They want us to hit it together, even mentioned bringing in one of the dreadnaughts.” At Alena’s frown he explained. “They’re worried about tipping the smugglers, so no army. My Chargers, you, maybe some backup.” If that didn’t sound like the perfect recipe for an ambush, Alena didn’t know what did.

“And what does this alliance actually get us?” Alena prodded carefully, never entirely sure just how far Bull had wandered from his past.

“They wouldn’t use the word alliance if they didn’t mean it. Naval power. More Ben-Hassrath reports. Qunari soldiers pointed at the Venatori… It could do a lot of good.” He was normally less transparent than this.

“And yet you don’t seem happy.” She decided to make the strike.

“No, I’m good. It’s uh…” his tone was failing to excite her at all for the alliance. “I’m used to them being over there. It’s been awhile.” Alena knew that the whole point of the Qun was to extend their reach to the whole world, and yet somehow Bull had deluded himself into thinking it wasn’t an issue until now. Truthfully he probably never expected to be alive to see it happen. Or maybe he really just never wanted to see it happen. “Look, the Qun answers a lot of questions. It’s a good life for a lot of people. But it’s a big change. And a lot of folks here wouldn’t do so well under that kind of life. But this isn’t about converting. This is just us joining forces against Corypheus. On that front, I think we’re good.” Alena felt her eyebrow quirk and knew he saw it too. Bull sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than her.

Still, the Inquisition has befriended stranger things. “I’ll see what they have to say after we hit the smugglers.”

Her answer seemed to surprise him. “Good. I’ll pass on word to Cullen and Red. We can set up the meeting whenever you’re ready.”

“It’s going to be a couple of days at the earliest before we can set out. Let me get the details for Orlais settled first.” Alena forced her tired brain to work. “You know, if they had requested Dawn for this little trip too, I’d avoid the whole thing.” She found herself saying and saw Bull frown lightly. “This already sounds like an ambush Bull, and I’m fairly certain I’m not the only target.” She warned before sighing and rubbing her tired eyes. “Maybe I’m wrong and this whole alliance is legitimate, what will they demand of us as repayment for their help?”

Bull stayed thoughtful and quiet for a moment. “I don’t know. And that’s what worries me Boss.” He finally admitted.

Alena decided to tackle the problem once she had more functional brain cells. “Vivienne is heading out to start getting Orlais ready for us. The peace talks have been confirmed for after the new year, so if this alliance is legitimate you might want to tell your people to send an Envoy as well.” She suggested before dismissing him.

Why was nothing ever easy? If the Inquisition was going to be present at The Winter Palace, her people had to be made ready. Josephine was already arranging schedules to allow for dance lessons, though a surprising amount of Alena’s people already had formal training. Blackwall, Dorian, Cassandra, Vivienne, Varric, and even The Iron Bull had all dealt with courts and politics and had admitted to being capable of dancing (thought Cassandra did so with great disgust in her tone), so they could be excused from those lessons, but the others she was unsure of. That was her Ambassador’s problem to figure out though. Currently Alena needed to go find her Harbinger to start scheming for the first night.
“You know we can work with that.” Leliana mused as she sipped at honey flavoured wine with her small counsel of conspirators.

“This is not the most peaceable approach.” Josie tried to caution but even the Spymaster could see the interest in her eyes.

“You’ve already said that we’re at a disadvantage in the court because I’m not human,” Alena didn’t sound offended, “why not embrace that and make it work for us instead?”

“Exactly.” Leliana smiled lightly, her mind already filling with images of what the different attires might look like.

“So not only Lady Dawn will be dressed in Elvhen fashion the first night?” Josephine sounded resigned but not upset. Cassandra, however, rolled her eyes.

“I think the whole point is still to make Dawn a spectacle, but a cohesive overall theme isn’t a bad idea.” Leliana comforted.

“And for the other nights when she is not required to be a spectacle? What do we dress the Inquisition as then Leliana? If we continue in Elvhen style we’ll be deliberately offensive, and if we go to the originally planned uniforms then even the least skilled players of the Game will question our first night.” Her friend wasn’t wrong, she just wasn’t thinking big enough yet.

“So what if the second night we pick Dwarven fashion?” Alena interjected. “Do you think anyone would argue that a Dwarven Inquisitor wearing her own peoples’ style of clothing was offensive?”

This actually brought Josephine up short for a moment, and Leliana wasn’t the only one to spot the gears working in that woman’s mind. “That could work in our favour.” Her words were hesitant at first; Josie was working the plan out even as she spoke. “The first night we are an astonishing show, unique and slightly offensive. No one will be expecting the Inquisitor to be hunting for information immediately, and many will overlook her activities in favour of the attire she is wearing. The second night we reinforce the Inquisitor’s standing, you won’t be able to sneak Alena but it’ll send the message that not only is the Inquisition yours, but that your power is not based on a human kingdom. But we’ll need to have a strong follow up for the third night.”

“Why not ask the Valo-Kas?” Cassandra’s comment silenced everyone and even Leliana was surprised by it, not that she let it show. She’d been aware of Cassandra’s interest in the mercenary Healer from the moment they started exchanging letters, but she hadn’t realized that her friend was that intuitive for the topic at hand. “If we’re going to represent the Inquisition in non-human attire for the first two nights, we have a third non-human culture to draw from.”

“The Qun? I don’t remember learning much about their fancy parties.” Alena wasn’t entirely joking if her tone of voice was any indication.

“Not the Qunari, the Valo-Kas.” Cassandra corrected without hesitation or even realizing how much her commentary spoke of where her mind was. “They have their own culture, why not at least ask and see if we can represent it?”

Leliana smiled into her wine as she sipped, wondering when her combative friend would realize she was falling in love. “You’ve spent the most time with them Cassandra, would you mind approaching them for us?” she prodded.

Cassandra gave her a suspicious, assessing stare but Leliana had perfected looking innocent long
ago. “I can,” Cassandra sounded almost hesitant to agree, no doubt looking for Leliana’s ulterior motives. Ironically she’d never discover them because Cassandra was oblivious to her own romance; it was both adorable and aggravating to watch.

“So if they give their go ahead, the Inquisition will be attending a human peace talks never once wearing human inspired clothing. I…I can work with that.” Josephine finally seemed on board with the idea. At least for no other reason than she would appreciate standing out from the crowd. Leliana knew her friend enjoyed the occasional ostentatious display; all those ruffles.

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A good idea was like a tsunami; once it was unleashed the only way to survive it was to get through the other side. Dawn’s suggestion for being the center of attention had germinated so much more than she intended, and yet none of it was bad. So Dawn ignored the wiggling anxiety in her spine and growing sense of dread in her gut because although her subconscious mind had figured it out, her higher reasoning had yet to. Josephine had sent Runners out to everyone that was going to be involved and commanded that they come to the lower Dance Hall for fittings and lessons. It was just Dawn’s misfortune that she forgot that most fittings involved mirrors.

She didn't remember walking into the room or even catching sight of the mirrors. She didn't remember counting each running step up the stairs and outside. She didn't remember trying to make for the same secluded corner The Iron Bull had taken her to the last time but failing. Dawn lay in the dirt, staring up at the afternoon sky and for a moment couldn’t remember what had happened to lead to this moment. It would likely have been more alarming except that The Iron Bull and Krem both loomed into her vision.

“Are you feeling better Little Bas?” The Qunari rumbled down at her, as if she had a clue what was going on.

“I think the look on her face is a no.” Krem pointed out thoughtfully.

“Did I really just run out here and blackout?” Dawn carefully asked, letting Krem help her to her feet. She already felt humiliated about being afraid of mirrors, but it was so much worse to know that a lot of people had seen it this time. She'd made it out onto the Upper Bailey before complete shut down this time, and she hadn’t even thrown up. Though blacking out wasn’t any better.

Of course The Iron Bull gave her a sharp, assessing look; probably trying to determine if she was being flippant or serious. Krem just nodded at her words. “It seems to have gotten worse since the last time.” The Iron Bull carefully prodded, more aware than anyone else what had just happened to her.

Now Dawn sighed a little, regretting the fact that even though now she spoke the language she didn’t actually always know what to say. “I... think that I was dragged here through an Eluvian. Ah... I have no idea what the Common word for it is.” She hesitated, trying to explain something that didn’t actually make sense to her in a logical way. They both looked at her so expectantly though, so she kept trying. “It’s a big, magical mirror, and it brought me here in a less than pleasant way.” She couldn’t actually look at them as she spoke, eyes looking more dirtward than anywhere else.

“So walking into a room with giant fuck-all mirrors propped up everywhere was not a fun experience.” The Iron Bull put it together quickly, even as Dawn nodded dejectedly. “And it’s the kind of threshold you will need to address, if seeing a mirror is enough to send you into a panicked flight.”
“Add it to the list.” Dawn managed not to whine as she spoke. She’d try to find time to add fixing her broken brain into her newly packed schedule. They were all attending The Winter Palace, but unlike every single other body on this planet she had no idea how to dance to the music here and there was a limited amount of time to actually get good. And not long after that she’d have to already be good enough to survive Adamant. Dawn was starting to suspect that she’d be ready for neither no matter how hard she tried. Her first world problems were going to get people killed.

“I’ll talk to Ruffles about working around the issue.” The Iron Bull prodded, seeming to pick up on Dawn’s overwhelmed exhaustion. He didn’t even know the half of it yet.

“A fancy mirror might have sent you scrambling, but even I know there’s a different reason behind the bruises under your eyes.” Krem pressed, serious in a way the game rarely ever showed.

“I have combat training with The Iron Bull at sunrise,” Dawn decided it was like a bandage; just easier to rip it off in one go, “I have a mini War Counsel with Alena at lunch, and then I spend the next three hours with Josephine and Leliana trying to teach me ‘Court Knowledge’,” she couldn’t help the air quotations, “and spend my nights learning dancing in the Fade. This is going to be my life pretty much until we arrive at Halamshiral.”

“You poor thing, do I need to get you a cookie?” Krem turned his sassiness onto Dawn and she was actually grateful for it.

“Manducare totum mihi asinum.” Dawn couldn’t help switching to Tevene just to see the stunned look on Krem’s face.

“You didn’t speak any of our languages when you got here and now you speak mine too?” Krem’s voice actually cracked on the last word.

“Get Dorian drunk and he has an absolutely filthy mouth.” Dawn smiled, but The Iron Bull ended their banter.

“What are you training in the Fade for, and who with?” he sounded like he already suspected the answers.

“Considering that I can’t get possessed… I could be actually cavorting with demons. Instead I’m just dancing with Solas so that I don’t make an absolute fool of myself at Court.” Dawn tried not to let her anxiety leak into her voice. She was running out of time, for everything, and she was already stealing time from herself.

The Iron Bull gave her a flat look while Krem looked actively uncomfortable. “Yeah, if I heard the mages talking about it correctly, they don’t THINK you can be possessed. Might not mean you can’t be.” The Tevinter tried to warn.

“I’d still have to give it permission.” Dawn countered seriously. She’d heard the demons stalking her at night but none had approached her actively yet, only ever the Spirits. Part of her wondered if Solas was still guarding her sleep, but Fen Harel had much bigger issues to contend with and she knew it. “I was joking about cavorting with demons by the way Krem, I’m crazy not stupid.”

“It’d be safer if you didn’t give them the chance at all.” Krem shuddered, even though Dawn knew he didn’t instinctively fear mages the way Fereldens were raised to. “Let’s go see what the Chargers are up to while the Chief takes care of some business.” Krem offered, shooting The Iron Bull a look over Dawn’s head that she likely wasn’t supposed to notice.

“Go on ahead, I’ll catch you both up.” The Iron Bull’s suggestion felt an awful lot like an order,
but Dawn didn’t argue. Hanging out with the Chargers sounded a lot more appealing than being locked in that room with the half-dozen wall sized mirrors; just the thought of it made Dawn’s skin clammy.

The Chargers weren’t shy about demanding explanations, a lot like the Valo-Kas in that respect, so Dawn found herself having to choose between being honest or lying for the sake of her pride. Her explanation to them was slightly less broken than her admission to Krem and The Iron Bull had been. And then Dawn got to sit and listen to their varied ‘opinions’.

Spike looked the least impressed by the need to go to Halamshiral; at least until the sullen woman was informed that none of the clothing would be typical court dress. And then it was like a switch had been flipped. Spike had been born the first child to a noble woman, but out of wedlock. She was given all the same tutoring as her younger half-siblings, but always with the given expectation that she would never inherit any of it. These were merely tools to make her a better bargaining chip for her mother. When Spike had become ‘disfigured’ and thus unsuitable to court life, she’d left her family and name behind to join the Chargers. Getting to help the Inquisition thumb their noses at noble propriety was right up her alley. Krem didn’t care about the fancy dress part, but he was looking forward to seeing the Inquisitor in action. Dalish had to point out to him that if she was doing her job correctly, Krem shouldn’t see her in action. And just like that the Chargers settled into friendly bickering and teasing, all of them just accepting that Dawn was uncomfortable around mirrors without comment. She should have realized it was because they all expected The Iron Bull to help train that fear out of her.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Elvhen:
Era sulahn= lullaby

I used Latin as my stand in for Tevene:
Manducare totum mihi asinum= Eat my entire ass
Satinalia was many different things to many different people, and the fallout from it might have unexpected results.

Another little time jump because I REALLY wanted to get Alistair's speech in there, but don't worry, the story timeline moves on.

There is work on a phobia in this chapter, and some of the approach might seem a little unorthodox but it is not supposed to be a cure in one day kind of thing. I didn't go into the overwhelming details in the chapter to spare anyone that has anxiety issues, but if anyone has question about it, feel free to ask.

At the head table with all eyes on the Inquisitor, the King of Ferelden, and two Advisors, Alena sat and wondered if anyone other than Josephine wanted to be there at the moment. She’d spared Dawn the burden of sitting at the main table, but that still left Alena, Alistair, and the Advisors in the hot seats. She wasn’t sure which one of them started it either, but someone at her table had started to make very… Ferelden comments in regards to the clustering Orlesians.

“I will ask Leliana to sing Andraste’s Mabari just to shut these sycophants up.” Alistair warned through his charming smile, sitting on Alena’s left.

“I might just beat you to it.” Alena muttered back, not bothering to smile. She could grin until all the teeth in her head fell out and never match the ease Alistair so casually used now.

“That is assuming I will agree.” Leliana’s voice carefully warned from further up the table. Of course the Spymaster was listening in, Alena wasn’t even surprised.

“Make it through mingling and then you can escape.” Josephine now promised from Alena’s right side.

Cullen had managed to talk his way out of the main table by insisting that he sit with his rarely seen family. Mia was as golden and gorgeous as he was, her shrewd eyes so familiar that Alena believed that she had always kicked Cullen’s ass at chess. His brother Branson was less golden, his wheat coloured hair was as gentle as his face was, but it was the youngest Rutherford sibling that stuck out. Rosalie was almost brunette compared to her brothers and sister, and likewise her amber eyes were closer to good whiskey than the gold Cullen sported. Alena had much enjoyed the chance to see her Commander with his family, especially as the entire flock of children and spouses had come as well. As amusing as it was to watch him trying to work around a sudden gaggle of nieces and nephews, it was also absolute hilarity to see him trying not to do anything that his siblings could pester him for.
It reminded her to write a letter home. Even if ‘all ties were cut’ with the Carta when she became the Herald, Alena knew a couple of eyes would like to receive word from her. If for no other reason than to avoid the solid sounding out Mia had given Cullen over never writing. Apparently he had been so remiss that he hadn’t even let them know he’d survived Haven.

Now though Alena envied the man his ability to sit amongst his loved ones and celebrate. Blackwall had shamelessly begged off the main hall celebrations, stating that he had no place amongst the likes of them that ruled. When Alena had pointed out that he had a place at her side, he’d smiled at her and promised that he’d save her a seat in the Rest when she could slip free of this mess. She hadn’t insisted that he suffer alongside her, though she did feel more than a little grumpy that Cassandra, Dawn, and even Varric all got up and left with the Valo-Kas Healer almost as soon as the food was cleared.

Orlesians were tiresome; Alistair’s speech would put a little reality into their heads but it wasn’t going to be enough, Alena was certain of it. “There is an absolute terror in facing the impossible. In seeing the world you know utterly and irrevocably changed.” Having a Warden Hero of the Fifth Blight admit that had silenced the room, and Alistair had needed no crown to appear regal. Alena wondered if she should take notes. “When Ostagar fell and my fellow Wardens and I were all that was left, it helped to know that I wasn’t facing that changed world alone. We came together then, Dwarves, Elvhen, Mages… it didn’t matter. The world was broken and people were scared and we came together to fix what we could. To save lives. To face whatever was trying to take our world away and say ‘No. This is where we defy you.” Alena had asked Alistair to make a speech and it turned out the man knew how to work a room. She wasn’t sure if it was spending that much time with Leliana or if being married to Siobhan had taught him the tricks, but there was very little buffoon left in the King Alistair had become compared to the man Alena had heard of in stories. “I was proud to stand with my fellow Wardens; Aeducan, Brosca, Mahariel, Surana, Tabris, Cousland, and Amell. You know their names because they stood as the first and last line between loved ones and a world trying to tear itself apart.” Alena could see some of the Orlesians actually listening finally, the names of recent heroes too poignant to ignore. “We celebrate Satinalia tonight with thanks in our hearts and our loved ones on our minds,” he lifted his glass to an utterly captivated room and Alena finally understood why Leliana acted so different with Alistair around. It was impossible not to feel hope listening to him. “Tomorrow I ask that you stand with the Inquisition against this Corypheus, not because I am some King from Ferelden making a fancy speech, but because this is our world and we are the only line of defence it has left. You are the heroes of this story, it is by your actions we all stand or fall.”

Alena could almost feel Josephine’s excitement. Alistair’s speech would certainly stir up a few nobles into helping. Usually with money donations, but Alena had learned to be as grateful for those as she was for troops and supplies. Apparently running an army cost a fortune.

“You have to mingle for an hour before you can leave.” Her Ambassador insisted even as Alistair received his applause and sat back down.

“But moom.” Alena whined under her breath at her friend, and Josephine actually laughed.

Alena ended up blinking rapidly when she caught Cullen suddenly jerk to stare at Josephine’s laughter; she wasn’t the only one to notice and if she wasn’t wrong that was a definite look of calculation on Mia’s face. Facing a Darkspawn Magister, a Lyrium Dragon, and even the Orlesian Court were all things Alena felt possibly capable of handling; she’d leave the matchmaking up to the professionals.

“One hour, out of this seat.” Josephine insisted, smiling. She really did enjoy organizing these events; it’d be a shame not to take advantage of it. Alena sighed dramatically but stood up,
preparing herself mentally for the task at hand. Why was being sent to assassinate someone less bothersome than being told she had to socialize?

She didn’t make it far out of her seat before Mia was suddenly there. “Inquisitor Cadash, Ambassador Montilyet, it is a pleasure to be hosted at such a monumental occasion.” The eldest Rutherford wasn’t at the noble court level of the Game, but for a woman whom had never had to be she was adapting remarkably. Better than Cullen seemed to, his face was going a strange puce colour as he was forced to remain at the table with the rest of his family. “I just wanted to take this chance to thank you both, personally, for encouraging my brother to invite us here for tonight.” Alena didn’t feel at all offended that Mia’s attention kept focusing on Josephine; she was used to being overlooked, and Mia was on a mission and Alena knew it.

“It is our pleasure to have you attend with us.” Josephine graciously knew what to say. “The Commander is always so focused on his duties that it is good to see him amongst his family.” Alena couldn’t help but watch Mia’s face as Josephine talked about Cullen; she really hoped that the flirtatious teasing in the War Room was indicative of something because Alena knew without a doubt that Mia was now going to pull for them. Then again, Cullen was the only unmarried Rutherford left; all the rest had husband, wives, and various offspring to prove it. Even Rosalie’s wife was here and she was starting to show their first pregnancy.

“You should sit with us for a little while, at least until I can introduce you to everyone. I’m sure they would all love the chance to thank you for this family reunion themselves.” Mia managed to maneuver and Alena dug the nails of her hand into her leg to keep from smiling.

“Yes Josephine, you should go sit with them. I am required to do a certain amount of social mingling now but I will definitely come by to say hello shortly.” Alena encouraged and saw Josephine give her a look that promised an overly polite chastisement later. With Alena’s plans to drink heavily once she escaped here, it’d have to be MUCH later.

Alena did, in fact, mingle with the nobles that had come to fawn over her Inquisition, though not for the hour Josephine had insisted on. Instead Alena had simply let the eldest Rutherford abscond with her Ambassador, and then waited until Mia had Josephine locked into a conversation. When Cullen looked panicked and Josephine looked amused, Alena decided it was time to interrupt with her hellos and goodbyes. It had taken maybe fifteen minutes since the end of Alistair’s speech but Alena wasn’t going to waste any more time.

Blackwall had saved her a seat as promised. And with how crowded the Rest was, that had to have been an actual heroic feat. The Chargers were packed into their area, all of them actually in attendance for once and it showed with how crowded that space was. Krem waved at her from a distance and Alena waved back but didn’t slow. Her goal was the heavily bearded Warrior with a stool and shitty human beer waiting.

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Skyhold was still recovering from Satinalia but the Inquisition was already six steps into its plan for handling the Orlesian Civil War. Now it was up to the people expected to play the Game to get ready, and woefully few of them were. Cassandra stared at the training dummy in excited agitation, her plans to spend anxious energy upon it thwarted. There was another note pinned to it. The scrap parchment fluttered in the stiff breeze and she stepped to it quickly before it could rip free.

*Seeker,*

*Thank you for celebrating Satinalia with the *Valo-Kas* us me.*
Healer

Her thumb felt glued to the parchment as she stared at the words Kaaras had scratched out. And for all of Cassandra’s resisting self-assessment, she couldn’t make sense of what it was she felt now. She had agreed to celebrate with the Valo-Kas but even Cassandra was aware enough to realize that she had gone more for a specific person. So why she was so uncertain of exactly what she wanted Kaaras to intend with his letters frustrated her to no end.

It was a ludicrous notion to even consider a possible liaison; they were in a battle to save Thedas! Her focus belonged on her duty to the Inquisitor, and doing what she could with Dawn’s foreknowledge to summon the untainted but scattered Seekers.

Spending time with Kaaras was pleasant in ways she hadn’t anticipated given their less than cordial first conversations, but no matter how hard she tried to ignore it Cassandra couldn’t deny that catching sight of the Healer’s broad shoulders or slightly sardonic smile made her breath hitch. So of course she avoided going to the Valo-Kas like Leliana suggested until after she knew Kaaras was busy in the Healer’s Wing.

“What do you want to dress like Vashoth for?” Kasaanda bluntly wondered, her face creased in a dismissive frown as Cassandra resisted the urge to grunt in disgust.

“The Inquisitor is attending the peace talks at the Winter Palace,” Cassandra started to explain, again, slowly and carefully. “And because Alena Cadash is neither human, nor noble the Inquisition is making a point to showcase that they rely on no human kingdom to achieve its goals.”

“So they sent you to me for fashion advice?” Kasaanda demanded incredulously.

“Ugh.” Cassandra rolled her eyes, shoulders slumping.

“Just spit it out Seeker, I play politics even less well than you.” Kasaanda insisted and Cassandra recognized the tone of voice Kaaras used to speak to her with; sometimes they were so clearly related it hurt.

“We’re dressing in fashion from the Elves and Dwarves the first two nights. Either we end the peace talks in human attire or Vashoth, which do you think will have the bigger impact?” Cassandra barked out and saw the taller woman smirk at her anger.

“Seeker, I know wearing our style will have the bigger impact. I’m just not sure you’re ready for it.” Kasaanda turned teasing and Cassandra scowled at her.

“Oh forget this!” Cassandra threw up her hands and stomped away, hearing the tall mage behind her laugh at her anger.

It would have been smarter, and likely faster, if she had just gone to Healer Kaaras for the information first. But Cassandra felt conflicted with approaching the mercenary. He was kind and gentle, and capable of crushing a man’s head with his hand strength alone. He was as adept at putting a body back together as he was at burning one to ash, and every time Cassandra thought she knew how to talk to him, their dynamic changed.

She hadn’t even thought about jumping to her feet to defend him when he’d fought with his sister at Satinalia. He’d been at risk and she had reacted, and it was easy enough for Cassandra to blame it on excessively trained reflexes. But she knew that wasn’t it at all. Seeing him in possible danger had made it impossible for her to not interfere. And then he had competently handled the situation
himself, while offering her easement and helping his own sister. It made her wish Anthony was still alive to discuss the matter with, or that there was a convenient tree to punch. Maybe the Inquisitor would send her to the Hinterlands and she could vent her frustration on the incessant bears.

“Seeker wait!” Kasaanda had laughter in her voice as she caught up. “I can explain to you what we wear and when we wear it, but it’ll take longer than a minute.” The Vashoth strode ahead, long legs eating up the distance but Cassandra had gotten used to that with The Iron Bull.

Kasaanda went into the Rest and Cassandra grunted before following. It was early enough in the afternoon that there were still tables available and not too many bodies around, but Cassandra suspected that far too many distractions were likely to happen. Still she sat at the table with Kasaanda, an internal score board ready to keep track of how many times they were interrupted here.

“The things to keep in mind about what the Valo-Kas wear,” Kasaanda started out serious so Cassandra gave her respectful attention, “is that everything we wear serves a purpose. But that doesn’t mean it can’t also look good, or have being beautiful be its purpose.” It was a surprisingly poetic phrase from the blunt woman.

“How do you mean?” Cassandra knew the world expected her to have no concept or care of beauty, but she enjoyed beautiful things even if she didn’t necessarily see the point to the effort put into beautiful sometimes.

“The vitaar is a great example; Vashoth are immune to the toxic properties and it hardens our skin into a kind of armour. Very handy if you have horns and can’t wear helmets.” Kasaanda rapped her knuckles against her horns. “But we use different ingredients for different colours, and create designs with them. Practical and beautiful.”

“Are we talking about your feisty lady love?” Varric’s question interrupted and Cassandra took a mental tally mark.

Varric was looking at Kasaanda who was now scowling fiercely and snarled, “Go away little man.”

Even as Cassandra asked, “Lady love?” in an incredulous voice. Kasaanda hadn’t seemed the type for romantic entanglements but clearly Cassandra’s assumption was wrong.

“Oh yes, our fine dead raising friend here has been getting chummy with our favourite trickster Sera.” Varric sat down at their table with a smile.

Cassandra looked at Kasaanda’s angry scowl but the mercenary didn’t tell Varric to leave again. “Congratulations?” it turned into a question because the other woman certainly didn’t look happy.

“Oh if only it were that easy Seeker,” Varric continued to enjoy the sound of his own voice it seemed, “see they were cozying up until the Valo-Kas went to Therinfall Redoubt; when they came back for Satinalia someone didn’t show up despite a Valo-Kas invitation to party.”

“Varric, that’s enough.” Cassandra didn’t exactly bark it, but the Dwarf went quiet. “We’re not here to gossip, Kasaanda please you were saying about the purpose of Valo-Kas style.”

The Vashoth woman gave her a look she didn’t quite understand, but said nothing about Varric’s words. He didn’t seem put-off in the least; gesturing to the server but staying quiet, for now. “Vitaar can just be beautiful shapes and designs, but some of them stand for greater concepts. A lot
of Tal Vashoth take the stylized art of the Qun and supplement it with our own creative designs. The symbol for the Valo-Kas is basically just the Qunlat letters all on top of each other.” Kasaanda explained staring at the beer the server brought her. Her hand made the mug look small but Kasaanda looked at Varric and nodded; Cassandra knew an apology accepted when she saw one.

“And the propensity towards leather…” Cassandra was actually curious.

“Leather lasts longer than woven fabrics for the items that get greater wear. But we don’t actually wear that much leather, a lot of it is just spell worked and that gives fabrics that leathery look.” Kasaanda was smiling again, a small quirk of the lips. “But we’re big into reds, blacks, and accenting streaks of bright colour or white. There’s a whole rhetoric about blood, bone, and guts but the truth is most of us are attention seeking assholes and those colours stand out.”

“Sounds like my kind of person.” The Champion’s voice warned of her arrival, surprising Cassandra because she hadn’t expected the Rogue.

“Hawke! Take a seat.” Varric invited as Cassandra remembered to add another tally to her mental count.

“Why are we attention seeking assholes?” Victoria Hawke sat and leaned in, eager to gossip. Cassandra hadn’t spent much time with the Champion of Kirkwall, so she found it a little astonishing to have her suddenly join what should have been a quick discussion. Why had she let Leliana talk her into this?

“The Vashoth are; it’s almost inevitable when you’re over six and a half feet tall and have horns. Though we do make the occasional quiet one, some of you’ve met the Ashaads.” Kasaanda actually brought them back to the original topic without Cassandra having to interfere.

An almost nostalgic smell hit her when a drink was placed in front of her, “Nevarran honey liquor.” It was Dawn offering distraction this time, almost hesitantly. “Solas had me try it that first time you heard me sing.” She shrugged her explanation even as Cassandra saw the others making space and a seat for the Offworlder.

“Thank you, I haven’t had this in quite some time.” Cassandra remembered her manners even as the table conversation continued.

“I get that you two are talking about Valo-Kas clothes, I’m just not sure why.” Hawke’s statement drew Cassandra’s attention again.

“Because when the Inquisition presents itself at the Winter Court---” Cassandra started to explain.

“They’re gonna make people lose their shit.” Kasaanda was the interruption this time so Cassandra didn’t grumble but it was close. “The take aways are that everything is practical and then we make it look good. Shirts can be an issue with horns, and vitaar make a lot of excess fabric unnecessary so don’t go for things that pull over the head. Red, black, white, steel instead of precious metals but we’re mercenaries; wearing gold as armour is a quick way to die looking stupid.”

“Wait, if Vashoth don’t like shirts how did I get mine?” Dawn sounded confused as she looked at the battered top she’d been wearing as they arrived in Haven.

“Its winter, only The Iron Bull walks around at this time with his tits out.” Kasaanda laughed.

“My tits are wonderful.” The Iron Bull’s voice boomed as he shoved a stool into the slowly expanding circle around the table.
“Your tits aren’t my type.” Kasaanda shot back without missing a beat and Cassandra said goodbye to any chance of a serious conversation occurring after that. She couldn’t get out without having to move past crowded bodies, and no doubt Varric expected her to do just that so instead Cassandra stayed put and sipped her drink.

“Your type is upstairs sulking.” Bull’s easy words shut Kasaanda up.

“I’m missing something.” Merrill Sabrae was suddenly there, all but sitting on Victoria Hawke’s lap. People were all but popping out of the woodwork now and Cassandra actually fought a smile as she took a cautious sip.

“The tall one with the eye patch is trying to get the tall one with the magic to go upstairs and talk to her…Sera so that they can get to the sex already.” Hawke explained without whispering.

“What the fuck Hawke?” Dawn demanded, her strange language shocking to Cassandra’s ears.

“I’m not big on beating around the bush, Little Bas.” The Champion retorted and Cassandra found her empty mug being replaced while she tried to figure out if politely leaving wasn’t the better option after all.

“Are you going to go talk to her?” Merrill demanded of Kasaanda, and Cassandra couldn’t help but want her to; it’d be awfully romantic.

“I’m not the one hiding.” Kasaanda spread her arms wide and knocked the mug full of liquor all over Dawn accidentally.

“Dude.” Another word from Dawn’s natural language as she pulled the wet fabric away from her skin with a displeased look.

“Shit, sorry Dawn.” Kasaanda actually looked contrite.

“Here.” Sera’s voice called out from the railing above, Cassandra saw a bundled shirt dropping that Dawn managed to catch before it too ended up soaked in liquor. Sera looked to be taking the stairs down and Kasaanda was painfully trying to act like the Archer didn’t exist.

“Well don’t just look at it, get changed!” Merrill encouraged over the din of the Rest and Cassandra saw Dawn flush a surprising shade of red while Kasaanda actually laughed at her lightly.

“Unless you hairy eyeballs gave her smalls, her wet layer is the only layer she’s got.” Kasaanda looked at Cassandra for confirmation and the Seeker froze, not actually sure of the answer. Josephine usually saw to everyone’s basic needs. At least on paper, the quartermaster took care of the day-to-day deliveries. Of course Dawn’s still rosy face answered the question for all to see.

The arrival of Sera at their table shut down the teasing conversation and Cassandra felt heartened by the fact that she wasn’t the only one at the table that remained utterly silent, blatantly watching the duo. Kasandra stared straight ahead as if she were really going to ignore Sera’s presence, and the Archer’s cool broke a little.

“Wot Tadwinks? Come on; I didn’t know.” Sera actually apologized; at least Cassandra thought it was an apology.

“Did the words ‘My Valo-Kas family is celebrating and I’d like you to be there, I missed you’ not make it clear?” Kasaanda finally looked at Sera and Cassandra hurt for the vulnerable quaver she thought she heard in the woman’s voice.
“It’s a big thing yah!” Sera couldn’t seem to stand still as she fidgeted under Kasaanda’s regard. Even sitting Kasaanda wasn’t looking up at the blonde Elf. “Meetin’ the family’s like, wot people do for relationships.”

“And you clearly don’t want that.” Cassandra almost gasped at how bitter Kasaanda sounded.

“Can we do this someplace private like?” Sera pleaded, aware of the captive audience.

Kasaanda looked at her clustered friends and Cassandra couldn’t read her expression at all. “That’s probably for the best.” And she stood up. Cassandra realized finally that when she didn’t know what to do, Kasaanda started to mimic her brother.

“See what you get to watch when you stick around Seeker?” Varric called out across the table.

“I think I need another drink.” Cassandra finally spoke, surprised at her own words.

“Here,” Dawn plopped her wet shirt onto the table, somehow having used everyone’s distraction to change, “maybe you can squeeze your drink back out of this.”

“Do you think they’ll be ok?” Merrill questioned the table at large, looking upwards in concern.

“I think they’re either about to go have angry sex or murder each other.” Hawke bluntly stated and Cassandra couldn’t help the annoyed ugh she let out, unfortunately it drew attention.

“It doesn’t have to be so crude.” Cassandra found herself arguing. “Just because your preferences aren’t for romance doesn’t mean that others don’t appreciate it.”

The broad grin that spread across Victoria Hawke’s face was only matched by the smug laughter rumbling from Iron Bull. Cassandra thought they were laughing at her at first, but with how wide Dawn’s eyes were as she looked behind Cassandra, the Seeker realized someone had arrived unexpectedly.

“I’m fairly certain this is the most romance my twin has ever practiced in her life, she’s not the Adaar known for such things.” Kaaras sounded far too amused and Cassandra calmly reached across the table to take Varric’s mug to drain it in one go. The Dwarf didn’t argue but the look on his face said he was memorizing the whole thing for later.

“Shokrakar said you came by the Valo-Kas camp; I figured if you went with Kasaanda then the two of you would be here.” Kaaras explained as Cassandra finally looked at him, trying to keep the anxiousness off of her face. He took the conveniently empty seat his twin had vacated, which put Kaaras on Cassandra’s immediate left.

“I was on Inquisition business.” Cassandra explained even as her hand instinctively moved to where she’d tucked his note.

“But you aren’t now?” he asked with that sardonic smile, claiming the beer Kasaanda had abandoned to tap it against the now empty mug in Cassandra’s hand.

“The Seeker is always business Fix-It.” Varric called out and Cassandra looked away from Kaaras to shoot the Dwarf a nasty scowl.

She was spared the effort of telling the author off because a Runner pushed their way through the crowded Rest to stand over their table. Everyone looked at the Runner expectantly as they hesitated, eyes dancing from Kaaras to The Iron Bull and back. “The Inquisitor wanted Bull for a meeting.” This Runner was not as young as some that Cassandra had seen but they were still a few
years shy of being an adult. This was probably the first time the poor kid had ever been close to a Qunari before.

It showed as Bull stood up, the Runner barely chest high to him and staring in stunned awe. “Little Bas come with me; we have a task to do this evening after I finish with the Boss.” Cassandra was surprised to see Dawn frown in confusion but shrug and follow; the Seeker had thought their training was in the mornings but she could have remembered that detail wrong.

“So what Inquisition business had you seeking out the Valo-Kas?” Kaaras drew her attention back with the simple question and Cassandra had to stop and think before she could remember the answer. In the end it really would have been much simpler and easier for her if she’d just gone to Kaaras in the first place.

When two sets of footsteps came towards her, Alena knew that the Iron Bull was already working on his plan to help break Dawn’s phobia. Poor Dawn was in for a wreck of an evening, but it was necessary. Still, she hadn’t expected it to start the day after her issue was discovered. He probably suspected the reason behind this summons then.

“Little Bas, go wait over there until this is done.” Bull urged her on and Alena smiled when Dawn waved at her before giving them some privacy.

“Now that the party’s over, it’s time to go to work.” Alena cut to the chase, feeling a bit of the time crunch. “We can leave to take care of the Qun alliance by the end of the week.”

“I’ll send the message Boss.” Bull seemed as solemn about this as Alena felt, and she couldn’t help but feel like the spy was still keeping something from her. Not a stretch by any means, she realized, but it felt like the kind of thing she might actually be able to pry free from him.

“Arrange what you have to for Dawn’s training, Josephine has set up a mirror-free fitting area for her for in case this isn’t resolved before we head out.” Alena found herself filling in the silence, watching Bull as discreetly as she could considering how much taller than her he was.

Again, there was that sense of hesitation from the Qunari so Alena waited. Bull had to read the expectant patience off of her because he actually sighed. “They did ask for her Boss. Just so you know.” He finally admitted before walking away.

She kept the expression from her face, but Alena wasn’t surprised from this news. Surprised that Bull had admitted it to her at all but not surprised to hear it. If she were a power hungry, conquering force of nature she’d want to try and meet the Offworlder who knew the future. And then either try to get her hands on the Offworlder for her own purposes or try to eliminate her entirely. That wasn’t even getting into the whole Inquisition, Venatori, and end of the world stuff; it was just prudent planning. So of course Alena had suspected that The Iron Bull’s handlers would have wanted him to try and bring her along too. It just impressed Alena that his actions and words thus far all spoke that he had told them no long before Alena could ever have said so.

That didn’t mean this Alliance wasn’t an ambush still, but it was one they knew was coming and could try and plan for. And maybe actually get a real alliance out of by the end of it anyways. Sometimes Alena really did wish she had a better head for this kind of thing. Give her a target and enough time and she could achieve her goal, but this kind of maneuvering and planning involved accounting for variables Alena wasn’t even smart enough to know existed yet.

Like The Iron Bull having to help Dawn get over her blind panic around mirrors; an issue no one
had suspected until Dawn had let out a ragged gasp and run from the room yesterday. He hadn’t
even been there to witness it but he’d come to reassure Alena and her Ambassador after the
incident; providing a brief explanation as to the cause before telling them that he knew how to
handle the situation and to leave it in his hands. So of course now Alena was going to take him
away from that for a bit, but as needs must. Dawn had a support system in place to help her if she
fell completely apart again this time at least.

It might be morbid, and a little disrespectful, but Alena couldn’t help but be curious about exactly
how Bull planned to cure Dawn’s fear. She’d never seen reconditioning in action and there was a
part of her that still didn’t trust him not to be messing with Dawn’s mind for the Qun. The fact that
he had had that exact opportunity months ago and had instead turned to Alena for help to protect
Dawn bought him a little trust. But the fact that he had kept quiet about the Qun actively asking for
Dawn to be a part of the Alliance delegation meant that Alena didn’t feel comfortable relying on
his loyalty either.

She pulled Stealth over her easily, lack of recent use not at all dulling her skills as she followed the
Warrior silently. He might feel eyes watching and suspect at the cause, but Alena knew that her
ability to hide was greater than his ability to perceive; she’d tested that fact on missions just to be
sure. Bull walked with Dawn down to the lower Ballroom and even Alena could read the
discomfort in Dawn’s body language.

“The Iron Bull… are there still the mirrors down here?” Dawn asked, the quaver in her voice
obvious but she didn’t hesitate to keep following him downwards. Alena wanted to offer what
comfort she could but remained the unseen ghost because sadly Dawn would need to face this.

“Yes Little Bas, there are mirrors.” Bull’s grumble confirmed and now Alena could see the colour
draining from Dawn’s face. “I had Solas and Dorian both confirm that none of them are these…
Eluvians you mentioned. They are just mirrors. No magic. No portals. No chance for you being
ripped away.”

“Ok.” Dawn’s voice sounded like a fear-filled squeak to Alena, but the woman didn’t slow down;
she had to give her that much, even Alena could see the shaking in her hands from three feet away.

No one remarked on the sound of a deep breath being sucked in and held as Bull opened the door
to show the mirror lined room, one of his hands discreetly positioned to grab her should Dawn
make another run for it. “Hold.” Bull’s voice commanded and Dawn didn’t run.

Alena had seen them training together in the early morning hours, a brutal looking but seemingly
effective routine worked out between her growing skill set and his experience as an instructor. It
was paying off now as Bull seemed to know exactly how far he could push Dawn before she
couldn’t withstand more, and she trusted him to respect that limit.

“There are six full sized mirrors, all on stands.” Bull started to explain, a hand on Dawn’s back to
help anchor her. She didn’t look to be resisting him, but Alena could see how stiff poor Dawn’s
spine was with trepidation. “On the table is an old hand mirror. I want you to go smash it.”

“What?” Dawn broke free of her fear filled stare to demand, looking up at The Iron Bull like he’d
lost his mind. Alena was likely giving the exact same expression but at least no one else was
around to see it; Stealth had its perks after all.

“I want you to go walk to that table in the middle of the room, pick up the hand mirror, and smash
it into as many pieces as you can.” Bull repeated his instructions.

“Simple enough.” Dawn said carelessly but didn’t so much as move a step to do as instructed.
Alena had to bite back an encouraging remark; she wasn’t supposed to be observing this at all. Sneaking in was likely a bad habit she picked up from all the Paragon-damned spies she’d been hanging around, but Alena was also honest enough with herself to know that she had always been curious. The green palm was a dead giveaway to that, even if Alena didn’t remember how it had happened.

Bull watched Dawn’s obvious internal struggle as she tried to go do as he instructed but her body was locked in fear. Alena suspected that if he hadn’t told Dawn to Hold, she’d have already made a break up the stairs and away.

“Describe what’s stopping you.” Bull commanded, taking a step further into the room and away from Dawn’s side.

“Nothing is stopping me.” Dawn barked out in clear frustration, still stalling at the entrance to the room.

“Little Bas…” Bull’s warning tone made Alena want to laugh and she was glad a lifetime of experience kept her quiet.

“Nothing is actually stopping me,” this time Dawn’s tone of voice wasn’t snappish and Bull let her continue without reprimand, “but even though my head is saying it is only twenty-three steps to that table and the mirror you want me to smash, my feet are not moving.”

Alena was surprised that Dawn knew exactly how many paces into the room she’d have to take, though once she thought about it, it made sense. Ever since arriving in Haven Alena had caught Dawn counting the strangest of things. Footsteps, birds in the sky, even the freckles on Sera’s face one time, though Dawn hadn’t ever explained why she had the compulsion to count things. Now Alena was starting to suspect that it was a not so effective coping mechanism.

“So take those twenty-three steps and break the mirror.” Bull insisted firmly, taking another deliberate step away from Dawn. She made an abortive little move to step towards him but still held back, her face showing the fear she wasn’t giving into. Dawn’s pulse jumped under her skin like a nug under a blanket, and Alena was starting to smell that tang of panicked sweat she knew too well.

The Iron Bull watched Dawn carefully, eye taking in all the critical details Alena saw and likely more besides, and then he stepped away from her again. This time directly towards one of the mirrors panicking Dawn so much.

“Don’t-!” Dawn stepped once towards him, fear for his safety overriding her panic it seemed.

Now Bull smiled and Alena ached for her friend, even now her tendency to put others first showed. And Bull would absolutely use that trait to drag Dawn through to the other side of her phobia. “You’re still here Little Bas, and so am I. Now go smash the mirror.” He insisted.

The look Dawn shot him in response said a whole host of things that Alena bit her lip to keep from snickering at. Her eyes were absolutely blown out with fear, but Dawn’s face also had a very clear ‘fuck you’ across it that said she wasn’t giving up yet either.

“Only twenty-two steps left to take kadan, now get your ass to that table.” He stepped towards a large wall mirror again and Dawn let out a strangled sound before actually RUNNING towards the table in the middle of the room to pick up the mirror and hurtle it against the far wall.

The sound of the shattering glass was astonishingly loud in the stone room, Alena surprised that
Bull was able to get through to Dawn so easily. But even as she thought that, Dawn had already
turned back from the table and was making for the door out of the room at a dead sprint. Straight
towards where Alena stood, hidden under Stealth.

She’d never been accidentally tackled before, but Alena was fairly certain it was an experience she
could happily go her whole life without experiencing. Dawn was already taller than her, and
steadily increasing training hadn’t softened her at all. The only reason Alena didn’t go flying into
the stone stairway behind her was that The Iron Bull was apparently prepared even for this.

“HOLD!” Bull barked out the Command and Dawn staggered to a shuddering stop. Alena had seen
the same expression of blank fear in the eyes of wild animals during a fire, even the raspy gasping
breaths were the same.

Bull carefully approached her, making his movements slow and fluid so as not to startle her out of
this frozen tableau and even Alena held her breath. “Nothing bad happened Little Bas. You’re still
here. I’m still here. The world didn’t end just because you saw and touched a mirror.”

His calm words did nothing to stop the shaking Alena could see shuddering through Dawn, but it
seemed to let the poor woman breathe a little easier. “Can I please go now?” her voice was
wretched sounding and Alena wasn’t sure how Bull didn’t give in to it.

“No Little Bas.” He shook his head regretfully enough, but it seemed that Bull was going to keep
the lesson going. Now Alena was curious to see the next progression to handling something
completely illogical. He gently turned Dawn around by the shoulders so that she was facing the
mirror she’d shattered. “Now I need you to pick a shard of that broken mirror and bring it to me.”

Oh that asshole, Alena seethed on Dawn’s behalf. Part of her appreciated his ingenuity, this was
supremely clever, and if she had had to endure it herself Alena was fairly certain she’d never
forgive him for it. Luckily for The Iron Bull Dawn was a much more forgiving person.

“What. The. Fuck.” Dawn’s carefully spoken words were in her own language but Alena was fairly
certain she could guess at their meaning based on her tone of voice alone.

“You can either bring me a shard of the broken mirror, or you can put your palm against the
unbroken glass of any of these mirrors. After that we’re done here.” Bull stated and Alena almost
walked out of the room, unable to tolerate the anxiety pouring off of Dawn now.

“I can’t.” Dawn’s voice had gone painfully soft. Her head even gave little negative shakes thought
Dawn didn’t take the expected step backwards, away from the mirrors in question.

Bull looked down at her and Alena read calculation on his face. The Qunari was about to do
something he knew Dawn was going to hate and Alena suspected she knew what it was. “I can
show you it’s safe…” he said simply and stepped towards a wall mirror once again.

Dawn seemed to surprise herself when she jumped forwards and literally grabbed Bull by the back
of his belt. “Don’t do that please.” She hissed out in a rush, releasing her grip on him quickly.

Again he gave her a calculated look. “What are you afraid of, exactly?” he pressed.

“I….” Dawn looked around the room, eyes clearly seeing something else entirely. “I don’t even
know. I don’t… I was there and then I was here and I don’t understand how. So how do I know it
won’t happen again?”

“You said you saw an Eluvian thing before you were brought here.” Bull repeated the story Alena
knew of Dawn’s arrival.
“I didn’t know what it was at the time. We don’t have…magic in my world. A mirror is just a mirror, unless it’s a one way mirror in which case it’s also a window.” Dawn was babbling as her anxiety slowly eased and Alena realized that Bull was distracting her from her fear, by having her talk about her fear. Clever bastard.

Now Dawn was frowning though, and Alena knew the expression on her face well. The frustration and fear of having blank spots in her memory where she knew there should be answers. Bull, however, wasn’t letting her wallow in it. “I have already told you these are not Eluvians Dawn.”

He reminded carefully.

“Would you know if one was?” she shot back in anger and Alena smirked when Bull hid his own smile.

“No, I wouldn’t. But I’ve had two mages come through here and confirm for me that none of them are. You trust Solas and Dorian both as experts in their fields, and you trust me to train you. Would any of us set you up to be hurt right now?” Bull walked Dawn through the logic.

And it was working; Alena could see Dawn taking deeper breaths as she moved past the precipice of panic. “No. None of you would set me up to be hurt like that.” She agreed without hesitation.

“So either put your palm to an intact mirror, or bring me one of the broken shards. And then we can go get a drink and discuss some changes to your physical training.” Bull encouraged, once again turning Dawn by the shoulders so she faced the room with mirrors.

“Oh goodie.” Dawn shot back but stayed frozen. Alena worried that Bull would have to keep trying to cajole her into action but Dawn finally took a deliberately deep breath, didn’t hold it this time or run, and crossed the room.

Alena felt every muscle in her body tense into agonized anticipation as Dawn held her head high, her shoulders back, and walked across the room like she didn’t want to sprint the distance. She visibly flinched every time her own reflection moved in the mirrors, but Dawn didn’t stop until she reached the shattered hand mirror she’d earlier thrown. A soft exhale left Alena as her friend crouched over the shards, her hand trembling so badly it was almost inevitable that she sliced her finger on one of the shards.

But it was as if the blood helped Dawn believe that nothing was going to attack her. She’d pulled her hand back sharply from the prick, bloody fingertip instinctively getting tucked into her mouth while her left hand reached out and snatched the offending piece. She turned and stood in one smooth motion, a look of honest surprise on her face as she walked towards The Iron Bull and put the bloody shard into his waiting palm.

He smiled down at her and Alena remembered to breathe again herself. “Good job Little Bas. Now let’s go get that drink I owe you.”

After witnessing all of this Alena felt like he owed her a drink too. She remembered belatedly that no one knew she was here as a witness, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t go to the Rest herself for some libations. It was called The Herald’s Rest after all.
Finding love in the midst of the end of the world is generally considered bad timing.

SMUT DEFINITELY SMUT

It was hard for her to stay silent and seemingly calm, Kasaanda was desperately trying to adhere to her brother’s advice but staying patient was not her strength. She wanted to shake Sera and yet it was an absolute struggle to stop staring at her mouth, so instead Kasaanda loomed in the Archer’s room, her arms crossed over her chest while she waited for the excitable blonde to start talking. Only now that they were alone Sera seemed as at a loss for what to say as Kasaanda felt.

“Why’re you lookin’ natme like that?” Sera mumbled her question, angry discomfort obvious.

“Because my tiny Elf girlfriend is adorable even when I’m mad at her.” Kasaanda didn’t mean to say that out loud but the stunned look on Sera’s face was entirely worth it.

“Wait, so even though…you’n me? Issat still a thing even if we….?” Sera didn’t seem to know what question she actually wanted to ask so Kasaanda was left without a clue how to answer, or what even she should say.

“I’d like it to be, but I don’t know if that’s what you actually want.” Kasaanda finally ventured what she thought was the right answer. Give her a pack of rabid Templars or lunatic demons and she knew what to do from start of fight right through to the bitter end, relationships were a lot scarier.

“Wha’ you mean tha’s not what I want?” Sera demanded, crossing her own arms over her chest to mirror Kasaanda’s pose.

“When I first mentioned me and you, your response was to say that you wanted us to get to know each other better first.” Even as Kasaanda talked it out, she felt the unhappy coil in her guts that said she knew what was coming. “But it seems to me that it’s all about me getting to know you and your life, your world. You don’t seem to actually care about getting to know me and mine.”

Her arms dropped from across her chest, body language shifting into a balanced fighting stance without her meaning it to. “When I asked you to spend time with me and the Valo-Kas I made it clear I wanted you there and that it was important to me, but you never even bothered to show up even for a little bit.” Kasaanda was starting to actually rather hate today. “I’ve heard the shit you give Solas and Cedric about Elvhen Glory and how stupid they are for believing in their gods. Is that why you didn’t care to celebrate with the Valo-Kas, because we’re not Andrastrian?”
“No! Tha’s not it.” Sera tried to deny but now that Kasaanda was talking she was on a roll.

“Am I not human enough for you?” Kasaanda was finally as blunt as she ever knew to be and the look on Sera’s face was as if she’d slapped her. “I’ve been through this before Sera, where I’m an interesting experience, a fascinating fuck. But I didn’t think that’s what you wanted.”

She turned to leave, a part of her angry and disappointed and deep down rather hurt. “Please!” Sera cried out and jumped to grab her shirt sleeve. “Kasaanda,” no nickname, so Sera was being deathly serious, “it’s not tha’ atall.” Her voice was still desperate, but not as loud.

Kasaanda turned to face her again, fighting the impulse to cross her arms over her chest again. She felt vulnerable and defensive but there was no point broadcasting that fact. “So what is it Sera?”

“I missed ya.” Sera frowned as she said it so Kasaanda waited for her to offer an explanation. “It was like… I missed you. And… you’re a Valo-Kas and I’m a Red Jenny and we’re not…we move….there are…. The blonde struggled but for once Kasaanda felt patient enough to wait it out. “I missed ya, a lot. And then I realized tha’ I will miss ya every time. All the time. And I hated it. I hated how I got when I missed ya because I got all mopey!”

“So you didn’t come spend time with me because you missed me while I was gone. And logically the best solution you found to fix the problem of missing me was to stay away from me even more.” Kasaanda tried not to sound amused, she really did, but this was Kaaris level logic.

“Shut up!” Sera lightly swatted at her. “Tha’s not how I saw it yah!”

Kasaanda quickly snatched her hand out, curling it around Sera’s wrist before she could pull her hand all the way back from the swat. “Sera, I’m sorry missing me hurt you, but avoiding me like you’ve been hurts more.”

Sera looked up at her with far too many emotions in her eyes. “It’s just going to get worse the more I like ya.”

Now Kasaanda smiled softly. “Yes, but I can promise I’m worth it.” She pulled on Sera’s wrist, not hard but enough that the Elf got the point and took a step closer to her. “Want me to prove it?” Kasaanda leaned in so her face was closer to Sera’s. “I would very much like to prove that we’re good together, if you think you still want me.”

She was expecting another swat to the arm for her words, instead she got an armful of Elf and a frantic kiss pressed to her lips. It was not a bad thing. Kasaanda curled an arm around Sera’s frankly ridiculously lithe waist while she cupped a hand into the ever messy blonde hair. Sera’s kisses started out more like sharp pecks of a beak, all driving need to keep the hurt away but Kasaanda slowed her down with longer, slower caresses of lips and tongue.

So it surprised Kasaanda to no end when Sera managed to undo all the buttons on her shirt without the mercenary noticing. Her hands were cold but gentle and Kasaanda smiled as she stepped back a little. Just because Sera was excited didn’t mean Kasaanda had to push things, but her Elf was definitely acting like she didn’t want to keep waiting anymore. Sera chased after her, and the damn room itself seemed to conspire to help her.

Kasaanda tripped over a book and ended up falling right to the floor with a tremendous clatter. Sera froze staring down at her for a moment and then they were both laughing. There was no way people out in the Rest hadn’t heard that but Kasaanda didn’t really care what they all thought was going on in here.
Neither did Sera it seemed, the blonde actually sat across her legs, still giggling as she came in for more kisses without letting Kasaanda up again. Kasaanda was a lot less subtle about getting Sera’s shirt out of the way; her own flapped open to expose her unbound breasts but Sera’s had to get pulled right up and over her head.

Sera’s belly and chest were even paler than her arms and face were; the freckles that gave colour to the more often exposed areas utterly missing from the soft skin of her tummy. Kasaanda ran her fingers across the line where freckles suddenly started, seeing the goosebumps chase up Sera’s skin from the light touch. Kasaanda’s teasing of her nipple was a lot less delicate though, her blunted fingernails scraping across sensitive skin even as she watched the growing flush spread down Sera’s collar bone.

The lightly playful, teasing touches grew more confident as Kasaanda cupped Sera’s perky breasts, feeling both the strength of the muscles underneath and the hard pulse of her heart rate. Sera squirmed as Kasaanda dragged her hands down from her breasts, along the adorably pasty skin of her ribcage and stomach, and then circled around to cup her ass, pulling her closer and sitting up to kiss her firmly.

Sera’s excited squirming only got worse as Kasaanda deliberately squeezed and relaxed her grip on Sera’s ass, her long fingered hands allowing her to tease in ways Sera wasn’t expecting. Of course Sera wasn’t just sitting idly by while being kissed; her smaller hands pushed the shirt off of Kasaanda’s shoulders and as far down her arms as she could get it, exposing Kasaanda’s chest more completely.

Where Sera’s skin was pale and freckled, Kasaanda’s was bronze and scarred with the little nicks and scratches acquired over a lifetime of enjoyably rough living. And where Kasaanda expected to have to encourage her, Sera surprised her by being bold. And Archer’s fingers were astonishingly strong and rough and Kasaanda groaned even as she rolled them over so her girlfriend was on the bottom now. They hit a short table and Kasaanda didn’t even stop kissing Sera to reach out and shove it away, though it didn’t go far. This room was too small and there was too much shit in it and Kasaanda didn’t care anymore as Sera pulled at the strings tying her trousers in place.

They both seemed a little frantic as Kasaanda lifted away to angrily kick off her boots and pull the last of her clothing off. Sera wiggled on the ground still, shucking her plaidweave pants quickly. Like her belly, her hips and upper thighs were pale and remarkably freckle free. Except for one little freckle sitting off center under her navel; the solitary spot drawing Kasaanda to lean over and kiss it lightly.

Sera let out a soft gasp and Kasaanda smirked, moving slightly to kiss just under her navel. Her hands smoothed down the outsides of Sera’s thighs, fingers digging in lightly to massage the muscles and she bit softly on the bottom curve of Sera’s navel. That earned a much less soft sound and Sera arched her body into the bite. With an invitation like that Kasaanda didn’t hesitate to slide a little lower on her lover’s body to place a kiss where thigh and hip met, using her hands to pull at Sera’s knees and spread them further apart. That was a definite sound of protest when she decided to kiss down Sera’s thigh towards her knee instead of going to more obvious targets first though.

So Kasaanda decided to be a little evil and changed her grip to swiftly flip Sera over onto her stomach. “Wa-?” Sera’s startled sound only made Kasaanda grin before she leaned over her naked back side and kissed between her shoulder blades.

Kasaanda traced her fingers lightly up the back of Sera’s thighs now, matching the pace of which she kissed down her spine and Sera all but vibrated. When Kasaanda reached the dip of where back and bottom met she slid her hand between Sera’s thighs, hearing her moan and feeling excited
wetness waiting. She let her fingers slide along the dripping seam as she started to kiss back up Sera’s spine, her fingertips lightly sliding into Sera further to then quickly retreat.

Soft gasping breaths puffed out of Sera each time she did so, and when Kasaanda kissed to the back of her neck she couldn’t help but whisper to her, “You are so beautiful like this Sera,” before pulling her fingers away and sitting back so Sera could once again turn to face her.

Kasaanda enjoyed the sight as she knelt on the ground, Sera’s pale body stretched out on the floor before her like a feast before a starving Vashoth. And was Kasaanda ever starved. Sera’s lips were red and plump, every kiss Kasaanda took felt like biting into ripe fruit and she couldn’t help run her hands over Sera’s body as they kissed.

Sera sucked on her bottom lip as Kasaanda cupped her breast, thumb encircling her nipple to pinch it erratically, and she actually bit down onto it when Kasaanda slowly stroked her other hand across Sera’s pubic and clitoris. A throaty whine of desire mewled out of Sera even as Kasaanda toyed with her body, lightly at first but every caress, stroke, and pinch gained in intensity as Kasaanda’s patience and control quickly faded.

She pulled away from Sera’s lips to finally settle low between her pale thighs, kisses following the line of her hip inwards. Kasaanda had to curl her hands around Sera’s hips to hold her in place; the first puff of her breath against Sera’s clit had made the Elf’s body jump as if she’d jolted her. She held Sera still as Kasaanda lightly teased kisses on the light curls of hair or along the lips of her vulva without touching her clitoris directly, and Sera made up for her lack of ability to wriggle by moaning her pleasure instead.

With a chuckle more thought of than actually laughed, Kasaanda took one of her hands off Sera’s hip to spread her labia and let her lick a slow line straight across Sera’s clit. The look on Sera’s face was a shout but no actual sound came out of her, so Kasaanda did it again. Now Sera desperately grabbed out and found Kasaanda’s horns a useful handhold as Kasaanda bent her attention her favourite task.

It was easy to focus on Sera’s pink little clit, sealing her mouth around it to suck in sharp or soft pulls as she felt like, and Kasaanda lifted her other hand from holding Sera’s hip to once again tease her perky breasts.

The little cries of pleasure Sera couldn’t seem to help but make drove her onwards, her teeth biting and tongue lapping until Sera’s whole body arched, muscles tensing and her eyes went wide, and yet not a single sound came out of the little spitfire as Kasaanda gently licked the taste of her orgasm away.

Kasaanda always enjoy the moment when her bed mate fell apart completely, the satisfied bonelessness a better badge of honor than any verbal compliment could be. Sera’s cute breasts jigged lightly as she caught her breath and Kasaanda found herself lightly toying with a nipple. She was aroused like no tomorrow, but that was easily sorted out because she was satisfied with the flushed pleasure still staining Sera’s chest and face.

When Kasaanda sat back, Sera surprised her by quickly scrambling up and pushing Kasaanda roughly backwards. If she hadn’t wanted it to, Kasaanda wouldn’t have budged but she let her girlfriend press her back to the floor. It was adorable how tiny Sera’s hand was on her shoulder though.

It never occurred to Kasaanda just how strong an Archer’s fingers and forearm was, though Sera quickly showed her the truth of the matter. Her teeth sharply bit at the dark circle of Kasaanda’s nipple and Sera stroked fingers along and then deeply into Kasaanda without preamble. The Elf
had remained surprisingly quiet while Kasaanda had taken her body for a pleasurable interlude. Kasaanda was unable to remain as terse.

“Ah-fuck!” Kasaanda grunted out, her head smacking back as Sera did something with her clever fingers. Kasaanda could feel her magic wildly slap out at the world, control completely shattered when Sera didn’t slow her assault at all, each movement of fingers and teeth exactly enough to ruin her.

Some lovers had to be convinced that Vashoth skin was tougher, that their tolerance for pain and pleasure greater because of it. Sera needed no convincing, despite having her own orgasm she seemed frantic for Kasaanda to fall apart too. Kasaanda came with a drawn out moan, the only one in the room able to feel the swirl of dead spirits breeze by thanks to her loss of control.

She panted for breath, scooping Sera from beside her to sit her lover on her lap. These kisses were softer, lighter and not frantic at all. They were still just as nice though.

Chapter End Notes

So to be entirely honest, this is the first time I've written wlw.
There's No Place Like Home

Chapter Summary

Life at Skyhold is not always life or death frantic. Until it is again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Although it really was quite wonderful to have her whole family together for the first time, Mia couldn’t wait until she could go home to rest as well. The guilt that caused did not help her feel any more settled either. Cullen clearly needed someone here to take care of him regardless of her homesickness, he looked terrible! Oh her little brother had grown up broad and handsome enough but the laughter seemed to have mostly gone from his eyes.

Except that it wasn’t gone entirely, Mia had seen a few interesting incidents of honest enjoyment on Cullen’s face. Usually in the company of that dashing Ambassador Lady Montilyet. But it was the woman’s title that made Mia hesitate before she made assumptions, regardless of what Branson and Rosalie said. Her matchmaking skills were notoriously fine-tuned; something both of her married little siblings should keep in mind considering the part she played in their own romances.

But Cullen was usually quite impatient when it came to nobles, and a little light gossiping had exposed that Lady Josephine Montilyet was the heir to her noble family. A Noble family that made its name doing shipping and trading, tasks the Ambassador actively played a role in even as she minded her four younger siblings and the Inquisition. It made Mia wonder what fondness her brother had for a noble woman, and it made her respect Lady Montilyet even more. How the woman managed to corral four younger siblings and the Inquisition without looking even a little frazzled was a trick Mia was desperate to learn.

Her own siblings were giving her gray hairs. Branson and his wife were quiet enough outside of foaling season, their son Stanton was just as gentle as his father was but his talent at glass blowing was to the point he had an apprenticeship offer. In Denerim. Far away from the family hold. And their daughter was starting to toddle around after all the baby animals Branson took care of.

But it was Rosalie and her wife that were the main cause of Mia’s restlessness. It was their first pregnancy and Brienne was having terrible burning in her chest and belly. Mia’s own pregnancies had been fairly uneventful but she remembered a few tricks that had helped ensure that. Pepperoot tea would help ease the burning sensation and help settle the stomach, but no one in their family had any leaves available; so Mia was on a quest to the Keep’s kitchens. For herself she wouldn’t bother but Rosalie was too shy to go looking at this hour and Brienne should rest as much as she could, so Mia was bundled in a heavy robe, boots scuffing along with a candle in her hand.

And she wasn’t the first to seek out the kitchens. She walked into the dark kitchens not expecting a single other soul to be about at the hour, and found a young woman standing at a table beating cookies violently into shape. Her hair was plaited and wrapped around her head in a heavy crown.
that Mia absently envied. A mother of three little boys and one girl couldn’t afford the effort that much hair represented. Besides, Mia knew her own golden locks still had the allure to distract her husband right out of whatever work he was doing.

It was the red puffiness around the woman’s eyes that prompted Mia to ask, “Miss, are you alright?”

She visibly startled, looking up with wide, expressive eyes. “Wha- ah… yes, I am fine thank you.”

The smile flashed at her stunned Mia silent and told her to whom she spoke; astonishingly perfect teeth like that could only belong to the rumoured Offworlder, Dawn. The Harbinger for the Inquisition. Intimidating title for a woman that looked a decade younger than herself and had flour on her chin.

“I’m Mia Castlewick,” she deliberately used her husband’s last name, “and my dear you look anything but fine.” She was politely blunt.

It brought a crooked smile to Dawn’s face, “I’m alright for now. I just…had a bad day. And I’m mad at a friend even though he’s helping me.” The young woman looked down at the cookies and gave a little laugh. “So like an absolute…” she trailed off and gave a slightly concerned look. “I don’t know the polite word in Common and I don’t know you well enough to use the word I learned from the Chargers.”

Her honesty made Mia laugh in delight. “Oh my dear, no worries there. My one brother is a soldier while the other lives animal husbandry, and my baby sister runs the river docks; there’s not a piece of language you could use that would offend me as long as you have sufficient cause to use it.”

Now her brows shot up and laughter danced in her expressive eyes. “I would be very careful who you say that around, Hawke would take it as a challenge.”

“The Hawke?” Mia couldn’t help the excitement that blurted out of her. “Victoria Hawke, Champion of Kirkwall and one of the few Amell scions left?” Cullen had actually written to her about Hawke arriving at Skyhold but for some reason Mia hadn’t realized she was still here. She hadn’t been at the Satinalia celebration.

“Yes, she’s around somewhere. I’m not sure just where that is actually, but she’s around. I take it you’re a…no that doesn’t translate. Wait, ah…” her face scrunched in thought and Mia startled herself by remembering the task that had brought her here initially. “You like the Champion’s story?” she hazarded a phrase, tone doubtful even as she spoke.

“I’m a fan of the story, and most of Varric Tethras’ works actually.” Mia admitted without shame. The Dwarf’s romance serials may be the reason that Mia and her husband have four children instead of just the three they’d planned.

“Hawke is something else entirely in person,” Dawn’s grin was fond and infectious, “if you go by the Herald’s Rest most nights you may get a chance to meet her.”
“Thank you but I and my family will be leaving Skyhold shortly. As much as I enjoy visiting our lives can only be left for so long.” And Mia saw an opportunity as she shifted through the jars of dried tea leaves, none of which were clearly marked. “Actually, I was rather grateful that Ambassador Montilyet convinced my brother to invite us all out, though I think he was initially only expecting myself to arrive.” Mia regretted using her husband’s name now but even as she watched Dawn frowned in confusion, and then her eyes scanned Mia’s features more carefully and finally flew wide.

“Holy shit you’re Cullen’s sister!” she blurted out in surprise and then clapped a hand over her own mouth in obvious dismay.

Mia just laughed, enjoying her new friend’s energy. “Yes I am, sorry for the subterfuge. I like to get to meet a person before my little brother’s reputation can scare them away.”

“I should have put it together sooner,” Dawn objected, “you’re both so golden and pretty.” Her compliment made Mia quickly touch her necklace and flush. “Though he is younger, I would say not little brother now.” Dawn pointed out and then gave a sniff. “Cookies!” she spun in alarm and jumped towards the one oven still pumping out heat.

Mia used the brief lull to finally find the right tea, taking a couple of pinches for Brienne. Behind her she could hear Dawn scraping around trying to salvage her baking.

“Cookies!” this time the word was triumphant and Mia turned to see her pulling a tray of wildly misshapen cookies that were only a little bit burnt. “Want one?” Dawn immediately offered to Mia, letting them cool before she picked any up.

And despite the task she should be getting done, or the sleep she was missing out on, Mia decided that she did want a cookie. “How has it been, living in Skyhold? Cullen has written very little about the day to day life of the Inquisition, I have only heard the barest of things about the Inquisitor, or Seneschal Leliana and Ambassador Montilyet.” She prompted, carefully nibbling on a still not cooled cookie.

“Skyhold is old and lovely and cold.” Dawn scraped all the cookies off of her tray and onto a small towel, folding the edges around with the clear intent to take them with her. “Alena is… like my mother’s best friend that has decided to take care of me.” There was a devastatingly soft smile on Dawn’s face and Mia remembered what Cullen had told her of the young woman’s circumstances. “Leliana is… scarily efficient,” the hesitation made Mia curious but she didn’t press, “And Josie is just the living embodiment of the word lovely.”

“They’re taking care of my little brother?” Mia didn’t meant to ask it so plainly.

“As much as he’ll let them. Seeker Cassandra is helping as well, as are his friends.” Now Dawn sounded reserved. “I… my arrival and the things I know were upsetting for a lot of people. And the language here is different than the one I spoke at home, so Cullen and I were not on good terms at first, but your brother is a fantastic Commander.”

“He told me he hurt you,” Mia warned softly, seeing surprise all over Dawn’s face. “He wrote asking how to apologize for saying the things he said, how to make amends. I’m still not even sure what to say about it.”
To her surprise Dawn smiled. “I’m made of tough Mia, words will not break me. Scratch the paint but not break me.” The phrase did not make a lot of sense to Mia but she let it be. “His apology was honest and accepted. But I know a gossiping sister, I was one so what do you really want to know?”

And Mia smiled at the direct question. "Have you noticed my brother being particularly fond of anyone? I do worry about him being out here all alone."

"I'm not often in the same activity as Cullen, sorry. You'd be better off asking Josie, I've seen them play chess on occasion. Or Cassandra, she's the Seeker that recruited him." Dawn didn't even realize she'd given Mia the answer she wanted, precious girl.

"That's alright, I'm just being an overbearing big sister." Mia felt torn between her curiosity over Dawn and her duty to her family.

"My sisters are the same, I might be a little bit to." another misshapen cookie was offered but declined.

"My sister's wife needs this tea or else I'd love to stay and chat." Mia hated to leave her new friend.

Dawn just smiled, "it was good to meet you Mia." she offered her hand politely.

"I have to ask," Mia found herself speaking without thinking about it first, "why are you making him cookies if you're angry with your friend?" Her match-making instinct flatted to life, only encouraged when Dawn ducked her head with a blush and a smile.

"It's silly; I'm annoyed with you, here's a cookie." Dawn laughed at herself easily enough it seemed, and Mia was absolutely charmed by her. "But stress baking is how I got to be the size that I...ah...was." Dawn seemed at a loss as she looked down at herself.

Mia did remember Cullen describing by her as a 'typically soft noble' but the young woman in front of her now had very little real softness left except for her limitless smiles and that hair. Maybe a few cookies would take the haunted gauntness from Dawn's face though.

"I find it romantic. When I first started courting my Jeremy I think we both put on weight for all the sweets we gave each other." And then off course the weight was their first child but Dawn didn't need that detail.

Dawn gaped at her, eyes wide with surprise. "Oh! No, its not like that." Her cheeks burned a brilliant scarlet, and Mia could feel amused smugness settle into her smile.

"Alright," she verbally conceded but absolutely believed it was exactly 'like that', "Well I wish you luck with your cookies, and your friend."

"Thanks." Dawn sounded a little confused but Mia just smiled and finally hurried back to bring Brienne the pepperoot tea.

Her head rattled around all the little details she'd come along, realizing that her brother indeed fancied the Ambassador. Though he probably wasn't aware of how fondly Lady Montilyet looked towards him in return. And unrelated but important she knew that the strange Offworlder Dawn really wasn't strange at all; just young and damaged but hopeful.

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The Iron Bull had brought her down into that goddamned mirror filled ballroom multiple times already, though it didn't always go smoothly.

Dawn never knew she could actively HATE twenty-three steps so much, but the paces from entrance to that table were the most disgusting twenty-three steps she’d ever had to take. And not for any reason other than irrational fear. That was the worst of it too, Dawn knew that she was being illogical and yet that didn’t stop her heart rate from jumping into the stratosphere the moment she saw an overly reflective surface.

That first day she’d left The Iron Bull’s side quickly to run to her room and sob uncontrollably into her pillow, not even entirely sure why. She’d been to unsettled to sleep and meeting Mia helped distract her at least. The cookies helped too.

He’d brought her back down there twice that second day. Bastard made her pick up each and every shard of the mirror she’d broken the day before. That was it, just brought her there the first time after lunch and made her pick up shards. She hadn’t gotten them all, the shaking in her hands getting to the point where she’d dropped one piece three times and The Iron Bull had taken the pieces and brought her back out without comment. Late in the evening he’d brought her back down to get the rest of the pieces.

And then he skipped a day, letting Dawn train normally, recover, and just start to believe that her torment was over. It wasn’t. The fourth trip down to the mirrored hell dimension had no little hand mirror for Dawn to focus on, and no table twenty-three terrible steps away to aim for. Just the ballroom and one giant, terrifying mirror. And The Iron Bull telling her she either had to stand there and let him touch that mirror, or go touch it herself. He hadn’t been close enough to stop her from turning and running up the stairs, though when he bellowed HOLD up after her, her damn feet had rooted to the spot as he slowly climbed up after her.

"Little Bas, you can't solve this by running." He reminded gently, leading her back down the stairs.

"Can you blame me for trying?" Dawn sounded dour to her own ears.

"You stand here, I'm going to go touch the mirror and you're going to see absolutely nothing happen to me Little Bas." His words made an agonizing ball of dread form in her guts and her chest felt heavy. The Iron Bull must have read the reaction of of her because he gave a grim nod. "You can do this Dawn." He tried to encourage.

Dawn could feel her head shake no, side to side but she couldn't even force the word out of her mouth. It became easier to count her heartbeat at least, because it was suddenly all she could hear as The Iron Bull turned to face the mirror. Her feet felt absolutely cemented in place, blood turning to acid, and Dawn could feel that something terrible was about to happen. The scream in her chest crawled up her throat, matching the high pitched whine suddenly overwhelming her ears as The Iron Bull reached out to the mirror and his reflection reached back. She couldn't hear him rap his fingers against the mirror, couldn't see the look of surprise reflected as the mirror suddenly canted, dropping to the floor. Dawn could only feel the scream rip free and her body react.

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As soon as the mirror shifted under his knuckles, Bull knew this whole thing had just gone tits up on him. She'd already looked on the verge of a panic attack and this would push her over the edge. He shouldn't have rushed this so much, but the alliance offer was waiting so he had to leave soon. Just for a little while but conquering a fear like hers needed to be addressed quickly.
That knowledge offered no comfort when she screamed 'katoh!' like her body couldn't contain her terror. He turned, expecting to find Dawn a huddled mess on the floor. Instead he took a staggering step backwards as she hurled herself at him as if her presence could help anchor him in place.

She had a decent grip around his neck and Bull hugged her tight even as he walked away from the mirror. Dawn was hyperventilating in his grip, nails digging into his skin for purchase.

"Dawn, Dawn I'm sorry that happened." Everytime she'd had an incident before she'd made a run for the outdoors but he didn't need an audience for this. So he took her through the corridors to that strange pool she seemed so fond of. With its broken wall and partial ceiling it offered that sense of openness she craved.

He sat on the stairs with her clinging to him, and deliberately took deep, slow breaths to remind her body how to do the same. Eventually her body calmed down out of blind panic and he heard her mumble something.

"Try that again Little Bas, I didn't hear you." He let her ease back, still holding on just to keep her from falling backwards.

"That's seven years of bad luck." Her statement made no sense to him even though he understood all the words. Must be a saying from her world.

He could understand her wanting to use humour to hide behind but that wasn't the best option just now. "That wasn't supposed to happen Dawn, I should have checked the support before putting you through that. But I am going to have to bring you back in there shortly." He warned, seeing her still pale from earlier reaction but not unsteady.

"You broke the mirror, you get to pick up the pieces!" she objected immediately.

He smiled but stayed serious. "The only way through this is forwards. You can't ignore it; right now it's just mirrors but when you're stressed enough can you say shiny metal won't set you off too?" he spoke from the painful weight of experience; foggy days still left him unsettled.

"UGH." she told her eyes and then thumped the top of her head against his chest. "Get knocked down seven times, get up eight."

"Exactly Little Bas, so let's get you back in there." He helped her to her feet, looking her over with a critical eye. He hated to have her all but shaking in fear still, an inappropriate part of him thinking of much more pleasant ways to have her shaking. But Bull knew mixing fucking and fixing fear was a bad combination. Continuing his seduction was a thought he'd pursue one he came back from helping the Boss cement an alliance with the Qun.

Until then he walked with Dawn back into the mirror room, seeing her body stance slide into fight position. She seemed almost startled that he asked her to do nothing more than wait with him while he collected the broken shards. She'd been battered enough for one day as it was.

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Yesterday had been terrible and she had expected The Iron Bull to bring her back down again that evening but he didn't. The following morning however The Iron Bull let her warm up with the Chargers, but when she came over to him for training he'd led her down and away from the training grounds. Taking one of the alternate routes Dawn didn't realize led to the lower Ball Room.
The new mirror looked devastatingly sinister in the unlit ballroom, only faint light glimmering off its reflective surface and Dawn was uncomfortably reminded of the deep dark ocean back on Earth. Her own people would rather explore the vacuum of space than the crushing depths, and yet here she was once again being asked to touch it, or let The Iron Bull do so.

“I hate you.” Dawn shook her head no once The Iron Bull repeated the exact same instructions that had left her fleeing yesterday, but today he smartly stood between her and her quickest route of escape.

“No you don’t Little Bas, if you did letting me touch a mirror would be easy.” The Iron Bull correctly pointed out to her.

“I still hate you.” Dawn retorted and took a reluctant step into the room.

“No, you don’t.” He chuckled at her and took three big strides into the room, clearly egging her on.

“Go fuck yourself sideways with a spiked mace.” Dawn spat out in Qunlat at him, glad that Kasaanda had taught her that particular phrase.

He didn’t reprimand her verbally like she expected, or even give her a disappointed look and a lecture. No, the bastard seemed to know she was playing for time and a way out of here, and he wasn’t letting her get away with it. The Iron Bull simply shrugged and walked towards the mirror.

“NO!” Dawn screeched and grabbed the back of his belt again. But this time the Iron Bull didn’t stop, he kept walking and even with as heavy as she was, Dawn’s weight wasn’t enough to stop him. Not if she was just dragging along behind him like this.

She didn’t even think about it either, Dawn just twisted her body around so she could worm her way between The Iron Bull and the mirror, trying to bodily push a Qunari Warrior away as if that was humanly possible. He kept walking forward and Dawn was backed up until her actual back hit the mirrored surface. At least this one was solidly attached and didn't fall.

And then he’d kept her there, shaking like a leaf in a thunderstorm. If Qunari didn’t have tougher skin than most, Dawn was fairly certain she’d have left bloody marks on him from where her nails dug in but he didn’t even seem to notice. The Iron Bull gently grabbed her upper arms and stepped them back once so she wasn’t against the mirror anymore but couldn’t get away from it more either.

“You’re still here.” He rumbled down at her encouragingly. She shook uncontrollably, wondering how yesterday still felt worse. Then he reached past her and rapped his knuckles against the mirror sharply, the sound making Dawn give an almost sub-vocal whimper. “I’m still here.” he hugged her this time, his grip a much more secure feeling than having a mirror at her back. “You’re doing well Little Bas.” He promised, turning them both easily so that his back was now to the mirror before walking them back out. It helped, oddly enough. Right up until he said they were still going to be doing their regular training still.

It hadn’t been pretty. It also hadn’t been a private humiliation. For some reason Hawke and Merrill were sitting on the battlements watching by the time Dawn realized that The Iron Bull had been serious about expecting her to keep training despite the morning’s mirror lesson. And of course Hawke had stayed to watch the entire painful demonstration, up to and including the moment when Dawn ran out of patience and tolerance and told The Iron Bull to go drown in the hot baths. He’d laughed at her and told her that she should walk off her temper before trying to wash off; instead Dawn went to bitch at Victoria.
“Now that, that is the look of a woman that just had the shit kicked out of her.” Hawke commented blithely from her perch on the battlements.

“Choke on a fishbone!” Dawn spat back immediately but Hawke just laughed so Dawn threw herself at the base of the battlements with an exhausted groan.

She was getting better, she really was, but apparently there was no short cut to mastering sword and board. Just the grind of learning. Sometimes a literal grind if her knees were any indication. Adding the process of breaking her mirror fear was not making anything else easier, that was for sure.

“I don’t understand.” Merrill remarked honestly, and Dawn felt bad for unintentionally excluding her but she was currently too frustrated to explain.

Luckily Hawke had no such issue. “You saw the training Merrill,” Hawke prompted and Merrill nodded, “so you saw when the Qunari, big fellow with horns, bodily hauled this one around like my Mabari used to go after Anders’ feathers?” This time Merrill frowned as she nodded. “Well, in this case Dawn held up worse than the feathers.”

“I hate you.” Dawn stated flatly but stayed seated. She huffed in a breath when both women fell silent. “Alright yes he absolutely can man-handle me despite my best efforts, especially since the moment I master one move he immediately makes it harder. But The Iron Bull is my fighting instructor, and I asked him to do this to me so I will not complain.” Even though she really, REALLY wanted to. “But seriously…” Dawn’s solemnness infected the other two.

“I hate serious. Serious ruins good times and causes headaches.” Hawke warned lightly.

“But seriously… I’m not going to be a master sword fighter anytime soon, so I just need to keep moving forwards.” Dawn shut the topic down.

Or so she thought. “Well that’s no good,” Merrill argued, “if you’re hurting you need to let him know.”

“Oh, it’s nothing bad like that. Just general soreness and a new found appetite that makes me want to eat everything. And I mean all the food.” Dawn corrected; Merrill nodded as if that made perfect sense. She didn’t want to get into the inexplicable issues with mirrors she was having, bad enough that the Chargers and The Iron Bull were aware of it and trying to fix her. Getting Hawke or Merrill in on that action too would break Dawn, she knew it.

“Quickest cure for aches and pains is alcohol.” Hawke offered helpfully.

“What is it with you and Varric and trying to get me drunk?” Dawn asked almost afraid of the answer.

“We’re trying to build up your tolerance so you can survive the Hanged Man.” Victoria answered with a deliberately snooty tone of voice as she stood up. Since it was either get stepped on or get out of the way, Dawn scrambled to her feet too.

“I feel like I’ve missed something, are we going for a walk?” Merrill asked, standing gracefully as well.

“I can show my grotto if you’d like.” Dawn offered, figuring that Hawke would just take them to the Rest for alcohol as promised if she led.

“That sounds naughty, was that supposed to be naughty?” Merrill sounded amused.
With an opening like that, Dawn was surprised to find herself taking the high road; but only
because Varric wasn’t around to hear it. “There’s a room near the Undercroft that is partially
flooded, and partially exposed to the elements, and I have claimed it as my grotto.” It was hard for
Dawn to explain the appeal of her little broken room without actually showing it to them.

It had been her sanctuary when she needed solitude and a place that felt even remotely like home,
but Skyhold was becoming home and she knew that having friends there would help, especially
after yesterday. “A couple of others know about my grotto, so someone might be there. Be
prepared to see naked bits because Cedric’s not shy and Dorian has no reason to be.” Dawn grinned
over her shoulder at her friends.

The sound of the waterfall grew stronger but Dawn stopped before they saw it. Instead she opened
a door to reveal her ‘grotto’. At least since Dagna had arrived it wasn’t the almost freezing cold
swim she’d endured. Now suddenly the pool cleaned itself and had a more tolerable temperature
all the time. And the occasional adorable Dwarf Arcanist in it; though not today.

Solas was at the pool’s edge, just about to submerge when they entered. Dawn smiled brightly to
see her friend there; they had only gotten a couple of chances to practice dancing thus far. “Hahren;
this is Victoria Hawke, Champion of Kirkwall, and Merrill Sabrae, Keeper of Kirkwall’s
Alienage.” Dawn introduced. “Ladies this is Solas, Fade expert, Advisor to the Inquisitor, and my
friend.” It was probably not the most dignified time for introductions, what with Solas being in the
equivalent of his smalls, but Dawn tried.

“Nuvenan ma son.” Merrill offered her own greetings in Elvhen and Dawn was happy to recognize
the phrase. Dorian and Cedric were now seeing which one could teach her their language faster,
and unsurprisingly they had both started with much less polite phrases first.

Solas bowed his head and replied, “Nuvenan ma tas son.”

“Huh, you’re buff for an apostate.” Hawke remarked diplomatically.

Dawn stared at Hawke in open mortification but Solas just seemed amused. “It would be foolish to
not make my body as much of a weapon as my Will is.” He countered with a respectful nod.

“Don’t let us keep you from your activities.” Dawn prompted to her friend and he gave her a smile.
She turned to Hawke and Merrill and saw both of them shamelessly enjoying the sight of him
swimming lengths. Dawn closed her eyes and sighed, letting them be; if they wanted to start
lusting after her friend it was their choice. Only Merrill had a fighting chance; Dawn knew he only
ever went for the Elvhen ladies. And then broke their hearts repeatedly.

“A cold swim right about now sounds great.” Hawke sounded winded even though Dawn
suspected Victoria liked a more chest haired male.

“I wonder if he’d be willing to talk later, I bet he has wonderful stories.” Merrill sounded giddy as
Dawn led them away and Dawn realized with a lurch that she’d drastically changed things by
introducing those two. She had no idea what this could alter but did she dare try and prevent it; did
she have the right?

Dawn briefly wished she was religious enough to seek answers in prayer, but that hadn’t worked
for the religion she had been raised in, let alone a whole new one she felt was based on lies. This
world wasn’t the game she had played, and dammit both Solas and Merrill needed a friend that
could understand the complexities of their culture in a way Dawn never would. He needed to
connect to the People of this time, not just his memories of those lost.
“So when do we host a game of Wicked Grace down here?” Hawke sounded absolutely thrilled at the idea and sidelined Dawn’s thought process.

“We can set that up the moment someone teaches me how to play.” Dawn lobbied back, trying to focus on the moment instead of worrying for the future.

“Oh I could teach you,” Merrill offered brightly, “Varric said my tells are really easy to spot so you should pick it up quick!”

Dawn gave the blood mage what she was sure was a fond, amused look. “That wounds marvelous Merrill. Does anybody have any other plans for the afternoon?”

Chapter End Notes

Translations
Elvhen:
Nuvenan ma son= I hope you are well
Nuvenan ma tas son= I hope you are also well
If the Walls had Ears

Chapter Summary

Varric is watching the actions of the Inquisition with an eye out for a future story, or maybe just hoping for a future at all.

The Inquisitor finally realizes the role of a Harbinger even as the Harbinger accepts the consequences of what she knows.

Chapter Notes

Look, I vaguely refer to canon lines! See, it DOES happen. Rarely, but you know, I try.... lol.

Skyhold and all the varied peoples within it all seemed to have found their rhythm, something Varric was grateful for because it meant he could reasonably predict where everyone would be. Most mornings Hawke slept in later than he did so he made his way out to get some work done before his favourite person could become a distraction. Depending on the content of his work, he liked to have general sounds in the background and usually the Main Hall gave him all he could want. But today he found himself wandering outside of his usual routine, walking the battlements quietly as his brain worked through whatever it was struggling with.

Down below on the training grounds he spotted Dawn with the Chargers, the careful eye of Bull making sure she wasn’t flagging behind or putting herself at risk. Varric still wasn’t sure he approved of the Qunari’s interest in Dawn, but he kept his mouth shut and his eyes and ears open. They seemed to be good for each other at least, and if anyone deserved a little happiness in the craziness the world had become it was Dawn. Poor Sweetheart had had enough heartache, and Varric knew that he wouldn’t be the only one to rip into the friendly Warrior if he did end up hurting her. Dawn might not have realized the extent of her connections yet but Varric had; once people stopped fearing what she knew they started to love and care about her as a person. The Offworlder had somehow become beloved of the Champion of Kirkwall and the Inquisitor both, and he suspected that if took a moment he could list a dozen others. Dawn certainly seemed to collect Heroes without any real effort.

Her training however definitely seemed filled with effort, if the sweat and grunting were any indication. He recalled the smooth ease with which Broody swung a sword that outweighed him, the lyrium markings adding to the Elf’s already formidable skills; but watching Dawn train Varric was most reminded of Aveline. His City Guard friend would probably have more than a few things to say about the entire situation Varric and Hawke had found themselves in, and then she would also likely have a way to solve it. He had to briefly wonder if Aveline and Cassandra would get along; both women were grossly competent and enjoyed giving him looks of disappointment. Though Aveline let him get away with more shit.

Alena found him watching the training below long before it was finished but the quiet Dwarf said
nothing for a long time, just stood next to him. “We’re going to be riding to the Storm Coast. I plan on leaving today after noon. Think you’ll be ready?” she finally quietly queried.

“Bianca and I are always ready your Inquisitorialness, just say the words.” He agreed without asking for the reason behind the trip. Alena had proven competent at selecting her teams based on ability and Varric knew if she wanted him there it was because she felt he was the best suited to join her team.

“We might have an Alliance with the Qun.” Her words stilled him utterly. The Qun had destroyed Kirkwall, driven before the anger of their Arishok and even if Victoria had actually torn that Qunari’s throat out, Varric had met his replacement. Dealing with the Qun, even when one of their leaders was supposedly their ally, was never as easy as it should be.

“Word of advice from someone that lived through the last uneasy alliance the Qun set in place; keep your weapons close.” Varric was utterly serious for once, unease sliding through his veins in a familiar wash.

Alena stared down at the Inquisition’s own resident Qunari and Varric watched her watch Bull. “Are you worried about betrayal?” he finally had to ask, knowing that if the idea had occurred to him it had to have occurred to her as well.

“Always.” She smiled lightly. “I’m in my late forties Varric; I didn’t get this old by being overly trusting.” Her words were meant to be humorous but he heard the truth in them. She trusted her people, but Alena also seemed ready to accept that people were inherently flawed and capable of disappointing her. It was quite the change from the Dwarf that had sought him out in the tavern of Haven, begging him to tell her stories as the world stared at her for salvation.

“If we’re meeting with Qunari, I would suggest that we bring Solas as mage back up. They know how to work around Circle and Tevinter mages, he’s our only wild card in that regards.” Varric could only offer advice but Alena nodded, likely having made the same conclusion herself.

“Solas, yourself, Bull and his Chargers.” Alena listed the team going and Varric frowned. Normally Bull left his Chargers to their mercenary work; it wasn’t like him to willingly bring his people to his People.

“Don’t take this the wrong way Stabby, but I really hope this doesn’t turn out the way I think it’s going to.” Varric admitted with a sigh.

“Me too.” Alena actually agreed.

They remained silent sentinels on the battlements for a while after that, both likely contemplating the absolute disaster it could be if Bull turned traitorous on them. Varric liked Bull; it would bother him to see his friend be the bad guy, but it wouldn’t be the first time Varric had been betrayed by someone close to him. He suspected the same for Alena.

“Has anyone thought to ask Dawn what she knows of it?” Varric asked the question without realizing it had even occurred to him.

Alena turned to look at him and then down at the Offworlder with likely answers. “Damn. Sometimes you’re more than just a pretty face Varric.”

He laughed at the compliment. “Don’t let Hero hear that, I have no desire to ruin Inquisition mom and dad’s relationship.”

Now she gave him a very flat, slightly dangerous look. “I am not THAT much older than you
“Go ask our resident Harbinger if our resident Qunari is about to go all Kirkwall on us Stabby; we’ll both feel better if you do.” He suggested with a grin.

But before Alena could leave to talk to Dawn, the training down below took a turn no one watching was expecting. Bull had been working on Dawn’s hand to hand combat with single blunted knives and a lot of fists, and apparently had a nasty surprise up his metaphorical sleeve. In reality he had a hand mirror hidden in his belt, and he pulled it out as Dawn dodged a heavy kick from him. Varric hadn’t been required to attend Ruffles’ little lessons in the lower ball room, so he’d only heard of Dawn’s issue with mirrors from the witnesses that had been there. Alena had seen it though, and her reaction alone told Varric the truth of how wretched Dawn’s experience must have been.

“Andraste’s puckered butthole, what the fuck is he doing?” Alena Cadash supposed Herald of Andraste herself stole Dawn’s favourite phrase and stared downwards in open concern. The blasphemy suited Varric’s mood though as he waited to see how bad this was going to be.

Dawn’s whole body throbbed with various aches and pains where blows had landed, but that nasty kick The Iron Bull tried missed her by a huge margin. She felt a small surge of pride and then a lot of concern because that could only mean that he hadn’t meant for it to connect. Her body whipped around as quickly as possible, ready for an attack.

He pulled out a fucking mirror. Oh god but it made sense. Logically she knew that there was no better way for him to drive home how important it was for her to work on her fear. The Iron Bull probably figured she’d freeze up or hyper focus on the mirror.

So Dawn did the one thing neither she nor The Iron Bull thought she could do; she ignored the mirror entirely. His hand was out of active use unless he dropped it, so Dawn jabbed upwards at his face, a feint that only worked because he was already surprised. The Iron Bull lifted his arms up a fraction and Dawn threw a heavy punch into his diaphragm instead. As he curled to absorb the blow, Dawn reached up to grab one of his horns, twisted around to set her stand and hip tossed The Iron Bull onto the ground. Without hesitating Dawn crouched over his chest, knees pressing into his shoulders to keep him down and set the edge of her practice knife against his neck. He stared up at her in pleased surrender.

For a second she couldn’t breathe; it felt like something was caught in her throat. It was her bundled emotions; elation and anger, pride and triumph, exhilaration and honest surprise, all trying to be expressed at once. Dawn lifted her face to the sky, thrust her fist into the air with the knife aloft, and bellowed out her jubilation.

“Yeah!” a huge grin split across her face and her chest heaved for air as adrenaline flooded through her. “Take that, I win.” She taunted down at The Iron Bull.

He grinned up at her, not denying her victory but when he shrugged his shoulders he was able to move her around despite her position and weight. Dawn realized just how suggestive the positioning was now that they’d stopped fighting, and her face burned hotly as she awkwardly scrambled off of him. She shut down the first thought that came into her head, and then any others just to be safe; that way laid demons.

“Well done Little Bas, I’m impressed.” The Iron Bull complimented easily, sitting up but not getting off the ground yet.
Dawn couldn’t make eye contact and she didn’t even want to know what her face was saying so instead she looked away, absurdly grateful to see Alena coming towards them. Any distraction would be good right about now. “What’s up?” she called out to her friend.

Now The Iron Bull stood up, dusting himself off and Dawn stared straight at the Inquisitor, trying to act as if she hadn’t just been straddling the seven foot tall Qunari. Her life had gotten complicated. “Is it time to go Boss?” his question confused Dawn because she hadn’t realized there were any missions left before Halamshiral.

“No yet Bull, I’m actually here to steal my Harbinger.” Alena gave her easy smile, dark brown wrinkles lining her mouth and telling of her humour. Maybe Dawn was trying a little too hard to find a distraction.

“Heh, we’re pretty much done anyways Boss.” The Iron Bull waved Dawn off without further ado and Dawn gratefully escaped that whole unsettling encounter. That was a jerk move to pull in a fight though; she’d give him hell for it later, or maybe ask Sera to.

“You alright?” Alena quietly worried at her as they walked.

“I won.” Dawn grinned, just letting go of everything else and focusing on the good.

“You definitely did.” For some reason Alena seemed vastly amused; Dawn decided not to press her luck by demanding an explanation.

Alena led Dawn into the sound proofed War Room, waving Josephine off; apparently it wasn’t a conversation for the Advisors. Now Dawn ruefully recalled that she’d been grateful for Alena’s interruption not three minutes ago. She should have caught on to the use of her new title; it was Harbinger of the Inquisition time.

“Oh, now I’m worried.” Dawn blurted out to her friend honestly.

“Bull’s people are offering an Alliance.” Alena’s simple statement made all the noise in Dawn’s head fall quiet at least.

“Save the Chargers.” Dawn blurted it out and slapped a hand over her mouth in horror. She’d thought of warning The Iron Bull and Alena about what was coming, but then she’d be taking away The Iron Bull’s right to choose for himself. She’d thought she’d settled on saying nothing at all as the best option.

Alena just looked up at her in contemplation. “I take it you didn’t mean to tell me that.”

Now the sickening curdles of guilt settled into her stomach. “I… I am a really bad friend.” It was too late to unsay it though. “I need to not interfere. I had decided to not interfere even, and then I go and open my stupid mouth…”

“If you think this is one of those things you have to keep quiet on, then all I know is that if I think I can, I’ll save the Chargers. It already sounds like something I’d do, even if I’m only guessing who or what I’m saving them from.” Alena carefully comforted.

“It’ll be fairly obvious when it happens. If it happens.” Dawn groused, recalling that things were already different than the game she’d played in another lifetime. Now that that thought had occurred to her though, Dawn could taste the actual dread. “You can’t let anyone know something might be up, this might be one of those things that’s different from my world story.”

The Iron Bull would know she had known all along and she’d already had a freak out over
 realizing how hurt he would be by it. She could understand him not trusting her at all afterwards; it might be the death of their friendship. But he’d either be The Iron Bull still and with his Chargers, and that was an outcome she was willing to lose him for, or Hisrad would come back. And then Dawn would be very grateful she’d kept so many things from him.

“Dawn, I was once successfully able to act casual and kill people.” Alena reminded pointedly.

“And once upon a time I could order a pizza, but today isn’t that day.” Dawn grumped right back. “Just…” she closed her eyes for a second, wondering how to fix the mistake she’d already made. “Just be you Alena. I know I can trust that, even if I can’t trust my world story to hold true here.”

“The last time you said something like that to me I got into a fist fight with a Darkspawn Magister.” Alena’s reminder was sobering.

“This isn’t that bad. But people are still going to die. Hopefully just the Venatori.” She added lamely, trying not to just completely ruin everything. Maybe she should take a page from Ashaad Two and just stop talking.

“A regular day of work then.” Alena smiled without demanding more answers and Dawn hugged her friend in gratitude.

“When are you leaving?” Dawn worried, feeling Alena hug her back without hesitation.

“This afternoon.” Alena’s answer made The Iron Bull’s earlier question make sense at least.

“Oh.” This might have been her last morning training with Krem and the Chargers. Mac still hadn’t told her about his life amongst the Avvar before he became a Charger; he had promised to trade his story for a song the next time they all got together to drink. That might never happened now. And either way she may never see The Iron Bull as a friend again, though that would be up to him if Alena saved the Chargers.

“Dawn, go get something to eat.” Alena suggested kindly, and even though food was the absolute last thing Dawn wanted at the moment, she agreed to go do just that.

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Varric stayed on the battlements, the only witness left to see the outcome of the fight from this angle. Alena had taken off to the training grounds to interfere if necessary but Varric had stayed put, observing. Not only was it entertaining to watch, it was also the sort of scene he’d want to include if they all lived through this and he got the chance to write the Inquisition’s story.

Dawn’s shout into the air made Varric nearly cheer back, the unashamed sound of success almost irresistible to join in on. And for a heartbeat when she looked back down at Bull, Varric was certain that the Qunari was finally going to make his move. But Dawn scrambled off of him and away, Alena interfering before the moment could happen. And only Varric seemed to have caught on to the look Tiny had on his face for that moment. Good for each other or not, The Iron Bull was definitely besotted with Dawn. Depending on how this alliance turned out that might be a very bad thing.

Bull didn’t seem worried about it as he cleared the training ground and left, every movement easy and relaxed. And still Varric stayed on the battlements; wandering a little and waiting even if he had no clue what for. But his subconscious was chewing through something and so far the Upper Bailey was providing all kinds of entertainment while he waited his thought process out.

It was early enough in the morning still that the Valo-Kas Healer probably thought no one else
would be about yet; no one other than the servants and those like Varric that operated on a criminally short amount of sleep that is. Kaaras walked almost furtively towards the training dummies along one wall, and Varric couldn’t help it, he followed to see what the mercenary was up to.

He went past the standard dummies that the soldiery trained on, and continued to the small area Cassandra preferred to train within. Varric grinned, disappointed that he couldn’t read whatever it was the note said as Kaaras pinned it to the dummy with a single mountain rose. It seemed that the Satinalia celebration had lit a fire under the Healer’s ass in regards to wooing Cassandra, and Varric nearly laughed as he spotted the Seeker herself stepping out the blacksmiths and stop dead in her tracks at the sight of Kaaras. Oh this was too good.

“Ah… Healer Kaaras.” She seemed startled to catch him at her training dummy, and with how Kaaras looked, he was as dismayed by this turn of events. Whatever god or Paragon Varric pleased to get to witness this was the best. “I was hoping to speak to you privately.” Cassandra hesitated, her normally formidable attitude nowhere to be found suddenly. Varric had actually never seen this side of the Seeker, even when he had accidentally caught her weeping over the deaths at the Conclave.

“Aren’t we speaking privately now?” Kaaras looked around at the empty training ground and Varric pulled Stealth over himself in an awkward hurry, just in case one of them looked up at the walls.

“Ah..yes…” Cassandra hesitated, seeming to lose her nerve and Varric swore under his breath. “The flirting… With me. I’ve…noticed it. Unless it is my imagination, which is entirely possible…”

Varric found himself clutching at the battlement stone in front of him, almost leaning over as if getting physically closer would make it easier to endure being a witness to this.

“No, it is not your imagination.” Kaaras finally admitted. “It might sound ridiculous to you, that a Vashoth mercenary wants to court you but…yes, I do. If that’s what you want.”

Varric felt a stone drop in his gut at the flash of fear on Cassandra’s face. He knew the Seeker slightly better than Fix-It did; he knew what she was going to say next. “No.” Cassandra spun quickly and walked back into the blacksmiths, closing the door behind her while Kaaras just stared after her.

“Go on Fix-It, go after her.” Varric breathed the encouragement softly, knowing that although his Stealth was a heavy shroud he could still give himself away through it.

Kaaras didn’t have to chase the Seeker; she came back out through the door in a rush. “I take it back, it IS what I want.” She walked towards Kaaras and Varric gave an excited punch to the air. “I want a man who…sweeps me off my feet. Who gives me flowers and reads me poetry by candlelight. I want the ideal.” She sighed and continued, the honesty of her words surprising Varric entirely. “I know what the world sees; I am a warrior. I am blunt and difficult and self-righteous. But my heart lies beneath all that; it yearns for these things I cannot have.”

“And who ever told you that you couldn’t have all of that? Though if you want me to read you poetry, don’t let Kaaris find out. He’ll insist on writing something truly horrendous and I’ll read it out of guilt, and that’ll definitely ruin the mood.” Kaaras smiled, refusing to be scared off.

Cassandra actually shoved his arm for the comment, though Varric could see her blush even from this distance. “You can’t be serious!”
“When it comes to how bad Kaaris’ poetry is, I’m always serious.” The Healer even managed to keep a straight face for his comment, though Varric saw a smile twitching on the Vashoth’s mouth.

“Then what poetry would you choose?” Cassandra challenged; obviously expecting him to be at a loss.

“You’ll have to find out as I court you Cassandra. It’ll be more fun that way, I promise.” Varric had to give the kid points for being smooth; Kaaras lifted Cassandra’s hand to kiss the back of her gauntlet, and then he turned her hand over and kissed the inside of her palm before walking away.

Down below Cassandra stared after the Healer with rosy cheeks and a stunned expression on her face while the Upper Bailey filled with more active, noisy life. The tender moment was shattered as someone in the Healer’s Wing shouted and Cassandra seemed to shake free of the stillness keeping her in place. Varric saw her look around for any witnesses, oblivious to him hidden under Stealth, and then she went to the letter and flower Kaaras had originally left for her.

Alena had asked Varric to finish the romance serial a while back, saying that she and others were fans. He was fairly certain he’d just figured out the other fan of his romantic works. Maybe he should include a little reference of letters and flowers pinned to a training dummy in the next installment; if for no other reason than to finally get back at Cassandra for stabbing him in the book. Though he was also glad for them both, it was nice to see some straightforward romancing. Someone in their group should have an uncomplicated love life.
The Long Walk Home

Chapter Summary

Courtship and Compassion and Cole makes a friend.
The Inquisitor anticipates disaster amongst alliances and The Hawke strikes at Dawn.

Chapter Notes

This chapter just keeps getting longer. I need to post it before it gets actually ridiculous.

Also, I HAD to include Kaaras' letter to Cass, you're welcome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cassandra,

If I am to follow the traditions of the Valo-Kas, in letting go of my failures I allow myself to grow and become better.

To do that I have to be honest.

Seeing you at the fireside during Satinalia it was all I could do to not steal you away for myself. I regret not having the courage to ask you to dance with me that night, or to ask you then if you would allow me to court you. Because I witnessed it when you defended the people of Haven both with word and deed, I knew it when you wrote to tell me after you knew of Dawn's pain, and I saw it reflected in your eyes as you watched the regrets burn; you are a woman of great passion and greater control. It's a pleasure to be your friend.

I also intend to Court you if you give me leave. So forgive me for being overly formal, most do not expect a Vashoth to relish on romantic things, but I believe you are entirely worth doing things correctly for.

Yours?

Kaaras

P.S The flower is a mountain rose. Like you it has a beauty both in its strength to endure as well as in its form.

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Compassion stood atop the raised portcullis, perched where no climb could have brought him and torn between so many cries. The noise of it all echoing and whispering. Quiet pleading to just make the pain go away. Stop. STOP.

Resolute because he knows he lied. For the first time in memory disobeying those that named him
liar by leaving her behind, and now he marches towards his fate. How many times can a broken tool be reshaped? But his hands. His hands that have broken and torn, rent asunder and destroyed; strengthened something fragile. Helped when that wasn’t his purpose. What did he want his Purpose to be?

Cole could hear the simple tune Varric whistled long past the sun setting and all possible sound having faded away. He almost lost it amongst the bright hot worry of cramping and blood when there should be no pain. And no, I will not lose this one too. But the persistent sound cheered Cole on even if Varric wasn’t here to call him Kid. He knew that even out of sight and quiet mind Varric remembered him now. Like glittering Dawn, Varric couldn’t be made to forget him as he currently was.

She had secrets, dark and deep, that were trying to drag her down into the crushing quiet again. Her pain had changed, the frozen agony quieted, thawed to hope and love but still painful. She knows. Things she hides to keep him safe. Compassion for Compassion. Love for Cole. Solas saw him as a Spirit and Varric sees him as Kid but only Dawn saw him.

He liked sour things. They tasted as bright as the smile his scrunched up face brought to Dawn when he tried it the first time. And he could leave out the rinds for ants to collect. She brought him bits and pieces to try, never with insistence but merely patient curiosity and told him of her favourite foods from home.

She had forgotten. The small line of banter he knew because she knew but she didn’t remember knowing. Their worlds shared a treat and he could find it for her. Not a ‘close to, almost, nearly like’, but the same. Return a memory home through an old favourite taste on the tongue. It would ease her pain and she knew pain was coming. Even if she didn’t know how much.

“Elgar, a word if you would?” the Dalish First approached him, heavy with experience but light with laughter. A question chasing endlessly through his thoughts.

“I am called Cole, Cedric Isene First of Clan Lavellan.” So many names, each with a meaning and a purpose and a place. Cole could have Compassion but could Compassion have Cole? The older Elf gave a nod to the correction and appeared thoughtful. “Yes.” Cole answered the question not asked.

Now Lavellan First Cedric-- No, the purpose of names meant that he had to place them in the right spot or else the names were just noise. Titles and labels can hurt or heal, depending on how they are used. Poison. Person. Friend. Real.

“You fear your scent is known.” His explanation offered no comfort, though the First seemed to understand him if the sound of hidden despair was his. “The Wolf will not hurt you for he cherishes the sunrise. You are not a threat to his People.”

Cole knew Lavellan Cedric needed him to stay but it was hard. So much pain susurrated through him, gripping, grasping, crying out for help but not always begging for what they actually needed. An end is an end and NO. He wasn’t just a quick mercy from pain. He was Cole and Compassion and Kid and Creepy and Dawn’s softly thought little brother.

“If Fen Harel is real then I am one of his People, technically.” Lavellan's solemnness saddened Cole; the First was known to Joy and Curiosity, not Fear.

“What is real? He worries; asleep for so long and nothing is right. Can't be right again, will never be right again. But she is impossibly real and burns too strange to be his creation. The knowledge hurts. A god never hurts, doesn’t feel pain for what is lost and found and discovered and he never
was one. Never wanted the name but bore it against them. Your name means war leader.” He startled the mage by leaning his face in close, trying to understand the soft sounds the yellow blood on his face was making.

“Did the Dread Wolf find me in the Fade?” he carefully spoke, not as if Cole were slow but as if he didn’t want the answer.

“I don’t know what a Dread Wolf is.” Cole admitted with honest concern. This was usually where others would get frustrated and leave, Sera would never have approached, and usually only Solas or Dawn or Varric or The Iron Bull or Krem would persist. And now Cedric.

“Why don’t I start with telling you the stories of my People and we’ll see what questions we have from there?” and Cole felt oddly stable as the First settled an arm across his shoulders, feeling his boots scuff the stone for the first time next to the silently walking Elf.

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Sending an ex-assassin in to an almost guaranteed ambush with a possible traitor in her midst was not a problem. Telling her to act like it wasn't even that big of an annoyance; Alena was fairly laconic at the best of times as it was. But making her go to the Storm sodding Coast in the middle of winter was the actual shit. It was the worst location the Inquisitor could think of to go and she was actually including the impending trip to Orlais on that list.

She missed Blackwall. Not that it wasn't fun with Bull and his Chargers, but the long stretch of almost peace during Satinalia let Alena get accustomed to her lover's constant presence at night. All the drinking songs in the world with Krem and Spike trying to out do each other for hideously off key notes were not enough to make up for the difference. Stones and Paragons she'd gone domestic.

"Boss, rendezvous was just south of Fort pointy-madmen," Bull broke into her musings without much effort, "my contact should meet us here."

"Shouldn't we be able to see them then? Qunari do tend to stick out a little compared to the foliage." Varric teased as if he hadn't been asking Alena about the odds of betrayal before they left.

"Not all spies are so obvious as Iron Bull, Child of Stone." Solas smoothly called out, all joking tones but with an underlying seriousness that left Alena wondering if he'd ever played the Game before. It was that nicely delivered.

"He's not wrong about that." An amused Elf stepped out of concealment. He wore no identifying colours or insignia but Alena could almost smell the convert on him. "Good to see you again Hissrad."

"Gatt!" Bull's voice boomed out, all excited cheer. "Last I heard you were still in Seheron." They had deliberately pulled a face Bull would know for this job, a fact not lost on Alena, Varric, or Solas it seemed. Oh Bull, don't be stupid.

"They'd finally decided I'd calmed down enough to go back into the world." The brunet Elf with no face Ink and a slight Tevinter accent shrugged as if his presence were of no matter to Bull. Now Alena was actually a little insulted; the Qun thought so little of her that they didn't think she'd understand what was going on. That or they didn't care if she did, she was already here after all.

Bull turned his body slightly, looking at her in a way that put Gatt into his blind spot; his greatest
sign of trust and Alena wanted to groan. "Boss, this is Gatt. We worked together in Seheron."

Alena caught Gatt looking over the team she'd brought with her, a glimmer of angry
disappointment hidden away as he focused onto her. "It's a pleasure to meet you Inquisitor.
Hissrad's reports say you're doing good work." She couldn't help but wonder if it was common for
Ben Hassrath to read each other's reports or if Bull was under some form of a review team. Did he
realize how little his handlers trusted him?

Bull interpreted her slightly curious look as wonderment over his name, as if Leliana hadn't already
gotten at least that much figured out. "My title was Hissrad because I was assigned to secret work.
You can translate it as..."

"Liar. It means liar." Gatt's tone had a challenging timbre to it; as if the less polite translation was a
reprimand to Bull instead of an explanation to Alena.

"You didn't have to say it like that." Bull sounded amusingly annoyed but he shifted his weight to
face Gatt straight on again. In the background Alena happened to notice Solas giving Bull a newly
calculating look; Ancestors' blasted Elf ears could hear a far distance she made a mental note.

"It's so good to hear friends say good things about me in their secret reports." Alena had heard
Josephine mutter that perfect line to Leliana and shamelessly stole it now.

"He does," Gatt sounded amused to admit but his eyes were still too hard, angry. "But they aren't
really secret, are they? And I was expecting to meet this Offworlder of yours Hissrad; its
disappointing to miss the chance." That was news to Alena; Bull had told her they’d asked for
Dawn but she'd always just assumed he'd been able to tell them no.

Bull lost his joviality. "Look-- Gatt...

"Relax," now the Elf smiled but it was a little too sickly sweet for Alena's liking, "unlike our
superiors, I know how it works out here." Gatt looked over at her, so very generous of him to
include her in the conversation. "We're in this together. The Tevinter Imperium is bad enough
without the influence of this Venatori cult." Yes, cults are bad. Said the convert, trying to convince
her to ally herself with the bigger, badder cult. "If this new form of lyrium helps them seize power
in Tevinter, the war with Qunandar could be worse." He pleaded for peace without at all
acknowledging that the Qun were waging a war of worldwide conquest and conversion.

"With this stuff, the Vints could make their slaves into an army of magical freaks." Bull supported
the argument. Even untrained bodies could be a problem to face down if they were all enhanced
with red lyrium, Alena couldn't forget the fall of Haven if she tried. No one deserved that fate; but
so far she wasn't convinced this wasn't a set up and Bull fell silent as he read some of the wariness
on Alena's face.

Gatt jumped in to fill the uncomfortable silence. "The Ben Hassrath agree, that's why we're here."
He pointed out towards the hostile coast. "Our dreadnought is safely out of view, and out of range
of any Venatori mages on shore." And she was just supposed to take his word on that. "We'll need
to eliminate the Venatori, then signal the Dreadnought so it can come in and take out the smuggler
ship."

She could herd Brontos though the holes in that brilliant tactical plan. It didn't make her feel any
more comfortable about this endeavour. Why not bring in more people and spring a counter
ambush on the beach? Not her army, but asking for just the Chargers and her trio limited them
severely. And outside the possibility of mages on the beach, her people took all the risk.
Looking at Bull’s concerned face only left her more uneasy. "What do you think?" She asked out loud while inside she wondered if Dawn had been begging her to save the Chargers from Bull.

"...Too many ways for crap to go wrong." He finished explaining his opinion but surprised her by going on. "If the scouts have underestimated enemy numbers, we're dead. If we can't lock down the Venatori mages, the ship is dead." And everyone here knew it wasn't Inquisition scouts that had done the sweep this time. "It's risky." Bull's simple comment felt stupidly ironic. If she wasn't so mad at him for getting her into this position she'd have laughed.

"Riskier than letting red lyrium into Minrathous?" Gatt demanded, actually stepping closer to Bull but turning to face Alena again. "My agents suggested two possible locations the Venatori maybe camped to guard the shore, we'll need to split up to hit both at once."

They definitely should have brought more people. And she should have found a way to get Harding out here to verify this information somehow. With Bull coming on her team Krem would lead the Chargers, and Dawn's panicked warning kept echoing in Alena's head. And Dawn's desire to stay apart from this became horridly understandable as Alena had to consider that maybe this was an ambush, but she wasn't the target.

The Iron Bull was.

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“What exactly has you in such a discombobulated state?” Hawke demanded as Dawn was once again swore and tried to shake her hand out. With Varric gone as support with The Iron Bull and his Chargers, Dawn had talked a bored Hawke into teaching her lock picking. It was far less exciting than she’d anticipated it being.

“I’m ignoring a pink elephant.” Dawn spat impatiently, trying to channel her frustration into mastering lock picking.

“Now I know how Merrill feels,” Hawke grumbled, annoyed. “I don’t understand.” The easiest way to spark Victoria Hawke’s ire was to make her feel clueless.

“Basically it’s like this: picture a big, fluffy Bronto that is bright pink.” She turned to look at Hawke’s frown. “Do you have a picture of that flamboyant Bronto?” Hawke nodded yes without ever losing that frown. “Now whatever you do, DO NOT think about a pink Bronto.”

Hawke’s eyebrows shot up as she made the intuitive leap of understanding. “You’re trying not to think of something so instead you’re fucking everything up?”

“Hey! I’m not doing that badly.” Dawn protested.

“That lock has been open for a solid minute Little Bas.” Hawke prodded and her habitual use of The Iron Bull’s name for Dawn made Dawn flinch. Of course Hawke noticed, and of course there wasn’t a chance she was going to leave it alone. “I’m not going to insult your intelligence by pretending that wasn’t painfully obvious.” Hawke sounded kind so Dawn sighed.

“Varric is going to have one hell of a story for you when he gets back.” Dawn said, needing desperately to do something to keep distracted. As tempting as it was to act like she didn’t care, the cat was out of the bag. “Either he’ll tell of Alena coming back with a failed alliance with the Qun and a solemn The Iron Bull celebrating with his Chargers…” Dawn stopped at the thought of the other option. At least her emotional control was to the point where she didn’t just immediately cry. “Or else Varric is going to say Alena came back with a successful alliance but The Iron Bull lost
his Chargers.” Dawn left out so much but the heart break in her voice expressed it anyways.

“Holy Andraste no wonder you’re a fucking mess.” Hawke sounded impressed and Dawn couldn’t help the laugh despite her emotions. “Seriously, if these are the kind of futures you’re always aware of I’m surprised you’re not crazier than Blondie.” There was a loving smile on Victoria’s face despite her words. “I’m guessing this is why you have been distracted?” she guessed astutely and nodded, not waiting for Dawn to respond as her mind made the conclusions. “Because if The Iron Bull came back without the Chargers, he wouldn’t really be The Iron Bull anymore would he?” she asked carefully.

“Keep flashing that hidden intellect of yours at me and I’ll think you want to seduce me with your intelligence.” Dawn teased.

“Say please.” Hawke winked at her then turned serious. “So fingers crossed that he comes back with his Chargers, and if not we help him pick up the pieces.”

If only it was that straightforward. “Either way he’ll know I knew. Do you think you’d be all warm and fuzzy towards me if I withheld something like this from you?” Dawn hated herself for asking; she really was doing it to Hawke too.

“Yeah… to be fair it took me a little to settle with the idea of all that you know.” Hawke shrugged unselfconsciously.

Dawn hummed in acknowledgement, “So although I know there’s nothing I can do to change things now…” Dawn finally looked up at Victoria’s eyes. “I told Alena before she left; save the Chargers.” She confessed.

“Oh thank the Maker.” Hawke grunted out her relief like a gassy belch. Dawn looked at her in shock, abandoning all pretenses at lock picking. “Don’t give me that look Dawn. It’s good that you’re fighting for the futures you think need to happen. No one else has the foresight you have.”

“But do I have the right?” Dawn finally blurted out the source of her stress. “What makes me the authority on what should and shouldn’t happen? And how can I claim to be someone’s friend and then turn around and inflict on them the pain and grief of losing their entire world?” Dawn buried her face in her hands for a moment, but didn’t wait for Hawke to respond. “But if I have the chance to save someone’s soul, shouldn’t I take it? The Iron Bull is worth saving and so are the Chargers.” Dawn concluded, voicing only a little bit of the equation she’d tried to work through. Because the Dreadnaught had lives and souls on it too and she was willing to trade those for the Chargers, so there was definitely blood on her hands after this no matter what.

Hawke’s eyes for once held the weight of all the experiences that came with the title Champion. “You don’t have the right, or the authority. But you’re also the only one with the ability to make those decisions while in a position to do anything about it all. And it is going to suck, each and every time. You just have to decide where your line in the sand is and how violently you need to react once it’s been crossed.” Hawke took one of Dawn’s hands into her own. “No one is ever going to understand the burden you’re carrying, not even me. I had to keep myself and my loved ones alive and we all know how poorly I failed that task. You have a world that is not your own on the brink and you’re trying to help keep it from toppling over. But you don’t have to face it alone.” She offered comfort when there had been no one around to give it to her when she needed it and Dawn felt a little misty eyed. “Now, more importantly; once he gets over his huff you’re going to ride the Bull until he begs for mercy right?” Hawke prompted, unflinching in the face of emotions and crude humour.

Dawn snorted, not prepared to be touched emotionally and then pestered immediately. If she were
being honest, Dawn wasn’t entirely sure she’d ever have the courage to try; it’d been a hell of a year so far and she’d hit the ground running. Though she knew Larry wouldn’t have wanted her being alone for forever either.

“Ok, so you don’t make up your mind yet. Wait until you see them all ride back home,” Hawke interjected before Dawn could voice her excuses, “but until then, it is my self-elected duty to keep you so busy that you can’t worry about it.”

“That’s going to leave a few marks, isn’t it?” Dawn asked, trying to inject a little humor back into her side of the conversation.

“Only if you ask nicely.” Victoria winked. “Rule one, safety in numbers. Let’s go collect the fun.” She dragged Dawn up and moving. Dawn considered putting up a fuss, just to enjoy seeing Hawke’s big sister mode activate, but she was actually glad to have someone help keep her busy.

Hawke brought Dawn out of the dungeons and into the cold air of the Bailey. Thanks to the quasi magical weather protection Skyhold never got disastrously cold, but they were nestled in the bosom of the Frostbacks; tropical it would never be. Without hesitation Hawke collected Merrill and Sera, Cedric, Dorian, and then surprisingly Cassandra too. Dawn hadn’t realized just how fast Hawke made connections.

“Ladies, gentlemen, Cedric, we have a grave undertaking,” Hawke stated dramatically, “our Dawn here needs to be distracted until the rest of our friends comes back. I think she has a crush.” Hawke had to add the last part in an exaggerated whisper.

“Fishbone Hawke, go choke on one.” Dawn suggested flatly and her friend just grinned at her. Cedric looked at Dawn and flashed a wink, the eldest member of this odd little group and yet not at all hesitating for whatever hijinks Hawke might suggest. If Dawn felt like Alena was an honorary aunt, then Cedric was definitely her favourite honorary uncle. Dorian looked far more wary, though he voiced no objections for being included. Dawn hadn’t formed a fast friendship with the Tevinter at first despite him having been her ‘bestie in the games’, but that had been rectified as Cedric and Dorian seemed to continue their strange relationship of overt flirting and yet not actually being together. Dawn and Varric had both already contemplated locking them in a closet somewhere together just to get the damn tension resolved.

Seeker Cassandra looked absolutely sold on the idea of aiding a budding romance. Especially since she was in the beginning stages of her own. Kaaras had shyly begged Dawn for help as she was ‘a human woman who's advice has got to be better than Kaaris’’. “All of our companions have been away before and you’ve not had issue. Is the relationship new then?” she asked kindly.

“It’s not that at all.” Dawn interjected in a rush before Hawke could put her spin on it. “I know of two outcomes for the Inquisitor’s current mission; one of them does not sit well with me.” She tried to keep it vague but also shut down Hawke’s teasing rumour.

“That’s putting it mildly.” Hawke butted in anyways.

“So if you don’t want one of them to happen, why didn’t you stop it?” Merrill asked and Dawn winced.

“Because I have no right to play god,” Dawn’s immediate response made Hawke snort, “Seriously, I’m trying to let people live their lives. I can only advise and deal with the consequences.”

“Yep, too serious shits. Best way a keepin’ your mind off of it’s ta fill it with sommat else.” Sera
informed wisely.

“Clearly.” Dawn’s tone was dry but she didn’t resist when they collectively swept her up to keep her busy.

After that Dawn’s friends seemed to have arranged a schedule that left her alone only for sleeping, and once or twice not even then. Hawke claimed her evenings for Rogue defense training and then boisterous hanging out, while Cassandra ran her morning physical training since The Iron Bull had already arranged for it. No matter what condition Hawke left her in the night before, every morning at dawn the Seeker helped pound sword and shield into her muscles to keep Dawn’s progress moving forwards. After a trip to the hot springs, the Seeker would peel off to be replaced by Sera, Kaaras, Dorian, Cedric or Merrill. It was one of the most bothersome ways for her friends to show her they loved her and Dawn cherished every minute of it, even when she was irritated.

If it was Sera, Dawn was willing accomplice to harmless pranks and one memorable incident where the pastry chef banned them from his domain for the next month. No more stress baking then. When Dawn spent time with the Valo-Kas it was mostly with Kaaras directly, often in the Healer’s Wing, though she did spend time with Shokrakar and the Ashaads as well. Katoh and several others had left to work small near-by jobs without needing the full numbers of the Valo-Kas so Dawn didn’t get to see them all. Dorian and Cedric continued to compete with each other over who could teach Dawn the more inappropriate phrase in their languages. She’d thought at first they were going to teach her the entirety of their languages but with how they were devolving into gross flirtations she suspected that this phase of their courtship was winding down and a new one would start soon. That meant that Varric was most likely to win the betting pool. With Merrill Dawn found herself in the role of listener, hearing tales Merrill had as a Keeper. After that it was Dawn’s great pleasure to introduce Merrill to Cole; the blood mage was astonished to see Compassion materialized. Of course it was also tantamount to introducing the endless questioner to the alliterative metaphor maker, so Dawn made a hasty retreat only to be nabbed by Hawke.

“Drink this and follow me.” Hawke prompted, thrusting a battered looking mug at her. The rogue didn’t wait either, striding away so Dawn downed the contents in one go and nearly died. She’d been expecting ale or wine, there was never any chance that it was water, but this seemed to be a psychotic blend of iodine and rubbing alcohol with the after taste of habanero peppers. Dawn couldn’t help but cough, choking down the heinous drink.

“What the fuck Hawke?” Dawn demanded voice hoarse as she caught up. Her friend was carrying a large jug that was sloshing and that made Dawn worry. “Future me is going to hate current me for this.” She admitted to Hawke’s evident amusement.

It didn’t take Dawn long to realize that the end destination seemed to be her own room. Opening the door, however, revealed that it wasn’t at all like she’d left it just that morning. Gone were the utilitarian cot she’d been sleeping on and the foot locker wardrobe. In their place her friends had somehow gotten a real, larger bed into the room and her belongings were now stored on wall mounted shelves.

“Don’t think Kasaanda didn’t immediately point out that you’ve angled the ladder to the turret so that a certain pair of broad horns could make it up easier.” Hawke warned, shoving Dawn towards the aforementioned ladder.

“I just never moved it back after he showed me this room and the upper level.” Dawn waved it off and started to climb.

“Your ass gives me life.” Hawke called up to her, climbing up after.
“Of course it does, my ass is fantastic.” Dawn called back and popped up onto her turret to see Kasaanda grinning at her and an oasis awaiting her. They’d moved in a low bench and a Sheik’s palace worth of pillows. Her old footlocker was also up here now, likely storage for something else exciting.

“Drink this.” Kasaanda handed her another battered looking mug. Dawn didn’t hesitate; instead she laughed and downed it.

“Oh god, what the Jesus!?” Dawn cried out at the unexpectedly sweet concoction she’d just downed.

Even without knowing what the exclamation said, Kasaanda laughed at Dawn’s outburst. “That’s fermented fruit juice from the plant I’m named after; the Kasaanda is a carnivorous flower that produces tasty fruit.” Kasaanda explained, flourishing a long, elegant bottle with a decidedly burgundy coloured fluid inside.

“Basically bug soup with a kick, got it.” Dawn nodded, licking the taste out of her teeth. Her lips already had the slightly numb sensation of strong spirits.

Hawke made it to the top of the ladder with her jug and refilled Dawn’s cup with it. “Merrill will be up shortly with Cole, Cassandra will bring Josephine and Leliana.” She warned and Dawn gaped at her. “The others are in charge of food so I’m going to go lend a hand.” Hawke tapped Dawn’s mug in a silent command. “I think you’ve figured out the drill about now.”

“Drink until standing is no longer an option?” Dawn replied with amusement.

“Exactly!” Hawke faked a vapid, cheery tone and departed to laughter.

“Shokrakar is having mild cramping, or else Kaaras would be up here too.” Kasaanda explained away her twin’s absence. This close to her delivery, it wasn’t surprising that it was all concern, but Kaaras was a good Spirit Healer and he kept saying everything was alright.

Dawn grinned at the news. “Is it a tradition to pick out a name before the birth, or after?”

“After, that way you can meet the child before assuming a title for them.” Kasaanda informed. “Sometimes it’s an aspiration for the child. My parents wanted me to be like the flower I’m named for; unassumingly beautiful until deadly.” The mercenary grinned a little dementedly. “My brother is supposed to be the navigator, guide to my sword. Apparently us both coming out as mages was a wild surprise to them.”

“He was always good at telling me where to go. I might not have understood him at the time, but that’s not really his fault.” Dawn joked and got Kasaanda’s bright smile out of her. “Where I’m from names are picked out long before the delivery. We have the ability to see the baby before birth. My parents named me Dawn because I brought light into their lives.” She smiled at the memory of her parents. She missed them dearly, but it wasn’t as painful as it was before.

“That’s lovely.” Merrill chimed in sweetly, drawing attention to the fact that she’d arrived with Cole.

“We’re your distraction.” Cole added in.

Dawn saluted him with her mug, taking a drink and coughing some more. “You’re my friends.” She emphasized purposefully, relaxing into one of the giant floor pillows.

“That’s what I like to hear.” Leliana’s accent purred as she climbed into view.
Dawn still didn’t know how to be around Leliana, too aware of all the secrets the spy master carried. The alcohol warming her from the inside helped now though, and Dawn stayed relaxed on her spot. “Join the festivities Leli; it seems that my turret is the perfect location for a drink.” Dawn grinned as Kasaanda started to pour out drinks for everyone; mostly from Hawke’s jug.

“You have such a lovely view from up here.” Josephine complimented, her ruffles not at all impeding her climb.

“I like it; it feels more like home by the minute.” Dawn admitted with a soft smile.

“That’s the point.” Cassandra stated bluntly.

“Somebody grab the damn thing and pull!” Sera yelled up from below.

“Words I never expected to hear from the lesbian.” Dawn joked and heard Hawke’s approving snerk even as Kasaanda laughed at her girlfriend’s expense.

“Food’s here.” Hawke redundantly informed and someone grabbed the basket from Sera.

There was barely enough room, but somehow there was more than enough food for everyone; bread rolls, soft cheese, cold meats, vegetables tossed with some kind of sauce, and fruit drizzled with honey. There were even those little frilly cake things Solas mentions in game banter.

More alcohol flowed into cups, though Cole kept sniffing his and then setting it aside so Merrill ended up drinking his too. Dawn was astonished at how well Merrill held her liquor.

“Seriously, I’m a whole other person heavier than you. How are you not slammed?” Dawn demanded, slurring more of the sentence than she wanted to.

“Oh, she’s useless right now, but Dalish constitution blah blah…” Hawke waved it off with an irritated huff.

“That’s not fair.” Merrill complained and the slurring in her voice was more marked than in Dawn’s. “I’m very useful; just don’t ask me to prove it right now.” Her admission drew friendly laughter.

Josephine’s little jam cakes disappeared criminally fast, and a few more generous rounds from whatever it was Kasaanda was pouring led to the Ambassador sharing some of the more humorous stories from when she first met Leliana. After the pair of old friends regaled them with fun stories, Kasaanda took over and shared a few Valo-Kas tales, mainly about Kaaris and his abysmal poetry. It was probably the one time Dawn could be grateful she hadn’t understood the language when she first arrived. Sera told a raunchy story after that left Dawn in tears, clutching her stomach and curled onto the floor with Hawke, Merrill, and Cole.

“You feel jumbled. The faces you see here are mixing with those that make you sad to remember. But the sad makes the hurt go away.” Cole breathed, actually taking a sip from his glass for once.

“I love my friends from Earth, and I miss them. But it feels good because they would be happy that I’ve found people that care about me here too.” She tried to drunkenly explain.

“You are loved.” Cole stated simply and Dawn wasn’t devastated by his words this time.

“I am loved.” she agreed, able enjoy the company of her friends.

Cassandra and Leliana had to help take Josephine down the ladder, and eventually Sera and
Kasaanda departed; after everyone threw pillows at them for getting too amorous in public. But Hawke, Merrill, and Cole stayed up there with Dawn. The food was demolished, and they passed around the jug, all cuddled up on the pillows, watching the stars.

Merrill told stories of the constellations, showing both Cole and Dawn their shapes. Hawke slowly unbraided Dawn’s hair and played with it, her absent ease reminding Dawn how much Victoria must miss Bethany. When Merrill fell asleep, Dawn started to tell her soft stories from home; whatever crossed her mind. It was oddly cathartic to tell Victoria about topics from the moon landing to how her late husband had proposed.

“I only ever heard Larry speak ten words in the four years I knew him,” Dawn was too drunk for the memories to hurt much, the bittersweet pain not as devastating as it once was. “I love you Dawn. Will you marry me?” She ticked her fingers off for each word. “He hated how he figured he sounded when he tried to speak. But for me he tried anyways. And the last two words I ever heard him speak were ‘I do’, when we were married.” She smiled at the memory, her sisters absolutely sopping with tears by the end of the simple ceremony.

The foot locker was finally opened to reveal blankets, and they roused Merrill enough to have her blearily light the braziers. Hawke started to tell Dawn about discovering little Bethany’s magic when her little sister accidentally froze a pond in the middle of summer.

Dawn woke to the sounds of commotion, a hangover like none other she had ever endured, and Cole helping guide her inside where it was darker. She was given water, a foul tasting restorative, and something to chew on while Compassion flittered around like her own personal nursemaid. Finally settled back inside, she drifted off again, ignoring the muffled laughter from her departing friends. The smell on her new bed pillow was the soft perfume Leliana preferred and it made Dawn feel oddly safe as she passed out again.

Knocking on her door hours later woke her again, and Dawn tried valiantly to ignore it. The potion earlier meant she was mostly spared the worst of her own doing but her mouth tasted terrible, her stomach sloshed uncomfortably, and her whole body felt wonky. The knocking persisted and Dawn finally shuffled to the door to murder the person pounding.

“Death and mayhem.” Dawn warned in a raspy growl as she opened the door. The asshole that had been pounding on her door was none other than Krem, looking confused.

“Cole said you needed to see me.” Krem sounded exhausted. “The Inquisitor insisted we ride hard back and I only just got to my room where Cole…’ his words cut off as Dawn threw herself at him in a huge hug. “Woah, okay.” Krem patted her shoulder awkwardly.

“Oh god, I can’t explain yet but it’s really good to see you.” Dawn finally collected herself enough to say.

“Tell me about it later. I need a bed; I’m too tired to even wash off first.” Krem admitted despite the road dust.

“Thank you, I promise I can explain a little later.” Dawn waved the exhausted Charger off.

The Chargers were alive. The idea filled Dawn with elation and that ran full tilt into her unsteady stomach. So even though Dawn was thrilled, she threw up into a chamber pot. After washing her mouth out and rehydrating, Dawn rattled her battered brain back together. Hawke had started her ‘let’s distract Dawn’ routine and planned every step out, so last night was done deliberately. Word must have come in that they were returning and Hawke knew to keep Dawn occupied. Brilliant bitch.
The Iron Bull lived and so did his Chargers. Dawn felt bad that he had just lost his known world; she knew better than most how much it hurt to have your life irrevocably altered like that, but she could eventually give him the comfort of knowing that he made the right choice. She just knew better than to say anything right away, he probably wouldn’t want to talk to her for a while. The cowardly part of her wanted to avoid the anger she expected from him entirely.

Hung over or not, Dawn knew she wouldn’t rest now that she’d gotten up and moved around, so she made her way to the hot springs. Judicious application of water to her belly and heat to her muscles eventually relieved Dawn of both the physical symptoms, as well as the suspicion that she reeked. Once again feeling capable of dealing with people, Dawn decided to hunt down a couple of her compatriots from last night.

The easiest to find from the Main Hall was Josie, the Ambassador at her desk and looking as polished as ever. “How do you not look like I feel?” Dawn demanded once she ascertained that Josephine was alone.


“Thank you for yesterday.” Dawn smiled in appreciation.

“I was as enjoyed to be there. I believe your masterminds were Champion Victoria and our Seneschal Leliana.” Josie easily informed, likely removing herself from the list of masterminds.

“And I’m certain you played no small role Josie. Thank you, all of you.” Dawn smiled sincerely and saw Josephine actually give a small, satisfied smile. “I suspect that once Alena wakes up you’ll all be called into a War Table meeting, so I’ll let you get to what work you can now.” Dawn departed. She knew that Hawke’s room was near Varric’s but Leliana would definitely be in the rookery; there was no guarantee that Hawke would be in her room.

No one paid her any attention as she went through the Main Hall again. Varric and Solas were still absent and Dawn detoured around Dorian’s area because she wanted to thank Leliana before she got side tracked. The ravens were mostly silent, one softly cawing at Dawn as she climbed into view. Leliana was sitting by her altar, not at all surprised to see Dawn in her rookery.

“Not even hardly,” the redhead smirked. “You look well enough to be a sight for sore eyes, especially to a potential romantic partner.”

“The Dawn will come, and here she is.” Leliana teased lightly.

“I spy with my little eye someone that is sneaky.” Dawn retorted and Leliana smiled. “How long ago did you get word that the Inquisitor was on her way back?” her segue was brutal.

“No romance Leli, just me hoping for the best case.” Dawn automatically denied, not even willing
to get into the whole caboodle with a hangover in her temples.

“Best cases always includes romance.” Leliana sounded like the young Bard from the first game in that moment.

“I wish,” Slipped out of Dawn’s mouth before she could stop it. Leliana looked triumphant but didn’t say a thing as Dawn grumbled at her, fleeing down the stairs.

As Dawn left the exterior route from the Tower, she couldn’t help but notice a brace of guards escorting an Elf in. Dawn suspected it might be Gatt on his way to inform the Inquisitor that there will be no alliance now; she owed Alena an explanation. It would be best to get it over with, so Dawn headed towards the training grounds. She’d hang back, stay out of sight but grab Alena as soon as it was clear to do. It was a great plan in her head; far less so in practice.

She watched from a distance, putting herself in The Iron Bull’s blind spot like an absolute coward. Alena saw her but said nothing. They seemed to be concluded and were about to part when Gatt looked past the Iron Bull and spotted Dawn. The Viddathari frowned as he studied her face for a moment before stepping past The Iron Bull and the Inquisitor entirely, much to their evident surprise. The Iron Bull turned to keep from giving Gatt his back and finally caught sight of Dawn, and she tried not to let the suspiciously blank on his face hurt. Gatt stopped a safe distance away, not at all bothered by having two violently capable people at his back.

“You’re the Offworlder.” Gatt called out, not asking. “This Tal Vashoth described you well.”

“The Iron Bull picked his name; you should try using it, Gatt.” Dawn put a soft emphasis on the name The Iron Bull had given the short tempered Elf.

Gatt took several quick steps closer, angry but not threatening and Dawn did not back down to him. Dawn gave Gatt her entire focus, ignoring her friends for the moment. “Choice? He chose to be Tal Vashoth!” Gatt fumed and Dawn realized that his anger was driven by grief; he had lost his friend. To him The Iron Bull living meant Hisrhad died; Gatt was the other side of the coin to Dawn.

“Right now there is only one person that can claim to know what’s coming over the next three years.” Dawn leaned closer but didn’t bother whispering. “Your Qun doesn’t know what I know, Viddathari; and what I know is that the right choice was made.” She stepped back and really looked at Gatt again. He was all denial and rage. “A tool can be made for only one specific purpose, but people are not things. You don’t have to mourn his loss Gatt; your friend lives and breathes and he’s standing behind you. You have the power to choose to join your fight to his.” She made the offer and saw actual shock flash across his face.

But a moment later Gatt staggered back as if she had slapped him, “Never!” he hissed before retreating swiftly.

“I guess that’s a fixed point then.” Dawn said softly as the guards escorted him away. “Inquisitor, when you’re finished here I’d like a moment of your time please.” Dawn finally looked at The Iron Bull, and once again his face gave her nothing but blank. “It’s good you and the Chargers are back.” Was all she could say before leaving them to conclude their conversation. She didn’t want to listen in to what they were saying, and from the way they shot her searching looks, both had caught her slip. Dawn had said ‘the next three years’, before she’d never specified beyond ‘in the future, if we win.’ The Iron Bull hesitated after Alena finished talking with him, but in the end walked away without saying anything to Dawn.

“From the look on your face, none of this surprised you.” Alena carefully engaged.
“The look on my face is a hangover masquerading as a human.” Dawn fell into step beside her friend. “I was a wreck the entire time, unsure if this was one of those things that had changed with my being here.” Dawn explained succinctly. “I trust you Alena, and I knew that because I told you if you got the chance, you’d save the Chargers…”

“You just weren’t sure I’d get the chance.” Her terse friend finished expressing Dawn’s fear.

“So last night Hawke and others threw a party on my turret and I drank everything handed to me until I passed out.” Dawn finished bluntly.

“Damn, every time you get trashed I’m not there to see it.” Alena sounded pissed enough that Dawn laughed.

“As long as I don’t have to buy, I don’t mind drinking.” Dawn countered.


“Not even; I have no idea what most of the drinks are called, I just drink whatever it is my friends are drinking and hope I don’t die.” Dawn shrugged.

“It’s harder and harder to remember that you’re not from this world. You’ve changed to suit it so well.” Alena complimented

Dawn felt uncomfortable and proud at the same time. “I got lucky. I’ve never really needed for anything; I have a place to sleep, food, water, and safety. More than that I have the chance to learn and improve myself. And I even have friends willing to get me blindly drunk when they think I need it. What else am I supposed to need?” and then Alena was hugging her so tight around her middle that Dawn couldn’t breathe.

“Are we sure that you’re not the Herald? I’m not half as good of a person as you are.” Alena mumbled

“You could not pay me to take that title from you.” Dawn joked. “Besides, that fancy chair of yours looks super uncomfortable.”

“It is.” Alena agreed. They walked together silently for a moment. “You know that Bull is pissed at you right?”

“I expected that might happen. I don’t blame him.” Dawn even managed not to sound as stupidly hurt as she really was. “The Qun will eventually send an assassin after him for it, but he always manages to handle it.” She warned obliquely.

They fell quiet as a runner came charging at the Inquisitor. Apparently now that everyone was back, Josephine felt that lessons for Halamshiral could continue. “Oh Ancestors not more dance lessons.” Alena whined.

“I will throw up on someone.” Dawn promised.

Suddenly Alena grinned and faced the runner before she could even speak. “Please go straight to Ambassador Josephine and tell her this: I’m not technically expected back until tomorrow; let there be rest.”

“Yes Ser.” The runner turned right around and headed out again.

“Let there be rest?” Dawn intoned after they were alone.
“It was that or ‘over my dead body’; I’ve been working on my diplomacy. But I still think I need to hide and if I don’t get some sleep soon I’m no good to anyone.” Alena yawned as if to emphasize her point.

“Go sleep in my bed, none will look for you there.” Dawn suggested and her friend took off in a flash.

The Iron Bull was pissed at her, but he was alive and still had his soul. Dawn was going to count that a win, even if it hurt and she struggled with the guilt of the 100 lives lost on that Dreadnought.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my gods, I can see Halamshiral in the distance finally.....

Translation
Elvhen
Elgar= spirit
Isene= Name; s/he who is like Fire. Cedric's primary parental figure's name
The world was far more interesting and far less predictable than an old wolf realized. Dawn learns that standing for what she believes in can hurt, and sometimes getting hurt is really her own damn fault. An Iron Lady is surprised and a Charger gets creative.

It had been illuminating to watch The Iron Bull amongst other Qunari, even a convert. His body language spoke volumes; the energetic little Elf Gatt was a friend and one Bull trusted, but not one he had expected to see here. Bull’s shoulders angled to always include the convert but when Gatt turned ever so slightly hostile, his stance shifted to deflect an attack. And it was what they were discussing that he found the most interesting; unless he misinterpreted Bull was supposed to have brought Ena’un with him. Had in fact told his superiors that she would be here, but it was clear on the Inquisitor’s face that this was news to her.

But was it news to Dawn? Did she know that Iron Bull was Hissrad, and that he would protect her like that? Or was this one of those things she claimed was different?

He suspected that Ena’un knew exactly who The Iron Bull had been and was now, or why else would she feel confident entrusting her training to him? But that then brought to the forefront the fact that Dawn knew deeply disturbing secrets about yet another companion, which made it all too likely that she knew details of his own history. They were going to have to have an honest conversation once he got back to Skyhold, more than likely in the Fade. And if Solas were being honest, a conversation he’d been subconsciously delaying for a long while. She not only understood Common well enough to offer explanations, Solas had heard her using more than a few Elvhen phrases by now too. He had to wonder, if Dawn knew who and what Solas had been, why did she never seemed to hate or fear him?

The mission at hand forced him to relegate that line of thinking for a later time; they were attacking the higher camp. The Ben Hassrath Elf was no mage and at best only a well-trained Rogue, but still Solas buried as much of his magic as possible; no need to let Gatt report back on skills the Qun need not know Solas had. Whatever changes Dawn had brought to his plans, Solas knew he was still on an intersecting course to the militaristic Qun. If this was his world now, if Ena’un and possibly others was his People, then Solas could not allow the Qun to continue advancing. He may not be the Dread Wolf of old but he would always be Fen’Harel.

Venatori that were lying in wait for their own ambush were easy targets for a team as well co-ordinated as the Inquisitor’s. Solas set a light Barrier over his comrades, amused to temporarily include an enemy as well, and stood at the rear guard to rain down what mage attacks he could. Too many spells could harm friend as well as foe; thought Veil Strike was as precise as always.

“This seem a little too easy to you?” Varric quietly asked him, working his way over while Alena and Bull looted the dead.

“It seems to me that our Qunari might be under a suspicious eye.” Solas obliquely agreed.

“Stabby looks one wrong breath away from slitting smug Elf’s throat just on principle and
Bianca’s ready for the other shoe to drop.” Varric set a neat little Thieves’ Lantern down, a quiet indicator of his paranoid concern. As Solas had felt it coming, some great shift of events that was going to change things, it seemed less paranoia and more prudence.

The flare was sent off and Solas watched Gatt as well as everything else as events turned sour. Whatever the trap was that the Qun had set; it seemed Iron Bull had just stepped into it. As the almost inevitable Venatori mage reinforcements boiled out of nowhere to attack the lower hill Alena looked sadly resigned, she’d known then that something was coming but The Iron Bull just looked openly and honestly panicked. It was support his people or his Chargers. This was the test for Hisrad then, the moment he would prove to be the obedient tool of the Qun Solas had always expected him to be.

But The Iron Bull turned a desperate plea to Alena instead; he trusted himself and his people to her choice. It was either cowardly or calculated, a difference that only Solas after the Veil could understand completely and even he wasn’t sure which.

“Save the Chargers.” Alena didn’t hesitate and her choice of words surprised Solas. She was not one to use words negligently.

Even as Gatt argued and pleaded for him not to, The Iron Bull’s horn rang out a call to retreat. And to be sure Solas set Barrier over the Chargers; a quiet reassurance that none but their ‘Dalish’ would be aware of. And he’d already spoken with the Chargers’…archer.

When Solas looked back at their own encampment Alena had placed herself between Gatt and The Iron Bull, both remaining silent as the Elf railed at him for choosing to become Tal Vashoth. Below the Dreadnought fell to the Venatori mage reinforcements that Gatt’s people had somehow ‘missed’, but Solas couldn’t care less about a small force they could have subdued if properly informed. He watched the Iron Bull stare after his friend from Seheron, after the sinking wreck of a Dreadnought he’d never been meant to sacrifice, and towards the triumphantly returning Chargers. He saw the moment Bull pulled a smile onto his face to cover the pain he had to feel. And he saw the shift in Bull’s gaze to staring straight back at him.

Like Solas, Bull had lost his People. And like Solas, he now had the chance to choose the people he would live or die for. Solas pressed the first two fingertips of his hand to his forehead and gave a slight bow, pulling his hand away. The old Elvhenan sign of respect one of those things that Solas thought maybe shouldn’t be lost, even if it would only live on through him.

And after that if there was the occasional wolf track found around camp at night, none in the group knew that it wasn’t just a wild animal pacing the perimeter. But Solas had always been suspicious, and his prowl served him well when he caught Alena and Bull having a discussion away from the camp.

“Bull?” The Inquisitor’s voice gave very little away in comparison to how her body moved, the little adjustments to her position something only a predator would recognize.

“Boss.” Bull’s tone was flat, accepting none of her sympathy.

“Got something to say?” she actually continued, the provocation surprising Solas because Alena wasn’t one for unnecessary confrontations.

“Dawn told you this was coming?” his tone and face said he believed he already knew the answer to that question and Solas sat silently in the woods, watching and trying to understand the Tal Vashoth in their midst.
“No.” Alena’s answer clearly surprised Bull, and even Solas was caught off by it. “Once I told her what we were coming for she let slip ‘save the Chargers’, but nothing else.”

Solas carefully crept away then, not needing to linger for more information. Ena’vun had a big heart, Solas had seen that time and again, especially if she found a way to include him in it. And even if he personally detested the idea, she seemed to have a growing involvement with Bull. Apparently that had not been enough for her to tell him of the future she saw coming. Knowing his past, knowing his future; she had still determined that whatever happened had to happen, likely because she needed to know the events that came afterwards.

He had to wonder at the alternatives that Dawn had had to take into consideration, and if Iron Bull knew more of the factors she’d figured out than Solas did. The newly Tal Vashoth seemed unsettled under his outwardly uncaring demeanour; the Chargers were all excited to be alive and they didn’t yet understand that their lives were supposed to have been sacrificed. That they could have been snuffed out easily and their friend Dawn had known, but said nothing. He couldn’t determine if she was smart or not to have kept her own counsel as she had because he didn’t know the things Dawn knew. And if that frustrated Solas, he could easily imagine Bull’s state. But more Solas had to wonder if Dawn were doing something similar to him.

Did she stay silent on what she knows is coming because she believes the outcome is necessary? And did Solas trust Ena’vun enough to let her approach him with what she could share? Or was it a matter of Dawn needing Solas’ help but she didn’t know she could approach him?

Had someone come to him way back then, he might not have made so many grave mistakes; had he been willing to listen. Dawn did not share his impetuousness but he had just witnessed her quiet determination regardless of the consequences. Even if he approached her to help she might say no; he could make no plans until he was back in Skyhold and had gotten answers out of Dawn.

Alena unwittingly assisted in that venture because she pushed them incessantly. Camps were broken early and set late; rest only seeming allowed because the horses could not maintain the pace indefinitely. Some of her haste was a clear and utter distaste for the weather along the Coast, but even once they were within the Frostbacks she pushed them on. He didn’t complain although it left the vast majority of their group tattered and snappish by the time they made it back. After being on horseback for at least twenty of the last thirty-six hours, a little surliness was expected.

It was no effort at all for Solas to escape into Skyhold to wash clean the pungency of horse and sweat. Despite the exhaustion presenting itself as a rather persistent headache, Solas’ cramped muscles refused to let him seek rest yet, and his unquiet mind added to the turmoil.

If Dawn knew of his time as Fen’Harel what did that change? Nothing. Everything. He wasn’t sure. Did he want it to change anything? No. Maybe. If he accepted that this world, these people were real, that made Dawn’s pain and the loss of his People immutable fact.

Reality was still an ‘if’; he had yet to experience anything undeniably REAL. But nightmare or not, he couldn’t stand idle while the Magister corrupted his Power and ruined the world, it wasn’t in his nature to be passive in the face of tyrants. And if a part of him wondered if that was what he had been becoming before Ena’vun arrived, he could only acknowledge that while she was always a variable he couldn’t account for at least neither could his enemies. Even the Spirits of the Fade seemed uncertain of what to do with her, circling endlessly around the protective wards Solas had laid in the Fade on her. It was not the permanent solution his pendant had been, but with the interference of The Iron Bull it was the best option he had left. Though Solas was curious to see how Ena’vun would act in the Fade now that she was not vulnerable or broken; and his protections would not be around for much longer given how often they were disrupting the Fade. Between the
joy Dawn exuded while they practiced their dancing to the lurking fear she had from the secrets she carried, the Fade couldn’t help but ripple around her.

His world might be gone or he may still be asleep. But there was definitely something about the Dawn that made it very hard for the Dread Wolf to keep chasing the moon. It was time to wake up and be sure.

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Dawn sat and stared up at the stars, curled up in her new pillows and blankets. A couple of them still smelled like her friends; or more accurately like alcohol, food, and fire. It was late out, the Herald’s Rest had finally grown quiet, and the stars all but sang above her. Idly, Dawn traced the constellations Merrill had taught her out of their shapes.

There was a solid, unhurried set of knocks at her door and a moment later she heard her door unlatch. “Dawn, are you in here?” The Iron Bull’s voice called out.

“He’s up here.” Dawn only hesitated a little, knowing that this talk was inevitable but not feeling ready for it just the same. A few steps and shuffles, and then he climbed into view.

His eye scanned over the newly refurbished seating arrangements. “This has changed.”

“My friends held an intervention of sorts. I felt much loved; also very inebriated.” Dawn admitted, trying to resist the urge to curl around a pillow. No need to broadcast how defensive she was feeling.

“It’s a definite improvement.” The Iron Bull found the low bench and sat down on it. Dawn stayed where she’d sat for the last few hours, piled onto pillows and under blankets. “You didn’t tell me.” He finally grated out.

“No I didn’t.” Dawn hesitated but knew she had to persist. “I can explain my reasoning if you want to hear it.” She felt so tired suddenly. “Or if it’s easier for you to be mad at me, I understand. You can hate me while you probably still feel guilty over supposedly betraying the Qun; even though by now you’ve already asked yourself a few important questions whose answers are not so satisfying.”

It was definitely the wrong tactic to take and she knew it but couldn’t seem to help the words coming out of her mouth.

The Iron Bull looked irritated by her attitude. “I’m angry at you because you didn’t respect me enough to tell me about things I could have changed if I’d known about them in advance. And now I’m left questioning if I can trust you.” His body language remained open and calm despite the uncomfortable topic.

Dawn shrugged helplessly. “If that’s what you see out of it, then nothing I have to say will change your mind. But I’m not apologizing for being happy that you and the Chargers came back alive and whole.”

The Iron Bull shifted to the edge of his seat, “If you had told me what was coming I could have figured out how to keep my guys alive and get the alliance with the Qun.” He growled at her obstinacy.

“They betray the alliance,” Dawn’s toneless statement silenced his next argument. “Every single time; and you die.” She wasn’t even looking at him, completely curled into her blankets; nowhere left to hide and too tired to fight. “If the Chargers die, The Iron Bull dies with them and Hissrad comes back wearing your skin.” She pulled one pillow tight to her body as if needing a shield.
“But I had to look deeper than that, I had to ask the questions you’ve probably already figured out. Why does the Qun demand the Chargers come with you in the first place? You’ve been living all but Tal Vashoth for a decade and they never batted an eyelash over it, so what changed?” she sighed, finally looking at him. “Fandom believes that they didn’t like your openness with the Inquisitor about your Ben Hassrath status, but more importantly they didn’t like realizing that they no longer had absolute control over you. Then doubt rises, so they of course had to test your loyalty. Who scouted the locations? Who led you to believe the lower point was safer and easier? How did a highly trained operative miss the Venatori reinforcements? If I had told you about it and you found a way to save face and save the Chargers, I would have no warning for the next time the Qun would call for their lives as a way to keep you under heel.” She broke their intense stare down, scrubbing her face. “I couldn’t even be 100% sure this wasn’t going to be one of those things where the details are different from what I know. And before you hear it from anyone else; I told Alena to save the Chargers if she got the chance. You can be mad at me for taking the choice away The Iron Bull; you can refuse to forgive me for that. I accept the consequences of my actions because you’re alive. And I will not forget that I chose to kill the Berethlok and the 100 Qunari inside to achieve it.”

The Iron Bull didn’t say anything in response to that, nor did his facial expression give anything away. Dawn had thought that he’d simply denounce her and leave but this continuing studied silence unnerved her. “If you’re going to yell at me can we go inside so it doesn’t wake the others?” Dawn finally blurted out, revealing her discomfort.

“I’m not going to yell at you Dawn, or lecture you. It’s late and we have early morning training to attend. Get some rest.” He rose almost stiffly and climbed down her ladder.

Long after the door had latched shut behind The Iron Bull, Dawn remained in her nest of pillows and blankets. She’d been ready for a different kind of confrontation. One with yelling maybe, but ultimately where they both expressed themselves and got a chance to either move on or put things to an end. Instead she got neither; Dawn was left sitting on her own, feeling like she was wounded and yet knowing she was fine.

The next morning Dawn was up and at the training ground as per usual. The Iron Bull had indicated that the Chargers would be back to their regular routine and that meant sunrise training, so Dawn screwed up her courage and got down there slightly earlier than normal.

To help keep her nerves at bay, Dawn worked through the patterns that Cassandra had been drilling into her, starting slowly so that her body could warm up in the frigid air. Her breathing steadied as she fell into the proper techniques and spun her body through the patterns faster and faster, the same joy in dancing found from the fighting form. A sudden movement in her peripheral vision and Dawn shifted her body, automatically absorbing the impact of the attack on her shield and redirecting it away even as she spun to face The Iron Bull, her sword at the ready.

He was already recovered from the deflection and her training sword met his practice battle axe, blocking and blocked in return. The Iron Bull pressed his size and strength advantage, anticipating any attack she could make while also overpowering the defenses Cassandra had shown her. It was a brutally efficient lesson but never cruel or rage filled; his blows were all carefully calculated to push and test her abilities with this newly learned skill set. She had no time to think, to plan or remember; her body reacted and her instincts drove her onwards. Where he crowded and powered she slipped away, dancing her weapon away from his entirely. Her skills were not up for actually defeating him, but she endured long past where her old abilities stopped. It should have been fun.

There was no quiet encouragement from The Iron Bull, the lack of friendly commentary and teasing choking Dawn up; reducing her movements to ugly, jerky movements if she let herself
think about it. But Dawn persisted, digging down into herself and kept going. He had every right to be mad; she’d wait out his anger but if he thought she’d turn belly up and apologize then he had better brace for disappointment. She would not beg forgiveness for wanting the Chargers to live, for wanting The Iron Bull to live. To apologize now would be cowardly and Dawn was sick of always giving in to her fears, so she tapped into her frustrated anger and kept going past when her shoulder started screaming.

Dawn’s breathing had become laborious, ugly billowing that grunted when she had high impact contact. Her shield arm was liquid agony, acid and pain overwhelming even the bruising assault she endured. Sweat dripped down her face as she continued on and The Iron Bull suddenly stopped his push, a moment later Krem was between Dawn and The Iron Bull, taking her place before the next blow could fall but not needing to.

She staggered back a step, confused at the Lieutenant’s interruption but Krem and The Iron Bull were starting to argue in a low volume while others pulled at her. She couldn’t understand what anyone was fussing over; The Iron Bull would never hurt her. She knew that this wasn’t him taking rage out on her because if he were she’d already be paste.

Stitches had to actually pry her fingers open for her to drop the sword. On her other side Dalish was swearing in Elvhen as she had to give up on pulling Dawn’s shield off. It had warped into the bracer Dawn wore.

“I’m fine.” Dawn coughed out, aching for a drink.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Stitches brushed her assertion off. Dalish finally let Spike cut the shield and bracer off, revealing a large tear in Dawn’s arm that poured blood now that nothing was sealing it. At the sight of the wound, the argument between Krem and The Iron Bull went quiet.

“Huh.” Dawn nearly barked the sound, her breathing was so harsh. “Didn’t even feel that.”

Stitches lightly slapped her up the back of the head. “That’s for trying to tell me you’re fine. I’m in charge of telling you if you’re fine or not.” The medic criticized with barely concealed concern. He was pressing some kind of mossy looking compress to it, staunching the bleeding.

“Dawn, this is what I meant. I’m supposed to trust you to speak up.” Now the Iron Bull seemed angry.

“Strip as much gear as you can now; we’ll take you to the bath house, wash you off and stitch this sucker there after cleaning it. Maker knows how much crap has already worked into it.” Stitches interrupted whatever argument Dawn could have made to defend her accidental injury and The Iron Bull stalked off of the training ground while the healer fussed.

Krem strode over, an impressive scowl on the Lieutenant’s handsome face. “We all saw the blood dripping from you; don’t know how you could have missed it.”

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“I was in the zone.” Dawn defended pathetically.

“He should have called the match before it even happened.” Krem still sounded perturbed. He might not know what was going on between herself and his Chief, but Krem was a good enough mercenary to know when something wasn’t right.

But Dawn shook her head. “He wouldn’t hurt me deliberately.” She insisted even as she carefully peeled her training armour off. If some of her insistence was driven by guilt, they clearly didn’t know that yet. She was going to have to tell the Chargers that she sent them into an ambush
without a heads up, but first she had to stop bleeding on everything.

Now that she wasn’t actively trying to keep up in the ring, she was exhausted and Dawn ended up shuffling after the Chargers’ medic to the bath house. Her arm started to really hurt the moment Stitches washed it out, and Dawn quietly whined through having it irrigated and then stitched closed. Topical anesthetic would have been just perfect for that. Thankfully there wasn’t an abundant audience for this; most of the Chargers had left and only Krem and Stitches had stayed.

“Strip and get in the bath.” Krem commanded.

“Say please.” Dawn teased with a forced grin and let him help her peel off her clothes, trying to act like everything was normal. “You’re the first man to help me out of my clothes since my husband.”

“Lucky me.” Krem’s joke felt as flat as her own had been.

“Don’t get your arm wet.” Stitches cautioned, seeming to have also picked up on the strangeness this morning held.

“Not the first time I’ve had to be patched closed Stitches. I started young; cracked my skull when I was two and tore my forehead open.” She tapped on the nearly invisible scar. The healer just nodded as if he completely believed she would do that to herself.

Krem’s laugh was real this time as he stripped and got into the large tub to help wash Dawn’s back. “Andraste’s ass you’re nothing but one giant bruise.”

“I’ve been training sword and board in the mornings and with Hawke in the evenings.” Dawn offered with a shrug.

“I thought your fighting style looked suddenly odd for sword and shield.” Krem touched the braided crown that held Dawn’s hair out of the way. “Want me to wash this for you?”

“Sure please, I’m not going to be able to for a week or so.” Dawn sighed as Krem carefully pulled her hair down and started to pour water over it. As he worked what was basically shampoo into it, Dawn tried to figure out how to explain things to him. “I’m not going to master sword and shield any time soon. But I can get good enough to survive, and Hawke has me learning her way too. Some of the Champion’s tricks are damned handy against a pissed off Reaver; she’s taken the Arishok out with them.”

“Dunk your head back.” Krem instructed, working the lather out of her hair and Dawn gladly let someone prod her body around while her head struggled.

The Iron Bull was definitely mad at her; still Dawn knew that he hadn’t meant for her injury to happen. But how could she explain to Krem that his beloved Chief was pissed off at her because she had decided that only she knew best. In the game the decision had ramifications only years down the road, but this was reality. These Chargers; human and Dalish and Dwarven alike, all deserved the chance to live to be old and gray. The Qun would never have given them that chance, eventually The Iron Bull would figure it out. She just wasn’t sure if he would still be her friend by that time.

Stitches returned without fanfare, carrying towels and clothes. “You’re training one handed for the next two weeks. No heavy lifting with that arm until it seals; you tear it open and you buy all my drinks for a night.” The medic warned.

“Yes mom.” Dawn put as much ‘annoyed teenager’ as she could into her voice.
He flicked water at her, “Brat. Let me know if you start to get red streaks spreading from the wound, or any pus, or if you start bleeding again.”

“At the first sign of infection, I’ll be pounding on your door.” Dawn agreed seriously.

“If the Chief doesn’t get his head out of his ass we’ll have to mount a rescue mission.” Krem joked and squeezed the water out of Dawn’s hair, haphazardly pinning it back up. “You’re squeaky clean and gorgeous, now get out.”

Dawn hauled herself out, patting herself dry. The clothes Stitches had brought were from the Chargers, which meant that the shirt she pulled on was stupidly too big. “Thank you for your help Krem.” Dawn gave him a kiss on the cheek and laughed softly when that made the hardened fighter blush.

She was going to enjoy these moments with the Chargers because once she told them the truth they might not want her around either. They still deserved to know, but this was the pain Dawn had been trying to avoid by keeping herself distant. She loved these assholes and it was going to hurt to have them mad at her. The Iron Bull was only the first of many she had kept things from, and the cost of her decisions already sucked.

“Krem, mind rounding up the Chargers for me tonight?” Dawn hesitated to ask but decided to be brave. “I need to tell you all something, and it’ll be easier if I do it all at once.”

The Lieutenant gave her a searching look, reading the seriousness off of her face no doubt. “I can do that Dawn. I’m assuming you don’t expect the Chief there do you?”

“See, this is why people want you for more than just your sexy biceps.” Dawn turned her nerves into a joke but didn’t disagree with him. She suspected that there were going to be no friendly getting together with The Iron Bull for the next while. “I don’t want to chase people out of the Rest, so why don’t you get everyone together in the Chargers common room and I’ll explain everything I can.”

“Dawn, whatever it is you think is going to happen after talking to us, it’s not going to be that bad.” Krem really was painfully astute.

“I wish I could be certain of that.” Dawn sighed before heading off to her room.

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The travertine tile clicked sharply underfoot, every step she took in the spiked heels a reverberation of sound none could ignore. Her steps preceded her into the rooms she stalked through like her own personal herald and Vivienne took a certain satisfaction in how they all scurried at the sound.

Her position in the Court had only climbed after associating herself with the Inquisition. It had been a calculated risk joining the upstart group but Vivienne had realized that she cared more about the world continuing than she had about maintaining the constant presence at Court she’d established. She had worked hard to establish the position of Court Enchanter as something other than a laughing stock meant for a mage to provide entertainment to the Court, but it would all stand for nothing if the dark future Inquisitor Cadash had seen came to pass.

So Alena had sent Vivienne back to Court, but this time as an Envoy. And for the first few days Vivienne played the role beautifully, and unquestioningly. Being back at the capital insured that she could spend time at the side of her dear Bastien, even as his health continued to deteriorate, and Vivienne had been certain at first that the move to have her back in Orlais had been entirely
motivated by the good counsel of the Advisors and the Inquisitor.

Then she had received a simple letter and had to reassess everything.

*Lady of Iron and Ice,*

*Snowy Wyvern is found in the Exalted Plains near location marked on attached map.*

*It won’t save him; it doesn’t even buy you more time. But I did.*

*I know you didn’t want me to interfere but knowing how much it hurts to not get the chance to say goodbye, I took the decision anyways.*

*Dawn*

The letter was crumpled in her fist even as she carefully handled the map that had been tucked inside the folds. It was a simply drawn section not far off the Scouting camp the Inquisitor had sent out there, and the Harbinger had thoughtfully included indicators of where large predators were in that area too.

Madam de Fer did not appreciate the interference even as she was grateful for it; it was not in her nature to enjoy owing others favours, especially not someone as contentious as the Offworlder. But being back in Orlais and seeing her beloved regularly only reinforced how little time he seemed to have left. Every time she went to see him, more of his vitality had faded away and less of the man she loved was left to her. If the Harbinger knew of a possible location to what Vivienne needed, even if it irked her to do so the Lady of Iron was going to make use of her knowledge.

And when they next saw each other face to face, Vivienne would have a discussion with Lady Dawn about just what exactly it was she knew about Bastien’s condition. Depending on what knowledge she still had to impart, it might be very wise to make amends with the Harbinger for the Inquisition, if for no other reason than Vivienne had to acknowledge that Dawn’s ‘world story’ had proven to have accurate information. She would be a fool to let a valuable resource like that slip her grasp simply because she disliked the fact that it existed. Not that Dawn wasn’t a lovely woman, by all accounts she was darling; Vivienne just did not see a place for an Offworlder amongst the movers of this world. And she would never think to pity the woman, pity would only be another burden for her to bear; Vivienne would do as she had for all possible threats and treat her with cautious respect. If the need ever arose, Vivienne would certainly be capable of showing Harbinger Dawn just how accurate the name Lady of Iron and Ice was.

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Something bigger than a failed alliance with the Qun was going on, Krem realized that the moment he saw Chief go after Dawn without warning. His leader was usually far more jovial and far less intense during training, even when he was kicking Krem’s ass. And Krem had been a soldier even before he’d met the big idiot. To see him putting Dawn through her paces like she wasn’t just a civilian barely used to handling a sword sent up all kinds of warning flags.

And then Mac had grunted about seeing blood and Krem couldn’t stand back any longer. He saw Bull pull the last attack even before he put himself in its path, and Dawn looked glassy eyed and confused as she stumbled away. The other Chargers were already in action, Dalish and Stitches seeing to Little Bas while Krem faced off with his boss and best friend.

“What the fuck Chief?” he didn’t even think about using the Off-world phrase, it was spreading like wildfire amongst the mercenaries; both Charger and Valo-Kas.
“I know; she’s done.” Bull spat back in a low tone, anger adding a rumble to his voice that Krem usually only heard after Bull had been hurt in battle.

“She’s done? You’re done.” Krem snarled right back. “What are you trying to do, make her afraid of you? She’s a civilian.” The last he had to push out through his teeth, a suddenly nearly overwhelming urge to shake Iron Bull like one of his stuffed nugs making his fists clench.

“And we’re supposed to trust our lives to her knowledge and abilities.” Bull ground out, just as frustrated sounding.

“You’ve never had a problem with that before Chief.” Krem pointed out and saw the moment when Bull decided to remain silent on whatever it was he knew and Krem didn’t. He didn’t press though; knowing that whatever it was that was happening trying to attack it straight on was a bad tactic to take. He’d be better off asking Dawn about it, she had a habit of blurting out whatever was on her mind if someone distracted her enough and a bleeding arm was an effective distraction.

But sadly he understood even less after trying to get answers out of Dawn in the bathhouse. Whatever it was she felt the need to tell them tonight it was clearly affecting his Chief as well as her. So he sought out the one person he figured would have a clue even if no one else was talking.

Cole was sitting on a railing between the Upper and Lower Bailey, not at all caring about the rather large fall at his back. Then again, Krem wasn’t entirely sure Cole could fall.

“You want to know why the sunrise hurts.” His quiet friend called out even as Krem approached closer. “Here instead of here.” Cole touched his chest and then his wrist. “You’re going to get answers.”

“I was hoping you might have some answers actually.” Krem admitted easily. He’d accepted Cole’s occasional tendency to know things he shouldn’t with the same pragmatism that had seen him through the army; shit can get weird but if its friendly leave it be.

“Varric calls it spoilers. Words that aren’t mine but feel so real.” Cole shifted lightly as Krem leaned against the railing next to him. His wide brimmed hat was carefully pinned up at the front and for once Krem could see Cole’s shockingly blue eyes.

“Right now I’m hoping it can help me help Dawn.” There really was no point trying to lie to a psychic.

“She hurts because she cares. You are all hers now and she’s afraid to lose you too, but the risk was there and is there and she could win it all and still lose the people she…” Cole suddenly went quiet, blinking. “Her secrets bleed a lot, even when she tries her best.”

“So I should wait until she tells the Chargers tonight then.” Krem deduced after a heavy moment of thought.

“Red; deep dark red. Like good wine. Rich, saturated and unforgettable. Varric will have some and you can trade him the gold ribbon for it. She’s never seen a nug before.” Cole smiled as if his solution would fix whatever problem was at hand.

They fell silent for a moment and Krem looked down at the lower market area; it was starting to thrive. “And the big guy?”

“Some split seams cannot be restitched.” Cole’s answer actually sounded a little ominous at first but Krem knew the rest of the saying his father used to use; they cannot be restitched but the item can still be saved.
“I’m still going to worry Cole, they’re my friends.” He shrugged it off.

“Horns up.” Cole almost sounded like he was asking instead of stating the steady call out.

“Horns up.” Krem grinned and pushed off of the railing. “Wanna come with, I just figured out your nug and ribbon remark.”

“The pattern is always the same but each one is different. They don’t all have names but they all, for a short time, are real. Even when they’re forgotten.” He’d figure out how that one tied in eventually; while he had a little extra time he could make Dawn one of his plush travel nugs.

When the time came for whatever story she had to tell, Dawn didn’t seem to be the only one on edge; Krem spotted Dalish actually sitting in the window frame, capable of bolting if she felt too trapped. Skinner sat on the floor in front of her, a silent but helpful barrier even amongst the Chargers. Mac loomed in a corner, unable to sit, and Stitches actually glared at Dawn’s bandaged arm. And poor Dawn looked ready to puke.

“So I asked your Lieutenant to get you all here because I owe you an explanation.” Dawn squared her shoulders and Krem ruefully realized she was setting herself for theoretical battle. “I knew about the alliance, and the ambush. And I knew there was a chance that you all might have died because of it. And I didn’t tell any of you.” She paused but Krem didn’t have to tell anyone to stay quiet, it was clear she wasn’t done. “I’m not sure how much you all know about what happened with The Iron Bull during the attempted alliance so I’ll be a little frustratingly vague but-“

“They know I’m Tal Vashoth Dawn.” Krem was only a little surprised his Chief had shown up; Dawn however looked undeniably shocked.

“Ah…well…okay then.” She was obviously flustered but soldiered on. “So you all know that The Iron Bull was offered a chance to sacrifice you all and well…here you still are. But there’s a version of the story where you are all chosen as the needed sacrifice. I knew that even if the alliance occurred, the Qun would betray it, and I still decided that it was important not to interfere or warn any of you.”

“You told the Boss ‘save the Chargers’.” Bull interrupted again, surprising Krem even more. The Chief was upset at Dawn, that much was clear.

“I hadn’t meant to; I had a plan and I just…” she made a strange hand gesture, “word vomit.”

“Did you think we weren’t expecting an ambush?” Spike spat out, arrogantly offended.

“Ah…wha-“ Dawn sputtered and now Spike gave a harsh laugh.

“Oh you’re so green girl. Nah, none of us thought this thing was on the level. No offense Chief, but your squirrely shit was never going to end well. I’m glad to be alive.” Spike was tactful as always, as delicate as her pike; Krem wasn’t sure if he wanted to reprimand her or take her out for drinks. But it looked like Spike’s blasé attitude about their almost sacrifice had confounded Dawn, she stood with a slight frown on her face and Krem realized that he was still missing some piece of information that would explain her and the Chief’s reactions.

“We’re mercenaries Dawn; we’ve been living violent lives for longer than you’ve been aware we even existed.” Stitches pragmatically pointed out.

“Some of us have been mercenaries longer than you’ve been alive.” Rocky muttered in his rough voice.
“I get that.” Dawn argued.

“I don’t think you do.” Krem saw where the others were going with it. “We have all accepted the fact that someday the Chief might lead us into a battle he can’t lead us out of. We’re trusting him to spend our lives well.” He hated doing these speeches; everyone was listening including the Chief. “We heard the same brief he did; the lower camp was supposed to be easier and safer. But if it turns out the Qun ‘forgot’ to tell us about the Venatori reinforcements or it just actually accidentally went wrong doesn’t matter; it was always a possibility. If we didn’t want to take the risk, we would find work as farmers or tailors.” Some of the others nodded and Dawn mirrored with little head bobs. “So don’t try to take responsibility for our actions; that’s not your guilt to bear.”

She stared at him in surprise but finally gave a solemn nod. Krem looked over at Bull and his Chief gave an indication to follow, so he left the Chargers to handle Dawn. She wasn’t the first civilian they’d taken in and walked through the realities of mercenary life, even if her circumstances were truly unique. As bracing as Spike could be, she knew better than most how jarring it was to go from relatively pampered to living by her skills alone and the shift in mindset that required.

“Chief.” Krem was trying to let his leader decided what he wanted to say.

“We’re going to need to get her ready for war.” Bull’s low warning was an absolute surprise.

“What?” this was not where the conversation was supposed to go, at least not to what Krem had been thinking.

“She was willing to risk you all, us all, to an alliance she knows fails. That’s how badly she thinks she needs to know what is coming. She’s training with us because she’s warned me that there is a battle coming she needs to be a part of, and she’s now training with the Champion too.” Bull’s words did not help settle Krem’s unease. “Something is coming and now I know she won’t tell me or ask for all the help she needs.” He didn’t say that he was clearly still too angry to deal with it though.

His Chief had always been as honest with him as a Qunari spy could be, but now Bull was Tal Vashoth and Krem was starting to realize that meant his boss and his best friend might need time to adjust to that change.

“They wanted her there too; told me to make it happen.” Krem knew his eyebrows disappeared into his hairline with surprise at Bull’s words. “Do you know how easy it would have been for them to take her during the ambush?” it was a scary thought but Krem still felt like something wasn’t being said. “From what she’s said we know that Dawn’s world story covered all the possible options, except for her being here. The plans she’s working off of aren’t taking into account her own presence and how that affects them; that’s going to get her and others killed.”

“You think she should tell us everything?” Krem’s skeptical tone made Bull grunt.

“I think knowing everything is dangerous when you feel you can’t tell the people helping you what they need to know.” Well at least Krem knew that his Chief was aware that he was pissed off at Dawn for not telling him.

“And the thing about her arm this morning?” Krem decided to get all the uncomfortable truth telling over with at once.

But this time Bull remained silent, his expression more than loud enough to tell Krem to let it be. As a subordinate he was tempted to let it lie, but as Bull’s friend Krem knew he needed to push a
little more. “Trust goes both ways Chief. She never hesitated to take all of the blame for this morning but you and I both know it wasn’t all on her. She should have called it before she got hurt, but if she’s preparing for war than you know she doesn’t feel like she can. Two months ago she was afraid to ask us for more clothes Chief. A month before that she was sleeping in the archer’s loop. The fact that she’s still only gaining momentum doesn’t mean this isn’t costing her a lot; don’t make it harder because you’re angry.”

Bull gave him a hard stare after that but Krem wasn’t sure what emotion the big idiot was hiding; he was too good to expose it. “Alright, alright. We’ll prepare Dawn for war, what are you going to do?”

“I’ll be keeping an eye out.” Was that a fucking pun? Every now and again the Chief reminded Krem of all the terrible jokes his dad used to tell.

“Chief, this is a bad idea and I don’t even know what you’re planning.” Krem groaned but Bull smirked, already knowing that he was going to go along with whatever it was Bull was concocting.

Horns Up.
Chapter Summary

The Iron Bull has to face the music while Kaaras has an internal struggle. The Inquisitor and her Advisors lock the War Room before a Wolf hunts, Dawn learns the hard way that she's only so patient and kind, and Cedric reads the signs.

Chapter Notes

Ok, so I straight up crashed 2 chapters together because I really want to get this story to Halamshiral already. So this chapter takes place over several days because I need to get these assholes moving.

Oh, also, slight smut.

I give up on editing this beast.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It had been quite some time since someone had thoroughly handed Bull his own ass, but once it got out that he had hurt Dawn during training he knew it was going to happen again; he knew better than to train her while angry at her like that. He just wasn’t entirely sure which one of their friends would do it, or if they would take turns. The Champion would pick her time of attack carefully, so he knew it wouldn’t be an immediate ass kicking from the dangerous blonde. Solas was too careful to ever attack him physically, so it wasn’t going to come from him. Krem still looked tempted to give it a shot and of all people The Iron Bull expected to directly attack him, his second in command was the most likely to just wind off and hit him.

Bull stopped dead in his tracks when he realized that it wasn’t going to be any of them that came after him. Not even exceptionally lethal Alena Cadash was his biggest threat now. Shokrakar was.

He turned and started walking towards the Valo-Kas camp the moment he left Krem and the Chargers to take care of Dawn. She’d been running around all day with a clearly bandaged arm; there was absolutely no chance that Kaaras hadn’t learned of that already, which meant that inevitably Bull’s old instructor already knew.

One of the Ashaad’s led him towards the tent Shokrakar and Taarlok had to themselves but every single member of the Valo-Kas that was still at camp watched him walk by silently. They all knew. He suspected that the only reason none of them approached him about it was deference to their leader, and maybe a little bit of respect for him too. Though right now he doubted that.

Shokrakar looked like her babe was about to rip its way through her belly to get to the world outside. It was actually a little grotesque; the muscles of her abdomen had spread so the belly could expand and he saw bulging veins, distended skin, and even what looked suspiciously like a relocated rib. Taarlok looked down at Shokrakar’s moving belly as if it were the most beautiful thing in the world and Bull tried not to shudder at the sight of her skin protruding as the baby
inside her moved. Hand him a squalling, squealing baby and he’d be fine; pregnancy was just unnerving.

When he looked up from her exposed belly, Shokrakar was already watching him. “So it took The Iron Bull took less than a day to lose all trace of Ashkaari, that’s surprising.”

He gave her a flat look but didn’t actually argue with the insult. Instead he just sat down on the ground by her foot like he had long before either one of them had become Tal Vashoth; like he hadn’t done since before getting taller than she was now.

And he stayed silent.

Shokrakar sighed softly, some unseen signal of hers sending Taarlok out of the tent though the canvas fabric offered no actual privacy. “Why did you think you were fine to train her if you were angry at her?”

“Well, I’m the only one she has hinted to of what is coming, and I clearly have been told almost nothing.” His response was still angry and he knew she picked up on it.

“So you attacked a civilian that trusts you.” Her tone managed to have absolutely no judgement. “At least that’s the way it looks to those on the outside. What were you trying to do?” Like she had a hundred times before, Shokrakar was helping Bull untangle the knots inside his head; he tried not to resent that he still needed her to at his age and experience but apparently even he wasn’t beyond getting screwed up due to emotions.

“The Seeker your Healer is sweet on, Cassandra, has been teaching her forms while I was away.” He started simply, trying to keep to the facts as they were only. “This morning I was testing her ability to intuitively incorporate those forms into what she already knew.”

“And how was she performing?” Shokrakar actually interrupted him so he knew the question was important though he wasn’t sure why yet.

“Remarkably.” He shifted his weight uncomfortably. “Good instincts, graceful as shit, not too stubborn; all around it was going well.”

“So what happened?” Shokrakar pressed.

He stopped and realized why she’d asked how Dawn had been doing. “I stopped thinking of her as a civilian training to survive and thought of her as one of mine training to survive. One of mine keeping something from me that I NEED to know to help her live.”

“And?” the less she talked the more he understood his own actions.

“I’m still angry at her.” He held up a hand, stalling her commentary. “Not because she didn’t tell me about the ambush…or not only because of that.” He was going to be honest, no more Hisrad. “She’s preparing for something terrible coming, and I suspect that she is not preparing to survive it. Have you heard her discuss any plans for after this has all ended?”

“No, but then I am not the one she would have made those plans with, am I?” Shokrakar looked fucking smug at the question.

“No one is.” He spat back and now she actually grinned at him.

“You still do not see it Imekari. But you are close.” She patted his shoulder. “Back to what happened. Things were going well in training…” she trailed off, clearly still fishing for something,
likely to bash him over the metaphorical head with.

“Things were going well; even when she got emotional she had it under control.” He stopped, posture straightening up as it occurred to him finally. “I tried to push to see if she’d call it when I knew she wouldn’t. Shit. Krem was right.”

“Why, why did you push?” Shokrakar focused on inconsequential details but he humoured her still.

“I needed to know if I could trust her to protect her boundaries.” He answered, trying to understand how that changed the sequence of events. He’d gone out there, not with the intention of hurting Dawn but still with the intention of pushing her until she failed. It was only made worse by the fact that he’d done so while angry at her. He owed her a world of apologies and there was no way to even start making reparations. Maybe he should just let her friends line up so they could kick him in the ass.

Shokrakar sighed again, as if he were being particularly dumb. “Why do you need to know?”

“If I am to get her through whatever is coming alive, I need to know what her boundaries are so I know when I need to step in and help.” His answer was clipped.

“Why do you care if she gets through it alive?” Shokrakar asked and Bull exploded upwards, onto his feet to turn and face her.

“She came to me asking for help and I made a promise. I plan to keep it.” He wasn’t shouting, or even gesticulating but the anger in him was obvious.

“And now you think she’s going to make you break that promise too.” Her words ripped apart the response he’d been prepared to give.

He stared at his once instructor, once caretaker. “I have already betrayed one people because of secrets and lies. I’m tired of being Hissrad.”

“And you think that to keep your Little Bas alive that you need to be Hissrad as much as Ashkaari?” Shokrakar still hadn’t moved from her indolent position despite his clear agitation.

“I think that every plan she already has in place was made with me being both. And made without taking her own existence into account.” He admitted, not knowing how else to say it.

“If you want her to see you, first you need to see her. Not the Offworlder. Not the possible target for the Qun. Not Little Bas. Dawn.” Now Shokrakar carefully stood, one hand supporting her own back, so she could face him head on. “You are not Hissrad. You never were. You were made into Hissrad. Now you can make yourself into whoever you want to be, not just who your superiors said you could be. Or who they needed you to be.”

“And it’s that easy?” he scoffed, watching her carefully move out of the tent before he followed.

Outside the tent the Valo-Kas, all those still near Skyhold and not on sentry duty, were gathered in a semi-circle waiting. He stilled, body shifting into position to fend off a large scale attack from very dangerous people before he realized that not a single one of them was armed.

“Being Tal Vashoth is never easy, but you don’t have to do it alone.” Shokrakar stepped away from him and let the other Valo-Kas step closer.

acknowledgement was still stained with anger. “Brother.” One after another, they each and all acknowledged him. “Brother.” It was an over the top, unnecessary display. “Brother.” The same word from a dozen voices sounded so different every time he heard it. “Brother.” He looked past the Valo-Kas at Shokrakar, knowing his face was absolutely blank and that she would understand.

“Who do you want to be Imekari? You said you’re tired of being Hissrad, and you’re no longer just Ashkaari. So who are you?” She stayed back even as the others stayed close to him and Bull realized that it had been a very long time since he had been surrounded without it being a fight.

Knowing that they would give him the time to answer, he looked down at his hands for a moment. His hands that had been tasked with breaking down, destroying, lying, betraying. His hands that had done all of that and more in the name of a people that were no longer his own. His hands that had also brought comfort, protection, passion, and peace. His hands had known a long time ago that he was not living the right way; it had taken his heart and head a lot longer to figure out though.

Bull looked up and saw a smile on Shokrakar’s face. “I am Iron Bull, and people are not things.”

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Talking an angry Antivan out of a murderous streak was difficult. Talking an angry Antivan out of a murderous streak when she was supposed to be the level headed, reasonable one was even harder. Even if Alena agreed with Josephine, she had to keep in mind that killing The Iron Bull was a bad idea now that she had finally, firmly, established that he was one of hers. But maybe he didn’t need ALL of his parts, he was doing well with missing an eye; she could possibly take a souvenir to help settle her Ambassador’s bloodthirst.

“Less than month to the peace talks and now she’s stitched up her forearm.” Josephine’s anger was still so polite; Alena just smiled lightly and took another drink. She’d called her Advisors in to the War Room and all but locked the door, only it was to discuss the very important topic of what the bottoms of the bottles tasted like. Alena knew they all needed one night before Orlais, and whatever that would bring, where the fate of the world could just take care of itself.

“Injuries happen during training Lady Josephine.” Cullen respectfully argued; his skin was flushed from drink even if his voice remained level. “I may not agree with having Lady Dawn trained to the degree she seems to have requested, but unless we suspect an abuse of authority it really is not our place to step in.” he was cautiously working through his third glass.

“From all accounts it sounds like this was both an act of anger as well as an accident.” Leliana managed to sound as if she still knew more than just that, though Alena now knew her Spymaster well enough to know that sometimes the redhead just had very good instincts.

“Considering what he just lived through, a little anger is expected.” Cullen shot back without hesitation and now Alena actually did smile lightly. “I’m not forgiving him, but I am acknowledging that the injury could have happened even if he had not been angry. I’ve trained with the Iron Bull myself; he is a well experienced fighter. But even the best of us make mistakes and can hurt each other.”

“So you think we need to leave it alone?” Josephine demanded of him, the amount of wine the Ambassador could drink before getting to this level actually entertaining to Alena as she watched her friends argue amicably.

“I believe that neither Lady Dawn nor The Iron Bull would thank us for interfering.” He admitted with a loose limbed shrug.
As her Ambassador and Commander stared at each other for a long, obvious moment Alena shot Leliana an amused look. Her Spymaster had laughter in her dancing eyes as she saluted Alena subtly back. Both ex-assassins were more than aware of the storm brewing between the soldier and the peacemaker and they both seemed to be eagerly chucking the pair at each other to try and make it happen.

“Why would she tell the Healer to let her arm heal with a scar?” Josephine seemed so worried about the relatively small set of stitches in Dawn’s forearm.

“It’ll serve as a reminder this way,” Cullen didn’t see the three women staring at him as he drank, “for them both.” He froze as he finished the dregs of his glass and set it down to see them all staring at him. “Not all of my scars are from bad memories.” He admitted with a little smirk that made Alena sit up and notice. For a heartbeat poor Josephine looked ready to cry out her frustration. “Sometimes the mark of a mistake is the only proof you have that improvements have been made.”

“Leliana’s little birds can keep an eye out and let us know if we need to interfere. Until then, we let Dawn and Bull handle it.” Alena finally declared, knowing that they’d follow her lead on it.

“You may need to release a general statement to the Companion’s with that instruction,” Leliana’s voice was laughing even as she spoke simply. “I suspect that there are going to be a few that involve themselves on Dawn’s behalf.”

Alena hesitated but nodded. “He’s got big shoulders, he can take it.” It was the closest she’d let herself get to saying that she was pissed off at Bull too. But she had seen Dawn’s torment before they’d even left; she was the only one other than Dawn that knew her Harbinger had been injured even before the alliance had been attempted. Whatever future Dawn had seen it had left a scar far more prominent than the tear on her arm now must be; considering how painful the metaphorical wounds from Redcliffe had been for Alena and she’d only had one dark future to avoid. Dawn had dozens from the sounds of it.

“The fashions selected for Orlais have all been completed except for the final sets,” Leliana thankfully changed the topic, though Alena could see Cullen fight the urge to roll his eyes. “Whatever final changes that need to be made will occur at the Winter Palace; the trunks and luggage that can be sent on ahead are already underway. Madam de Fer has arranged for their collection and storage on her end.”

“But the dance lessons will continue until the day we set out.” Josephine warned with a pointed look at Alena.

“Keep bribing me with these, I’ll keep practicing.” Alena admitted with a shameless shrug, keeping her bottle of Hirol’s Lava Burst in hand.

“Lieutenant Killeen is remaining as my stand in, fully supported. The Valo-Kas leader has passed her mercenary crew over to Killeen for use during our absence, useful as they have experience with siege conditions.” Cullen input his last steps to take before Orlais. The only person seeming to dread this more than Alena was her Commander.

“So the only thing left for any of us to do is survive until we arrive at the Winter Palace.” Alena saluted her Advisors with her bottle. They each lifted their glasses to her in return. “Our Harbinger has told us what little she can of what’s coming. Corypheus is still out there waiting, there are Venatori in hiding all over the world, and we’re on our way to a fancy party where people actually want to kill us.” The Advisors all looked amused at her lack of motivational speech. “Let’s show them what the Inquisition can do.”
Kaaras was ready to help deliver Shokrakar’s baby; he’d never done a delivery before but since arriving he’d been collecting tales from midwives. There was still a part of him absolutely feeling freaked out about it but outwardly he was calm. Today’s round of cramping and discomfort was yet another false alarm; her body was ready to drop the babe at any moment but the child seemed determined to stay on the inside. This was the first pregnancy Shokrakar had successfully carried to delivery but she seemed implausibly calm about the entire process despite previous failures. Kaaras had been too untested a Healer the last time she’d tried to carry a baby to term but her body had taken too much damage during a fight and he had felt the child slip out his ability to save.

This time he’d chase the soul into the Fade itself to give both mother and child a chance if he had to.

Unfortunately for Kaaras, today’s false alarm left him behind on his schedule for setting up his date. The Valo-Kas were staying at Skyhold while the Inquisition visited Orlais; this was his last date with Cassandra for nearly a month. Kaaras shook his head at himself, laughing lightly; Kasaanda and Sata-Kas were already teasing him relentlessly about being a love soaked fool. He was and he didn’t care.

For their first date, Kaaras had decided to share with the Seeker one of the Valo-Kas ‘barbarian’ tactics they’d joked about. Namely how they trained as a mobile unit lacking permanent options like training dummies; instead they used whatever was available, as well as each other.

Having a mage with fire opened up a lot of options, the fact that he was also a Healer allowed them to get a little ridiculous too. Instead of bashing dummies over and over, Kaaras liked to use candles. So he’d taken Cassandra to a quiet glade and revealed how he’d set up candles all over.

“The goal is you use the weapon of your choice to strike the flame before it disappears, but be careful not to knock over any candles in the process.” He’d explained simply, knowing that it was something one had to experience to properly enjoy.

Kaaras had felt the constraints on his mage relax just a little and all the candles were burning brightly; tall, happy flames dancing. A little more control and one by one they went out in little hops until the last one before him shyly stood alone. The spear he’d brought with him shot forwards, the thrust fast and his fingers warm and sure around the wooden shaft as the metal tip cut through the flame. Cassandra had silently watched him swat at fast little flamelets for half a minute and then charged right into it herself. At that Kaaras had grinned and spawned a second target to chase; they had to account for each other and the flames.

For a little while he’d been focused but the moment he’d caught her grin as she lunged he’d lost all hope of concentrating. She really was beautiful; the playfulness he saw a hidden facet he was thrilled to witness. She bore the weight of responsibility like most courtly women wore jewels, as if it were her birthright and she would not be bowed by it, but he loved that air of wonder she still held protectively inside. And how her dark eyes had danced as she chased the fire; Kaaras had ended up standing still and just staring at her with a dopey smile on his face.

They’d played around the candles until the end of the night.

Their second date Cassandra had planned even though Kaaras had thought he was the one doing the wooing. He hadn’t been expecting anything so it was with absolutely unveiled delight that he had realized her request to join him at her usual blacksmith haunt wasn’t about Inquisition business.
She hadn’t been wearing armour; it was almost shocking to see the defined lines from her shoulders to her waist and down to her hips because they were always behind that sturdy breastplate. He wasn’t surprised she had them though; he’d seen her cleave into Red Templars.

The table he’d only ever seen her reports or weapons on had held small stretches of unbleached canvas and little cups with bright colours in them. “You have shared so much of your culture and history with me,” Cassandra had seemed mildly anxious, as if she was unsure of what she wanted to say at the time, “And I have told you about my brother Anthony.” Kaaras had nodded, wondering what her tragically murdered brother had to do with the colours on the table. “Navarra is renowned for its art, and as our guardian left us isolated and alone, one of the things we did was paint. I have not taken the time for such a frivolous task since before Anthony’s death.”

They had kissed, hands covered in saffron yellow, cobalt blue, and bright passionate red.

But tonight Kaaras had a plan less about the past and more about enjoying each other’s company in the now; so of course because it was more elaborate he was running late to get it all set up. He’d wanted to set up a moon rise picnic, back in the little glade he’d used for the candles before. The candles themselves were once again set up, more for romance than training this time, and he’d gotten the fistful of mountain roses into a bouquet for her, but he still hadn’t gotten the blanket or food laid out before Cassandra’s footsteps sounded.

“Vashedan.” Kaaras swore, trying to fling the blanket into place before she could see the scene wasn’t ready.

Of course he still had the damn picnic basket in the one hand so he was using only one corner of the blanket fisted in his grip to flap it around; a slight breeze ensured that it casually slapped back into his face.

The footsteps stopped and Kaaras just sighed. “I really do mean to respectfully woo you Cassandra but right now I need your help getting the blanket unhooked from my horn please.” There was no salvaging his dignity from this.

“I don’t know, this could be a good look for you.” Her voice held laughter as she stepped closer, and he held still while hands tugged the blanket free from his horn.

Kaaras looked down at Cassandra’s grin, her eyes bright with suppressed laughter and he gave in to the urge to just kiss her. Just a quick, relatively chaste kiss still left him feeling like he’d drank six lyrium potions back to back but he didn’t press for more.

“I’ll set the blanket; you get the items in the basket ready.” Cassandra suggested logically and Kaaras didn’t argue as she did just that.

In one smooth snap she had the blanket out and on the ground and Kaaras looked skyward for a moment wondering where the pain in the ass breeze had gone. Apparently he was just lucky, there was not even a trace of wind now but instead of complaining he just relaxed his will and the candles were all brightly dancing.

The basket held claim to a few items of interest. There was a bottle of Antivan wine that had been gifted to him with a comment from the Ambassador herself, a subtle mention about it being one of Cassandra’s favourites. There were little meat filled pastries he’d seen Cassandra prefer, as well as cooled grapes. A candle and a book of poetry were left as a surprise, Kaaras still nervous about their reception.

Seeing Cassandra away from the immediate expectations of duty was something Kaaras felt
privileged to share, the hardest edges of her expression relented ever so slightly. Not many would ever get to see the softer side of the Seeker, and he nearly choked on his wine trying to keep from blurting out that he was already in love with her. It made him awkward as he was aware that it might be a little too fast for the Seeker, especially since Cassandra had admitted to wanting the proper wooing process.

Thus the book of poetry; he was going to spare her the poems Kaaris had scrawled out for him to read. Kaaras had tried finding something worth using in their torrid prose but there was just nothing worthy of Cassandra there. Instead he had used all the connections he'd built, and some of Taarlok’s as well, to try to get his hands on a decent book of poetry.

They’d come up short. Nothing was right, and Kaaras had felt actual despair over it; enough so that the clever little First that hung around the Valo-Kas regularly had picked up on it and gotten the tale from him. After that Cedric seemed to have developed an over eager need to assist in Kaaras’ romance which meant that even the Tevinter had even gotten involved in it.

That, Kaaras had to admit, had been for the best. Carmenum d’Amatus had been banned in most ‘proper Andrastrian cities’, so apparently Dorian had simply sent home for a copy. He even had a lovely passage picked out that wasn’t too suggestive, but was still moving and Kaaras planned to take advantage of the group effort his wooing had turned into.

Cassandra found the book of poetry first, snooping into the basket when Kaaras wasn’t looking. “Where did you even find this, I thought it had been banned?” she opened the book and started to flip through the pages, eagerly chasing down the passages Kaaras had marked to read with little ribbons.

“As much as I would like to claim all responsibility, the Tevinter got the book for me.” Kaaras admitted with a reluctant shrug. She looked up at him from the pages, an ever so slight flush to her cheeks. “I would achieve much greater things for you if it would make you keep looking at me like that Cassandra; in your eyes I feel mighty.”

He had less than a heartbeat before Cassandra dropped the book and all but threw herself at him, her lips eager against his. It hadn’t been his intent but he was certainly not complaining; there were much worse things than having an arm full of warm, willing Cassandra. Especially as he knew he was in love with her.

But that meant he kept things from going further than he wanted to just yet, despite the disappointment he saw lingering in her eyes. “The first time we make love, I would prefer it not to be a goodbye Cassandra.”

“You set quite the scene for someone that was not planning for that level of intimacy.” Cassandra’s comment as she looked around at the blanket spread out in their private glade, lit by moonlight and candles, made Kaaras laugh softly.

“I did say I wanted to woo you properly. I’ve never had the luxury of romancing someone I… vashedan.” He’d nearly said it again. He needed this trip of hers to Orlais to be over with already.

Cassandra’s hands were calloused and strong against his cheeks as she tilted her face upwards to kiss him. “When I come back from Orlais I expect you to finish that sentence properly.” Her words made him freeze, wondering how she knew what he wanted to say.

“I’ll finish the sentence properly now but then we’ll both be sorrier for it when you ride out.” He couldn’t help warning with a laugh that wasn’t at all joking.
She smiled at him then, something happy and beautiful and stunning, before carefully stepping out of his arms. “In that case. Why don’t we return to the lovely wine and the other item in the basket you still haven’t shown me.”

The candle was beeswax, not one of the simple tallow ones that littered most spaces. It was a carefully crafted scarlet candle and he’d gone back and forth on the colour so often that Kasaanda had actually hit him for it. “I wanted to give you this. I hope you think of me fondly as it brings a little light into your life.” He’d had a much better explanation for when he gave it to her, but of course every word of it disappeared out of his head now that the time to be poetic had arrived. “It’s infused with the scent of the mountain rose, so that as it melts down the perfume should lightly fill the air.” He’d struggled with trying to think of a gift to give her, Cassandra was a practical woman in most aspects of her life and had little patience for frivolity but romance and pragmatism were not often good bedfellows.

And as she looked at him, his brain ground to a halt again. “Thank you Kaaras, it is such a lovely colour. And I will cherish thinking about you whenever I use it.”

They both seemed slightly frustrated by how chaste their date remained after that but Kaaras’ resolve held firm.

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He had wasted too much time already it seemed; Solas had taken a single night to recover from the Storm Coast and before midmorning the Iron Bull had injured Dawn. Until that moment Solas had believed he was now a matured rational Mage, long beyond the habits of a much younger Age. But some of the things it occurred to him to do despite his respect for the Iron Bull were not the things a civilized Elvhen scholar tended to have. His control showed in the mere act of not acting on those impulses.

Instead he went to find Dawn. They were scheduled to dance but her injury precluded that in the waking world now.

"Ena'vun?" He wasn't surprised to find her waiting for him in the fresco room. The Ambassador had provided Dawn with weighted practice gowns and today she’d picked the blue one without sleeves, not an act of contention but comfort for the wound.

"Welcome back Solas." Her smile hid no trace of duplicity or secrets and his confidence in the coming conversation faltered slightly. "Heard it was an interesting experience from start to finish." She didn't hesitate to hug him as had become her custom.

"Interesting experience covers a multitude of events Ena'vun and I expect you know that better than any other." He walked them over to his desk and winged back chairs.

She didn't seem surprised that he'd figured it out. "Not much would have changed. At first." She was able to shrug but Solas could see sorrow as she looked away.

"I don't condone the way he reveals his displeasure." Solas snapped the words off quickly, hands wanting to check her injury even though he was no Healer.

"I...you know what, I'm not thrilled about that either." She surprised him. "I mean...okay, I'm a big dummy for ignoring the fact that I was past my limit. With the way my shoulder felt I knew I needed to call it; my Pride got me into the injury. But it's not like I was beating on myself, and he had no right to get pissed at me for being injured afterwards."
Knowing the source of Bull's anger didn't forgive the actions that hurt one of his People, but Solas could understand how one could think they had a situation well in hand until something blindsided them. "Why didn't you warn him of the ambush?" He was almost surprised to actually ask straightforwardly.

"Chances are he suspected I might know the future, so why didn't he come ask me what was coming?" She shot back and silenced them both; her expression went surprised, as if she hadn't realized it fully until she said it.

"Would you have told him had he asked?" Solas studied her face as he awaited an answer she didn't fully understand yet.

Dawn looked thoughtful, serious but not solemn, before answering. "I don't know. I want to just say no but... I don't think I would have is the most honest I can be. Why didn't he ask?" Her question sounded rhetorical. Solas understood why Bull hadn't, the same self preservation that kept Solas circling around his own questions. Afraid she might not have answers. Afraid she might. "I think he's mad at me because I did go to him for help on a future event. But not this time, not about him and his future. He knows I'm willing to interfere when I think I have to; this must have painted a very clear picture for him.

"You are assuming Ena'vun." Solas had to softly warn her.

She gave him a slightly sour look. "You're a lot smarter than I am Solas, so is The Iron Bull, Josephine, Leliana, and a lot of the others depending on the topic at hand. I know that. I also know that everyone acts in based off of a very precarious sequence of events. I have the ability of knowing all the little sequences while lacking any ability to explain it all to anyone. So you're all stuck having to trust me to a degree that probably isn't natural. The fact that any of you are on speaking terms with me is a bonus, I'm aware."

Her reference to how blind they had all been before her collapse undermined the pedestal he might have felt he belonged on. "We could be screaming mad at each other Ena'vun, and you and I would still remain; I am steadfast to my People."

Her smile was beautiful even though there were tears in her eyes. "Thank you Old Wolf; I am touched to be one of your People. But if we want to do your history proud we'll need your nasty tea for Fade dancing. I'm one armed until further notice." Her segue nearly distracted him from the name she used.

"Ena'vun," he watched her so carefully; her body and her eyes told him the truth of her trust. Whether she knew it all or only enough, that wolf from her lips was anything but damning. "We can meet tonight during regular resting hours, take the time now instead to practice an old art with me." He gladly redirected his intended sentence. Her eyes went wide and shot to the frescos on the walls, clearly panicked so Solas laughed. "No, I would teach you the technique but not on these works."

"Oh thank god," her exclamation made him laugh again, "your paintings are Masterpieces, I do not want to mess that up."

"I was thinking instead of showing you an art Arlathan used to add to their lives beauty, relaxation, and magic." He wondered what she would make with the water colours and brushes once used to make Powerful Calligraphy.

"But I'm not a Mage." She voiced the obvious objection.
"I've heard you sing and held you dancing Ena'vun; bringing beauty into the world is natural for you, magic or no."

There were no tears in her eyes when she smiled this time. "You really are a sweet talker. Just what kind of trouble did I sign myself up for here?" She teased even as she slightly flushed at the compliment.

"Nothing that will exasperate that arm, I promise." He smiled, amused. They were both dressed for dance practice and instead he was going to share ancient culture and art with her. It seemed none of his plans thus far had survived the Dawn.

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In a week they were supposed to go to Orlais to prevent an assassination and the Venatori takeover of Halamshiral; what little sleep anyone was getting was not considered restful. Even without the wolf jaw bone necklace to guard her sleep, Dawn had stopped remembering her dreams so at least she felt like she had a leg up on everyone else. It was a pleasant change from when she first arrived to Thedas and her dreams were simply torturous replays of Larry’s gruesome death. Maybe that was why Dawn didn’t even realize she was sleeping at first; there was no blood so it couldn’t be one of her dreams and if she was remembering it then she couldn’t be asleep.

Bach’s cello in G major was playing in the background, the warm notes making Dawn’s eyes roll at the exquisite sound. Listening to her father play had always been a treat and there had been bitter tears shed when arthritis had made him put it down. Now the music had no source, a wistful gift from her subconscious. Opening her eyes added to the perfection of the reverie.

Larry wasn’t dead, his impressive physique unmarred by shattered ribcage or demonic fist crushing his heart. He’d always been physically impressive, refusing to let his disability to ever allow people to call him weak, and his love for Strongman competitions had only ever added to that. It had been a double bonus for Dawn; he got a confidence boost and she got to enjoy washboard abs.

As if he could read her thoughts, dream-Larry gave her his flirtatious smile, hands dancing with familiar figures *like something you see?*

*Always* Dawn’s face hurt from smiling so much, her hands graceful despite not practicing.

*Would you like to see more?* his kind eyes danced with laughter, no longer signing as he teased the hem of his shirt upwards.

*Yes please* Dawn encouraged, not questioning it at all when she found herself laying on a silk sheeted bed that they could never have afforded in real life.

Larry blew her a kiss and pulled the shirt he wore up and over his head, revealing the glorious expanse of his ebony abs in one swift motion. The silver in his nipple glittered at her and Dawn laughed, biting her lip and clapping as he tossed the shirt aside. *More?* he signed, hands laughing along with her.

*Don’t you dare stop* she imperiously gestured for him to continue.

Larry peeled his jeans off with adorable little wiggles and winks, stripping naked to silent laughter. Bare and glorious Larry crawled up the bed over her body, carefully sitting across her legs. *Can I unwrap my favourite gift now?* he even batted his eyes coyly as he signed.

Dawn blushed and nodded, receiving a kiss as her reward. Larry’s tongue piercing clacked against her teeth, surprisingly jarring but quickly soothed as he chased the pain away. His hands tickled...
down her sides, making her body writhe and Larry grin. Even if he couldn’t hear her, Dawn moaned softly when Larry dropped his kisses down her neck and collar bone, shirt discarded to leave her in bra and pants. His teeth scraped at the edge of her lacy bra even as he shimmied down her body to start dragging her pants down her legs. But her late husband left her underwear on as he continued to litter kisses across her body. She scraped her fingers against his scalp as he bit at the side of her breast through the lace.

Larry hummed as Dawn reacted, his dexterous fingers rolling the top of her panties down. His mouth disappeared along with her bottom layer, and finally the bra was pulled free. It felt decadent to be bare on silk sheets while hands over her body like a blind man reading braille. Lips followed soon after, ruining any thought process she might have had.

With as good as it felt Dawn’s body shook as his hands stroked lower, teasing without connecting. “Oh please, oh please, pleeeeease….” She sobbed softly, body aching with need. Tension that she had been ignoring for months coiled tightly inside of her, screaming for release.

“Shhhh…” a kiss pressed to her lips even as a finger stroked across her clit, boldly satisfying. Dawn felt the unfamiliar scratch of facial hair as she was kissed and then cried out as finally she felt the slick press of a finger slide inside. Her eyes rolled with pleasure, the slow thrust a prelude to more. She fisted the sheets as a second finger joined the first and the attack shifted from lips to nipple, leaving Dawn groaning at the sensations.

“Shhh…” he soothed again, a short beard definitely scraping against the sensitive skin of her breast.

Her thighs were spread with gentle touches and Dawn gasped as tongue repositioned also. Larry had never been one to enjoy this, simply because he couldn’t see her to see how she reacted. He had found other ways to bring her pleasure but never through this. Now though her back arched as lips and teeth grazed her clit, strokes of tongue leaving her panting. “Please!” she cried out and heard the rumbling laughter that definitely belonged to Iron Bull. Looking down the line of her body revealed the ex-Qunari Reaver stroking her intimately and Dawn felt her body clench tight with anticipation.

With an alarmed jolt Dawn woke up from the dream, heart racing and body twitching. Her hands might be shaking with adrenaline but between her legs was undeniably wet. Arousal and guilt welled through her; she'd only had nightmares for so long that not remembering her dreams had been a blessing. And then terror lanced into her guts as Dawn worried that it might have been a Lust demon trying to prey on her; if her dreams were protected than it might not have been a dream at all.

“Oh god.” Panic drove her to her feet, bare toes slapping against the cold stone floors and Dawn bolted to get help. Adrenaline caused the high pitched ringing in her ears and the tinny taste in her mouth, and Dawn hit the battlements while still in her bed clothes. The cold night air chilled the sweat on her skin but Dawn barely felt it as she went to the one person that her panicked brain could think of that could stop a demon from haunting her.

The door to Cullen’s office wasn’t barred and opened under her hands. “Cullen! I’m sorry to barge in here but I think…” she started to babble as soon as she stepped through the threshold. The Commander wasn’t at his desk, which should not have surprised her considering the hour.

“Lady Dawn?” his groggy voice mumbled from the upper level where his bedroom lay. “Are you alright?” He started to scramble down the ladder, responding to her urgency if not her words.
Dawn closed her eyes for a moment, trying to catch her breath and her thoughts. When she opened them again, Cullen had reached the bottom of the ladder. “I am sorry. I… I need you to Smite me.” She blurted out.


The last thing she wanted to do was explain to anyone what it was she’d dreamt about. She shook her head no vigorously. “I can’t say, please. Just Smite me so I know I’m ok.” She insisted.

The Commander frowned, stepping away from her to walk towards his desk. “The apostate Solas has already conferred with us about your strange connection to the Fade. We simply do not know what a Smite would do to you.” He explained while looking into his desk for something.

Dawn closed her eyes against the surge of despair that his words brought. There was only Solas’ assertion that she couldn’t be possessed, but was that the entire truth? She trusted Solas to never deliberately hurt her, and yet Dawn still hadn’t discussed the Fen’Harel issue with him. His own actions had proven that although he was a lot smarter than she was, he wasn’t infallible. She could not guess at his next move, ever, and she knew the paths to the future!

“There is one test I can try, to help settle your concerns.” Cullen sounded closer and Dawn opened her eyes, surprised to see him stepping determinedly at her with a knife in his hands.

With an alarmed squeak Dawn threw her shield arm upwards in a futile attempt to protect her from an attack that never actually happened. “A demon would defend itself aggressively Lady Dawn. Take a seat, please.” His voice was kind as he led the rattled Dawn over to one of his office chairs.

She felt cold, feet nearly burning with chill from the stone floors and even her hands were icy. Dawn let the Commander settle her into a chair and then blankly waited as he fetched a blanket to wrap around her, stirred up the fire, and set a kettle to boil. He’d been sleeping in the half pants most of the men favoured but seemed unselfconscious of his bared chest as he set two mugs out. Dawn continued to watch him silently, astonished at how many scars he had. She’d understood logically that he’d been tortured at Kinloch but she’d never really thought about what that meant for him as the survivor. He’d always been so steadfast in the third game; even during his personal quest it was easy to overlook that he never gets the luxury of forgetting his past.

After he put the warm mug in her hands, Cullen patted her shoulder and climbed up his ladder, rustling around for a minute before throwing down a pair of honest to god knitted slippers. It was so unexpected that Dawn snapped out of her fugue to put them on.

“You knit?” she asked as Cullen climbed back down, wearing a shirt and sturdier pants.

He flushed and scrubbed the back of his neck. “It keeps my hands busy when I can’t sleep.”

“Makes sense, these are nice.” Dawn wiggled her slipper clad feet. “How bad are your nightmares?” she hesitated to ask but he seemed prepared for her question.

“Sometimes it’s like I was never rescued.” He admitted solemnly. “And when I wake up I wonder if it’s all real. But most of the time I can endure.” He sipped his tea and Dawn mirrored the action, surprised at how similar it tasted to chamomile. Not the same, but enough that it helped. “Did you dream of demons tonight Dawn?” he met her gaze without a trace of condemnation in his eyes.

“I don’t know.” She admitted with a weary sigh. “I used to dream, every night, of the rage demon punching through Larry’s heart. Or if not that then seeing Emma impaled on a dragon claw while her blood rains on me and I scream. After my… after turning to Solas for help I stopped
remembering my dreams.”

“So what makes tonight different?” he didn’t offer empty platitudes of comfort at least.

Of course he’d want to know what had alarmed her now if constant bloody nightmares weren’t the issue. And telling him would be the only way to settle her concerns; he was an ex-Templar with extensive experience. But knowing that did not make saying her dream out loud any less embarrassing. “It started with… ah… my late husband being alive.” She fumbled for a way to say what she needed to without too much cringing. “We were being intimate.” She finally decided on a term and saw Cullen flush at her words. He couldn’t look at her now, rubbing at the back of his neck in discomfort. “And then I noticed some off details. Things not right to Larry, and I realized that…ah…” she looked down at her hands, not able to say this next part while looking at anyone. “It wasn’t Larry. I had changed to dreaming about being intimate with…someone…not my late husband.” After a thick, silent minute Dawn looked up to see Cullen almost crimson and realized what he must fear; she did run here in her nightgown after all. “Not you.” She blurted; that would have been too horrific.

Cullen coughed, taking a large swallow of tea to cover his obvious embarrassment and discomfort. “Well, at least there’s that.” He finally croaked.

“I apologize, I know this is uncomfortable.” Dawn babbled; embarrassed even more now that her panic was receding.

“No, I understand your fears Dawn.” He was kind but firm. “You’ve said you know what was done to me. Afterwards… any dreaming was suspect.” He admitted painfully. “I felt hunted. But when sleeping in a null field didn’t stop the sensation I knew it wasn’t the demons but my own mind I was fighting.”

It surprised Dawn that he’d be confessing all of this to her, except that she recognized that he was trying to offer her hope. That she could endure it because he had, and he wanted to help. He’d deeply hurt her with his words once before but now he was bearing his deepest vulnerability to her; it had to be the strangest progression of friendship she’d ever gone through.

“It was Iron Bull.” Dawn stunned herself with her confession, Cullen’s eyes going wide at her statement.

“And that surprises you?” Cullen sounded almost amused.

Dawn gaped at him in stunned silence before finally blurtling, “If you haven’t noticed Cullen, right now I am not his favourite person.” Dawn didn’t know how to process Cullen’s apparent amusement at her predicament.

“Dawn, you and Bull have been building towards this the moment he started calling you Little Bas.” Cullen stated blandly and held up a hand to forestall her objection. “Are you trying to tell me you’re not attracted to him?” his expression was flatly disbelieving and Dawn knew her entire face burned with admission. Cullen’s eyebrows went up in an ‘I thought so’ expression so Dawn buried her face in her hands. And then started laughing. After a moment Cullen chuckled along with her.

Slowly the tension in her spine released its iron grasp and Dawn felt like she could breathe again. “So I’m not possessed, just horny. Fantastic.” She spoke as Cullen was sipping his tea and the Commander almost choked on it.

“You’re healing, and that can be as scary as being wounded was.” He pointed out, the painful voice of experience.
“Bad timing.” Dawn agreed with him.

“Isn’t it always?” he sounded amused again and Dawn remembered the late night conversation with his older sister. He had no idea.

“You at least have a chance to ask a certain lovely Ambassador to dance at Halamshiral.” Dawn indicated with a conspiratorial smile.

Now Cullen flushed and looked away, silent confirmation that Dawn hadn’t been wrong when she heard the flirtation to their interactions. “We..ah…we are all going to be there to represent the Inquisition.” He stammered.

“Cullen, ask Josephine to dance. You both deserve happiness. And it’ll frustrate the Orleans to no end.” Dawn decided to be blunt. This was different from the game, and even if Dawn had wanted to tell Cullen to eat his sword the first few weeks, he did deserve something good too.

“Shouldn’t I be more worried about this ‘secret’ dance you have planned with Solas?” he not so subtly redirected the conversation.

Dawn shrugged, knowing that everyone had theories but only a few had any real clue. Of course all the Rogue types had likely spied it out but Cullen was no spy. “It’s going to be quite something to dance in front of so many people.” She didn’t confirm or deny anything.

It surprised her to find that dawn had crept up on her while she chatted with Cullen, oddly comfortable with the Commander now that they’d aired their skeletons at each other. “I should go to training, I’m already late.” She worried; Iron Bull didn’t tolerate tardiness and he was already mad at her.

“You know what people will think if you walk out of my rooms at this time in your night-rail.” His tone was bland but Dawn got the point. With swift movements Cullen climbed his ladder again, and this time he chucked down a proper shirt and pants at her. They weren’t obviously Cullen’s since he always wore the red overcoat at least.

“I am still in shit with Iron Bull though.” She quickly pulled the pants on, amused that she got into the Commander’s pants in a way she never expected. She quickly exchanged the sleep shirt for a real one, tucking it in quickly and wrapping the belt he offered around her hips.

“I don’t have boots in your size,” Cullen sounded apologetic, “but I can tell Bull that your lateness is my fault, he can’t punish me.” The Commander smirked so Dawn laughed.

“Slick.” She complimented and decided to just barefoot it. Iron Bull would notice but if he cared to ask she could give him a heavily edited version of why.

It was a quick walk to the training field from Cullen’s office and Dawn quickly caught sight of a pissed off Iron Bull. The moment he spotted her she felt the intensity of his irritation; having Cullen walking with her didn’t seem to be winning her any points either. His eye critically scanned over her, pinging off the bare feet immediately too.

“Bull, Lady Dawn tells me that I’ve made her tardy for training with your Chargers. I apologize for interrupting her time with you, I requested her input on a matter and she obliged.” Cullen lied passably well and Dawn quickly fell into the warm ups without making eye contact with anyone.

She couldn’t hear what Iron Bull and Cullen were saying, but the Commander left without looking concerned which only made Dawn worry more. Iron Bull’s irritation seemed to abate after Cullen’s explanation but Dawn was still left jittery feeling. Part of it was admitting that that Dawn was
suddenly all too aware of Iron Bull’s body and not because she needed to be for training. So she tried to concentrate on not looking at Iron Bull. Krem at least just looked amused that Dawn was late to start and with no boots, but he just kept her running and moving with the rest.

“Dawn!” Iron Bull barked out, summoning her to her penance.

She steeled herself and fell into place before him. Iron Bull stared at her silently for a moment, dropping his eye to her now dirty bare feet. When he caught her gaze again, Dawn felt nearly faint with how flushed her face was. “It’s a very long story Iron Bull.” She babbled and it seemed to faintly amuse him.

“Hand to hand today then; Lady Dawn.” Dawn wasn’t sure if that was a playful tone of voice or a mocking one. It was bad enough that he only used her given name now, but calling her Lady Dawn actually hurt a little. Still she kept any comment to herself.

It was the first time they were training hand-to-hand since Iron Bull left the Qun and Dawn felt tense from the start, trying not to anticipate having his hands on her body. He kept his movements slow and controlled at first, Dawn executing mostly familiar counters and attacks. Slowly their speed crept up, as did the inevitable intensity of impact. Today Iron Bull seemed to relish quick jabs at her sides and hips, constantly pushing her off-balance. And her bare feet were fair game to quick stomps and kicks if she started to get sloppy. And thanks to her distracted brain, she was pretty much non-stop slop.

Her endurance had greatly improved from the last empty hands training they’d done, and all her work with Cassandra and Hawke for fighting was paying off. Ironically even her dancing practices with Solas seemed to help her now too. Iron Bull could still knock her down nine times out of ten, but Dawn remembered the little hand mirror fight and knew that she could win. She just had to focus. And stop thinking about how damn good he looked all sweaty and slightly aggressive. Was there a word for being aroused and a little angry about it?

Iron Bull had tripped her up yet again, sending Dawn stumbling as she tried to throw a punch. It was simple for him to duck around her attack and bear hug her back to his chest, lifting so her feet left the ground. “Dawn this is no good for you if your head’s not in it.” And then he dropped her to continue training.

“I know.” Her tone was curt, trying to ignore all the noise from inside her head. So of course now she was getting right pissed; a little at him but a lot at herself because he was right. She needed to focus or risk getting injured again.

“If you need to focus on business then go focus on business but if not I need you here and present.” He was still so calm and for once it felt like being handled with kid gloves.

“I know.” More anger leaked out that time; she had to calm herself down.

“Then you need to focus on training, not on whatever business made you late to it.” At least there was a little bit of reprimand in his tone that time, a little angry about it?

Training was even uglier after that. She was hitting a little too hard for practice but he wasn’t
saying anything about it. He wasn’t saying anything at all; just letting her anger drive her around
the training ring as matador lead around, well, a bull. Instead of having to knock her down, Iron
Bull merely started to let Dawn be her own obstacle; silently giving her these looks every time. Not
like he was disappointed in her, but just confused. And silent. She missed the old training where
quiet commentary and teasing jokes were the norm and that nostalgia did not sit well with her
anger.

And Iron Bull managed to grab her up, her attempt at an attack so poorly executed that she actually
hit herself in the face. “Dawn, whatever it is in your head you need to FOCUS.” His voice was only
concerned warning and Dawn’s last shred of patience snapped.

“I asked Cullen to Smite me because I thought I’d been tempted by a demon.” Dawn all but hissed
at him as she turned to kick him and of course he caught her leg, his giant hand easily controlling
her calf So Dawn stole a move from Victoria Hawke herself and jumped her weight up onto the leg
he was already strongly supporting, her right knee snuck in on his blind spot to crash into his chin
because she knew he wouldn’t drop her. Dawn pulled on Iron Bull’s horns at the same time to help
drive her impact even as he finally tried to push her away. Her knee hurt. So did her chest as she
staggered away panting.

Iron Bull stared at her calmly and she stared in confusion back at him. “We’ll continue this later,
go take care of your head.” He called out, disengaging and walking away without any further word.

Dawn knew the Chargers were watching the scene avidly, trying to figure out what was going on
but even Dawn couldn’t explain why she’d just gone off like that. If it had just been the Chargers
that had witnessed this, then Dawn could have let things lie. But of course she spotted Hawke up
on the wall, watching. That was just what she needed, and worse yet Dawn knew that avoiding the
blonde Rogue would just get her kidnapped. Again.

With no other recourse, Dawn climbed up, still fuming, and sat with the Champion. “You’re
having a shit day.” Hawke remarked lightly.

“Oh, what gave that away?” Dawn snidely asked.

“To start with?” of course Hawke would have a list of answers ready. “Generally it’s a good idea to
start the day wearing your own clothes.” At Dawn’s astonished look Hawke laughed. “I can smell
Curly’s soap and hair pomade; all his clothes pick it up after a while.” There was no judgement on
Victoria’s face. “Want to tell a nosy Hawke about why you needed to wear Curly’s clothes to train
with Iron Bull?”

“I really, really don’t.” Dawn denied, groaning at the idea. “Just know that I turned to Cullen as an
ex-Templar, not as a man.” She needed to go change though; she did not want rumours starting that
would ruin things for Cullen and Josephine. Dawn pushed herself back up, heading towards her
room and not even surprised when Hawke hounded her steps.

“I mean, my curiosity is piqued and all. Curly definitely had his appeal, but I was fairly sure you
were after bigger game.” Victoria pestered remorselessly.

“Hawke, why were you waiting for me on the battlements?” Dawn decided to ignore her friend’s
previous statement entirely.

“Well, the thing is… The Winter Palace.” Hawke made a face. “More importantly, I’m not going
to it so I need you to watch out for Varric for me.”

“What?” Dawn was surprised enough to stop walking for a moment, but Hawke just carried on past
her so she ended up scrambling to catch up to her own room. The blonde was already sprawled across Dawn’s unmade bed.

“Last time I stepped in Orlais I had a bit of a bad experience.” Hawke negligently summarized Prosper’s attack and the incident with Tallis.

“So you’re avoiding an entire country?” Dawn pulled off the borrowed clothing, changing quickly even with an audience.

“I’m not giving any more answers until I get some in return.” Hawke smiled as she said it.

“Fuck you.” Dawn snarled temper still not settled from earlier.

“I’d be on an ever growing list it seems.” Hawke easily lobbed back and Dawn actually growled as she kicked her own boot towards the Champion.

“I did not fuck Cullen!” Dawn shouted at her friend. “I went to him because I thought I’d succumbed to a Lust demon last night alright?”

“Woah Sweetheart!” Hawke switched from teasing to placating. “I’m sorry, I’m not laughing at you.” The careful way Victoria spoke reminded Dawn sharply of the fact that while she’d helped raise her younger siblings, Dawn was still acting like an asshole. “Sit down and start from the beginning. You have nothing to be ashamed of; I know Isabella and Anders, their sexual exploits are why my hair is white.”

Hawke’s ridiculous statement made Dawn laugh in spite of her pissy mood. So despite her embarrassment, Dawn went through the humiliating process of bringing her friend up to speed on the details of her dream and how she’d gone to Cullen for help. Then the blonde looked thoughtful.

“So when you did remember your dreams here, they were pretty much the kind of dreams you didn’t want to remember, and then you stopped remembering any dreams whatsoever?” Hawke waited for Dawn to confirm with a nod. “And then last night you have a dream again, and it’s not absolute shit. I can see why you jumped to Lust demon. I can even get why you ran to Curly.”

“Excellent.” Dawn grumped sarcastically; feeling like her skin was too small still.

“Sweetheart,” Hawke took her hands to stop her from angry pacing, “when was the last time you took care of yourself?” she asked with an innuendo laden tone.

“What the fuck Hawke?” Dawn demanded. “Are you seriously asking me that?”

“I’m not just being a cad but think about it Dawn. The last person who brought you pleasure is dead.” The blunt statement hurt but wasn’t cruel. “Your body and your head are telling you that you have moved on. I’m not saying go have anger sex with Bull, let that asshole figure his shit out and come crawling back. But you are allowed to feel good, to have and make pleasure. Even if it’s on your own.”

Dawn stayed quiet after Hawke finished, thoughtful. “How the Void did you get so smart?”

“The man I’m in love with is oblivious and still in love with the woman that keeps breaking his heart.” Hawke stated bluntly.

“That’ll do it.” Dawn sighed and sat down finally. “I’m not even sure what’s making me so angry. I thought he would just Smite me and that’d be the end of it, but now it’s such a fuss…” she buried
her face in her hands and slumped against her friend.

“Have a date with yourself tonight; hot bath, bottle of wine, personal time. Even if you don’t do anything sexual, you can take one night to give yourself some Dawn time.” Both of them started laughing after a pause.

“That was a truly terrible pun Hawke. I expect better from you.” Dawn teased her friend, glad that she had helped.

Now Hawke gave a dramatic sigh, “All these expectations, what’s a Champion to do?” she rested her cheek on top of Dawn’s hair for a moment, hugging her around the shoulders. “Leave Iron Bull to me Sweetheart, it’s time I had a little chat with our resident Tal Vashoth.” Hawke’s tone turned malicious.

“Considering that I just admittedly attacked him while angry, I’m not so sure I have any stones to throw Hawke.” Dawn tried to warn, though the expression wasn’t one Victoria would be familiar with.

“You’re lucky he didn’t expect that from you, it was sloppy as shit. Next time do it faster.” At least Hawke gave advice instead of sympathy.

“I didn’t expect it from me.” Dawn countered with a short laugh.

“It was still sloppy. We’ll work on how well you throw yourself around tonight; now go have a date with yourself.” Hawke sprang out of the bed and went to the door with her instructions, leaving without another word, or closing the door behind her.

“Fishbone!” Dawn hollered out and heard Victoria cackle.

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Victoria perched up on the battlements like a Hawke shaped water spout. Luckily for the Champion of Kirkwall it wasn’t actually raining out currently. Hunting Qunari was hideously difficult at the best of times, though to be fair the streets of Kirkwall were a world away from Skyhold Keep; adding rain to the mix would have made this a lot less fun. Her target was acquired and Victoria Hawke dropped off the battlements; a quick scramble had her shadowing him as he walked from the Main Hall towards the Herald’s Rest.

Bull changed directions, angling towards the training grounds and Hawke smirked, stepping to walk beside him. “Dramatic entrances are a bad idea for a Rogue.” he remarked off hand.

“Varric has been telling me that for years Tiny. I’ll tell you what I always tell him; I like doing it because it makes me tingle all over.” Hawke matched strides with Bull until they were in the middle of the training circle.

“That’s a mental image I’ll revert to on cold nights.” Bull joked.

“You never got to meet Anders; he has this trick with electricity…” Hawke added in a wistful sigh to help add to the imagery.

“Why are you determined to talk to me away from listening ears?” Iron Bull asked with a casual ease that hid his likely deadly capabilities.

Hawke knew that if he thought for a moment this was an ambush, things would turn bloody and quick. Her body had taken a long time to recover from the last time she tried to fist fight a Qunari
and Victoria had no interest in a repeat performance. “You’ve had more than enough time to pull your head out of your ass. I know you’re pissed at her for keeping things from you that you feel she rightfully ought to have told you,” Hawke waited for Bull to grunt affirmative. “I’ve gotten a run down on what she was stuck with; did she have the right to determine whether or not you should decide for yourself to stay or leave the Qun.” Victoria had The Iron Bull’s absolute attention and it sent her primal instincts into hair trigger mode. If he so much as breathed wrong she was gone. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed but your Little Bas is hurting and I don’t mean the arm. You fucked up. She fucked up. You both need to actually talk to each other about it.” Was it a bad idea to try and tell a recently ex-Qunari spy what to do? Definitely. Could this turn into a devastating fight? Certainly. Was Hawke angry enough over Dawn’s hurt to be reckless? Absolutely.

Bull’s neck and shoulders seemed to swell for a moment, bulging with tense readiness. And then he tilted his head to the side, a deep crack sounded and he gave a gusty sigh as his body language slumped into a more languorous demeanor. “You don’t need to remind me how damn vulnerable she is,” his easy stance didn’t fool Hawke; she’d sprang into action a few too many times from such a slump herself to fall for it now. “I promised her once that she’d be taken care of, and I intend to do it.”

“Then get on with it; you might think giving her space and distance is the best option but this isn’t helping her. My own little sister is too far away for me to fuss over properly so Dawn’s who I’ve got to get protective over.” Hawke admitted easily.

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“Is this a shovel talk?” Bull grumbled his amusement at the belated realization.

Hawke just gave him a flat look. “Don’t think I didn’t see the game you were playing before. You watched her from the moment she entered a room to the moment she left, and you made damn sure no one else tried to step in either. I’m betting that you were trying to get her to come to you first.” Hawke’s scorn was as close to a physical slap as she could give him without starting a fight.

“Dawn is one of those people that can love someone so completely that it would fill in some of the broken parts in ways no one could ever imagine; you would be making a mistake if all you wanted from her was sex.”

“Do you meddle in everyone’s affairs?” he demanded gruffly; by passing her diatribe entirely.

“Only if I have to; I like you Bull, I really do. I’m glad you and your Chargers are still with us. But I love Dawn like I love Bethany and the rest of my people. I will back her.” She gave a polite warning.

“I have no desire to fight you Champion, but my business is my own. Including my business with Dawn.” He could finally say that and entirely mean it.

And there was the crux of it; he didn’t disagree with Dawn’s actions to interfere but withhold information in regards to Hawke. Right now keeping what Dawn knew to herself offered her the opportunity to precisely plan a solution, whereas informing the parties involved would inevitably alter their behaviours and possibly spoil Dawn’s plans. As Bull and Hawke parted on wary but not aggressive terms, he had to admit that if Dawn hadn’t told him about it; it was because she truly thought it was the best solution. Not for herself, maybe for the Inquisition, but definitely for him.

Bull knew he had been running for a long time; from the shadows of his past filled with screams hidden in fog, from doubt about his place, his purpose. They had hounded his subconscious even as he reveled in life with his Chargers; ever fearful of the call home. If he had truly wanted to stay with the Qun he could have talked the Boss into it. But he hadn’t, instead he had put the decision
into her hands, already certain what she’d pick. Alena valued the Chargers for their own deeds; she wouldn’t betray an established trust like that. And if he wasn’t mad at Alena for that, he really had no right to remain mad at Dawn.

And Hawke was right; keeping his distance from her only made them both miserable. The ache in his jaw was enough of a reminder of that. It was definitely time to start talking to Little Bas properly. Starting with some ground rules for both their sakes. No more training together when one of them was angry.

“Hey Bull!” Alena called out, drawing his attention.

“Yeah Boss?” he focused on the diminutive Inquisitor.

“Vivienne has sent work from Halamshiral, bad weather is expected before much longer. I want you and the Chargers to range out ahead of the main group by about half a day. Take a couple of the messengers with you to report back anything meaningful. Otherwise I trust you to handle whatever obstacles you encounter.” She instructed briefly.

“You got it Boss, when are we heading out?” Iron Bull shifted half his attention to the logistics of getting his people ready and moving a week ahead of schedule.

“Tomorrow morning.” She looked at him expectantly.

“We can do that. Anything else Boss?” Bull departed once she indicated nothing else and went to find Krem, all other plans back on hold.

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Cedric sat in the slowly shrinking shade, stewing over the letter in his hands. Keeper Istimathoriel had written him a tale of woe from his Clan but there was no letter from his son included. Doshiel was still angry with him for leaving; Cedric’s thirteen year old son hadn’t wanted him to go and didn’t understand why his Bae didn’t come home. So now Cedric was enduring the silent treatment from him and it hurt. But he stayed because he could do so much good to help protect his Clan and his son. Too many strong mages in a Clan at once was a demon trap and until his son was trained enough to defend himself, Cedric couldn’t go home.

And from the sounds of it, home might not be there by the time Cedrick could get there either. He needed to find a way to send help to his Clan, and he could only think of one way to do that. The Inquisitor was an intelligent woman and he was certain that she would have a way to help.

He ducked back inside the library, intending Fade Step through to the Main Hall but as he prepared to do so a voice brought his actions short.

“You look like I feel,” Dorian Pavus’ cultured accent was oddly vulnerable sounding and Cedric was incapable of ignoring it even though he knew a hangover when he saw one. “Bad news abounds no doubt.” Dorian astutely guessed.

“Suspiciously well-armed and overly numerous bandits targeted my Clan not too long ago. The Inquisition sent out forces and my Clan found refuge in Wycome. Only now it seems there is a plague that my People are suspiciously not catching and tensions are raising.” He held up the letter as he spoke, surprised to be comfortable letting the Tevinter peacock read it.

Dorian frowned, carefully shaped brows furrowed adorably as he scanned the letter. “I’ll tell the Inquisitor myself my friend; have no fear. We’ll see this taken care of.”
He was so insistent that Cedric could only honour such a generous move as he would with a lethalin; he stepped forward and kissed Dorian on the mouth boldly. “Thank you Dorian. It means a lot.” He cupped the man’s cheek for a moment, seeing surprise in his lovely dark eyes before he stepped back. “If ever there is a favour I can do for you, please know you can call on me.” He offered sincerely.

Dorian only looked flustered for a moment longer. “Yes, well… I inevitably shall.” He recovered. “Are all Dalish as demonstrative as you are?” he seemed almost compelled to ask.

Cedric laughed and shook his head. “Do you represent the entirety of your People? My Clan is fairly open with affection, and most casual touches aren’t seen as sexual. Intensity indicates intent; that kiss was a thank you, not a seduction. If you would like I can show you the difference.” Showing the glittering peacock the joy of his gratitude would be awfully fun.

The younger man seemed astonished by such a direct approach, a fleeting vulnerability there and gone despite Cedric’s constant flirting. Dorian was handsome, educated, and determinedly charming, and yet Cedric realized that he was still so uncertain of his reception. “I will not toy with you, Tevinter Prince, not until you know it’s safe to do so. But if my attentions are not wanted I will not be offended by a no.” he offered Dorian an out.

“And what makes you think I want you as a paramour?” Dorian tried to play coy and Cedric smiled, not hearing a ‘no’ in the man’s words.

Dorian was taller than he was, broader through the shoulder too, but Cedric still stepped into his personal space. “Because you want something a little wild and unplanned in your life; you’re just afraid now that I’m here to tempt you.” He met Dorian’s eyes and curled out a lick of magic, skirting it along the Necromancer’s aura in a deliberate caress. And then he walked away because otherwise he would be tempted himself to try and scandalize as many watchers in the library as possible. Dorian was a very appealing man, for more than just his well-groomed exterior.

Unfortunately for them both, news broke that the Inquisitor’s group was moving up their departure to the morning. His beautiful Prince would have the entire visit to Halamshiral to consider Cedric’s offer, Cedric just needed to remain patient.

With the chaos that change in schedule caused though, Cedric was unable to even bid the group farewell. There were too many people and too much needed to get going for it to be practical or feasible. Still Cedric found himself watching after the group until they left even the long distance of his vision. Maybe he understood his son’s anger at being left behind a little better now too.

It was the ghostly chill of Necromancy that lured him into Dorian’s currently vacant nook, and a temporarily arisen Fennec was waiting to deliver a message. With a curious smirk, Cedric curled his magic out and saw that his guess was right; the message was for him and Dorian’s voice echoed from the ghost.

M’aureum,

Inquisitor Cadash is prepared to back up your Clan and deal with the plague issue prohibitively. Lieutenant Killeen will have any follow up reports and has been briefed to keep you informed.

When I return you will have to show me that difference you mentioned.

Dorian

An almost impish desire to Fade Step to the Tevinter’s side was shrugged off. Wistful fantasizing
because Cedric’s Fade Step was line of sight only. The handsome mage did know how to make a parting volley though.

Tarasyl’an Te’las was quiet with the higher ups all gone, and news would be slow to trickle back. The only bright spots of entertainment left to Cedric were the Companions of Kirkwall, left voluntarily behind in Skyhold, and the Valo-Kas helping run sentry under the Lieutenant’s command.

It seemed he was not the only hunter whose prey was currently out of reach. The Healer Gray One was pining after the Seeker. Cedric didn’t understand it, but it was amusing to see the Healer Adaar trying to act like nothing was amiss. More interestingly, the other Adaar seemed even the worse for wear with her plain faced lover gone despite all commentary about not being a romantically inclined body. The children were cute with their first brushes against love and lust, their innocence fondly remembered from his time at that age.

But all thought of fun and games fled with the next set of news. His Clan survived, but the leader of Wycome was complicit. Astonishingly, he was called in by a painfully young Runner to attend to a response plan. Lieutenant Killeen was taking her role of informing him seriously.

She was a sharp minded officer that took no shit. “Ryder says we can send in scouts, see if the whispers of Venatori in Wycome are true or not. No matter what else is discovered, we need to try and get ahead of this plague nonsense.”

“I will attend on this mission, I can help liaison between Clan Lavellan and the Inquisition forces, as well as provide mage support.” His son would be thrilled to have his Bae home.

Lieutenant Killeen studied his face, probably looking for some sign of insecurity or overt emotions. She would find neither; he was a First and battle tested long before Haven. “The Inquisition thanks you for your efforts.” She finally acquiesced.

His fun with the Tevinter would have to wait. While Dorian helped the Inquisitor in Halamshiral, Cedric knew his place was with his People.

Chapter End Notes

Translation
Qunlat:
Ashkaari- One who thinks, the title Bull was given after childhood but before he became Hisrad.
Imekari- Child

Elvhen:
Bae- Dad

Tevinter:
M’aureum – My golden one
Orlais is a Foul Word

Chapter Summary

Freedom is a tricky thing, especially when survival curtails it.

Varric bears witness, Dawn learns a hard limit, and Cedric goes home.

Chapter Notes

Ok folks, I go on vacation on the 17th and return the 31st.
That being said, I will endeavour to get the long ass Halamshiral chapter posted (its not done yet and after a little editing its sitting at around 18000+ words) but that would be the only update I could reasonably expect to get up while overseas.
There should be a whole buttload of updates once I get back though.

He really was too hungover to be travelling; Hawke and Merrill had seen to that and Varric grinned as he thought of them. A quick round of Diamond Back, for old times’ sake, Victoria had cajoled and he caved faster than a Templar at the Blooming Rose. Of course neither one of his friends were obliged to get up at the ass crack of dawn to ride out, though they had made an entertaining pile of limbs to crawl through to get up in the morning. It had been the first time he’d been warm since Haven.

Riding a stubborn mountain pony with the Inquisitor and her hoard of world changers was a poor trade-off for leaving his favourite person back at Skyhold. But maybe Hawke would actually stay out of trouble this time? As soon as he thought it Varric nearly groaned; he’d just jinxed it. He fought the urge to look over his shoulder to verify that the castle was actually still there. His pony picked up on his agitation and side stepped with an irritated snort, forcing Varric to relax again.

At least the mounts the Inquisition had been saddled onto provided entertaining distraction. Seeing Tiny riding the biggest Abyssal-Hangtooth Dracolisk anyone had ever seen was actually almost worth squinting into the rising sun with a blinding headache. The mostly burnt umber coloured beast was named Mouth because if left unsupervised he’d occasionally try to eat metal or rocks. That fact had only seemed to make Tiny like the Dracolisk even more; they were made for each other. But because Iron Bull had to be a half day ahead, it wasn’t a show Varric got to see except for first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

The Nightingale sat bestrides a Nugalope with a tiny paper crown placed on his head, carefully nestled in amongst his horns. Varric had learnt of her pet, the perpetually reborn Schmooples; the crown made him wonder if her menagerie had just grown by one very big one. But it was still better than Dawn’s seriously creepy ride; the undead horse with a sword through its skull had decided that it was going to be Dawn’s mount for this expedition and there wasn’t anything anyone seemed able to do about it. Dennet had had a beautiful chestnut mare saddled and ready for her apparently, but when they all came to the line the tackle Dennet said he knew he’d put on the mare was suddenly on the Bog Unicorn and it was waiting for her.
“I think its perfect Dennet, no worries. I’ve always wanted to ride a unicorn.” Dawn had eased his concerns and mounted the ghostly thing.

An hour onto the road and Varric was still wondering why she seemed to at ease on a beast that left the rest of the Companions shuddering and cold. “You’ve ridden before, Harbinger.” Leliana’s accent always made Varric think she was laughing at a joke only she knew.

“Not in almost a decade Nightingale.” Dawn shot back with an easy grin, but Red was right; even if her riding posture wasn’t perfect it was natural enough that Dawn had clearly had instruction before. Adding to the effect of Dawn’s competency no doubt were the Inquisition sword and shield she’d been equipped with, and the armour that made her look like any of the other Warriors their camps usually claimed. “It seems like Bog here is going to make it easy on me though.”

“Unlike your friend the Champion,” the Nightingale had Varric’s complete attention now, “who asked me to continue your Rogue training since she is not here.”

Varric had to fight a laugh at the look on Dawn’s face. He’d tossed the idea out at Hawke as a joke while they’d been bitching back and forth about Tiny; he still couldn’t believe Hawke had gone to confront him alone. But Hawke had remarked that it was good Bull had set Cassandra up as a replacement teacher because Dawn would just find her own way to keep training if not, and Varric had snidely suggested that Hawke need only ask another competent Rogue to take over. Like Leliana, because Maker knew Varric was the wrong kind of Rogue to teach a Warrior how to dodge and the Inquisitor was a little busy.

“What the fuck?” Dawn’s voice whined and Varric’s grin grew. “I’m barely figuring out how to hit people with the big pointy, I’m never going to learn to Rogue it up. Besides, I remember you being an archer.”

Leliana remaining silent about it only confirmed for Varric that Dawn knew the Nightingale’s story. It was frustrating to realize that unless Red shared, this was as close as he was getting to it. Dawn wasn’t in the habit of telling other people’s stories without their permission.

“When do my lessons start?” Dawn sounded resigned but not ungrateful.

“A schedule will only make you complacent, I can decide our lessons start whenever I like; it is up to you to be ready for them.” Leliana warned.

“Ok, you still have your creepy death from the shadows mojo.” Dawn sounded as impressed as Varric felt and he wondered what the Offworlder word she used meant; it felt like it fit perfectly to describe Leliana. “So you’re going to fly off at me at any moment; that’ll help me feel more capable and not at all leave me an anxious mess.” Varric smothered his laugh as Dawn batted her eyelashes at Red sarcastically.

“I will be helping train your reflexes to react to a fast, up close attack. The Commander remarked that your reactions were not yet geared to handle a covert attack.” For some reason that made Dawn flush and Varric frowned. Had someone made an attempt on Dawn’s life? He’d heard about the attempt against Iron Bull but hadn’t considered that there might be more targets; going after Dawn was actually a smart move from their enemies.

“So that’s why I’m riding in the center of everyone, you think I need a meat shield.” Dawn sounded a little annoyed by the reality of things, and even Varric’s hungover brain could tell that meant trouble. It would never be a good thing when Dawn started to sound like Hawke.

“Sweetheart, we like keeping you alive. It’s what friends do.” Varric interjected himself into the
conversation, though Leliana had likely been aware of him listening in.

“I…well yeah. That makes sense. I like my loved ones alive as well, and whatever Bog technically is too.” Dawn nodded her head haphazardly. “But I am from a world where basically the only person that has the right to tell me where I can and cannot go is me, though even then there are exceptions to that.”

Something about her serious expression must have caught Chuckle’s attention because he pulled his massive Hart over alongside Dawn’s Bog Unicorn. Varric’s pony looked very out of place amongst their eclectic mounts.

“The Age old debate between freedom and security, there are no simple answers.” Solas summarized it succinctly.

“Some risks do need to be taken.” Leliana agreed but Varric could tell her mollifying words were too little too late; the seed of constraint was already burrowing into Dawn’s awareness.

It looked like the idea of being told she couldn’t move about freely, or that her friends were set up to take the attacks so that she could survive really did not sit well with her. It was the same look Victoria would get whenever Leandra had tried to tell her to ‘stay out of trouble’ or to ‘be a good girl’.

“Sweetheart,” Varric called up and caught her attention; he could see the storm brewing in her eyes, “The Chargers are only an hour ahead of us by this point, the road is free and safe.”

She gave him a fierce flash of teeth in her grin; revelry and chaos just like Victoria would have, and then suddenly the Bog Unicorn was running.

“That creature moves through more than just the mortal plane,” Solas complained immediately. “There is no mount here that can catch her, not even my Hart.”

“What did you do that for?” Leliana demanded with a dangerous glint to her eyes.

“Listen, I have spent the last ten years watching a woman much like that grow into a Champion,” Varric wondered if it was something about him and his chest hair that drew a certain type of human woman to his life. “She’s going to do great things; but never, ever let her see the effort it takes to keep her safe.” Not when both women seemed to have a hard time believing they’re worth it. “Besides, she won’t go running to Iron Bull right now anyways; I bet you she's back before an hour is out without a single apology to anyone.”

“She’ll probably apologize to me for running off so I’m taking that bet.” Alena piped in, her green Dracolisk smaller and smarter than Tiny’s had been.

“The Harbinger seems to have a rebellious streak.” Leliana commentated and Varric saw Solas smile at the understatement.

“You need to get out of your tower more Red; that’s been apparent to the rest of us for some time now.” Varric dared criticize. She was the better spymaster by far, likely a better Rogue overall too, but he knew Dawn.

“Actually I believe it was Ena’vun that needed to ‘get out of her tower’, to steal your phrase.” Solas corrected smoothly.

“She joined us at Haven and has basically been with us there or inside Skyhold since.” Alena agreed, nodding as she spoke. “Can’t blame her for wanting a little space.”
“And we’re not supposed to worry?” Leliana sounded skeptical; of course the Spymaster would want to keep her safe, Dawn hadn't told everything she knew yet. Leliana could be a bit cold sometimes.

“If she’s back before the hour is out like Master Tethras assumes, the barrier I cast should hold.” Solas surprised them all when he spoke up this time and he gave an amused smile when he saw that. “I said no mount could catch her, but my magic could. She is as protected as I can make her without being at her side.”

“Well why didn’t you say so earlier?” Leliana still seemed irritated at Dawn’s antics; Varric could understand it but he knew how futile it would be to try and fight her on it.

“It was deliberately subtle in nature, though I am unsure if Ena’vun will be able to detect its presence.” Solas obliquely explained.

“So you were hoping that if she didn’t notice it no one needed to know?” Alena sounded amused.

“And if she does notice it she’ll come back screaming mad at you, you do realize that right?” Varric laughed but was surprised when Solas gave a pleased seeming shrug.

“Her wrath is fearsome if I’ve understood the entirety of her origins in Thedas well enough, and it would make continuing our dancing practice uncomfortable for a time, but we would adjust.” Solas’ whole attitude was just a little too supercilious for Varric’s tastes.

“You’re going to dance with her on horseback Chuckles? Now this I gotta see.” Varric needled him purposefully.

“I’m certain we could quite entertain you Varric, but sadly no. There are other ways to use our time that allows us to practice.” And Solas was right back to being self-satisfied.

“Do you think this is going to get the urge to run out of her? Further along this is a lot less safe.” Alena refocused their antics.

“Her own self-preservation will help keep her by; Dawn’s free willed not stupid.” Varric defended.

His faith was won out when just about three quarters of an hour later and Dawn was riding back into camp. She was utterly unharmed, face reddened from wind and eyes cleared from the storm Varric had seen in them earlier. “This guy can really run.” She enthused brightly and Varric laughed.

“Did you meet up with the Chargers?” he played along with her, ignoring that she’d bolted in the first place to prove a point.

“Nah, didn’t want to worry them about me suddenly showing up.” Her explanation made sense even if he didn’t believe it was the entire truth. “Oh, and you,” she turned to address Solas, “Gold star for hitting me with barrier at a full gallop, but I’m still tingling.”

“Ena’vun, would you like to use this opportunity to practice?” Solas side stepped her compliment and commentary entirely.

“Are we about to see some of these mysterious ‘other ways to practice dancing’ you alluded to earlier?” Varric scoffed at the mage.

But Dawn was already maneuvering the Bog Unicorn over next to Solas’ broadly build Hart. “Well technically we’ll only look like we’re riding; all the practice will be in the Fade.” She corrected
him helpfully.

And even as Varric watched, Solas shifted further back on the Hart and extended a hand to Dawn. In her turn Dawn had actually managed to crouch on top of her saddle, a trick Varric had told Hawke NOT to share because he hated it when the Rogue herself pulled it off, and then took Solas’ hand and hopped onto the Hart’s back in front of him. It was smoothly done but Varric knew they hadn’t ever practiced it; it was a side result of the dancing. The Hart shifted as the weight suddenly slid onto his back, but a beast that size merely flicked his ears and continued on once no attack commenced.

So far Varric had only caught them practicing the strange dance about four times and it had been something else each time. He was almost disappointed that he wouldn’t get to see more of it now. Fighting alongside Solas for months meant that Varric wasn’t even a little bit surprised by his preternatural grace and elegance, but he had been surprised that Dawn was able to match it. When she trained with Tiny or even with Hawke Dawn’s focus seemed to be entirely on mastering the moves on an instinctive level which made her precise but not necessary elegant. But when she danced with Solas it seemed to be a natural extension of her own nature; effortless. Whatever their final dance looked like, Varric already knew what the Orlesian Court was going to think of the duo; if he didn’t know better he’d be making assumptions himself.

Solas was digging into a saddle bag and extracted two thin slices of something from a carefully wrapped package. “One on the tongue to ease the transition but it is fast acting so settle into place first.” He recommended to Dawn.

“It’s not going to make me too dopey to react if the Nightingale decides to come for me?” Dawn worried even as she shifted her seat slightly. There were no stirrups for her, so instead she simply slumped into the Elf behind her as if he were a chair back.

“She would have to make it through my protections first.” Varric heard the confidence in Solas’ words and shot a look at the spymaster to see her reaction.

“Try to spring an ambush on a prepared apostate? No thank you, I travelled with Morrigan for a year.” Leliana didn’t seem offended but Varric saw how she looked at Solas more circumspectly after that.

As Dawn had opened up with her friends, she’d become a lot more physically affectionate and comfortable with each of them. Varric had been grasped into too many hugs himself to ignore that her affections were sweet and innocent, even if to an outside observer they may appear to be anything but. Dawn all but snuggled in front of Solas on the Hart they rode while the mage curled his arms around her to help anchor her in place; his hands resting on her legs made for a very interesting tableau and Varric could see a few of the other Companions watching them with interest. But any sexuality the scene might have had ended the moment they both slumped into near unconsciousness; Solas’ forehead rested against Dawn’s shoulder and her own head lolled to rest against the top of his, and both of them seemed like puppets whose strings had been cut even if Varric could still see them breathing.

“That is exceptionally eerie.” Varric had to say the comment out loud.

“That’s the effect of good alchemy.” Dorian shot back with a sniff. “I’ve seen others use a similar compound, though only mages thus far. It helps the weakest of us to purposefully cross into the Fade but for stronger mages it merely allows the passage to be quicker and easier.”

“And their method of repose?” Leliana queried, eyebrow quirked to indicate the semi-sleeping duo.
“Physical touch makes it easier to find each other in the Fade, the more contact the faster the process should be.” The Altus shrugged as if the question was beneath the Spymaster.

“How long do you think they’ll be out of it for?” Alena asked the practical question.

“That depends on how strong their mixture was. I would guess no more than an hour or so since Solas has elected to use it during travel.” The Tevinter mage seemed bored with the conversation now that he’d imparted his knowledge and shifted his mount away, another Nugalope though this one lacked the crown and massive antlers.

Varric wondered what Red was actually thinking as she studied the almost slumbering pair on the Hart. If he had to guess, he’d worry less that Leliana was suspicious of their actions and more over her wanting to test the defences Solas had alluded to moments ago. His own curiosity left his fingers itching to try and see if he could find a way through, or around, whatever it was Solas had left set up and Solas hadn’t even thrown the challenge in his face but hers. As the Spymaster looked to her own pack for a moment Varric knew his guess was right; Rogues were notoriously curious creatures. Less than a minute later and Leliana had lobbed a small ball of scrapped parchment at Solas’ prominently bald head.

The little paper never connected. It held fast about a foot away from his skull, floating in air like a bug caught in amber and then quickly crumbled into ashes after a quick spark of fire. Solas’ groggily raised his head off of Dawn’s shoulder and angled his face to peer out at the Nightingale briefly before he tucked his head back down; only Varric was at the right angle to see the smirk on Solas’ face.

What mischief was the apostate up to now?

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Riding off at a gallop on an undead horse was probably not the best way to convince her friends and defenders that she was a mature person and capable of handling her own security needs, but if Dawn had stayed put a moment longer she was going to start screaming at people. Thank god for Varric, he at least seemed to understand it. And when a barrier wrapped itself around her like a warm blanket fresh from the dryer, Dawn knew Solas as well wasn’t going to come chasing after her; though thanks to the magic tingling on her skin she felt like someone had forgotten to put the static sheet in with the blanket.

Bog’s hooves thundered on the packed dirt of the trail, though occasionally Dawn would feel a weird shudder pass through it. Every time that would happen her stomach would give a lurch and her blood would sing with feedback energy; it had been almost a year since she’d been able to go fast.

There was almost a hypnotic rhythm to the pounding of hooves, the shudder and silence of the Bog Unicorn’s run, and the feeling of wind streaking across her skin. For the first time since arriving in Thedas Dawn was truly alone; there were no walls holding her in and no one around to stand between her and the world. The air of the Frostbacks was crisp and cool, though the bitter cold of midwinter had finally seeped away and the sun slowly crept up the horizon.

It was the sun that helped Dawn to realize that Bog wasn’t just magically alive and fast, but magically fast. Those lurches became smoother the more she relaxed into the natural rhythm Bog set up, and she got an ever increasing awareness that its entire purpose was to run, as if it was a quasi-living embodiment of the joy of movement. Once she gave in to the idea that Bog’s purpose was to move, those lurches because natural feeling and she realized that with every jolt forward, the sun jumped an increment in the sky; the distance covered between one gallop and the next an
impossible feat and yet Bog didn’t even feel fully stretched out yet.

With Solas’ barrier still curled around her protectively, Dawn decided to see what it was Bog could really do, at least until she found the Chargers. No need to get entirely reckless, though several people would already give her shit for this anyways. As if it felt her permission, Bog shuddered lightly and then really opened up its speed. Now her heart beat raced in never-ending pulses, each strike of hoof against dirt resonated through her and the wind screamed past them both.

The Bog Unicorn came to a sudden but settled halt and Dawn sat panting on top of its back, a grin across her face as she stared out over the landscape below her. They were on a curve of the trail higher than the Imperial Highway they were headed towards, and she could see Iron Bull and his Chargers already, though she had been running for maybe twenty minutes.

“Oh I love you, you impossible thing.” Dawn laughed, patting the Bog’s shoulder affectionately. Again it tossed its head, actions all standard for horses Dawn had been around as a child taking lessons except for its utter silence. The Bog never huffed nor snorted, though it seemed more than willing to stomp or run.

They’d covered an hours’ worth of distance in less than twenty minutes and a part of her was greatly tempted to see how quick the Bog truly was, but for now she knew it would be smarter to turn back to the others. Besides if she went blasting past the Chargers and Iron Bull, and they saw her do it, there was no way she wouldn’t be coming back to a fight. Iron Bull would probably leave it be, but Stitches would rip her a new one if he saw her galloping around using both arms as if one wasn’t still technically on light duty for another week. He definitely didn’t need to know that Dawn had already had one of the Skyhold healers cut the stitches free because of how damn much they itched.

But instead of turning Bog around and letting it run them back to the others, Dawn sat astride awhile longer in stillness just watching the Chargers move further away again even as the day warmed up. Solas was right in that there was no easy solution between keeping her safe and letting her be free but Dawn wasn’t ready to face the idea that someone else might be calling the shots on what she was and was not allowed to do. She’d had a pretty wide range of freedom growing up, being ethnically mixed had left her able to blend into several groups while not directly belonging to any of them and living in North America had made a certain level of independence inherent in her nature. But when she tried to think about it without getting all screwed up emotionally, Dawn had to admit that her freedoms were not all that restrained compared to life in a big city had been. Her skin still crawled at the thought of her friends getting hurt trying to keep her safe though.

“So how do I keep them safe?” she asked into the quiet air and felt an echoing urge to run from the Bog Unicorn in how it shifted weight. “I cannot run like you do, I’m not that fast.” She laughed as if it had actually spoken to her, it wasn’t but Dawn liked feeling as if she was rationally thinking things out. “I can help keep them safe by keeping myself safe.” She admitted slowly. “Shit, I hate being the responsible adult.” Still she sat there for another few minutes.

She sat so still and quiet in fact that a nug ventured out onto the trail right in front of her. And Dawn gave the most undignified squawk when a rather large bird suddenly dove from the sky and snatched it up. It was an adrenaline inducing, visceral reminder that although the Dread Wolf wouldn’t hurt her a regular wolf would have absolutely no compunction about doing so. It was time to embrace a little security.

“Alright Bog, show me your best and get us back to the Inquisitor fast please.” She finally turned them back up the trail.

This lurch was different than all the others; Bog hadn’t even started to run but the whole world
moved. Her body felt like ten thousand volts ran through her, muscles cramping spasmodically and her equilibrium spun about like a turbulent gyroscope. Bog halted as suddenly as it had moved, and Dawn slid out of the saddle, staggered to the side of the road and vomited up everything she’d even thought about eating.

The Bog Unicorn lipped at the fly away hairs that had come loose of her braid, its size looming over her in silent comfort. She plucked her water skein off the saddle bow and rinsed her mouth out. “That didn’t happen.” She finally croaked out and spent a minute clearing her throat so she sounded normal. “Let’s go a little slower this time eh?” she muttered and Bog let her remount without a fuss.

The rest of the walk was utterly normal but less than two minutes later she was back with the group; unable to tell any of them about her experience without making everything worse. All she could was summarize with, “This guy can really run!”

She’d thought that would be the end of it too, Solas offered an opportunity for practicing in the Fade and she’d take the distraction; her blood was still singing from endorphins and adrenaline. Right up until she actually stepped into the Fade with Solas beside her she felt like she’d gotten away with it, and then she staggered into her friend as all her energy vanished.

“Ena’vun,” Solas sounded concerned and chiding at the same time, “it was foolish to think there’d be no cost to Haste even if it’s taken equine form.” He all but held her up without complaint or effort.

“Is that what Bog is, a spirit possessing a horse? What’s with the sword then?” Dawn made a disgusted face even as she clung onto Solas’ supporting embrace for a moment longer and then tried standing on her own again. She felt shaky and weak and didn’t understand why.

“I am assuming the sword was the method of original death for the horse as well as the resting place of the spirit. It is a rare confluence to create such a creature.” He enthused, a scholar excited to come across something only previously theorized; the Egg was an egghead.

“Well next time I decide I need to go fast, I’ll take you with me so you can share the experience.” Her tone was dry. “Why did I feel fine in the awake world but so drained here?” but when she turned to look at him, Solas was gone. A flare of concern washed through her but before she could properly worry he stepped back into view as if he’d never disappeared.

“My apologies, it seems Leliana was unable to resist testing my defences.” Solas’ satisfaction said louder than words how that encounter had gone.

“I wonder why? Someone who shall remain nameless had to go and throw a gauntlet at her.” It felt weird to use basically an English phrase in Common, but have it mean the same thing even if it sounded utterly different.

Now Solas smiled, obviously pleased. “Sometimes a little demonstration is required.” He shrugged off his own involvement.

“A perfect lead in to get us dancing.” Dawn decided to let it go if it meant he didn’t lecture her about playing with the Bog Unicorn’s ability to be Haste. She felt like a flattened pancake already, what was a little physical exertion on top of that?

“Except you were just letting a spirit syphon your energy Ena’vun.” Solas chided with a patient tone. “You’re awake and here right now out of willpower alone, you’re already too tired to dance.”
Dawn could feel the ‘ooohh’ expression on her face because that made a lot of sense for why she felt like someone had dropped an anvil on her. “But I’m not a mage, how can I do something like that?”

Solas laid his arm across her shoulders in support, letting her curl her arm around his waist so that they could walk together and she wouldn’t totter over suddenly. “You’re not a mage; though you are also not like any other entity I’ve encountered before either.” His words were categorical not complimentary and Dawn nodded; she’d heard him say this before.

“As I’ve said, my world doesn’t have magic; you’re a Fade Dream to us.” Dawn still had no clue what their term for fairy tale was.

“The fact that you’re here in any form is interesting; as best as I have been able to determine you carry your own Veil but are not affected by the one of this world.” He was carefully shaping the Fade around them, slowly constructing a physical world for them to move through without letting Dawn trip over any obstacles.

“You once said I was different than the Tranquil; they’re a brick wall whereas I’m a locked door.” She remembered being so confused about everything back then, not much had changed really.

“You don’t use magic, and sometimes it’s almost like you won’t let it be used on you; especially here in the Fade.” Solas’ Fade construct formed into a simple garden path; the large stones of the path worn and almost familiar looking. “But for the most part your unique nature is quietly passive.” He led them to a stone bench at the base of some massive statue hidden in the haze.

Dawn got comfortable, satisfied letting Solas lecture her as long as she got to sit for a little bit. The longer she was here the harder it was to stay awake, and she was already sleeping technically.

“When you let Haste draw energy from you, you theoretically became a conduit through the Veil, a short cut for lack of a better term.”

“But I’m not like that all the time?” Dawn immediately worried.

“No Ena’vun, you are quite safe. But this was the first time you’ve shown such a capacity. Since you have arrived, you have been slowly adapting to this world, and this only proves that no one knows what you can or are going to do next.” His words failed to comfort.

Dawn leaned against him, his arm still across her shoulders as he listened to her work things out. “That explains why I’m starting to remember my dreams again.”

“To protect you completely would permanently Mark you.” His inflection was odd and Dawn didn’t fully understand what he was trying to imply but she trusted his concern for him not to have done it.

“Freedom versus security.” It circled right on back to that for her it seemed, an exhausting spiral.

“If you apologize Varric loses the bet and Alena wins.” Solas informed randomly.

“I’m not apologizing.” Dawn denied immediately and Solas laughed softly while she fought the growing urge to yawn.

“I didn’t expect you would Ena’vun. Though I am curious as to how far and how quickly the pair of you moved.” He probably tried not to sound too eager but Solas always did have a certain intensity to his curiosity.

“Well we made it from near where the Imperial Highway to two minutes away from where I
returned in a single move. And then I threw up.” Dawn admitted with a yawn. “So you figure the calculations.”

“That is an impressive move; I’m surprised you don’t feel more unwell from it.” He shifted his embrace to get a better look at her and Dawn let him fuss. She just felt so tired; even already asleep and her eyes were still drooping.

“The Bog Unicorn did all the work, I just held on.” She let her eyes close, lids heavy and thick even as Solas settled her back under his arm.

“Rest Ena’vun; you’ve put yourself at risk in more than one way today but for now I can keep you safe.” He promised and Dawn curled into his shoulder.

“Who’s afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? Apparently everyone but Little Red Riding Hood.” Dawn slurred the words she felt so tired, and it was bad that she wasn’t entirely sure she’d said that in English, but sleep claimed her before concern could.

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He had been a much younger mage the last time he’d gone through something like this, so it took him a while to recognize the feeling. Rage. Cedric Lavellan was one more bad turn away from going into a dangerous place inside his head. One he hadn’t been to since the death of Doshiel’s mother along with half the Clan to slavers.

The First had arrived to find that a Venatori agent had already been assassinated, the source of the plague had been identified and eliminated, and yet it seemed that instead of alleviating the situation it had only driven the noble born shemlen literally frothing mad. That was the last news the Inquisition scout could give him before his homecoming, a warning from Lady Guinevere Volant.

Cedric had Stepped as far as his endurance could take him, walking the rest of the distances in between and still his feet knew it the moment he crossed a non-existent line into home. He felt it in his very skin, his Vallaslin all but thrumming with recognition.

“Bae!” a half pitched squeak shouted and suddenly his son was lumbering at him.

Cedric couldn’t even talk through the emotions clogging his throat; pride for the strength showing in his son’s shoulders, astonishment over how tall he was now; he’d missed so much, wanted to tell his son about all he had seen in turn. Instead of words though, he hugged his son tightly, each tear eagerly dripping down telling a story of their time apart.

It was a reunion that their Keeper gave them far too short a time for, but haste was still needed. “We are going into the city tonight da’len, through their alienage. In the morning we intend to combat the illness, not the people.” Istimaethoriel warned in her warm, kind voice. He had fortuitous timing, he’d been afraid the Clan would move in before he arrived.

“I’m no Healer but I can help, I will help.” Cedric immediately offered; he’d been working with red lyrium more than any of the Clan mages at least.

“You just got back and you’re already leaving me again!” Doshiel interrupted, voice breaking from more than just puberty.

“Doshiel…” Cedric felt the guilt pulse through him because it was true. But Cedric wasn’t just Doshiel’s father but also the First of their Clan, it was his place to go and support their Keeper.

“I hate you!” his son shrieked and stormed away.
Deshanna sighed and gave him a sympathetic look. “That age is hard on us all. Their bodies are already fighting through changes and stress and the presence of his magic is only complicating the process. He is strong, like she was.” The reference to Doshiel’s mother no longer hurt as deeply as it had since her death. Time could be kind, even to one wearing Dirthamen’s Vallaslin.

“He has inherited Yara’s gifts?” Cedric was afraid of the answer.

Yara had been his best friend and many had joked about his being Dirthamen to her Falon’Din, excepting that Cedric and Yara had been very much in a sexual relationship with each other. Istimaethoriel had been Keeper, Yara the First and Cedric their Second, his gifts powerful but not in league to hers. She’d been a rare Elgar’ladarelan, her ability to touch and soothe even the most dangerous of spirits a skill many had thought lost to the Clans.

“It would seem so, though it is still too soon to know for sure. Doshiel may have Yara’s gifts but he inherited your temperament.” His Keeper sounded amused by that combination. Cedric had been the quiet one out of the pair, satisfied in his abilities whereas Yara had always been seeking something more, something grand. But when trouble actually happened, their roles reversed; he became bold and dangerous whereas Yara retreated to keep others safe.

She would have loved to meet their son.

He was given the news of his Clan even as Cedric walked with his Keeper, taking in the welcome of his People. Their numbers had regrown in the now almost fourteen years since the slaver attack and Cedric was proud to see how far they had come despite losing so many integral members of their Clan. He would not let it happen to them again.

“You should remain with the Clan,” he quietly advised his mentor. “Stay with them and let me take the risk in your place.” He insisted and knew he didn’t need to tell her why he felt that way. The Clan would survive his death, had already survived his absence, it would not survive losing Deshanna right now.

“They do not know your face da’len, but I have become somewhat familiar, at the least to our Alienage dwelling siblings.” She rejected with a sad tone of voice.

“Then I will your shadow until we return from their walls.” Cedric insisted and she let him believe it would be true.

“You are much changed from the First I sent to the Conclave, and it suits you.” She subtly pried into his private affairs, always the concerned mother even if she was not his.

“I have found much out in the world and there is much more to seek out.” He obliquely referenced.

“And the light to your eyes that I have not seen in some time belongs to you alone?” she pestered.

“I have found…there is not a title for it yet.” He admitted reluctantly. Cedric hadn’t lived a celibate life after Yara’s death, it was not his nature nor would she have wanted it of him, but he had not pursued a relationship with any of the lovers in his bed. Dorian wasn’t even a lover in his bed and yet he enjoyed the pursuit of his pretty Tevinter more than he had his casual lovers.

“In time then da’len, not all things need titles.” She smiled slightly, pleased as only a matriarch watching her Clan grow could be.

When he was finally dismissed from his Keeper, it was only to go see out his son. The trials of magic his son was enduring were nothing like the ones Cedric had lived through and he knew he could offer no words of advice for him. And with how his son refused to even look at him after
Cedric entered the aravel where he was sulking, wiping away tears, it was clear that no advice was wanted.

“Your mother held you in her arms for a single day before she was taken from us. I fight now so that can never happen to us again.” He quietly confided in his son, who was becoming an adult all without him. “I don’t leave you behind because I think you don’t belong at my side, but because until you are ready it is my place to stand in front of you. To take the hits I can survive and you might not yet.”

Doshiel remained silent and sullen, though Cedric knew his son was listening. His ears all but quivered in curiosity because it wasn’t often Cedric dwelled on the past. He’d shared all the stories of Yara he could with his son, but for a long time the hurt was too much. It had eased before the Conclave, but watching Dawn struggle through her own grief had helped Cedric lay the last of his own to rest.

“I want you to come with me when I go back to the Inquisition. I haven’t discussed it with our Keeper yet because you deserve to discuss your future first.” His words had his son’s complete and compelling attention.

“To Tarasyl’an Te’las? To where the Inquisitor wields Power in her hand like this world has never seen?” Doshiel’s tone had blatant hero worship in it and Cedric smiled broadly, wondering what his son would make of Alena in person. Doshiel was already taller, though since Alena was a Durgen’len that was no surprise.

“I think it would be good for the world to meet you and for you to meet the world.” Cedric knew his Keeper had been right; being out in the world had changed him but for the better. He was hoping that for all the terrible things out in the world, Doshiel may have a chance to meet all the wonderful things too.

“You’re just trying to get me to forgive you before you run off and die!” Doshiel switched right back into anger and Cedric kept the smile off of his face. He really was Yara’s son.

“I plan to live to be old, decrepit and a complete embarrassment to you.” Cedric countered and let a slight smile sneak onto his lips.

Doshiel tried to snort angrily and instead just made himself degenerate into laughter when his nose all but honked with tear induced congestion. “I’m mad at you Bae, don’t make me laugh.”

“I apologize, I’ll be less witty and charming immediately. I might have to ask Ivun how to do that but if there was ever a master of boring plain things it’d be our Ivun.” He teased, knowing the Craft Master well enough to get away with the ribbing. They were notoriously fascinated with the most asinine details, from how often the Halla ate one type of leaf over another, to how thick a bow string could be before becoming too stiff. The more tedious the information, the greater Ivun liked it. They were much like the strange, plain-faced Sols in that respect.

"It's still not fair, you just got here." it was a legitimate complaint, not just teenaged obstinancy.

"I know. I wish I was capable of a longer Step, or that I knew to head out sooner. Then I could have been here already." Cedric agreed, shifting slightly closer to his son.

"You should never have gone!" Doshiel denied.

"No da'l'en, I needed to go. Not just for your safety, but for the Clan and myself. I have met the most amazing people, witnessed awe inspiring things, and I have been able to help so many
families stay together." Cedric felt some ease as his son turned to face him straight on.

"But my family has to be apart for that?" it was a honest, selfish demand.

"Why do you think I want you to come with me when I go back? I missed you." Cedric kept it a simple truth but his son still moved from his huddle to come over and hug him again.

"I missed you too. And I'm sorry I said I hate you; I love you Bae." Deshanna had been right in saying that Doshiel had inherited his temperament; the quick to anger was Yara but the inability to stay mad at a loved one was all Cedric. Yara could hold a grudge for years.

"Let's get out of the aravel; fresh air --" Cedric started to cajole but Doshiel interrupted.

"Leads to a fresh head. Keeper Istimaethoriel keeps saying to me too." Cedric figured the eye roll was both his and Yara's.

"Think about if you feel ready to leave the Clan for a time. I do plan to come back but..." Cedric looked out of the camp and vaguely towards Skyhold. "But I will be honest with you, there are people I've come to love there too."

"Have you met the Harbinger?" Doshiel demand as they left the aravel, and immediate interest spread to any within earshot. Cedric was amused at his son's hyper-focus on the 'interesting' facts.

It felt strange to discuss his first encounter with the Valo-Kas and Dawn's brutal arrival. Of getting to know the tragically young Emma Trevelyan in what proved to be the last months of her life. They couldn't infiltrate the alienage safety until nightfall so he told his Clan abbreviated tales of arriving at Haven until the sun went down.

Then he kissed his son's forehead and headed out into the dark after his Keeper, the rage he had put away earlier still waiting to return should he need it.
Wicked Eyes, Wicked Hearts, and Wicked Minds

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition arrives at Halamshiral and has an experience. Blood stains the marble but not all of it is from the enemy, and sometimes the best one can do is trade a life for a life.

Chapter Notes

I am on vacation, this chapter was originally going to get split into three separate ones and posted over time blah blah. I have crammed these suckers all together into one and gifted you with this monstrosity.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wicked Eyes

Val Royeaux was the glittering, festering capital of Orlais but The Winter Palace was the heart of Celene’s power in these parts. At least that was the summary Cullen heard, and he had gotten the gruesome run down of the build up to civil war from Lady Montilyet. For an Ambassador that was dedicated to finding peaceful solutions, she certainly did not flinch from the bloody reality of political war.

In all relative terms the trip from Skyhold to Halamshiral was not terribly arduous, or even dangerous, and yet Cullen was convinced he’d likely pass from a stress induced ulcer long before he had to worry about the nobles at Court pawing at him. It started the very first day when their Harbinger decided that pelting up the trail without guard or warning was a prudent action. The only reason he had not sent a guard, or chased off in pursuit himself was the utter lack of reaction from the Nightingale. If there was a clear danger then Leliana would have taken action herself. Instead he had kept the rest of the travel line tight and controlled, guards sweeping around the perimeter on the sides and behind them and trusted that the Inquisitor and Nightingale had a handle on whatever was going on with Dawn.

If that had been the end to his trials on the road, it would have been enough. But it hadn’t been. They’d spent just under a week on the road, and the harsh weather that Lady Vivienne had warned them of swept over them and back towards the Frostbacks. Their first days on the road had been under the bright if still distant sun, doing little to truly warm things but that had been preferable to the squall that swirled rain and snow past them in an endless slush that constantly worked its way down the back of Cullen’s collar and armour to leave his skin clammy and chilled. Visibility dropped from leagues in the distance to barely being able to see the Imperial Highway a meter in front of them and still they trudged on.

To add to their experience, the Grand Duke Gaspard du Chalons whom had invited the Inquisitor and her entourage to stay at his Winter Estate insisted on sending out an honour guard to escort them in. Only he had failed to inform the Inquisitor or her Advisors that such a force would be
waiting for them. The Chargers had encountered an unknown, well-armed force patiently waiting by the gates of the city in the middle of a storm; things could have gone horribly wrong from there. Orlesians were notoriously bigoted against any race or culture that was not distinctly their own and The Chargers were clearly not a peaceful bunch. But instead of finding bloodshed, Cullen had seen Iron Bull talking to the leader of the unit amicably even as the Inquisitor’s numbers rode in to be guided in by the rest of the honour guard.

“It is to our advantage that Iron Bull seems able to befriend most that he encounters.” Cullen muttered to the Companion closest to him at the time, in this case it happened to be Dorian.

“For a great big brute you mean?” Dorian’s amusement curled around his words like his moustache framed his mouth. Even the intolerable weather hadn’t moved the lip hair out of the mage’s careful styling.

“I meant for a mercenary, especially for an ex-Qunari mercenary. I survived Kirkwall remember.” Cullen remarked without heat.

“You, Varric and I then are the only ones that have seen what one of his type could potentially do.” Dorian sniffed but it wasn’t a negative judgement.

Cullen remembered what a Sten of the Qun could do, from the one that traveled with Siobhan, Leliana and Alistair to the ones that had torn through the city he’d been protecting; none of them brought to mind Iron Bull. “He has led the Chargers successfully for near a decade, I suppose it was foolish to hold him in the same standard as those that have been the aggressors.”

“Yes and no my dear Commander,” Dorian’s tone had lost its joking. “We have seen Iron Bull abandon the Qun that commanded him, but you have never lived through the maddened rage of a Tal Vashoth. That may still be his fate; consider our Harbinger and her wounded arm.”

“For someone like Bull that would be the worst outcome outside of direct possession.” Cullen agreed with the Reaver on that account; both of them had hurt too many innocent people already.

“And yet, for all that our peoples will gleefully continue slaughtering each other into extinction, I am glad to have him as part of our team.” Dorian admitted quietly and Cullen looked at the pampered mage in surprise.

The deprecating smirk on Dorian’s lips said louder than words he’d expected that reaction. “I have seen how he worries over every one of his Chargers, every one of the Inquisition. How he bears the guilt of his own actions and works to make amends for them.” Dorian looked down at his fingernails for a moment and then back up at the Commander, Cullen was startled at the honesty he saw in the man’s face. “If someone that should only be a beast to me can be and do better, then I really have no excuse for my own country now do I?”

“I’ve heard you discussing what actions to take to help support Minaeve, you aren’t doing nothing Dorian.” Cullen kindly corrected, knowing the sense of personal failure the Altus was likely struggling with.

“The entire world shook when the Breach was opened, and again when it sealed shut and our Inquisitor survived Corypheus. You would think that seeing the path of our arrogance takes us on would wake my country up. Instead it seems to only have driven those in power to grasp for even more while those that need their protection are left to rot.” Dorian shook his head. “I want my country to be what it could be, what it should be, and I am only just starting to do what I can to make that come about Commander. So if I have to learn from even a Tal Vashoth Reaver that in another lifetime I wouldn’t have hesitated to incinerate, then so be it. The world is not as simple as
we’d like it to be.”

“That’s a very good decision to come to as we ride into the heart of Orlesian power.” Cullen remarked in a lower tone as they approached the honour guard.

“No worries Commander, I can always change my mind.” Dorian’s response made Cullen laugh softly.

He had to focus on the honour guard and following the Inquisitor’s edicts after that, though the stress coiled in his gut never truly relinquished its hold on him. He hated being in Orlais. It was more than just having to endure the Game for the sake of the Inquisition; he hated how the people he had come to respect and care for would be treated by the Court of glimmering idiots, but Cullen had mastered holding himself in place even when he desperately wanted to take action. No one was safe in Orlais, not the Inquisitor, the Harbinger, the Ambassador, or even himself. The people who lived within Halamshiral were not safe, nor were the servants that worked the party they were attending; Cullen had listened carefully to Dawn’s information when she shared her world story. It seemed that if the ground could open up and swallow Halamshiral entirely the world might be a better place for it.

But as that was unlikely to happen, Cullen steeled his spine and followed his Inquisitor into Halamshiral. He would do his best to keep as many safe as possible; that was something Cullen knew how to do.

The Grand Duke’s chalet offered to them held just enough space for the entirety of their forces, an indecent amount of discussion had gone into assuring that Inquisitor Cadash had selected the right amount of people to take with her to be taken seriously without it seeming like this was an invasion. The Chargers had allowed the honor guard to guide them in, but once within the chalet grounds Cullen witnessed the mercenaries expediently assure that the grounds were safe as they had been instructed to; an utterly effective unit. Cullen scanned those that had come with him, looking for anything of concern while he trusted to their skills.

Dawn had settled after their first day’s experience, though Cullen wondered at how long that would last for. His jaw may not ache any longer but he would never forget that for all that their Harbinger liked to save lives and be peaceful; she had the ability to surprise them all. The Inquisitor was harder to read, but he suspected she was just as unsettled by these events as he felt, neither one of them were made for High Court. Lady Montilyet however, looked at ease and ready for anything the Grand Duke could throw at them. Thankfully the best that their honour guards could manage in the weather was to let the Inquisition settle into Gaspard’s winter chalet and get out of their way.

He’d hated the idea of riding into Orlais; hated the idea of walking into their Winter Palace for three nights of intrigue, pomp and circumstance. He was used to tolerating weather in all its foul forms, though the current squall left much to be desired, but Cullen knew that the thing he dreaded the most was still to come and from the one source he found himself unable to resist. Josephine insisted that they may rest the first night, but as soon as the Inquisition members had woken in the morning and left their designated rooms that they meet with the tailors for the last of the fittings. Cullen, Dorian, Solas and Blackwall were all going to stripped, poked, and pinned by Gaspard’s on site tailor once last time before the peace talks started. Elsewhere in the building the more custom-sized tailoring needs would be handled by Orlais’ most famous Tailor, a wizened old Dwarf that looked older than the city itself. And Lady Vivienne’s own personal stylist had agreed to take on the Advisors, Inquisitor and Harbinger.

As he stood staring at the outfit he’d be wearing the first night, Cullen valiantly tried not to imagine how the fashions would appear on a certain dark eyed beauty that was claiming more of
his thoughts each day. After they returned to Skyhold he promised himself to take action, to finally
determine if his feelings were reciprocated. But for now he had to stand still and try not to breathe
too deeply, or else bear the wrath of stick pins.

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Madam de Fer didn’t care much for Dawn, and despite the help Dawn had given her towards
having more time with Bastien, the feeling was mutual. Dawn could respect ambition and self-
preservation, but Vivienne had made her feelings about ‘the Offworlder’ perfectly clear from the
start so there wasn’t much she could do to alter things. It did mean that Dawn was actually a little
delighted in how pinched the woman’s expression became as Dawn revealed her gown to the ladies
though.

She felt suitably weird to be wearing the Arlathan inspired dress, even if only a few would properly
recognize the Elvhen style. It was just so distinctly not Orlesian and yet the moment Dawn had
finally come out wearing it, not a single thing could be said that would talk her out of it. She’d
never worn anything that had felt so perfectly right on her body before, nor ever believed a dress
could make her look as elegant and regal as this one did. Solas truly found a Masterpiece design for
her.

All the subtle, and not so subtle differences in her body since training to be a Warrior were obvious
in this dress, and it made her giggle nervously when she first looked down at herself in it. She was
wrapped collarbone to toe in a dress she’d never have had the guts to wear back on Earth, and if
she had been Elvhen this kind of sensual dress would make her stunning. The fabric was a dark
burgundy silk, the opaque pleats at the bottom lusciously rich and delicate, but the upper body was
sheer with darker layers modestly cupping her breasts, contouring down her sides to run the length
of the lower skirt, a similar panel starting scandalously low on her pubis. The sheer fabric was
jeweled with sapphires and silver to accent the lines of her body without offering any concealment;
a part of the Arlathan Game, not Orlesian.

Her body was technically covered from collarbone to finger tips, and the hem of the dress floated
along the floor, and yet she was scandalous in all the best ways. In contrast to the complexity of
her dress, Dawn’s long hair was held up off her neck by jeweled hair pins. The last nod to the
Elvhen fashion inspiration were Dawn’s bare feet, the length of her skirt currently hiding her
painted toenails from view.

“You look like an absolute heathen my dear.” Vivienne criticized even as she helped pin up the last
of Dawn’s hair.

“I can pretty much guarantee that this dress is going to cause some waves. Are you ready for this?”
Alena cautioned as she queried.

“Solas and I will be in the spot light, and even Josephine says that no one would dare interrupt us
once we get started. I’m going to be far safer than you; maybe not my reputation, but I don’t care
about that. Go be a sneaky little shit while I go be a spectacle.” Dawn waved her friend’s concerns
off.

“Quite.” Vivienne didn’t tsk or huff but Dawn certainly felt her disapproval; the frost in the air had
nothing to do with Vivienne’s mage abilities.

With nothing intelligent to say in rebuff to that, and knowing that she was likely sorely unequipped
for a battle of wits with the Court Enchanter, Dawn let it go. She had more important things to
focus on tonight, like not embarrassing the Inquisition.

Despite her confident words to Alena, Dawn felt so nervous walking out of the dressing area set aside for her and out to where the rest of the Inquisition was waiting. Alena had a bit of a sadistic side and had deliberately kept Dawn slated as the last to get ready and out; just so that everyone was watching when she revealed the dress. A part of her hated her friend for it; as much as Dawn loved being the center of attention she hadn’t deliberately chased it since before arriving in Thedas.

But she’s screwed up her courage, threw her shoulders back, and let Alena and Vivienne reveal her to the rest of the Inquisition. Dawn’s gown received smug expressions from Solas and those that had seen it already, stunned silence from most, one hastily swallowed oath, and one long whistle from Blackwall.

“Now that’s a dress that will be talked about for quite some time.” His compliment was simple but honest.

“Why thank you,” Dawn curtsied shallowly, “but Solas picked the design so all compliments should go to him.” Dawn wondered if her skin would ever get tired of holding the blush that seemed to stain her awfully red.

“I’m fairly certain that our dear apostate would look very different in that outfit darling.” Dorian offered with a grin that made several others laugh too. Even Solas gave an agreeable nod though he remained silent on the matter, eyes dancing with laughter. She couldn’t help but stare at her Elvhen friend for a moment longer, he had glittering piercings carefully punched through the length of his ears and that was not something she had anticipated.

She looked at the others and realized that while her dress was unique in its overall sheerness, the others were just as much of a spectacle to see. Alena wore softest dove gray silk that hugged her body without restraining, and was accented with the burgundy of the Mages and the sapphire blue from the Warriors. Although her dress was also Arlathan style Alena’s skirt had a higher front with a longer trail, favouring slashes of fabric being cut out to expose skin or structural details of the dress. Dawn could tell it was all artful dishevelment now to disguise actual damage the dress might suffer later. Blackwall wore closer to the game’s Elvhen style jacket, a darker blue open tunic belted in place over a lighter coloured shirt, and the outfit emphasized the lines of his body and the breadth of his shoulders.

Cassandra and Iron Bull wore a similar style, and Dawn spent a moment staring at how much a few yards of expertly tailored sapphire blue fabric could alter how she stared at a chest she’d seen bared since day one. The Warriors were all attired predominantly in the blue, clothes cut so that should they need it they could battle and yet none of them looked threatening. The mages were more luxuriously outfitted, all three of them being the type to appreciate well cut clothes despite Solas’ current aesthetic. The mages’ fashion was far more tuxedo thanks to the long tails their jackets had, though the predominant colour for them was closer to Dawn’s Bordeaux toned dress and slim gray trousers, which made her wonder if she was deliberately decked out to look like a mage. It also left Dawn and Solas looking a little like a matched set even as they kept away from each other so as not to spoil the surprise dance later.

The Rogues were mostly absent; only Alena and Varric remained visible while Cole and Sera were comfortably behind the scenes, and Varric’s smoky gray tunic carried their colour theme forward. Despite herself, Dawn had at first pictured Elvhen clothes in shades of green and brown, the natural tones favoured by the Dalish. But the Fade memories Solas had shared with her had revealed a culture of People that enjoyed rich, saturated hues. It was never about blending in for the Elvhen of Arlathan, and Dawn felt proud to see that the Inquisition was impossible to overlook representing
The Advisors were no exception to the team styling rule, though allowances were made. Cullen was a Warrior and his attire mimicked those of his type but bore his rank. Leliana wore the lightest shade of silvery gray out of the Rogues, and it forcibly reminded Dawn that the Nightingale was a candidate for the Sunburst Throne after all of this. And although technically Josephine was a Rogue, she was resplendent in burgundy just a bit lighter than the Bordeaux colour Dawn wore. Though Josephine’s dress was far more concealing it did nothing to disguise her beauty, something that Commander Cullen seemed all too aware of as he openly stared at the Ambassador until he caught Dawn grinning at him for it. It was hard for Dawn to remember that they were here because of war and murder until Grand Duke Gaspard de Chalons arrived to escort the Inquisitor inside as his guest.

Tradition called for the highest ranking to enter first, with each following person descending in importance. With the Inquisition, they had to be introduced in actual batches starting with the most noteworthy names. In the game it had just been the Inquisitor, her chosen trio and the Advisors, though the banter always did indicate that everyone got to attend. Now Madam de Fer was warmly welcomed home, and the people tittered over Cassandra’s many names. Iron Bull’s alien-ness over shone the disapproval garnered by Solas’ presence. Varric drew many whispers but Dorian was met with appreciative murmuring. Cole remained unseen, Sera was a Friend behind the scenes, and in the center were Alena and Blackwall, not openly together but so well suited to the other that it would take an idiot to not see it.

Dawn wasn’t ready for the intensity of being scrutinized by the Orlesian court; Bull could tell that the moment they met up with Gaspard Whatshisface. The man had made a pass at her in true Game etiquette, and Dawn had just stared at him until he’d cleared his throat and continued talking. And what in the shit was with that dress?

It was the fucking Elf’s fault somehow, he knew it. Solas was just too satisfied, eyes gleaming with possessive pride. There was no way Dawn knew what it looked like when she walked in that get up, how each sway of her hips made the ridiculously low panel covering the front between her legs look like it were about to slip lower. He’d helped train those muscles into her body, knew exactly how the hard work she’d done had shaped her, and still that dress begged him to look just a little closer. At least she was clearly unarmed so he didn’t have to worry about her getting up to any foolishness; he’d heard about her galloping off stunt.

Letting the Boss, Sera, the Kid, and himself do the investigating while Dawn stayed under everyone else’s watchful eyes was a good plan, but he had found out about the part where Dawn was to draw the attention so the Inquisitor could fade out. He didn’t like it, but saw the use of it so he remained paranoid and vigilant. And damn if that dress didn’t promise to keep all eyes on Dawn anyways; when she did decide to dance in it, it would be quite the tantalizing show.

Red had found a perch already, her face oddly relaxed and youthful; she’d been feeling homesick and this alleviated that. The Inquisition had her loyalty and duty, but her heart still liked to play the Game. As he walked around the crowds, Bull listened and watched. Ruffles had picked up a more delicate duplicate; younger sister, the artistic one if the aggressively fashion forward dress wasn’t misleading. Cullen looked like he was embattled by the urges to finally go steal Josephine away, and to start taking swings at the hands fondling his backside. Not that Bull could blame him; he’d dealt with Orlesians a nauseating amount as a mercenary. They either liked to treat him as if he were a dumb brute and Krem was the real brains of the Chargers, or like a strange creature to be whispered about and touched but never treated with respect. It was still better than how they
circled around the Commander as if he were an item on an auction block, or how they gravely avoided Solas in all his Elvhen Glory.

“Time to circle around to the garden side, there are trellises I want to climb and you’re going to be my distraction.” The Boss commanded in a low voice after doing an obligatory introduction lap. Part of the ruse tonight depended on Dawn’s strange story drawing attention off of the Inquisitor, but that’d only work if they stayed away from each other. As Alena’s designated muscle for the night that left Bull constantly watching Dawn to see where she was, and then positioning them as far away as possible; he tried not to feel like it was a reference to his life at the moment.

So Iron Bull walked alongside the Boss and slipped into a side garden area. His eye quickly scoped out the trellis leading up to balconies; it was, of course, out in the open. But he was a near seven foot tall horned Qunari wearing expertly tailored clothes; eyes turned to take him in and even Iron Bull couldn’t tell when Boss had pulled Stealth over herself and scampered off. He didn’t try and look for her either, instead Bull listened to whatever gossip his presence stirred up, ready to redirect if someone mentioned looking for the Inquisitor. Instead it felt like everyone was discussing Dawn’s dress and how aggressively it displayed her…everything. Time slowed to a brutal crawl as he endured that vacuous conversation in a hundred different forms.

And then Cadash was suddenly back by his side, her ever so slightly pinched mouth giving away unhappy news. “Even with Dawn’s heads up I failed to save all of the servants.” He heard her mutter in frustration. “Where I’m going next you’ll draw too much attention; go find Varric and stick with him until I need you again, and pass this on to Red.” She slipped a paper into his hand so smoothly even Bull was impressed, and then she swirled off in the crowd to go speak to some blue masked dowager.

He hated these types of jobs. Oh they paid well, and that hot cheese was usually entirely worth it, but the people involved drained him of his happy. Red looked like the exact opposite happened to her as he slid her Boss’ message. Though whatever internal conversation the Nightingale had to put such a sparkle in her eye was not one he wanted in on. His eye looked over the crowds around him critically, searching out specific people.

“You look about as impressed by all of this as I feel.” Varric smoothly met Bull as he halted at a railing.

Bull grunted and scanned the dance floor below, seeing the band getting into place. Music and dancing would offer greater chances to sneak around and maybe get all the proof they needed to end this quickly. Far too many people were exposed in this current plan and putting certain people at risk didn’t sit well with him.

“Oh this should be good.” Varric muttered, drawing Bull’s attention to him. “Just remember Tiny, you’ve got no one to blame for this but yourself.” The Dwarf cautioned and Bull frowned at his erstwhile friend.

“What the crap are you talking about Dwarf?” Bull grunted out as unfamiliar music started to play. Orlesians didn’t know on how to deviate from the traditions of the Game, something strange was going on. A more careful look revealed familiar faces on too many of the musicians; they were from Skyhold. Which meant that this must be part of the distraction plan involving Dawn, “How bad can it be?” he demanded and was not comforted when Varric started to laugh.

Everyone was at the railing now, the strange music a perfect lure for these perfumed idiots. And then Dawn, in that damnable dress, strode out onto the dance floor like an Arishok assumed the battlefield and with her walked the smug little shit Solas. He’d lost the strange onion cap he’d worn earlier and instead his bald head, and more importantly his pierced Elvhen ears, were prominently
displayed and glittering. Adding to the effect was their suspiciously well matched outfits. Cadash wouldn’t even need to use Stealth now; no one could tear their eyes from this little tableau for love or money. Despite the churning in his guts, Bull had to admire the ingenuity of the plan; it was distracting as shit.

Their dance started simply; Solas and Dawn faced each other, each stepped slightly towards the other but there was still space between their hips and chest. Their hands gripped each other and their arms were graceful in their bend. And Solas precisely leaned Dawn’s body away from his, her balance on one bared foot even as the movements remained languorous and graceful.

The music was gaining in intensity and pace, the marked rhythm of their bodies matching it. A tight turn was quickly snapped into an abrupt pause on pointe. The next moment they were tangled together in lunge before slowly rising back up. Now their embrace stayed close, chest and shoulder tight, hip and thigh familiar. Their faces would occasionally turn towards each other in an alarmingly intimate manner before snapping away, and when a graceful spin allowed Dawn to hike a leg around Solas’ hips, Bull could hear Varric laughing again.

Bull had trained with Dawn, he knew just how her body shifted as she moved away from a sword stroke or braced to absorb and deflect a shield bash. The sculpted muscle in her arms she’d built by wielding a weighted training sword and supporting a war shield. And for now her part of this dance was reminiscent of a battle field to him; the long slide of her leg was modeled after the sweep kick she’d use to bring a larger opponent down. Dawn’s movements were sharp and precise. Solas’ were possessive and sensual; no longer merely holding her hands to snap her into turns and dips but instead his hands slid down Dawn’s sides and controlled the spin of her body by guiding her hips.

Dawn was tantalizingly dipped back and then they returned to grasping hands together and Bull shot a look at Varric. “I’ve seen them practicing this and it’s always a little bit different.” His friend airily explained.

When Bull looked back, the dance seemed to have left the pretense of respectability behind entirely. Solas’ hands drifted from her shoulder to ribs, down hips and back up, and their faces were often in extremely close proximity. It was definitely not a battle any longer; instead it looked like complicated foreplay. And when Solas’ hand gripped the back of Dawn’s neck after catching her from a spin, Bull felt his jaw start to ache. Their bodies molded very closely together as the music built to a crescendo, one of Solas’ hands now on her sternum, and Bull had to consciously unclench his jaw or loose a tooth. The final dip of the dance matched the music; a sharp, almost predatory snap of movement that Dawn was quickly pulled upright from. They ended with their heads turned in close, arms tangled around each other, and then Dawn was laughing, a triumphant, celebratory sound.

“That definitely worked as a distraction.” Cadash gloated from Bull’s right side, clapping and whistling to join Dawn’s jubilation. The Inquisitor’s clear approval spurred others and soon it was all anyone wanted to talk about, Bull was glad when Varric and the Boss wandered off and drew the gossipers with them.

The little shit Solas came by to mutter, “Pawn to H4,” looking so pleased with his part despite the disapproving whispers following after him like a noxious perfume.

“Arishok to G6.” Bull growled back.

But the Elf just smiled with ease, sounding far too satisfied as he said, “Pawn to H5. Careful.”

Bull resisted the urge to try and question or pester his opponent, wondering why Solas was choosing now to pick up the game they’d stopped playing after Bull left the Qun. “Arishok to G5.”
The humour left the Elf’s face as he lost his mage at least.

“Queen to F3.” It should have felt good to hear the ease leave Solas’ voice as he countered but Bull felt annoyance more than anything else.

“Clever, almost trapped the Arishok. Ben-Hassrath to G8.” The compliment grated but Bull said it anyways. Half the fun of this game was in messing with the little asshole’s head anyways.

“Mage takes pawn, threatens queen.” If that didn’t sound like a promise or a threat Bull didn’t know what did, yet his face revealed none of his thoughts and he knew it.

“Arishok to F6.” Bull countered the move quickly, half his attention split onto watching the dance floor below them and those swirling upon it.

“Knight to C3. You’ve developed nothing but your Queen.” Solas sounded surprised as he reviewed the moves in his head.

Bull would have teased Solas about getting cocky, he had already lost a Tamassran, and yet he held his commentary behind his teeth and smiled. “Tamassran to C5.”

Now it was Solas looking thoughtful, his face twisted in obvious focus but Bull was watching his eyes. The body was good at lying; the way Solas held his shoulders slumped and bowed fooled most. But Bull never believed it because Solas’ eyes told the lie. He was too proud, too arrogantly confident to be as untested as he wanted them to believe. “I will need to consider.” The Elf finally admitted but it didn’t feel like a victory.

By the time the first night of dancing had wrapped up, Iron Bull had a migraine so bad he’d actually lost his appetite and was grateful when they left the Winter Palace.

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Dawn had arranged with a few friends to fill her dance card after Solas, once finished the ‘secret dance’ she spun around with Dorian, Varric, Cassandra, and even Blackwall. Though Dawn had settled the bad blood between herself and Cullen she didn’t pressure him to dance, and she knew better than to ask Iron Bull. Not only were they still skirting around the injuries and anger they’d caused each other, Dawn still didn’t trust herself to put hands on him outside of training. And the last dance of the night was deliberately saved for her to share with Alena; the sight of the Harbinger and the Herald was enough to once again bring all eyes onto the dance floor even if it was standard Orlesian choreography.

What Dawn hadn’t counted on was Alena sharing her evening’s exploits while they danced, and it was remarkably difficult to keep a straight face as her friend described exactly how the Chevalier looked while tied to Celene’s bed; naked. And the commentary Alena had dropped about the Chevalier’s assets left Dawn teary eyed as she swallowed her giggles, not wanting to know what her face was saying to anyone watching at the moment.

She left the dance floor feeling that overall the first night had been a triumphant success. Even if there were going to be inevitable rumours about herself and Solas, the dress and dance guaranteed that, she didn’t care. That was only reinforced when Josephine had admitted that the reputation Orlais had for the Harbinger, no matter what they decided on believing, would actually only work towards helping the Inquisition. Either she was a strange heathen that only they were able to contain or she was an otherworldly creature that gave herself to them; either way Alena would come out looking grand.
“Ena’vun, there is someone that would like to speak with you.” Solas was suddenly at her side again. Even if the dancing was finished for the evening it seemed that the party only stopped once everyone was forcibly removed; crowds remained gathered and chattering even as the major moon itself was setting.

Dawn turned to face the small Elvhen lady Solas brought to present to her. “Hello, I’m Dawn.” She offered her hand automatically, a lifetime in First World conditions having trained certain habits firmly.

“I am Mahalla.” The Elvhen lady introduced herself, looking surprised to be offered a polite introduction instead of being treated like the servant she was dressed as.

“She is one of those that your warnings saved tonight Ena’vun.” Solas kept his words vague, not wanting to give away Inquisition secrets but Dawn still understood his meaning.

“Oh my god, I’m so glad to see you alive.” Dawn felt a big grin spreading across her face and gave in to the urge to just hug the shorter woman. In her peripheral vision she could see Solas looking pleased but let him have his moment.

Mahalla looked overwhelmed to not only be speaking to the Harbinger for the Inquisition, an Offworlder, but to have her being so affectionately excited to see her alive. “My Lady, there are others… the servants that have heard about the warning. They wanted to thank you too.”

Dawn’s face hurt from all the smiling. “They don’t have to Mahalla, I’m just really glad that you made it through. Though there are still two more nights so please continue to be careful.”

Mahalla just shook her head, tears in her eyes suddenly. “You save us and don’t even require our thanks; you truly aren’t of this world my Lady.”

Dawn shot Solas a panicked look, not at all knowing how to handle someone being effusive at her for simply helping warn those that could do something about it. “I’m nothing special Mahalla, just a girl from the wrong side of an Eluvian.”

“Now that is a lie Ena’vun.” Solas chided her and she gave him an exasperated look as Mahalla took a moment, overcome with emotions. Lacking any other way to help, Dawn grasped Mahalla’s hands to offer comfort.

“If you think it’ll help your friends, take me to them please. No more tears, not unless they’re happy ones ok?” Dawn pleaded at the tiny lady in front of her; even Merrill was heftier than Mahalla was.

“Th-they will not be…believe that you aren’t like those others. Not unless they can see you for themselves.” Mahalla was quiet in her speech, and Dawn had only just realized that Solas had carefully guided them into an empty corner for their discussion, away from interference.

“Is it alright if I bring Solas along with me?” Dawn had to ask; fairly certain running off alone with strangers would be a bad idea.

“Of course my Lady, please bring your falon’saota.” Mahalla seemed eager and whatever word she used made Solas nearly choke. Dawn knew one of those words but she’d have to clarify with Solas later why he looked startled that she’d used it, but with Mahalla now eagerly pulling her along by the hand she could only wildly grasp for Solas’ sleeve to drag him along too.

The Winter Palace was a labyrinth of passages that even the game hadn’t gotten right. As bad as she’d thought it’d been in the game to run around finding things, being there in person was so
much more exciting. And exhausting.

Out of the immediate area filled with drunken, loud nobles Dawn realized that Halamshiral was mostly populated by Elven people, though she remembered that there was no Alienage here at least. Not that living in perpetual servitude was any better. “One of these days I’m going to have to do something about that.” Dawn muttered to herself, the curious look Solas shot her answered with a shake of her head. That was a whole other series of battles to be fought; first she had to help insure that there was a world still left.

Mahalla led them both into the less pristine levels of the palace, Dawn’s fancy dress garnering her as many stares now as Solas’ ears had while they danced. She felt him grip her hand in comfort, seeming to be aware of how unsure Dawn was of what was coming next. He’d been the one to bring Mahalla to her after all.

Their guide stopped in front of a heavy door that was doing a damn good job of containing the boisterous noise coming from inside but there was only so much stone, wood, and metal could do for soundproofing. “It seems like the real party is in here.” Dawn teased softly with a smile to cover her nerves.

“We lost Panelan tonight; he decided to try and confront those that were trying to kill us, but the rest of us, we live because of you.” Mahalla’s words made Dawn freeze to the spot.

“Take a breath and step in Ena’vun; they are waiting to thank you.” Solas was standing close behind her, words softly whispered so that only she heard them.

“It should be the Inquisitor they’re thanking, not me.” Dawn shot back in her panic even as Mahalla swung the door open and led Dawn and Solas in.

At first the noise and movement overwhelmed Dawn’s senses, leaving her ready to run if she had to but Solas just stood behind her, letting her know she at least knew one person in the room. And then someone noticed the new arrivals and the music and talking all cut off into horrid silence as they stared at her.

“This is the Harbinger that sent word and saved us.” Mahalla gushed into the silence and if Solas hadn’t been a physical barrier at her back, Dawn would have a made a run for it. In the game it had always seemed like only two or three servants were killed; there were easily a dozen people in the room now though, and some of them were children. Dawn had found it easier to dance in front of a room full of snooty nobles; having people stare at her as if she was something special just for doing the right thing was too much.

“Steady on Lethallan.” Solas spoke softly but in the quiet room others heard him too.

Dawn could hear whispers but no actual words, and her hammering heartbeat nearly drowned out even that. She was locked in place, unable to retreat but unsure how to move forwards. Luckily for her children were direct creatures regardless of culture or worldly upbringing. A little boy, no more than four, ran up out of the crowd and Dawn saw who must be his father make a belated snatch for him.

“My Bae says you’re not a princess and I can’t ask you to dance.” The little boy pouted.

She didn’t even think about it, Dawn simply knelt down so they’d be at the same eye level. “Well I’m not a princess, though in a dress like this I feel like one. Solas designed it for me and we danced earlier but with so many smelly people around I’m sure you couldn’t get to see it. If you’d like I would love to dance with you.” She offered him her hand just like she had to Dorian and the
boy grinned at her, revealing a gap in his smile.

“See Bae?” he called out to an absolutely appalled looking man.

Dawn fought the urge to freeze up again as she realized that everyone was still staring but she’d made the little boy a promise. “Josephine says it’s only polite that I know the name of my dance partner, I’m Dawn.” She introduced herself as the boy took her hand.

“Felassan.” He answered brightly with an adorably untrained bow and Dawn was very glad Solas was behind her and thus unable to see her face.

“Well then Felassan, shall we dance?” Dawn asked even as she stood up, scooping him up on her shield arm easily.

“Yes!” Felassan cried out and Dawn ignored everyone else watching and danced with him as she would have if her own child had asked.

There didn’t need to be music to a song her heart already knew so it was easy to sing Once Upon a Dream, her earlier aches and exhaustion forgotten. Felessan’s eyes went impossibly large and he looked utterly entranced before she even finished the first refrain.

And because she liked to show off just a little, Dawn tried the main phrase in her broken Elvhen; “Arelasa ma, arvenemima melahn’an era.”

But that was the extent of her ability to translate through the song thus far; she had to switch back to Common for the rest. The waltz still completely captivated Felassan up until she finished singing and dancing with him.

“You gotta be a princess from the story.” He insisted vehemently and Dawn grinned as she put him down to curtsy.

“Not even hardly little arrow.” She denied and he took off to tell his dad about dancing with her as if every eyeball in the room hadn’t been watching. And suddenly Dawn felt very awkward again because now they definitely didn’t know what to make of her.

“Ena’vun…” Solas’ voice sounded strange and she turned in surprise, not expecting her song to affect her friend so strongly. But then again if someone suddenly sang in English around her she’d probably be wrecked and not just a little emotional.

“I’ve wanted to translate that song since Cedric started teaching me Elvhen. It makes me think of dreamers walking the Fade.” If she squinted real hard that even looked like the truth from a certain angle but there was no way Dawn was telling Solas that he fit the requirements to be Sleeping Beauty, even if he wouldn’t get the reference. And then she thought about the words she’d chosen more carefully and realized why it had gotten to him so strongly, “Arelasa ma Solas.” She didn’t even think about not saying it.

He hugged her, face buried into her shoulder and she felt a few drops of moisture. It was only fair, he’d held her when it’d been her heart breaking; Dawn had just never expected to make Fen’Harel cry with a song, especially in front of witnesses. She had no clue how to give him privacy for this moment but a heartbeat later and Solas loosened his embrace and stepped back, looking mostly composed.

“My apologies Ena’vun.” His voice was even back to its usual cadences.

“Really Old Wolf, going to get shy on me now?” Dawn couldn’t help but try and ease the emotions
It worked and he smiled. “When I was summoned into the Chantry War Room to try and help translate for you all those months ago it never occurred to me that I was meeting a perpetual surprise, but this is beyond your usual antics Ena’vun.”

“I’m fairly certain you’re the one that brought out Mir Da’len Somniar.” Dawn indignantly defended and Solas actually laughed. Dawn smiled and turned away to address the actual people she’d been brought to meet. “Hello. I’m Dawn, this is Solas; we’re with the Inquisitor, short lady with a funny looking glow to her hand.” Her awkward attempt to mimic Hawke’s humour at least drew another chuckle out of Solas.

“Are you really from another world?” this time it was a young woman brave enough to speak up.

“Yes I am, but there’s a lot of information I will not talk about.” She shrugged, not wanting to lie to them about that.

“Why’d someone like you decide to help them’s like us?” she demanded, suspicious and angry. Dawn wondered if maybe she found a new Red Jenny for Sera.

“Because it was the right thing to do.” Dawn didn’t hesitate to answer.

“But you’re a shemlen.” The woman didn’t bother saying more than that.

“That’s an accident of birth I have absolutely no control over.” Dawn shrugged, not having the ability to explain how differently she viewed their world.

Her confrontational interviewer went quiet, face distrustful but Dawn didn’t press. The Elvhen population of Halamshiral had been poorly treated even without the typical Alienage conditions; one good deed wouldn’t undo all of that. “I’m not asking for anything in return for this, you don’t have to worry about me holding anything over you.” Dawn decided to state it clearly.

“That’s not what we believe at all!” Mahalla was quick to interject, though Dawn still saw suspicion in some of the looks directed her way. The earnest Elvhen woman’s exuberant gratitude was in the minority, though Dawn was certain they were all glad to be alive; probably just sick and tired of having to fight to keep it that way.

“It’s alright Mahalla; I’ve been through a situation where someone’s kindness had a cost to it. I’m not about to do that to anyone else but none of you know me, why should you trust me?” she shrugged. “I’m just glad you’re all alive. So please, go back to enjoying your night. There are still bad people in Halamshiral though, please be careful.”

She smiled and turned to see Solas carefully waiting to escort her back to the main area. He looked like the earlier emotions had never happened at all and she envied that ability. She always looked like someone had slapped her in the face with a wet towel if she so much as sniffled too much.

“Are you one of those bad people, Harbinger for the Inquisition?” the same young woman called out and Dawn looked over at her.

“I’m trying not to be, but I’ve yet been put into a situation where I have to be.” Dawn answered honestly. “As a friend once told me; we all have our lines in the sand, it’s up to us how to react once they’re crossed.” She only slightly misquoted Hawke.

She felt slightly less joyful than when they’d left the main party earlier, but Dawn refused to let the encounter get her down. She did good things because that’s what she believed in doing, trust would
develop when she had consistently shown that in her actions. She just wished that it wasn’t such a surprise to the Elvhen of Orlais that a shemlen would want to help them.

“It has been a remarkable evening Ena’vun.” Solas carefully described.

“I’m going to sleep like the dead.” Dawn agreed. “Oh, before I forget, what does falon’saota mean? I know falon means friend but saota isn’t one I’m familiar with.”

And she blinked in shock as Solas’ ear tips turned a brilliant scarlet. “It refers to the concept of one out of two, alike to the term bond mate or husband and wife.” He explained, clearing his throat a little first.

Dawn took a moment to consider the effect of their matching outfits, physical comfort levels, and his reaction to her singing in Elvhen would have had on the Halamshiral Elvhen, and realized it was a pretty safe guess for them to have made. It was an entirely wrong guess, but not for the standard reasons. “Well at least they were respectful enough to think we were married; all the human Orlesians think you’re my illicit lover.” She didn’t worry about it for her own sake, but she might have to for his. “If it bothers you, we can correct them.” She offered, not wanting to ruin his chances for an Elvhen romantic partner.

“It is no matter Ena’vun, I am unlikely to return to Halamshiral for some time.” His answer wasn’t technically a lie, and Dawn smiled lightly to cover her awareness of that fact.

They walked in comfortable silence back to the still enduring party. Alena frowned, she seemed to have been looking for one or both of them, and as she wandered closer Solas slipped away with a simple kiss to the back of Dawn’s hand as farewell.

“Where’d you two get off to? Disappearing like that together isn’t going to help disperse any rumours Sweetheart.” Alena wasn’t angry, just concerned.

“Leliana nearly asked me to push the line even more, wanting the gossip about me to overshadow any curiosity over your whereabouts tonight.” Dawn pointed out, realizing that the Inquisition was gathering to leave for the night.

“Josie talked her out of it I bet.” Alena grinned.

“I believe you’re right Inquisitor.” Dawn agreed with a wink.

“Bleh, can no one else call me that for the rest of the night?” she grumbled in disgust.

“Absolutely. But I’m fairly certain the end of the night was two hours ago.” Dawn had to point out.

“Ugh.” Alena’s grunt sounded an awful lot like Cassandra’s usual with an eye roll, and Dawn laughed.

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A hot bath didn’t help his head settle any but it took away the sweat and the feeling of discomfort on him. Orlesian bathhouses were slightly less decadent than Tevinter ones, though not close enough if Dorian’s bitching were anything to go by, but they were opulent. Much like the hot pools in the bowels of Skyhold, these were set up for casual lounging to soak up the heat. But here there were cooler baths as well, and one so piping hot that only Bull seemed able to tolerate it.

“So that was how they danced in Arlathan?” Dorian demanded of Dawn in lazy ease.
“According to Solas’ Fade memories. That dance would have been the sexiest waltz-tango combination ever in my world, though it wasn’t a perfect translation for that kind of dancing either.” Dawn explained but Chuckles wasn’t here to add in his own bits or opinion.

Everyone was taking shifts in the bathhouse as there wasn’t enough room to accommodate them all at once. They were at Gaspard’s Winter Manor; it was only slightly smaller than his Summer Manor apparently, and he was graciously staying there while the Inquisition occupied this one. Currently Iron Bull shared the baths with Dorian, Sera and Dawn. Alena and Blackwall had retreated to their private room without commentary, Cullen had offered Josephine, Leliana, Vivienne, and Cassandra privacy by waiting to share with Solas, and Varric, and no one knew if the Kid even needed to bathe.

“How often you two practice all that touchy swirly shite?” Sera demanded in blunt curiosity. “I’m surprised Elvhen Glory himself could dance like that with such a stick up his arse, but you was fine as tits in that dress Dawn.”

“Thanks.” Dawn’s humour coloured her single word response. “We practiced constantly but I never did get all the moves down correctly. Thankfully no one watching would have a single clue about that though.” Her smile was self-deprecating. “I grew up with music and dancing as part of my life, even if it was never this kind.”

“What’d you do’n marry a deaf person for then?” Sera demanded, but despite her crass words it wasn’t meant unkindly. Bull still saw the Tevinter flinch at the archer’s directness though.

“Well that was certainly delicate. Are you even aware of what you’re going to say before you speak or does it come as much of a surprise to you as it does to us?” Dorian demanded of her while Bull stayed silent.

Dawn was still staring off at nothing, memories gentle to her for a change it seemed. “Larry once signed that he could ‘hear’ the music in the way it made me move. That the rhythm and beat were easy to feel, but it was the joy on my face that let him see the music, not just reading the words from my lips.”

“Damn fine sounding fellow.” Dorian complimented easily.

“Pretty words for a guy that didn’t talk.” Sera’s words were probably also supposed to be complimentary.

“He was good, but he would have hated it here; this world has none of his favourite things. I’ve healed enough to say I miss him but this isn’t the world for him.” She admitted without guilt or guile.

“But did you miss dancing?” Sera seemed more interested in the moment than the past.

Dawn laughed lightly as she got out of the baths. “Yes, I really missed getting all dressed up and going out dancing with my friends.”

“Shoving his Elvhen Glory in everyone’s face like that must have made his Baldy-ness feel great.” Sera ribbed.

Dawn’s smile gained a vicious edge to it that Bull hadn’t expected. “I liked the idea of making an entirely racist Court watch, admire, and be completely overwhelmed by the very culture they try to erase. So asking Solas to dance in an Elvhen style with me was fairly easy.” Dawn casually stated even as she dried off from her bath.
“Was it your idea to insinuate that you’re sexually intimate with an Elvhen mage?” Dorian demanded and Bull wondered at the man’s slightly strangled tone of voice; the last he had checked the Altus was getting cozy with the Dalish First Dawn had come to Haven with.

Instead of being insulted, Dawn laughed at her friend’s outburst. “Oh Dorian, darling; my ability to be bothered about other people’s opinions on my lovers died a long time ago. After a dance like that people were going to assume I was intimate with my partner regardless of who I danced with. It was just a dance; I already know Solas is only attracted to Elvhen ladies.” She shrugged. “What you saw was a show put on to keep all eyes on us, and judging from your reaction it was entirely successful.”

“So you don’t care about how this will set a reputation for you?” Dorian sounded almost impressed and Bull realized the man must be considering the beating his own reputation was going to take once his relationship with Cedric became publicly known; Bull was amused to realize that it wasn’t going to stop the glittering ‘Vint at all. Good for him.

“The servants all think she’s Queen of fancy dress now,” Sera interrupted. “That warning of hers saved lives, even if one of them still got slit open. And lots of them Elfy types saw what she did tonight as ‘honoring their history’. The archer didn’t bother taking the scorn out of her voice though Dawn had an amused smile on her face.

“We’ll see tomorrow just what consequences today earned. I’m going to bed, goodnight.” Dawn bade as she left.

“You’re awfully quiet.” Dorian turned his attention to Bull now.

“Varric said that Bull got quite the eyeful of that dance tonight.” Sera cackled at her pun. “Saw you take her a couple of turns around the floor too Sparkler. You’re both pretty, though you try harder.”

“Thank you. Unlike you slovenly Fereldens, I appreciate the effort it takes to look this good.” Dorian brushed off her criticism. “Dawn wanted to dance with all of us tonight, all of her friends.” The mage didn’t even bother to try and conceal his side eye at Bull. “But with Cole serving as hidden body guard and yourself as Red Jenny, she knew it wasn’t going to happen. And I’m sure she was convinced that not everyone would want to dance with her even if she asked.”

“Have a go at getting my hands on her in a dress like that? Kasaanda would kill me, but yes please!” Sera whistled and made a crude gesture. “Can’t say as I blame Baldy for taking the opportunity for that, but does she really not see?” Sera’s incredulity only made Bull amused, the smug little shit was playing a game he’d already lost it seemed.

“Dawn’s world story has quite the interesting array of information, though occasionally some of it has proved to be unreliable.” Dorian explained and Bull remembered seeing Dorian and Cedric sitting with Dawn on many occasions. “She is quite a graceful dance partner, though she instinctively leads. I feel honored that she felt she could share that with me tonight.” The mage laid it on thick as he tried to bring them back to the point he was making, as if Bull hadn’t already figured out what Dorian was doing. That boy had better learn to not play with fire unless he wanted to get burned, but the Warrior in Bull refused to leave the mage and the rogue on their own in enemy territory so he ignored the Tevinter instead of rising to the bait.

“Do you reckon she’s got another showy dress for tomorrow?” Sera idly wondered, not at all caring about Dorian’s obtuse tirade against Bull.

“Hessian have mercy, I hope not.” The Altus swore. “Tomorrow all the Families are going to want to dance with her. I bet you both a bottle of Tevinter’s best that Lady Montilyet is here first
thing in the morning with a full dance card for her. It’s in the Inquisition’s best interest; she has everyone’s attention despite the Herald’s presence and others will have picked up on that too.” He warned.

“Oiy, the high and mighty types are going to have their hands all over her places.” Sera made a disgusted face at the idea.

Bull never did get rid of that headache before he staggered off to sleep, and something told him that tomorrow was going to be another headache inducing day.

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**Wicked Hearts**

The morning of the second day brought its own brand of insanity to Alena’s life almost before the sun was up. Blackwall was brushing her hair gently, braiding it up for her even though she could do it twice as fast herself, and the Nightingale strode into their bedroom without knocking.

“Slight complication; it seems someone took yesterday’s distraction as tremendous insult. There’s a contract out on Dawn’s life.” The spymaster wasted no time to inform the Inquisitor.

“Good luck trying to talk her into staying behind, I would like to see that fight.” Blackwall gave a wealth of warning in a simple seeming sentence. No one had to reference the little incident Dawn had created during their trip to Orlais the last time it was implied she couldn’t determine her own freedom of movement.

“How much does it change our plans?” Alena remained pragmatic. Her lover was right; Dawn would not take it well if they tried to hide her away.

“The Commander and Josephine already know no one else does yet though.” The Nightingale started. “We’ve already been approached with invitations for both you and Dawn to dance at tonight’s Ball. Absenting the Harbinger would do more harm than good at this time; we need her present or risk appearing weak.” the Bard warned.

“So tell Dawn and a few key others to keep them on the lookout for trouble, and let her continue to play the role of distraction.” Blackwall suggested into the silence.

“So who do we tell?” Alena nodded to his suggestion; it was the most practical course to take.

“Iron Bull would be a good one to keep an eye out for trouble.” Blackwall suggested with a trace of malicious humour in his voice.

“You should have seen him standing there watching her dance with Solas,” Leliana’s voice also held approval. “That dance was very distracting.”

“Cole could be really useful here.” Alena added in, redirecting back to the point.

“Sera’s too unreliable, and love him but Varric might be a bit showy.” Blackwall conceded.

“We should leave Madam de Fer and the Tevinter Altus out of it.” Leliana suggested but seemed willing to let someone argue otherwise; no one did.

“I say we tell Solas too; they may try to target him also.” Alena decided as the thought occurred to her.
“As you wish Inquisitor.” Leliana bowed her head and departed.

“Well I think this is going to go about as smoothly as any of our plans do love.” Blackwall teased as he finished her hair finally. “Do you think it was really her dancing with Solas that resulted in this?” he doubted.

“I think having her existence confirmed and literally here in the flesh was too big of an opportunity to pass up.” Alena explained. She knew the process well, though she also knew that a properly talented assassin could get through despite all her experience and all their caution. Especially since the Inquisition was already out of place to deal with an entirely separate assassination plot.

“We’ll keep her safe love.” Blackwall promised, reading the concern off of Alena despite her silence. He wrapped his scarred, chiseled arms around her and hugged her tightly. “I won’t lose you, and we’ll fight to keep her safe too. Anyone who expects anything less is in for a big surprise.”

Alena laughed at his dire enthusiasm and tilted her head so she could kiss his cheek. “I love you. Thank you.” She spoke into his magnificent beard. His distinguished silver streaks gleamed.

“Charm a man into forgetting his duties with talk like that.” Blackwall teased and gave her a kiss back. “I love you too; now let’s go save the world.”

“For the third time this week.” Alena joked. She didn’t want to be in Orlais. She especially didn’t want to be in Orlais, at Halamshiral, dealing with high level politics and a pair of assassins too many. At least she got to dress up pretty for all of this. Yesterday’s dress had held up surprisingly well and she expected that tonight’s would be no different; though she was only supposed to be dancing with dignitaries as opposed to sleuthing.

Tonight’s dress was a soft, velvety copper dress that was made from the traditionally stiff fabrics popular with the Deshyr. The Inquisition was wearing clothing inspired by her own people tonight and Alena felt astoundingly regal. Her sleeveless copper dress was heavily jeweled and embroidered with a gold stylized Cadash Thaig Crest in the bust while the rest of the lines followed the bold architecture that held the deep roads intact centuries later. Blackwall looked down right edible in his Dwarven inspired bronze coloured suit. Gone were the flowing layers from yesterday’s style and in their place were properly buttoned, stiff tunics that only served to emphasize the man’s indomitable strength. They needed to get moving on saving the world so she could hurry back here to peel him out of his clothes.

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Dawn heard Alena just downright ugly laugh when the Inquisitor saw her in the Dwarven inspired gown designed for the night. She had off the shoulder sleeves that went all the way to fingertip even as the train touched on the floor behind her. The dress was the same copper as Alena’s, and the same gold for embroidery, but the dresses couldn’t be more different if they tried. While Alena’s demure hem helped disguise the presence of inevitable weapons, Dawn’s dress had a high front slit. The jewels and embroidery added to that sense of the dress being able to open all the way up the front with the low bust reaching down to the high front slit, and yet she was far more modestly covered than yesterday. Lacking a Thaig to represent, Dawn’s dress was instead decorated with the filigree and geometry of Dwarven designs, no less stunning for its simplicity.

“Oh Paragons and dusters, we’re not even in the realm of subtle with this are we?” Alena grinned up at Dawn, and executed a perfect spin to show off her own gown.

“I have no idea what you’re implying.” she batted her eyelashes innocently.
And then Dawn had to fight to keep from staring as she caught sight of Iron Bull in the bronze all the Warriors were wearing tonight. His suit had the structure of the old military uniforms from earth, back when half the battle was being more fabulous than your opponent, and the copper sash across his body only served to emphasize how much broader he was than the standard human. The mages lacked the sash, a fact that was probably for the best considering how slender the Inquisition Companion mages were. They made up for it with the golden hued attire selected for them tonight though; Solas’ piercings were swapped out from yesterday’s silver to beaten gold but it was Vivienne that looked truly otherworldly.

Dawn forced her attention back onto the crowd around them, trying not to let it show on her face that she was looking for an assassin with her name as a job. Lady Josephine had given Dawn an apologetic smile and a full dance card for tonight, and then told Dawn to anticipate a murder plot with her as the scheduled victim. That had taken a moment for Dawn to properly digest to say the least. And she was glad that Celine and Alena would share a dance to start the night, before she was expected to do anything, but after that Dawn was expected on the dance floor from start to finish with very few breaks anticipated. And even worse, not many friendly or familiar names on the dance card either.

“Breathe.” Dawn whispered to herself jokingly, bracing herself for a lot more dancing than yesterday. It was not a fun thought though, because this time she wasn’t dancing with her friends.

Gaspard of the grabby hands claimed her first dance of the night; Josephine explained that this was a big honor to her. What that meant was that Dawn couldn’t simply pry his hand off of her ass and slap him in the face like she wanted to. Despite being the Harbinger, Dawn was still too low ranking for Empress Celene to bother dancing with but Florianne had insisted that she have a turn. Dawn tried not to let the homicidally inclined Florianne know how much she detested that dance.

After that Dawn was danced with, bade farewell, introduced to her next dance card name via Josephine, and then danced with again in an endless cycle. Everyone wanted to try and pump her for information; several had made it clear that they’d like to try and pump her for other purposes too. She was allowed to tell off none of them, that wasn’t part of the Game.

Finally the band halted for a breather and Dawn escaped the floor to gulp down water cleverly served in champagne flutes. Sera had been the brains behind that suggestion, and the erratic archer had found a few trusted types to keep Dawn supplied.

“Enjoying your night?” It was Commander Cullen that came to check on her this time, probably as a way to escape his own nightmare of admirers. The bronze he wore as a Warrior suited him and the gold buttons were a near match for the colour of his eyes, and Dawn knew that the Court was already in love with him.

“I’m going to need to bathe in dragon fire after this to ever feel clean again.” Dawn said with a brilliant smile that belied her words.

Cullen’s surprised laugh drew interested glances and he flushed under the added attention. “Maker do I understand that feeling. I’ve never had to wonder whose hand is on my ass quite so frequently.” He confided honestly.

Dawn nodded and walked beside her escort for a moment. They had come to an understanding where they respected each other; an uneasy friendship was starting to grow where there used to just be animosity. “One of my dance partners found no irony in the fact that he criticized my choice of dress yesterday for being ‘too immodest’ while he had his hand firmly patting my ass.” Dawn commiserated.
Lady Montilyet swirled closer in a stunning gold dress that knocked the attention span right out of the Commander, and handed Dawn a preselected plate of nibbles. The Ambassador and the Commander were shyly not looking at each other while they tried to stare at the other and Dawn had to keep her commentary to herself. Surprisingly, she succeeded. Probably not due to her efforts so much as the fact that she was too busy stuffing food and water into her gob to talk. And when she had cleared both plate and glass, she had to give Josephine the rundown of the people she’d danced with. Any little slip of news could prove advantageous, even the propositions offered leverage.

But before Josephine could tell Dawn her next dance partner’s name, Dawn decided that this time she was interfering with events she saw happening. “Lady Montilyet, would you mind giving me a moment to have a word with the Commander, please?” she asked and quickly tugged the surprised Commander away a few steps.

“Is something amiss?” Cullen sounded confused instead of concerned at least.

“Not yet, but I need you to be bold Cullen; go ask Josephine to dance.” She insisted.

“I want to,” his answer didn’t surprise her, “but I don’t want the whole Orlesian Court watching when I do.” He did a good job of concealing the distress his voice expressed.

Dawn blinked for a moment; Josephine and Cullen were both pretty reserved people in the public eye. “Oh Cullen, go ask her to dance; I’ll give you the distraction you need.” He gave her a slightly concerned look at that but to her surprise he then nodded and walked past her to do just that.

She had about thirty seconds to actually decide what the hell she was doing, and then she set her shoulders back, walked to the railing, and started to sing. “Heart beats fast, colours and promises… How to be brave, how can I love when I’m afraid to fall…”

Ironically being the center of attention likely also made her less at risk for assassination; simply because it was too risky to Stealth target someone with that many eyes watching. Even as good as Alena was, Dawn knew her friend couldn’t work Stealth with people staring at her. And Dawn needed to find out who the conductor was after this because they were brilliant; bringing in musical accompaniment after very little hesitation.

It must have made quite the spectacle; an Offworlder dressed like the Rogues whose clothing was inspired by the Dwarves, singing a song in Common from a world they would never know. Thanks to the careful coils and pins yesterday, today her hair flowed and twisted with curls and waves that Dawn had been informed to leave free flowing, though she had pinned it back enough to keep it off of her face and out of her eyes. It was a sweaty mess if anyone dared touch it, but from a distance it still looked damn good. The copper of the dress played up the flush she already had thanks to the heat but Dawn was hoping that maybe to the aesthetic conscious Court she looked glowing instead of sweltering.

And as everyone was looking at her as she finished singing, she was the only one to see Cullen and Josephine finally kiss. It was a struggle not to fist pump the air in triumph but when the audience watching her started to clap she let herself grin broadly. She let Cullen and Josie have another moment before walking through the ring of watchers still looking at her, and towards the Ambassador and the Commander.

Josephine straight up hugged her tightly as they came towards her in turn. “Thank you.” She breathed softly to Dawn in the embrace.

“I’m happy for you.” Dawn whispered back.
“That was quite the distraction, Harbinger.” Cullen teased lightly, his eyes on Josie and a smile stuck on his face.

“Well that was the last trick I had up my sleeve.” Dawn shrugged it off. “Guess I have to go back to dancing with Orlesians now.”

“Yes, well, we are still here in support of the Inquisitor.” Josephine was composed once again.

“The show must go on.” Dawn smiled to take out any implied complaint and followed the Ambassador over to her next dance partner.

The night continued on that vein, a perfectly executed routine that covered all the necessities without being too difficult; at least for most of the night. When the band called the final break, they announced that the next set would be the last and Dawn was too tired to be excited by the chance to rest. Her shoulders and back ached, her thighs were sore, and Dawn was actually certain at least one foot was bleeding. Since training with Iron Bull and Hawke Dawn’s physical endurance was vastly improved, but she still wasn’t prepared for dancing all night in high heels. Add to the fact that the longer she danced the warmer she ended up feeling and Dawn was ready to go drown in a cold bath. The hair on the back of her neck was a disgusting snarl that would take some struggle to undo.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” Dawn politely refocused on her latest dance partner. They’d mumbled something and Dawn was supposed to be paying attention. The masked man was politely leading her out to fresher air on a balcony, something she’d seen more and more people doing after each dancing set.

“I said that you are far more charming than I usually am forced to deal with, and it’s a shame that circumstances aren’t different.” Another pass then, added to the long mental tally.

“I appreciate the compliment, and can only say that circumstances are what they are.” Dawn shrugged, not wanting to soothe another ego after rejection.

“Exactly.” Her dance partner sounded pleased at her answer, and it was only then that Dawn noticed the glint of a dagger in his hand.

The would-be assassin thrust his blade forward, aiming for a vicious gut wound. Half trained instinct had Dawn throwing herself backwards, tucking her legs in when her hip hit the railing to deliberately roll over the edge. It saved her life but dumped Dawn a floor down into manicured flora. Branches snapped under Dawn’s weight, scratching and tearing at her but helping to absorb some of the impact at least.

“Shit!” Dawn cursed, knowing that she was unlikely to be heard from anyone inside and scrambling to move before her attacker came after her. ‘COLE!’ Dawn mentally screamed for help even and she heard her not so gracious dance partner scramble down to finish the job.

“Not good.” Dawn whined as she tore free of the hedge and ran as fast as she could to get around a corner or something. Her dress looked stiff and structured but it would do jack shit to stop a blade, it hadn’t even held up in a fight against unreasonably large thorns. And she had ditched the heels because FUCK THAT. ‘Cole, I need help please!’ she panted for breath even as she bolted around a garden courtyard that was, in all honesty, a hedge maze for some asshole’s pleasure.

When Dawn stumbled into the center of the maze and realized that there was no way out, she knew she had to try and fight. In a fancy dress that provided no protection and while armed with her bare fists. She crouched by the side of the hedge, out of line of sight and waited for him to run in after
her. Her goal was to tackle him and try to beat the knife out of his hand before he could skewer her with it. It wasn’t a brilliant plan but adrenaline was doing something ungodly to her higher reasoning, and it wasn’t like she had any better choices available.

The garrote wire snapped over her neck and it was only hard earned reflex that let Dawn wrap her fingers around it before her assassin could kill her with it. The wire was something hideously strong, digging in as if flesh offered no resistance. Blood slicked in a hot wash over her skin and Dawn felt him tighten the garrote, willing to take the time to strangle her to death even with her fingers wrapped around the wire. Dawn never expected that her blood could burn so hotly, or smell so strongly copper. She wanted to gag, a strange sensation of vomit trapped in her throat even as her heart pounded loudly. When a high pitched whine started in her ears, Dawn’s free hand scrabbled at his face, gouging her thumb back into his eye.

The pressure around her neck slackened slightly as her killer grunted in pain, flinching away. Dawn collapsed forwards, gagging for air and coughing around the overwhelming pressure in her throat. While her body refused to do anything but dig the garrote out of her flesh and try to breathe, the assassin had already pulled his knife again and prepared to end her. Dawn flinched when blood splattered across one side of her face, a sticky surprise as the assassin was suddenly perforated by the Spirit of Compassion.

“I heard you. You didn’t know where you are so I couldn’t find you.” Cole wrapped his hand over the wound in her neck, helping her try and hold the blood where it belonged. Trying to talk hurt and tears were already dripping off of Dawn’s face. “Help is coming. Help is here.” Cole tried to soothe as tears obscured her vision.

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“Lots of blood, she’s passed out.” Cole called out as Solas and Iron Bull charged into view. The Elf smoothly pulled a healing draught from his belt and uncorked it to pour down and over Dawn’s blood covered throat even as he sunk to his knees.

Bull’s more sensitive nose picked up a sour scent and he cursed. “I can smell the Adder’s Kiss from here.” He identified the familiar poison. It was survivable if treated quickly, but it certainly wouldn’t be making his Little Bas feel any better.

Solas sneered as he tossed the useless healing draught aside. The poison Bull identified nullified the properties of healing potions specifically to try and increase fatalities. So instead of depending on alchemy, Solas drew on the Fade to heal as much of the damage as possible; but Bull knew he was no Healer. It was a bad time for the Valo-Kas to be back at Skyhold dealing with Shokrakar’s pregnancy. Poison in her system meant a much harder struggle to keep Dawn alive, and she would die of blood loss if they did nothing to seal the wound. But first Solas would have to draw all of the poison out of her body. Bull watched Dawn’s blood start to congeal under Solas’ hands and sweat prickle across his bald scalp before he was finished.

“She lives.” The apostate croaked opening his eyes as the Inquisitor arrived.

Iron Bull silently fretted in the background while the Inquisitor openly fumed and Cole looked thoroughly blood soaked and lost. “My turn to play distraction. Get her out of here and to the manor. Vivienne’s getting the carriage ready. Try to not let anyone see you. This attempt failed; but the employer won’t know that for sure until tomorrow, buy us time to figure out who that is.” Alena quietly commanded.

“I’ll carry her so I can monitor her condition, if Iron Bull agrees to provide cover that is?” Solas asked almost archly.
“Let’s get moving.” Bull growled impatiently.

“She’s still fighting, or at least dreams that she is.” Cole whispered into the impending conflict.

It was enough to halt the animosity while they split to get Dawn to safety. Alena swirled inside to spread word, likely pulling The Inquisition into position to react violently if necessary. And to keep eyes and interest on herself, Alena did something she’d been expressly told not to: she danced with Blackwall for all of the Court to see. If he hadn’t been so worried for Dawn, Bull would have lamented missing that kind of show. Cole ghosted out of sight and he hoped the Kid was trailing a stray thought back towards another knife in the dark; one that would never come close to finding its mark. Solas was entirely focused on helping keep Dawn alive until they were safe so Bull remained on high alert. No one else jumped out at them but just seeing how bloodless and boneless Dawn looked currently was agonizing.

Madam de Fer was untouched by it all, arranging a carriage for them so smoothly that none seemed aware of the emergency in their midst. It helped that the blood soaked Cole had vanished and Bull drew so much attention that no one even noticed Solas slipping into the carriage with Dawn in his arms. It was the longest short carriage ride of his life, and Bull didn’t say a word as Solas tried to improve her condition.

“She’s going to have visible bruising tomorrow even once the healing potions start to work.” Vivienne calmly predicted even as she casually wiped some of the blood off of Dawn’s face with the edge of her golden dress.

“Unless you know an alchemical mix to help her that the Adder’s Kiss won’t counteract that kind of commentary is unneeded.” The Elvhen mage snidely remarked to the Circle loyalist.

“It’s interesting that this attempt on the Harbinger’s life doesn’t seem to have surprised either of you, and yet not all of us were made aware of the possibility.” Vivienne noted instead of answering Solas’ query.

“Compliments of the Advisors no doubt.” Solas commiserated with the human but everyone fell silent as Dawn writhed in pain despite her unconscious state.

“I’m going to rip the bastard apart with my bare hands.” Bull’s low voiced intensity was absolute and unapologetic. Be it a single person or the entire fucking Court; Bull would find out who was behind the hit and he would gleefully tear them into pieces and chuck them over a cliff. And then he’d have to figure out how to apologize to Dawn for every single thing he had done wrong since leaving the Qun. One of those prospects was a lot more difficult than the other.

“She lives, despite the closeness of the call. Tomorrow they will likely try again.” Tamassran Fer warned, resting a hand on Bull’s arm.

Dawn remained entirely unaware of the fuss raised over her in the hours she recovered. He never abandoned her side even after Solas was forced to leave to meditate and Tamassran Fer retreated to confer with the Advisors. It wasn’t until The Boss herself stormed in that Bull moved.

“Who?” he all but growled at the assassin, but his fine Dwarven friend wasn’t at all offended.

“Florianne. Apparently the Venatori don’t like the idea of us having a Harbinger.” Alena sounded sadistically gleeful at the prospect of handling this.

“I wanted to rip the bastard apart with my own hands.” Bull doubted that Cadash would let him do this for her though.
“Too bad Tiny.” Alena shot him down as expected and he knew he had no one to blame for that but himself. “Go rest up. Tomorrow is going to be awfully bloody.” The Inquisitor dismissed and Bull reluctantly left. He knew how unlikely it was that anyone outside of Dawn was going to get any rest tonight.

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“I know you’re awake.” Alena said it softly but Dawn still opened her eyes. “Don’t talk; Solas says you still have a lot of swelling and bruising. By morning healing potions should work on you again, so we’ll get you on your feet at least.” She all but glared at Dawn and even though Dawn knew better, she tried to talk.

“Why mad?” Dawn squeaked out, and then clutched at her neck, coughing from the pain.

“Idiot. I said don’t talk.” Alena helped Dawn sip water carefully. “I’m not mad at you. Nearly losing you scared me. All my experience and skill, none of it was useful to help protect you. Trying to wrap my head around that and not give in to the temptation to lock you away somewhere safe… it’s an exercise of will power.”

This time Dawn didn’t try to speak, she just gently nodded her understanding. And then she patted Alena’s hand to keep her attention. With deliberate movements, Dawn pointed to her eye, then tapped over her heart, and finally pointed at Alena before showing only two fingers. It was the easiest way to try and sign so that her friend could understand her meaning.

**Wicked Minds**

Time, sleep, and eventually healing draughts all helped gently battering ram Dawn back onto the road of health. She was at least well enough to be adamant that she would attend the final night though she wasn’t getting the resistance she expected to face for that plan. Well she was, but it was coming from different corners than she’d been expecting though.

“Ena’vun please. You were nearly strangled and were actually poisoned and your body has had several rounds of forced healing in the last day alone. You need to recover.” Solas tried to counsel, one of her hands carefully held in his as he continuously checked her health.

“Don’t let the bastards see that they’ve gotten to me.” Dawn’s voice was still raspy. “Their assassin just vanished last night; tonight Alena will crush the last of their plans. And by the end of it all, the Inquisition comes out looking completely untouched. I can think of no better way to play the Game to win. The one provision the Advisors insisted on was that I always have at least one Inquisition Warrior or Rogue with me at all times, and a mage capable of barrier in eyesight.” Dawn kept her voice low, talking still unpleasant despite multiple rounds of healing.

“That’s an oddly specific requirement.” Solas didn’t argue with it though. He’d probably been playing a version of the Game since before humans crawled out of the primordial goo on this planet.

Dawn shrugged carefully. “I didn’t deny their request so tonight I dance with my escorts only. And no one will know that I am quite unwell until long after it doesn’t matter anymore. That’s the best I’ve got.”

“Rest until the last minute then Ena’vun; please. Do an Old Wolf a favour and spare my nerves.” Solas actually pleaded and Dawn relented.

She was tired, though more a pervasive fatigue than acute exhaustion. Adrenaline had whomped her
system but all the forced healing had left her body keyed up and anxious. Dawn’s throat itched and tingled, constantly trying to trigger a coughing fit and she wasn’t even allowed to try clearing her throat yet.

By the time Dawn left the privy, Josephine was in her room with her clothes. “Your attire had to be altered to help cover the bruising, but it’s not as significant an alteration as you may expect. Your top should help conceal your wounds and still work with the entire assembly.” The Ambassador tried to soothe.

“I’m not worried about it Josie, but if you feel you need to do something to pick up my mood I would love to see you dance with Commander Cullen again tonight.” Dawn shamelessly blackmailed.

“Again?” Josephine almost stumbled, clearly not expecting this tactic from Dawn.

“I won’t be able to sing as a distraction this time though. But I suspect having your little sister and the Orlesian Court see you dancing with the Commander will only help you. I know about the betrothal your parents are trying to arrange for you, but if they know about you and Cullen….” Dawn smiled and gave a shrug. “No one can argue about a match up with the Commander; whom you utterly respect and adore, and who absolutely cannot take his eyes off you.” Dawn confirmed smugly.

“Truly?” she sounded so hopeful that it reminded Dawn that Josephine was just a lovely person no matter what the world threw at them.

“Yes, but he’s got some hang ups over nobility and his own sense of self-worth, so you may have to be more direct than you’d prefer.” Dawn kept her advice simple, not wanting to give away secrets that weren’t hers to give.

“I’ll keep what you’ve said in mind, thank you.” Josephine inclined her head. “Now, I shall assist you into your attire for the evening.”

The bruising on her neck was disguised by a soft collar of sanguine fabric that they had strips attached to. Those strips latticed across and under her bust; revealing tantalizing glimpses of skin but not outright exposing her chest. Her face, arms, and midriff were marked up with human safe vitaar in the red, white and black markings that decorated all of the Inquisition, and she wore Qunari typical pants dyed two shades darker than her top. It wasn’t a material Dawn was familiar with wearing, but somehow it had been treated to be softer than cotton and never chafed even if it looked like leather. Rounding out the look were two tight, perfectly proportioned Dutch braids down her back. It wasn’t a huge shift from the original design, so Dawn still felt comfortable in the outfit.

“Whomever you managed to get to redesign this is brilliant. Our enemies actually slit my throat and we’ve turned it into war paint.” Dawn enthused with false morbid humour.

“I’m glad you like it.” Leliana purred and slinked into the room. “We were ready for much more dire things than a simple wardrobe change.” The Bard lightly informed, watching Dawn intensely.

“So who are my shadows tonight?” Dawn side stepped the matter of trying to thank the Nightingale; if the Bard hadn’t been all but terrorizing Dawn for training on the way to Halamshiral she would never have survived last night. When Dawn did get a chance to thank Leliana, it was going to be completely honest and right now Dawn was still trying to ignore how close to dying she had gotten.
“Iron Bull is your primary companion tonight, with Solas providing magic support. The real events don’t start until after we have you with the Inquisitor for a dance, and then with Blackwall. After that you’ll be protected by Cassandra and Dorian, and then back to Bull.” Leliana seemed far too pleased with the pronouncement, but Dawn didn’t argue. Knowing that Iron Bull was watching her back helped make her feel safer, he’d managed to thwart his own assassination multiple times. It would just suck some of the fun out knowing that he probably wanted to be anywhere but standing as her guard.

“I feel all warm and tingly.” Dawn lightly joked to cover her bout of nerves. “At least I haven’t completely embarrassed the Inquisition yet.”

“You’re doing fine,” Leliana’s accent made her words sound more conspiratorial, “much better than Siobhan and Alistair did their first year in court.”

“Your definition of fine is interesting.” Dawn couldn’t help but point out while Josephine made disagreeable noises in her defense. “Even with a heads up I failed to spot my assassin before he’d already pulled a knife on me.”

“After beheading Loghain, in front of his daughter, Siobhan and Alistair got engaged. As in, proposed in the still warm pool of blood of their vanquished enemy.” Leliana pointed out with laughter dancing in her tone. The Bard truly was transformed now that she was back in the Game. If this world held true to the storyline from the game, Dawn would try and throw support behind Leliana’s bid for the Sunburst Throne. Vivienne would serve herself, Cassandra would do her duty, but only Leliana would thrive despite her broken Faith. It also helped that her goals would help the most people possible.

“Having seen different versions of Alistair or others as Monarch, I can tell you that that’s still not the worst I’ve heard of.” Dawn decided to be honest.

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Leliana grinned, an honest to god full toothy smile without any hidden violence in it. She looked a decade younger and painfully beautiful.

“I sincerely hope that none of us have to go through what the King and Queen of Ferelden had to endure.” Josephine turned it more solemn again.

“I don’t know Josie; some of what we went through wasn’t so bad.” Leliana kept it vague.

“That tells me what happened when you all met Isabella…” Dawn threw in jokingly and the Bard gave her a sharply assessing look, which made Dawn actually laugh. “Oh god, it’s true! I was joking!” Dawn didn’t explain more on the Bard’s behalf but couldn’t stop laughing.

“Tell no one.” Leliana warned but the warmth of laughter in her voice gave away her amusement.

“But Leli, then no one will know that side of you. And it’s quite the side to see.” Dawn teased with a wink as she opened the door.

Iron Bull stood outside the room waiting for them it seemed. “Red, Ruffles, I need to steal Dawn for a moment.” He offered with an apologetic smile.

To Dawn’s everlasting surprise, it was Josephine that gave Iron Bull a dressing down. “One sign of tears or one hair out of place, and you will deal with me.” The tiny Antivan Ambassador warned.

“Yes Ma’am.” Iron Bull treated her with the same deference he did Madam de Fer.

Dawn tried not to let her discomfort show on her face, but she knew he picked it up anyhow. Damn
ex-Ben Hassrath. It didn’t help when he scanned her outfit with a critical eye. “Alena’s idea, she consulted with the Valo-Kas for help.” Dawn babbled nervously.

“It suits you.” Iron Bull’s voice grumbled. “The whole thing is a nice touch; the entire Inquisition wore non-human inspired clothes at the Winter Palace. It’s a subtle sort of ‘fuck you’.” He mused and it helped Dawn calm down a little.

She knew how to talk to him as a friend, had considered herself good friends with him before the whole Demands of the Qun fiasco, but now she felt utterly adrift. If he wanted to talk like they used to it would make tonight easier but the idea left her feeling sad; it would be a bold faced lie from him, so she had no idea how to reply now. Lacking any other option, Dawn gave him her best customer service smile.

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Bull sighed when he saw the forced smile on her face. It was a good fake, but he didn’t need to be Ben Hassrath to read her eyes instead of her mouth. Especially since she’d been honestly enjoying herself with the two other women just before. Shit he should have done this sooner.

"I owe you an apology Little Bas; you’ve acted in my best interest and I know I can trust you. It was wrong for me to come at you with the intent to push you to failure, and I should never have done any of that while angry. You got hurt because of my loss of control and I am sorry that ever happened.” He didn’t sugar coat his actions or motivations. “You almost died yesterday before getting the apology I absolutely owed to you, and I would have been pissed at myself for not telling you that in time. I’m not Hisrad; I don’t have to deal in lies and betrayal anymore and I don’t want to.”

Dawn just stared up at him for a moment and he bore her scrutiny with the same determination she’d used. When she threw herself at him like she did during the mirror fiasco he took a surprised step back but hugged her tightly in return.

“You are forgiven.” She spoke quietly but with conviction.

“That easy?” he couldn’t help asking even as he reluctantly released his embrace.

Now the smile Dawn gave him was real. Hurt still stained the edges, but she was made of sterner stuff by now. “Iron Bull, nothing is ever that easy. But you’re my friend, and we’re at a party. I will be demanding dances and I expect I’ll get my pound of sweat from you; that’ll be more than enough to make me satisfied.” She gave that shrug and smile combination that Bull had realized meant that she was making up her plans as she went along.

Now Bull grinned down at her. “That’ll scandalize the Orlesian Court.” He teased.

“Do you see how many fucks I give?” She shot back with a grin, not seeming to want an actual answer as they joined the rest of the Inquisition.

Ruffles was giving him a suspicious and slightly angry look as they arrived, but Red just looked amused. She looked completely at ease and yet he suspected that the spymaster had lingered to listen in and then ran here to appear to have been waiting. Some spies he could pick out of Stealth, Sera’s was terrible for example, but Bull knew Leliana was not one of those; if she had spied on them, only she would know. He let her have her secrets; it was unlikely someone that traded in them would find anything in what Dawn and he had discussed worth using against him.

If Bull could keep his Little Bas alive tonight might not be half bad after all; though it did give him
pause to see all the Inquisition sporting ‘vitaar’ and other Qunari trappings. A lot of it was pure Vashoth culture not Qunari, but there was enough overlap to really weird Bull out. He didn’t complain though because it did result in the most comfortable outfit of the trip for him. The Boss had given him the go ahead to simply wear his usual gear, though he did scrape off the blood first.

Dawn was trying not to laugh as she walked with him towards the Court, her eyes dancing with absolute glee as she kept looking at the vitaar painted onto him. The barely concealed joviality warned him that she knew of the origin to these special vitaar, and once again Bull was curious as to exactly how many intimate details she knew about everyone.

“Iron Bull… umm… I’ve never seen you wearing vitaar like that in battle before.” Her amusement snuck out and coloured her words with laughter.

“Well stated, I don’t wear this vitaar for battle.” He grinned, neither one actually saying out loud that this was his sex vitaar. Though this was the only time he’d ever had someone know that when they weren’t actually having sex. “I knew none of these assholes would get the joke.” He jerked his chin at the ostentatious buildings around them.

“You’re all but standing there with your cock out.” Dawn managed to say with a mostly straight face but Bull guffawed at her sly commentary.

“Little Bas are you aware of what your own vitaar represents?” he asked it casually, seeing the flash of consternation in her eyes even if she refused to ask him what they meant. It wasn’t sex vitaar, but the symbols stenciled onto her flesh were the ones the Valo-Kas wore in battle. Their permission for her to wear them gave a blatant declaration that they considered her one of theirs to anyone that would recognize it. It was a far cry from the battered and lost Offworlder he remembered marching into Haven with Shokrakar physically guiding her that first day.

As the Harbinger’s designated escort for the night, Bull got to ride in with her, Tamassran Fer as mage support, and Varric rounding out the team. Every carriage was broken down into Warrior-Rogue-Mage-Civilian to optimize each carriage’s ability to react to attack; both independently and as a collective. Boss was riding in with Ruffles, Blackwall, and the Tevinter Altus. Cassandra, Sera, and Solas were joined by Red. Cullen had decided to ride horse in, better to stay on top of the mobile guards. And if he happened to stop by the Ambassador’s carriage more than most, Bull certainly wasn’t going to call him out on it.

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Wycombe was stinking in a way Cedric had forgotten shemlen cities tended towards. Too many bodies and not enough fresh air. The Alienage was the pitiful, pathetic hovel it was ever allowed to be in every shemlen city and Cedric wondered if he could eventually talk the Inquisitor into allowing him to burn them all to the ground. His rage fed off his disgust but Cedric merely focused on the little good he could do for these distant cousins to the Dalish.

Namely help the city get over its red lyrium addiction; if he could help do that maybe the Elvhen in Wycome would actually survive.

They had come in through a barred river tunnel that led into the Alienage but was truly only a small tributary that would eventually dribble into the coast. Of course some clever smuggler inside had found a way to remove the bars but make it look like they were solidly in place. Those sneaking in dared not light a torch or candle, trusting instead to keen eyes that could peer into the dark; Reaban living up to her name. The young Hunter had a gift for seeing at night in even the darkest conditions, and although she had only recently received her Vallaslin the responsibility of leading the way in did not seem to rattle her. She was doing their Clan proud.
As they carefully crept through the tunnel into the city, Cedric could tell they were close simply due to the sounds of the Amaranthine coast growing louder. But reaching the end of the tunnel didn't mean they were able to slip out at the end; they had to go one at at time, starting with their Keeper.

With how paranoid and vigilant the shemlen of Wycome currently were, particularly the nobles that commanded their own militias, it was dangerous for them to move around. And even a shemlen could tell Keeper Istimaethoriel had never bowed to a human's hand, she had no bearing of subservience to her. None of the Dalish truly did, though a few of them could fake it if required. This was not the night for that however.

One by one the Dalish of Clan Lavellan slipped out and were met by one or two of the Wycome Elvhen, getting absorbed into the Alienage. Guards patrolled the outer wall but rarely bothered observing the Elves at their rest, and Cedric waited to be the last one out of the tunnel. He found himself suddenly being escorted by a shockingly young thing with hair so red he could still tell its colour by moonlight.

"You're dressed different than the others," the voice was deeper than he expected, the young man pretty in the way of all delicate things.

"Good eyes." Cedric confirmed without revealing anything. He barely even breathed to speak, not wanting the sound to carry.

"You and I will be making first breach Pops, your Keeper Issy said you were her second in command." Cedric grinned at the bastardization of Istimaethoriel's long name. Most people just went with your Keeper.

"I am; good force cage, weak Step, no real barrier worth a roast unless you stay close." He summarized the pertinent points quickly.

But the kid just stared at him blankly even as they hid at the house closest to the gates of the city. No training on how to work with mages then, this was going to be a quick and dirty lesson for the youngster. "Yeah whatever, we're going out the gate first, dressed as the laundry crew for noble houses. Once we get you tattooed lot out into the city it'll be easier to move you around, we'll go to the hardest hit areas so you can try your thing there."

The kid seemed honestly concerned and Cedric wondered if he had a shemlen friend who was hurt by the illness. "Where is Istimaethoriel?" Cedric asked the question that wouldn't put the kid in a bad position.

The red head grinned at him, "So you don't know then? She's with my Elder." And there were layers of unsubtle innuendo in his tone.

Cedric's eyebrows jumped up even as he grinned. "Good for them." He offered his hand. "Cedric."

"Mirwen." Their introductions were companionably brief.

Preparations started before Keeper Istimaethroiel and the Alienage Elder Telahn entered the house where Cedric waited. They were all garbed as the laundry workers, uniforms doing much to give anonymity to the dozen waiting Dalish and half dozen Elves. Cedric followed Mirwen out, the first two to move once the gates were open.

He couldn't openly carry his staff but Cedric had continued to practice magic without a foci even at Skyhold, this was not an obstacle to stop him. Besides, Cedric once again reminded the rage
waiting inside him that he was here to help the sick. Instead of destruction, he made his wrath feed his actions to help.

The Clan had been preparing the spelled packets filled with the herbs and alchemy to help soothe the worst of the symptoms. First to ease withdrawal and then to help the body purge its toxins. Once past guards too stricken with their own withdrawal to pay close attention to knife ears in uniform to see the Vallaslin where there should be none there were no obstacles in their way. His knuckles were white around the basket he carried; contents their only hope to keep the death count down as they entered the merchants area without a single challenge. The smell of sickness and fear soured the air, churning his emotions further.

The group split apart slightly, going door to door and giving out the packets with quiet explanations. He expected resistance and disbelief, that little morsels could ease the worst of the sickness. Instead he saw dejected misery, hopelessness and fear. These people hadn't done anything to deserve this; they'd been poisoned by the Venatori. Their pain was an affront to decency. And rage promised dark things to him when he saw hollow eyed babies watching him talk to their parents, their fragile little bodies destroyed the most.

They'd worked into the poorest section of the city, baskets dwindling and being replaced as necessary by the ever eager Mirwen. Here he didn't see as many sick children but it was for the most tragic of reasons; their help had come too late. And it was here that Duke Antoine and his guards found them.

Cedric assumed the worst of course, his crushing cage ready to unleash gruesome death the moment the noble cried attack but it never came. "Keeper?" The Duke at least looked as unwell as his merchants did. "I was informed of your arrival and actions."

Istimaethoriel stood proud, no staff in hand but never needing one to be the clear authority. She wasn't a noble born woman and she would not bow; Cedric was proud to be her student still.

"How can I help you save my city?" The Duke's request made Deshanna smile and he kept talking. "Wycome is supposed to be the revelry capital of the Free Marches, but the laughter has stopped. Now my people drink Antivan wine to drown their sorrows instead of celebrating their joys."

And Cedric chuckled lightly to himself when his Keeper simply handed the shemlen Duke a worker's basket filled with the little packets. The man recovered from his surprise quickly and passed the basket to the eager arms of one of his men. "These pellets... they're the cure?" He sounded hopeful instead of skeptical.

"They are Magic and medicine both Duke Antoine." Keeper Istimaethoriel didn't obfuscate. "Made by my people as we have in our midst the ways of such things."

"Then please help the people of Wycome." The Duke had been naively led by the Venatori agent in his midst Cedric tried to keep that in mind as the man's attitude now seemed so at odds to his previous actions.

Cedric should have felt more settled, more secure with the Duke's men on his side. The Keeper should have been safe. But although they had distributed packets at the worst affected areas there were those that felt they should have been seen first. The Duke's men were further away, obeying his commands to distribute the Dalish 'magic pellets' when the First of the attackers charged into the poor market space. Cedric had heard them coming and Stepped the little distance he could cover to try and make it to his Keeper's side.

The Dalish had their arms full of delicate magic, the Wycome Elvhen were young and untrained,
the Duke stood with Istimaethoriel and Telahn while the guards were too far away, and a score of armed thugs descended. Cedric feared he was about to see his friend and mentor be killed but even as the red lyrium induced rage of the attacking noble and his men spilled onto them Duke Antoine reacted.

Armed with a ceremonial set of armor and filigree for a sword and the shemlen still put himself between the attackers and the two elder Elves. Cedric realized with amusement that Dehsanna was already One with Nature, held in place but inflicting damage on their enemies as she summoned roots and tendrils, thornblades slicing and slowing their assault.

Still the thugs reached the trio of leaders before Cedric could recast his Step; it always was his weakest ability. As the Duke collided with the first attacker Cedric unleashed crushing prison instead of Step, catching up six of the assailants in an awful wet crunch of gore. He quickly followed it up with a slightly underpowered Mind Blast; only knocking one or two astride but flinging the dead mash back at the attackers.

Cedric had to be careful now, the Duke's guards had reached the melee as well but he couldn't see Dehsanna or Telahn anymore. Panic landed through him igniting the rage that he'd held in check thus far, and his next Mind Blast sent everyone to the ground.

The world spun even with his eyes closed, his skull pounding with his heartbeat and agony. He'd ripped through his entire store of mana but the fighting had stopped. Cedric forced an eyelid open, hoping it would help anchor his equilibrium again. Instead he saw Mirwen staring down at him in stunned awe. The redhead was even more brilliantly crimson under sunlight and Cedric let him help get up.

The Duke's men were up and subduing the hostile noble's thugs and Cedric saw Keeper Istimaethoriel settled on the ground, holding the Duke's body. The shemlen had died with the attacking noble's sword in his gut and his own sunk into his killer's neck. In the end it was probably the kind of honourable death noble shemlen dreamed of. Elder Telahn stood over her, stooped in pain but holding a bloody short sword to defend them.

"So do we go back to handing out the packets or do we flee before these shemlen start blaming us?" Mirwen asked, painfully young to be so cynical.

"We help for as long as we can." Cedric answered in place of his Keeper, aware of what her answer would be. "Wycome is your home and you are our People, lifestyle differences aside we will help you until our being here makes it worse."

Mirwen frowned, disbelief mixed with just the faintest bit of wistful hope. He wanted to believe that help had come but when had it ever before? "Lets go see what we can do to help and figure out what steps to take from there." Cedric suggested instead of trying to convince the kid.

It wouldn't be that easy, it never was, but sometimes that was half the fun. Though with how much his temples ached Cedric decided that maybe he was getting a little old for those kind of outbursts.

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Dawn spent the tense carriage ride in trying to distract herself with the details of her companions' outfits. Like Iron Bull, Varric had opted for no shirt with his black and red accented attire. That much chest hair unleashed was a lot to handle but she wasn't at all surprised to find that Varric was solidly barrel chested. Fandom would have a collective apoplexy if they could see it. Madam de Fer bared nearly as much skin as Dawn did. Although Vivienne wore her customary white, the cut and red accents of her attire were in-line with the Tal Vashoth styling. And paired with the skin
tight pants and towering heeled boots the Court Enchanter preferred she gleamed dangerously, with accenting streaks painted over her skin.

The final night of Halamshiral started with the Inquisition arriving dressed like a conquering Hoard, and the Inquisitor was the star of the show. Alena’s outfit was a dark heartbeat, all blacks and darkest reds, while the rest of the party gradually lightened towards the mages wearing mostly white. A part of Dawn worried that the Warriors were all in bloody red tonight; the only thing missing from the assembly was their weapons, and those were all discreetly hidden away. But considering that they were literally here to kick ass and take names, the attire suited the mood.

“Can I please drink as least one glass of the bubble wine tonight? I love bubbles.” Dawn plaintively whined to Iron Bull, desperately trying to ignore her nerves. She’d nearly died in the gardens last night and here she was coming back for round two.

“Try the pink stuff, it’s delicious.” Iron Bull commiserated with a smirk. No one needed to remind them to stay on top of their game tonight, light banter was softly susurrating from several members.

“Breathe.” Dawn softly spoke in English. She was uncomfortable but determined to go forward, so all she could do was breathe through it every time she felt like freezing up. She didn’t have to count her heartbeats or steps, the static was a long way away by now, but still she worried.

Iron Bull’s hand rested against the small of her back for a moment, helping her take that first step forward like he had done during the mirror training. After that every step was easier; she was as safe as her friends could make her, and she wasn’t someone who could just hide away anyways.

Leliana had people keenly watching Florianne to catalogue any secondary assassins the woman might send out, but as Harbinger Dawn was supposed to let no sign of the impending chaos show on her face. Honestly being bait again was a lot less scary with Iron Bull her literal bodyguard. A near seven foot tall, muscled Tal Vashoth that was brimming with sass and casual aggression went a long way to settle her nerves.

“No one will get close to you tonight unless you want them to.” Alena softly offered a low voiced comfort as they were once again presented to the Court.

“I just want to dance with my friends tonight. And not get my throat slit against.” Dawn admitted with a deprecating laugh.

“Welcome to the Game Dawn.” Alena smiled as she said it.

“Next time there better be party hats.” Dawn grumbled back as her friend swirled off to be the Inquisitor.

It was interesting for Dawn to watch the differences in the Court compared to their first night here. Upon arrival they’d been watched suspiciously and held in low esteem. But over the last two days, somehow the Inquisition established itself as a primary player of the Game. The Court now looked to them. The Inquisition had been slowly introduced in batches on the first evening, but now no one dared stop them from coming in as a unified whole. It helped to put a little bounce into her step despite the previous night’s end; for once in her life Dawn was part of the cool kids’ group.

“You got a handle on this Sweetheart?” Varric sidled up next to her, a teasing smirk on his face.

“Chin up, shoulders back, walking with a swagger.” Dawn repeated her internal instructions with a wink down at Varric even as the Court reacted to their outlandish attire.

Not all the men were topless, Solas and several others had opted for a vest like top that made Dawn
think more steampunk, but she wasn’t complaining. Everyone looked damn good. Dawn’s bared stomach was a running theme for many others as well; Vivienne looked flawless as always in her favoured colour, and Cassandra was intimidating as hell her Warrior’s red with those abs. Sera had opted in for a vest and even Cole was decked out to be on display tonight. And if Dawn wasn’t wrong, Cullen and Josephine were a lot less worried about people seeing them standing that closely together tonight, his Warrior’s red standing stark next to Josephine’s pristinely untouched white.

“You did good yesterday, getting those two together.” Varric commented in a low voice.

“I’m glad. It’s nice that there’s a happy ending in this somewhere for someone.” She answered honestly.

“You mean ending the civil war isn’t a happy ending?” he sounded worried so Dawn winked at him.

“Where I’m from, ‘happy ending’ can have a much more…Orlesian meaning.” Dawn tried not to grin but Varric laughed and she failed.

“I like your style sweetheart.” Varric nodded, shooting another look at their companions before up at her again. “Think there’ll be any other ‘happy endings’ tonight?”

Dawn grinned even as she flushed a furious red for no real reason. “That’s up to Alena and Blackwall, go ask them.”

Varric gave her an amused look. “That’s not the couple I was talking about.”

“What is it with you and Hawke telling me I need to get laid?” Dawn didn’t mean to sound so exasperated but Varric laughed at her. “I happen to have standards my romantic partner needs to meet.” She insisted with a deliberately joking, arrogant sniff.

“Oh, any standards I fail to fulfill then Sweetheart?” he demanded with a grin.

“Well for one thing I prefer it if my lover isn’t actually in love with someone else.” Dawn knew she wasn’t referring to Bianca Davri either, but it wasn’t until Varric stopped dead in his tracks that Dawn knew for sure he realized it too. Dawn wanted to shake Victoria and Varric both for their blind obstinacy but knew it was a matter they had to figure out for themselves; people in glass houses and all that.

“Nicely done Ena’vun.” Solas’ voice brought a smile as Dawn saw her friend circling by. She knew what they were all doing; Iron Bull was on watch around her and here was Solas within easy Barrier distance. It should have made her feel stupid and useless but Dawn just felt grateful.

“Thank you Old Wolf.” Dawn didn’t even doubt that Solas had figured Varric and Hawke out too, he was definitely smart enough.

He inclined his head to her but then focused his attention over her shoulder onto Iron Bull behind her. “After careful consideration; knight to D5.”

She hadn’t realized they’d started the chess banter already; wasn’t it only supposed to start in the Hissing Wastes?

“Arishok takes pawn at B2.” Iron Bull seemed to carefully answer but Dawn knew the outcome of the game already.
Solas smirked as if he could read Dawn’s thoughts. “Mage to D6.”

“Arishok takes tower; check. What are you doing Solas?” Iron Bull demanded suspiciously.

“King’s Gambit.” Dawn didn’t even realize she still remembered the name of it; in the scheme of things that was a non-essential detail to recall and she’d already forgotten far more important things. But now she had both their absolute attentions. “It’s what I remember my world story calling the maneuvers you’re using.”

“So you know how this match is played?” Solas sounded intensely interested in her answer.

“I know what King falls, I can’t remember the moves.” She corrected cautiously as he studied her expression.

“King to E2.” Solas finally looked from Dawn back to the ominously silent Iron Bull.

When Iron Bull remained quiet, Dawn turned to face him. He wasn’t looking at Solas but down at her and Dawn frowned back. But he spoke before she could ask what was wrong, “Alright. Tamassran takes tower.” It was only then that he looked away from Dawn, “Your last tower, by the way.”

“Pawn to E5.” Solas didn’t sound worried despite Iron Bull’s warning.

“Really? I’ve got my whole army bearing down on your King and you’re moving a pawn?” Iron Bull sounded flatly lost by the maneuver from a player as skilled as Dawn assumed Solas was.

“Never underestimate the power of even a single piece Iron Bull, hasn’t the Inquisitor taught you that?” Dawn interrupted on purpose, trying to make her tone joking. She remembered how the game ended, and how fandom considered what the ending meant for both Iron Bull and Solas. “I remember how this game ends well enough to know that no one wins, regardless of what King falls. What is the cost of victory?” she tried immensely hard to not look at either one as they stared at her.

Thankfully Varric was a very good spotter because he came in to rescue her now. “Come on Sweetheart, let’s dance.” He grabbed her hand and led her away. “What did you say? I’ve never seen them both look so perturbed before.” He demanded and spun her around gracefully, leading even with the height differences. Or at least trying to; Dawn had a bad habit of taking the lead with everyone. Solas had been amused the first time he realized it, Josephine had been mortified.

“I…I think I need a drink.” Dawn whined instead of answering him directly.

Varric laughed even as he let her lead the dance. “Now that’s a plan I can get behind. If we go up the stairs on the far side we can get at least one in before the kill joys get to us.”

Dawn grinned, letting Varric’s easy charm help her relax again as they followed the only newly learned choreography. She never really forgot all the eyes watching her now; they were dressed to strangely and acted too outrageously for anyone to ignore them, but it was hard not to think about how any one of the eyes could belong to an assassin waiting for her to make another mistake. Thankfully Varric ignored whatever vigilance Dawn displayed and when the song ended he pulled her up the far side stairs, away from the Warrior and Mage watching in consternation. He had some prearranged signal worked out with Sera because she met them with a pair of drinks that weren’t cleverly disguised water, and a wink.

Iron Bull made it to them before Dawn got her drink finished but Solas cheated by Fade Stepping right to her side almost immediately. Dawn looked at Varric and they both started to laugh. “What
happened to sparing an Old Wolf’s nerves Ena’vun?” Solas lightly chided.

“I still obeyed the rules, I’m not apologizing.” Dawn shook her head and finished her drink.

“How was this not flouting the rules?” Iron Bull called her out but he didn’t sound angry.

“I’m supposed to have either a Warrior or Rogue with me, and a Mage capable of barrier within eye line. Did I violate any of that?” she demanded of the trio guarding her, knowing that they were worried about her continuing health. They had reason to be, two of her current guardians had to drag her all but lifeless body out of here last night. But Dawn could not give in to the fear always churning through her guts.

“It helps if you have all of us at once Ena’vun.” Solas continued to lecture but Dawn’s brain jumped right into the deep end of the gutter at her friend’s words.

“I would need a couple more drinks before being brave enough to request that.” Dawn flippantly replied in English, owing it to a couple of lost friends from home to say it.

“No fair, I can hear the sarcasm but I just can’t tell what you’re saying.” Varric cried foul on her even as he passed her a second drink.

Dawn couldn’t help it, she laughed. There wasn’t a snowball’s chance in hell that she was going to translate that, not where either Solas or Iron Bull could hear her at least. That would be unfathomably embarrassing. Solas’ patient tolerance and Iron Bull’s wry amusement only made her laugh harder too. “I’m crazy Sugar, not stupid.” She denied Varric’s implied request.

“That would explain your choice of friends Sweetheart.” Varric nodded in agreement, clinking glasses with her.

Solas and Iron Bull settled nearby, trying to not obviously be her body guards but still staying close enough to be effective if they had to be. Varric just stood with her, chatting as if this were a typical Tuesday to him. Dawn knew that the Court watched her out of the corners of their eyes, expecting another spectacle from her at any moment. But singing, dancing, and surviving her own assassination were all the tricks Dawn had, she just wanted to have a good time with her friends while they saved the world.

“How are you holding up Little Bas?” Iron Bull asked, interrupting a vital conversation between Dawn and Varric about Nugs versus Raccoons to hand her one of those pink drinks he’d mentioned earlier.

“Cheers,” she drained the drink in a thirst quenching chug. Iron Bull just looked amused and traded her glasses, letting her have his still mostly full one. “I’m crazy thirsty and I haven’t even danced much.”

“Blood loss does that Sweetheart.” Varric piped up, trying to sound sarcastic but there was too much concern threaded into his voice to pull off casual humour.

“Wasn’t all those health potions supposed to fix that?” she knew she was whining a little. It was like being hungover; being here in her condition was self-inflicted but that did not mean she couldn’t complain, it just meant she’d get very little sympathy from the trio making sure she didn’t fall on her face.

“There is a reason I’ve been begging you to take it easy Ena’vun.” Solas sounded long suffering.

Before she could respond one of the Orlesian nobles got bold enough, or drunk enough, to brave
the intimidating Inquisition members standing around her to approach. “Lady Harbinger, if I might have a word with you?” he was one of the Celene sycophants she’d danced with yesterday.

“Lord Orrick, whatever we may discuss it can be done so here.” She smiled even as her skin crawled. He’d been one of the ones to presume her dance with Solas implied a certain sensuousness of personality and was trying to bed her.

“My Lady,” his eyes obviously flicked to Solas, then more hesitantly to Varric and then up to Iron Bull. Apparently Lord Orrick thought Dawn had some stamina. “I had wanted to continue presenting my argument for that… collaboration I was discussing with you yesterday. I did not want to cause any jealousy amongst your… servants.” He once again flicked a judgemental look towards the non-humans.

Iron Bull’s face looked politely neutral, Varric looked so offended it was hard not to laugh, and Solas was barely concealing his amusement. Dawn could feel an almost sadistic laugh build in her gut as the man continued to press his opinion.

“Just one kiss my Lady, and I would die a happy man.” The perfumed idiot tried to cajole.

Dawn’s polite smile turned vicious and she knew it by how her friends reacted to it. “Lord Orrick, you may wish to rephrase that sentence; the last man to ever kiss me also bled to death in my arms.” She deliberately implied a more sinister role with her words.

She kept her voice and body language as at ease as possible, her smile not faltering at all even as the asshole went bone white. After he politely excused himself, Dawn gave in to the laughter bubbling in her gut.

“That was almost mean Sweetheart.” Varric sounded proud despite his words.

“He was implying I was sleeping with all of you,” Dawn was shaking her head, the thought making her laugh uncontrollably considering her earlier comment, “as if any one person would actually survive that.”

“That’s a wonderful vote of confidence there Sweetheart, I didn’t know you felt that way.” Varric teased back with a wink.

Dawn kept her teeth locked together over the comment that wanted to come out in response to that. She had thus far not mentioned to any of the Companions about their die hard shippers back on Earth, but Varric’s ego would become unbearable if he knew that almost all of the fandom collectively wished he was romanceable.

“You’ve played a touch of the Game before Ena’vun, it shows.” Solas interjected carefully.

“Customer service.” Dawn knew the words technically translated but they had no meaning here; no implied hellish servitude. Solas quirked his eyebrow, recognizing that she had done that deliberately.

“After this, water only until the night is won.” Iron Bull drew her attention, handing her the last pink drink.

“Alright; well I’m not the one going to be at risk for the next while so ah… none of you better fucking die.” She saluted with her glass and sipped it as they all laughed at her blunt cheers.

“From what I heard Sweetheart, you owe both these two a drink for having to keep you alive from that condition yesterday.” Varric pointed out, killing a little of the humour but reminded her of the
seriousness still required.

“Then I was in very good hands, wasn’t I?” she shot back, not joking. She finished her drink, desperate to wash the memory of blood from her tongue. “Time for me to dance with Alena, you all get to do your thing once I’m spinning about with Blackwall.” She didn’t look back at them as she stepped out to meet the Inquisitor.

Her friend did a better job of looking pleasantly proud as they danced, seeming to be utterly carefree despite what was about to come. Dawn was a wreck already and she felt like every single Orlesian and Inquisition eye watching could tell that. “So the whole world knows about you and Beardy now, how does that make you feel?” Dawn queried, knowing Alena had only exposed her hard won privacy to help her.

“Surprisingly good. I love him, the world could end tomorrow, who cares if people know that behind closed doors he is mine in every way.” Alena shrugged, her almost smugly poetic words making Dawn grin and nod.

“It’s a good feeling to have,” she agreed with an almost wistful honesty, eyes drifting up of their own accord to look for Iron Bull watching.

She hadn’t forgiven Iron Bull because she wanted him, but because she believed his apology. He hadn’t asked her to forget that he had hurt her, he was just asking for the chance to show it would never happen again. She would give him that, but they weren’t at the same place they had been before the Demands of the Qun. She’d known it would change things but Dawn wasn’t sure what they were now. It didn’t feel like cowardice but caution to wait and see what would come next.

Alena vanished with Iron Bull, Solas, and Varric, and Dawn danced with Blackwall. “Don’t look so down girl, they’ll be alright.” He tried to cheer her up. “They know what’s coming and our enemies don’t.”

“I’m still going to worry, they’re my friends and I love them.” Dawn admitted easily.

“You are fearless Dawn.” He shook his head and his beard mostly hid his smile.

“Hardly, I was so scared yesterday. Still kind of am today.” She admitted with a weak laugh.

“That’s survival; physical threats deserve fear. But I meant your ability to see all what you see, know what you know and still love people so completely. Fearless.” Blackwall didn’t argue; he just stated his opinion.

“So far you’ve all proven to be worth loving.” She helplessly shrugged off his comment and he let her.

She had to take a break after that, energy levels too low for sustained dancing. Cassandra and Dorian were her escorts while the others worked or mingled. Neither one had seen her directly after the attack but they didn't seem to know what to say to her about it now either. It promised to make for an awkward time at the final night of the party but unfortunately Dawn wasn't going to get a problem that mundane.

In the game when the Inquisitor gets ambushed and obtains the final proof of Florianne's duplicity she gets to rush back into the dance hall to surprise the Venatori agent before the assassination. Dawn was even looking forwards to seeing the cutscene starring her friend Alena. She just wasn't entire sure when it was going to happen.

So Dawn tried to keep herself unobtrusive as she wandered the party with Cassandra and Dorian,
conversations fleeting and faulty. She tried to listen for any distant fracas that would turn the night into a real rumpus. She even tried to discreetly keep track of where Florianne was. But the one thing Dawn hadn't anticipated seeing was little Felessan from her first night slipping out of a service corridor to run up to her.

Dawn saw both Warrior and Mage freeze, unsure how to react to a child charging at her, but once again Dawn simply dropped to her knees. "Are you okay little arrow? What are you doing here?" she worried, checking him over for injuries and finding none.

"You haven't been here long enough to have a secret love child darling." Dorian remarked helpfully.

"Dorian, hush." Cassandra grunted, and Dawn ignored them both.

"The bad men are coming. I saw them with red swords that sound ugly and Bae told me to hide. But you knew they would be there and they are and auntie Mahalla says you're safe." Felessan rambled quickly, shifting around in his anxiousness.

"Then the Venatori agents are making their move." Dorian caught on quickly.

"The Inquisitor needs to kn-" Cassandra started to say but cut herself off.

In their focus on Felessan's unexpected arrival and the news he carried, they'd all forgotten to look past their own little circle of attention. "Interesting news bearer you have there Harbinger. I did not realize a human could sway the loyalty of the Elves from Briala's clutches." Florianne's serrated politeness hooked Dawn's attention.

She stood too close behind Felessan. In the game Dawn remembered her being a Rogue, but she couldn't remember if the woman was an archer first or two handed blades; given the setting she had to assume blades. Her suspicion proved to be correct as a thin but wickedly sharp looking hooked blade rested over the boy's shoulder in a silently implied threat. Dawn put a brave smile on her face.

"Felessan, do you remember how I said to the young lady that I was trying not to be but I've never been put in a position where I had to be?" He stayed silent, petrified with tears welling in his eyes and yet brave enough to give her a shallow little nod. "I've just been put in that position da'len, so I need you to close your eyes and trust me." and he did.

Adrenaline flooded Dawn's systems but it felt different than when she'd run for her life. Her hands shook again, this time from the desire to wrap around the woman's throat and squeeze as hard as she could. This woman betrays her brother, betrays her culture and Capital and god, all in the name of ambition but still Dawn hadn't believed her capable of threatening a child.

"Dawn..." Cassandra's tone was query and caution all at once. Dorian stayed silent but his barrier crackled over her skin in an unfamiliar wave as Dawn stood up to face Florianne straight on.

"What the fuck do you expect me to do, she's threatening a kid." Dawn's voice somehow remained lodged firmly in customer service pleasantry.

"Step away from your guardians and come with me." Florianne quietly commanded.

Although her attire was more intimidating than yesterdays it wasn't any more protective but today Dawn's fear was less than her indignation. She held it in check because there was a little boy with his eyes closed and tears making tracks down his cheeks still at risk. She didn't look away for anything, her focus utterly on Florianne's eyes as the other woman calculated what action to take
next. Iron Bull and Hawke both said that a person's eyes will tell you what they're about to do, and Florianne's eyes were looking for a way out. Dawn didn't dare look away to find out why.

"You want me, Venatori scum, come and get me." Dawn snarled at her even as she made her own move.

She didn't trust someone willing to threaten a kid to not just kill him out of spite, so Dawn wasn't waiting for it to happen. She'd once promised Iron Bull she'd tell him before doing anything she thought might be suicidal but it was a promise she had to break now. Her injured hand shot out, grabbing Florianne's wrist and pulling the blade wielding hand closer to herself. It was a move the woman clearly wasn't expecting and that surprise gave Dawn the time to slam her fist into Florianne's diaphragm. Felessan scrambled away, eyes still shut and Dawn had to trust that one of her friends would mind the boy. She dared not look away as Florianne slashed out with her other blade.

Dawn's focus cut out the sounds of the crowd gasping and watching in eager, despairing enthusiasm. She was only the most vaguely aware of faces and eyes, noise but no words. Everything else was watching Florianne; eyes, blades, shoulders, feet. The woman lunged, the long skirt disguising her movements so Dawn only spun out of the way at the last minute. A line of pain burned along her ribcage, blood dripping down her skin in a hot, ticklish dribble. It wasn't going to kill her immediately even if it hurt like hell so Dawn ignored it and tried not to look down at it instead of watching Florianne. She knew what it looked like now though, when Florianne's eyes crinkled that little bit an attack was coming.

The next time Dawn saw it she did a slight side step instead of a larger dodge, gripping Florianne's wrist as the thrust went past to hold her arm steady, and drove her palm into Florianne's elbow; forcing the joint in the wrong direction with a sickening pop. Florianne's return assault dissolved into a shriek of pain, her blades dropping to the ground from hands that couldn't grip them for the agony radiating in her arm. Dawn let go of the woman's wrist as she dropped to her knees, tears cascading from under her mask and Dawn grabbed a fistful of her coiffure to pull her head back sharply. Her good hand wrapped around Florianne's throat and squeezed lightly.

"I have you life in my hands and it means nothing to me; you threatened a child. Be grateful to your fake red god that your judgement doesn't lie in my hands. I am the Harbinger, I know every future you have left and I can make you suffer." Dawn warned with brutal honesty. And then she released her grip, not at all surprised to find that she was three for three at causing a spectacle of herself. Every eye was on her and all Dawn cared to see was that Alena was there, watching. Her friend read whatever plea or cry Dawn's face gave her and walked towards her.

"Inquisitor, the Venatori agent in Halamshiral has been subdued as you requested." the shaking in her hands wasn't anger anymore. That had evaporated and all she wanted to do was laugh. It was inappropriate and she knew it so Dawn swallowed the urge down.

"Thank you for saving lives tonight Harbinger," Alena's response surprised her and she realized it was Alena's way of helping Dawn. It was still too much for her to handle, and Dawn could only give her friend a bow of her head; her spine felt made of welded steel and would not relent, and it was all Dawn could do to keep her hands held loose instead of clenching them into fists.

She couldn't focus on Alena complete the mission; couldn't hear people trying to discuss what had just happened. Nothing else mattered until she was certain that Felessan was alright. Dawn spun on her heel, twisting her search around until she saw the boy standing in the protective embrace of his father's arms in the crowd. A sob nearly tore out of her throat, relief and gratitude welling tears in her eyes instantly and she had to fight to keep her composure. Her jaw ached with how tightly her
teeth were clenched and she marched stiffly past the Inquisition and Court both and out to the same balcony she'd fallen off the day before. At least she knew there was a viable escape route. The tears scalded as they fell, her skin clammy and cold in the night breeze. But she refused to make a sound, savagely crushing the sobs her body ached for.

Until Iron Bull quietly stood at the railing next to her, doing nothing more than resting a comforting arm across her shoulders. Her will power crumbled and she curled into his chest, sobs muffled against scars earned from much worse battles. He hugged her then, letting her hid the emotions against his chest until she felt capable of speaking them in a less primal fashion.

"I nearly got that little boy killed." her voice sounded terrible, emotions and injury making her sound phlegmy. Iron Bull didn't speak, seeming to know she wasn't looking for answers- the reality was just too much for her to digest all at once. "I wanted to kill her. I wanted to take her to the ground and bash her skull into the white marble." the confession left her feeling hollow.

"You didn't." Iron Bull pointed out, letting her pull free from the embrace.

She turned to look out over the balcony, eyes seeking out the route she'd run the night before; someone had raked the pebbles back into aesthetic order. "I wanted to. I didn't spare her out of mercy Iron Bull; why should she get off easy, death is an end and she deserves to pay."

"But I think I'm capable of very bad things if I'm angry enough and someone's hurt one of my people." she cautioned insistently.

"You're still riding your adrenaline and endorphin high Dawn; a bad guy tried to hurt a cute kid to get to you. You disarmed her, with perfect form by the way, and then subdued her." he settled his hands on her shoulders and it was only then that she realized she was swaying from side to side as if she was unable to stand still. "Don't mistake being a passionate person for being someone who let's those emotions rule them." he corrected. "If you were then Florianne's brains would be staining the dance floor."

"That might actually make the party stop." Dawn's humour was a weak defence.

Iron Bull gently cupped her face in both his hands. "You did well tonight Dawn; and not just tonight. None of this is familiar to your world but you're handling it amazingly." he affirmed for her. "But right now you're in shock and don't even realize it kadan."

"I'm fine." she immediately denied and then hissed as he gently put a finger near the slash across her ribs. "It's just a flesh wound." the Monty Python quote was reflexive and ironically true. But now that she was more aware of the pain she couldn't ignore it completely anymore.

"Little Bas you're lucky its shallow. You still need to have it looked at," his hand was warm against her side and because her better sense had left the room she thought about kissing him. "You're still in shock." he admonished.

Dawn swallowed the lump of emotions that tried to clog her throat. He probably had a point about the shock. "We should go back inside, once the Inquisitor is done her thing she's supposed to come
out here and dance with her partner." she all but babbled, trying to act normal.

"She's already danced with Beardy, yesterday to cover for when Solas and I had to get you out." Iron Bull carefully reminded.

"Doesn't mean she can't want to dance with him again. Useful tip; most women will say yes if asked to dance." she tried to tease as if she didn't still feel jittery and hollow.

With the sounds of celebration from inside filling the air at least it wasn't an awkward silence, but it still surprised her to hear music start up again. Apparently there ain't no party like an Orlesian party because a murder plot ain't gonna make the beats stop.

"Your ribs are still bleeding." he reminded.

"Yes." Dawn nodded, aware of the sting.

"Your knuckles are too." he held his hand out for hers and she let him turn the abraded skin up into the light.

"So they are." she agreed as he kept hold of her hand.

"And you're still in shock Little Bas." he had a damn smirk.

"Shut up and dance with me." her own smile softened the words.

He grinned and despite her injured ribs she lifted her other hand to rest on his chest; lifting for his shoulder would crack the scabs open. His other hand curled over her hip, half on her skin and half on fabric. Everything else in her head quieted down as her focus decided that was the most important thing in the world. There was no Court of judgemental eyes watching them or complicated choreography to follow, and the music sounded distant compared to the night breeze across her skin. It was easy because even if she stepped wrong Iron Bull adapted to it and kept them on the beat. And because she'd said shut up and dance, Iron Bull did exactly that; dancing with her on the balcony without ever saying a word. But it was different than the barren silences between them from before and they both seemed to know it.

The music stopped and they stepped apart and it was like the world popped back into existence. Sarcastic clapping pattered from the archway and Dawn saw Alena and Morrigan about to have their 'liaison' conversation. It was Morrigan clapping and as soon as she had Dawn's attention, she walked out. "Twas wonderfully spun Harbinger." her sharp smile indicated more than just the dance.

"It's hard not to dance well when your partner knows what they're doing." Dawn carefully deflected, knowing that she was outmatched in this kind of exchange. "But don't let us keep you two from business, I'll have plenty of time to make your acquaintance." she put a pleasant smile on.

Morrigan gave her an intense look and Dawn wondered for a moment if the Witch of the Wilds was about to unleash her acidic wit at her. "Tis vexing to realize that although you appear quite mundane to the regular senses, to the magical ones you are quite something unique." she sounded annoyed to admit.

"The Harbinger for the Inquisition is from a world none on ours can even imagine." Solas almost sounded angry as he commanded attention. And Dawn realized he was as he frowned at her.

"Ena'vun, if I may?" he offered his hand, the anger in his gaze directed at the slight wound in her side. He'd been literally pleading with her to take it easy today and instead she got into a fist fight with someone who was armed. The fact that the only part of his anger showing was a frown was
impressive as hell; he had to be irritated.

"She threatened Felessan Old Wolf; kindness was not an option." Dawn immediately stated.

"Yet she still lives and breathes; that isn't a kindness?" Morrigan scoffed.

"No." Dawn and Solas answered in unison and she shot him an amused smile. She'd liked Morrigan for the most part and agreed with her on some things even, but Dawn had long ago accepted that the game was pathetic and weak compared to the real people. However Dawn still refused to let the Witch of the Wild get away with her mysterious and aloof routine.

So Dawn let Solas take her hand so he could do what little doctoring he could for her. She looked back at Iron Bull and saw him watching the entire scene unfolding with an amused smile on his face. He caught her looking at him and gave the deliberate blink that was his best attempt at a wink and for some reason her face flushed.

"Your hand is fine, though expect some mild bruising." Solas' clinical assessment drew her attention now, and when he carefully checked her ribcage goose bumps raced across her skin. "It will sting but this needs to be cleaned out, the Venatori have used poison on you before." he warned with a carefully neutral tone but when he met her gaze his eyes were all anger. "I thought there was supposed to be a competent mage with barrier watching over you?" the fact that his anger wasn't directed at her surprised her.

"I'm fine." she insisted but it didn't calm him any.

"Areolasa ma Ena'vun." he turned the phrase back at her and she understood a little better how much it had wrecked him. "I've shared dreas and memories with you; there is never going to be a time when I am alright with seeing you hurt."

Before Dawn could reply to that Varric swaggered over to say, "Sweetheart do you know how to do anything the easy way?"

"I only know on how to do two things the easy way and you haven't asked the right way to see them." Dawn waggled her eyebrows with her tongue caught in her teeth to imply innuendo.

"So what is the right way to ask?" Varric challenged back, laughing at her antics.

"Politely." Dawn kept a straight face for another heartbeat before laughing. But less than a minute later and her laughter slid tears down her cheeks and suddenly she wasn't laughing anymore but crying again.

"There's the drop." Iron Bull announced from over her shoulder but he sounded weirdly far away with how her ears were ringing.

"Let's take you home Ena'vun." Solas' suggestion was accompanied by his familiar embrace.

"Home is not a place or a People, it's the people you pick." Cole announced, suddenly appearing. His arrival had caused the others to react and her comforting hug to end, but it had also given Dawn the surprise she'd needed to snap out of the emotional fog.

"Time for the Inquisition to go kids." Alena ambled over to the growing huddle of people around Dawn.

Her friends had helped her keep from making yet another spectacle with her emotions at least; they'd shuffled her to the side and surrounded her from view. Iron Bull was a comforting wall of
muscle, Alena a deadly grin leading the way, Solas a quiet comfort and Varric straight up held her hand as they walked out.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:

Dwarven:

Deshyr = Assembly Lords

Elvhen

Falon-saota- bond mate, husband or wife.

“Arelasa ma, arvenemima melahn’an era.” = I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream (carefully arranged to make it syllabically fit the song too)
Sometimes the most terrifying thing is silence, and a Healer needs Compassion. Dawn finds that the more she understands the less she comprehends.

Varric tried not to notice the blood on his hand but it was through active will power instead of blind ignorance. It wasn’t his blood, despite participating in Stabby’s little counterambush he had been far from any messy violence —one of the fringe benefits to being a long distance Rogue—and instead it was transfer from Dawn’s hand onto his. It took him a hard swallow to get over the fact that it was Dawn’s blood all over his hand though.

He’d sat at Victoria’s bedside after her duel with the Arishok; he’d seen how close she’d been to dying and it had taken every act of self-discipline to not fall apart then. Watching someone that is so full of life and vivacity be laid low had hurt, and Varric had known even then he’d cared about Hawke more than he wanted to let on. He wasn’t in love with Dawn, she was Sweetheart in jest because Varric knew where his heart really belonged, but that did not make it any easier to accept seeing her hurt less than a day after someone tried to kill her.

The tears had stopped, her skin had been the icy cold of shock, and still Varric held her hand for the entire silent carriage ride back to their villa. Considering that Gaspard had been all but coerced into a triumvirate with Celene and Briala it was not actually considered safer ground, but Varric knew the Inquisition had fortified it to be the safest place for their people within Halamshiral.

“Come on Sweetheart, let’s get you cleaned up.” Varric cajoled to the alarmingly quiet Dawn still following him around. When she gave him no lip back he started to worry a little more.

The Advisors and Companions alike were all watching her as inconspicuously as some of them were capable, so it was a good thing Dawn was so out of it or else their scrutiny would be adding to her discomfort.

"A Mage and a Warrior should also take their baths; just because the party's over doesn't mean that all the participants have gone home." Alena sounded tired, not surprising considering the last three days have taken about a year off of Varric's own life; and he hadn't seen Dawn with her throat practically slit. The damage was covered by her shirt collar but Varric knew there'd be a scar; he'd seen Carta victims garrottes had been used on.

"I'll gladly take first shift in the baths," Sparkler suavely stepped in and Varric almost timed the response to it perfectly.

"Absolutely not, you already failed to protect Ena'vun tonight." Chuckles' harmless hobo reputation was taking a mild beating with his current aggression.

"I set Barrier before Dawn could even engage in the fight, it was nullified." Dorian defended.

And it bothered Varric that Dawn was stuck listening to this while she still looked so...wilted. So he simply kept leading her towards the bath house. "Whoever comes with gets to bring the robes." He called without looking back. Varric was fairly certain he heard Red laugh while a few others
It didn't surprise Varric one bit when Iron Bull walked in as the designated Warrior with the robes but he was very surprised when the Iron Lady came in a step behind, carrying an honest to Andraste glass of wine. His surprise must have shown because she looked pleased.

"While others might squabble and lose the chance, I come prepared to be of actual use." Vivienne brandished the glass of wine and a jar Varric hadn't noticed earlier.

"But why," now Dawn spoke, "no offence Vivienne but you're the one person I've not sat and had a drink with, and that's because you want it that way." the Court Enchanter's unexpected arrival had at least jostled Dawn out of her passive silence.

Varric could see Vivienne's expression and she didn't even bat an eyelash in the face of Dawn's blunt honesty. "My dear, such ungentled directness can be forgiven for the trials you have endured on your first visit to Court, but only so far." Vivienne's return volley was a slap of warning.

In response Dawn pulled an unimpressed face, reached up and unfastened the collar holding her shirt straps in place. "You mean surviving this?" She didn't have to point to the still angry red slash scarred across half her neck and the dark black bruises clustered around it like Downtowners around a fire. Dawn didn't wait for Vivienne to reply, she just unfastened the rest of her top, pulled her trousers off unceremoniously and stepped into one of the hot pools without another's word. Varric was glad to hear her getting angry; better that then her earlier blank nothing.

"This will remove the vitaar far more easily than scrubbing," Vivienne proffered the jar to Dawn in lieu of responding to her demonstration, "without also irritating your wounds." The glass of wine was also set next to Dawn, "and this has a tincture in it that will help prevent infection while reducing pain." Varric looked past the ladies to see Iron Bull had settled into the hottest bath, watching the scene as avidly as Varric was.

"Thank you Vivienne." Dawn's anger had dissipated with the steam it seemed, though Varric suspected they had all glimpsed a piece of what it could be like when she confronted the Grand Duchess. It only made sense, he'd heard the story of how Dawn had used a broken staff to fell a demon on her first day here.

"Darling, you gave me more time, I do not need the frivolity to afford you the same respect." He didn't understand the Court Enchanter's reference but they worked to kill whatever tension Dawn had animating her.

Dawn slumped in the bath, dunking under the water's surface deliberately and resurfaced a moment later looking more like herself again. Varric marvelled at her endless seeming ability to recover from the knocks life kept throwing at her. It reminded him of a certain blonde he was desperately missing, though he was one of the only ones to know how much of a show it was from Hawke; he knew all of Victoria's tells.

"I'll go to work on your hair Sweetheart, you get the Vitaar off." Varric knew how to play along with the best of them.

"You'll put me to sleep if you play with my hair Sugar." She warned but didn't decline the offer.

Varric laughed and stole some of the ointment to remove the vitaar, wondering if it worked on blood as well; one of her braids looked sealed together by it. There was a reason he wanted her focused on the vitaar instead. The baths constantly circulated, engineering not magic, and the water ran pinkish red, milky white, and murky black for only a short while. And Dawn never knew the
horror story her hair had been. Which was good because when it was clean it was a silken blanket of hair.

No one remarked when Dawn finished the wine. And no one took their time luxuriating, not even Madam de Fer. But Varric realized what a bad idea it was to rush when Dawn gave a pain filled hiss.

"Shiiiit." She muttered, "I just scrubbed the fucking scab open; ow."

"What'd you do that for Sweetheart?" Varric lightly teased, knowing the last thing her still shot nerves would need was a fuss being kicked up.

"Because it's surprisingly hard to tell the difference between blood red vitaar and blood red blood while my side's still kinda numb." Her 'talking patiently' voice wasn't enough to distract from the content; numb was not good.

"It wasn't numb earlier Little Bas, when did it start loosing sensation?" Iron Bull honestly seemed at ease and Varric found it helped him relax as much as it must have worked on Dawn too.

"After Solas checked my injury out; it's just a little magic." Dawn shrugged. It was one of the few times Varric was viscerally reminded that Dawn wasn't from this world; she had no idea at all about how magic actually worked.

"Before cleaning it? For all that it's a clever finesse of magic that seems imprudent." Vivienne inserted her opinion on Solas' actions.

"There's no poison." Bull offered simply, and then ruined Varric's calm by adding in, "I checked Little Bas' wound for discolouration and bleeding response earlier, and I tasted no poison when I checked."

"That's disgusting Tiny, and I've seen you eat boiled nug before." Varric condemned.

"I didn't swallow!" Tiny immediately protested.

"I never took you for a spitter Iron Bull." Dawn's comment brought a beat of silence and then one sigh with three rounds of laughter.

This time Varric was glad to see no tears after the laughter. He didn't believe she was anywhere close to fine yet, but being able to laugh for real was a good sign. It has to be. He had led Dawn to the baths by the hand but she had put herself together enough to function before he dropped her off at her room. If that wasn't a win, he didn't know what would ever count.

Varric knew Nightingale had already swept Dawn's room; Solas too if his protective anger earlier was any indication. Varric was starting to wonder about the Elf, he seemed a lot less paternal lately but Varric kept his opinion to himself. Still when he saw Iron Bull and Solas having a low voiced conversation without going for each other's throats, he had to fight every Rogue urge in his body not to slip into Stealth to listen in. It was not his business tonight, he needed to figure out how to have a very important conversation with Hawke. Though he did wonder at the two chess pieces sitting on the railing at their elbows.

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Kaaras was asleep when he felt something change. His entire life he'd had a strong connection to the Fade, to the point where it was easier for him to find Spirits than even his Necromancer sister, and the changes in the Fade alerted him. Unbridled joy and then a wash of concern and Kaaras was
awake before the pounding stomp of Taarlok's panicked run could rouse him for Shokrakar's delivery. Finally.

The father to be looked ready to fall over. "Breathe; you're no good to us on the floor." Kaaras the Healer got away with ordering his superior ranked mercenary around; right now he was the highest authority.

"She's saying the cramps aren't bad but there's blood." Taarlok gasped out.

"Then get some water and some towels. After that get some more lyrium and healing potions just for extras." he already had everything he needed but all the midwives had told him to give the father something to do. One lady even suggested having him go chop wood if necessary. Apparently fathers were useless in most cases of childbirth.

And sure enough, Taarlok looked less pasty now that he had a tangible goal to achieve. Kaaras kept the amused smile on his face as he ducked into the tent to see Shokrakar pacing, naked and with only mild spotting on her thighs.

His magic tumbled free of his restraint, washing over the expectant mother. She was fine, the cramping in her body showing no unhealthy signs and even the blood was normal. But the baby inside her wasn't as fine as Kaaras wanted it to be.

The babe was positioned wrong, a distressing fact Kaaras had been half expecting and was even mildly confident he could handle. But much more worrisome to Kaaras' magic was realizing how STRONGLY the Fade was reacting to the birth. The almost born babe would one day be a powerful mage, but as of right now it just put the child at extreme risk. Shokrakar and Taarlok were going to have a son if Kaaras could get the mother and child through the birthing process, but to do that he had to chase off the Demons first.

Shokrakar could tell none of this, only that she had 'strange body' and was trusting to his skills to see them through. He felt concern over the baby being in breach position, but Kaaras had no clue how to defend a soul from Demons when it wasn't his own. So he'd just have to make himself the bigger target so the Demons lost sight of the child.

"The baby's in the wrong position, we're going to have to go in and get him from you." his voice was confident sounding, and to be honest he had expected it. For some reason breach babies were devastatingly common amongst Qunari and Vashoth, requiring a surgical solution that Kaaras could perform now. In theory. He'd just never done it before.

"What else?" Shokrakar asked, calm as only she could be in the face of that news.

"He's a mage, different than either Kasaanda or I but I can't tell what else. And with the Veil so thin here They are noticing him; he's dreaming." Kaaras didn't bother trying to lie, this was her body and the child within hers to care for. "I have an idea how to protect your child and see you both through this."

"I trust you, Healer." her quiet confidence helped settle his anxiety. He would keep both mother and child alive, no matter what.

Even if it meant risking possession like he was about to do.

For the first time since his own magic presented Kaaras stripped away every limit and control he'd ever put on his magic and it surged forward like lava erupting from a mountain. Outwardly he led Shokrakar to the low bed that would be her surgery table, hands steadier than they had been in
years. Kasaanda must have felt his exposure because she stepped inside the tent even though she'd sworn neither love nor money would get her in there.

Both Kasaanda and Kaaras were quiet about their spirituality, though both believed deeply in their own way. Because when Kaaras let his magic loose it was a tsunami of life; up until the exact moment Kasaanda's magic took over. Some thing left the body and Kasaanda's Necromancy controlled the corpse that a heartbeat before Kaaras' magic had been trying to Heal. Their magic proved a soul existed so neither twin ever felt the need to worry about what god put it there. If pressed Kaaras would attribute it to the Lady, a half formed amalgamation of religious females he'd been raised to respect and if demanded he would call Andraste. He wasn't sure exactly what his twin believed, but he saw her understanding when she looked from him to the child still inside Shokrakar and back. Until the baby's soul was settled into its skin it was at risk. She gave him a nod and settled herself into a meditative position.

He could work with the Fade while awake to a degree she couldn't, so Kasaanda was setting herself into position to take over as distraction should Kaaras fall. And her magic would tell her the moment the fight had been lost. Or won.

"Drink this and lay back." Kaaras gave Shokrakar the vial of sleeping draught he'd brewed for just this emergency.

"If I don't get to meet my son, I would have liked to call him Taam-Kas." Shokrakar said simply, accepting that the worst may still happen but quietly confident that he would see them alive and well. Kaaras let the emotions stirred feed into the Well of Power he was lighting as a beacon around himself.

"I will see you both through." Kaaras insisted firmly, the Power he was holding in check colouring his voice.

Kaaras was only vaguely aware of Taarlok quietly sitting off to the side, holding Shokrakar's hand even as she swigged the vial before lying down. He remained silent as Kaaras leaned over to cut a precise line across the skin and muscles of Shokrakar's belly; deep enough to pull child and birth sac out but close enough to keep the rest of her insides where they belonged. After that Kaaras could only care about his patients, and ignoring the cackling calls of Demons come to find him playing bait.

Since he'd pooled all that Power anyways, initially just as a way to be distracting, Kaaras didn't hesitate to flood Healing into Shokrakar's exhausted body. He gave her energy to fill the stores tapped out by growing another life, to ease the pain adrenaline and endorphins couldn't erase, and with the Power still available to him he dealt with the umbilical and fluids, letting her skin and muscles smoothly close over a healthy system. It had been easy for him to do in seconds what her body would have taken weeks to achieve, but as always Kaaras had to make sure he didn't burn her system out with Healing. Instead he set her body and let her sleep, focus now on his final patient.

Kaaras held the still silent Taam-Kas and slipped his awareness into the Fade, knowing that he would not have to go far to find monsters. Mages don't often describe their own experiences in the Fade because it would expose too much about their own inner minds, but Kaaras knew this was not his usual Fade. It was too empty.

In flagrant dramatic display a small basket with Taam-Kas sleeping in it was presented in the middle of a completely empty space, on a stone pedestal. Kaaras was a Healer, but not naïve; he knew a trap when he saw one. He was just going to have to be tougher than whatever it was that would come at him; every second counted.
His first two steps held tense cavernous silence and nothing else, but before his foot struck the third one he was driven to his knees by ear shattering screaming. He pressed his hands over his ears but it did nothing to drown out the accompanying noise inside his head. All the screams of pain and anguish that he couldn't ease. All the patients his magic had failed, he had failed because he did too much or too little; had learned too slowly to save more. He tired so quickly because every fraction of control was hard fought and won against the ruin his gift could cause.

"All your talent, your Power and still you can't save one little child." A well build Qunari addressed him, bearing militaristic even if the face was unfamiliar. "You can't save him, not alone; you simply don't have the control it takes."

"And what's it to you?" Kaaras challenged, keenly aware of the fact that he wasn't talking to a mortal being.

"You could be so much more than you are. Your gift is a force to be reckoned with, and yet you let these insignificant nothings limit you. You wouldn't have to worry about control with me to help you, I could do the worrying while you could finally focus on Healing. As many as needed you, for as long as there was someone hurting. We could be glorious." Pride revealed itself with his words and Kaaras gave a disgusted sneer.

He knew this personal Demon well by now. Kaaras had had to face the reality of his ego a long time ago or else fall prey to it when someone's life was on the line. Thankfully he'd also learned that fire worked perfectly well in the Fade, especially against a physical opponent. He didn't need a staff or spear for focus because this wasn't about control. "I do not need Pride to be my best self," he sounded calm but the fire he'd called raged, ready to be unleashed.

"You are a little boy in the face of monsters that will consume you." The Arishok shaped Pride still tried to cajole, unable to believe Kaaras wasn't interested. "Let me help keep you alive so you can help so many more. There's no shame in wanting to be the greatest Healer Thedas has ever known."

"No." he didn't try to offer logic or explanation. His soul was not for Pride to take.

Kaaras closed his ears to the words beckoning him and let the fire inside play. It felt like exhaling after holding his breath for so long, a spot of bright relief to him while Pride screamed in agony. The fire was unquenchable and his Healing had no call towards Spirits or Demons, so Kaaras was free to let fire ravage the Arishok into ash.

It shouldn't have surprised him to see Wrath patiently waiting to unleash her fury. He tried not to think about how appropriate it was that she had chosen to wear the form of his sister, that was her own Demon to face. "He always was full of hot air; it was satisfying to hear you make him scream." she grinned with the bright triumph that looked far less sinister on Kasaanda.

Fire and fury and chaos would do no good against an opponent that embodied all three, but Kaaras had a few other options. He thought of Shokrakar's infinite patience, of how still his father would be before deciding to move, of how the ash that falls from the mountain was as deadly as the fire, and he strove the emulate them. He didn't speak and Rage's patience snapped like his own twin's would have. It was disorienting to have something so wrong play so correctly.

"What, cat got your tongue? Or do you just not have the horns to get the job done?" her mocking tone cut but he didn't rise to the bait. He focused on the Power he'd pooled, the reserves slowly draining out the longer he held onto it. Eventually he'd run out of energy entirely and then he'd really be in trouble.
Rage as Kasaanda stormed closer, looming larger than his twin was in the flesh. She was threatening in the way of loud noises and violent winds; the unpredictable, uncontrolled impulse of nature. Kaaras stood before infuriated Rage and held fast. "Doesn't it ever get tiring to have to be the one always in control? Aren't you tired of limiting yourself so they don't have to feel afraid of what you can do?" she circled around him and it was hard to hold still, stay rooted, with such a threat at his back.

Kaaras pulled his energy into himself again, not to lash out with fire like he had against Pride but to completely cut Rage off from it. He stared past the grinning, snarling face of his twin and focused on the baby sleeping in the basket. The Fade wasn't real but it was also so painfully real; a layer of imagery laid over the world that he could almost see. Rage had never been his most fearsome Demon and he knew it; his anger had always been a shield to defend him against the Demon that would likely claim him one day; Despair.

"You don't have to face it alone." Rage promised, wearing Kasaanda's face and always ready to give him strength.

And like always he could only shake his head no and step away without saying a thing. He could not fight Rage because to engage her was to invoke her. The only way he'd ever triumphed over the anger inside was to acknowledge that it was there and be cautious of how he used it to help his patients.

It made him a relentless Healer, but it was never enough.

He could never save all of them, not when it counted.

Kaaras didn't notice when Rage faded away, his focus entirely on the still baby in the basket. Taam-Kas didn't look asleep anymore, too still and quiet.

"No." he didn't mean to speak, feet flying forwards and hands grasping. Nothing stood in this way or offered challenge as he ran for Taam-Kas' tiny form.

"No." gasped out as his magic failed, his hands finding a cold, still corpse. Kaaras' body curled around the basket as he lifted the baby's body out, mechanically trying to restore breath and life.

"No." barely spoken; breath gone to tiny lungs with pathetic, desperate hope fading for every heartbeat and lack thereof. He'd taken too long with his own struggles to save the child.

"No." his vision blurred as tears came on the heels of defeat. His magic ran dry, useless and powerless in the face of Death. Even here. Especially here. The well of Power he'd built as metaphorical bonfire had finally burned out.

"Yes." Dawn's voice drew his heads up, shock to find her face used here. More devastating than seeing her here was seeing her blood soaked from where her throat was slit. "You stayed here to save a baby that died anyways. And to pay for it I was left without my Healer." Her voice was resigned as if she had known this was her fate. It disturbed Kaaras greatly to realize Dawn may exactly know her fate and still let it happen if it meant letting her friends live, she cared so much about everyone's future but her own. If she had been here she would have fought harder and faster and gotten to Taam-Kas in time. The pain of that realization hurt in a way he hadn't expected.

"They're lying." Cole's presence was even more shocking than seeing Dawn's face used here, but somehow Kaaras knew it wasn't a figment or symbol. Compassion had somehow come.

"You can't make your decision when they're lying. You can't see when they twist and lie and hide.
I can see even then but I don't always understand or know, I can't always tell when its the right thing. I want to help but although I See I do not Know.” he plaintively explained, an absurdly pale and trusting hand offered.

Compassion reached out to him, offering strength and asking nothing in return than for Kaaras to act on it. For him to use what he knew to help save lives, because Compassion was letting him See. As soon as Kaaras took Cole's hand he saw the insidiously clever attack Despair had used. The other Demons had used avatars to lure and confront him, their power seated into the spectre. Despair had simply let him believe his worst fear so it could feed off the helplessness it engendered. Taam-Kas lived, defended by Kasaanda and it was time to leave the Fade.

Kaaras opened his eyes to the physical world, holding a very much alive and gleefully screaming baby while Compassion knelt across the tent in the shape of a young man named Cole. Shokrakar was even already awake.

"Shokrakar, Taarlok, this is your child Taam-Kas. One day he is going to be a mage." Kaaras didn't bother trying to hid the tears that freely dripped down his face as he set babe in mother's arms.

"Welcome to the world Taam-Kas." Shokrakar quietly greeted her first living child while Taarlok gently wiped a wet towel to clean up the babe's face.

With the happy new parent's absorbed in their introductions, Kaaras got a chance to look at Cole properly. He'd had few direct interactions with him before, but since Compassion had helped him, Kaaras now saw the young man in front of him differently. For one thing, he really was just a young man. Kaaras could now See the spirits mumbling around Kasaanda, lured in by her Necromancy but Cole just peered back at him with bright, shocked looking eyes. There was a bond between them now but it wasn't like Kaaras had expected; he didn't feel possessed and Cole still existed outside of him. Like the line between alive and dead, Kaaras now knew there was a distinct difference between Spirit and Demon. Though the Chantry probably saw it all as the same thing.

Kasaanda stirred awake, clawing her way back into consciousness. She stared at Kaaras for a long moment, sensing the change in him and likely listening to her own spirits for counsel. He had always drawn the attention of the spirits but she had always understood them better. Her yellow eyes slid to look at Cole and her eyebrows jumped towards her horns. But to his surprise she stayed silent, for once having tact.

The weakness and dizziness his actions caused kept him still, and Kaaras felt surreal as he stared down at the lyrium potion. But still he didn't take it. If necessary he could reach for Compassion and draw upon that bond now, though he didn't want to take it for granted; but the exhaustion of well spent magic was masochistically enjoyable and he felt no need to rush his recovery just yet. Mother and child were both hale and healthy.

"The Inquisition is on its way, though they are days behind now." Cole spoke up, watching the child and parents cuddle in open curiosity. Kaaras wondered at how calm the Valo-Kas leader was to have a spirit show up during her delivery but between the Healing and confronting his own Demons, he was officially too tired to worry about it.

"They might just be ready to let others hold the baby by then." Kasaanda spoke up and gestured for Compassion and Kaaras to go first. He tried not to take is as her not wanting him at her back now.

Kaaras ducked out of the tent to see all the available Valo-Kas waiting anxiously for news. The screaming baby was a good sign so they all looked in good cheer. "The Valo-Kas has a little brother!" he announced and the mercenary family roared back in enthusiastic response, collapsing into smaller clusters of gossip. They would wait for the parents to show the child, and then the
questions would come.

"The rising sun calls me little brother. She will be home soon." Cole cryptically remarked but didn't seem to want a response. At least not until he turned those astonishingly bright blue eyes up to meet Kaaras'. "Despair lied with her face."

Which at least confirmed for Kaaras that the rising sun was in fact Dawn. "It's good that Dawn is safe." he let relief loosen his shoulders.

"She survived her assassination." Cole nodded in agreement and suddenly Kaaras was all anxiety again. "Though there is noise in her head its different than before." his words failed to comfort.

"Someone attacked the Harbinger? Bold." Kasaanda summarized, giving Kaaras the moment he needed to realize that Despair's attack would likely have been successful had he known that news earlier; the guilt would have hurt deeply.

"A silvered mask over a black heart. She threatened the little arrow and tried to hurt the rising sun. Now the Wolf and the Bull and the Blade all want her blood, but life is not always a mercy." that was probably profoundly important.

"Let's get the details of the story from someone.... coherent." Kasaanda suggested, impatience an unpleasant familiarity after Rage.

"Is the Necromancer made uncomfortable talking to a Spirit?" Kaaras couldn't help but tease his sister, their method of coping with unusual things heavily reliant on humour and violence. Kaaras realized that this was the longest he'd seen Cole actually stick around.

Before he could turn and ask Compassion if he was stuck now, Cole answered. "Compassion Sees and doesn't know. Cole can know but not See. I am free to go, but Compassion will always be with you now." he seemed at ease over that illogical dichotomy.

"My brother's an abomination and yet I'm the one people look at funny for having a pet skull." Kasaanda muttered, tone joking instead of distressed. It didn't mean she was actually fine with the sequence of events, but Kaaras knew that she would leave it until they were alone to talk to him about it.

"Sod off Tadwinks," Kaaras teased back, "didn't you hear his news? They're almost back." he cajoled.

Kasaanda's smile started small and reluctant but quickly grew. She might not say it out loud but Kaaras knew his sister was in love with her Archer and had missed her. Likely as much as Kaaras had missed Cassandra; it had been most of a month for both of them and they were equally eager to see the Inquisition return. It was a far cry from the vagabond mercenary image they'd tried to project.

Though it was going to be interesting to explain to Cassandra, a Seeker of the Chantry, that he was now bonded to Compassion.

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The terrible weather that had chased them here had thankfully abated before the Inquisition left Halamshiral. It was still blustery but the idea of being back at Skyhold soon seemed to drive them all onwards and Dawn had to keep reminding herself that just riding off on the Bog Unicorn was a bad idea. Even if it would have been faster. She felt absolutely unsettled and at first she was willing to accept that it might be a hold over from nearly dying. And maybe some of it was
legitimately due to that but Dawn also had the strange feeling that something dangerous was just behind her.

It left her rather sleepless as she always hovered at best in a daze. Then inevitably she'd jerk into abbreviated reaction though there'd be nothing there; the tent she shared with Cassandra, Leliana, and Josephine empty of threat. Riding in the middle of the mobile Inquisition, silently accepting the security she'd flouted not too long ago, Dawn still felt like something terrible followed in her wake.

She tried to be discrete about her hypervigilance but Dawn knew that her unease was picked up by those more trained in reading body language than she was at hiding it; they were just giving her privacy to process. But since no one else seemed to sense something wrong, clearly it was just in her head. That offered exactly no comfort. And because Dawn seemed to enjoy inflicting angst on herself she was trying to distract herself from one fear by obsessing over Adamant being next. Soon her friends would be at very real risk, and even though she planned to be there for it, there were absolute chances that someone she loved could die. This wasn't the game; there were no resurrection potions here, no raising a fallen Companion; dead was dead.

She'd almost died, but the creeping down her back wasn't just from that. It couldn't be. As her wounds healed Dawn felt more accepting that yes, she'd almost died; but she hadn't. The fear wasn't greater than her drive to keep living. So why then did she spend every night feeling an unknown spectre of fear wrap around her throat?

The Bog Unicorn picked up on her agitation, clear if silent desire to Run only fuelled by her anxiety. Any hope she had of appearing settled was undone by the instincts of Haste. And of course her embarrassment over that didn't help her ease any so Dawn suffered in quiet, frantic silence.

"Ena'vun," Solas broke the ring of respectful space around her and pulled his Hart along side her, "why do you look like you haven't rested since leaving Halamshiral? I would have thought you'd be glad to quit that place." it was a polite way to say that she looked to be coming undone at the seams.

Dawn gave a tired smile, not bothering to lie to the shrewd Wolf. "I feel like something is following me every step of the way back. Some blindingly bright hungry nothing chasing me down. But no one else feels it so..." she explained, trying to keep her voice low.

"You react to the world, and the Veil, differently than anyone I've ever heard of Ena'vun; don't doubt your instincts." He quietly affirmed and Dawn couldn't help but feel a surge of gratitude to him for not dismissing her concerns.

Solas gave her an almost playful smile and offered his hand, "Why don't we go see if there is any sign in the Fade of what you're sensing?"

Go confront the thing leaving her shaking in the dark of night with no idea as to why? Hells ya, she could finally do something about it. Dawn gave a savage grin, satisfied with the idea of taking Fen'Harel Hunting in the Fade. It was long practiced ease that had her gracefully shifting in her saddle to crouch on top of it, making the step off of Bog's back over to Solas and his Hart.

They fell into comfortable ease, tucked into place around each other without misstep. Solas wrapped an arm around her ribs, keeping her back pulled close to his chest. It helped keep the chill wind off her back and she was grateful for the warmth he seemed to radiate. With his free hand he retrieved one of those Fade wafers they'd used to practice dancing.

"Sleep Ena'vun; I will see to it that you are unmolested." He promised and Dawn was comforted by his intensity. He believed her even though she had no proof yet; it was humbling to realize his trust
in her. She took the wafer he offered on her tongue and relaxed back, ruefully amused that Hunting with Fen'Harel was the safest she'd felt all week. His grip around her guaranteed that she wouldn't slip free, and Dawn let the wafer work on her exhaustion.

But for once she didn't slip easily into the Fade. The wafer kicked in and Dawn's body melted into repose but she wasn't asleep. Anxiety sat on her chest, its claws sunk in deep and keeping her alert. Whatever she was afraid of it was here in the physical world it seemed. And somehow Solas felt her strange entrapment, not leaving her to struggle through it alone.

"What is wrong Ena'vun?" His voice sounded as groggy as she felt but Dawn had no idea how he had the ability to talk. Her body was asleep but her mind felt like a kite caught in turbulent wind; a single string holding it in place as she was buffeted about. She wasn't sure what move would keep her aloft and what would plummet her to the ground; it was eerie to feel her mind so adrift from her body. And there was no way she knew of to express it to the Mage trying to help her.

The same terrible something was still too close, stalking and choking the air from Dawn's lungs. Distantly she felt Solas settle his Barrier over them and then all Dawn could feel was overwhelming sensation she dubbed the Wolf as Solas set his Power around them like a mantel. It sunk into her back, across her body where he held her carefully in place and sent shivers down her spine as Dawn became absolutely certain Fen'Harel's blue eyes were showing.

"Sleep ara Ena'vun." and surrounded by the Power of a being once worshipped as a god; Dawn slept.

She expected to dream, to face in the Fade what was haunting her in real life. Dawn was not expecting to land inside a memory. Especially not a memory so perfectly recreated. The antiques shop; the air was so hot and humid Dawn felt the sweat beading under her breasts. She could smell the familiar tang of the Market; car exhaust, slightly rancid garbage, locally grown foods, and the sweat smell of a city baking in a heatwave. It'd been so long since she’d been amongst that many people that the sound was overwhelming at first; a detail she had forgotten over time.

The antiques shop was still achingly beautiful and Dawn was surprised to see Larry there, easily represented in the Fade for the first time; just a memory instead of a torment. He wasn’t as tall as she remembered, his Strongman muscles still straining at his clothes but Dawn had now seen Warriors in tailored clothing; Larry’s look was impressive but his strength wasn’t practical, still he looked damn good. She saw the lines around his mouth solely due to laughter and the love in his eyes as he watched the memory of Dawn-that-was. And Dawn-that-was was so heartbreakingly young still, unbroken and carefree. Dawn looked away, not wanting the reminder of what had been lost a year ago, and was surprised to find that Solas wasn’t with her this time.

The antiques shop was still filled with all the kitsch and the pieces she’d run her hands over, but her eyes were automatically drawn to the stunningly tarnished mirror she now knew to be an Eluvian. Without touching it now her fingertips recalled how the mirror’s surface was as warm as the summer heat could make it but the frame had all but burned with how cold it had been.

Dawn-that-was cowered before the sound as the portal between worlds tore open, getting pulled through it because she’d been the last to touch it; Larry’s death had only occurred because he’d grabbed for her.
Dawn stared at the scene that had changed her life, stunned silent to realize the implications. And of course the Fade restarted the scene, letting it play out again and again for her as if she’d see something different this time; some evidence that Larry’s death wasn’t her fault. Dawn had no tears to cry for this moment any longer despite the guilt churning in her guts and when the scene restarted for the umpteenth time she felt a scream of anger bellow out. Her hands grabbed at one of the pieces of antique furniture and she smashed it against the surface of the only currently inert Eluvian. The defiant roar Dawn let out as the Eluvian shattered to pieces under her assault was deeply satisfying and utterly undone when the scene restarted a heartbeat later; mirror intact.

“Ena’vun.” Solas’ voice finally drew her attention and Dawn started, surprised to see him now since he had been missing from the start.

“Why was there an Eluvian on Earth? How did the Elvhen of Arlathan find their way to my world?” she couldn’t help the questions even though she hadn’t meant to ask them.

“I don’t know.” He admitted solemnly and Dawn believed him; Solas was not one to lightly admit ignorance.

He held a hand out for her, physically guiding her over to the mirror that had been the origin of her sorrows. In the physical world just being in a room with regular mirrors still left her wildly uncomfortable, even though she didn’t go full panic attack anymore, but this mirror had already done its worst to her; there was no fear left in her for it.

“What are the details you can remember about it?” he encouraged her to recall, standing between her and the memory still painfully playing out on a loop.

She breathed and looked at the Eluvian ready for more heartbreak. The mirror itself couldn’t show her reflection, the image blurred out as Dawn realized for all the work she’s done around mirrors she still hadn’t bothered looking in one. And even she had to admit that a year of life in Thedas had changed her more than a little from Dawn-that-was; since she did not know how she looked the Fade could not play off the image. So she looked instead to the frame.

“It was stupidly large; I knew that it would never fit inside a standard room.” She reached out to touch the frame again, feeling the burn of its chill sink into her fingertips.

“Why did you look at it, touch it, if it wasn’t practical to you?” Solas’ voice was quiet enough that Dawn’s attention wasn’t drawn from her inspection.

“Because it looked familiar.” She admitted, trying to let her memory show her the mirror instead of reflecting what she thought it should look like.

“To your eyes or to something in your gut?” his breath stirred the hairs on the back of her neck. She turned her head to direct her words over her shoulder to him without ever breaking her stare at the Eluvian. “I think I knew what it was; I just didn’t believe I could be right. So I ignored it.” She gave a humourless laugh. “If you haven’t noticed Solas, I am very good about not acknowledging things unless they are plainly presented to me. Likewise, I tend to be a little…impulsive with my reactions.” As if she had to explain passionate impulses to the Dread Wolf; his own mythology had tales.

The frame under her fingers hadn’t been metal, but it hadn’t been wood either. Dawn-that-was had assumed it had to be plastic carefully molded but now Dawn knew it was stone. Heavy stone carved with shapes and symbols that never belonged to Earth, weren’t even the patterns of the Dwarves from Thedas.
Her hand came up to trace fingers along one of the designs, fascinated to see it and trying to figure out the meaning. Solas reached along her arm to still her hand against the frame. “Even memory can be invoked with Power Ena’vun. You are not as safe here as you were within my memories.” He warned softly but it didn’t make her retreat. A part of her greatly wanted to take whatever Power was being offered so that she could smash the mirror to bits. As if he knew that, Solas lifted her other hand to press against the glass, the hot and cold of the Eluvian a part of its existence under her hands and only her friend’s body bracketing hers offered anchor.

“I was happy.” The words were finally pulled out of her, painful and cleansing. “I had a good life. My family was doing well, my husband and I were in love, and I didn’t even hate my job. But I was bored,” the admission hurt even now, “I looked at this Eluvian and a part of me knew what it was and I…” her skin felt cold and she wondered how the mirror didn’t fog under her touch from it. “I wanted excitement. I wanted to be a part of something. I wanted the Eluvian to be real and to open and take me here. But I never believed it would.”

The Eluvian stayed dead under her fingers, her unvoiced fear unproven; she hadn’t caused the mirror to come to life. This one, at least, wasn’t out to get her anymore, it had already done its job. “Why are we here?” Dawn felt desperate as she asked Solas, finally pulling her eyes off the Eluvian to look at him.

With his body no longer framing hers it wasn’t hard to see his expression; Solas looked thoughtful as he considered his answer before giving it. Before he could speak though, Dawn felt the Eluvian behind her thrum to life. “No.” she barely breathed the word, feeling the visceral hook of the Eluvian pulling her to Thedas. “No.” she was feeling the choking, burning pain of the garrotte digging into her neck. And still Dawn set her shoulder as Fear propelled her forwards; knocking Solas safely to the ground so the Eluvian couldn’t take him too.

But although she felt Fear laughing, Dawn opened her eyes to see Solas looking alarmed and slightly pained to have her throw them to the ground, but ultimately ok. She wrenched her attention around to the Eluvian only to find that it had remained inert after all.

She slumped off to the side of her friend with an exhausted, irritated groan even as Solas shot a look from her to the Eluvian and back, adjusting his position on the floor without getting up yet. “Ena’vun, I take it you are still apprehensive around Eluvians?” he sounded almost amused.

“Can we please go kick Fear’s ass?” Dawn whined, an arm slung over her eyes to block out the memory that was still looping. She loved Larry dearly but right now she was starting to be sick of seeing his face in this endless repeat.

“Fear has been drawn here in response to you Ena’vun, and I will deal with it,” Solas’ words drove a definite shiver down her spine; Fen’Harel far more obvious in this context. “But it is feeding off of, not causing what you are feeling.” he informed gently. “This memory is your subconscious trying to tell you something. Look at it and see if there is a concept it represents that’s affecting you now.” Solas cajoled with just the right amount of challenge to have Dawn pull her arm off of her face.

“I so head canon you as a shrink in my world Old Wolf.” Dawn fell back on humour to avoid more introspection. She was sick of being so emotionally shattered. She was still sprawled on the floor of the antiques shop, Solas lounging next to her on his elbow; looking utterly at ease. So it was all in her head, she was doing this to herself, but there was a reason for it; now she just had to find it. Dawn rolled to her feet smoothly, standing up in a maneuver the Nightingale had demonstrated. Then turned and offered Solas a hand up. “I think better on my feet; if this memory wants me to solve it then let’s go solve it.” She wondered what seeing what the Dread Wolf could do would be
Solas smiled, letting her pull him up. And thankfully he didn’t comment on how tight her grip was or how she flinched as the memory looped behind her again. Somewhere in the background Fear was gorging itself off of her but not for much longer. “Solving the memory, Ena’vun,” Solas kept his grip on her hand as he stood to keep her attention, “starves Fear.”

“So on with the soul searching.” Dawn made the hands sign for ‘celebrate’ even though Solas wouldn’t recognize it, the gesture feeling strange after so long not signing. “Ugh, this is depressing as crap.” She tried to sound joking but with the look Solas shot her; he wasn’t buying.

“It is uncomfortable but necessary. You do not have to face it alone; I am here for you Ena’vun.” Solas offered and seemed surprised when Dawn hugged him for it.

“Thank you Old Wolf,” Dawn let herself take one last moment before turning to face the memory again.

Larry and Dawn—that-was once again entered the antiques shop, her leading the way without a care in the world and Larry following with an amused smile. Dawn watched them circle around, her actions then much more clearly pulled towards the Eluvian now that she was looking for it, while Larry honed in on the crib.

It was easier to watch the Eluvian come to life and swallow her—that-was whole with a friend at her side. “It’s the Eluvian, that’s why this memory.” Dawn didn’t realize she was speaking.

“Ena’vun,” Solas gently moved her to face him straight on, “it is not your actions that pulled you here.”

Dawn pulled her eyes off the memory to look at his insistent expression, “You saw; I was the last person to touch it, and it hit back.” Dawn wanted to hold a cool head but the memory-scape was doing a number on her. “I’m sad Larry died and I miss him, but I also like my life now too.” Being in the Fade sucked for emotional control; they were already in her head and it was much harder to filter her emotions. “And I am not the same as I was that day; Dawn-that-was wouldn’t have survived Halamshiral.”

For some reason Dawn thought that finally saying it out loud would solve the problem. Her guilt for letting go of parts of her past self a constant weight she ignored because she had to grow and change; even if it meant becoming someone the people she’d once loved might not recognize. But the memory looped again and Dawn gave a truly disgusted snarl as she kicked out at the Eluvian’s frame. Solas wisely remained a silent witness to her temper tantrum.

“I’m not afraid to admit I feel guilty for Larry’s death, for becoming the bloodied fucking Dawn; what more do you want?” she demanded of the inanimate object before kicking it again.

“Ena’vun,” Solas drew her attention again, kindly but determined, “why are you worried about Eluvians?” he redirected her scattered focus and she realized that he had deliberately stood so the mirror was at her back again.

Her skin crawled and it was the exact same as how she felt in the woken world. That sensation of something just waiting to consume her, something she was powerless to defend against. But it had been following her ever since Halamshiral. “Morrigan.” Dawn breathed the Witch’s name. “I’m reacting to the Eluvian Morrigan has.”

Her realization was spoken out loud, Solas looking as surprised at her news as she felt. “Now
Ena’vun, are you truly feeling its presence or are you simply reacting to your subconscious awareness that it’s there?” he pressed for clarification.

“I didn’t get the heebie jeebies from the one in the shop; I think it’s just me being a head case.” Dawn shrugged but smiled. “Head case or not, I can keep my distance from the one Morrigan has; I know when that one gets used.” Knowing what it was had killed the Fear. Dawn didn’t expect Morrigan’s Eluvian to come to life and chase her down so as long as she stayed far from it there was no problem.

Dawn started to laugh in relief, shoulders and chest shaking, but like on the balcony at Halamshiral tears ruined the laughter. Solas hugged her and let her bury the tears against his shoulder, petting her hair and letting her ride out the chaos inside.

“You adapt every day to things in a way that should be impossible Ena’vun.” His voice was soft and comforting, helping the hug settle her back down from the wreck her emotions caused. “Though seeing Fear here tells us that you are not as untouchable to the Fade as you once were, I have felt no weakness in your internal Veil.” He offered analytical comfort as well.

“Have you been trying to breach my defences Old Wolf?” Dawn teased, awkwardly trying to recover from her subconscious self-assault.

“More that I have become intimately aware of them in the pursuit of safeguarding you.” There was a thread of wry humour laced into his words and Dawn flushed. “I keep my People safe Ena’vun.” He reminded and gestured for Dawn to lead the way through a simple looking door that led away from the now empty antiques shop.

“I seem to be very good at attracting trouble though.” Dawn had to admit.

“Quite.” Solas agreed with a light laugh. “Ena’vun is the appropriate moniker for you Dawn,” Solas using her Common name was a shock, “you offer hope after despair has done its worst and are a light where all memory of brightness has been lost. You are the rising sun and those of us that are shadows are drawn to you.”

Dawn could only think of one way to reply to such poetic words, “Got to kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight.” she didn’t look at him as she quoted a song he couldn’t know. “Do you think any other shadows are going to haunt me tonight when I try to sleep?” she walked with Solas further away from the memory that had carved wounds into her again.

“I’ll see to it that your rest is peaceful Ena’vun, but for now you should wake --.” Solas looked surprised when Dawn stopped his wake up call with a hand to his lips.

“Wait; since Halamshiral is over I need to talk to you about Wisdom.” Dawn wanted to take advantage of the privacy these Fade chats gave them so she dove right in, taking her fingertips away as he raised his eyebrows to encourage her explanation.

“I asked Josie to speak to her contacts and she got me a Rivaini Amulet of the Unbound; apparently it’s waiting at Skyhold for us. In my world story your friend Wisdom is going to be summoned against her will by Mages and she becomes bound into Pride. The necklace will prevent that from happening to her.” She couldn’t read Solas’ expression he was too careful to reveal his thoughts.

“You were aware of a problem I did not have a solution to, and found a way to resolve it before it became a problem for me to address.” His eyes dropped from hers as Solas inclined his head in a respectful bow, bringing one of her hands to his lips to press a kiss to the back of it.
Dawn gave a weak laugh. “I have the advantage of knowing Old Wolf. But saving Wisdom was only half the issue and I cannot find a solution to the other half on my own. Those mages summon a Spirit to help them survive, just because Wisdom is safe doesn’t mean they won’t find another Spirit that ends up just as hurt but with no one to rescue her.” Dawn tried to explain.

And for some reason Solas was smiling at her, eyes dancing with some inner amusement that he wasn’t voicing beyond the laughter he was struggling with. She felt her jaw drop as he grinned at her. “Ena’vun, that is solved simply by eliminating the danger in the area; which the Inquisition is already doing.” His laughter faded but the sparkle remained in his eyes, the smile teasing on his lips. “To summon a Spirit to bind takes tremendous effort and control; they would have had to summon Wisdom specifically and when that fails they’ll no doubt find a different route.” Dawn frowned, not understanding why Solas had laughed. “You solved one problem Ena’vun, and helped the Inquisition achieve the Power to solve the other already.” He held her cheeks to tilt her face forwards and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

Her heart pounded wildly and Dawn gave a huffed breath because for a crazy second she’d thought that he was going to kiss her. “So wake up; ignore the mirror of doom, get back to Skyhold and give you the jewelry to save your friend, make world a better place?” Dawn summarized her to do list and Solas laughed; at least she understood why this time.

“We can discuss getting the amulet to Wisdom once we return to Tarasyl’an Te’las Ena’vun, thank you.” He hugged her again.

“We protect our People yeah?” Dawn hugged back in confirmation. “Now I can wake up.” So she did.
Peacocks, Promises, and Progress

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition returns triumphantly from Halamshiral and a First anxiously awaits the follow through. Triumph begins to taste like ashes for those still in the trenches, and sometimes even when you can't walk forwards you can crawl.

Chapter Notes

So I am having an.... interesting time at work lately thanks to contracts and *insert foul language* like that. I apologize if this causes delays as my brain shuts down in self defence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cedric was waiting in the Lower Bailey, nearly vibrating with impatience. He'd crossed an ocean, reunited with his son and Clan, and helped foil a Venatori plot since the last time he'd seen the Tevinter peacock, and Cedric knew his time hadn't been any less exciting than Dorian’s own. What a difference a few short weeks could make though; given the current state of the world. The amount of aggravation that had occurred before Cedric was here was mind boggling. First he had to rush to his Clan. Then there was the secretive sneak into Wycombe followed by heartbreaking discovery and concluding with bloody battle in the streets. And that had only been the beginning of his struggles.

After that had had to face off with the driving force that was his Keeper’s Will. Deshanna Istimaethoriel had decided that the Elvhen in Wycome’s Alienage were as much hers to look after as the Clan was, and somehow the people of Wycome were more than willing to work with the Dalish on the matter. For now at least. Cedric had rushed to his People afraid he might lose them all; instead his Clan seemed to have gained a city full of shemlen. And because Cedric had already admittedly planned to return to the Inquisition, with Doshiel in tow, Deshanna had decided that Mirwen would be the perfect protégé to help take over the errand boy position that Doshiel had been filling. Both father and son tried not to act too hurt at how easily they were replaced.

It was perhaps the first and only time Mirwen looked as young as he really was; the maturity he’d borne during the events in Wycome notwithstanding. Deshanna would take care of him and the Alienage she had adopted and Cedric left his Clan knowing that they were in the best hands available.

With Doshiel along with him the return trip had taken longer but Cedric took advantage of the aftereffects an area experienced once the Inquisition had stabilized it; namely Inquisition waypoints. Killeen had given Cedric a small marked parchment that apparently identified him to the camps as one of their people and even with Doshiel along none of the camps had argued with it. Merely resupplied him and sent the pair of Dalish along. Or let them camp in a secure site for an evening. More than just the sense of safety, Cedric was impressed to hear Inquisition soldiers addressing him directly with Andaran Atish’ an without a moment of hesitation. If nothing else,
Alena Cadash’s Inquisition was living up to the attitude of including ALL people of Thedas.

Doshei had been utterly disgusted at the realization that Tarasyl’an Te’las was just a keep in the mountains, beautiful and ancient but not magical. Or at least not the type of magic either Dalish mage was used to sensing. And Doshei’s teenaged angst was only further provoked when Cedric realized that despite all their delays after Wycome that they STILL made it back to Skyhold before the Inquisitor and her group had.

It had given him time to introduce Doshei to those that had kept his Bae alive. “Doshei, these are the Valo-Kas. Shokrakar and her mercenaries were there as well when the Harbinger came through, and like me they rescued her as well. A third was rescued at that time, but Emma Trevelyan did not make it out of Haven.”

His son had stared at the Gray ones; face as carefully blank as a sheltered all but fourteen summers old Dalish could make it, and politely offered his hand towards the closest one. “Thank you for saving my Bae.”

To Cedric’s everlasting amusement, it was Katoh that Doshei offered his hand in hello to. The Valo-Kas Warrior was about as undiplomatic as it was possible to get and a good friend of Cedric’s by this point. “Mostly we just kept the humans from killing him, though occasionally he had to be rescued from Kaaris’ poetry too.” Katoh had brushed off Doshei’s gratitude easily. “Besides we only tolerate your father because he tells good stories. I expect it’ll be the same for you, so I hope you brought good stories.” Her voice had been a rumble of warning and Cedric saw alarm in Doshei’s eyes.

And then Katoh winked at Cedric and both adults were laughing while Doshei just rolled his eyes. “Am I once again the most mature person around?” he’d sounded so exasperated despite the crackling voice.

“Probably my son,” Cedric had teased playfully. Doshei once again went to roll his eyes but ruined it by laughing as the Valo-Kas all nodded in agreement.

“I want to hear the story of how you all survived with my Bae. He’s told me his version.” Doshei turned the charm that had to come as much from Yara as it did himself on the Valo-Kas. “He said that you all were already there before the Harbinger came through or before you met up with him, so you were in the best position to tell me what actually happened.”

Cedric had stayed back as the Valo-Kas absorbed his son, the mercenaries surprisingly at ease around one so young. And then he noticed that their leader Shokrakar was less rounded and more laden down than he’d last seen her and Doshei no longer looked so painfully young.

“The da’dorf is finally here, congratulations.” Cedric quietly commended as Shokrakar stood next to him, her infant child swaddled against her chest.

“Taam-Kas, my son is named Taam-Kas. And according to my Healer, he will one day be a mage.” Shokrakar had announced softly.

“Taam-Kas.” Cedric inclined his head to the infant and yet all Taam-Kas managed in response was to burble at him. “My son is named Doshei, and he too is a mage albeit less Grey and slightly older than yours.”

“How old do Dalish mages usually present?” Shokrakar wondered softly while in the background Kaaris explained in slightly gory detail the experiences the Valo-Kas endured leading up to the explosion of the Conclave.
“Most will do so around puberty, the same as the shemlen. Sometimes we have early presentations, but rarely do we have late magic arrival.” He admitted, knowing that humans had a longer range of ages they tended to present into, sometimes they were actual adults before it arrived though those tended to be the weakest mages Cedric heard of.

“This is the youngest I’ve heard a Tal Vashoth presenting as a mage.” Shokrakar didn’t sound worried but Cedric didn’t need to hear it to know it was there.

“Doshiel’s mother, Yara, knew he was a mage while in the womb.” Cedric admitted softly. “She was always so sure of that fact though he’d shown no signs of it until the day it presented.” He offered Shokrakar a comforting smile. “You have your people to help you the same as I had mine; and more besides. I am certain that your son is going to be able to consider the entire Inquisition his playmates and protectors.”

Shokrakar looked down at her son and for the first time Cedric saw the Valo-Kas leader looking stunned; as if she could not believe her child was really there finally. “I am glad the world is being saved, I find I am looking forward to showing it to him.”

“Just wait until the rest of the Inquisition comes back; I’m fairly certain Taam-Kas has a score of obligatory aunts and uncles and cousins that will eagerly help expose the world to him.” Cedric had laughed, imagining some of them handling a newborn infant.

But they had not spent all their time with the Valo-Kas because Cedric was teaching his son the skills he’d need to be First, and eventually Keeper someday. And to do that Cedric continued to teach the other non-Dalish mages as much as he could and in turn brought back methods and magics that were new to the Dalish. And all the while his son was held to the same exacting standards as Cedric remembered Yara holding the pair of them to as they’d grown up. If sometimes there were non-magical lessons involving the Lieutenant or those the Advisors left behind in their steads, no one bothered to tell Doshiel that they were outside the usual needs of a First.

Thankfully Keeper Istimaethoriel had already gotten Doshiel accustomed to following her around as a silent but observing shadow. And at the end of the day Cedric started to discuss the day’s lessons with Doshiel, going over the decisions made and the reasoning behind it, or the tasks accomplished and the needs to be met the next day. A Clan was smaller than Skyhold and the Inquisition, but these skills expanded out as well as they did collapsing down to smaller numbers. And no amount of reviewing the last few days in his head was helping distract Cedric from the arrival of the Inquisition. Finally.

“Bae, I can see the Inquisitor!” Doshiel’s voice wavered between uncomfortable squeak and the more baritone echo of his adult tones.

Doshiel wasn’t the only one that had caught sight of the returning Inquisition or even the most excited; Cedric knew he wasn’t even the most anxious person in the lower Bailey waiting. There were lovers anticipating the return of familiar loved ones, the time apart a constant reminder of what was missing; as opposed to Cedric’s own unfulfilled promise to a certain peacock only now returning.

Kasaanda and Kaaras were present, each awaiting the Companions that had claimed their affections; though there was a tension amongst the twins that had not been there before he’d left. It gave Cedric something to concentrate on other than how slowly the Inquisition was pulling into Skyhold; or how hard he searched for a specific face across the distance.

Cedric was certain that Doshiel was gaping in wide eyed astonishment just beside him as the Inquisition finally arrived. His son’s awe towards people Cedric had lived with for months was
amusing and he did everything he could to encourage his son’s curiosity; even though at this exact moment he was a little distracted.

He waited while horses were pulled in and unloaded of content and companion. Supplies and superfluous bodies moved about, eventually clearing the way for the cluster of bodies Cedric waited for. The Inquisitor quickly left the crowds of people behind and he watched the Durgen’len until she was out of view. He wanted to say that he looked for his friends next, but Cedric knew the moment he caught sight of Dorian his brain stopped thinking of anything else.

The man was as gloriously magnificent as always, even his travel clothes looked impeccable. Cedric could feel the satisfied smirk curl on his face and didn’t try to fight it. His eyes scanned over the Necromancer, head tilted to the side as Cedric took in what little the man’s body language gave away. And then Dorian caught sight of Cedric watching him and froze, uncertainly clear as a scream in his eyes. Still to unsure of his reception despite their brief interlude and that affectionate farewell message.

Cedric hadn’t planned on walking towards Dorian while the taller mage seemed rooted to the spot, and yet he found himself standing a little too close to the Necromancer. And since he’d already put that much effort into this hello, Cedric went all in. Dorian had asked him to show him the difference between a friendly thank you kiss and one meant for seduction after all.

Dorian tasted like trail dust and watery wine; lips ever so slightly chapped and dry. But his mustache was still perfectly oiled and combed. The element of surprise meant that Cedric danced his tongue against Dorian’s before the Tevinter even realized he was being kissed, but only for that moment because then the peacock was kissing back with an intensity Cedric appreciated.

“I take it you’re the Dorian my Bae is all serious about?” Doshiel seemed utterly uncaring as he interrupted. Cedric felt his ear tips burn, as if he were still a young man caught sneaking back into Camp after curfew.

“Serious?” Dorian sounded amused as he made the word a question. For the first time in his life Cedric suddenly worried that his feelings weren’t returned, but then the Altus looked at him and he seemed….happy.

“Listen Tevinter shem,” Doshiel suddenly sounded exactly like Hunter Panelana.

“Oh Creators...” Cedric groaned softly as his son continued.

“My father,” subtle emphasis on the Common term deliberate and squeaky, “is an honest man under all his attempts at humor and charm.” Ouch, Cedric was cut to the quick by his sister-in-heart’s description of him being parroted by his son. “He had always been clear about when he would be ‘spending time with a lover’,,” Doshiel sounded like himself again at least, “but you make him nervous to put a name to what you are to him.” Cedric was surprised to hear such an astute observation from his son. It was another reminder that for all that he was lacking Vallaslin still; Doshiel wasn’t the babe Cedric had raised.

“Well that would be a matter for he and I to discuss first, don’t you believe?” Dorian seemed to have it completely in hand despite Cedric’s flabbergasted state.

“Which I planned to do now that you’re back.” Cedric finally managed to say something but it wasn’t anything useful. “Fen’Harel save me from a meddling son.” He finally swore lightly, grinning as he realized that for all Yara and Doshiel had never met properly there was undeniably a trait or two they shared.
“I’m fairly certain that after a hello like that we’re on the same page m’aureum.” Dorian smiled brilliantly, all earlier surprise and hesitation over with.

But before Cedric could capitalize on that kind of declaration, Doshiel continued to demonstrate the joys of a teenaged son. “Fantastic, can I go now? I have no desire to watch you two romance each other.”

“And I have no desire for you to watch it.” Dorian quickly remarked in kind.

“Why did I think it was a good idea to introduce you two to each other again?” Cedric questioned the air rhetorically, knowing it’d get a rise out of both of them. Doshiel gave an indignant squawk that unfortunately cracked around the edges while Dorian laughed.

“That I do not know, but I would greatly appreciate if we could pick this up after I had a chance to rectify my current… dishevelment.” Dorian reminded that he had technically not actually gotten into Skyhold yet.

“I’m not going to complain if you want to go wash off the horse smell.” Cedric smiled as he said it, seeing the humour glitter in the Tevinter’s eyes too.

“Oh Creators….” Doshiel grumbled.

“Go bathe my road weary Prince.” Cedric winked with a smile even as his son dramatically gagged before Dorian left with a jaunty wave. “And you, insolent little brat, back to lessons.” He tried to sound serious and stern as he turned to face his son.

“That’s still better than standing here watching people get all smooch-y.” Doshiel pointed out and Cedric finally recalled the larger gathering Dorian had been a part of.

The Adaar twins had both been present, one with a rose for his Seeker while the other merely caught the entire weight of her tiny lady Love. Both were retreating swiftly with the persons of their affections and Cedric smirked as he realized that sometimes the best part of missing someone was the moment they came back to you. As long as they came back; it had taken Cedric an awfully long time to accept that Yara wasn’t making it back to him all those years ago.

“If you can manage to curtail your wit for the rest of the day, I’ll even try and convince the Harbinger to sing for us.” Cedric cajoled his son, not at all above bribing him for good behaviour.

But when he looked down at Doshiel, he was surprised to see his son staring at Dawn with wide eyes and a slack jaw. It wasn’t a lustful look, but as if Doshiel was seeing something impossible and trying to convince himself it was real.

“Dosh?” he prompted finally and Doshiel tore his eyes off of her to look up at him.

“She’s really not from here.” Doshiel sounded as young as he looked for once.

Cedric vaguely recalled his own reactions to Dawn’s Offworlder status and how it felt to him as a mage. “No Doshiel, she really isn’t. But Dawn is ours now and we plan to keep her.” He made it a simple statement though it was profoundly true.

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“You’re determined to get me killed.” Alistair complained bitterly as the wind changed directions and managed to dump another body weight’s worth of sand down the back of their necks.
“If I wanted you dead cuz, no one would ever find the body.” Victoria quipped back, not at all believing his bitching. Alistair had missed the life of a Warden, the freedom of the road, and Hawke knew it. Otherwise why would he have agreed so readily to accompany her to the Hissing Wastes? NO ONE wanted to come out here.

When the Inquisition had ridden off for Halamshiral, Hawke had had every intention of staying put in Skyhold and waiting for a certain Author to come back. Waking up in his bed without him because he’d ridden off had been the final thing needed to convince her that she really was in love with Varric and really should let him know it at some point. But then Alistair started to have worse symptoms and the message in from Bethany said it was the same for her and suddenly Victoria had no more time.

So she’d grabbed the King of Ferelden and headed off into the middle of the Maker Blighted desert chasing ghost stories and demons. And together they found a Keep full of crazier than usual Wardens.

And she’d had such high hopes for a place called Gryphon Wing Keep. Then again having hope for anything related to the Gray Wardens just seemed to be asking for heartbreak. This time turned out to be no different than all the others.

Their teasing banter fell silent as they silently watched the Venatori move about the Keep below them, far too many Wardens mixed into the bunch for anyone’s comfort. Only before Alistair or Victoria could comment on it, they had both witnessed the reality of why.

Blood magic. Maker in the heavens, the mages were sacrificing their brothers and sisters in arms to raise demons.

“No.” Alistair had sounded so wounded as the word escaped him, despair painting agony onto every breath the moment they realized what the scene below them had to be a part of. Victoria had already seen the atrocities blood magic could do to an innocent soul; she didn’t look too closely at any of the living or dead bodies down below.

“Alena said she saw a future where a demon army swept across the world. I think we just discovered how the Venatori get their army.” Hawke remarked bitterly once they’d crept away from the Ritual Tower.

“Why, why would the Orlesian Wardens be going along with this?” Alistair demanded as if she could provide him an answer.

“You tell me, Warden. What would make the other Wardens so afraid they’d turn murderous?” She snapped at him, not liking the implications any more than he did. He’d voluntarily become a Warden, she’d given Bethany to them against her sister’s will. It had been to save her from Taint but still.

“Nothing. I can think of nothing that would make me turn on my fellow Wardens like this.” Alistair had no humour in him for once. His handsome face was lined with worry and planning. “But neither can we simply leave them here to continue building an army and killing the only defence we have against we Blight.”

“A Champion of Kirkwall that’s been in hiding for two years and a Warden King that has spent the last ten years sitting on a peaceful throne. Yes clearly we are the crack team needed to infiltrate the Venatori and stop their dastardly plan.” Hawke kept her tone flat as she stared at her cousin’s husband, wondering what Siobhan had initially seen in this man outside of his adorable smile.
“We can start by letting the Inquisition know what we’ve found; their scout camp was only a day or so of hard travel. Fall back to that point, inform them what’s going on and see what suggestions they come up with?” Alistair suggested, tone slipping into something far more soldier and far less king.

“I don’t want to take eyes off these idiots though.” Hawke countered. “You go, I’ll stay and watch and report any important changes.”

“And not at all get involved yourself in a battle again overwhelming force. Because your past paints a slightly different picture of you.” He argued right back, not at all cowed by the look she shot him.

“Did…did you just try and imply that out of the two of us I’m the impetuous one?” Victoria demanded. “Me, who tried to flee the Blight while you went and picked a fight with its cause. Me, who tried to hide my family and take care of them and keep out of the way but instead had to defend my city from rampaging Qunari? Me, who tried to help behind the scenes as much as possible while Meredith and Elthina murdered or made tranquil mages left right and center? I have never picked the fight Alistair,” her tone wasn’t laughing, “but by Andraste’s flaming garter I will end it once it’s begun.”

“I don’t doubt that, but I do doubt your ability to hold still while you see absolute insanity right in front of you.” Alistair managed to agree without being condescending at all and suddenly Victoria understood how he might have wormed his way into Siobhan’s heart. Her cousin always did like arguing.

“Neither one of us should stay behind alone, but as there are only two of us and one really does need to go report in then I am the best option to stay.” Hawke reverted to more logical tactics.

“Why you? I’m a Warden; I could conceivably lie my way through an encounter. They catch you here though and there is no lie that they will believe.” It was a good argument, and Victoria almost let him convince her.

“That or they’d just slit your throat and raise a demon thanks to your corpse.” Her comment shut them both up.

“How many Wardens?” Alistair asked after a long stretch of silence.

“What?” she clued back in to the agony on the man’s face.

“To raise enough demons to call it an army, how many Wardens have already been murdered by their own?” he didn’t look up at her, staring down at callouses worked into his hand instead.

“That’s assuming that the Wardens have to kill other Wardens to do it. With the right of Conscription they could have gone into any prison or jail and taken the dregs of society to sacrifice.” Her words really weren’t any comfort and she knew it, but there wasn’t a whole lot she could do to actually make reality any better for her friend.

“I’ll go report at the camp. I can’t stay near this and not…” he fell silent, looking out at the night shrouded desert.

They had moved far enough away to not hear the screams of good people dying and evil being born. They had moved far enough away to not see the light from the fires of those few still living and needing light. They hadn’t moved far enough away for Hawke to feel like she wasn’t holding the knife in her own hand and being asked to sacrifice the life of her friend for the sake of peace.
Peace she knew would never come and had always been a lie.

What peace comes at the cost of life?

“Let’s go King, I find I’m not all that tired.” Hawke could navigate by stars as well as by sunlight, Isabela had taught her that. And maybe, just maybe she could once again find a solution to the madness before her that wouldn’t come at the cost of someone else’s life.

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It felt strange to ride into Skyhold, and Dawn wasn’t sure if that was due to the fact that she’d never actually ridden into a Keep before, or if because the last time she’d come towards Skyhold had been as the Offworlder instead of the Harbinger. No blizzard chased them across the bridge this time at least. And the people waiting to welcome them home added a wistful touch she hadn’t been expecting.

The Valo-Kas had stayed behind to support the Keep, and now she saw that Kaaras and Kasaanda stood head and shoulders above the rest as their loves returned. Less obviously spotted but still distinct was Cedric scanning the crowds for a certain well-coiffed Tevinter, and Dawn felt fairly certain the younger Elvhen standing at his side was his son. That was unexpected too.

But the really unexpected thing was seeing Shokrakar standing in the back of the crowds, belly no longer round and holding a bundle of fabric.

“Baby!” Dawn’s feet and mouth figured it out a lot faster than her brain had, her whole body flying into motion even as she all but shouted the word.

Shokrakar at least looked amused by her antics, a smile twisting one side of her mouth as she watched Dawn pelt towards her. Dawn actually skidded when she stopped running, momentum staggering a little as she stared up at Shokrakar and the baby in her careful embrace. “This is my son, Taam-Kas.” She introduced while Dawn all but vibrated as she resisted the urge to reach for the baby.

Thankfully Shokrakar was both very good at reading people and willing to indulge Dawn; she smiled and passed Dawn the little baby Vashoth. “Hi.” Dawn instinctively smiled and spoke, remembering how nervous she’d been the first time she’d held her sister Thalia’s daughter.

Taam-Kas stared up at her as all babies had stared at the new world around them and Dawn couldn’t help but be amused that babies were adorable across every universe. Qunari and Vashoth were physically larger than most humans and apparently that size discrepancy started young; Taam-Kas was less than a month old and the size of a three month old human child. His skin was flawless pewter gray and she could tell it was new born soft still because he wrapped that tiny little hand around her finger.

“Do Vashoth babies like to have their tummies….what is the word for raspberried?” Dawn looked up at Shokrakar to ask but realized there was a small audience watching her lose her few good senses over a baby.

Unsurprisingly Varric had wandered over, Dawn was not at all surprised that he liked the little ones, but she was surprised to find that Solas had accompanied Varric as well. He’d never seemed the type to care about those that couldn’t hold a well thought conversation.

“You just asked two people that speak different first languages, and an Author that only speaks Common, what a word in your language could translate as Sweetheart. Are you sure you should be
holding a baby?” Varric teased playfully.

“Sugar I was one bad trip through a mirror away from starting my own family, and I have helped both my sisters raise theirs; I think I can manage.” Dawn replied with a sarcastic nod of her head.

“I must admit I was not expecting…” Solas trailed off making a vague hand gesture that even Dawn couldn’t interpret.

“Don’t tell me the big bad Wolf is afraid of a little baby.” Dawn felt her eyebrows disappear with surprise.

The look Solas shot her in response though was not amused. “Ena’vun.” Just her name in a flat tone and it held all the warning she was going to get on the matter and they both knew it.

So instead of saying a thing Dawn shot Shokrakar a look, saw her smile and then put the baby right into Solas’ unsuspecting arms. For someone with literal Eons of life experience, Solas stiffened up as if he had never held a baby before. He looked about as comforting as a statue and he stared down at the baby as if it were going to start spewing lava instead of vomit at the very worst.

“Relax Chuckles; he’s not going to steal your soul.” Varric teased, clapping Solas on the back companionably.

“Though according to my Healer, Taam-Kas will one day be a mage.” Shokrakar spoke up and Dawn saw all three of them look from the Tal Vashoth to the baby and back in surprise.

“You have signs indicating such already?” Solas broke his anxious paralysis, looking far more at ease holding the child now that he wasn’t looking at it in his arms.

“Compassion Saw the lies and helped show the truth.” Cole was suddenly there again, missing since their retreat from Halamshiral. “And now there is an anchor in place of the nothing that was before. I can help Heal the hurt without hurting the healing now, though I cannot do the Healing.” He seemed so proud of whatever it was he was talking about.

And Dawn wasn’t the only one frowning at him for it; Solas for once looked as lost by his commentary as she felt. “Well Kid, it’s good that you can help.” Varric continued on, blithely unaware that Cole was being more unusual than usual.

“Kaaras had to interfere on Taam-Kas’ behalf, that’s how I know. My Healer would be the better person to ask about the signs he encountered.” Shokrakar returned the conversation to the original topic.

“Considering that I saw him holding a mountain rose for Cassandra, I HIGHLY recommend you give them an hour or so first.” Dawn warned immediately, smiling as she realized that despite himself Solas was rocking Taam-Kas back and forth easily now. It was very hard to remain detached and aloof from the world when a baby is literally babbling at you and trying to cuddle your face.

“Fix-It has stamina Sweetheart, so does the Seeker; better make it two hours Chuckles.” Varric tagged on.

“It is a matter that can wait for another day; if the parents are not pressing for answers than neither do I.” Solas finally countered. He caught the smile on Dawn’s face and stiffly passed her Taam-Kas again, as if annoyed to have been caught swaying the baby around.

Again Taam-Kas stared up at her with big, wondering eyes and she smiled down at him in return.
“Hello little butt, I’m Dawn. And these people around you being silly are some of the people I love and care about. They’re mostly good, though some of them write stories full of lies.” She wasn’t talking in a baby voice though she did keep her tone bright and happy sounding.

When Dawn looked to shoot Varric a smug ‘yes that was a reference to you’ smile she realized that everyone but Cole was staring at her in various degrees of open shock. “What?”

“Sweetheart, sometimes your ability to surprise me really surprises me.” Varric lightly remarked, patting her on the back now.

Frowning and shooting a questioning look at Solas did nothing to ease her confusion; he looked surprisingly vulnerable as he stared back. “I’m missing something.” She admitted plainly.

Thankfully Shokrakar was a direct sort of person. “The hairy one is referring to your statement that you love us. The bald one seems to not know how to react while the hairy one is trying to cover how happy your comments made him feel.” Trust an ex-Ben Hassrath to get all of that out of an eye blink and breathing.

“And how are you reacting?” Dawn decided to let Solas and Varric have a moment to settle their expressions before she looked at them for confirmation.

“My son is alive and well. My Valo-Kas have work. And I am loved by the Harbinger of the Inquisition; worse things could happen.” Shokrakar admitted before finally cracking a smile.

“If this is the reaction people have to hearing that I love them then I need to start telling people that more.” Dawn was only joking a little bit. “I thought North America was bad for repression.”

Her sarcasm was cut off as Taam-Kas decided to use a healthy set of lungs to scream into the morning air though he didn’t feel wet or stink for a change. A quick look to Shokrakar revealed she wasn’t at all worried about his vocalizations, “Vashoth babies ache as they grow. Crying like this in the first month is very common until he learns the sensations.” The explanation wasn’t satisfying but since Shokrakar seemed at ease about it Dawn simply adjusted her grip on Taam-Kas and adopted the rocking motion Solas had unconsciously used earlier.

And like she had for nieces and nephews and had planned for her own babies, Dawn sang the entirety of ‘twinkle twinkle little star’ to Taam-Kas. His unhappy screaming cut off with a very surprised look; apparently Taam-Kas was not expecting this kind of noise to be made back at him. The lullaby translated rather well into Common so Dawn didn’t hesitate to sing it in a language the kid could actually one day learn, and Taam-Kas didn’t start screaming again when she stopped so all around Dawn considered it a win.

“So just a little experience with little ones then?” Varric sounded amused but Dawn was too busy letting Taam-Kas grip her finger to death to look at him.

“Thalia, my sister, had severe post-partum after the birth of the twins. She… how do you say <span title="soul sickness">Asala-taar</span>?” Dawn looked up finally to ask Shokrakar.

“Soul sickness.” Iron Bull offered the answer, surprising Dawn because she wasn’t sure when he had joined their little huddle. Seeing her looking, Iron Bull made grabby hands at Taam-Kas so with an amused grin Dawn handed him over.

The rest of the Inquisition had gone about their arrival back at Skyhold even as Dawn and the group around her stayed off to the side. There was so much to do now that they were back, but no one around her seemed all that eager to get to getting to. And Cole just watched everything with
open curiosity.

“Well in my world we realized that sometimes after giving birth the mother gets soul sick, it can take some a long while to recover even after the baby is born. Thalia had a rough year and a rough labour; I wasn’t with anyone at the time so I just moved in and did what I could to help her and the babies. Let me tell you, there is nothing quite like living with newborn twins.” Despite how harried she had been a half dozen years ago, Dawn smiled at the memory now. “And after that my other sister, Aisha, and her husband had their kids. And I was married by the time my latest nephew was born so everyone was expecting me to bring the next couple of screamers into the world.”

“I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard your sister’s name.” Varric gently pointed out.

“Memories hurt but they have their place.” Cole spoke up again and Dawn knew he was skimming her emotions. “The heart aches but accepts and the head knows.” He looked at her and then decided to ruin her illusion of carefree. “Your count is wrong though, a new Dawn is there now; so little in her arms, so fragile, named to memorialize the one that never got to hold her.”

Dawn stared at Cole, certain that her face was expressing everything she fought with inside. There were too many around currently that could read every little emotion burning through her veins but Dawn felt rooted to the spot. One of her sisters had named a daughter after her. Because they thought she was dead. A distant part of her wondered where the static was, the thing that had shut her down so frequently before when emotions hurt this badly was nowhere to be found and Dawn tried to just breathe.

First the Fade dragged her through the looping hell of her own memory and now Cole unfortunately reminded her that her family thought she was dead and she would never be able to tell them otherwise; for every step forward Dawn felt she took pieces of her heart seemed to be ripped out in response.

“Kid.” Varric’s quiet word silenced anything else Cole might have said on the matter but Dawn still knew they were all watching her for a response.

Tears didn’t come. Static didn’t come. Her hands felt icy and she wanted to shiver even though she wasn’t all that cold. Iron Bull held Taam-Kas like he was the lightest burden in the world, Varric looked like he wanted to apologize for Cole, and Solas looked like he was studying her reaction. Beside her Shokrakar wasn’t even looking at her and Dawn was grateful for the illusion of privacy.

“Well…now I need a drink.” Dawn finally broke the awkward silence.

“Probably a good idea to unpack first.” Varric jumped on the topic change. “I’ll go round up our missing trouble makers and meet you at the Rest in a half hour Sweetheart.” He promised and Dawn took the out with both hands and ran with it. She left without goodbyes but no one stopped her.

Her family had grown in so many ways since she’d come to Thedas. She’d lost Larry but gained the Inquisition. She’d lost her parents but gained Alena and Cedric. She’d lost Thalia, Aisha, and their babies, but gained Cole and Kaaras and the Valo-Kas. And she’d lost none of them really except Larry because they were still alive and well and living even if they were away from her. It still hurt but no tears would come.

Dawn stood in the doorway to her room and stared into it for a moment. A month ago her friends had decorated the room for her but she hadn’t changed anything in it since. Or before that either really. She’d been stolen from her world and thrown here to Thedas and ever since Dawn had been going along, accepting the things life gave her. Larry was dead and she missed him but the Dawn
that had loved him beyond anything else had died with him. The Dawn that had thought nothing of helping her suddenly single sister raise her kids was now as capable of taking a sword up to defend them as she was lifting a bottle to feed them. The Dawn that either Thalia or Aisha had named a daughter after no longer existed. But that was okay too; Dawn might never get to meet her niece but she had Hope that the Dawn she was now might do her old family proud. It was time to look forwards.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
Elvhen
andaran atish'an – Formal Elvhen greeting meaning welcome to this place of peace
da’dorf- lit. Little Gray, Cedric uses it as an endearment to describe the baby Vashoth.

Tevene
m’aureum- My golden one

Qunlat
Asala-taar- Soul sickness

Lyrics for Twinkle Little Star

Twinkle twinkle little star How I wonder what you are Up above the world so high Like a diamond in the sky When the blazing sun is gone When the nothing shines upon Then you show your little light Twinkle, twinkle all the night Then the traveler in the dark Thanks you for your tiny spark He could not see which way to go If you did not twinkle so. In the dark blue sky you keep And often through my curtains peep For you never shut your eye, ’til the sun is in the sky. As your bright and tiny spark Lights the traveler in the dark Though I know not what you are, Twinkle, twinkle, little star.
Chapter Summary

The Inquisition has returned to Skyhold and there is one conversation that had to happen immediately. It does not go as planned but things seldom often do, especially for Kaaras.

Chapter Notes

I did not set out to make this chapter smut but….that is exactly what happened. I'm sorry?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Letters just weren’t enough; Kaaras missed hearing Cassandra’s voice from the edge of laughter to the disparaging grunt if something had annoyed her. There was nothing he wanted more than to make a spectacle by taking her into his arms and kissing her soundly. Except that he needed to explain the new bond to Compassion first; as Cole still existed apart from Kaaras it was a complicated matter.

Complicated seemed to be the name of the place his life had set up camp within; things were already tense and awkward with Kasaanda about the new Spirit connection so he could imagine how poorly this could go over with his Seeker love. Regardless that fear had done little to bank his eagerness to see her again. The mountain rose he’d brought for her today was a bud only just opening, and even if his twin was snappish with him still Kaaras had talked her into using her magic to preserve it for him. At least he could give Cassandra one beautiful thing that wouldn’t wilt in time.

The Inquisitor all but flung herself up the stairs and away from the mounts and crowd. He was certain that Blackwall was close behind as well but Kaaras only had eyes for Cassandra. The Nevarran Seeker was already watching him and Kaaras froze under her regard. Never had he wanted to live up to the expectation in someone eyes as much as he did hers.

He wanted to say ‘welcome home’, ‘I missed you’, ‘I’m glad you’re back’ and hand her the flower. Instead of saying any of the things he’d planned, Kaaras found himself thrusting the flower at Cassandra while his mouth blurted out, “I love you.”

Not in private, in a romantic setting.
Not intended for this crowded Bailey.
Entirely honest though, at least Kaaras knew he had that going for him.
And apparently one piece of luck was with him because even as Cassandra reacted to his poorly
timed confession, Dawn drew a greater reaction by discovering Shokrakar and Taam-Kas. He
didn’t turn to watch the Harbinger like most others did though, eyes set to the woman looking
flushed and surprised in front of him instead. He knew Cassandra wasn’t one for public
demonstrations for all that she loved romantic gestures, and this had not been the venue he wanted
for this particular declaration.

Cassandra smiled and Kaaras could breathe again. “Well I did promise to finish that sentence once
you got back.” Kaaras laughed at himself.

“And you keep your promises.” Cassandra agreed, still looking happy despite the public space.

They both stepped closer, her fingers lingering against his as she took the rose from him. “Take a
walk with me?” Kaaras finally asked, getting back to the original plan he’d come up with.

And despite her likely road weary exhaustion, Cassandra took his offered hand. He needed to
explain his new bond before he did anything else out of sequence; Cassandra deserved to know
before anything else happened between them.

“While you were in Halamshiral my Ari Shokrakar gave birth. Taam-Kas is healthy and will one
day be a mage.” Kaaras led Cassandra towards their glade but started his explanation immediately.
“But I guess because the Breach occurred, Taam-Kas being a mage left him vulnerable so I had to
try and keep him safe.”

“How would you do that while delivering him?” Cassandra’s question revealed her depth of
knowledge in regards to mage ability, and Kaaras gave a humourless smile.

“That was the same question I asked; my only solution was to make myself the bigger target than
Taam-Kas’ tiny soul.” He admitted plainly. “I made myself an irresistible target and faced my
demons as consequence.” He wasn’t being metaphorical and she knew it.

“That is a very dangerous thing to do.” But even though there was caution in her words Cassandra
didn’t shy away physically.

“Yes, and I almost lost against Despair. But Compassion came to help. I… am protected now and
in return Compassion cannot be bound.” They had reached their glade but Cassandra was looking
at him instead of the scene he had set up.

“I’ve read the tome of the Seekers and know the secrets of my order.” Her words were serious and
unexpected. “To become a Seeker I spent months in a vigil, purging myself of all emotion, but I
was made Tranquil.” She seemed so calm with that admission. “I didn’t even know. Then the vigil
summoned the Spirit of Faith to touch my mind. That broke Tranquility and gave me my abilities.”
“So Faith and Compassion.” Kaaras couldn’t help the astonished laugh. “You aren’t afraid of what I am.” He was stunned; even his own twin was though Kasaanda tried to act like she was fine. But Cassandra, the Chantry Seeker and Divine’s Right hand, wasn’t at all worried.

“No more than I fear my own connection to Faith.” Cassandra’s ease left Kaaras laughing in relief, the sudden absence of fear staggering.

And she seemed to understand, a smile beautifully lighting up her face. “I love you Cassandra.” He said it again, deliberate this time and still wholly honest.

Her smile blossomed into a happy grin, a flush across her sharp cheekbones. “I love you too Kaaras.” She replied and the words sent his heart soaring.

She stepped into his arms and lifted her face to kiss him, so bold and sure and wonderful. And he still hadn’t properly shown her the surprise at their glen. One day he’d get the timing of a date right, but for the moment Kaaras was too happy to care. He didn’t have to fight to keep the words locked behind his teeth anymore; reciprocated love sweetened each moment of the kiss.

Cassandra finally stepped away, smiling and flushed as she looked around at what he had set up. “For someone so uncertain of how I would take your news, you certainly set quite the scene.” She lightly teased.

He’d brought a bathtub down to the glade, huge and heavy and filled with steaming hot water thanks to fire magic. There was a privacy screen to pull and he’d laid a picnic on the far side of it, though he’d also sprinkled rose petals across the water. The picnic was mostly comprised of Nevarran honey mead and those rolls he knew she liked so much.

“Regardless of how the day turned for me you deserve the chance to relax and recover from your trip. I’ve heard rumours that it was quite eventful.” He stepped around the screen to offer her privacy.

“Eventful is not the word I would have used.” Cassandra summarized with a disgusted tone but didn’t elaborate.

It was a matter of discipline and thinking restful thoughts that held him to the picnic side as he heard the sounds of clothing being discarded and water being sloshed. “Lady give me strength.” Kaaras muttered and took a deep breath as he heard Cassandra give a happy little moan as she settled into the bath.

For a moment he wondered if Cassandra was doing it deliberately to test him as she hummed a throaty sound of pleasure while water sloshed around. He could easily imagine the scene but that did nothing to help him stay politely on this side of the screen. Once again he pulled his mind to more appropriate thoughts and poured out the honey mead.
“Kaaras,” there was warmth in Cassandra’s voice and his entire body reacted with a jolt, “please join me with the mead.”

He was around the curtain before she finished speaking, and he even managed to bring her glass with him. Cassandra was beautiful, all sleek muscles writhing under taunt skin with water glistening across it. Kaaras made eye contact as he passed her the drink and saw her amusement and delight.

“Did you have expectations of the barbarian, Seeker?” he teased, voice too husky already.

“Well it’s only fair that we’re on the same footing Healer, so I do expect you to be a gentleman and strip.” She retorted taking a drink and not looking away, there was definite desire in her eyes.

It was astonishingly easy to get out of his clothing in record time. Kaaras had never been body shy so even nude and aroused he felt no shame as her eyes swept from horn tip to toes. And Cassandra flushed even as she settled in the bathtub, letting him look at her bared body in return. But they continued to play at whatever game his Seeker love wanted to play. “Would you like some help scrubbing your back?” he offered, coming around to her shoulders. He couldn’t help but appreciate how well fit she was, strength only barely disguising her beauty to those too blind to see it.

“Yes, touch me please.” Her voice was filled with meaning and Kaaras sent an unvoiced prayer out to whatever Lady was blessing him in this moment.

He leaned over to kiss her even as his hands smoothed over her shoulders. She was still sitting back, the tub blocking access so Kaaras instead ran his touch down the corded muscles of her arms where she’d laid them along the rim.

The kiss ended only when he took the empty glass from her fingers to lay it aside, lifting her hand to place kisses along each fingertip. He walked around to her other hand but this time used little nips along her fingertips and heard her gasp at the difference.

“Would you like some more honey mead Cassandra?” he offered voice low even as his hands continued to stroke across the skin of her shoulders and collarbone.

Kaaras felt her swallow before answering. “Yes actually.” Her tone was huskier than usual and Kaaras bit back a groan.

But he’d made the offer so Kaaras took his hands off her reluctantly and picked up the glass, wishing he’d brought the bottle. He moved quickly, hearing Cassandra moving about in the water the moment he turned. There was something undeniably sensual about seeing the water lapping at her flushed nipples but as Kaaras saw her come around the screen still naked, he decided that seeing water beading and running down her belly to the dark hair between her thighs was the better vision.
“You’re beautiful.” He complimented honestly, seeing her surprise and delight.

“I am not beautiful to the Courts of Orlais; too muscular and blunt.” She immediately denied.

“You’re beautiful and terrifying and I love you Cassandra Pentaghast.” He loved how she flushed in response.

And then she was in his arms kissing him again, and Kaaras was very happy with the change. Now he could run his hands down her spine, feeling old scars and lifelong training under the drops of water. Her body was perfect against him and Kaaras groaned into the kiss as Cassandra fisted a calloused grip around his impatient erection.

Strangled desperate sounds dragged out of him and Kaaras knew his eyes were wild looking as Cassandra worked her tight grip in full strokes; his knees threatening to buckle. Taking his cue from her, Kaaras dragged his hands down over her butt and dropped to his knees; chasing the water off her breasts and belly with his mouth. His fingers tickled across the back of her thighs as his lips found the dip at her hip and Cassandra made a wonderfully husky sound when he scraped teeth across the top of her thigh while scratching fingers through the hair guarding her pubis.

The next moment Kaaras found himself bowled onto his back, Cassandra easily tipping his mass over even before he realized she was moving. Her mouth was bruising against his, as commanding as the rest of her, and Kaaras laughed into the kiss. His laughter stifled off as Cassandra titled her hips and the head of his cock slid against her wet excitement.

Once again Kaaras pulled his hands down over her hips, carefully pressing up into her body. Cassandra gave a tattered gasp, body arching up and driving him deeper. She held onto him tightly and Kaaras bucked as he sucked in air desperately. He was on his back, mostly on the picnic blanket though grass tickled his feet, and his hands rested against Cassandra’s hips as she straddled him while being silhouetted against the dappled sunlight through the leaves.

Her hips circled in slow methodical swirls as Kaaras thrust deeper into her, fighting to keep steady and even. Cassandra gave a sharp cry as her body found its limit and Kaaras swore as she took command of the pace driving her hips in sharp snaps so he was buried deep over and over. He let out a shattered breath as Cassandra swept a hand down her body to cup her breast, calloused fingers twisting at her nipple while the other went to the curls between her thighs.

It was too much for his battered resolve and Kaaras felt his rhythm stagger into needy thrusts. Cassandra’s body was slicked and tight and long before he intended to Kaaras came, body pulsing with pleasure though he’d meant to get Cassandra off first. Even as he shuddered his ecstasy she rode him with determined slams, fingers busy on her clit until Kaaras felt her orgasm as well. He wrapped his arms around her even as Cassandra’s spine seemed to melt, and he rolled so they lay to the side on the blanket. Kaaras’ chased his breath and tried to settle his mind enough for coherent speech.
“My body opens, filled and blessed, my spirit there.” Cassandra quoted the poem Kaaras had read to her before she departed.

“Not merely housed in flesh, but brought to life.” She seemed surprised that he’d recognized the passage.

“I have never known anything like this and it frightens me.” She admitted, seriousness replacing seduction. “I’ve been with only one other man in my life. A mage with whom I adventured when I was still very young. He…died at the Conclave.” Suddenly Kaaras understood the quiet respect Dawn and Cassandra had always shared.

“I will not let Corypheus win,” she swore fervently, “I will not let him take you from me.”

“I will fight to protect you too Cassandra.” Kaaras respected the grief she’d silently borne.

She kissed him, gentle and sweet. “I wish we could stay here for the rest of the day, but as you remarked, The Winter Palace was not uneventful.” She warned.

Kaaras nodded his head, knowing he needed to check on Dawn’s wounds. “Go on then, I’ll clear the glade.” He kissed her one last time before forcing himself to roll to his feet. He’d check on his patient and then return to clear the glade after making sure she was alright. Though as his enhanced Healing awareness hadn’t warned of anyone near death so he wasn’t too anxious about it.

Cassandra once again drove the planning out of his head when she stood as well. Her body wasn’t the polished perfection seen in statues but was instead the absolute optimum weapon Cassandra could make it to be, and he marvelled at the grace and strength displayed as much as the resilience evidenced in her scars. She caught him staring at her and frowned; grunt and eye roll obligatory.

“You’re ridiculous; get dressed.” She muttered, her cheeks flushing.

“The world can wait a while longer.” He denied to her evident surprise. And then he kissed her again.

Chapter End Notes

Translate:
Qunlat
Ari- leader
Knowledge, Wisdom, Intelligence

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition returns to Skyhold after succeeding at Halamshiral, but the world did not idly wait for the heroes to save the day, it went ahead and found another crisis to embroil itself into.

Chapter Notes

ALL THE POVs! Not really but it felt that way....

Translation:

Elvhen
Elgar'ladarelan – One who heals Spirits.
Elgar'vhen'an – Fade, lit ‘home of the spirits’

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Returning to Skyhold wasn’t necessarily the triumph everyone wanted it to be; Dawn realized that after dealing with her little moment of introspection. She’d survived an assassination attempt, witnessed Josie and Cullen get on with their happily ever after, and even confronted the issue of her Eluvian phobia; but while she and Varric and the others had been away, Hawke had gotten up to her usual antics. She’d absconded with Alistair, and Dawn technically knew where they were but kept that to herself as Varric swore a blue streak. They weren’t even back a day yet and it felt like Dawn had run out of time already.

“Of all the nug-humping, darkspawn taunting, straight-up stupid things she could do, she does this?” Varric demanded, shaking a crumpled letter without letting Dawn read it. He was so angry he was pacing and Dawn blinked in surprise when he pulled the tie out of his hair to let it hang loose, an auburn mass that he ran fingers through in agitation.

Even too irritated for that it seemed, Varric snarled and quickly tied the hair back out of the way before spinning to look at Dawn straight on. He un-crumpled the letter and read it to her: “I’ve taken my cousin-by-marriage demon army hunting. What else did you expect? Will send news, might even make it back before the Kirkwallers show up. Don’t take it out on Merrill, you know me.” He mimicked Victoria’s tone and inflection so perfectly Dawn knew this was not his first time imitating the Champion.

And she understood Varric’s frustration, she really did. Because it was now entirely impossible for Dawn to ignore that Adamant was coming on a remorseless deadline, and she didn’t feel ready. And if she wasn’t ready then either Alistair or Hawke would end up sacrificed. Something Dawn would not allow happening if she had any power to alter it.

Varric seemed as determined to avoid certain sobering thoughts as well. “Alright Sweetheart, we’re grabbing Merrill and we’re drinking.” He proclaimed in a grave tone.
And even though they were back at Skyhold less than a day, with the day she’d already had Dawn wasn’t arguing. Even if Hawke sent back word today about Gryphon Wing Keep or Erimond and Clarel, the Inquisition could not head out immediately. She had one last night to be selfish. So Dawn followed compliantly along as Varric stalked out to collect Merrill and then head to the Rest for serious drinking. Since Merrill had been conferring with Solas about Halamshiral he was talked into joining them.

Dawn had already told Josie to give Solas the Amulet of the Unbound so Dawn could at least feel assured that that crisis was averted. Though with the bitching and grumbling still muttered from Varric, she knew all was not well yet.

“He seems unusually dyspeptic.” Solas remarked lightly while Merrill listened to Varric’s grousing.

“He realized he’s in love, but now she’s not here and he can’t tell her that. How would you handle it?” Dawn was amused, aware that in the game at least Solas was the type to fall hard and fast.

Now Solas arched an eyebrow in response. “With a lot more dignity, I’m certain of that.”

Dawn let it go, too agitated to sink into the carousing the boisterous Rest was filled with outside of their table. They were the morose off note, everyone else seemed almost celebratory. The Chargers were finally off duty, Skyhold had its Inquisitor back and they had taken Halamshiral by storm. It was no surprise to find Iron Bull surrounded by his people, already far ahead of Varric’s thinking with the amount of bottles around, and Dawn felt a strange lurch to realize that this might be the last time they all got the chance to relax and celebrate. After this battles were to be fought.

She didn’t even check the bottle Varric passed her; she simply took a long pull and earned some surprised looks for it. The wine was dark and delicious and dangerous, and Dawn ignored the curious look Solas gave her at the sudden intensity she demonstrated. His sip was more cautious but at least he didn’t press for answers.

Months of training and she was barely capable of keeping herself alive against an attack. In fact she had flat out failed to keep herself alive; Cole had had to rescue her. And she thought she could save the Hero and the Champion. Dawn took another drink, glad that no one present could read her mind.

“It’s been ten years; another month or so is no big deal.” Varric finally spat out the kernel of his irritation.

A heavy pull from the bottle hid her expression from the overly observant Solas. Adamant was coming and if her little experiments with Dagna didn’t work then Varric might never get his chance, and it would be her fault. She took another drink before passing the bottle to Solas; she couldn’t dwell on the worst that could happen or else she’d fall apart. Right now her only comfort was that Dagna confirmed that their rune amplified grenades had successfully sealed an entrance to the Deep Roads utterly shut. But was that enough against the Nightmare?

Dawn turned to ask Solas, and he seemed eager to hear her question, but she caught herself in time. Instead of asking the question she wanted answered, she covered by blurting out a different one she hadn’t meant to ask either. “Would you be willing to pierce my ears?”

By the surprise on his face, Dawn could tell Solas hadn’t been expecting that question at least. To be fair she hadn’t seriously thought about asking it until it tumbled out of her mouth. “I always wanted to back home but I just never got around to it; I always thought I had time.” She admitted with a laugh. “But these are lovely and I trust you not to hurt me too much to do them.” She smiled
as she reached out and lightly tapped the piercings still woven through his ears.

Solas looked amused, so at least her request hadn’t offended. “Yes I can pierce your ears Ena’vun, though you seem to have forgotten I can also ensure you feel no pain from it.” He drummed fingers against her ribcage to remind her of the slash he’d tended.

“Yay.” Dawn once again did the hands sign for ‘celebrate’. “Now we need to figure out how to solve Sugar’s little problem.” She redirected, feeling like she was completely out of her depth once more.

“I somehow doubt that I am the one with the answers Master Tethras seeks Ena’vun.” Solas’ subtle emphasis gave Dawn pause and he smiled at her reaction. Dawn pulled the bottle back from him without replying, taking a drink that did nothing to convince the Old Wolf that he was wrong.

Thankfully Varric was engaged with Merrill discussing the arrival of their friends, and had missed that little exchange. “Of course she’d call the others here and then leave me the burden of keeping them from killing each other.” He repeated his complaint.

“I think it’ll be nice to have everyone around again, even if they aren’t all nice to each other.” Merrill chirruped happily.

“Who does ‘everyone’ actually consist of?” Dawn had to query. She still hadn’t found out if Anders was alive or dead, or if Varric was as unreliable a narrator as the internet suspected.

But apparently Varric still functioned at full capacity even while seething mad at Hawke and a few bottles in; it spoke about how often he’d been in that condition. “I’ll trade you that story for a song Sweetheart.” He challenged, opening another deliberately.

“Oh I’ll give you a song Sugar, but you have no one to blame for this but yourself.” Dawn warned, already flushed from the wine and the heat of the Rest. Singing used to help settle her anxiety, Dawn was hoping that still held true now.

Singing the lullaby hadn’t hurt her still untested throat, and Dawn was at the relaxed and carefree state of drunk so she didn’t hesitate to sing Jessie Ware’s Say You Love Me. Her throat wasn’t entirely ready to be singing for an audience yet, and Dawn was drunk enough that she had to ignore her friends to focus on translating the song and controlling her voice around the notes she was still unsteady with. Maybe if she’d been more sober Dawn would have picked a less dangerous song, but really nothing else fit so well.

Varric laughed and applauded as soon as she finished singing, but Dawn was fairly sure she saw an awed look in his eyes. “I literally asked for that didn’t I?” he made it sound like a rhetorical question.

“You did, and it was lovely though kind of sad.” Merrill helpfully input. Solas, at least, stayed silent on the matter of the song.

Dawn took a few careful drinks, easing the ache in her throat. “So are you going to tell me what I wanted to know Sugar, or are you going to try and get another song out of me?” she teased, vacillating between guilt and pride over their reactions.

“Fenris and Isabella are likely to show up at any time. Aveline is back at Kirkwall; only she and Hawke know where Sunshine is.” Varric meandered to the point and Dawn wondered if he was stalling on purpose to build suspense. “Merrill is already here and I suspect Choir Boy will arrive with reluctant fanfare before too much longer.”
Dawn knew everyone was watching her reaction to the news, though likely for very different reasons. Now the question was if she could trust the game narrative, it had not proven to be entirely reliable thus far. Alistair and Siobhan weren’t the only Heroes from the Fifth Blight, Hawke and Varric were romantically poised to collide, and Cullen and Josephine had found love outside of their usual narratives; anything could happen at this point. Sebastien still being a friend may or may not mean that Anders was dead, and the smirk Varric tried to subdue warned that he knew she wanted to ask about the apostate missing from the list.

“Anyone else coming here for Hawke?” she still asked, needing to know more than she needed to appear omniscient.

Varric grinned at her without answering, but Solas spoke up. “His Tales of the Champion claim the mage Anders and the Spirit Justice were slain after the explosion they caused unsettled Kirkwall, but that’s if you can trust the source.” His reply left the Author sputtering in amused indignation. Dawn laughed, glad to realize the Wolf was making friends.

“Are you implying I lied to the world Chuckles?” Varric objected lightly but Merrill started to laugh behind her hand and Dawn cackled right along with her.

“Sugar, we know how much of a liar you are. We all love you anyways but no one here would be surprised.” She winked to soften her words.

Varric gave in and laughed, not sounding offended at all. “You have come a long way from the quiet little Offworlder that wouldn’t say a word to anyone Sweetheart. I feel like a proud papa.” He teased back.

“I don’t call anyone daddy,” Dawn grinned, “so if that’s your kink it’s a fight you’ll lose.” She helpfully warned.

“I’m fairly certain that in this condition Ena’vun, you are significantly less coordinated than you’re expecting to be.” Solas seemed to enjoy the friendly banter even if he barely touched the wine.

“You’ve got a point there Chuckles,” Iron Bull’s voice drew the table’s attention and Dawn realized that the patronage at the Rest had shifted around without her realizing it. Before there’d been a crowd blocking the Chargers’ area off but now it was almost like their table had been absorbed into it without anyone ever moving. “Maybe I should deliberately get you drunk so you learn to function in this state Little Bas.”

“The sounds like a recipe for disaster.” Merrill worried, “Won’t that put Dawn at risk?”

“It can.” Iron Bull acknowledged. “Little Bas, how stable do you feel at the moment?” he was sprawled back and lazy looking, and yet Dawn was half convinced he was about to take a swipe at her.

“Well I’ve already sung once and I have to resist oversharing, so a fight right now would probably be sloppy.” She stood up, feeling fluid but not staggering.

Iron Bull still hadn’t moved from his sybaritic sprawl and Dawn actually looked over her shoulder to make sure Leliana hadn’t appeared to ‘continue her Rogue training’. No lethal redhead had arrived and Dawn whipped her gaze back around to face Iron Bull too quickly. The room spun slightly and she sat back down harder and faster than she meant to.

Her friends laughed while Iron Bull gave an amused smile. “You’re not wrong Little Bas, but falling on your ass loses you style points.” He criticized.
“Oh bite me.” Dawn spat back, flushing red at the teasing and grabbing the wine sullenly to take a drink.

Now Iron Bull stood up and Dawn felt her eyes go wide even as her body froze to the spot. He wouldn’t. Dawn watched him come closer, unable to look away as he stopped in front of her chair and even took a knee so they were more or less eye-to-eye. “Little Bas, right now you’re drunk so you get a warning; next time you say that to me I will do it.” Iron Bull wagged his finger in her face and Dawn absolutely believed he meant it.

She still couldn’t stop herself from saying, “Well then I better watch my fucking mouth.” She needed to stop talking, and drinking, and staring. “Eventually I’m going to get into real trouble from it and then where would I be?”

There was a spark of laughter in his eye as he grinned at her response. “Probably over my knee, seeing how red I can smack that ass. But again, not while you’re drunk Little Bas.”

Dawn felt her face flush at his words and nearly died when she heard Merrill mutter, “Oh that sounded dirty.”

And somewhere between facing the Eluvian in the Fade and that third or fourth bottle of wine, Dawn’s good sense had abandoned ship. “You know,” she couldn’t shut up, “that sounds like a loophole I could take advantage of.” Oh look, her dignity just ran off after her good sense.

“Oh no Kadan, being drunk means you’re off bounds but once you’re sober it’s an entirely different matter.” Iron Bull warned with a pleased grin.

“So it comes back to watching my fucking mouth.” Dawn quipped weakly, having no other counter to offer.

Iron Bull tilted her chin up, fingertips gentle and thumb calloused against her bottom lip as he turned her face side to side. “I’m watching your mouth right now Little Bas and I like my odds.” He teased and pulled his hand away swiftly as Dawn snapped a bite at it in retaliation.

“Laugh it up Iron Bull; I can still mouth off in English.” Dawn grinned after switching to her native language.

“You’re playing a dangerous game Kadan.” Iron Bull warned with a purr to his voice that left Dawn swallowing, aware that everyone was watching the exchange. She just couldn’t look away to prove it.

“I’m entirely certain I cannot answer that without getting into trouble.” Dawn smartly switched back to Common and heard Varric laugh about ‘Hawke missing this!’

Iron Bull laughed as well and finally got up to return to his seat. Dawn almost buried her face in her hands when she realized Merrill was watching like it was a movie, Solas rolled his eyes at her but fought a smile, and Varric was actually writing as much as he could down.

“I’m in so much trouble aren’t I?” she questioned the table at large and Varric was gleefully merciless.

“After a song like that Sweetheart you were kind of asking for it.” He smugly enjoyed the karma Dawn was wallowing in.

Thankfully Solas took pity on her. “Ena’vun, might I suggest a restorative? I’ll attend your request while you recover and the night can end peacefully after that.”
“Make a hasty exit before drunk me leaves sober me even more humiliated? Yes please.” Dawn agreed while Varric laughed at her some more.

Solas just lifted an eyebrow in amusement and gestured for her to lead, all while Dawn tried not to act like she was fleeing Iron Bull’s gaze. “Merrill, get Varric so drunk he hates me tomorrow please.” Dawn called as way of farewell, and left the laughter of her friends behind.

It wasn’t prohibitively cold as Dawn stopped to breathe in the evening air. Solas didn’t rush her, seeming at ease with the silence as she looked at the glimmering stars, and Dawn finally felt the flush fade from her skin. “We’re not even home a day Old Wolf, and I’m already causing myself problems.” She joked lightly, seeing Solas smile as he led them into his fresco room, and tried desperately not to think about Keeps in the desert.

“You certainly don’t waste time before you make life interesting Ena’vun.” He didn’t actually disagree with her.

Dawn carefully moved the slightly humming stone aside and sat on top of the desk in the middle of the room, watching as Solas puttered about in a deliberate fashion. The cool air had helped clear her head enough that she noticed when he opened containers to retrieve items that had no way of having fit inside the receptacles at all; a casual, even negligent use of Power that was somehow all the more impressive for him not being aware of it. Once again Dawn wondered if her feeling when he did Wolf things was just her head again like with the Eluvian. Was she crazy or sensitive, or both? She dragged her thoughts off of feeling vaguely sorry for herself, trying to will the anxiety out of her spine. This was supposed to be her last night of indulgence.

“Are you ready Ena’vun?” Solas drew her scattered focus, the tools he needed to pierce her ears already assembled.

She gave him the ‘come at me’ gesture which apparently translated well enough across to this universe that Solas laughed and handed her a restorative potion. Even as she thumbed it open and drank, Solas stepped close next to her; they’d spent enough time in each other’s personal space by this point that it wasn’t awkward.

“Did you already get the necklace to Wisdom?” she made small talk while he did something; her ear felt numb and she could only sense the occasional tug.

“Even I am not that fast at consorting with Spirits through the Veil Ena’vun. We did only just get back today.” He pointed out gently. “Though Wisdom will be protected soon, so do not fret.”

“I’m just happy we can save your friend. In the world story it’s always too late, so being able to prevent that helps me hope I’m able to change other things successfully too.” Dawn felt a little of the worry constantly laying on her shoulders ease at least.

Solas finished her one ear and moved to start working on the other one. “What are you worried about changing next Ena’vun?” he asked casually, as if it were no matter the answer.

“Oh the usual Old Wolf; if I can keep my loved ones alive, defeat the bad guys, and establish enough stability, this world grows and changes and evolves.” Dawn flippantly answered, only realizing as she said it that it was all true. “Maybe I’ll even get a puppy someday.” She added on after a pause.

Solas had to stop his work to laugh, clearly not having expected her final addendum. “You jest to cover it Ena’vun, but I can tell you truly are worried for something.” He resumed the numb tugging on her ear.
“I am Old Wolf, I really am. And after how poorly Halamshiral went for me, I’m even more scared than before.” It was easy to admit that when she couldn’t see his expression. The restorative left her slowly sobering but increasingly discomforted.

“If there is anything I can do to help Ena’vun, please know you can ask me.” Solas insisted as he stepped back, his task finished.

Dawn smiled, knowing that he meant the offer sincerely. And that she’d do everything to try and ensure that it wouldn’t come to that. “And I love you for it Old Wolf, and for the kickass new decorations.” She gently felt her newly perforated ears. They were going to ache once the magic wore off. “But as you once pointed out, my ability to predict the future depends on the context I know creates it; right now I can change nothing else. I can only Hope, and keep training.”

Solas gave her room to jump off his desk. “Go rest Ena’vun; we can determine how I can help you tomorrow when you’ve recovered.” He instructed with finality she didn’t bother arguing with.

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When he’d arrived at Tarasyl’an Te’las, Doshiel had thought he’d feel the Fade echo the memories of what had happened there. The place where the sky was held back, where Fen’Harel betrayed the Creators and Forgotten Ones and locked them all away; Keeper Istimaethoriel had taught Doshiel all the histories Clan Lavellan had to tell. But it was just stone and dust, the magics of old worn out and missing.

At least until the Inquisitor had returned. Doshiel hadn’t felt anything like the Power in her hand, and he could see it glowing like jade fire even before he could make out the features of Inquisitor Cadash’ face. It had been enough to distract him for a little bit from the embarrassing scene his Bae and the Tevinter were putting on at least.

Nothing was strong enough to distract him from the ripples shuddering out and away from the Offworlder though. The lines and lights of energy that Doshiel had always Seen but hadn’t understood was the Fade laying over the world; all moved around the woman making way in front of her steps and swirling in to follow closely behind her like errant birds playing in the wind. Where the Inquisitor had a hand that glowed like it held a fallen star, this Offworlder was the fallen star.

Doshiel blinked his eyes, having to concentrate to stop Seeing the energies swirling around and even off of her, and looked at a shemlen woman that otherwise was rather unremarkable. She wore the same armour he saw several others wearing, her face was pretty in the way of shemlen women but not remarkable, and even though she glowed like the sun to his Sight to his eyes she was just a simple human.

Keeper Deshanna had always told him that no one else Saw the world the way he did, that being an Elgar’ladarelan meant he would always be aware of more than just the physical. It was the only reason Doshiel could understand how his Bae and the others didn’t stop to stare at this Dawn every time she came into view.

And then she started to sing to a baby and even trying to keep to the regular sight everyone else was limited to, Doshiel could See the Fade around her react. Everything she felt, every scrap of emotional energy the Offworlder naturally generated, fed right into the Fade as if the Veil did not exist.

“Dosh?” his Bae prompted and Doshiel finally tore his eyes off of the Offworlder to look up at him.
“She’s really not from here.” He didn’t know how else to say it; his Bae couldn’t See.

“No Doshiel, she really isn’t.” his Bae treated the response seriously and Doshiel realized that even if he couldn’t See it, he still knew. “But Dawn is ours now and we plan to keep her.”

“Can you keep the sun?” Doshiel wondered softly as his dad led them back into the Keep and towards the endless lessons.

He did not get an answer to that question from his father; nor from the tomes of books or tales of people. Doshiel believed his Keeper taught him the things he needed to know but the more he saw of the Inquisition, the less, he realized, he knew. The Clan could not prepare him for meeting Spirits bound, seeing the Anchor, or watching the Offworlder.

As Doshiel tried to focus on the lesson his Bae was walking the Circle mages through, he kept losing his track of thought back to the beacon of light that the Offworlder appeared to be. That was how she appeared in the waking world to his physical eye; Doshiel was almost painfully curious about how she appeared in the dreaming Fade. Would she be the blazing sun or the softer light of the North star? Would a shemlen from another world even dream in their Fade? It was his job as the learner to remain silent and absorb the lessons his Elders were imparting, and yet Doshiel had to fight back the questions because he wanted to know. Needed to know. What was the Offworlder if the Fade didn’t know how to react to her? And was she a threat to his Bae?

He kept the questions carefully caged; having enough self-discipline to not immediately demand answers though he so wanted to. If he wanted to be treated as an adult he had to act like an adult, bad enough that he was clearly lacking Vallaslin but if he started to spew questions like a child his father would treat him like one.

Fortunately his Bae was understandably distracted himself, and even if Doshiel had given the Tevinter shemlen a hard time he was also happy that his bae had someone to look after him. Keeper Deshanna and the Hahren always liked to point out that ‘A lone Dalish is in need of People’; Doshiel just hadn’t realized that People did not necessarily mean the Dalish. That was one of the things he was learning his Bae meant about meeting the world and how amazing it could be; the world was not easy but it was interesting.

“Doshiel…” his Bae hesitated and a flash of guilt was obvious on his face.

“Gross…” Doshiel complained under his breath. “Go see your boyfriend Bae, I do not want to hear about it, or see it, ever.”

His father shot him an amused but exasperated look and Doshiel tried not to whine when he scruffed up his hair affectionately. “Some day you may find someone that makes you act all gross too, and if that day comes I cannot wait for you to understand how this conversation feels in reverse.”

“As if I would ever act as silly as you do Bae.” Doshiel retorted quickly, trying to layer in the tones that Hahren Panelana used.

Instead of being offended, his father just gave a fond smile. “Never say never my son.” He gave Doshiel another hair rub that messed it up even further, and then scampered off to see Dorian.

Doshiel had never seen his Bae in love before, but he knew the swagger that his Bae used when he planned to ‘spend time with a lover’ so he knew he would not be seeing his Bae again this night. That suited Doshiel just fine because he was curious to try something that their Keeper had been teaching him to do; find a specific person in the Fade.
If he wanted answers about the Offworlder, there was literally no better source than observing the woman herself in the Fade. Doshiel knew he had to be more experienced with that than she was; she wasn’t even from here!

He knew how to meditate so that he could guide himself into the Fade, and even mostly knew how to shield himself from the Spirits that came to talk to him every single time he did so. His Keeper had said he wasn’t ready for this venturing on his own yet but Doshiel just wanted to know what the Offworlder his Bae cared about really was. Not all Spirits that offered temptation were actually evil, and Doshiel knew he was one of the few that could see what she was; this Offworlder was not normal.

And she was around a pair of mages that actively scared Doshiel. She shone brighter than the stars but the mages with her certainly did not. The Hahren with Dirthamen’s Vallaslin on her face had a red wash to her aura and the whispering weight of Pride and Sloth curling around her. When he looked at her for too long, Doshiel tasted copper and felt the shivering cold of a blade across his wrist even if he never approached. He’d never met a blood mage before. The flat ear mage was even more disconcerting to look at. At first he appeared no different to Doshiel; he had no glow like the Offworlder, and his aura looked as plain as his face did. Then multiple Spirit eyes Doshiel hadn’t realized were there opened up and a pair looked right at him; then winked before disappearing to his sight again.

The bald headed mage never even turned to look towards him with his physical eyes, but Doshiel had jolted out of his meditation and scampered from the upper level of the Herald’s Rest, out onto the walls. The cold air of the growing evening helped cool the sweat prickling across Doshiel’s temples as his instincts screamed at him that he had just escaped a terrible threat even though the flat ear hadn’t actually done anything. Nothing threatening anyways; besides no mage could manifest themselves on this side of the Veil like they did on the Elgar'vhen'an side. Doshiel wasn’t going to tempt fate by getting in the other mage’s way, though he was surprised his Bae hadn’t warned him about the dangerous feeling mage. Maybe like the Offworlder this mage only looked strange to him.

“Strange and different don’t mean dangerous.” A tall and painfully thin shemlen was suddenly walking beside Doshiel, and he let out an undignified squawk of alarm.

Doshiel tried to put barrier over himself at the same time he tried to Step and the two magics collided and fizzled out into nothing but an instant headache. And once again Doshiel had to concentrate to stop seeing the Fade layered over the real world. It was too confusing with Cole/Compassion.

“Cole, I’ve asked you to not do that. It actually makes me queasy to see you and see you.” Doshiel complained, all need for acting mature falling away with the strange spirit.

“The rising sun sees me as all of who I am but she doesn’t have the Sight. You have the Sight but you see the me that is there and the me that is here but they don’t look the same to you. I cannot not be there and here.” Cole explained as if it actually helped.

“Eeeehhh whatever. Just, cough or something before showing up, that way I can get ready.” Doshiel sighed, rubbing at his eyes. It never helped but nothing really did once he saw something.

“You see the tangles and string, the bindings and torn places. You see the always and the never and the should not. But you do not see the things you do not know. I did not always know, I do not always know. But I can ask. You have a question.” The spirit shemlen’s words left Doshiel’s face crinkled in confusion.
“Now I have more than one.” Doshiel hated the whine that crept into his voice. Not that Cole ever seemed to care about apparent maturity. He was the only one that didn’t treat Doshiel like he was a bed wetting, snot sniffling da’lin.

But the downside to getting friendly and flippant with a mind reading Spirit shemlen was that he was a mind reading Spirit shemlen. “Why so many eyes? Who is she? What is she? What does beer taste like? Is that what adults do without young ones around? Why is it so noisy? What’s that bad smell? Can no one else See this? What are those strings? Who dares connect to my Bae? Will I lose him again?”

“OKAY,” Doshiel interrupted loudly, cheeks and ears equally flushed with embarrassment. “I have more questions than I can realistically ask. Sometimes I just wonder things, you know? I don’t need the answer, but the question just….pops into my head.” He tried not to sound defensive and knew that if it had been anyone but Cole it wouldn’t have worked.

“You can find her in the Fade, but if she doesn’t allow it you cannot get close. The rising sun is easily seen but not approached.” Cole ignored Doshiel’s emotional embroilment.

“Is she as bright to you as she is to me?” Doshiel finally realized who Cole meant.

“All light is bright after living with its absence, and the Wolf has been so long in the dark. He is collecting the Scents but hasn’t caught the People. Only her and he is so very afraid to lose that light.” And Cole once again ventured out of the topic at hand and into whatever topic Spirits thought about.

“O-kay…” Doshiel hesitated to agree but neither did he want to listen to ravings.

“You shouldn’t go Looking alone, there are dangers in the darkness hovering around the light.” Cole warned and vanished before Doshiel could ask him to clarify.

Doshiel furrowed his forehead in thought, trying to make heads and tails of the Spirit’s comments. Was he trying to say Doshiel shouldn’t Look at those around the Offworlder or that he shouldn’t go into the Fade looking for her? Or that Cole knew Doshiel was going to do both anyways and should have his Bae around to be safe?

Keeper Istimaethoriel always did say that there was no shame in being safe; better safe and alive than brave and dead. But that was a saying said to children, a polite way of saying: stay put here and let the adults take care of the dangers. Doshiel didn’t have Vallaslin, but that hadn’t stopped his Bae from believing that he was ready to leave the Clan and come to the Inquisition with him. Doshiel wasn’t a baby, and he was mature enough to admit he wasn’t an adult yet either, he knew there were dangers in the Fade he couldn’t beat.

But it wasn’t like Spirits could lie to him either.

Doshiel blinked as he decided that he’d be careful when he went looking for the Offworlder in the Fade. He didn’t need his Bae holding his hand for it, he didn’t need an adult to point out the risks, Doshiel knew them and could See them coming. And he would be little and small and hidden to the dangers of the Fade. A quick peek wouldn’t put him at too much of a risk, and then he could confidently know that the Offworlder wasn’t a threat to his Bae. Or the Inquisitor. In fact, it was practically his Duty as a Healer of Spirits to make sure that wasn’t what this Offworlder was, an injured Spirit.

With a decisive nod Doshiel turned on his heel and went quickly to the Mage’ Tower his Bae kept their rooms in. It would be empty all night long thanks to the Tevinter shem, so Doshiel took all the
time he needed to lay out the protective wards his Bae had taught him.

He was curious, not reckless after all.

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Solas had been expecting to end his night after Ena’vun made her departure, his intent to venture out after Wisdom in the Fade with salvation as a gift in his hand for once. But before he could go find his friend in the Fade, Solas was shocked to find someone stalking after Ena’vun. A young Elvhen mage stood hesitantly at the ‘threshold’ of Dawn’s Fadescape, looking nervous but determined and when Solas focused on the boy more carefully he was astonished to realize he was an Elgar’ladarel.

“What are you doing?” he circled in close behind the boy, undetected and currently not a threat.

The boy jumped and whirled but didn’t cower. His eyes went wide in alarmed familiarity and the colour drained out of his unMarked face. But for all the fear he clearly displayed, this child also revealed a stout heart by speaking, “My Bae said that the Harbinger was not from here, but he never said anything about you.” He was confrontational in the way of scared young things, using bark and bluster to keep away the dangers.

Solas froze at the boy’s statement, unsure what his next move needed to be. He was found out, but by a child.

“I can See the shroud of uthenera still clinging to you Hahren.” And with the boy’s words Solas could breathe again.

“Only one like you could See it. It is not known.” He shot the young mage an assessing look. Features were all too familiar for all that they were much younger, unMarked, and combined with the face of a mother; this had to be Cedric’s progeny. Because this encounter occurred in the Fade as the one with the boy’s father had, Solas could take the same solution and yet he found himself hesitating to lock away the memory.

“My Bae doesn’t know?” he asked, intensely serious for one whose voice was cracking even in the Fade.

Solas idly wondered if this youngling even understood the entirety of his rare Gift. And maybe only because of the woman that had just left him in the waking world Solas found himself smiling instead of scowling. “Your father does not know. And I intend for that to be the case for a while longer.”

And the boy grinned up at him, radiating mischief suddenly and Solas felt ancient to his very soul. “You are a Sentinel, my Keeper has told me of you. I’ll keep your secret Hahren; you’re creepy but one of the good guys.”

It felt oddly painful to hear his earnest belief was so sorely misguided. Solas was not one of the Sentinels left behind by the Evanuris to guard their Temples but if the child believed him to be such, he wouldn’t go searching for the more dangerous truth. “You still haven’t explained what you are doing here.” He refocused the boy.

They were standing on the threshold of Ena’vun’s Fadescape, the area ahead affected by her subconscious Otherness. “I wanted to know what the Offworlder really is; she Looks like nothing else.” Direct honesty was a pleasant surprise, even in the Fade.

“Ena’vun has many dangerous things trying to get to her. It would be wise not to expose yourself to
such things as would try to Hunt her.” Solas knew exactly how well telling the boy to not do
dangerous things would work; it may have been an Age or more since he was that young but he
remembered the need to flout authority still.

It’d probably work just as well to tell Ena’vun to be careful; she’d deliberately go do something
reckless just to prove a point. He found it infuriating how often she disregarded her own safety.
Solas knew if Dawn suspected a child was putting himself at risk to investigate her she’d be
terribly upset, and yet she’d thought nothing of defending others even while entirely unarmed and
barely standing.

“I’m not an idiot.” The boy was impertinent and youthfully arrogant. “With a beacon like the
Offworlder around nothing nearby can even See me. You just have too many eyes Hahren.”

“How little you understand your own Power.” Solas felt almost sad that the child didn’t have a
proper teacher around to show him what an Elgar’ladarel lan could really do. “Do the Dalish truly
understand so little of your own history?” he felt the usual contempt but now also a flash of guilt.
Ena’vun had once asked him if it wouldn’t be better to return the forgotten history to the Dalish. At
the time he’d demanded how that could at all help the plight of the Elvhen vagabonds, but staring
at the earnest and utterly unprepared Healer of Spirits in front of him Solas had to admit that Dawn
was right. They did not even know the simplest truths of their own history and without those
foundations to build off of nothing they attempted to reconstruct now would ever hold.

“My Mae was like me but slavers took her away before she could show me.” The boy declared
with a lifted chin and a defensive set to his shoulders. Solas had definitely wounded his pride. “Our
Keeper tried to find another at the Arlathan but there hasn’t been one like my Mae in generations.
If you have some hidden knowledge to lay on me Hahren, I know better than to argue with a
Sentinel.”

Solas just stared at the boy. “You are mastering a magic your people haven’t encountered in
generations?” he was actually impressed with the boy’s natural control now; if this is what he had
learned without a teacher, the things he could accomplish with a proper Hahren would be truly
remarkable.

Now it was the young mage’s turn to give Solas an almost assessing look. “My Bae is rude to those
like you because it was flat ears that told the slavers where to find my Clan. The flat ears knew
where to find my Clan because my Mae had helped calm a corrupted Spirit near their town. I
cannot do that yet, I have mastered nothing. My Mae mastered the skill without a Hahren to guide
her and the lessons she left behind are what I have to learn from. Our People have lost their history
but you’re living proof it’s not all gone.”

Solas looked at the boy, almost offended and yet also strangely proud for his defiance. “When I
have tried in the past to approach the Dalish with their history, I was not well received.” He
admitted simply, washing his hands of the obligations the boy wanted to lay on him. “More often
than not I was violently dissuaded from correcting your Peoples errors.”

“What you are, what you know, it’s a threat to the things we have built without those like you. Are
you surprised we act out of fear?” the child actually laughed as if Solas’ experiences were his own
fault.

“Raised on the same stories they are, you don’t look on someone like me with suspicion.” Solas
didn’t hesitate to point out Dalish intolerance.

“You don’t Look like you want to do me harm.” The confidence quieted Solas’ indignation. He
didn’t want to do the boy harm; he was tired of doing nothing but harm even when his intentions
are for the best.

“I want to be worthy of the look in her eyes; hurting you is counter to that.” Solas only admitted because they were in the Fade and certain truths were undeniable; especially to an Elgar’ladarelan.

“Between a shemlen and an Elf, you’d pick the human.” The boy seemed astonished and offended by the realization and Solas couldn’t help the grin that grew in response.

“I would pick her; she is my People.” He was not at all embarrassed to admit that even if the Dalish boy would never understand. To the Dalish you either were or were not Dalish; were or were not People. They could not understand that Ena’vun defied any and all rules that had been previously entrenched and unalterable before her.

The boy at least stayed respectfully silent on his opinion of Solas’ version of People. “This does nothing to tell me that she isn’t a threat to my Bae,” he pointed out shrewdly, “it just tells me that if she is then you are too.”

Instead of being frustrated by the boy’s intelligence and accusations, Solas laughed. “If I wanted to be a threat I would already have done my worse. You and your father are safe.”

“So we’re your People too?” of course the boy would immediately push his luck, there is no discretion in youth. Solas was certain the expression on his face said louder than words his opinion on that attempt.

“For now it serves your greatest interest to stay away in the Fade. I am not a threat to you but many other things are. They will not approach when I am here, but I am not your guardian.” Solas did not need the child realizing he wouldn’t stand idly by and watch as the young Elgar’ladarelan got ravaged by those drawn to Ena’vun.

“You’re telling me to get out of the Fade but you’re trusting an Offworlder to handle herself?” the indignation was immediate and expected, and Solas fought to keep the amusement off his face; no need to be rude.

“Wake up.” Solas laced a little Power into it and the boy disappeared from the Fade. It would be a visceral lesson for the boy to learn, that even with all his rare Gifts there were still those with more Power that could take his control away. Talent alone wasn’t enough; he needed to practice to his utmost limits.

Solas spared another moment for silent centering, knowing that if the boy had been unmolested in the Fade then the protections Ena’vun naturally had still held. But that didn’t mean he no longer planned to ensure the perimeter of her Fadescape was not stalked by terrible things.

“You are much changed to how I last experienced you to be.” Wisdom called out only when it was clear Solas was alone.

He had originally come to bring the Amulet of the Unbound to his friend, so it should not have surprised him to have Wisdom seek him out in return. “I am not a monster for all that monstrous things I have had to do.” And the monstrous things he’s been able to avoid doing thanks to Ena’vun’s interference; if Wisdom had been corrupted, he would have insisted on being the one to set her free.

Wisdom smiled, face settling on a young human form Solas didn’t immediately recognize. “Like your Ena’vun, you no longer know what you Look like.” She sounded supremely amused by that.

Solas ignored her error. “Ena’vun has provided a way to keep you safe from a Fate most
unpleasant.” He held forward the necklace that he’d been given outside the Fade. And finally he told his long-time friend everything Dawn had shared about her world story and Wisdom’s death.

Wisdom held the rather ugly bauble reverently. “Did she truly understand that with this I will exist unpossessed and unpossessing on either side of the Veil?”

Solas felt his lip curl in a smile. “I believe so. As I have told you previously, Ena’vun has an understanding of this world that only an Outsider could have. It is remarkable; even if she did not know, it would please her.”

Wisdom tilted her head as if hearing something Solas’ sensitive ears couldn’t detect. Her eyes were distant but her movements graceful as she clasped the necklace around her throat without further prompting. And the moment it locked shut, Solas could feel the Fade subtly relax around Wisdom; as if she was no longer wholly anchored to it. Her expression looked astonished and then pleased before she focused back onto Solas.

“Your Ena’vun is clever to have figured this solution out, though I am left lacking the context in which she learned such things.” As always Wisdom only saw her lack, the ever enduring drive to know integral to what she was.

“I have wondered that myself ma falon.” Solas acknowledged honestly. He didn’t admit that he should have already demanded answers from Ena’vun by now though.

“I would like to meet her.” Wisdom sounded like she’d just made a decision, but Solas wasn’t sure on what. She’d never harm Dawn, but Solas felt uneasy about deliberately bringing a Spirit to Ena’vun in the Fade. And Wisdom smiled as if she expected no less than his hesitation. “This necklace will protect her from me as much as it protects me from everything else; do not worry for your Ena’vun, I am not the threat.”

“But there is a threat.” Solas picked up on his friend’s word choice.

“Something Hunts, an unknown something I do not Know. The fear in the dark, the movement in the corner of the eye; it stalks the edges of your Ena’vun always looking for a way in. And soon she will let it; it is only after that happens that you will Understand.” Wisdom warned in the enigmatic way of Spirits.

“Something seeks to possess her?” he felt the churn of rage and fur inside his skin, the Power in his blood thrumming with potential.

“As much as she seeks to possess it in return.” Wisdom looked Solas straight in the eye for the first time. “My ‘Fate’ was changed through her actions and so I will tell you this, your Ena’vun is not what you think her to be. She has shown you a new way to look at the world and now you need to see her with those new eyes as well.”

“And what do you know of my Ena’vun that has you warning me but still asking me to introduce you?” Solas demanded, unable to keep the suspicion out of his tone.

Wisdom just smiled at him again before vanishing.

Solas let out a frustrated snarl before tearing himself from the Fade as well.

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Alena couldn’t help but watch Dawn as she entered the War Room the next morning. Her Harbinger was holding up surprisingly well for someone who’d nearly been assassinated, but
Dawn had picked up a new intensity on the way back from Halamshiral that was interesting to watch. Especially considering that while Alena and her Inquisition were trying to prevent a Venatori takeover of Orlais, Hawke and Alistair had decided to go investigate where the Wardens had gotten off to. In the Western Approach. Alone. Alena wasn’t sure who was more pissed off by that, Varric or Josephine.

Dawn didn’t seem surprised by this development at all, though she quickly admitted that it was different from her world story; it was just entirely in line with the two of them. “But they are necessary there; normally it’s a planned mission but this is entirely like Hawke.” Dawn sounded so annoyed that Cullen snorted.

“What’s coming now?” Leliana demanded directly.

“I stop a demon army.” Alena surprised her Advisors with the answer. “The Time Rift warned us one was coming, that’s what’s next right?” Alena watched Dawn resignedly nod yes.

“Hawke and Alistair are going to discover weird shit at Gryphon’s Keep. Magister Erimond is a Venatori working with the Wardens. The Wardens had been deceived by the false Calling and Clarel was convinced to try and raise a demon army to take into the Deep Roads to kill all the Old Gods, preventing any future Blights.” Dawn’s words absolutely silenced the room.

“How are they raising demons?” Cullen demanded, voice dripping rage.

“Blood magic. Their Mages are being used to raise them, the Warriors and Rogues sacrificed to the cause. And once the ritual binding the demon to the Mage is complete, that mage is a slave to Corypheus.” Dawn’s voice stayed steady as she spoke though Alena was certain this was one of those things that had been haunting her Harbinger.

“How wait to tell us about this?” Leliana demanded hotly.

“We needed an army.” Cullen surprisingly was the one with the answers. “You don’t raise a demon army in a single day, and I’m betting Dawn didn’t know where they were before they already have their army assembled.” He directed to Dawn and she confirmed with a nod.

“We had to build relations, develop influence,” Josephine spoke up now, “before we could hope to defeat them.” The Ambassador was solemn as she looked at Dawn. Alena’s Harbinger was staring down at the table top map and missed seeing the calculating look the Ambassador gave her.

“Yes. So why burden you with this until you were in a place to do something about it?” Dawn sounded both tired and relieved to be getting this all out in the open. “There is going to be a battle though that might be putting it too mildly. I can tell you everything I know about the location but I’m not going to interfere with planning; I trust Cullen to have a successful assault. And Alena leads her team in. But I am joining that team.” Dawn’s simple statement resulted in an explosion of arguments. Dawn faced the tide of them calmly, likely having expected it given what had happened at The Winter Palace.

Alena met her Harbinger’s eyes and waited out the storm of her Advisors. Despite the fear this civilian should be wallowing in she could see the weight of consequence to Dawn’s determination that hadn’t been there before her near death experience. “I am going. This is not me asking permission, and if you try to stop me I will find a way to go on my own.” Alena kept her own counsel on the matter as Dawn continued, her flagrant command surprising the Advisors. “I can only tell you that my being there will save lives, but I cannot guarantee that if I tell you everything. I have a very small opportunity to do this and I plan on succeeding.”
“This is why you’ve had Bull training you.” Alena realized and Dawn gave a shallow nod. “He’s already said whatever mission you insist on going on with me he had to go on too.”

Dawn looked visibly pained at Alena’s words. “Of course he did.”

“Anyone else you think needs to go?” Alena was curious; she already had a theoretical team picked out.

“I can only say that I would leave Cole off of your team, I don’t know how his change in status will affect him now.” Dawn confided.

“Can you give us a timeline?” Cullen was already plotting; Alena could see it on his face.

“No sorry, sometimes it even occurred before Halamshiral.” Dawn shrugged as she apologized.

“We should prepare to move some forces as soon as we get word back from Hawke and Alistair.” Leliana added in and Alena could tell her Advisors wanted to discuss the Harbinger’s news without the Harbinger present.

Thankfully Dawn had picked up that same feeling and offered, “I will let you plot and plan, if I am free to go?” Dawn waited until Alena nodded before stepping out. She looked like she was about to go ex-Qunari hunting and Alena mentally wished her the best of luck with that.

“I know she’s been training but are we seriously considering allowing her to go, she already nearly died that and that wasn’t even in a war zone!” Cullen demanded, not unkindly.

“She has information we cannot allow to be lost with her death.” Leliana agreed though not unkindly. The Nightingale was as fond of the Harbinger as she seemed able to be of anyone.

“What if the life she is hoping to save is the Inquisitor’s?” Josephine asked and silenced the other two Advisors.

Alena loved the strange woman that had once only been the Offworlder. Dawn was a lot of things to a lot of people now and she wasn’t just the Harbinger to Alena. At this late stage of her life Alena knew that Dawn was the closest she was ever going to get to having a daughter, and she was obscenely proud of the young woman’s development since joining her world. It also meant she’d rather chew off her own arm than see her put in a position where she could be hurt and yet trying to fight Dawn’s self-determination would only increase her danger not decrease it. Because Dawn would do exactly as she’s said she would, go willingly or find her own way.

“She’s coming with me; we need to plan for that.” Alena finally stated. Interestingly no one argued but she could see them waiting for her to explain. “In all the time Dawn has been here, she has asked for nothing from the Inquisition. So if she tells me that she needs to be there, I am going to make sure it happens. She has never led me wrong and I owe it to her to trust her now. So that means my team automatically includes Bull. We’ll be following Hawke, so Varric is a logical choice, and I suspect Solas will insist on going as my mage support if Dawn’s going. Any arguments with that arrangement?”

“Blackwall might have a thing or two to say.” Cullen deadpanned.

Alena smiled but said nothing. No one had any objections to her team, so even if they didn’t know when and where yet, they could get those going ready.

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Bull felt someone staring at him and carefully shifted position to spot Little Bas on the stairs watching him train with the Chargers and the Valo-Kas. Her body language was curled in as if she had to defend herself from a blow about to land, and her facial expression looked slightly agonized, but to his surprise she walked past them all and went into the Tower where their rooms were. Her gait was stiff, her pace angry, and Bull gave a smile although he wasn’t actually pleased; she was definitely pissed off at him but he couldn’t take the time to discover why just yet.

He may only know that a battle was coming, but that meant being in an army and that was enough for him and Shokrakar to start getting their people ready. When he had suggested to his old teacher that they combine forces for training, Shokrakar had agreed to it almost too easily. He wasn’t sure if it was pragmatism to keep her people on their best, practicality to have them used to working within larger groups, or some esoteric reason that only Shokrakar would ever understand, but he trusted her enough to let it lie. Besides, he had never successfully gotten information out of her that she had not wanted to share in the first place, and Bull knew that fact was not going to change any time soon.

It still felt like he was being led around by the nose a little bit though; especially when a Runner came pelting out to them and summoned him in to speak with the Boss.

The Advisors were already scattered to their spaces, Ruffles barely looking up as he walked swiftly past her desk and to the War Room where the Boss was still presiding over the map table. “You wanted to see me?” his voice drew her attention up off the table with papers scattered across it in seeming chaos.

“Dawn might come to scream at you for interfering, she just found out about your request to go on whatever mission she wanted to be a part of.” Alena warned without preamble.

Bull dropped his eye to the papers under the Inquisitor’s fingers and paid closer attention to the details written on them. “What can you tell me about it?” he requested, looking back up at her when the papers under her hand offered no clues.

“We’re going up against a demon army. She’s going with us once we get word on where the demon army is gathering; said she had to go to save lives that would otherwise be lost.” Alena looked casual as she watched him, but Bull knew when his reaction was being carefully studied for clues.

He knew exactly what lives would be lost if Little Bas didn’t go, the same two idiots that had already disappeared from the safest Keep the world could currently boast. But he’d kept that information to himself even when he’d been supposed to report it to his handlers; Bull trusted Dawn’s assessment enough to not interfere right now. If she wanted Alena to know, then Alena would know.

“We got a timeline?” he asked instead of giving away anything, wondering if Dawn had always known how much time she had to get ready.

“No.” Boss shook her head and it surprised him. “Until we hear from Alistair and Hawke we can do nothing more but keep on saving the world.”

“So far you’ve done a good job Boss, I might even use you as a reference after all of this is said and done.” He grinned down at his diminutive, infinitely deadly Boss.

But Alena had a far too serious look in her eyes and Bull dropped the humour. “She’s not a warrior Bull; she’s not a Rogue or a Mage either. None of the Advisors want her going with me when it’s time but I have agreed to allow it because if my Harbinger believes that strongly she needs to be
there then I will help her. But I want to see her make it through this too.” He stayed silent, not sure what Alena was trying to get at just yet, though he had a few guesses. “The moment the lives she thinks have to be saved are secure, your job is to get her out of there alive.”

“That was already the plan Boss, though it sounds like you want me to throw her over my shoulder and run out of there leaving you in the dirt and a Warrior short.” Bull layered his disapproval with that plan into his tone.

“If you have to; yes.” Alena confirmed. “If neither you nor Dawn will tell me who she needs to save, then once she’s ensured they are saved then you have to save her. Or tell me the names so I can assure their survival and we leave her safe at Skyhold.”

But Bull was already shaking his head no. He remembered how devastated Dawn had been when he’d gotten the information out of her. She had said that is she didn’t go Alena would be forced to sacrifice one of them; Bull realized that even if Alena wanted him to grab Dawn and run, he might not be able to. Why would one of them be sacrificed?

“Little Bas told me the situation could not be avoided, that she could only change things at the last minute to save whoever she needs to save because until then she needs to know what people are going to do.” He explained as carefully as he could without giving away the secrets Dawn had let slip already. “Apparently if she changes nothing right now, we win the battle. Do you want to risk changing that outcome?”

The Inquisitor stared up at him, not at all intimidated by the near 200 pound weight difference between them. “No. So what the fuck are we going to do to guarantee she makes it through this?” so many were using Dawn’s native phrase now that it was almost like hearing Common.

“Step one is to start exposing her to violence so she doesn’t freeze in the face of it; you gotta start taking her out with you on the safer missions Boss.” Bull hated to say it, knew he would live to regret it the moment he said anything, and also knew he had to say it if he wanted the best for Dawn.

“Red says you talked Solas into helping train her to react to mage attacks.” Alena pried a little bit.

Bull grunted affirmative. “Chuckles has agreed to participate in some of the morning drills Dawn is already a part of. If he’s not available I can call on Cedric or Dorian.”

“Why not use Dalish; her ‘bow’ would be effective.” Alena carefully played along with the ruse the Chargers still kept going.

“She doesn’t know on how to pull a punch.” Bull admitted with a shrug; it’d never been a skill Dalish had had to learn before. “And Shokrakar’s two aren’t the type Dawn needs to train against. She needs to get used to fire balls, ice bombs, and lightening, not walking corpses.” It wasn’t that he thought Dawn would never encounter a Necromancer that wanted to do her harm; it was just that in the midst of an army, a few walking dead bodies were not the biggest threat to Little Bas. And the Healer wouldn’t attack her at all and they all knew it.

“And you’re hoping that if I take her to a Rift she’ll get all the experience she could ever want against demons?” Alena figured it out quickly.

“That’s going to be the hardest on her I think.” He warned and saw Alena nod in agreement. “She didn’t freeze up while fighting Florianne, even after the disaster of the night before. But demons…”
“Demons are going to be where her resolve is tested. Maybe we can avoid the entire situation if that can convince her to tell us what we need to know to save these lives without her going through her worst nightmare.” Alena didn’t sound convinced.

“We can try, but you didn’t hear her determination back when she first asked me to train her.” Bull had to warn. He remembered Dawn intensely promising to find a way to go with Alena whether or not she was battle ready. Of course back then Bull had believed very firmly in the ideas that not only would he have Dawn in his bed shortly, but that he could talk the rest of the information out of her long before she’d have to go to battle. Neither of those had proven to be correct, though for reasons far outside of Iron Bull’s ability to predict.

“Back when you were telling me only that she wanted you to train her, not that it was to get ready for a battle?” Alena reminded and Bull nodded without shame.

“More than just the state of the world has changed since then though, hasn’t it?” Bull retorted.

“Keep her alive if you can Bull; I know you never planned to do anything else but I have a bad feeling that whatever it is she’s been getting ready for is even bigger than she’s let on.” Alena charged.

“Same.” Bull left without further commentary.

He even returned to where the Chargers and Valo-Kas were finishing up their squad drills, but Bull knew his mind was still chewing through his conversation with the Boss. He gladly let Krem handle their people, trusted Shokrakar to slap him if he needed to pay attention, and let his mind worry over the matter of Dawn’s survival.

“You are staring it in the face Iron Bull.” Shokrakar’s quiet words pulled his attention. He looked at her, knowing she wasn’t being literal. “Thinking about it will not serve you, take action.” She made no implication of what action he should be taking, and still he knew what she wanted him to do suddenly. What she had likely been telling him to do for months now that he stopped to really consider it.

“She and I are joining the Inquisitor at the battle to come.” Bull quietly informed his longtime friend and teacher. “I cannot tell her how I feel until after it is done; I will not be the distraction that costs her.”

And Shokrakar looked at him, an almost serene smile on her face. “Do you truly believe that knowing for sure you love her would be a distraction instead of a comfort?”

Of course she would just come out and say it like that. “I know Little Bas Shokrakar; she’s already got enough things going on in her head. If I tell her I love her now that’ll just be one more burden when the time comes. You and I both know that woman gets reckless when it comes to protecting those she feels she needs to protect.”

Shokrakar didn’t argue, or even reply at all, just watched her people train with his. It wasn’t until the training was wrapping up that she finally spoke again, “Whatever is coming is going to change the face of the world.”

“For better or worse.” Bull pessimistically agreed. And apparently to shut up his dourness, Shokrakar gave him a look and then stuffed Taam-Kas into his arms.

“The world will be better because we will make it better Imekari. I will not abide a world my son cannot grow in.” apparently the infinitely patient Shokrakar went away the moment mama
Shokrakar felt the need to step in. Bull was impressed and even a little intimidated; not that he would ever let her know it.

Instead of responding he simply held tiny Taam-Kas and bounced the little guy around in his massive hands. The child was going to be raised by the same person that had helped mold Bull into Hissrad for the Ben Hassrath and then later helped collect the pieces when his Purpose had been shattered. In his hands was literally the next generation of the world and Bull knew Shokrakar was right; he would not abide a world in which the little ones like Taam-Kas couldn’t grow and thrive and live. And Little Bas was trying to help drag them all there whether they knew it or not.

“Go.” Shokrakar seemed to read his mind, taking her son back before Bull could even voice his intention to step away.

His feet knew the route without hesitation and Bull didn’t even bother to stop and knock at her door once they took him there. He unlatched her door but was surprised to find Dawn not at her bed. But the turret access was open so he headed for the ladder upwards.

Dawn was bundled into blankets, tucked into a corner of her turret with the braziers going for more than just warmth. She seemed to be unconsciously seeking out the light and that alone let Bull know how very dark her head space had to be.

“Boss has told me that we’re on her strike team for the battle to come.” He settled onto one of the seats, moving slowly and carefully.

“I might get you killed.” Dawn croaked out in reply, making him squint his eye at her. “If you come with us, will you be focused on keeping yourself alive or will you be worried about keeping me alive?” she didn’t seem to need him to reply to know the answer.

“If you’re going Little Bas, then so am I.” his tone warned that trying to argue otherwise was a terrible idea.

“I need to go,” Dawn hissed, the anger a thin layer trying to hide her fear, “I need to save them.”

“And I need to keep you alive Little Bas, so I am going.” Iron Bull countered firmly. Maybe Shokrakar was right and he should tell her.

Dawn stood up and stormed over to him, snarling in his face thanks to his low seat. “I’ve already watched one person I love get killed by demons Iron Bull, don’t make me mourn you too.” He fought to keep his face blank, wondering if Little Bas even understood what she’d just admitted to him. He looked from the finger she was wagging in his face to her eyes before he carefully standing up.

Dawn held her stance and glared up at Iron Bull as he continued to silently contemplate her. “I am not asking for your permission Kadan.” Then he leaned in, face inches from hers to say, “I am going.”

Bull could see the effect it had on Dawn immediately; her breath caught in and her hands came up to cover her mouth, physically trying to hold in her emotions. The tears her anger had been trying to hide dripped over, racing down her cheeks even as her whole body shook. He’d anticipated her reaction and stepped that little bit closer, letting her hide against his chest as the emotions dripped out of her.

“You won’t fail me. I will watch your back and you’ll watch mine and we’ll get through whatever is coming.” He curled his fingers into her hair gently tugging her head back so she’d look at him
again, pulling her out of her emotions. “Tell me Dawn, if not everything then anything that can help me keep us both alive.” He urged as her tears stopped.

“I can’t.” her voice was still wretched but she wasn’t running. “Once it starts, I can only react to it and that only works if I know how to react to it. I need everyone to do the things I know they do naturally, even you. It’s the only way I can anticipate what’s coming.”

“So go get some rest Little Bas, we have training in the morning.” He encouraged. This close it was impossible for him to miss how her eyes flicked down to his lips and back up, but he didn’t kiss her. If she needed things to stay in this strange stasis until after the battle, Bull would respect that. But once the battle was over he and Little Bas really did need to say the things they kept hinting towards. He finally pulled away from her, heading to the ladder down but confident that she was following him in.

“Goodnight, Iron Bull.” She hesitated at the door before adding, “And thank you.” She didn’t sound as helpless now at least.

“Goodnight Little Bas.” He smirked and left. He would see her through the battle ahead and then afterwards he would tell her how he felt. And then Bull had no idea what would happen, but if he could keep Dawn alive he had hope.

Chapter End Notes

Say You Love Me Lyrics:

Say you love me to my face
I need it more than your embrace
Just say you want me, that’s all it takes
Heart’s getting torn from your mistakes

’Cause I don’t wanna fall in love
If you don’t wanna try,
But all that I’ve been thinking of
Is maybe that you’re mine
Baby it looks as though we’re running out of words to say
And love’s floating away

Just say you love me, just for today
And don’t give me time ’cause that’s not the same
Want to feel burning flames when you say my name
Want to feel passion flow into my bones
Like blood through my veins

’Cause I don’t wanna fall in love
If you don’t wanna try,
But all that I've been thinking of
Is maybe that you're mine
Baby it looks as though we're running out of words to say
And love's floating away

Won't you stay?! Won't you stay?!
Slowly, slowly you unfold me,
But do you know me at all
Some one told me love controls everything
But only if you know!

'Cause I don't wanna fall in love
(No no no no)
If you don't wanna try,
'Cause all that I've been thinking of
Is maybe that you're mine
(You're mine)
'Cause I don't wanna fall in love
If you don't wanna try,
But all that I've been thinking of
Is maybe that you're mine
Baby it looks as though we're running out of words to say
And love's floating away
Won't you stay
Won't you stay
An Abysmal Approach

Chapter Summary

Time does not wait, instead it races ahead leaving more than one person feeling unprepared.
Not everyone knows what is coming, still the tension in the air is all but palpable and soon the Inquisition knows it will go to war.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She was going to die, get someone killed, or both. Dawn was convinced of that and yet neither one of those possible outcomes was enough to stop her from trying. “I can do this.” She breathed to herself, too distracted by anxiety to care if she’d spoken in Common or English. Sometimes she couldn’t remember which was which anymore.

The ground in front of her toes was littered with invisible traps that she was supposed to navigate her way around or through all without ever losing track of Iron Bull or Solas because those assholes were shamelessly lobbing fucking snowballs at her while she tried. Apparently staring at her feet and not paying attention to the threats around her was a bad habit they wanted to break her of immediately.

Despite Dawn’s best efforts the Ice Mine she’d been trying to avoid flared up and clamped onto her leg like a frigid pit-bull, “Fuuuuuck!” frustration made her voice harsh and raspy.

Iron Bull and Solas both just gave her varying looks of amusement and assessment. “What happened?” Iron Bull called out, trying to get Dawn into the habit of recognizing when something did or did not work so she wouldn’t just be acting in reaction to things.

“I got impatient.” She called out, loud enough to be heard and yet still managing to lace weary irritation into her tone.

She stared down at the iced crystal boot locking her leg to the ground. “Why did you get impatient Little Bas?” Iron Bull stalked closer but Solas stayed back.

It was not fun having two masters in their respective fields team up on her like this. Solas and Iron Bull had seemed almost aggressive with each other at Halamshiral and yet now they were working together better than Dawn would have ever anticipated. She had the bruises and freezer burn to prove it too. The pain wasn’t her favourite part for sure, but the real problem for Dawn was her frustration over having so little time left and she was only at this level of competency. ‘Because if I can’t be better than this immediately I’m going to get Hawke or Alistair killed’ was not the answer Iron Bull was looking for and Dawn knew it so she kept the comment buried with her anxiety. Besides, only Iron Bull knew who it was Dawn was trying desperately to save; it was probably a smart idea not to bandy that information about.

“I thought I’d stepped over it enough.” Dawn explained instead of offering the entire truth.

Iron Bull gave her a look that said louder than words he knew she’d left out some of it, but he
didn’t press. “You guessed, and now your leg is trapped.” He paused for a heartbeat and then took a casual seeming swipe at her with the back of his hand.

With her leg frozen in place Dawn was pinned and couldn’t dodge backwards. It was either let that big meat pie of a hand connect or….stop it. Dawn’s body took action before her head could figure it out, which was probably the entire point of this torturous session. They’d been working hand-to-hand this morning so she had no shield, but Dawn shifted her free leg and body so that Iron Bull’s hand collided into her up-raised shoulder and arm instead of across the cheek. It wasn’t the hardest hit he could have given, but neither was he holding back as much as he once was; Dawn’s arm sent a shockwave of ‘I do not like this’ through her but with gritted teeth she ignored the sensation and curled her arm around his forearm quickly to pull him off balance even as she shoved with her other hand.

Iron Bull was heavy enough that it wasn’t entirely successful but he stopped attacking. “Heh, you’re learning.” He complimented and swaggered back over to where Solas was watching.

Like her first day of training Dawn had been coming out to work out with the Chargers but they finished long before she did now; Iron Bull and Solas had combined forces to kick her ass thoroughly. It made sense to train her to react to magic, they were going up against Wardens and demons and mages; that didn’t make it any easier to do though. The ice around her leg cracked open but didn’t vanish, leaving her skin cold to the touch and the trouser leg damp but her foot free. Solas was frowning in thought and even if Dawn couldn’t actually See it, she was certain he was getting ready to use more magic. Whatever it was he was about to do, Dawn suspected it wasn’t one of the usual things she remembered from the game.

Fire crackled in front of her, a noisy pillar of flame that stank of char and filled her vision with red light. A rage demon. Here, in Skyhold. Here where there were civilians and children. Here where the people she loves can be hurt. Adrenaline flooded her so quickly that Dawn felt dizzy; the sound of static in her ears as her breath suddenly burned in her lungs. And when it surged towards her Dawn had only the one possible weapon to use against it; the ice that’d been locking her foot in place.

“RAHH!” Dawn gripped a slippery shard of ice in her hand tightly and lunged at an angle to move past the demon as she slashed, the bellow blocking out the sound of static as she moved.

The ice met no resistance, the illusion of the demon offering no real threat, and Dawn stumbled with forwards momentum, dropping the ice in shock as she spun to see no demon at all.

Her whole body suddenly felt shaky and slightly unreal; as if she’d managed to get high without realizing it. The static was gone from her ears but in its place her heartbeat sounded like canon fire every time it pounded and her breath rasped irregularly as she panted for breath.

“Ena’vun?” Solas’ voice sounded muted and distant even though he was standing right in front of her and she didn’t recall him walking over to her.

“That was a dick move Old Wolf.” Dawn was surprised she could even speak for how dry her mouth was, still feeling weirdly disassociated.

“I had faith in you. Now you know for sure you won’t freeze in the face of it Ena’vun.” Fen’Harel smiled at her and she believed him.

“Still a dick move.” Dawn had to say as some of the shakiness did bleed away with the knowledge but she still felt far too offset.
“One we both thought you needed to go through.” Iron Bull admitted to his part and Dawn looked past Solas to the ex-Qunari.

“So I’m collecting psychological traumas now? Excellent.” A definite whine had worked its way into her tone.

“You’re increasing your hardiness. Be honest Little Bas, how close did you come to losing it?” Iron Bull challenged not unkindly.

“Too close.” The admission sucked, “so I guess that means I need to go through it like ten more times.” She sighed and rolled her shoulders to try and shake off the tension; it didn’t work.

“The point is to desensitize you Ena’vun, although the task is unpleasant it is necessary.” Solas obliquely apologized.

“It’s enough for now that you know we’ll be working on it Little Bas. Go hit the hot baths; we’re not going to solve this in a single session.” Iron Bull dismissed in an eerie echo of how he’d helped with her mirror phobia.

Not that Dawn had actually gone to stand in front of a mirror yet. She probably should at some point, just to be sure.

“You just want me gone so you two can psychoanalyze my actions.” Dawn didn’t actually argue though, she couldn’t tell them the details they needed to really get her ready for the battle ahead so instead she accepted their process. And the guilt. It was too much for her to take and go calmly sit in the baths though, adrenaline and worry a painful drive.

“Dawn, the heat is to help the shock you’re on the edge of.” Iron Bull clearly read her agitation.

Her shoulders slumped, knowing he was right and yet feeling mad at him for pointing it out anyways. “Will I ever not be an emotional wreck?”

“Your emotions are not a weakness Ena’vun,” Solas argued now insistent, “They are a source of strength; and not just for yourself alone.”

“I’ll believe that the moment I feel like I’m not going to get someone killed or worse Old Wolf.” Dawn couldn’t help mouthing off, careless with anxiety.

“You must trust us with some of this burden Ena’vun; the agony of it reveals itself at your edges.” Solas pleaded, his gaze not releasing hers once he had it. “Mema el’uis, ar niven halanima.”

It wasn’t the first time Solas had alluded to being aware that Dawn knew more than she’d let on, but this felt more deliberate. She did wonder why Solas hadn’t asked for confirmation, Fen’Harel was too clever to treat his caution with anything but wary respect; Dawn really didn’t need to deal with an overly curious Wolf just yet though. The coward in her wanted to never have that conversation but Dawn knew better than that; Solas deserved the truths she could give him.

“Little Bas, you need to recover; give yourself time to settle before your next task.” Iron Bull cautioned when it looked like she was going to argue.

“We don’t have the time for that Iron Bull.” Dawn tried to laugh it off as if it wasn’t the plain truth but knew they both had to hear it. “But I’ll go wash off quickly. I’m sure a hot bath followed by food isn’t outside even my abilities to handle.”

“Ena’vun,” having the two of them together like this made it a lot harder for her to make an easy
escape. “I may have a solution to help settle some concerns,” his unexpected comment held her in place a little longer, “if it’s a viable option I’ll speak to you about it tonight.” His expression was all serious contemplation.

“Alright Old Wolf, tell me about it whenever you’re ready.” Dawn capitulated, needing a couple of minutes away from people suddenly.

No one called after her as she dismissed herself to the baths. Iron Bull wasn’t wrong about her needing the heat; her hands were still cold. So Dawn dutifully hit the hot baths, letting the mineral heavy water do its wonders on her muscles and scrubbing the sweat off quickly. It was only as she hastily lathered her hair and dunked under to wash it out that her thoughts were too loud to ignore any longer.

A Rage demon hadn’t made her freak out anywhere nearly as bad as a mirror did. What the hell was wrong with her? And yet still Solas was right; knowing she wouldn’t freeze up in the face of one helped. Despite that acknowledgement here she was now, having just faced off against one even if it was only an illusion, and she felt shakier than she had during the actual training. She would be useless to everyone if she kept falling apart during or immediately after events. No wonder Iron Bull and Solas were begging her to tell them anything that could help them get her ready. She was going to get someone killed with her weaknesses. Dawn was almost certain she would hesitate to actually kill a person, and the fallout from that was where she’d get others killed. She’d had trouble using mousetraps back on Earth, but Dawn expected to be able to kill someone with a sword when the time came, she had to be insane.

But then she had to confront a much less pleasant aspect of her own mind; she’d badly wanted to bash Florianne’s head into the ground to keep her from ever being a threat again. So there was some part of Dawn that was more than willing to think about being violent to people; if she gave into it would she become a blood thirsty monster? Or would she be much worse, apathetic over the lost lives. It shouldn’t be easy to take a life, each one should mean something to her, but she couldn’t let herself fall apart because of it either. Because if she did she was going to be the reason either Hawke or Alistair is sacrificed.

Dawn had no idea how to get there though, how to get to the other side of this mental block in her head to be the person she had to be to keep the people she loved alive. It was why she’d originally asked Iron Bull to train her, help her mould herself into what she had to be to succeed. It was why Iron Bull and Solas were conniving to get her ready- they were both very lethal when they chose to be, but only when they chose.

She’d always been worried about losing either one of them to their violent sides and now Dawn was depending on them to keep her from doing the same. Neither Solas nor Iron Bull would stand quietly by if she were to start down that dark path.

“Wow, you get real maudlin when left on your own.” Dawn muttered to herself in her best Hawke impersonation. It worked enough to get her up and moving from her less than restful bath.

No one pestered her as she retreated swiftly from the baths to her rooms; the wet hair piled on her head a clear indication of where she’d just been. She was not expecting to come to her room and find that while she’d been out in the morning that someone else had been in.

And delivered dozens of parcels of clothes.

And a note.

Harbinger,
Despite my insistence you interfered in my life and gave me more Time. Gave me the chance to spend the sunset of my beloved’s life at his side and say goodbye.

I am not the only one whose plans you have interfered with, for the better.

This is but a small way we can show our eternal gratitude.

Lady of Iron and Ice

P.S We shall start working on your reputation as Harbinger; you will do the Inquisition proud

Dawn looked from the letter back up to the parcels and realized that this was an entire wardrobe that Vivienne had requisitioned for her; apparently with the help of unnamed others. Pragmatically Dawn had to admit that it was a calculated move, she had been introduced at Court and even if she wished it were otherwise Dawn knew her appearance within Skyhold was going to be under scrutiny to a higher degree now.

The amount of insecurity that thought curdled in her guts was embarrassing.

Her measurements had been taken for Halamshiral, they must have used those to help set up a wardrobe that reflected her rank now. This wasn’t just Vivienne being Vivienne, though Dawn did recall the game Vivienne’s commentary about the power of appearance; there were too many others that had to help the Enchanter with this. For one thing some of the items of clothes looked too Elvhen in style to have come from Vivienne’s suggestions, for another Dawn could not imagine the Grand Enchanter gifting her a wardrobe and not insisting that she select the first outfit Dawn tried on.

“I’m the Harbinger of the Inquisition; it’s time to start acting like an adult.” Dawn muttered to herself, not at all hiding her amusement over the fact that acting like an adult in this instance meant playing dress up.

She didn’t even deny that she was too excited to see the clothes that had been custom made for her.

They did not disappoint but it was too overwhelming for Dawn to really take it all in, especially after the fiasco of her morning. Suddenly overwhelmed by the options Dawn simply dug into one parcel and pulled on the outfit that came to hand.

The long tunic dress was customized for her measurements and the resulting fit looked corseted but was just perfectly structured. The fabric of the bust, shoulders, and sides were a vibrant green while the torso, front and back panels of the skirt were black. Gold piping and chain delicately accented the front and acted as ties on the high side slits.

It was about as far from Varric’s mended hand-me-downs as she could get without stripping naked and painting herself purple.

Custom made clothes felt significantly better than that would have though.

Dawn left the bulk of her hair down, pulling only sections at the temple to braid back, trying to at least keep some of it out of her face before stepping back out to face the world. Weirdly enough the new clothes helped her feel a little more capable of facing the things she still had to do to try and save people.

It was an odd contrast to the stress she’d endured during the morning training and Dawn had to wonder if her friends were all very carefully handling her so that she could be READY and yet not fall apart. Everyone around her seemed so painfully competent and Dawn was endlessly trying to
play catch-up; it was both humbling and exhausting.

“Woah Sweetheart looking good!” Varric whistled and drew her flustered attention as she walked into the Main Hall.

“Thanks, I’ve been outfitted to reflect my Harbinger status.” She grinned and did a little spin. As she did it occurred to her that maybe if she wanted to feel less like she was lagging behind everyone that she had to try and get plans going even if she wasn’t ready for them yet. She was still struggling to be ready for Adamant but Dawn knew that there was still plenty of trouble she had to get ready for after that. She needed to lay the ground work for after Adamant, no matter what happened. “Actually now that I have your attention, I’m hoping you might know where Merrill is.”

Varric was still examining her new dress with an approving eye. “She was pestering Cedric and his kid about what it’s like being a ‘Healer of Spirits.’ If she’s not still with them I don’t know where she’s gotten off to.”

Dawn tilted her head to the side, just imagining the sheer amount of questions Merrill must have had for them. Though she did worry how a blood mage that was slightly exiled from the Dalish would get on with a First and his son, she was mollified by the fact that Cedric was more cosmopolitan than he liked to admit. “That….that has got to be a lot of Dalish-ness all in one spot.” She felt a wide grin start to spread across her face. “If we went and took a shot for every time Merrill asked a question do you think we’d run out of alcohol or die of blood poisoning first?”

“I’d die of blood poisoning, you’d run out of alcohol.” Varric didn’t miss a beat, picking up the joke smoothly. “Though I still owe you for the last hangover, so don’t think I don’t have plans to get you back.”

“Yeah yeah, I’m trembling in my boots.” Dawn waved her fingers as she left him laughing.

With no other plans or people popping up to interfere, Dawn was free to head to the mage tower where she hoped to grab Merrill. The blood mage wasn’t actually with Cedric or Doshiel, the two Lavellans were busy guiding the Circle Mages through a grounding exercise, but Dawn could hear Merrill jauntily singing an astonishingly filthy sea shanty* from higher in the Tower.

Dawn cleared her throat once she’d climbed up to the level where Merrill was sitting on the floor, surrounded by open books. Merrill’s song had just gone into an appalling description of what happened to the brandy when Dawn arrived and thankfully her friend cut off the song before elaborating more.

“Oh, hello.” Merrill cheered gesturing for Dawn to take a seat on the floor with her, so she did.

Dawn felt bad to be bringing such serious news when Merrill was so obviously relaxed and happy, but she needed to give Merrill time to consider what Dawn was about to tell her. The Well of Sorrows was not an easy burden to consider shouldering, and even if Dawn couldn’t think of anyone else that would understand the little bit she could properly explain, she didn’t want to force Merrill to accept it. Though having Merrill take the Well did seem like the best solution to Dawn now; Morrigan had already proven in Witch Hunt that she would steal Elvhen History for her own purposes so Dawn did not want to trust her with even more of it. And a part of her was not at all comfortable with the idea of letting Morrigan be bound to Flemythal, better to let Mythal remove the Old Soul from Kieran and leave them alone entirely.

Merrill knew Flemeth as Asha’bellanar, she could understand how Flemythal existed in one body thanks to Anders/Justice, and she would respect the very real risk of possession that the Well
presented. And this was her People’s history to boot, Dawn couldn’t think of someone else that she’d trust with the burden of this; in the end no one knew the consequences of the Well.

“I’ve got something I need to talk to you about Merrill, and I’m sorry but it’s not going to be easy.” Dawn warned her cheery friend.

And then she told Merrill about the Arbour Wilds, the Well of Sorrows and it’s repository of knowledge, and finally about Flemythal and how the Creators were not actual gods.

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Commander Cullen,

The Champion has confirmed the Harbinger’s report: A large force of Grey Wardens has moved into the Western Approach. We have established a foothold out there already; the Champion and His Majesty are eager to take the matter in hand.

Knight-Captain Rylen

Cullen stared down at the report again and sighed. He had been hoping that maybe the Harbinger was wrong this once, but Dawn’s foreknowledge was once again painfully accurate. His only comfort was that she said they could win; that this time the Inquisition could succeed and there was no inevitable failure to chase them away. If Hawke and King Alistair didn’t get themselves killed in some stupidly heroic venture first; if Dawn was allowed to go with the Inquisitor into a warzone.

He was so sick of seeing civilians getting hurt; he’d become a Templar to help people. All he seemed to be doing instead was sending out farmers and children to die; facing off against demons and Venatori and Red Templars. He tried very hard not to imagine what his once brethren had looked like in their last moments; infected and infested with red crystals, corruption ruining them beyond even recognition. And now he was going to lead the Inquisition against an army of demons raised by the Grey Wardens.

There were no heroes anymore, all those he had once looked up to and admired revealed to be as corruptible and prone to failure as he was. It was no comfort to stand amongst their number, not when they were as damned as he was.

His head hurt worse than ever before, anxiety and withdrawals a constant badgering pain. Cullen pressed his fingers against his eyes, trying to dig the pain out of his head even as the pressure sparked behind his eyelids. Every part of his body ached, and there were times Cullen was even certain his hair hurt, and yet he was being trusted by the others to come up with a battle plan that would successfully see them quell a demon army. And they still didn’t know where the battle was going to occur. Dawn did, he suspected that much, but Cullen hadn’t gone after the Harbinger to find that answer.

First he had to decide if he could do this at all.

He’d failed to keep the Inquisition members safe at Halamshiral, Dawn’s near death experience a testament to how poorly he’d arranged her security. Because like everyone else he’d gotten into the habit of thinking of Dawn as being almost untouchable, thinking that no one could ever get to her through them. Instead they had gotten to her twice.

Cullen had to swallow down a swell of nausea, the inevitable side effect of his endless pain. If he could just think just have five minutes without this pain. The lyrium in his philter called to him, a
seductive hum that knew the tune he wanted to hear. And had to ignore; even if his very soul begged for it.

He’d told Cassandra she needed to find a new Commander, someone not so worn out and distracted, and she’d shot him down. The best he’d gotten from her was a promise to watch him and step in if she thought it necessary, but he knew that she wouldn’t. They were all too desperate, too worried about upsetting the fragile balance Dawn had indicated led to their victory.

Cullen stared down at the box that had been his burden and boon since joining the Templars. The figure carved into the lid was barely discernable now, worn down by the years and Cullen’s habit of stroking his thumb across it for luck. The tools inside were familiar weights in his hands, the spoon and blade beautiful in their simplicity. His breath caught as his fingers traced over the little lyrium vials waiting for him to mix in and without hesitating Cullen picked up the entire box and threw it across the room with a disgusted snarl.

And nearly brained the Inquisitor with it.

“Maker’s Breath!” Cullen panted in shock while Alena looked at him with raised eyebrows. “I didn’t hear you enter. I…” he felt humiliation churn into the nausea already in his guts and had to swallow instead of finish his sentence. “Forgive me…” he couldn’t look at her, knowing that this woman had been so much more than anyone could ever have hoped. A Carta dwarf that was an assassin, and yet she was exactly the leader the Inquisition needed. Now they needed a Commander half as worthy.

“Well at least it missed.” Alena shrugged the matter off entirely in that understated way of hers and Cullen almost staggered in relief.

And then really did stagger as his entire body went weak, trying to compel him to satisfy its cravings. Alena stepped forward to help him and he waved her off, leaning back against his desk for support instead. “I never meant for this to interfere…” he knew Cassandra had to have already told her about his choice to forgo his philter.

“I believe you.” Alena stepped closer but didn’t crowd him or touch him and he was profoundly grateful to her. Even the air on his skin hurt right now.

“For whatever good it does, promises mean nothing if I cannot keep them.” He tried to keep the bitterness out of his tone but knew she picked up on it anyways.

“Cullen, you are not the only one to have fought with the demons of an addiction.” Alena quietly confessed and Cullen stared at her in shock.

“For you, lyrium was a requirement associated with your cause. For me, my addiction to Amrita Vein was my own fault caused by boredom.” Alena sounded almost amused to be discussing this topic. “But it’s not just the lyrium is it Cullen?”

“It’s the weakness the lyrium lets me forget, or at least ignore for a while.” Cullen spat out, anger still unsettled and he paced to try and bleed some of it out.

“You are not weak Cullen. Not at all.” Alena hesitated and Cullen suddenly understood that she knew about Kinloch. He thought he’d feel embarrassed but instead he felt relieved.

“Was it Dawn that told you?” he asked, not even angry if the Offworlder exposed his greatest failure to the Inquisitor.

“Leliana and Alistair.” Alena corrected and Cullen paused for a beat and then nodded. They had
rescued him from Kinloch, one directly and one in the camp afterwards, and Cullen did not begrudge either one trying to help now. Maybe the world still had one or two Heroes left.

“You should be questioning everything I’ve done. I thought that this would be better. That I would regain some control over my life but…” his teeth gritted together and Cullen barely felt the increased tension through the migraine already ravaging his skull.

The Inquisitor let him pace and panic, staying silent as he agonised inside and out. “How many lives depend on our success? I swore myself to this cause! I will not give less to the Inquisition than I did the Chantry! I should be taking it…” he spun and punched at the wooden bookshelf that had found its way into his office. The pain helped a little. “I should be taking it.” He whispered again.

“No.” Alena’s simple statement melted the steel out of Cullen’s spine and he collapsed into his desk chair. “You give the Inquisition more than you ever did the Chantry because you are not a mindless addict. But you don’t have to suffer through your symptoms alone, thinking there is penance in pain.”

He sat up straighter, looking across his table in shock. How had she known? “This is my burden to bear Inquisitor, my weakness to overcome.”

“Speak to the Healers, they have found a way to alleviate pain without numbing the mind as well.” Now Alena grinned and sat in the chair across from him. “Actually you helped in that process too. Remember the day Dawn punched you? She ended up in the Healer’s wing afterwards and her actions then snowballed into what we have now.” She turned serious again. “You give enough Cullen, the Inquisition cannot ask for more. And this is your chance to start over too, if you want it to be.”

“I don’t know if that’s possible. But if an ex-Carta assassin can manage it, I can do no less.” Cullen feebly tried to jest, knowing that neither himself nor Alena were overly comfortable with excess emotions. He sighed. “Alright, which Healer do I need to speak with?”

Alena didn’t smile but he could tell she was pleased. “Elowyn.”

Cullen nodded and sighed again though he did actually feel better somehow. “I’m sorry Inquisitor; you came to my office for a reason, not to listen to my gripeing. How can I help you?”

“I came to warn you that another of Hawke’s companions is going to be in Skyhold before next week is out.” This time the nausea was all due to remembered trauma instead of physical withdrawal.

“Who?” Cullen still avoided Merrill Sabrae but there were one or two Kirkwallers he could tolerate being around for short periods of time.

“We have misplaced a King but a Prince is on his way.” Alena seemed as impressed by that title as she had been by Alistair’s; not at all.

“Sebastian Vael will be an interesting addition to Skyhold.” He carefully replied and Alena gave a bark of laughter.

“I’ve already heard Varric bitching about it Cullen, he’s not the only one making his way to Skyhold.” She warned and this time Cullen let out a longer, drawn out sigh that wasn’t entirely honest.

“Please tell me that at Aveline Hendyr is at least coming to help corral the Kirkwallers?” he almost
begged; the Guard Captain was reliable and at least not insane.

“Cullen, do you really think we’re that lucky?” Alena’s tone held laughter. He gave her a flat look instead of replying, knowing the answer was no.

“So we’re getting all of them except for the sane one. Maker’s Breath….” Cullen trailed off deliberately, pleased to make Alena laugh again. His head still hurt, and he was trying to ignore the smell of the leaking lyrium philter he’d thrown, but Cullen would make the effort for as long as he could; he could do no less.

“What are they really like? I trust Varric’s account on them about as far as I could throw Bull.” Alena didn’t waste the opportunity and Cullen tried his best to explain the personalities behind the tales.

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They were going to test Ena’vun’s resilience far sooner than Solas thought was prudent given the stresses she’d been under lately, and yet he could not argue against the suggestion that she join the party sent to the latest Rift reported. For one thing, he knew Ena’vun would not appreciate feeling like he did not consider her capable; for another he knew that she would need to face real danger now to be prepared to face even bigger dangers later. The thought of Ena’vun joining them in battle against corrupted Spirits left him dismayed and almost desperate for a solution to prevent it, though he had to acknowledge there was no other way. Not after all the mistakes that had already been made to bring them to this point.

He was only mildly comforted by the fact that Dawn had accepted the ring of protection he’d offered her. The simple looking Sylvain wood ring had been inlaid with protective spell work since before the fall of Arlathan, and even with the Veil in place it had held during the great length of his uthenera; Solas was depending on his old ring to protect Ena’vun now if he could not.

The fact that the Dalish wore nearly identical rings to try and ward him off was actually a point of hilarity that Solas longed to share with Ena’vun. Those he used to protect as Fen’Harel had first worn these rings in defiance of the flashier jewelry the Evanuris decorated their favoured slaves with; their practical purpose a gift he could give to those that trusted him. Now the rings had come to symbolize his greatest failures to the Elvhen People but he had hope that he could reclaim this piece of his own history as Dawn was trying to help him reclaim so many others.

“Do you think she’s ready?” Varric was suddenly at his side, the Dwarf startlingly silent only when he chose to be.

Solas followed the author’s jutted chin to where Dawn finished strapping on the last of her equipment, her movements confident and efficient but the paleness of her face a clear indication of her nerves. “If we don’t fail her; yes.”

At Varric’s surprised look Solas couldn’t help a slight smile. “You’re including yourself in those ‘we’ now Chuckles, have you decided to finally join us 100%?”

He stilled; the Dwarf’s words unexpected. Solas breathed carefully, unable to dreg up an argument against Varric’s comment. “It seems I have.” He finally admitted voice softer than he wanted it to be. The Dwarf patted him on the back companionably.

“I think it’s called finding a cause to believe in,” Varric continued to quip despite the topic they were discussing, “that sense of purpose you’re struggling with. I found mine following in the footsteps of an errant Champion as she saved my city, seems you found yours in protecting the
“Considering that your Hawke has flown without you and Ena’vun bears the scars of my failure, we have not comported ourselves with distinction.” Solas’ mouth twisted with distaste at the admission.

“We’re not dead yet and neither are they,” Varric seemed to easily shrug aside the discomfort, “that means we can try again and do better Chuckles.”

“Caring about the world and those currently in it is exhausting.” Solas had not meant to let those words escape into the open air, the weakness they revealed too vulnerable.

“And exciting,” Varric gestured expansively and Solas looked out at the team he was gesturing to.

The Inquisitor was silent, looking out of the Keep and into the distance as if already picturing the task ahead. Solas had initially panicked when he’d discovered it’d been a Durgen’len that the Orb had Anchored to, but now he knew there was none other like Alena Cadash and his concerns had been misplaced. Likewise he’d held only contempt for the vocal Dwarf currently standing at his side, companionable and quiet. Iron Bull hovered near Ena’vun, staying far enough back to not be obvious with his worry but when Solas met the Tal Vashoth’s eye there was confidence in it as well as concern.

Dawn had already faced danger, and even though Solas hated that she bore the scars from it he also knew she bore the confidence earned of surviving as well. He would be there to watch over her as much as possible, she was wearing his old ring and that alone would keep her relatively safe, and Solas knew that the others around him also wanted Ena’vun to come out the other side of this unscathed.

Too bad what he wanted and what he usually got was never the same thing.

“Mount up, we’re going.” Alena called out, focusing them all on the task at hand.

Once again Solas was astride the Hart he’d claimed, the majestic beast now long accustomed to the sensation of Solas working magic while atop him. The others likewise returned to mounts they were familiar with, the shivering sensation of Haste swirling around the Bog Unicorn Dawn favoured. Even without the Spirit tapping into Dawn’s energy Solas could feel where it curled around the edges of her metaphysically. It was strange comfort to realize that even should his protections fail, Solas knew Haste would do its best to see Dawn to safety.

The report from the Scouts had declared that on the trail back towards where Haven once stood a Rift had opened and was spewing out demons. Solas suspected that due to the proximity to the now sealed Breach the Spirits being pulled through and corrupted were not the weakest; those had long ago fled the chaos.

“No napping on this trip, eyes open and minds alert.” Alena called out though she didn’t shoot a look at Solas. As if he would suggest a Fade visit to Ena’vun at a time like this.

When they’d last set out from Skyhold into Orlais the weather had turned foul on them almost immediately. Less than a month later and Solas was surprised to find that the sunlight was successfully starting to melt snow accumulated in the crags of the mountain and the breeze that swirled around him held the playful promises of thaw.

That playful promise lulled them all into a sense of ease that shattered apart the moment they came within sight of the Rift and dismounted. The energy boiled and heaved; a twisted mockery of
Power that Solas could not tap into or tame though he could feel it calling out to the mark in the Inquisitor’s palm.

His fingers tightened around the staff in his hand, knuckles whitening with his frustration as tendrils snapped out from the Rift; Spirits being forced through the Veil and becoming corrupted for it.

“I feel like I’m standing on a beach in a thunderstorm; is that normal?” Dawn’s question broke the silent stare off their group had with the Rift.

“The energies produced by the Rifts are volatile enough that even non-mages are able to feel it Ena’vun, the sensation will pass.” He offered comfort and drew her attention.

Dawn’s pupils were blown out in a way he had not anticipated and Solas felt a spike of alarm. She was not affected by the Veil, existed outside of its ability to interfere with entirely, and he hadn’t considered what that might mean around a Rift that was a literal tear in the Veil. Unfortunately for him the corrupted Spirits birthed by that Rift would not wait patiently for him to assess the risk to Ena’vun; the wail of a Despair demon launching itself closer was their only warning.

Solas set Barrier over them all, the familiar tingle of safety a temporary bulwark against attack, even as he spied a Terror clawing its way into the ground.

The Inquisitor had worked all the Companions together in varying configurations since the very beginning so they were all accustomed to the routine of facing a Rift. Solas danced backwards, knowing that the despairs favoured ranged attacks and that holding still for terror was a terrible idea.

Normally so obedient to his Will, his focus slipped from tracking the despair through the air or the terror underground to where Ena’vun shadowed Iron Bull’s side. He could fault the Tal Vashoth for many things but he did not doubt Bull’s desire to see Dawn safe; not after their discussion following the failures at Halamshiral. It was why they had both pushed her so hard during the training sessions once they were back, but ever since Halamshiral Solas felt less certain of being able to assure she wouldn’t be harmed.

A bolt of ice shattered against his personal Barrier, calling Solas to task and reminding him that if he wanted to be unharmed he had to focus. The terror was pinned between Dawn and Iron Bull, being hacked to pieces while the despair fled Alena’s deadly blades. Varric never lost aim, peppering the despair from a distance and as it landed Solas gave a negligent seeming sweep of his staff; lashing out with fire and leaving the despair shrieking. The familiar slap of power outside of his command left him snarling as Solas felt the Inquisitor try to force the Rift closed with the Anchor.

The Power of it fluctuated, heaving uncomfortably as something larger forced its way out instead. Alena and Varric danced away from the newly arrived lesser Pride; terror and despair already felled. Solas threw a stronger Barrier over them all, focusing on resisting the lightning whip the Pride wielded. He scanned the area, seeing no other corrupted spirits despite the massive hole gaping in the Veil from the Pride’s entry but knowing that could change at any moment.

Prides liked to target the threat directly in front of them, any damage done to the peripherals was purely incidental, and Solas was enraged to see Iron Bull standing with Dawn at his side in its way.

Solas grabbed his Power, lashing out with a half formed curl of Will in a way he’d been too controlled to do since his youth. The Veil Strike he’d meant to form was instead something Older;
not a fist of stone and Fade but instead an invisible extension of his Will tearing at the Pride like a monstrous maw. And to his utter dismay Ena’vun used the opening his attack presented to charge in, slashing a gruesome line across the Pride’s belly. Hot ropey intestines spilled out, steaming in the air as her slash took her out of harm’s way and Iron Bull sunk his heavy war axe into the same wound. Instead of dissolving into nothing, the Pride exploded in a shockwave of lightning that scorched through them all.

He viciously grounded the energy through his staff, pulling it away from his stricken friends. Still on her back the Inquisitor forced the Rift closed before any other spirits could be pulled through and ruined, and Solas ran towards where Dawn was laying on the ground, gasping.

Dropping to his knees, memory filled with the terror of doing the same while clasping hands to her blood soaked throat, Solas was astonished to discover that she wasn’t gasping in pain, but giving light breathless laughter.

“Ena’vun?” he queried, concern leaking through his restraint.

Iron Bull had regained his feet and loomed nearby, but seemed satisfied to let Solas administer to her. Varric and the Inquisitor were alert in case of another attack, no one the worse for wear despite the Pride’s farewell attack.

“That was shocking.” Dawn gasped out, voice wheezing but loud enough to be heard.

For a beat there was silence and then Solas wasn’t the only one to helplessly laugh at her pun. Iron Bull guffawed loudly while Varric gave sputtering commentary about just how terrible it was, and Solas even saw Alena huff softly in amusement and relief.

“You are well Ena’vun?” he had to ask despite seeing her injury free before him.

“You’re not dead so better than some Little Bas, but you lost points for ending up on you ass again.” Iron Bull replied and Solas recalled their little scene in the Rest.

“So did you!” She immediately objected and to Solas’ delight followed quickly with, “the only one that kept their feet was Solas, so by your standards he kicked your ass there.”

Iron Bull didn’t seem offended to lose to him though, laughing with a shrug. “At least one of us kept their footing; that was new.”

The Tal Vashoth said it with seeming ease, his tone and body language a lie meant to keep Ena’vun laughing. But he wasn’t saying just how concerning it was to those that were more familiar with how the Rift and spirits acted; the energies released today were wildly unpredictable. And Solas was not sure if it were a side effect of his own unusual actions today, a reaction to the presence of Ena’vun, or if some other unknown factor were at fault. It was no comfort to know that no one else had answers either.

“You survived your first real mission out Sweetheart, congratulations.” Varric jumped in, equally cheery and his tone just as much of a lie as Iron Bull’s had been.

“Yay me.” Dawn cheered right back, fists wiggling in a familiar way by now.
There were no other threats around to address, which was the reason why the Inquisitor had taken Ena’vun as part of the team, so Solas kept warily alert but did not anticipate attack. Iron Bull and Varric were busy helping Dawn come down from the adrenaline high of a successful fight, a task accomplished by incessant chatter and teasing, but Solas remained quiet at the rear. He hadn’t been able to pull a magical stunt like that since waking, had tried constantly and desperately to reach the Power he’d once had to shape the world around him but it had always eluded him. With the Orb gone, the Anchor buried into Alena’s palm, Solas had had to accept that he was not what he had once been; after nearly a year of helping and learning with Ena’vun and the Inquisition, Solas had come to terms with the fact that he wasn’t who he had been anymore either. If his old power was returning, would his old ways follow?

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Varric was once again called away to help the Inquisitor, so it fell to Merrill to make sure the rooms were ready for her friends arrivals. She could have gone to the pretty and pleasant Ambassador Montilyet but Merrill enjoyed doing the tasks herself, the last of the rooms clustered near Varric’s were all but ready to go.

It had given her the chance to keep her hands busy while her head tried to make sense of everything Dawn had told her about. Dawn had said that the Creators weren’t gods and Merrill had at first thought her friend was confused; the Creators were created by the world, they gave their gifts to the world even, but they didn’t create it. Merrill had been confused by that when Keeper Marethari had explained it to her as a young First so she could see how an Offworlder like her friend would be confused by it.

But then Dawn had explained that her world knew the Fall of Arlathan had nothing to do with humans at all, it had been a civil war from within the Elvhen themselves. The Evanuris were just generals, albeit powerful mages, that allowed themselves to be worshipped as gods and one of their midst had deliberately severed the world into two with a spell. The Veil was a spell created by one of her own People, in an attempt to save the world from the overly powered Evanuris, and yet it had done the most damage to them.

Merrill knew magic still existed in the world, she felt it every time her heart beat and her breath stirred in her breast. She felt in in the blood flowing through her veins and not just because she was a blood mage; magic was as much a part of the world as sunlight or a breeze. It was staggering to think of what it must have felt like before the Veil.

And yet that wasn’t even the focus of Dawn’s discussion; a fact that Merrill fretted over now. How could her friend think that the discovery that her gods weren’t gods wasn’t the big reveal? Because apparently Mythal had left a repository of knowledge in one of her temples and the Inquisition would eventually go retrieve it.

Merrill stared at her grime stained hands, seeing where dust and dirt had worked itself under her nails and into the swirls of her skin. She felt entirely unworthy to hold the knowledge she now did. Dawn had warned Merrill that the Well of Sorrows was not a Gift from the Creators but a burden of duty that she did not know the extent of. Voices from the past with knowledge that was long lost and forgotten. The ability to assume the form of Mythal’s blessing, a dragon, but the tether of being bound to Mythal’s Will. The chance to defend the people she loves and the world she lives in but at the sacrifice of her personal freedoms. In a way, Dawn had asked Merrill to be a First again, only this time one that would directly link to the Evanuris.

“She did not expect you to decide already.” Cole’s voice drifted from the doorway, a habit the spirit boy was developing to try and stop scaring others with his arrival.
“Hello Cole.” Merrill greeted, offering a smile even though her head hurt. “Are you talking about Dawn?” she figured he was but sometimes it was nice to clarify from the start.

“She worries that you will be bound and it will be her fault. She made the request, took the decision, and would wear the blood on her hands if it’s real.” Cole answered without directly answering.

“Oh that’s sweet,” Merrill felt a more real smile brighten her face. “But it is my decision to take on the risk, and it is my decision that drives me, not hers.” The conversation felt uncomfortably like the one she’d had with Hawke about Marethari and Audacity, and her smile faltered. If her old Keeper had just had a little faith in her, she’d still be alive.

“Her love means she shares the burdens.” His head tilted to the side, the wide brim of his hat obscuring his features. “Why are you preparing a room that is already prepared?” he switched topics quick enough even Merrill had a moment of confusion.

“Oh, I’m just removing the dust blankets and making sure it’s all aired out. And giving it a few….necessary touches.” She explained, the smile returning to her lips.

She hadn’t been in Skyhold when it was still under repairs and the rooms set aside for her friends only needed the most basic of preparations but Merrill had planned to give them more than just that. All of the rooms for her friends were getting personal touches meant to make the space wholly theirs. Even if her friends never noticed those little touches, Merrill felt better for doing them all the same.

“Did you want to help me settle this place to right?” Merrill offered Cole the edge of the dust sheet she needed to fold and he obliged without comment.

“Helping is supposed to make the hurt go away.” Cole remarked after they had folded every conceivable dust sheet Merrill had gathered. “I don’t always know what to say to help, and sometimes what I say doesn’t help. You know how to talk to people better.”

“That’s kind of you to say.” Merrill laughed, knowing how not true that was. People were generally bad at listening to her no matter how carefully she spoke; now Merrill tried to keep things as simple for everyone as possible. “Was there someone you needed to talk to?”

“I like talking with you. Your questions have answers that hold more questions.” Merrill was glad Cole’s floppy brimmed hat meant he couldn’t see her pleased flush. It was nice to have someone that liked talking to her; a lot of people didn’t like having her around.

“I like to ask questions because then I can find out what I don’t already know and need to ask questions about.” She finally answered, realizing that they had finished the last of the rooms; Fenris and Isabela’s. More hands and a friendly voice really did make for faster work.

“She’s afraid that I’ll know her as I know him; their bond from the womb never gone or forgotten. She’s Proud of his strength, Angry that I could help when she could not, and Afraid that if he could fail and fall then she can too.” Cole frowned and his pale, wide eyes filled with frustrated concern. “They sound louder to her now and she blames me but They are reacting to her own turmoil. Nothing I say will convince her of that.”

Merrill didn’t know who they were talking about, but she knew what she thought of it. “Well if it’s not your fault it’s not fair that she’s blaming you for it. By the Dread Wolf it’s bad enough getting in trouble for the things you did do! Getting in trouble for something you haven’t done has only ever made me want to do the thing out of spite.” She scolded this friend that was mad at him.
People were disgusted by her decision to use blood magic despite the risks it put her in, but some people feared Cole in a way beyond silly superstition. They did not and could not understand that he was a Spirit of Compassion and Cole the individual at the same time. Merrill couldn’t See it like some could, and she could not easily explore the Fade, so she just took him at his word.

“Did you want me to speak to your friend for you?” Merrill thought to offer.

“They will settle the matter in their own way, the catharsis of the fight needed to wash away the doubt.” Cole’s denial still confused her but she didn’t ask for clarification. “You want to ask if I will tell you more than Dawn did.”

“You See and understand things that I cannot and she may not,” Merrill didn’t bother denying it. “I know she has kept things to herself, even during this, and I don’t want to pry out secrets she needs to keep. But I’d like to know.”

“She thought she’d fear the Flame but it’s the heartbeats that scare her. So much to do and no time left to do it in, and she loves them so much it hurts to think about losing them. You. Me. Us. Any. We are the burdens in her heart and her head and shoulders, and the light that calls her from the dark.” Cole sat on top of a wardrobe trunk, feet crossed as he stared at his fingertips.

“So…. How can we help her then?” Merrill came over and pulled herself up to sit next to the pale boy.

“I don’t know.” Cole’s comment was worrisome; he always knew how to help, even if he couldn’t do it himself. “She has asked me not to look at what she knows. At first I thought it fear for what I am but when I Looked….I saw why she always hurts so much. All the ways it can go wrong wrapped up so tightly in the only way it can go right. And still the ever driving need to change the things she can change with the hope that it makes it better. It doesn’t always, and soon she is going to feel the pain from that too.”

“If we can’t take away the pain, what can we do to make her smile as well?” Merrill tried a different tactic because she knew better than most that sometimes the pain is inevitable, but it doesn’t have to be ALL you felt.

Cole blinked and turned to look at her, face handsome in its pleasant surprise. “She likes your stories, and your hugs. Those will help the rising sun smile again.”

“Then that is what we will do.” Merrill decided, sounding firm and confident even if it wasn’t how she really felt. “We will see her when she comes back and then whenever we think she needs it, we’re going to hug the daylights back into her.”

His bloodshot gaze blinked, actually seeming to focus on this moment alone instead of the distant stare he normally adopted. “It won’t be enough to keep the nightmare at bay. But it might be enough to keep the sun in the sky.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant by that, or why it left her ominously chill, but Merrill knew that sometimes the only way to help her friends was to be there with them through whatever pain they experienced. She was willing to bleed to power her spells to keep her friends safe, she would do no less emotionally either.
*Friggin’ in the Riggin’ is the inspiration for Merrill’s tune

Translation:
Elvhen
Mema el’uis, ar niven halanima. = You have secrets, I want to help you.
Kirkwalled Skyhold

Chapter Summary

It was never going to be smooth sailing with the Kirkwallers coming to Skyhold, but no one was expecting immediate disaster.

And a family matter is finally settled. Mostly.

Chapter Notes

I wanted to give a few POVs this chapter, let me know if it is too scattered feeling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’d taken Alena two days to go out, close the Rift, and return to Skyhold but in that time Skyhold had filled with far too many expectations. One of Alena’s least favourite aspects of being Inquisitor was sitting in Judgement of someone. It wasn’t the burden of deciding what to do with people that Alena hated so much as it was the fact that her decisions were immediately dissected by everyone everywhere for some hidden motive or indication of what she was planning next. They were all vastly overestimating her if they thought she had some sort of long term plan beyond ‘don’t let the world end’.

It should not have been a surprise to learn that the triumvirate of Orlais was making Judging Florianne her problem; it made the most sense since she’d been the one to thwart her in the first place. And Alena could possibly understand why Gaspard would have a hard time passing a death sentence on his own sister, regardless of her own betrayals.

But Alena was planning on not passing an execution order. Florianne had found the weaknesses of the Game and had exploited them so thoroughly that Orlais would spend the next few years recovering from it; she was a brilliant mind and Alena had wondered if there was a way to turn that to the Inquisition’s advantage. The biggest concern being that if they tried it would just allow Florianne the chance to betray them in turn.

Josephine and Leliana had both voiced the same concern, and Cullen had flat out said to not trust the schemer, but still Alena found herself back in Skyhold for less than a day and on the throne to Judge the Venatori agent. It was at least a saving grace that Varric had taken Dawn with him after they returned so he could introduce her to the Prince of Starkhaven; distressing news had come in from Halamshiral and Dawn would need privacy to deal with it. That was not something that the Main Hall could offer her at the moment.

“I do not believe a reminder is necessary for this accused.” Josephine’s voice forced Alena back to the matter at hand and she looked out at the surprisingly filled Main Hall. “Her capture and disgrace could not have been more public; Grand Duchess Florianne du Chalons, although her titles are among the dignities already at risk of forfeiture.” Josephine introduced as Florianne was brought forward, chains clanking as the guards all but dragged her in. “You spared her life, despite her treachery. What becomes of it now falls to you.” The Advisors had all already agreed with
Alena to try and keep Dawn’s name out of the Judgement. Technically it’d been her Harbinger that had spared Florianne’s life upon capture, but Alena was willing to shoulder the burden of this for her friend.

“Out of your element Florianne, welcome to the Inquisition; my party.” Alena greeted easily, eschewing fancier language deliberately.

“Peh!” Florianne didn’t spit because ladies don’t do that sort of thing, but her tone held all the dismissal as a gob of spit would have.

“Despite her posture, Lady Florianne has acknowledged your authority.” Josephine pointed out, not at all bothered by their prisoner’s attitude.

“Should I curse you and your Harbinger on behalf of the Elder One? I realize he had no intention of honoring the concordats I manipulated,” Florianne stood tall and proud despite the chains shackling her wrists together. “Do as you must. I respect your mastery of the Game, even as I despite your victory. Celene and Gaspard do not know their fortune.”

Alena could respect the Grand Duchess even as much as she detested her; what she wanted to do to the woman and what was best for the Inquisition were as equally opposed. “She remains a creature of formality and opportunity. We have a use for both.” She sat forward, the sentence and posturing all already figured out in advance with her Advisors. “Grand Duchess, Josephine will see that your wiles profit the Inquisition; don’t disappoint.”

The Main Hall susurrated with whispers after the pronouncement but Alena ignored it all to focus on the newly acquired Agent watching her almost curiously. “One must remember that the Game is never truly over, your Worship.” The guard to Florianne’s left reached out with the key to her shackles. With her hands freed, Florianne gathered the sides of her skirt and curtsied to Alena as if she were the Empress now, before turning to leave the Main Hall with Josephine keeping an eye on her.

Paragons and Dusters, this could go wrong in so many ways. Alena was out of the uncomfortable throne and on her feet before Florianne was even out of the Main Hall, moving away from the crowds all discussing her decisions. As if she’d made it lightly or without consulting her Advisors first. Alena rolled her eyes at the constant back-guessing that came with her fancy title and left it alone; it truly didn’t matter what she did because someone would find it lacking somehow. She’d just keep going forwards until the world ended, was saved, or she died from the efforts.

“You look dour love.” Blackwall’s quiet voice drew her out of her angry scowling. She’d made it out of the Main Hall and hadn’t even realized her lover had joined her; that was far too distracted for an ex-assassin to be. “I cannot wait for this all to be over.” She shook her head, frustrated and tired and still so worried about what was coming. “To stand at the other side of history and know that my job with it is finally over and I can just…be.”

Usually they reserved their affections for private settings but after Halamshiral the entire world knew of their romance, so Blackwall apparently decided the best way to distract her from her miserable line of thinking was to kiss the thoughts right out of her head. It worked. Insofar as worrying about the future was no longer the primary thought in her head anyways.

“Keep that up and I’ll ask you to find us somewhere private for the follow through.” Alena warned, not joking at all.

“I absolutely will, once you’re done playing nice with the Prince of Starkhaven.” Blackwall
promised with a smile Alena felt in his kiss more than saw through his beard.

“Ugh, politics.” Alena muttered, filling her tone with as much disgust as possible to make him laugh.

It wasn’t that she disliked the Prince of Starkhaven, or even minded being the Inquisitor all that much now; Alena was just feeling tired. They’d succeeded at The Winter Palace; Orlais was as stable as it could possibly be and ready to face whatever Corypheus wanted to try and throw at them, no one on their side had died even though Dawn had come close, and Alena had established the Inquisition as a neutral Authority that others now turned to for guidance. All it had cost was her privacy, a bucket of Dawn’s blood, and the near death of a small child.

And Dawn’s interference hadn’t gone unpunished, a fact that Alena knew would devastate the young woman once she learned. Dawn had saved young Felassan from Florianne and one of her supporters had killed the boy’s father for it, the Elf Mahalla had arrived with the news and young boy in tow. Apparently staying in Halamshiral for either one of them was now far too dangerous and Vivienne had sent them to Skyhold. Alena hated that she was letting Florianne live when the boy deserved justice and yet the Inquisition needed her wiles.

“Go say hello to the Prince. I’ll be waiting for you in the hayloft.” Blackwall broke her free from the depressing thoughts crowding her head.

“Have I told you lately that I love you?” Alena asked in way of reply.

Blackwall’s eyes sparkled with laughter and desire, “Not often enough, now quit stalling.”

Alena grinned and went onto toe-tip to give him a farewell kiss that left them both more than a little out of breath. And then she turned and walked towards the wing where Varric had insisted the Kirkwallers all be clustered. It seemed like a bad idea to let the group that had all but blown up Kirkwall congregate together, but Alena suspected it’d just be easier to keep them together than have to deal with the annoyance of trying to separate them all. If it’d been over a year since she’d seen her loved ones she’d insist on being near them too. And it wasn’t like Alena’s loved ones were any less destructive than the Kirkwallers had proven to be.

“Inquisitor Cadash, may I say it is a pleasure to meet the Herald of Andraste in person?” Sebastian Vael bowed with exquisite grace.

“You can call me Alena, Prince of Starkhaven; my titles are cumbersome and much grander than I actually am.” Alena took a gamble on the man, having heard of his reputation both before and after finding religion.

“And I am just humbly Sebastian; I am a Prince for my people only because there is no one else to protect them.” He immediately proved half the rumours true even as he proved the other half very false.

“I appreciate your presence here in support of the Inquisition Sebastian; Ferelden and Orlais are likewise willing to assist against the threat that Corypheus presents and I think it will take us all to stop him.” She didn’t bother bullshitting the man.

“The Free Marches are in as much danger as anywhere else. Wycome has lost its leader and Kirkwall is still recovering; I will help in whatever way I can.” The man offered fervently and Alena suddenly felt old.

The Prince had arrived hours after Alena’s team had gone off to close the Rift, and Florianne’s
escort had arrived shortly before Alena had returned, and all these people were just waiting and looking to her for guidance on what to do next. Since taking a nap until the world ended wasn’t an option, Alena decided to continue trying to fix shit that was way beyond her paygrade.

“Can you tell me why Hawke called all of you here?” She decided to question directly, suspecting that Sebastian would appreciate that more than clever subterfuge.

“I can only tell you what Victoria wrote to me to summon me here, at best I can only guess at what she said to compel the others.” Sebastian admitted without hesitation.

“Let’s start with what Hawke said to bring you here. Maybe we can figure out what the Champion is planning before it falls apart on us.” Alena suggested and the Prince gave a rueful laugh.

“Hawke’s plans are not always the best, but she has proven to be quite effective at getting things done.” He didn’t disagree with her assessment though.

“And a sea storm is effective at washing the shore clean but that doesn’t mean you want one every day.” Alena countered. “I appreciate the fact that Hawke came and told me about Corypheus, and I am grateful that she’s helping the Inquisition out. But right now I am trying to prepare my people for a war against Wardens and demons alike, I can only rely on what I know.”

Sebastian looked thoughtful and nodded. “Victoria is my dear friend,” he hesitated to hand over the letter and Alena started to wonder at what it might contain, “Though the events of Kirkwall were not her doing, she has taken responsibility for them. I…we….we all failed that city. I came because she asked me to, and that is all Hawke would have had to do to draw the others here for her. Though I suspect a couple will not arrive to this location for their own reasons.”

Finally he handed over the letter Hawke had sent.

*Choir Boy,*

*It’s time I introduced you to the Herald of Andraste, considering that you wear her boss’ face above your crotch. Things are ramping up and I suspect we may need a steady heart and steadier aim. That’s where you come in my friend. If you can, I could use your help and so could the Inquisition.*

*Hawke*

Alena read the letter twice and learned two very important facts from it. One- the kind of loyalty Hawke inspired in her people was terrifying. Two- if Hawke considered Sebastian’s aim better than Varric’s, Alena would be an idiot to refuse his help.

“Thank you Sebastian; for letting me see this and for coming to help.” Alena handed him back the letter.

“I do have a request, if I may be so bold.” Sebastian seemed more comfortable now that she’d read the letter and Alena was left wondering what it was he’d been worried about. “I have heard many tales of this Harbinger Offworlder that belongs to your Inquisition; I’d like the chance to meet her.”

“I thought Varric had already brought her to introduce the two of you.” Alena felt uneasy. They were back within Skyhold, it was likely only that the duo had gotten distracted by something deliciously alcoholic knowing them.

“I have not seen Varric as of yet, perhaps they had to attend to another matter first?” he didn’t seemed insulted or worried, so Alena kept her face relaxed and calm.
“Plausibly.” She didn’t actually agree because it wasn’t like Varric to say he was doing one thing if he planned to do something else instead.

When a Runner charged towards her with wide eyes and a pale face, Alena felt almost prophetic. “Inquisitor…there is an incident occurring in the training grounds.”

Paragons and Dusters, Alena knew it had to involve her Harbinger.

“If it is alright with you, I’d like to attend to the matter as well.” Sebastian offered and Alena was too irritated to deny his request. She gave a sharp nod and hustled after the Runner out to her training grounds.

She heard shouting, the thud of stomping feet, and the eerie song of lyrium that didn’t sound quite right before she skidded into view. Bright blue lights drew her attention first, streaks of humming lyrium under the skin of the Elf swinging a metal enshrouded fist at her Harbinger’s face.

“Oh no.” Sebastian sighed, not making a move forward after he saw Alena halt in place.

“For the last time, I am not a demon!” Dawn shouted at the enraged looking Elf.

“That is exactly what a demon would say.” The pissed off Elf hissed back and Alena clued in to who it was; Fenris. Her eyes scanned over the crowd and picked out Varric standing with a Rivaini woman wearing a ridiculously plumed Admiral’s hat and Merrill.

“What is going on here?” Alena barked out, voice loud and angry. She was only mildly worried for Dawn; the woman had grown more capable than she anticipated, there were archers on the battlements ready to shoot the Elf if it looked for a moment like he planned to really hurt her, Iron Bull was glaring in the background but not interfering, and Alena could even see Kaaras standing in the distance looking ready to handle any injuries that may occur.

Unfortunately Alena’s bellow drew Dawn’s attention, but did nothing to stop the snarling Elf. His arm suddenly flared bright with activated lyrium and he slammed his fist at Dawn’s chest. Alena recalled the passage in Varric’s Tales of the Champion where he detailed how the lyrium ghost could hurt others.

As soon as Fenris’ fist connected to Dawn’s chest a whomp of air flared out in alarming mimicry of the Pride’s last lightning attack, and Alena watched in silent surprise as the glowing lyrium under Fenris’ skin suddenly went utterly inert. Dawn grunted and staggered back a step but quickly recovered. Everyone else was staring in stunned stillness as she stomped a kick forwards into Fenris’ abdomen and sent him flying backwards into the dirt.

Dawn pressed a hand to her chest, likely bruised even if he didn’t rip her heart out, and panted out, “I am not a demon Fenris even if I am not from this world. If you don’t want to be my friend, fine, but don’t make me your enemy. I have too much I still need to do to let you stop me Leto.”

Alena wasn’t sure why Dawn called Fenris whatever it was she’d said, but the look on the Elf’s face was as if she’d just stripped naked and set herself on fire. He looked terrified of her, and somehow terrified for her all at the same time. And of course, because Alena knew that her life would never be easy and thus the life of her Harbinger was doomed to be just as screwed, it didn’t even surprise her all that much to see the little boy Dawn had defended in Halamshiral launch himself at Fenris.

“Stay away from the Princess!” the little boy shrieked, little fists pummeling at the armour clad adult.
Fenris looked startled, clearly not wanting to hurt a child even with all the spiked edges of his armour. He didn’t defend himself against the futile attack, nor did he have to.

“Felassan!” Dawn’s worried tone drew the boy immediately, the tears of anger on his little face not blinding him enough to keep him from hurtling himself at Dawn and clinging to her like moss to a fallen monument. In an eye blink Dawn’s body language changed and Alena knew that if Fenris got to his feet and attacked now, her Harbinger would do everything she could to eliminate the threat to the little boy even if she’d feel bad for it later.

“Everyone, back to work!” Alena finally bellowed out, no other reminder needed from the Inquisitor to disperse her people back to their places rapidly.

Iron Bull ushered Dawn out of the training ring, not bothering trying to get the little boy out of her arms as he walked her over to Kaaras to ensure she was alright. On the other side Fenris was letting who must be Isabella to help him back to his feet. “Your friends have an interesting way of saying hello.” Iron Bull didn’t sound impressed when he addressed Varric across the ring.

Alena looked up at Sebastian, reading off of his face the mixture of awe and surprise that most people had on their first encounter with Dawn’s Otherness. Usually it wasn’t quite this showy, but it certainly made an impression.

“Considering that your friends wanted to kidnap her, you have no stones to throw Tiny.” Varric lobbed back, tone joking but face serious.

“What happened?” it was the Prince demanding, his expression back to wary but polite.

“Yes, someone please tell me why guests to my Inquisition felt it alright to attack my Harbinger.” Alena was a lot less polite.

Dawn was ignoring everyone, talking to the little boy still wrapped around her and sobbing, and Alena left her friend alone to address the situation she could actually do something about. “On my way to introduce Dawn to Choir Boy, Broody and Rivaini decided to intercept us. It seems that Fenris here can feel Dawn thanks to his lyrium and knew she was not a local. Things went downhill from there and Dawn suggested that if he had a problem with her that they handle it in the ring.” Varric explained succinctly.

“I believe her exact words were ‘fuck it, fight me if you don’t like it’.” Isabella offered helpfully.

“Dawn.” Now Alena called her friend’s attention.

The heartbroken look in Dawn’s eyes as she looked up from the little boy was a punch to the gut. Felassan must have told Dawn that his father had been beaten to death by racists who took umbrage over the Harbinger saving an Elf and humiliating a human in the process. “Dawn,” this time Alena softened her tone, resisting the urge to step towards her hurting friend, “you asked to fight him?”

“I’m human but alien; the only way he was going to believe that was to realize it for himself. I wasn't expecting that though.” Dawn offered as an explanation and Alena wasn’t the only one to hear tears in her voice though none fell from her eyes.

“You injured Sweetheart?” Varric called out in concern.

“Nothing physical Sugar.” She called back but there was no playfulness to her tone for once. 

Alena watched as Dawn held herself together despite the terrible news she’d just received, and she
hated that her friend had had to learn this skill so quickly. Dawn should be free to cry and sob over the death of Felassan’s father, she should have been free from concern over allies attacking her, she should be allowed to enjoy the few good things this world could offer her. Instead Alena could only give her friend the respect of her support as she put the mantle of Harbinger on even over her broken heart.

“Actually, I’m fairly certain you have a bruised sternum.” Kaaras called out, voice deliberately cheery sounding as he drew everyone’s attention.

Somehow a Vashoth Mage was as good at being overlooked as she was, Alena tried not to take offence. “Well he did punch me with a gauntlet on; a bruise is the least of my concerns.” Dawn replied looking like someone would have to pry Felassan from her if they wanted to check on her health.

“Enough.” Alena sounded as tired as she felt, bad sign. “Harbinger I wish to introduce you to the Prince of Starkhaven, when you are ready please find us in the Main Hall. Guests of the Inquisition, you may peacefully explore Skyhold.” She tried very hard not to put any emphasis on the word.

Her formality was all the warning her people needed to treat the situation seriously and Alena turned from them all and walked back to her Main Hall, seeing the Prince follow her in her peripheral vision.

“I found that exchange…. Disconcerting and educational.” Sebastian remarked as they re-entered the Main Hall.

“Is Fenris always that confrontational?” Alena made polite conversation back.

“Generally at first, though he warms up once he gets to know you.” Sebastian nodded with a slight smile.

“I suspect that tepid is the warmest he’s going to get towards Dawn.” Alena couldn’t help but joke back, glad that at least one of the Kirkwall guests seemed not inclined to cause problems.

“Why did the boy call her Princess?” it was a good question, and one Alena hadn’t a single clue for.

“Because when I first met Felassan I was wearing my Halamshiral ball gown and he thought I was a princess from a story.” Dawn’s voice called their attention to her.

Alena saw the little boy had been released from her protective grip, nowhere to be seen now but likely with someone Dawn considered safe. Her friend looked calm, face not serene but certainly not the devastated facade she’d worn earlier. The split knuckles and visible bruises from the brief fight with Fenris had already been taken care of thanks to Kaaras no doubt, and Dawn looked every inch the Harbinger that the Inquisition needed her to be now.

It was hard not to grab her friend’s hand and drag her away from all this so she could go on just being Dawn.

“Dawn, Harbinger of the Inquisition, may I introduce His Royal Highness, Prince Sebastian Vael of Starkhaven.” Alena fell back on Josie’s formality training, ever grateful that her friend had hammered all the correct forms of address into her head months ago.

“Please, just call me Sebastian.” He bowed as he made the request, just as polite to Dawn as he had been to Alena.
It was only when Dawn returned his bow with an elegant curtsey that Alena realized that her friend had been fighting Fenris while wearing parts of the new wardrobe they’d all gotten her. There was a certain amused despair for Alena when she realized that instead of wearing the clothes in the intended combinations Dawn seemed to have merged separate styles into her own new one. Her gray, white and heather piped kilt from Kirkwall had held up surprisingly well; no stains of dirt showed on the tightly woven wool but the bone coloured Valo-Kas wrap blouse revealed some streaks of dust that hadn’t been brushed off yet. The clash of two cultural styles worked surprisingly well together and despite the mess on her clothes Dawn looked Court ready.

“And I much prefer Dawn to Offworlder or demon.” Dawn returned with a wry smile.

Sebastian laughed. “I can promise not to call you either, Dawn, unless you make it a special request.”

“If I ever feel the need I’ll come ask.” The easy back and forth worked enough to make Dawn’s body language relax and Alena was impressed with Sebastian by that more than anything else he’d done thus far.

“I am sorry that Fenris felt the need to do all that. He…has lived a hard life and it has left him very suspicious of others but at heart he is a good person.” The Prince apologized and defended in one breath and Alena couldn’t help but like the man for it.

“There aren’t any within Skyhold that don’t have a sad story to share,” Alena replied but didn’t condemn, “I will not tolerate further attacks despite those histories.”

“I know all about Fenris’ past, you don’t have to convince me of his pain.” Dawn said at the same time and shot Alena a smile at the overlap.

“Regardless, this was not how I was hoping my friends and I could introduce ourselves to the Inquisition and offer our aid.” Sebastian was the soul of courtesy and it highlighted to Alena the difference a lifetime being reared in nobility could make. Alistair had been like her, a regular person before being put into authority and his years as King could only round the rough edges he’d had; Sebastian was all polished marble since childhood.

“Have you heard the reputation we have pretty boy? This is exactly how everyone should have expected it to go.” The Rivaini called out, interrupting their discussion deliberately. Alena turned to look the other woman over. She was wearing a brief tunic that acted as a dress with over the knee boots and enough blades on her to technically qualify as an armoury; the plume of feathers sticking out of her cap Alena really, really wanted to know the story behind.

“Isabella, this is not the best way to work with allies.” Sebastian chided lightly.

“When have I ever promised to play well with others, Choir Boy?” she demanded and sauntered closer, dripping equal measures sexual appeal and violent promise.

Alena knew others like that, had seen her very own best friend walk that walk, and she had to stifle the inappropriate urge to laugh. “I know Hawke invited you all here, but this is my Inquisition. If you can’t behave I will get you to leave.” She didn’t threaten but it wasn’t a gentle sounding promise either.

“I’ll stay out of Fenris’ way.” Dawn sounded as tired as Alena felt. Was weariness contagious? “It shouldn’t be too hard, I spent months learning how to avoid people in this Keep.”

“You won’t have to sweetness,” Isabella turned her charm onto Dawn and Alena was curious to see
how Dawn handled it. Normally her friend was more than a little oblivious to when people were flirting at her. "Calling him by his old name did more to convince him to leave you alone than all the violence in the world could have."

"I have that effect on people." Dawn didn’t seem surprised by it and that told Alena just how much Dawn knew of the stories behind the people they were now dealing with.

"What did Hawke say to bring you here?" Alena dropped the previous topic deliberately and focused instead on trying to figure out the Champion’s plan before it could go catastrophically wrong.

"She offered me a bigger hat." Isabella winked as she said it but Alena actually believed her, though she couldn’t figure out why. "And she might have mentioned something about Fenris getting to kill all of the demon summoning mages he could ever want."

"Fuck; that means Gryphon Wing Keep has already occurred." Dawn’s curse drew surprised looks from those that didn’t know her propensity for cussing.

"What other kinds of secrets does that pretty head of yours contain?" Isabella purred, ignoring Alena and Sebastian now to step close in front of Dawn.

"You tell me, Naishe." Dawn replied with a smile that stopped Isabela in her tracks.

"Not all names from the past have the power to hurt anymore." Isabela countered flippantly.

"Who ever said I was trying to hurt? I know things that can, I don’t like to though." Dawn’s confidence shut down whatever was happening. Dawn looked past Isabela, ignoring even the Prince of Starkhaven, to meet Alena’s gaze. "Inquisitor, if I may be excused, I don’t think I’ll be much assistance at the moment."

Alena’s nod freed Dawn like a stone out of a sling shot and her Harbinger vanished without a trace of magic at all. "Would either one of you like to explain to me just what kind of pissing match you’re trying to get into with my Harbinger?" she addressed the two humans still around.

"I assure you Inquisitor; I am here only to help." Sebastian immediately confessed.

"I’m not here to cause any problems." Isabela denied at the same time.

"You; I believe," Alena indicated the Prince, "you, however, are definitely up to no good." She addressed the ‘Admiral’.

"Your Harbinger knows our pasts and that means she also knows how much it hurts to have it thrown in our faces. I will defend my people from any attack I think they need me to." It wasn’t an apology nor was it a lie.

"Her husband was brutally murdered by a Rage demon within seconds of them arriving here. Your mate calling her a demon is no less damaging than her calling him by name.” Alena countered, just as protective of her loved ones.

"So they’ll both bleed and recover, problem solved." Isabela shrugged it all aside as if it were no matter at all.

"I am certain this is not what Hawke wanted from us.” Sebastian turned chiding but Isabela laughed at him for it.
“No one is certain of what Hawke wants, not even herself. That’s half the fun.” No one had an argument against that either, which was probably a bad sign.

“Keep Fenris peaceful, that’s all I’m asking. If I have to deal with you, or your friends, no one is going to like the end result.” Alena finally made it perfectly clear what she, at least, expected.

“We can certainly do that Inquisitor.” Sebastian tried to soothe but neither woman looked at him.

“We’ll stay out of your way.” That was the best Alena was going to get from the pirate and she knew it.

It wasn’t good enough, but it would have to do. For now.

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Sometimes he really hated being the witness to everyone’s worse moments. Varric had watched far too many of his friends get hurt all for the sake of helping a world that seemed determined to burn. It was typical of his luck that Choir Boy had arrived right after he’d left with the Inquisitor, and it was inevitable that Florianne had arrived just before their return, but it felt like an absolute disaster to have Fenris and Isabella show up just as Varric was getting Dawn away from Alena. Whatever Stabby’s latest report said, it’d given her a heartbroken look when she watched Dawn.

It was too late for meals and too early for drinking, not that Choir Boy indulged, so Varric had expected to find Sebastian amongst the gardens near the little Chantry altar. The man might be new to Skyhold but Varric figured his habits wouldn’t have changed even if his location did. But to his surprise the holy gardens of the Inquisition were absent the errant Prince.

“Well, shit. Go figure that it took the world nearly ending to pry Choir Boy away from the altar.” Varric joked, keeping the easy attitude they’d all adopted since the Pride exploded.

Still, it felt like a shit storm was coming.

“Maybe he went to the Herald’s Rest expecting that to be your first stop?” Dawn countered with a wink and a smug grin.

“I have no idea why you’d think such a thing of me Sweetheart; I’m a bastion of moderation and good morals.” He couldn’t resist the haughty tone, barely suppressing his laughter. He had led them out of the Main Tower, taking the long route to avoid the throne room, and they were almost at the Rest already.

“Gee Sugar, could it possibly be because I’ve known you for longer than a day?” he was impressed with the amount of sarcasm she slathered onto a simple question. “Besides, aren’t you the Paragon of the Hanged Man anyways?”

“I’m just a legitimate businessman who goes where his clients are most comfortable.” Varric gave the typical spiel, making Dawn laugh.

“I don’t buy that for a moment Sugar.” She shot that down fast enough.

“He goes where all the best stories or troubles are.” A familiar and unexpected voice called out in a warm taunt.

“Generally all I have to do is stand near you Rivaini, and trouble finds its way.” He called back, looking towards the stairs and seeing Isabella there with a very audacious hat on.
He should have known that nothing was ever going to be easy in his life by this point; Isabella wasn’t alone.

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They had been at sea when a green hole tore open the sky. The sun was setting, the horizon on fire with bloody scarlet, searing orange, and the last kiss of yellow before suddenly a sickly green flooded the sky.

More horrid than the Heavens looking poisoned was the pain that burned through him in response to it.

Fenris couldn’t recall the experience of having lyrium etched into his skin; his brain had blocked the trauma and wiped his memory to protect him from it. He did not black out this time, though it felt as if the lyrium in his flesh was being pulled towards catastrophe. From the lines below his lips, down the length of his body, and to the tops of his toes; every drop of lyrium burned like caustic fire. And it did not stop, did not abate for a moment.

Isabella hadn’t understood, she had only seen him in pain and turned sharp to hide her worry. He could do nothing but endure, and so he did.

News came in; Isabella got word from the ports about the Conclave being attacked by something. Next came tell how the Temple of Sacred Ashes was entirely gone, a Dwarf the only survivor. And then Varric made use of his network to tell them of his survival, and the end of the world.

A Breach that spat demons. Fenris snarled at the thought because he could be there, doing some good but the closer Isabella brought them, the worse his skin scalded. The survivor had a name, Alena, but more importantly she had something in her hand that could close Rifts and possibly the Breach. Fenris wondered if her hand burned with the same pain his skin now did.

They didn’t receive more news for a while but Fenris knew something had gone wrong; his lyrium marks twisted as if trying to writhe and wrap around to new positions. When Varric next wrote it was to tell tales of Time Magic gone awry and Fenris believed him. His skin bled pain with every heartbeat, the very heavens were torn asunder, and there seemed to be no real reason to hope for anything but insanity.

The letter didn’t stop with just the Time Magic though. It also told of Varric’s new quest to save the world. He was joined by a Qunari and a Tevinter, a wandering Elf mage and a haughty Circle Enchanter, an Archer who hated mages almost as much as Fenris did and a Warden that seemed unshakeable, and finally the Right Hand of the Divine herself.

Despite the risks they had allied with the Redcliffe rebel mages; because apparently NO ONE learns from even recent history, and they were going to close the hole in the sky.

To Fenris’ everlasting surprise they succeeded too. For the first time in months his skin didn’t burn like acid, and Fenris was nearly delirious with relief. Isabella had taken gross advantage of his renewed vigor and they set sail to meet Varric at Haven; ready to celebrate.

They never made it off the ship, letters flew like birds-on-wing; Haven has fallen, the Inquisition wiped out. Tales of a woman who knew the future contradicted those saying the Herald of Andraste had saved them, and Varric promised he was alive.

But they were to stay away.

Fenris was fine to wait but Isabella became impossible to be around as her worry was buried under
the search for the perfect hat.

They went back to sea but only ran coastal jobs, always ready for that final letter. Months after the world apparently ended they were finally called to Skyhold, the heart of the Inquisition.

Fenris had thought he was prepared for anything, even that the Offworlder wasn’t a rumour or tall tale at all. Though he did seriously doubt the claims that she was a human. He could feel his lyrium react again, the expectation was for pain but instead a pleasantly soothing sensation radiated from the marks the closer he approached.

He’d have rather endured pain; it was easier to resist that demon after all.

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It didn’t particularly surprise Sebastian to discover that immediately upon arrival Fenris got into an altercation. He loved that man like a brother but Fenris had some lingering issues he was still resolving. Usually his ire was directed only towards mages or slavers, but this time his friend was attacking a woman that looked anything but evil.

Sebastian looked towards the Inquisitor, sure she was about to call to the archers on the battlements to fire. She didn’t and he overheard the crowd around them wonder just who was attacking the Harbinger and why.

“Oh no.” he sighed, now aware that his colleague was fighting the very person Sebastian has just asked to meet.

She was younger looking than the title Harbinger had made him assume, no older than Bethany and younger than Victoria. The Harbinger was wearing a foreign style blouse and a Kirkwall kilt, which he suspected Varric was the source of, and a very long braid that spun about like a dragon’s tail.

The Inquisitor called out and the Harbinger stopped but Fenris kept fighting. Before even Sebastian could call out a warning, his friend struck the Harbinger squarely in the chest. And then Sebastian felt the breath of the Maker himself.

When Fenris struck her, the Harbinger didn’t have her heart ripped out as Sebastian had seen his friend do many times in the past. Instead the blue glowing light of Fenris’ lyrium fueled rage went dead and gray. The air whipped past them all, the eye of the storm the Harbinger that had been struck and yet she was still standing. Her counter-attack both in deed and word served to end the fight with a finality that lifted the fine hairs on the back of Sebastian’s neck.

Who was this Harbinger?

A small boy ran out, attacking the larger Elf and screaming about a Princess. Sebastian’s confusion and consternation only grew when the Harbinger claimed the little boy, clearly the Princess he had been defending and yet this was the first Sebastian had heard of her nobility. And if she truly wasn’t from this world then how could she claim noble status? The questions were piling up faster than the answers could.

“What happened?” Sebastian couldn’t help but demand, trying to keep the consternation out of his tone.

The explanations provided offered no comfort and he fell mostly silent as the Inquisition adjusted around the event as if this were just a usual Tuesday*. It was painfully reminiscent of his time in Kirkwall and Sebastian understood how Hawke could have felt at home amongst these varied
peoples. Though listening to the Harbinger explain her reasoning and the unexpected nature of the fight really gave no more insight into the woman herself, or the strange role she was playing Sebastian’s world. At least Hawke was straightforward with her brusqueness.

This Harbinger was also far more openly emotional than Hawke would have ever tolerated allowing herself to be. Being attacked and called a demon had seemingly only made her frustrated but whomever the little boy was to her had left her near tears. And by her own words it wasn’t due to a physical injury; some emotional wound had occurred and Varric seemed to be concerned for the Harbinger in the same way Sebastian had experienced the Dwarf to be for himself in Kirkwall.

The Inquisitor seemed to be more exhausted by the fight than the Harbinger was, so Sebastian remained silent as he followed her back inside. He finally felt able to speak once they were away from the crowds and the absurdly expressive eyes of the Harbinger. “I found that exchange… Disconcerting and educational.” Sebastian couldn’t help the hesitation, unsure he had chosen the right descriptors.

They became true enough through his formal introduction to the Harbinger of the Inquisition. She didn’t bat an eyelash over him offering the familiar use of his first name, nor did she hesitate to insist on the return of that favour. Her supposed nobility was shown to be a figment of childish enthusiasm, and yet she handed the exchange even after Isabella’s arrival as if born to politics. Her confidence during the fight and the interlude with Isabela indicated that she was a natural force and yet she easily deferred to the Inquisitor for permissions.

The woman was a bundle of contradictions that left him wondering why Hawke hadn’t properly warned them. Or stayed long enough to witness the events for herself. It was a cold reminder that he’d been called to visit Skyhold to help save the world, whether or not he understood all of the other players trying to achieve the same.

Sebastian could only pray that the Maker smiled kindly on these poor fools; himself included.

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It had taken Kaaras a quick curl of magic to ensure that the injuries Dawn had received were taken care of. The knuckles of her hand that had been split and cracked open were now soothed into wholeness and the bruised sternum that had worried him settled back to normalcy. He no longer had to have physical contact to Heal, but despite easing her wounds Kaaras still felt pain radiating from Dawn’s aura.

It wasn’t until the little boy in her arms buried his head against her shoulder that Kaaras realized he was feeling the pain of her emotions instead of a physical hurt. Whatever the little boy in her arms represented, Dawn was now wounded and Kaaras’ gift wouldn’t let him leave it alone. He was helpless to say anything about it though, not wanting to reveal Dawn’s vulnerable state to these new strangers as she handed the little boy in her arms to Iron Bull with a quiet word to them both and walked after the Inquisitor.

“What the fuck Broody?” Varric immediately demanded of the Elf that had been fighting Dawn a moment ago.

“She’s doesn’t feel human.” The Elf spat back angrily.

“She needs our help not a violent attack; if you had taken a second to think about it you’d realize that she feels weird to you because she’s not from our world. Every single mage that has encountered Dawn has said the same thing!” the Dwarf fumed and those that loved Dawn all stood back and let him be their mouth piece.
Kaaras looked from the scene to where Iron Bull easily held the little Elf boy Dawn had passed him. The little boy also radiated emotional pain but it was mixed in with enough confusion that Kaaras had no clue what it was that had chewed both boy and Dawn up so badly emotionally. “Hello little one, I am Kaaras.” He offered softly, carefully gauging his reaction. “I’m a friend of Dawn’s.”

Iron Bull looked like he was ignoring them; focusing his attention onto Varric chewing the Elf Fenris out, but Kaaras knew the Tal Vashoth was listening in as well. The boy sniffled, tears and emotions a wild mess. “Why’d he hurt the Princess?” he demanded, sounding angry and scared and Kaaras knew why Iron Bull hadn’t been able to put the little one down; his own instincts were screaming at him to cuddle and protect the little one from any possible danger.

“Because he was confused and didn’t know any better.” Kaaras hoped that wasn’t a lie though he suspected the truth was far more complicated. “May I look at your hands? I’m a Healer and you seem to have bruised them defending the Princess.” He offered, magic telling him that Felassan was alright, barely even bruised at all and yet it was the one thing Kaaras could fix.

Felassan sniffed again though the tears were drying up at last. Kaaras spied Bull watching him out of his peripheral but said nothing. “Will it hurt?” the question was asked even as Felassan held out his hands, as if accepting the pain regardless of Kaaras’ answer.

“No Imekari, it will not hurt.” Kaaras promised as he curled magic around little fingers to soothe the bruises away.

The little one watched with wide eyes as the blue and red faded from his skin as if it’d never existed. “Thank you Karaz.” Felassan’s pronunciation was off but Kaaras didn’t correct him.

“You’re welcome. Any friend of Dawn’s is a friend of mine.” Kaaras gave the little boy a serious bow and was pleased when the kid smiled in response.

“Here comes your Princess.” Iron Bull rumbled softly and now Felassan squirmed in his grip, trying to be put down and take off running all at the same time.

Kaaras looked up, realizing that Varric had taken the violent Elf away while he’d been distracted, and saw Dawn coming back out of the Main Hall. She no longer radiated emotional pain; instead Kaaras could see a series of emotions careen across her expressive face until she gained control over her emotions. Iron Bull had kept Felassan in his arms only because he simply walked the little boy closer to Dawn and Kaaras followed along, not knowing what else to do.

Dawn took the little boy back into her arms without saying a word and Kaaras stood awkwardly to the side, watching Bull watch her. When the ex-spy’s eye slid to meet his, Kaaras was caught between wanting to leave and wanting to ask what was going on. He did neither.

“Kadan?” Bull made it a question and Kaaras felt his eyebrows jump to his horns, when did Bull start calling her that?

“I’ll be alright Iron Bull. We’ll be alright, won’t we Felassan?” she sounded normal, and Kaaras watched her face, looking for any signs of distress but found none.

“Auntie Mahalla said we would once we got here but I miss daddy.” The little boy’s words made something in Dawn’s face crumple and Kaaras watched as she barely held it together, frozen in place by the pain Dawn fought against.

“I know sweetie, and I am so sorry they took him from you.” Oh Maker no, Kaaras did not like the
sounds of this at all. “And I am sorry they did that because of me.”

Kaaras was only able to tear his focus from Dawn when Bull tapped him on the shoulder. “I’ve got her, you keep the others away.” He instructed softly and Kaaras gave a sharp nod.

Whatever else happened today, he knew that Dawn needed to process whatever it was that Felassan was talking about. Bull would keep her safe and Kaaras would keep others from looking for her if at all possible. Iron Bull curled an arm across Dawn’s shoulders and guided her and Felassan away as Kaaras turned back to those that might want to follow. Thankfully no one moved to pursue; the Inquisitor was inside with the fancy dressed human she’d come out with, the attractive lady with the silly hat was gone, and Varric had pulled the violent Elf away a while back. The only one watching Kaaras as Dawn and Bull left was Kasaanda.

His twin caught his gaze, hesitated for a moment, but finally walked over to talk to him. Kaaras tried not to let it show how much it hurt that his twin was still avoiding him whenever possible. “What was this all about? I miss all the fun stuff.”

“I’m not entirely sure. I feel like there were whole layers to this that I missed.” Kaaras admitted cautiously.

“Wow, it must be strange if you can’t See it with the extra eyes you now have.” And there it was; another angry dig at him for bonding with Compassion.

And maybe only because Kaaras was still rubbed raw by Dawn’s emotional pain, he didn’t ignore it this time. “Like you care, you’ve been so busy avoiding me and acting like I’m some kind of monster to even know what’s changed with me.” Kaaras spat at his twin and turned to walk away before she could find a retort.

Or before she could see the tears he was fighting against.

“Kaaras…” Kasaanda called out after him but he kept walking, not sure what he’d say to her next and not wanting to make it worse than he already had.

She let him get another ten steps before he was soundly tackled from behind. “You don’t walk away from me. Not like that!” she snarled at him as he twisted free.

“You’re the one that walked away. Ever since I saved Taam-Kas, ever since Cole saved me. You left and I’ve been trying to find my sister ever since.” He hissed back, shoving her shoulders as if this were nothing more than another brawl during Satinalia.

“Because I failed you.” Kasaanda snarled right back and threw a perfect uppercut into his diaphragm. “I was supposed to be able to help keep the demons away from you and none of you could even FEEL me.”

Kaaras had to gasp air in violently before he could say “You’re a necromancer with Earth focus; you never could have helped me! You never could have failed me!” and then connected a sharp jab.
“But he could save you!” Kasaanda shouted as if the sentence could release all of her anger and self-recrimination.

“Because I was always a Spirit Healer!” Kaaras’ words stopped the fight and he was surprised to see blood dripping from her nose. “I just hadn’t called to Compassion yet; I didn’t know I could. And I didn’t know it’d cost me you.” She had blood dripping from her face and Kaaras looked down to try and hide the tears dripping from his. “I fix things and I don’t know how to fix this and I’m sorry.” His words had lost the power of his anger.

This time when Kasaanda tackled into him it wasn’t an attack but a hug. “I’m right here and you didn’t lose me, you big idiot.” And even if it wasn’t what badass mercenaries were supposed to do, Kaaras hugged his twin sister tighter and cried against her shoulder because he really had been afraid he’d lost her. “But I almost lost you and I don’t know how I’m supposed to deal with that. I’m supposed to take care of you, you’re my little brother.”

Now Kaaras laughed. “You’re older by seconds, stinkweed.”

“Still older.” She immediately argued, and even if they weren’t there yet Kaaras had hope that maybe they’d get back to feeling solid again. He pulled back from the hug so that they could clack their horns together.

“You know that Cole will never, ever hurt you right?” he had to ask; to be sure his twin wasn’t just pretending to be alright as they walked towards their camp.

“I could break that man with one hand, I’m not worried.” Kasaanda said flatly, sounding annoyed that Kaaras would ever doubt that. “And if you say that Compassion is alright I trust you.” The admission was said with as much confidence as her first one was and Kaaras was obscenely grateful for it. “But we still have to have a serious discussion over you spending almost every single night away from the Valo-Kas camp. I could believe that it was you working fervently at the Healer’s Wing except that I’ve seen the satisfied glow on the Seeker’s face.”

And now Kaaras buried his face in his hands to try and hide his blush from his twin. And the grin because he was happy she was back to teasing him for his love life.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took a HARD LEFT TURN from where I originally intended it to go.
This is likely for the better let me tell you :D

Translation:
Qunlat
Imekari - child

*Tuesday, Friday, and Sunday exist in Thedas according to the banters throughout the game
When worlds collide there is always going to be damage, but not everyone is as ready for the fallout as they first appear. And sometimes the one that weathered it the best is the one you’d least expect. Varric has seen the damage his Kirkwallers can do, Isabela has survived the damage of her world falling apart, and Dawn just wants to help.

Varric had had every Lom, Rick, and Gerry come to him with the sole purpose of telling him their opinion on Fenris’ near murder of the Harbinger. To say it had left him in an inhospitable mood would be akin to saying that the Lyrium Dragon was an inconvenience; a huge fucking understatement. As if he had been the one to summon the other Kirkwallers here, as if he had been expecting Fenris to react that way, or as if he had the ability to prevent it all from happening; like usual Varric was the one being yelled at for another of Hawke’s plans gone awry. It was so nostalgia inducing he could spit.

Someone would probably yell at him for that too.

When a bottle of his current favourite vintage was set down in front of him with a deliberate thud, Varric closed his eyes and took a deep breath, unsure if this was a good sign or a bad one. “It seems to me that you could use a bit of this and a friendly ear to listen.” Sebastian sounded deliberately nonchalant, which was far better than angry accusations would have been.

Varric looked from bottle to the man that had delivered it and laughed. “You have no idea Choir Boy, no idea at all.”

“Has the Inquisition always been this…exciting for newcomers?” the Prince turned friend settled down, leaving the wine all for Varric.

“Well this show got started with a bang and it’s been pretty even on running that way ever since, why change now?” Varric laughed, gladly abandoning the paperwork he wanted to ignore anyways and focusing on opening the bottle and spending time with his friend.

“I had heard about the Conclave,” Sebastian tuned serious and solemn, “first Kirkwall, then the Circles, then the Divine. Sometimes it feels like the Maker himself is finally telling us all just how very displeased he is with us.”

“Well right now I’m none too pleased with him so at least it’s mutual.” He scrubbed his face and sighed. “You know what is really pissing me off about this Choir Boy?” he didn’t wait for a response, Sebastien looked ready to hear it anyways. “It wasn’t until Hawke got here and made me look at Dawn properly that I realized just how fucked up all this is for her, and now this shit.” He sighed. “I swear Victoria is trying to give me grey hairs before my time; inviting everyone here and then swaddling off to the Hissing Wastes to leave me to deal with it.”

“How do you mean?” the question was so plainly open ended that if anyone else had asked it Varric would have spun them a grand ol’ tale. But it was Choir Boy, so he told the truth.

“Dawn didn’t speak any of our languages, with that much grief weighing her down she barely
spoke at all.” When he didn’t press for clarification Varric figured someone had let slip the detail of Dawn’s late-husband and his immediate demise. “And yet...she tried to warn us about Haven. Couldn’t even string a sentence together to introduce herself but she wanted to save people. And we nearly killed her for it. And when we survived despite being idiots, we came here and immediately ignored her; having someone that knows things... it’s unsettling. And we all sort of hovered around, waiting for the next revelation while Solas tried to get enough language into her for her to be useful. We all wanted answers from her but...” he shook his head and took a drink of the wine, sour because of his thoughts. “She came to me shortly after we got here and told me my own future, at least a part of it. I didn’t believe her then.”

“But you do now?” he seemed surprised and Varric smiled though it held no humour.

“I do now. She has this way of just...existing and everything around her is changed. It’s terrifying, and holds so much potential. I think that Dawn coming to our world was very good for the Inquisition and very bad for the Harbinger.” He hadn’t put it into words before, mainly because Hawke had never demanded it but Varric knew he needed to say it. “You know how I feel about the Maker and Andraste, and even the Herald. Those I believe in because I grew into them, outside the Herald my entire life has been surrounded by it, and Alena Cadash walked out of the Fade in front of witnesses. Believing in Dawn is something far less explicable and likely far more dangerous; she’s just a mortal like me and yet... I have hope.”

“Hope for what?” Sebastian prodded, seeming as unsure of what Varric would say next as Varric was to say it.

“That if I survive all this and Victoria does too that maybe I’ll finally find the right words.” Varric laughed and saw Sebastian’s face light up in response.

“Well if nothing else, this Harbinger has been a boon for getting you to admit that.” The Choir Boy himself lifted the wine bottle in salute, even if he didn’t drink.

“Yeah well...there’s nothing quite as effective at getting you out of your rut as having an Offworlder waltz into your life and upend everything. Have you heard about what is coming?” they veered off the dangerous topic of his and Victoria’s...stalemate, and onto a safer theme; the end of the world.

“Demon summoning Wardens and a Dragon that vomits Lyrium.” Sebastien summarized it so easily that Varric took a drink.

“And knowing all of that you’re still here?” Varric couldn’t help but joke.

“We are all called on to do great things despite ourselves; you’ve been here from the start Varric. It seems to be you and I are both exactly where we need to be.” The Prince calmly pulled the rug out from under his feet.

“You really believe that.” Varric sounded less surprised than he felt. “After everything this world has spat out over the last year and you still believe that this is exactly to the Maker’s plan, don’t you?”

“Of course, we are at His mercy. We were given the Herald to guide us from the beginning, if this Harbinger is here beyond anyone’s ability to explain how can you not see it as the will of the Maker also?” it was the obvious religious argument he should have anticipated and yet Varric had no actual counter to it.

“Maybe I never thought he was that cruel.” Varric took another drink, actively considering
Sebastien’s words despite his commentary. If Dawn had been ripped from her world and brought here, forced to witness the murder of her husband, and then emotionally abused for a few months, all so that Varric’s world could survive…he wasn’t sure it was a fair trade at all. But what else could explain Dawn coming here from her world? And things she knew…

“You’ve listed the cost the Harbinger has endured being here, but she has survived all those things that likely should have killed her. She didn’t speak the language and yet now she speaks freely with any and all. Her life was irrevocably altered and yet here she is, thriving and making a difference. It may not have been an even trade, but it seems to me the Maker is still watching out.” It was a damn compelling argument, or maybe Varric just wanted desperately to be convinced.

“I wish Hawke was here.” Slipped out before he could smother it and Sebastian gave a sympathetic smile.

“Victoria certainly does have a way of working any situation doesn’t she?” that was a major understatement. “From what I have gathered, we will all shortly be on the move out to where Hawke is waiting.”

“A Keep full of demon summoning Grey Wardens under the mind control of a Tevinter mage gone way past the usual level of crazy; I cannot wait to tell the story of how Hawke gets us through this one.” Varric had to laugh because Choir Boy was right; chances were Hawke would be put in a crazy situation and come through it in defiance of all expectations otherwise. And if he prayed that this would be the case, just to be sure, no one would ever know and Sebastian would never hold it against him.

“So what are your first impressions of the Harbinger?” Varric decided to try and see what differences Sebastian saw without knowing all of the details that had brought Dawn to her current self.

“From the little I’ve seen and the lot I’ve inferred, she’s an impressive woman. With an odd phrase she keeps saying in her own language that seems to have infected everyone.” His frown made Varric laugh.

“What the fuck, yeah we’ve kind of adopted that from her.” Varric nodded, still laughing. “It’s just so satisfying even if no one is 100% sure it means what we think it means.”

Now Sebastian was the one laughing, “Has no one asked her to verify?”

“Where’s the fun in that Choir Boy?” it felt good to have a friendly conversation again. Even when people weren’t sniping at him over Fenris’ actions he couldn’t help but pick up on the increased tension in the air.

Maybe it had to do with the whole ‘childhood heroes are now the bad guy’ thing going on with the Wardens. It was possibly the only time Varric was glad Blackwall had been lying about being a Warden himself; Hero was a skillful Warrior that Varric never wanted to get on the wrong side of. It hurt to realize that even if they did succeed against the army Corypheus was building that doing so also likely meant eliminating their only way of defeating the Blight when it inevitably came back. Somehow all of that was killing the party vibe that had built in Skyhold after Saturnalia.

“What has the Harbinger said about what is coming and the effects after?” It was a good question and one Varric could only partially answer.

“Dawn has warned us of what we may be facing but has been rather reticent with details; something about telling us too much would change how we react to things. If what she says is true,
we’ll come out the other side of this successful.”

“But you have reason to doubt?” Sebastian pressed, calm where others would be intense.

“The little demonstration you saw her put on in the ring, the fighting part not the weird not-mage shit, is something she’s been learning how to do since shortly after we got to Skyhold. How many well fed, highly sheltered people do you know of that go out of their way to learn a fighting style all because everything is going to turn out fine?” the sarcasm dripped from his voice like spilled wine.

“The Inquisition is planning on allowing the Harbinger to join the fight?” Choir Boy seemed surprised and almost offended by this.

“Stabby has already told the rest of us; Dawn made the request to go and who are we to tell her no? And before you get your smalls bunched over it, the big guy you saw hovering over her after the fight has been the one training her. And Tiny plans on keeping her glued to his side until we’re all back safe and sound.” Varric made the ‘I got nothing’ gesture that was another stolen expression from Dawn’s world. At least this one he asked her to explain.

“After Kirkwall I am surprised you would put your faith in a Qunari.” Sebastian sounded cautious as he tested the topic.

“Oh I had my doubts about Tiny for a bit there, especially considering how taken he is with Dawn, but I watched him cut his ties to the Qun. They wanted him to sacrifice his people, his Chargers, for them. He picked his people and I have no doubt he will do everything he can to keep them alive now.”

“What if they decide to murder the Harbinger?” Choir Boy at least didn’t press for more assurances.

“Whenever the Inquisitor says to mount up, unfortunately until then it’s all waiting and preparing.” He took a deliberate drink of the wine as if to emphasize the point.

“Other than not trying to murder the Harbinger, is there anything else you’d recommend I do while we are still here?” Sebastien prodded, likely more for polite conversation than any actual curiosity.

“Well if you want to risk getting blown up I could introduce you to the Arcanist. Dagna’s crazier than Blondie ever could be but for an Orzammar Dwarf she’s fun to talk to.” Varric offered, getting out of his seat and glad for something to do. All this waiting around was killing him.

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It was interesting to watch this half-trained Harbinger the Inquisition managed to drum up. She displayed enough of Hawke’s mannerisms that Isabela knew her friend liked this woman, but she held an edge all her own still; Hawke was too cocky to care about little instincts whereas this Dawn looked around anytime Isabela stared too long. She was cautious enough to listen when her gut said she was being watched but Isabela had also seen that when the woman had fought against Fenris she had never anticipated the nearly fatal attack; the Harbinger had a naïve streak wide enough to get killed through. They were all just very lucky that the Harbinger was immune to Fenris’ lyrium fist.

Isabela had already given Fenris her opinion of the exhilarating display put on by both himself and the Harbinger, and eventually she’d poured enough wine into him to drag the reason behind his actions out. Knowing the reasons behind his actions, even if she didn’t entirely agree with them,
didn’t actually help all that much though. And waking to a hungover Fenris was about as much fun as waking up a hibernating bear.

Now though Isabela was in the delicate position of being one of the few people not mad at him for trying to murder Dawn while also leaving her as curious about the Harbinger as a cat pacing a caged phoenix. Nothing about the woman made any sense, and Isabela was honestly grateful that she could not feel the weird shit mages and Fenris felt around her because it was strange enough as it was to simply watch her. The Harbinger had enough proper gold in her ears to be a Queen, her hair was longer than even an Oracle’s, she knew things no one could know and reacted wrong to things she could not know to react to, and despite the fancy title and attire she cursed without hesitation. Isabela wanted to like her on principle and yet held herself back from doing so. Dawn wasn’t a mage; according to everyone who could give a damn about the topic that was the one fact everyone DID know. The rest was all supposition.

She looked human; lacked the pointed ears for Elf, too tall for Dwarf, too small for Qunari. Varric had insisted that she couldn’t speak any recognizable language at first and yet now she was charming dignitaries and doubters alike. From watching her Isabela could tell the woman was used to moving around people; the Harbinger carefully did not touch unless she was interacting with a select few and then she was very demonstrative. And yet in spite of that physical withdrawing, she was also willing to verbally engage with anyone regardless of rank or entitlement. That alone revealed how little political training she’d truly gotten.

“Do I want to picture you being clever or mysterious? Oh what a decision.” Her flirtations just made the Harbinger smile, as if she expected them and respected them.

“Why have you been watching me?” Dawn asked straightforwardly, her entire attention on Isabela and it was easy to believe this woman was from another world; her focus felt like being in the eye of a storm.

“I’m not a threat to you sweetness, you know that right?” Isabela changed topics, not wanting to admit that she was as curious as she was.

“If I say yes, does that make us friends?” Isabela shot the Harbinger a sharp look after her question, trying to read her expressive eyes to see if this was a taunt or the same innocence Merrill had. Or both.

“If you won’t answer my questions sweetness, how am I supposed to figure you out?” her question made Dawn shrug but smile.

“Well you could always go compare notes with Leliana; if I remember you two have met.” It was the ever so slightly suggestive flutter of eyelashes that warned she wasn’t just fishing but actually knew. Interesting.
“Maybe I relish the idea of slipping some delectable secrets from you piece by piece?” unlike some Dawn didn’t seem annoyed or enticed by her incessant flirting; a fact Isabela took note of for later.

“Now you sound like Solas used to. I will keep the secrets I must and everyone better pray to whatever gods they believe in that I never fail to protect what I can. But if what you meant was sitting down, having a drink, playing twenty questions…. Well that will have to wait until we’re all alive on the other side of Ada—ah… what’s coming.” Isabela had a great Wicked Grace face and knew nothing showed about catching the Harbinger’s almost slip. What had she been about to say then? Another thing to worry on later.

“What’s the point in saving the world if you’ve forgotten why you want to save it when the time comes?” Isabela’s counter made Dawn’s eyebrows jump in surprise. “Think about it sweetness; the bad guys are all having a wonderful time ruining everything, who has said that as good guys we can’t enjoy the world we’re trying to save?” it felt weird to include herself on the side of the good guys to be honest.

“Need to remind people why we fight the good fight?” Dawn’s surprise quickly morphed into amusement and assessment; she seemed to actually be considering Isabela’s advice.

“Exactly.” Now her smile turned conspiratorial, “so tell me sweetness, what is something you’ve wanted to do for yourself that you should go for?” Isabela could almost see ideas spring to the Harbinger’s mind; a flush and a quick blink of her eyes gave it away and yet the ideas themselves stayed locked behind those perfect teeth.

“Actually I’m pretty lucky; I don’t want for much and what I do want for…I’m willing to wait for. And that’s not me being self-sacrificing, just pragmatic.” Dawn finally spoke but it was not what Isabela wanted to hear.

“Spoilsport.” She taunted the Harbinger with a pout but didn’t think it’d work.

“Fine,” Andraste’s lacy knickers it worked, “I may have an idea but I can think of at least three people who’ll be angry at me for it if I try.”

“This sounds much better; tell me sweetness, what do you want that could make so many angry?” Isabela understood why Victoria and Varric both seemed so taken with Dawn at least; her enthusiasm was addictive.

“I want to ask Fenris to spar with me again, repeatedly.” Even Isabela wasn’t good enough to keep the surprise off of her face and Dawn saw it, nodded as if she expected no less.

Isabela felt adrenaline flood her system, everything sharp to her focus suddenly. “Why?” her tone was as protective and paranoid sounding as she felt.

“Because I love Iron Bull and Solas both and neither one of them is alright with trying to really hurt me if they can avoid it. Leliana’s training has helped toughen me up a bit but even she still pulls back. Fenris won’t and I need that.” Dawn’s explanation came out in a rush, her expression a pre-emptive wince of pain as if she expected to receive an immediate explosive argument.

Isabela gave the Harbinger the same critical assessment she would a ship to take to sea; for all her pontification about not being committed to anything but a life on the sail Isabela knew she and Fenris were as permanent as could be. If the Harbinger put him at risk even love for Victoria wouldn’t keep Isabela and Fenris around. But Isabela also trusted her gut enough to believe that Dawn was terrified of a specific unknown something happening and was trying to do everything
she could to avoid it. Now Isabela had to decide if she was going to trust Dawn to know how to do that.

“I can suggest it to him, but you’re absolutely right about the backlash. That Qunari of yours could do some damage.” She didn’t want to make any promises.

“I know. Everyone still looks at me and sees the broken woman I’m trying to grow from and recent events are not helping.” The Harbinger’s seriousness was as compelling as her enthusiasm could be, “I’m trying not to limit myself because I’m afraid that’s who I’ll ever be. This is not something I’m doing for fun but I promise that it will help.” No wonder Hawke had taken to her so intensely, Victoria collected broken people like Anders had collected stray cats.

“Don’t forget to live for now too sweetness,” she’d seen other idealists burn themselves out, “planning to save the future is all well and good but not if you don’t make it there yourself.” Dawn gave her a smile that was a little too bittersweet for Isabela’s liking and she wondered if it was already past that point for the Harbinger. “Tell me what the last thing you did solely because you wanted it?”

The Harbinger frowned as if she didn’t understand the question, but then looked thoughtful. “I’ve done things for my own self,” Isabela didn’t point out that having to argue that point probably meant she really didn’t. “I told Iron Bull to dance with me even though I was still wounded,” Now that sounded like a fun story to hear, “and I’ve gotten drunk and had my ears pierced all within the last month.”

“Good places to start, but you can go up from there. Also, if whoever did your ears is Rivaini I’ve got something important to tell you about your glitter sweetness.” She sounded joking but Isabela knew that much gold to a Rivaini was significant.

Dawn grinned at her, as if she already knew the warning Isabela was going to give. “Elvhen so you don’t have to worry about hidden messages,” it seemed she knew a little about Rivaini hierarchy at least.

“And what do I get for taking your request to Fenris?” if she understood the bits about gold then the Harbinger wouldn’t be offended by Isabela’s need for ‘encouragement’ either.

The Harbinger shrugged, still smiling and even if it was friendly Isabela felt a chill of warning. “I’ll owe you a song.”

Isabela liked to pride herself on being a creature of instinct and now hers were saying to take the deal, “I accept.”

“I’ll leave it in your capable hands then, thank you Isabela.” Dawn surprised her by hugging her quickly before skittering to the door inside.

It was going to be interesting to see how Fenris responded to the request, and if he said yes the reaction of everyone else was going to be entertaining. And she was going to have to ask Varric about why she felt like accepting a song from Dawn could be dangerous.

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Her conversation with Isabela was still kicking around, unsettled and unsolvable like a million others making noise in her head. Dawn was already doing the last few things she could to get ready for Adamant, her focus had to be on that for now and yet what Isabela had said was true; Dawn was allowed to exist for more than just fixing the problems she could solve. Not that anyone had
said she couldn’t it was just now Dawn had to face the fact that she still felt like she had to be serving a purpose for the people around her to tolerate her presence. It was her own insecurity and one that wasn’t actually fair apply to her friends. They were all there waiting for her to reach out to them however and whenever she needed to so Dawn decided to reach a little. The letter in her pocket certainly wasn’t getting any lighter for waiting.

“Can I borrow you two for a moment?” Dawn asked as Leliana and Alena talked together on the stairs down from Leliana’s aviary. It wasn’t a War Table matter, and Dawn was sincerely hoping it wouldn’t become one later either, though it was a good thing to have both Nightingale and Inquisitor review it.

Leliana spied the letter gripped in Dawn’s hand and went full Nightingale. “Briala has been the Marquise of the Dales for less than a month and she’s already sending you formal correspondence? Unprecedented.”

Alena just looked inquisitive and Dawn tried not to smile at the internal pun. She looked down at the letter and lost all urge to smile. Briala had felt the need to reach out all the way from The Winter Palace, that alone was a huge red flag and Dawn handed over her message from the Marquise of the Dales.

*Harbinger,*

*His death occurred because you thought you had the right to interfere with Elvhen lives. You are a shemlen like all the rest, do not think to try and approach my Elves again.*

*Marquise of the Dales Briala*

Dawn let Leliana look it over as if she could discern more from the two lines of text, and accepted scrap paper and charcoal from Alena to scribble ideas down with. They’d come down the stairs and hovered awkwardly at the railing so Dawn could finish the task of drafting her response. A simmering anger had started in her blood, the amusement of before entirely washed away. Dawn had a second to consider that she should wait until she was calmer to draft her first response, but then she caught movement out of her peripheral and spied Solas down below as he started to outline what would become the Halamshiral fresco. Mahalla had saved Felassan when his father was attacked because she’d grabbed the boy and bodily ran with him to Madam de Fer so the Inquisition could protect them. She had had no faith in Briala or Celene or Gaspard to take action to help.

*Briala,*

*His name was Isene, his son is named Felassan, and his sister is Mahalla.*

*You failed to protect them and try to blame me. I would expect nothing else from you Marquise; you betrayed Clan Virnehn to further your political goals and have forgotten the Elvhen in your own city suffer daily.*

*Do not presume to threaten the Harbinger of the Inquisition, or think I will be deterred in my actions.*

*Fen’Harel enansal*

*Harbinger*

“What does that last line mean?” Leliana queried, though Dawn had to wonder if the Spymaster didn’t already understand Elvhen enough to have read it. Leliana passed Alena the hastily scrawled
message as they continued down to the main level; no doubt the intended destination was Josephine’s office so they could get her input on the matter.

“It’s a message that Briala will understand.” Dawn tried to be vague, realizing that her anger had made her indiscreet but the best she could do now was scratch it out once they handed the rough draft back.

Leliana and Alena both gave her this look as if her obstinancy was adorable, but useless. Of course Dawn had overlooked the fact that Alena was sometimes about as subtle as an avalanche, literally. “Solas, what does Fen’Harel enansal mean?” she asked and Dawn fought to keep the panic off of her face.

When he remained silent for a moment, Dawn couldn’t help but look to see Solas watching them, eyebrows lifted in surprise but he didn’t look concerned. “The Dread Wolf’s Blessing. May I ask why?” he seemed nonchalant about it so Dawn tried to play it cool.

“Our Harbinger is trading barbs with Celene’s Spymaster; I just wanted to see at what level they were at.” Alena shrugged it all off as if it were no matter.

“And you expect that line to have significance to her?” Solas actually seemed pleased as he asked it, looking to Dawn.

“Yes.” Dawn kept her answer brief, already frustrated with herself. Elvhen people routinely swore on the Dread Wolf’s name, making any use of it negative; only Dawn and Solas knew better than that. And since she was still trying to lie to herself about being able to keep Solas in the dark on all that she knew Dawn was more than a little angry with herself for yet another slip-up. It was getting harder to remember what she’d already shared and what she was still keeping secret.

“And how has she earned such a rebuke?” he came closer and Leliana handed him the letter from Briala.

Now Dawn had to wonder if this was as much a test for Solas as it was a review of her own skills. He still dressed the part of the homeless wanderer, but far too many things had changed for anyone within the Inquisition to really believe it. In the game Leliana never stopped being suspicious of Solas, she only accepted his initial story with a brief attempt to verify it due to the circumstances. After all, Leliana didn’t live through the Blight and become the Left Hand of the Divine by being anything but competent and cautious.

And it surprised Dawn to see true anger in Solas’ eyes as he looked back up from the message Briala had sent. “The fact that she considers you at all like those that have wronged her in the past makes me doubt the intelligence of this Orlesian Spymaster. The death of Felassan’s father is not on your shoulders Ena’vun.”

“But it is on my conscious Old Wolf, I did not even consider the consequences of my actions. Now though, now I’ll never forget. It’s time Briala is given the same reminder; failure to consider the consequences will not stop them from happening.” Dawn countered with a serious tone. None of this would ease Leliana’s suspicions either; time for damage control, she had already let far too many things slip today. “This is just the rough draft response, I know I can’t actually reply like this.”

“Actually…” Alena interrupted but trailed off with a thoughtful frown, looking to a nodding Leliana before continuing. “Actually I think your instincts on this are pretty good. She’s sent it with the Marquise seal but not through official channels. This is not a sanctioned letter from the Triumvirate but a personal message from Marquise to Harbinger, your response is exactly the kind
of message to retort with.”

“And if she wants to send further responses we will be ready.” Leliana added, likely annoyed that the Orlesian Spymaster had gotten a letter into Skyhold without going through her.

“It was a poor attempt to capitalize on the emotions you learning of Isene’s fate will have roused,” Solas was agreeing with them, Dawn was truly screwed. “I believe both Inquisitor and Nightingale are correct, your response is perfect.”

“Ah…. Ok then. If you all think that this is a good response I’ll find a pen and make it happen.” Dawn could only shrug, knowing she wouldn’t not win an argument against the three of them.

“I’ll take care of that for you Harbinger, I want to trace the route this letter used on the way in.” Leliana offered and slipped away without waiting for a response or giving the rough draft back.

“Sometimes I want to pin a bell on her, just to see how she’d work it.” Alena sounded so casual that her commentary made Dawn laugh softly.

“With flare no doubt. Thank you Alena, I’m still not used to the people in positions of power wanting to talk to me let alone being able to just…send me a vaguely threatening letter.” Now that Dawn was thinking about it, getting the letter to her without having Leliana know if it first was a threat; I can get to you.

The realization must have shown on her face because Alena just sadly nodded. “I know Dawn, I know. We’ve got your back on this.” She patted Dawn’s back comfortingly but there sense of unease lingered. “Solas?” the Inquisitor looked to him for a nod and left only after he had given it to her.

Almost an entire minute later Dawn realized that Alena had been asking him to look after her, as if she needed a keeper. “I know you’re busy Solas, there’s no need to baby sit me.”

“Ena’vun I cherish the time we spend together. Besides, Wisdom has asked that I introduce the two of you and I can think of no better task to get your mind off such an odious matter.” Solas immediately moved on past the topic of Dawn’s letter and subsequent slip up as if it really were nothing of importance and she could have kissed him in gratitude for it.

“I get to meet Wisdom?” she blinked, trying to imagine what it’d be like but her mind came up blank.

Solas smiled at her response, abandoning the stenciling he’d been working on to walk with her out of the rotunda. “Wisdom insists upon it actually, said that your actions requires a personal thank you.”

Normally when they were doing Fade things he’d lead her to the little couch in his mural room and he’d take the chair, but this time he led them out of the Main Hall entirely and into a curve of hallways that ended at the back of the Castle. She’d wandered this hallway once or twice when first arriving to Skyhold but it held only rooms and pathways to other rooms, she couldn’t think of why he’d lead her here.

He traced a glyph of some kind at the end of the hall and a door that had been utterly invisible to her opened with a click. Curiosity rode her back like a cape, Dawn looked into the room expecting to see a wonder of secrets and surprises. Instead she walked into what had to be Solas’ bedchamber.

“For a meeting of this nature the usual methods of traversing to the Fade could not be used.” He started his explanation the moment Dawn turned to look at him, her question apparently clearly
written on her expression.

“So how are we going to visit Wisdom?” usually she ate a cookie and viola, problem solved. The fact that this next visit wouldn’t involve a cookie was actually kind of disappointing.

He looked at her with an indecipherable look, “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” Dawn admitted without hesitating, not seeing how the one would alter the other.

“Thank you.” Solas held a hand out for hers and she shrugged as she put her hand into his.

“You’ve earned it Solas.” Dawn didn’t know what else to say because it was the truth.

“How we normally visit the Fade is akin to how a swimmer swims upon a lake, to visit Wisdom you must dive into the Sea.” He had his instructor’s voice going, barely used since she’d started to master the language but still familiar.

Solas continued his explanation even as he puttered about and it was so reminiscent to when he’d pierced her ears that Dawn couldn’t help but smile. “I have long ago arranged a system to find my friend or be found in return, but for your meeting with Wisdom the journey requires a more focused role than our usual method.” He was mixing something crumbly with crushed herbs before putting both into wine. “Before you drink this Ena’vun please be aware that due it’s the properties you will not be able to rouse yourself from the Fade sleep.”

Suddenly his concern and caution made a lot more sense. “As I said Old Wolf, I trust you. You’ll wake me up again.” It wasn’t like her own sleep had been all that restful since Halamshiral, even after Solas helped her confront her Eluvian phobia; this would probably do her some good.

She took the wine glass from his hands, seeing an almost tender smile on his face as she drank. Wine should not be pasty tasting and yet this glass was. Even as Dawn made a face at the texture to her drink she felt its effects start. “Woah.” It felt like her body suddenly had no weight at all and yet her eyelids were a thousand pounds.

“Don’t fight it Ena’vun, just lay back; you’re safe, I’ve got you.” Solas sounded like he was speaking from a great distance away but she felt his hand on her shoulder helping guide her back to lay on the bed.

Normally passing into the Fade with Solas was as simple as stepping from the threshold of one room into another, there might be a door but it wasn’t locked. Now there was a forest maze of trees and deadfall and Dawn was in the middle of it. Ahead of her there was no defined path, behind her was simply more forest, and nowhere to be found could she see Solas waiting to guide her onwards. But this was definitely not her dream or her creation and so Dawn knew something was going on. Solas would not bring her here to abandon her so she looked around, trying to think like he would.

Think like the Wolf in an old forest. A really old forest that didn’t look like any from Earth. An ancient forest filled with trees that were older than some of the established countries from her own world? Elvhenan. Dawn looked upwards and saw what she’d originally missed; the most impossibly delicate crystals twining through the branches as if droplets of dew caught in a web. Now she spotted more and more glimmers, the crystals above her refracting and bending light she could not even see the source of. Standing in a field of fireflies on a moonless night with the stars overhead had never glittered so beautifully and yet Dawn ached because she knew even this memory was more than the physical world had left. And that was neither good nor bad, it just was.
“I am Wisdom and yet for one so young you are wise.” An unfamiliar voice called out and Dawn turned quickly.

And saw her mother. Pain lanced through her chest, homesickness and longing and fear all combined into terrible amalgamation that wanted to compel her to run forwards and embrace her mother even as caution warned her away. That could not be her mother and thus it had to be a trap. “You’re not real.” Dawn breathed, closing her eyes against the tears that were suddenly dripping free.

“I am real and I am not who you see but what I am is why you see them.” That gaspingly indecipherable commentary had to belong to Wisdom, Dawn only knew of one other person who spoke in such convoluted riddles and Cole couldn’t change his appearance anymore.

“Where is Solas?” Dawn focused on the task that had brought her here and the missing player.

Wisdom smiled, the expression wrong for Dawn’s mother’s face. Oddly enough that helped; this doppelganger only looked like her mama on the surface. “You will see him again before departing the Fade tonight, no worries. But this conversation was to be for you and me alone.”

“Why? Solas said you just wanted to thank me.” She didn’t want to have to be suspicious of Wisdom and yet couldn’t help but feel that way now.

“I do wish to thank you. Whether you knew of it or not, the talisman you have gifted to me has given me freedom from so many dangers. But the words thank you are not what I wanted to give you in thanks.” That…actually made sense after a minute of parsing it out.

“You need not give me anything; I did what I did because I don’t like seeing anyone hurt. And that was the only fate left to you if I did nothing.” The fancy language was contagious, that or the Fade really liked sophistry.

Wisdom came close enough to rest her hand against Dawn’s cheek, having to look down at her from her mother’s great height. “You needed to see what I can look like, even if you do not understand now you will. All too soon you will.”

“That was spectacularly ominous Wisdom.” The comment slipped out without fancy rephrasing and now Dawn heard Wisdom laugh.

Her heart squeezed tight, breath staggered out because that was her mother’s laugh. The face was right but the smile had been wrong but oh that laugh. Dawn made herself breathe in, a rueful part of her brain recalling that she had told Isabela about wanting to toughen up. She had meant physically but it appeared a little emotional toughening was going to happen too.

“Your challenges are coming child and I do not know what fate lays in wait for you. I can only warn you that you are Hunted and that soon you will find yourself with less answers than you need. My thanks to you Dawn from Earth is this: You do not need answers to still have Hope.”

Wisdom’s words left Dawn frowning but before she could ask for clarification Wisdom kissed her forehead and literally shoved Dawn backwards.

The Fade was a screwy place. It didn’t like obeying pesky little laws of reality like gravity, linear distances, or apparently any form of common sense. She’d been in the center of ancient woods from Elvhenan, and yet after Wisdom shoved her Dawn found herself falling backwards to never hit the ground. Instead of impacting anything, Dawn had a moment of disorientation, regained her footing, and found herself standing in the center of what had to be Arlathan.
What other city was lit by glowing stones embedded into the very roads?

Dawn looked from the road she stood on, bare foot and yet not cold, and saw that ahead of her was a large structure that looked all too similar to Tarasyl’an Te’las except that the forest went right up to and through the Keep. And instead of the great lumbering gates Dawn knew Skyhold boasted, the arches here were the delicately laced stonework she’d always seen in Elvhen imagery.

The air smelled faintly like warm leather and melted wax, a near paper like crinkle as it snapped through pennants flying far overhead. Not a single other soul seemed to inhabit the greatest city from Elvhen culture even in the Fade. Her footsteps were a quiet tattoo accompanying her forwards, the wind through the trees a susurrating call to continue and the city itself seemed to watch her progress. It was peaceful, like a moment of rest instead of abandonment, and Dawn followed no specific path but the pull of curiosity as she explored.

It was and was not Skyhold. As if the one was modelled after parts of the other, Dawn had the strangest sense of familiarity even as she knew she had never wandered a Keep like this before. So lost in her wonderment she actually jumped when she heard the mournful howl of a frustrated Wolf.

“Solas!” The shout burst out, the Fade not caring at all that she was supposed to keep this secret, and Dawn was running towards the sounds with her feet finding a path her head did not know.

In Skyhold’s center there was a waterfall and the Undercroft; this Keep’s heart held a chained Dragon. Snarling and ravaging at the chains around the Dragon was a Wolf and when multiple red eyes opened to regard her she knew it was Fen’Harel in essence.

His maw and paws were bloodied, tracks leading from the anchors that pinned the chains to the ground and she knew he would continue to try and free the beast before him until his very bones shattered from the effort. Hearing her approach the Wolf spun to face her, a deep growl warning from his chest. He did not approach or move to threaten, Dawn realized very quickly he was protecting the Dragon.

The Fade was all about symbolism and Dawn knew better than to trust that the scene was anything of face value, and yet she was not sure how to help. The chains on the Dragon went in to its very skin, anchored into flesh and bone as much as the stone floor. Any attempt to remove them would tear pieces of the Dragon apart, killing it to be free. It reminded Dawn all too much of how Solas dealt with a Wisdom that wasn’t saved in time; she was pleased to be freed of the Pride form but at the cost of all she was.

The Wolf seemed to determine that she wasn’t a threat and turned back to the Dragon, a low growl of frustration filling the Fade Undercroft with a roar similar to the waterfall Dawn was accustomed to. He stalked forwards, teeth snapping at the chain but not able to break through even with his mighty jaws. Chains were meant to keep from breaking.

“Wait! Even your teeth can’t bite through metal!” she’d watched Harrit enough times to at least understand that.

But for all the eloquence Solas used in the waking world and even normally in the Fade, the Wolf now did not comprehend. He merely looked at her with mournful red eyes, as if the struggle would continue even though he knew it was fruitless.

“Trust me, I will find a way to help.” She begged of the Wolf, trying to think of where she could find a hammer at the very least.
For once the strange properties of the Fade worked in her favour, her requirement created the items she needed. Where Harrit’s station was in her Undercroft, now she saw the hammer that had nearly cost the man his life in Haven. And for some reason propped up next to it was the shield Dawn remembered Emma Trevelyan bearing for the few short weeks she’d known the Templar. She left the shield alone, not liking any of the implications of it’s arrival in the Fade, and grabbed the hammer to accomplish her task.

“Move.” She warned the Wolf still worrying at stone and chain, taking the hammer in both hands to swing it up and over to smash down on the chain.

The sound of shrieking, tearing metal and crumbling stone was unexpected; Dawn had been braced for the hammer to bounce off harmlessly and had never anticipated that it would work on the first try. But it did. The force of the impact rattled up her arms, burning through her hands like she had put them in Dragon’s fire and she snarled at the pain but didn’t drop the hammer. The Wolf growled but did not attack, pacing restlessly around the chains still pinning the Dragon down.

Dawn let him lead her to the next chain, his bloodied paw prints an obvious path. Knowing now that she could do it, that her plan was working, Dawn repeated her actions. She lifted the hammer and brought it down with everything she could, a single blow impossibly demolishing what Fen’Harel’s jaws could not even scratch. Each piece of the cage trapping the Dragon in fell away, the effort required all that she had to give and yet now that she had started Dawn didn’t dare stop.

The Wolf and the Dragon watched her, impatient, eager, curious, and enraged. Her hands were either agony or entirely numb and she refused to pause, somehow knowing that the momentum she had built up to get through this had to keep going or else fail entirely. Harrit’s hammer was heavier than even the real thing could be and yet she wielded it like having held it every day of her life, the pain of success acceptable as long as she could endure. The Wolf no longer growled or snarled, the patter of blood from his ruined jaws the only sound left to him as he watched her, guided her to the last piece anchored to the stones.

“On the count of three…” Dawn barely breathed, the encouragement as much for herself as the beasts watching her.

One- the heartbeat that pulsed and pushed blood through her even here in the Fade as an aspect.

Two- the creatures eagerly awaiting freedom and yet not ever truly bound in this place of metaphors.

Three- voices raised in a shout of effort and exertion and elation. The hammer smashed down and shattered; chain and stone and tool all gone.

The next sound Dawn heard was the snap of Dragon’s wings unfurling, the newly freed beast moving impossibly fast as it snaked its head around to snap its jaws around the Wolf that had been its only companion. A creature in pain will lash out even against friends, even when they don’t want to hurt those that helped.

“No!” Now the shield was on her arm, never picked up but always there waiting. It took no thought to stand between Dragon and Wolf and raise the shield that belonged to another.

Impact.

Pain.

Fear. Confusion. Reaction.
Dawn curled around the warm weight in her arms and moved, trying to somehow pull them to freedom and instead found herself rolling out of the bed and hitting the floor with a very alarmed Solas along for the ride. All around them both the blue of Barrier crackled and thrummed, protecting her from a threat that did not exist.

“Ena’vun?” Solas sounded very concerned even as she slumped back, eyes closed and chest heaving to catch her breath.

“Sorry, I--” Dawn trailed off, her eyes opening as she realized there was something very impossibly wrong.

Strapped to her left arm was a shield. Not the one she’d wielded in the Fade, bearing the ruin of the Lyrium Dragon and stained with Emma’s blood, but crested instead with a Dragon Triumphant in purest looking silver.

“What the hell is going on?” Dawn demanded, afraid to move and seeing Solas look as unsettled.

“I don’t know Ena’vun,” that was no comfort at all. “I had been watching you and Wisdom, unable to hear but there to pull you free when she sent you somewhere I could not see or follow. Here in the waking world you would not awake even though I Called.” His eyes stared at the shield with concern but no commentary which was somehow worse.

“Wisdom….pushed me. She looked like my mother, talked like a fortune cookie, and then shoved me into an entirely different plane of existence in the Fade where wolves and dragons needed my help. Sweet god I hope I never see what she does to someone she doesn’t like.” Dawn babbled as adrenaline ruined her thought process.

“Ena’vun….” Solas brought her focus back to him, voice gentle in response to her clearly growing panic “I need you to tell me everything, no detail is unimportant.”

“Can we get off the floor first?” at least it was a good question, if a little insignificant in the face of everything else.

Solas gave her a more searching look and seemed to realize she was shaking; the adrenaline and panic from the Fade not at all dissipating now that she was awake. Without a word he ignored the shield and simply hugged her tightly to him. “You are safe, I’ve got you.” He mumbled comfortably and Dawn didn’t argue.

What game was Wisdom playing at? What was so important about that scene that she would engineer it for Dawn? If that Wolf wasn’t Solas then what was it, and why the hell was it so important that she have this shield? None of the questions were going to have answers and Dawn gave a silent snarl when she realized that this played very nicely into Wisdom’s little ‘less answers than you need’ spiel.

So Dawn did the only thing she could do, she told Solas every detail of what she could remember.
Echoes, Ripples, and Reactions

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition has placed its pieces on the board and now it is time to play the counter moves required to thwart Corypheus’ plans. The people that make up the Inquisition are far less sure they can do the job than they appear, and yet the Inquisition moves anyways.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fenris might have acted impulively, maybe even perhaps rashly, but he knew that his actions would have consequences and he was prepared to face them standing tall. He wasn’t worried about being attacked, this Inquisition Hawke had embroiled herself into seemed to think it was still honorable which gave him a little safety. It wasn’t that someone wouldn’t try to jump him in response to his actions, but that if someone did do it, he would likely get away with defending himself at least.

He was not expecting the Tevinter Mage to sit down across from him.

The man was oily in more than just nature, his hair and moustache so perfectly twirled and combed that they glistened. Fenris’ jaw started to ache, teeth so tightly clenched together he felt the muscles of his face writhe. He’d gotten away with attacking the Harbinger only because it had turned out utterly ineffectual, Fenris knew if he attacked this mage he’d never live to see the sun set; he had no more room for error.

“Go away.” It was the only warning Fenris could growl out, every fiber of his being calling for him to reach across the table and strangle a strange man who represented everything Fenris despised.

“No.” the asshole had the audacity to smile. “Dawn is off limits to you. Go near her again, try to hurt her again, and I will make your life miserable. And all I will have to do is be there to ensure that. Imagine it, wake and I will be waiting nearby somewhere. Go to lunch and I will be over your shoulder. You will always see me, you will always know I am there. You hate mages and you hate Tevinter mages most and I am Dorian Pavus of Minrathous and I am an Altus and you will never be rid of me. The people I care about love that woman like kin so if you hurt her, I will gladly waste the rest of my life ruining yours. Do you understand me?”

The leather strap of Fenris’ armor creaked as he forced himself to lean back casually. “Your mistake is thinking I would ever listen to a thing like you. I am a free man and I will never be commanded again, Dorian Pavus of Tevinter.” He bit the words off, spitting them out like tasteless kernels.

Peripherally he could see several eager eyes watching, likely those that wanted no other excuse than to lash out at him if he so much as breathed wrong. It was a wonderful time for the Qunari to arrive.

“Have we already gotten to the angry threats or have I missed it?” the one-eyed Warrior demanded
jovially and sat himself down at the table, ignoring the stale angry air.

Fenris knew this could not end well. He knew he should stand and leave, let the taunting and torment pass him by utterly. But he stayed instead, an echo of Isabela’s voice reminding him of the need. ‘This isn’t about us for once, it’s about still having a world to live in after tomorrow.’ He may hate and revile these people for what they are, but that did not take away from what they were doing. He’d expected physical confrontation as cost for his actions; that would have been far easier to bear.

“Just in time for the angry denouncements!” Dorian didn’t look away from Fenris at all to address the looming interruption.

“Good enough.” He rested thick, battle scarred arms on the table and leaned in towards Fenris, his one eye sharper than a blade. “Ebala mertaar ara,” Fenris’ spine nearly cracked with how fast he sat up hearing the Qunlat, “my Kadan has warned me that she made a request to spar with you.”

Fenris could see the Tevinter Altus’ eye twitch as the Qunari stuck with a language the mage clearly did not know. It was a small satisfaction to ignore the oiled man utterly, “So Isabela says.” He replied in Qunlat.

“I don’t like it, but I won’t object.” The smile on the Qunari’s face looked friendly enough, and their tone of voice remained easy and yet Fenris knew violence was only just contained. “I know the amount of damage a body endures as part of intense training, if she comes to me with so much as one mark more than that and you will never see the end coming.” The smile at the end of the threat was broad and friendly and full of teeth.

“I’ll beat your girl bloody but not more.” Fenris switched back to Common deliberately, knowing that others needed to hear this too. ‘I’ll help toughen her up because that is the request she’s made and even if she makes my skin crawl I see the need. You’re wasting your time threatening me Qunari; you and the Tevinter both. I do not fear either of you, or this Inquisition. I am here because this is my world as well and I do not trust those like you to save those like me.”

“Well it’s good to see your ability to make friends is still as strong as ever Broody.” Varric joined the tense table, the only one who wasn’t smiling in threat.

“I sat alone to have a drink, these others descended as if I had invited them.” Fenris shot back, exhausted by the socializing already.

“Well you look so friendly and welcoming you can’t really blame them now can you?” his friend teased right back and Fenris found himself smiling slightly for real.

“I take the health and well-being of our Harbinger seriously. As her friend I thought you would do the same.” The Tevinter sounded outraged.

“I do Sparkler, don’t ever think otherwise.” Varric held up a hand to forestall an argument and to Fenris’ surprise the mage waited. “But if I am going to trust her vision of the future then I am also going to trust her. Otherwise what’s the point?” Fenris wasn’t the only one to remain silent and surprised in the face of the serious tone Varric took. His normally expansive friendliness had finally disappeared.

“He tried to kill her!” They were garnering more attention now and Fenris figured he’d end up having to fight his way out of this after all until Varric proved his power with words.

“I know. So does she, and yet she has still asked him to help her. Who are we to decide what Dawn
is and is not allowed to do for herself? Who at this table thinks they have the right to make that choice for her?” with the way the mage’s teeth clacked together Fenris knew there had to be a story to the pampered Altus’ reaction.

“As I said, I don’t like it but I’m not objecting.” The Qunari rumbled out.

“I may not understand Qunlat Iron Bull, but even I know a threat when I hear it.” The Tevinter pointed out acerbically.

Fenris kept his own council, wondering just what it was about the Harbinger that made others fall over themselves to defend her. She wasn’t from this world, they couldn’t feel it but Fenris lived with the wrongness of her washing over his skin like a caress. She wasn’t a demon or an abomination, she wasn’t even a great physical threat though he’d know more about that after sparring with her again. This Harbinger of the Inquisition was just…a woman trying to change their world to suit her needs. Fenris didn’t trust anyone with that kind of power; no one had the right to choose the path of another’s life.

They were watching him now, expectant and angry and neutral alike. He didn’t care about those around them that were listening in, the little birds and scurrying mice of the Inquisition gossip mill would always kind their crumbs of news. “I’m not going to try to kill her again unless I know for sure it’ll work and that she deserves it. You will get no other assurances from me.”

“That was an assurance?” Varric demanded with a laugh.

“Yes.” Fenris kept it brief.

“I said all I have to on the matter,” the Qunari announced, redirecting their focus. “first round’s on me.” He lifted a hand to signal the server.

“I don’t drink with slavers.” Fenris spat out, looking at the Tevinter at the table.

“Well that’s good, no one here does either.” The mage had the audacity to say. Before Fenris could snarl out anything else, the oiled mage continued, “I am not my country any more than Iron Bull is the Qun or Varric is Orzammar. Even a brute like you is intelligent enough to realize that.”

Fenris knew his snarl was clear to see, disgust likely palpable. “Sparkler, I love you like a brother, but you won’t convince him. This is definitely one of those leave it alone things.” Varric spoke up before things could deteriorate more.

And to his surprise the Tevinter looked thoughtful instead of arrogantly offended. “I won’t linger and ruin such a lovely get together. Try to kill her again Fenris, and I will gladly watch as a long line of people rip you apart. Good day.” He bid farewell, standing and leaving gracefully.

Fenris still wanted to spit after him. He looked at the Qunari and Dwarf watching him expectantly now. “You offered drinks Qunari, where are they?”

“Iron Bull, Tal Vashoth.” He even managed to smile as he introduced himself formally.

“Fenris, self-freed slave.” He shook the giant hand, wondering how many of his own kind he’d killed.

“I cannot wait until Hawke hears about this.” Varric muttered as the first round of drinks arrived. ---
Adamant. Crawling with the echoes of history, triumphant ghosts repelling the hoard. Seeped with the blood of Gray Wardens and now horribly once again saturated. Everything Alena did began and ended with blood it seemed, inevitable for an assassin turned Inquisitor.

Dawn had told Alena and the Advisors the tale of how the Wardens had been lured into such folly already, and news had spread that the heroes of everyone’s childhood were now the ones in need of rescuing. Alena wasn’t sure if that was an effect of her Harbinger or her Nightingale; Leliana had a certain bias towards those she’d saved the world with once before after all. Either way Alena was going to use it for her advantage because even if others knew what was happening, only a select few knew where it was going to happen. History soaked Adamant.

Paragons and Dusters what was Dawn still keeping secret if announcing their destination hadn’t eased her strain? Alena forced herself to consider the possible outcomes Dawn was trying to avoid and couldn’t get around the idea that her Harbinger was coming to try and save her life. Why else would Dawn have put herself through so much, and continue to do so? It was humbling and inspiring and terrifying.

“Did you forget how to block?” Alena was surprised to hear Healer Kaaras so loudly rounding someone out. She shamelessly moved closer to spy on what had riled him up so much.

The Healer was throwing a shit fit at none other than Dawn herself, the bloodied and bruised wreck of her face an obvious indication that her first sparring match with Fenris had occurred. Alena’s critical eye assessed the damage and she had to admit that it looked bad but there were no obviously serious injuries; she’d looked worse after more than a few bar fights herself.

“He’s very good, even without the lyrium marks.” Alena saw Dawn shrug painfully and then lick her split lip. One of her eyes was puffed shut, discoloured like a peach that had been dropped down a flight of stairs while the white of her other eye had a disturbing red tint to it.

“Empty hands?” Alena called out, stepping into view and distracting the irritated Healer with her arrival. Her tone implied acceptance of Dawn’s injuries and Alena knew it would force Kaaras to back off a little. She didn’t like the idea any more than anyone else did, but Alena recognized the need as much as Dawn already had.

“Yeah. I don’t quite trust him around me with a weapon yet.” Dawn admitted plainly, her smile splitting the scab on her lip.

“At least you have that much self-preservation.” Kaaras grumbled but Alena could already see the worst of Dawn’s bloodied bruises easing. “I am not going to Heal you completely, but I cannot let you walk around in pain; maybe seeing the bruises in the mirror will help remind you that some of us don’t like seeing you hurt.”

Alena was surprised by his vehemence but more impressed by his work. The wreck of Dawn’s face had eased considerably, as if in a few seconds a week’s worth of Healing had already occurred. It still wasn’t enough to keep Alena from noticing Dawn’s flinch when a mirror was mentioned though; seemed that there was still an issue there.

“Thank you Healer Kaaras, I need to speak to my Harbinger.” She politely dismissed, shamelessly using rank to give her friend a break from the lecture. Kaaras gave her a sour look but didn’t argue, he was a mercenary and knew when backtalk would be accepted. This was not one of those times.

“You’re the best.” Dawn enthused after Kaaras had left.

“He’s not wrong though Dawn, it’s going to sit wrong with a few people to see you so battered.”
She had a painful flashback to the blood soaked mess Dawn had been at Halamshiral.

“I know.” Dawn huffed out, irritated but agreeing. “It’s not actually fun for me either. Today sucked; I hurt, I feel wildly outclassed for the fight ahead, and I know I have to do it again.” She looked so serious and determined, her young face still bruised but better at least.

Alena made herself stop looking at Dawn’s injured face to assess the rest of her. Her plaited hair was askew, effort and sweat matting and snarling and wrecking the free strands. Her clothes were likewise utilitarian, the old cast offs she’d worn before being gifted a more appropriate wardrobe dusty and rumpled and torn. Alena wanted to keep Dawn safe and knew she couldn’t. Dawn was special and sweet and should not be dragged through the war coming and Alena knew she could not spare her from it all the same. With the things Dawn knew Alena didn’t dare argue against her insistence; whatever future Dawn wanted to prevent Alena was going to back her. Even if it bothered her to witness the process.

“Well you can always delay the inevitable and come have dinner with Blackwall and me in my suite.” Alena offered with a smirk.

“Oh I love you.” Dawn gushed and Alena laughed.

“Go; quick wash and then straight to my suite. If you see anyone on your way, that’s your problem.” It was the best she could do. There was no way Dawn’s sparring injuries wouldn’t bring lectures down on her but that would be a problem for another day.

“Got it!” and Dawn was off, dashing away with a bright laugh.

Alena watched fondly, aware that Leliana was lurking in the shadows, waiting for her attention. “Raven has come in from the Champion; she confirms it’s Adamant and that the Wardens are gathering an army of demons. Our Harbinger has given us plenty of time to assemble the required provisions.”

She knew what Leliana’s information meant; her army was ready to move out and they knew where to. It was time to rip the Warden’s from Corypheus’ demented grasp as she had the mages and Orlais already. He had driven her from Haven and now Alena greatly looked forward to returning the favour and driving him from the land of the living entirely. Dawn was fighting to prevent a future Alena did not know of; Alena was fighting to ensure the future from Redcliffe never came to pass.

“Tell them; we move to War.” Alena didn’t dither for more time even though she did not feel capable of leading an army. To be fair she knew it was Cullen properly commanding the soldiers, and she left the provisioning to Josephine and Leliana. Her job would be to lead the strike team into the very heart of Adamant; Dawn had told her that there Alena could convince Clarel and free the Wardens. They just had to get there first.

Tonight would be the last night the Inquisition was still at peace; tomorrow they went to war.

Leliana didn’t leave so Alena waited her out, knowing another comment was coming. “She did well against Fenris and he didn’t go easy on her.” It was good that someone more impartial was watching, Alena didn’t trust that things wouldn’t get out of hand otherwise.

“We have as long as the march to Adamant is to make sure we’re ready.” Alena didn’t directly reply, knowing that for all the others of the Inquisition worrying over Dawn it was her job to focus on the Bigger Picture.
“I expect it won’t be enough for some.” Leliana was honest at least.

“It never is, is it? You’ve stood with a leader and an army before Leliana, you tell me: are we ready?” The Nightingale was coiled and quiet. No one had pressed for details, Leliana had been left in peace about her involvement with the Heroes of the Fifth Blight, but now Alena was asking this.

“We were so young, so very keen.” She sounded bitter and yet amused. “Siobhan and Alistair are just…impossible not to get swept up by. The other Wardens, even inhospitable Mahariel, all looked to them for guidance and we all believed. We weren’t ready and we knew it and still…the world survived.” Leliana rested a hand on her shoulder, a rare bit of contact from one so remote. “You are far more capable and ready for this than we were for that, I believe in you Inquisitor and I believe the Inquisition is ready.”

Alena knew Leliana was a Bard, capable of spinning the most fabulous of lies with absolute convincing sincerity. “Thank you.” She believed her anyways.

It was going to take just under two months with the best of conditions to get her part of the army to Adamant*. Dawn was going to have maybe six weeks to get the last of her training in because they simply had no more time left than that. And now they had only tonight left to enjoy Peace. Alena looked down at her ruined palm, wondering just how much farther she was going to be able to take the Inquisition before the pain in her hand got to be too much. Every time she used it since Haven it hurt a little more. But that would be a worry for another day.

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Shokrakar was more than used to people looking at her strangely; she was a Tal Vashoth, she was a Tal Vashoth with red hair, and now she was a red-headed Tal Vashoth with a baby strapped to her most of the time. All of these things individually were rare, in combination it was almost unheard of. She ignored the stares and whispers and simply watched as the Inquisition around her realized it was at war.

“Lieutenant Killeen will once again be in command of Skyhold in my absence.” The curly haired Commander reminded unnecessarily.

She was standing with Taarlok, theirs one of the mercenary groups elected to stay and defend Skyhold should the need arise. The Valo Kas did not argue the assignment, though she had gotten a few quietly worded requests to attend the battle, and now Shokrakar had to stand in place even though her instincts wanted her to go forth and do bloody battle until the world was saved. It was not the glory she sought but the assurance that the world would be safer for her family after; both those of blood and of heart.

Cullen prattled on a while longer, redundant reminders of things Shokrakar would never forget and she remained silent. The words were not for her benefit, nor for the forces remaining behind but for the Commander himself; strain and stress evident on his handsome face. Her patience here would offer a little peace to the man and so Shokrakar gave it, knowing that she could always chase the man away by freeing a breast and putting Taam-Kas to it. She did not have to, the Commander was called to another task and finally Shokrakar was left in quiet, her babe and her mate both reasonably silent.

There was one last thing she had to do before the Inquisition set off, a task that she wanted to assume for herself instead of delegating to another. The bundle was wrapped and set against her leg, unwieldy and heavy and from more than just its physical weight. As Shokrakar caught sight of Dawn, she handed her son to his father and picked the bundle up.
“Shokrakar, Salar eb karakost.” Dawn saw her watching and came right up to her, face bright despite fading bruises.

Shokrakar had to laugh, her Qunlat wasn’t perfect but the implication was clear. “How many languages have you gained now Little Bas?”

Dawn hummed and blinked, clearly counting. “Well technically I’m not really fluent in most of them, and I’m afraid I’m losing English through lack of practice, but ah…six…ish. Kind of.” The look on her face was amusing, this little one was only just realizing how many languages she now had a basic command of.

“You have done well Dawn, do not doubt that.” Shokrakar saw the flush of pride on Dawn’s cheeks before the woman cleared her throat to refocus.

“I ah… wanted to come say goodbye and thank you. I don’t know how long we’ll be gone for and I know the Valo-Kas make a living by keeping busy so I don’t know if you all will still be here when we get back.” Dawn talked herself around to the point, eyes darting to the wrapped bundle in Shokrakar’s hands with obvious curiosity.

“We will be here Little Bas.” Shokrakar confirmed, not bothering to explain that there was nowhere safer for her son for some time to come. “I have a delivery for you, something the Valo-Kas has held onto since Haven but is ultimately yours.”

“Since Haven?” Dawn frowned, trying to figure out what it could possibly be and Shokrakar knew it would never occur to her. So she pulled the concealing layer away and revealed the shield that had saved Dawn’s life in Haven. It surprised Shokrakar to no end when the colour drained from Dawn’s face at the sight of Basvaarad Emma’s shield, her eyes gone wide with actual fear. Dawn’s breath stuttered out in a laugh that held no humour at all.

“No, thank you.” Dawn finally managed to speak even if she didn’t reach out, her voice inexplicably hoarse and Shokrakar wondered if she’d made a mistake in this somehow. They were originally going to give her the shield as soon as they had returned from recovering Haven but due to the events at the time she’d waited.

“Meraad fixed the strap and the Arcanist took the lyrium that had broken it before she would let the Blacksmith repair the last bit.” Taarlok spoke up, seeming to read the need off of Dawn’s face. He was no Ben-Hassrath but her mate had spent most of their lifetime with her and had picked a few tricks up.

Finally Dawn reached out and took the shield into her hands. “Thank you. I…thank you.” Her face was still the pasty tinge of shock but Dawn was recovering and so Shokrakar let her be.

“Those that we have lost or will lose along the way are remembered, even if we do not say their names daily. We remember by living what they taught us and using the gifts our time with them gave.” Shokrakar was speaking about the shield and so much more and knew Dawn caught that too.

The colour was slowly returning to Dawn’s face, her eyes dry from tears but by no means unaffected. “Do you think they’d be proud of what we’ve become?”

“I believe so.” Shokrakar hadn’t known Emma Trevelyan that well but it was an easy assumption to make, especially since Shokrakar knew they weren’t only talking about the one dead human.
Dawn took a deep breath in, her shoulders squared and her balance evenly set as she held the shield that had saved her life. “Me too.” The admission was quiet but confident and Shokrakar allowed herself to smile.

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There were a great many things still needing to be accomplished and yet there was no time left to do them in. Solas snarled and fretted where no one could see, his concern about something greater than the idiot Wardens suffering for their secrecy and power now. It was true that they could not allow Corypheus and his demon army freedom to march across the world, Solas was glad to be a part of the team elected to stop the blind fool from such calamity, but it was short-sighted to assume that that was the only threat.

There was more going on than a simple tyrant with delusions of godhood.

He stared at the shield Ena’vun had brought with her from the Fade, a stunningly perfect fragment of history belonging to Mythal. The same stunningly perfect shield that had failed to protect her from betrayal and death was now here. He didn’t want to think about what it meant, and yet here it was; undeniable proof that Dawn could absolutely bring down the Veil if she knew how. Because this shield had been destroyed; he’d torn it asunder himself Eons ago. But the Fade existed with no sense or constraint of Time and Ena’vun wasn’t limited by their understanding of ‘impossible’; it left Solas wondering what exactly Wisdom was doing.

Why had his friend thrown Dawn into that particular memory?

Solas had been alone when he found Mythal. Alone to witness her magnificence bound and beaten, bloodied and far too still. No heartbeat. No mana stirring. Gone.

It had chilled his blood to listen to the accuracy Dawn used as she described the scene he could never forget. His old home. His failure.

“The streets were glowing like clouds reflecting moonlight. It was beautiful but made for some strange shadows and weird depth perception.” Because for all that Ena’vun was, she wasn’t a mage and couldn’t See the magics in the path. “I think it was Arlathan but so much of it looked like Tarasyl’an Te’las. Or maybe it’s that Skyhold looks like Arlathan did.”

Solas would have smiled under different circumstances, but he had been too shocked; her descriptions were as accurate as if she’d truly been there. He’d tried to keep the dismay off his face and listened for every detail she could recall, aching to have seen it again with her and yet grateful to not relive that particular moment.

“I heard a wolf, all alone, and my feet took off to find it.” It surprised him to hear Ena’vun ran to Fen’Harel but it really shouldn’t have; she was the kind to care for even a terrible beast of legend. “I found Fen’Harel prowling around a dragon chained to the ground.”

He’d stopped breathing then. “He was trying to rip the chains apart with this teeth, face and paws bloodied long before I’d gotten there.” Ena’vun was so focused on the memory she was describing that his expression went completely unnoted. “The chains were going right into the dragon’s scales and I knew that pulling them free wasn’t an option. They were…as much a part of the dragon now as the fire in its guts must be. But still Fen’Harel tore at them and the more he tried the greater his own pain. And the dragon just watched and waited, utterly unable to take action.” He’d focused on her more carefully, the scene she’d participated in deviating from his own experience. “It was the Fade and I know it’s not like reality, suddenly there was Harrit’s blacksmith hammer and I had to give it a shot.” She’d paused, expression conflicted before she actually looked at him, “the hammer
wasn’t the only item to appear either. Emma’s shield was there. She... when I first got pulled here she was there too. With the Valo-Kas. Emma was a Templar but not any longer, more importantly she was a Protector. And that is exactly what she did, she protected me at Haven and died for it. And the shield was there, next to the hammer.”

Solas forced a careful breath in, lungs burning with need and yet so heavy. The Fade was living symbolism. Ena’vun was curled into herself, not defensive as much as coiled; waiting. “I grabbed the hammer, told Fen’Harel to move and swung it at the chain’s anchor in the stone.” Of course she did, Ena’vun could stand to see a creature bound in chains about as well as he could. “I was surprised it worked. One swing and blam, the chain shattered. I thought my hands would too, it hurt to hold on after that kind of impact but I managed. And then I followed Fen’Harel’s bloodied footsteps to each of the next anchors and swung again, and again and again. Until the final chain fell away and the hammer broke.”

Dawn straightened from her contained position, looking him straight on instead of facing memory. “The dragon was free but she was in so much pain. She lashed out and that’s when I had the shield on my arm, between the dragon and the wolf. Then I woke up back here.”

He’d distracted her then, turning his attention to the shield she had brought with her to the woken world. Ena’vun had no way to know what the shield she’d been gifted was, did not know the burden of failure it reminded Solas of. He had failed to protect his friends then, failed to stop the tide of greed and ambition; failed to save his world. Did Wisdom send Dawn to that memory for her sake or his?

Now there was no time to dedicate to finding his elusive friend in the Fade. No time to demand answers or garner understanding. The Inquisition was moving to confront Corypheus’ Gray Warden army and their corrupted Spirits and he was going as well.

Because he had failed then. Had failed so foully that even thousands of years later he was reviled for it, though the truth had been long lost. Solas carried Mythal’s shield so that Ena’vun would not have to be burdened with it, and he couldn’t help but wonder if he would be forced to watch history repeat itself.

No. Solas would not fail this time, he would not let Dawn fall. If Wisdom felt it necessary for her to see the moment of his despair, set her on the path to bring the reminder of it back to him, then Solas would once again stand defiant. He had been a different creature then, had tried and failed and learned. He would protect Ena’vun because he knew, there would not be a world worth living in if he failed her as he had Mythal and himself.

Ena’vun had stood between the Dragon and the Wolf in the Fade. Now it was time for the Wolf to stand with the Rising Sun.

Chapter End Notes

Translate:

Qunlat

Ebala mertaar ara- I am not here to hurt you.

Salar eb karakost- You are looking good (I had to make this one up using the few words available, I know its more like you are looking above peace, I went with the implication)
An Army moves approx. 10 miles a day, I figured at best it would be 21 blocks between Skyhold and Adamant, each block representing 35 miles. So if I say there are approx. 672 miles between Skyhold and Adamant, an Army moving at 10 miles a day would take over 2 months. But the Orlesian contingent of the Army can move right from Orlais, and assuming Alistair has already sent a message to the Fereldan Army (I’m the writer, we can just assume these things) then it’s only the Skyhold forces that need to march that entire distance. So I’ve cut the time down to reflect only what Skyhold’s forces has to cover.
Staring Down the Abyss

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition moves towards Adamant and even if plans are set, they are never permanent.
Some wonder about the future, some worry over the past, and a very select few have greater issues on mind.

Chapter Notes

Well that was a huge gap between posts, thank you all for your patience.
I rewrote this chapter like 3 times until I really figured it all out. And as it is I have to go into a previous chapter and update the timeline there to make this all line up properly.

For those keeping track: It has now been one full year since the Conclave.

There were many aspects of travelling with the Inquisition’s army that Dawn had never considered before it was time to set out. The first was that once the Inquisitor decreed that they would be moving, they moved. She had a day to settle what affairs she had left and that was it; Dawn wasn’t the only one to find herself running amok trying to see all the people she needed to see before departing. Shokrakar and Emma’s shield were only the first stop on a long list of people she wanted to say goodbye to before leaving for a few months. After the rest of the Valo-Kas had been seen to and bade farewell from Dawn turned to her other oldest companion, Cedric.

“So you’ll be staying here, keeping Skyhold in one piece for the rest of us?” she teased the First, knowing that he was only staying behind now because his son was his responsibility and he took that duty seriously.

“Still haven’t decided; Doshiel keeps insisting that this place would look much better without all these big stone walls.” Cedric immediately retorted with a smile, playing along.

“Well if you need to blow a few up, Dagna’s the person to speak to.” Dawn felt a little relief to have someone still cracking jokes but she had to turn serious again. “Thank you for helping Mahalla and Felassan settle. I... I don’t even know where to begin.” Dawn had agonized over how to best help the two Orlesian transplants.

“It will not be the first time I help an adult who’s escaped the Alienage adjust.” Cedric immediately offered the comfort he could, all without ever losing that amused smile. “Though it is the first time I’m getting the chance to un-brainwash a child, so thank you for that experience.”

It took Dawn a moment to figure out what Cedric meant by that; he was Dalish through and through whereas the Orlesian Elves had been raised Andrastrian. She bit her tongue hard to keep her commentary about religious brainwashing to herself; Merrill only knew because she HAD to
know. Everyone else was allowed their beliefs without interference. For as long as she could manage at least because once the Titans started waking up with vigor Dawn was fairly certain all kinds of historical truths were going to come spilling out.

“I’ve spoken to Lady Montilyet about their situation as well and let her know that you’ve stepped up. But if you need anything, Josephine has offered to help out as well.” Dawn prompted, the mental checklist of what she needed to do still tallying.

“Your kid will be safe da’len, I can promise that.” Cedric was wise enough to ignore the reality of how dangerous the world was and gave Dawn the comfort she needed with his words and the hug he wrapped her in as well. “In return I fully expect you to try and help keep my glittering Peacock alive and well.”

“I’ve already done that, he’s not on the strike team.” Dawn knew Cedric wouldn’t demand for elaboration, he simply accepted that Dorian not being on the strike team meant he was safer. “According to my world story he should come out homesick for you but otherwise unharmed.”

“I can accept that.” Cedric nodded, finally stepping back from their embrace. “He’s allowed to miss me, it’ll make the reunion all the more sweet.”

Dawn laughed, hearing an undeniable lasciviousness to Cedric’s words. “I don’t want to know. I don’t want to know, I don’t want to know.” She repeated as Cedric joined her laughter.

“Now you sound like Dosh, he says something similar whenever I mention Dorian.” Cedric nodded as he spoke, teasing in the best way.

“I don’t blame him.” Dawn was grinning, feeling far easier leaving this conversation than she had been the one with Shokrakar.

Dagna was nothing but her usual energetic, endlessly inquisitive self. Dawn had cautiously recruited the Arcanist to help her create grenades using the Thedas equivalent of gunpowder, and together they had made something that wasn’t wholly Thedosian or Terran but hopefully the best of both worlds. The most powerfully enchanted runes possible had been etched into the casings of each ‘grenade’, and Dagna had even created a bandolier to carry them across Dawn’s chest and out of harm’s way. Now all Dawn had to do was make it to Adamant, through the army of Wardens and demons, past Erimond and the Lyrium Dragon, over the edge of a cliff to fall into the Fade, and then to the Nightmare itself. Easy.

The second thing Dawn learned about moving out with an army was that there was no such thing as actually moving out with the entire army. Sappers and those involved in the siege engines had apparently already been sent out, as had the vast majority of the foot soldiers. Additionally, there were still matters of politics that had to be handled despite the world possibly ending soon and that meant Dawn was expected to travel on a different route than the bulk of the army.

Josephine pulled Dawn from Dagna’s Undercroft, leading her upstairs with forebodingly comforting words about ‘having already taken care of the additional wardrobe packing she’d now require’. Alena was waiting for them in Josephine’s office and she looked annoyed. It made Dawn freeze on the spot, the expression so damningly familiar to her mother’s own irritation that Dawn’s brain went into immediate panicked teenager mode.

“We have to make a side trip to Val Royeaux.” So the annoyed look wasn’t for something she did, but in regard to having to go to Orlais. “I have a matter to attend to and I need you to stand in my place for the meeting at the Chantry.” As always Alena cut to the chase. “The Siren’s Call will cross us, and Josephine…”
“Has already covered the additional wardrobe needs.” Dawn interrupted carefully. “I know Halamshiral didn’t go as planned but I can cover a little schmoozing without too much concern, so why do you look so unhappy?”

“Paragons and Dusters,” Alena mimicked Cullen’s favouring nose pinch, “of course you wouldn’t know the date.” Alena’s shift to suddenly sympathetic left a stone in Dawn’s gut. “In about two weeks is the anniversary of the Conclave.”

Oh. That meant… that meant it’d been a year since she’d been pulled here and Larry was killed. It hurt, but in a way Dawn wanted, and could, deal with in private. She loved Larry, his death wouldn’t stop that, but she had moved past devastation and rebuilt herself. Larry would be so proud of her.

Alena and Josephine were silent, watching her for the emotional reaction even Dawn was expecting from herself. “I see why you weren’t able to excuse the Inquisition from sending representation even given the fact that we’re trying to save the world.” It was the only thing Dawn could think of to say.

Josephine recovered without a trace of it showing but Alena let her see the acknowledgement of how far she’d come in her smile. “I tried nonetheless. But even recognizing the political and emotional necessity of this, I am not stepping foot inside another Chantry; for everyone’s sake. The last two I spent any time at all in have been utterly wiped off the map, and even Redcliffe’s Chantry was badly treated and I only stopped there briefly.” Alena was shaking her head with a laugh but there was too much white around her eyes.

“Fair enough.” Dawn didn’t argue or blame her; it’d be hypocritical considering Dawn’s unease around mirrors.

“Prince Vael and Leliana are going to escort you in as the two most recognized as favouring the Chantry,” Dawn kept her mouth firmly shut around the whole ‘Leliana is a potential Divine’ thing, “and to help remind those watching that my Inquisition stands for all Iron Bull and Solas will be attending as your body guards.”

“I can take a moment now to go over the expectations you will be performing to for this event.” Josephine offered once Alena was done.

“I am your Harbinger Alena, I will not let you down.” Dawn offered with a smile.

“You never have Dawn, you never have.” Alena corrected as she left the room.

Dawn didn’t have the time to waste in sitting and learning and yet she stayed with Josephine. The static she had once been so familiar with was nowhere to be found, the shock of hearing it’d been a year since Larry’s death was no less painful, but Dawn realized she was simply strong enough to endure it and continue with what she had to do. Gone was the emotional marshmallow she used to be. In her place was the Harbinger.

The main army was taking the long route; down from Skyhold, through the Exalted Plains where they were going to collect Gaspard’s Chevaliers and Celene’s regular army, skirt Lake Celestene in the Western Approach and finally head up towards Adamant. The Inquisitor’s group would only be taking some of the same route; once out of the mountains they were going to take a sudden Northern turn, catch ship to the Val Royeaux side and cut down through the Orlesian Empire until they came at Adamant from above. After dumping the information on her, Josephine briskly waved her back to preparing to set out.
Her dismissiveness wasn’t insulting, Dawn saw the pile of papers on the Ambassador’s desk and knew she was the sole Advisor staying behind. If Dawn thought she had a limited amount of time to get things ordered before leaving, she could only imagine how much Josephine needed to get done before everyone left. So she simply agreed to everything Josephine told her was going to happen and then gave her friend a firm hug goodbye so the next person could be seen to.

The third thing Dawn learned moving with an army was that not even the easy things were easy. She’d spent months training in the gear for the upcoming battle and yet now that she was wearing it for more than training, Dawn felt wildly uncomfortable. She wore nothing fancier than what the standard soldiers of the army did and yet Dawn found herself feeling like she was walking around wearing the very walls of Skyhold itself. And her peripheral vision was absolutely shot to shit. At least it gave her a modicum of invisibility; Alena had her Stealth and Solas had his Fade Shroud, Dawn got the uniform of being overlooked.

Of course, the moment Dawn joined her travel companions her plain soldier’s armour once again stood out. The Companions were a distinct bunch. Iron Bull was massive and Dread did nothing to make him look uniform to anyone else, Alena was literally still glowing green handed, Solas wore nothing resembling armor at all but stuck to his usual attire, and Varric swaggered along with his chest as on display as always. It also felt vastly different than heading out to Halamshiral had, though once again Bog Unicorn silently waited for her. Some of that weirdness may have had to do with the fact that this time the Kirkwallers were coming along as well, Isabela was their Captain across to the Val Royeaux side after all.

“Hello beautiful.” Dawn cooed at the Bog Unicorn, seeking comfort amongst the anxiety as she checked her saddle bags.

“You truly ride that…unusual thing?” Prince Vael’s voice caught her attention.

“Bog’s not bad at all; quiet and as fast as we can be.” Dawn defended with a mild tone as she turned to face the Prince.

Sebastien was in the infamous white armour and the moment Dawn caught sight of the silvered belt buckle she lost it, laughing until her ribs hurt. He really did have a woman’s face right above his crotch, utterly overlooking the irony of a Chantry brother having such a gaudy, suggestive emblem. How the hell did Hawke ever focus with him around in this get up?

“I think that’s the first time Choir Boy has ever garnered that reaction Sweetheart.” Varric casually ambled over, likely to come see what spurred the giggle fit.

“I’m sorry… it’s just that….I knew about the Andraste belt buckle but I still wasn’t ready.” Dawn tried to get a handle on her laughter, appreciating the tension break but also realizing it was a little inappropriate and probably rude.

Sebastien had looked startled for a moment but then smiled, not seeming offended. “It is disconcerting to realize even my fashion choices have made their way into your world story, but I am glad that at least they are providing joy.”

“You could hear that your crotch is famous in an entirely different world and not go for the innuendo.” Isabela sighed, sounding amused and disappointed all in one breath as she included herself.

That was not helping Dawn stop laughing but as she mounted Bog, she realized it was alright. As Isabela had said, yes they were going to save the world but that didn’t mean they couldn’t enjoy themselves along the way. Even if they were on their way to solemnly remember those lost thus
far. That acknowledgement finally helped settle the last inappropriate giggles and she watched as Alena conferred with Cullen before finally setting out.

It wasn’t until they reached the port to cross the Waking Sea that Dawn realized the fourth thing; she’d never seen the Sea before. Her whole life on Earth and she’d lived, worked, played, and endured in or around the city. The coast was either an expensive air fare away, or several days in a car. She had had time and money for neither option, though like piercing her ears it had been on her bucket list ‘for a later date’. Some of those bucket list items would never be accomplished now, though Dawn felt less sad about that thought than she expected to, possibly because now she could add things to the list she’d never considered before.

“The Siren’s Call is waiting for us, my first mate has us ready to set out as soon as the tide turns.” It was a subtle change from Isabela the Rogue to Isabela the Admiral and yet Dawn recognized the switch over immediately.

Apparently Dawn wasn’t the only one affected by seeing the sunlight off the sea. It was beautiful in that ‘don’t look directly at the solar eclipse’ kind of way and Dawn shared a moment of appreciative silence with the Inquisitor’s team and Kirkwallers both. “You know, my world has great oceans, seas, lakes, and all sorts of impressive waterways between. I got to see them in pictures because it was never worth it for me to go see them in person. Starting to think I missed out.” She addressed the statement to the open air.

“Just wait until you’re on the waves with the wind in your hair.” Isabela grinned, eyes glittering with wicked humour. “There’s nothing quite so… invigorating as being at sea.”

“That sounds like a challenge.” Fenris reproved mildly.

“Get us to sail before indulging in your hedonism,” Alena was smirking even as she scolded, “I’m going to be away from my lover for several weeks and forced celibacy isn’t my favourite thing.”

Isabela grinned at Alena but didn’t directly respond, instead she said “Welcome to the Siren’s Call Inquisition, while on board my ship if there is an emergency you will follow any orders I issue. If I am eliminated, my First Mate is next in command and is to be obeyed as well. Any questions?” Isabela got absolutely no arguments.

It probably helped that she asked the question with her hands on the hilts of her daggers suggestively, though with this group no one seemed concerned. Dawn took a mental note, not that she intended to intimidate people into compliance all that often but it would probably be effective against a group not as grossly competent in violence as this one was. And since those outside the Inquisition inner circle really didn’t know anything about her, sometimes an act of aggression would help avoid a fight. She was getting more than enough violence in as it was and they weren’t even at Adamant yet.

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Cullen was the Commander of an Army officially at war; his entire focus needed to be on the battle to come. Despite his best efforts though, it wasn’t. Not only was his focus shattered and scattered across the map currently tucked into his bags, but far too much of even his wandering thoughts were circling around the dark haired, ruffles-loving Ambassador left safely behind at Skyhold. He was worried for Josephine in the way he hadn’t worried over his family or compatriots since taking his vows as a Templar. He was worried that who came back from this battle might be as unknown to her as he had been to his own kin after Kinloch.

He was worried he was going to ruin them all. He was concerned he was going to be a survivor
when so many others wouldn’t get that chance. He was afraid his will would fail.

The headaches were still there. Constantly inconsistent yet inexorable waves of pain were his dependable companions but Cullen knew he would ignore them. Would not give in to the sickly song of lyrium. The Inquisitor had told him of her own experiences with addiction and Cullen had to admit that hearing about it helped. He wasn’t alone; Alena Cadash might not have ever been a Templar leashed by lyrium but she still knew the itch just under her skin that had driven Cullen to claw himself bloody in the past. The need never lessened but he was slowly getting better at living despite the ache calling to him for just one more injection.

“You do realize that with the Ambassador still in Skyhold you will be returning to a roof that is finally repaired?” Dorian pulled him from morose thoughts.

“Lady Montilyet is aware of my request that if the roof is to be repaired that a window be put in place.” Cullen gave a slightly delayed reply to the Tevinter, still adjusting to the reality that he wanted his relationship with the Ambassador to be public knowledge so that her family didn’t continue forward with the betrothment Leliana had hinted about.

“Lady Montilyet eh?” Dorian’s tone turned playful. “Is that the name you use behind closed doors too Commander?”

“Dorian, have more respect,” Blackwall spoke up now, as disgruntled sounding as Cullen felt, “if not for the Commander, at least for Ambassador Montilyet.”

“I meant no disrespect Blackwall, merely concern for the Commander’s well-being.” Dorian flippantly replied and despite himself Cullen found himself laughing.

“And how, exactly, is your prying into my private affairs a mark of your concern for my well-being?” Cullen couldn’t resist demanding.

“Ah-ha! So there are private affairs going on then, I knew it!” Dorian triumphantly declared with an effusive hand gesture and Cullen felt the flush go down the back of his neck like an arrow.

“Dorian…” Blackwall warned with tone instead of expression but the Tevinter mage at least looked contrite.

“My apologies, I just meant that it is good to see my friend finding happiness in companionship.” Dorian confessed as if Cullen wasn’t still there, blush fading but not unnoticeable.

“Maker save me from friendships with ‘Vints.” Cullen groused, sounding too amused to be taken as angry.

“To be fair, Commander, we make much worse enemies.” Dorian didn’t seem to be at all offended.

“Seems to me that you have no trouble making friends with that Dalish fellow you’ve been chasing after since Haven.” Blackwall slyly pointed out.

“The First from Lavellan? Cedric isn’t it?” Cullen recalled the brief report Leliana had given him on the mage: Loyal to his Clan, has a young son, mage gifted in some aspects of Spirit but weak in others. He also recalled a small subscript about how Cedric came in with the Valo-Kas, he’d been one of the group in place when Dawn had been pulled to their world.

“Yes, his name is Cedric, and yes I have had no trouble making friends with him.” Dorian didn’t elaborate, and had a dark enough complexion Cullen knew he wouldn’t spot if he was blushing, but Cullen knew he was a bit flustered.
“Making friends, is that the term you use for what goes on behind closed doors?” He couldn’t resist, the mimicry making Dorian actually gape at him for a moment before laughing.

“Well done Commander!” Dorian laughed, the sound drawing some interest from those around them but no one paid too much attention. “Though no need to be so shy or coy my friends, I am not even a little bit concerned with declaring that Cedric is in fact my lover.”

Cullen couldn’t really argue with his friend about that; Dorian was a ranked nobleman in Tevinter and he had never once hesitated to pursue, or maybe allowed himself to be pursued by, Cedric who had no recognized rank amongst humans. Though once again, the strange dynamics of pro-mage Tevinter always confused the matter. “I am not concerned for my sake in declaring my affections; I worry only for how it will affect her.” He finally, carefully, stated.

“That’s something our more ostentatious friend cannot understand.” Blackwall reminded. “His ability to not care about the opinions of others is a virtue I wish I could emulate.”

“Considering who you would be if you actually didn’t care, I for one am grateful for your bother.” Dorian easily countered and then moved the conversation along. “Commander, I commend your concern for Lady Montilyet’s sake but I have to ask if that’s the whole truth?”

Cullen opened his mouth to declare that of course it was, but hesitated. Because yes, he was so concerned that having any affiliation to him would make life worse for Josephine. But it wasn’t because of his common birth rank. He was concerned that being with him specifically would be detrimental for her. “There is a lot I still need to make amends for.” If anyone could understand that it was the two men with him now. Thomas Blackwall was wearing another man’s last name as a reminder of who he needed to be, and Dorian was trying to find a way to redeem his entire country.

“Take it from someone from a much bloodier starting point, you will never feel worthy of the love she offers.” Blackwall pitched his voice lower but Cullen still heard him clearly.

“How are you handling all the additional attention The Winter Palace has garnered you and the Inquisitor?” Dorian seemed to realize that Cullen had no response to give and smoothly stepped in now to help him.

“Not as well as Alena has handled it.” Blackwall admitted, sounding fond. “The Inquisitor is an amazing woman but she has never let me forget that she is no religious monument. ’A person’s past is not their entire tale’ as she likes to say.”

“And what of your future together?” Dorian pressed where Cullen wouldn’t.

“My life is in her hands; that has always been the truth.” Blackwall’s stoicness helped settle some of Cullen’s anxiety.

The failures of Cullen’s own past, his ruthless cruelty after Kinloch and those he hurt in Kirkwall, were all known. His addiction and struggle to free himself from Lyrium and the Chantry both were also known, though to a smaller group. Josephine already knew his darkest secrets; she’d been there to wake him from nightmares and sat through the grisly tale of how he came to endure them. After all that, he had no other skeletons left to scare her away with.

“What if her family doesn’t approve of me?” it slipped out, the insecurity revealed by such a pathetic question making Cullen sigh and pinch his brows before he could even garner a reaction.

“My friend,” Dorian didn’t sound mocking at all and Cullen looked at him carefully. “Having seen
her sister’s giddiness when she spied the two of you kissing at Halamshiral, I am fairly certain that at least two Montilyets approve of you.”

Cullen felt the blood drain from his face a moment before a hot blush furiously exploded across his skin. Dawn had been providing such a good distraction that he’d truly believed no one had noticed the private moment between himself and the Ambassador, but apparently at least two had. Blackwall laughed and clapped him on the back firmly.

“Knowing how noble families work, I can guarantee you that her family inevitably knows. By the time our adventures in the Hissing Wastes are over you will have your answer; but if it will set your concerns aside, send a bird to your Lady.” Dorian’s advice was pragmatic.

But Cullen knew he didn’t have to. If Yvette had seen their dancing and kiss then he knew the excitable youngest Montilyet had certainly already discussed the matter with Josephine. And Josephine had not at all indicated that she wanted to end their relationship, so Cullen took heart from it. Josephine was far too astute to ever take action that would hurt the reputation of her family or the Inquisition.

“Sparkler, I don’t know how you did it, but it seems like you actually helped settle the Commander’s concerns.” Blackwall casually remarked and Cullen found himself laughing at the entire situation.

He was leading an army into war on the off-chance that they could successfully prevent the end of the literal world. Once the Inquisition survived that, Cullen knew he could stand in the face of even familial disapproval for the chance to be with Josephine. Maker’s Breathe he was even willing to learn to tolerate nobles for her sake. Without having to hear Cullen say any of this, his friends joined in the rueful laughter and let the conversation shift to less personal topics.

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Hawke,

It feels weird to be on the Siren’s Call and not see your silhouette off port side, watching the sun set. Especially with almost everyone else here already, though it helps to know at the end of this trek I’ll see you again finally. You’ve missed so much a single letter cannot contain it all.

Varric had to sit back as he realized he’d never written a more honest sentence in his life. The sea breeze tickled the hairs around his face and he sighed, absently moving the inkpot onto the corner of the parchment so he wouldn’t lose another one. Isabela’s ship cut through the waves of the Waking Sea with an ease Varric knew meant sturdy boards and steady winds; he’d never love water like Rivaini did and he never would, but at least learning how not to drown in Dawn’s pool took away the crippling anxiety he usually felt at sea.

He let the angst ridden train of thought go, not wanting to ride it down the inevitable depressive spiral. It wouldn’t help anyone for him to turn pessimistic. Even without Hawke around to bolster everyone’s moods, Varric knew he couldn’t be in much better company and all it took was lifting his head to see it.

Rivaini’s ship and crew were flawlessly professional and Varric enjoyed the chance to see Admiral Isabela earning her ridiculous hat. Fenris too was different at sea, some of the haunted hunted look faded away with the receding coastline. At least until Dawn came close, then Broody went back to, well brooding. Or trying to beat her bloody in training.

Dawn had improved astoundingly since starting to train with Bull, and even more after adding
Hawke, Red, and Solas to her mentor list. It was still something else entirely to see her bare hand spar with Fenris. Lacking a weapon in hand did not for a second mean that Fenris was taking it easy on her, and Varric had seen the bruises and blood to prove it. It was hard to simply see the marks their training left, even as they faded from her skin, but Varric had made himself watch some of the sessions to try and understand Dawn a little better. He always came back more impressed by her and less sure he’d ever really understand how she did what she did, or even why. What drove someone who honestly enjoyed laughter and the bright things in life to allow themselves to be beat on to that degree?

It didn’t help that Varric knew that he hadn’t been given all the information but he could function without all the details even as it annoyed him to have to. The only anxiety relief he was likely to get was that at least the Inquisitor, and likely Iron Bull as well, were more aware of Dawn’s motivations. It could be that he was digging deeper than the situation called for, Dawn could simply just be that afraid of being in a battle, but after how she handled herself in the Winter Palace Varric suspected that something more in the shit was happening. It was just more prudent to prepare for the worst and pray it never happened. At least they’d called a break to the training once they reached the ship. It was too likely for one of the crew to be hurt and Isabela seemed as unsettled about the ferocity of the training as Varric was. He’d given everyone an earful about not trying to control Dawn’s life, it would be awfully poor form for him to now start trying to do just that.

The second day of their trip had lost the overcast and with the sun actually able to shine, life on a ship deck was downright luxurious. Bull looked to be straight up napping in the sun, Solas was applying some kind of oil to his stave, and Stabby was carving her stone as always. Choir Boy had removed the armour that had sparked such hilarity at the start and now read in the shade, doing his best to ignore Merrill merrily singing an uncomfortably bawdy song that Isabela had taught her the night before. Dawn’s head was on Merrill’s lap, seemingly uncaring that the blood mage was unbraiding the long plaits of her hair even as Merrill bawled the dirty ditty. It was probably the most relaxed Varric had seen Dawn be since returning from Orlais.

He looked down at the letter trying to flap away in the breeze like the bird it was intended for. Orlais had made certain realizations unavoidable and now he was stuck waiting to tell her the truth. Three simple words and he knew he couldn’t write them. For once this was definitely the time he’d be better off not writing it but saying it to Victoria’s face. The idea of that filled him with as much elation as it did anxiety and yet he knew neither was going to stop him when the time came. But first they had to make it through all the time in between.

Merrill ended the scandalous song even as she finished unbraiding Dawn’s hair, fingers combing through the mass of silken strands. It was with more than a little amusement that Varric realized that Merrill’s reach was too short for her to do the entire length of Dawn’s hair.

“Have you put the Harbinger to sleep kitten?” Rivaini queried, her face the beautiful glow of mischief. Since it wasn’t aimed at him, Varric decided to just sit back and enjoy the show.

“No, I’m still here.” Dawn answered for herself without opening her eyes.

“You owe me a song Sweets.” Oh this was certainly going to go well. Varric may have glossed over some of the painfully accurate applications Dawn’s songs tended to have. It was hard to explain how she seemed to have the ability to strip you open as deft as a blade could even as her song gave everything she had. It was an experience he would never think to deny his friends.

“Hmm….well this isn’t going to work lying down…” Varric looked down to hide his amused grin, not wanting to warn Isabela to brace for what was coming at all.
And like the Siren the rig was named for, Dawn had enthralled the entire ship. It was uncanny not only because Varric had never seen shipsters be so still but also because of the accuracy of the song Dawn picked for Isabela. He knew what Dawn could do with tune and word and still it was unsettling. If Varric were a more superstitious man he’d be nervous. One of the ship crew clearly was because Varric spied the woman make a Rivaini hand gesture he’d only ever heard being aimed at Oracles. Others of the crew seemed cautiously stunned, one step shy of freaking out and waiting on Isabela’s reaction to determine their own. It wasn’t often that Dawn outed herself as Other, but when she did she really went all out.

“So tell me, Admiral; was it worth the trade?” Dawn asked, entirely unaware of the effect she had just had.

Bull was no longer pretending to nap, his one eye was cracked open and watching the sailors and Varric realized he was trying to determine if Dawn’s little demonstration had turned any of the crew against her. He needn’t worry, outside the one sailor having a religious experience the rest looked too awed to be a danger. Alena was watching Dawn with a fondly amused expression, as if she should have seen this coming but hadn’t, Rivaini and Fenris had their Wicked Grace faces on so he was less sure of their reactions but Varric knew Dawn had once again surprised them. Sebastien looked plainly shocked, his reaction honest and reassuring. Only Merrill and Solas looked unsurprised by Dawn’s antics; Merrill was still playing with the end of Dawn’s hair and Solas was watching Varric watch the reactions of everyone else.

Varric gave his friend a one sided shrug and a crooked smile. He was the unofficial scribbler of Inquisition history, moments like these might never make their way into an official Tale but they certainly existed for those that experienced them.

“How is music so readily available in your world?” this time it was the Nightingale and Varric wasn’t surprised she was using the chance to dig; it was rare that Dawn actually talked about her home world.

“I can try to explain how but you need to know that there are no words in Common that translate the concepts properly.” Dawn’s simple statement garnered a lot of attention; everyone wanted to know more and Varric didn’t blame them. “We have tools that archive the music and energy that will let us play them again and again, pretty much endlessly. And there are so many people on my planet that new music is always happening.

“Sounds decadent.” Fenris scoffed with his usual irreverence.

“Oh yes, Planet Earth could definitely be called decadent. And beautiful and even a little terrible. The people were even more frustrating. There were just so many of us…” she shook her head, the smile on her face surprising considering the topic at hand. “I don’t think any of you will ever
understand just how many people were there. I’m still finding how empty Thedas is to be a bit…weird.”

“Haven’t you been a bit isolated since getting here?” Sebastian asked now, surprising Varric.

“I was dragged all through the mountains surrounding Haven, saw a little bit of the city there too before coming to Skyhold. And I’ve been to Halamshiral and now the Waking Sea. So yes, I have not seen much of your world, and no I still feel very confident saying that your cities are simply nowhere near as populated as the ones I am used to were.” It was strange to hear the confidence in her response, normally Dawn was so deferent.

“How many people are in your world?” Stabby asked, a polishing rag smoothing over her carving stone.

“Over seven billion.” Dawn used her own language, apparently that didn’t translate either. “Ah…shit…what is the word you use for million times thousand? Take that and picture it seven times over. My world has that many people and a bit extra. The city I lived in had as many people as the Free Marches does.”

No one really had anything to say in response to that and Varric wrote down the sounds of the words she’d used from her own world. Maybe one day he’d get her to walk him through the basics of her natural tongue, but even if not Varric suspected that Dawn missed hearing words in a language she didn’t have to translate for.

Varric looked back to the letter he’d been trying to write since they left Skyhold. At this rate he’d be able to hand deliver it to Hawke.

*If we all make it to the other side of this story I’ll try to explain everything you missed after running off to play the hero. And if we don’t all make it I will be vastly disappointed.*

There really was nothing else to say in the letter after that.

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The Library of the Inquisition was filled with so much knowledge that it could be overwhelming for anyone trying to even start a little bit of research. They had shelves dedicated to the various herbs and plants littered throughout the Hinterlands, scrabbling in rocks amongst the Storm Coast, and existing despite the extremes of the Hissing Wastes. If Cedric wanted to he could find tomes on ancient Antivan horse breeding practices, the entire genealogy for the Navarran throne, and even multiple copies of Varric Tethras’ most lauded works.

What he could not find was a single tome written in Elvhen or about Elvhen history.

He didn’t even notice the lack at first, assuming that records in a language none of the humans could read would be on the bottom of the requisition list. But Cedric noticed shelves and even an entire stack dedicated to the limited selection written in Dwarven, old Nevarran, and even an account of Rivaini practices written in a strange cypher no one could break. But no Elvhen books, language, or history.

When Cedric finally picked a fight with the sheltered mage in charge of the library, he discovered it wasn’t an oversight at all or even due to gross annihilation by Andrastrians; it was just that another Elvhen mage had beaten him to the punch. Solas had apparently gathered every scrap of written Elvhen the Inquisition could lay its hands on, ‘in an attempt to translate and share the history before it is lost’. And then the scholar had told him about how Doshiel had been helping
Solas in the endeavor.

Cedric had been distracted by his relationship with Dorian but never so much so that he didn’t realize that Doshiel was adapting remarkably to life within Skyhold. So remarkably that Cedric knew his son had sought out additional mentors. It was common enough practice amongst the Dalish; if there was another teacher available you learned from them as well as your Keeper. It had just never occurred to Cedric that his son would find a mentor in the plain faced Solas.

Or maybe it was that Cedric had never expected the flat ear to accept teaching a Dalish.

He had kept his own opinion of Solas and pretended ignorance to his son’s exploits, he may dislike the bald Elf but Cedric knew his biases were not necessarily the truth of the world. Doshiel was free to seek out the friends and mentors he wanted for himself, Creators knew Cedric had his own assortment of friends and teachers that had left others questioning his sanity. So it was out of Dalish loyalty alone and not paranoid paternal caution that Cedric decided to chip his way through the wards that Solas had left in the lower library to discover what secrets lay within.

The first layer had been a complex ring of wards designed to keep any and all away and unaware of having been redirected. Cedric walked past the library and found himself at the room of bottles three times before he caught the boundary of the ‘Keep Away and Look Over There’ that had been so subtle but effective. Getting through that boundary had been simple, a matter only of focusing and walking past it.

The next layer was far less subtle and far more amusing. Solas clearly had an Adept level of skill with Spirit to so easily manipulate the usual Repulsion wards. After Keep Away and Look Over There, Cedric found himself falling prey to ‘Did someone just call my name?’ and ‘I’ve forgotten to do something important’. He was on the stairs back up before he caught himself and stopped dead in his tracks. It was harder to ignore the second layer of wards but Cedric was stubborn enough to manage it. Even if he had to loudly hum to help cover the sensation buzzing through his skull.

The third layer was much less friendly.

Cold snapped across his skin, a burning, freezing pain that staggered him a step back to where the air was less deadly. His breath gasped in, the cold air shocking in his chest and making him cough out the sensation. His clothes and hair were slightly wet, the freeze immediately melting to his body heat once out of the ice mine and Cedric took a moment to cleanse his aura of the lingering frost. Whatever it was Solas had in the library it was clearly worth protecting far more than a few dusty tomes warranted. Though Cedric had to also acknowledge that the ice mine was not to the level where it’d kill someone. It startled, it hurt certainly, but it was just enough to drive the incautious away.

Luckily for Cedric, he knew more than a few ways to go about clearing a space of unfriendly wards.

If someone else was around he’d have less options but given that there were no mages or even living bodies in the vicinity, Cedric started to coil in his mana building up Mind Blast. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, a looming sense that this was a bad idea hovering an inch away from his skin. Still he coiled in more power, layering the intent to wipe everything away that was an obstacle into it. Even if Solas had anticipated Cedric’s snooping, knew of his ability to take Mind Blast to this level and prepared with countermeasures, Cedric would continue trying to get into this library. His People’s needs outweighed the desire for his own safety every single time.

Mind Blast lashed out, whipping under the control of his will and tearing through the wards in front
of the lower library door like a blade through unguarded flesh. The wards of repulsion simply ceased to exist. The more complex wards gave with a sigh and the ice mines erupted in little pops of detonation though none of the magic hit him in return. Whatever else the flat ear had laid to protect the library fizzled out under the attack of Cedric’s Mind Blast and the First smiled a little grimly. And then he stayed absolutely still, coiled Force Cage this time and unleashed it even as his vision went hazy for such mana use so quickly.

The hidden defenses hissed at the onslaught, giving way under the magical attack. Cedric was fairly certain that these were far less friendly than the initial one’s he’d encountered. Even standing away from the breaking defenses Cedric could feel them lashing out at him, striking against his aura as they burned out and settled into nothing. Again elementally based, though now Cedric sensed a swell of Fade mixed in as well; none of the defenses were lethal despite the complexity and layers he had encountered. They were designed to deter, repel, scare off, chase away, and even lightly reprimand the overly curious and yet Cedric could feel the absolute worse each one would inflict and none of them were aggressively hostile. But there were so many wards that clearly visitors were not wanted.

What was this flat ear hiding?

Cedric cautiously tested the hallway around him, magical senses open enough that the whispers of spirits so forgotten they no longer had Names chittered in his ear for the effort. Whatever protections this library had, they were not going to keep him out anymore. Though he could feel something still resonating from within the room itself, part of the secrets he was here to collect no doubt.

The physical lock was no true barrier and he finally opened the door to the lower library, stepping in to see a space clearly dedicated to long hours of study. But it was the fact that he felt nothing in the room that kept him entirely unnerved. This lower library was so thoroughly warded every Spirit in the Fade could hurtle themselves at it and Cedric was certain the person in here would never know. And not a trace of that warding was detectable from the outside. The complexity of the ones keeping him out had been impressive, the skill required for this left him deeply awed.

Inside the main table had a book open and displayed, a beautiful specimen of Elvhen script that was likely heavier than the Inquisitor herself. Cedric prided himself on being able to understand the oral stories still told in Elvhen, and he was one of the few in the Clan that could parse out the few written texts they had, but this was older than even the script he could read. Clearly that wasn’t the case for Solas; the shelves disguising the walls were filled with books from a multitude of languages. Oddly enough there were also several books in Common but for the life of him Cedric could not figure out their connection to the rest of this library.

Cedric had wanted to find the stories from his people’s history, wanted to use the resources of the Inquisition to help all Elves reclaim the fragments left of their past. Solas had beaten him to it and decided to hoard it away for himself behind a locked door.

His teeth creaked, the clench of his jaw driving a sharp stab of pain through an old break point. He turned to leave, knowing he was too angry to stay, and saw Doshiel in the hallway.

“Bae? What are you doing in here?” Doshiel sounded angry, the crackling still in his voice almost settled.

“I came to locate where all the texts in our language had disappeared to.” He answered honestly, albeit briefly. “Now it is my turn to ask, what are you doing here?” he already knew though, the realization intuitive but trustworthy.
“I…ah.” Doshiel’s indignation broke under the weight of his guilt; he had to confess his tutorship with Solas now. Cedric had to hide his pride when his son stood with his shoulder back, chin up and met his eyes to declare, “Hahren Solas has trusted me with the key to access the library and continue my studies even while he is away.”

“Hahren Solas is it?” Cedric could feel the corner of his mouth twitch with the growing urge to smile and he fought it hard. “Well in that case, I owe you both an apology for ruining the warding outside.” Cedric’s amusement slipped his control, revealing itself in his tone.

“You knew!” Doshiel squeaked, aghast.

“Dosh… you are good and I have been distracted, but you are my son and always my top priority. I knew, and I trust you to decide for yourself if Hahren Solas is one of the ones you wish to learn from.” His commentary left his son gaping, speechless and astonished. “What I do not understand though, is why you both decided it was necessary to secret away all and keep it to yourselves. Do you not think that those like little Felassan have as much right to learn where they came from as you do?”

Now Doshiel looked agonized instead of guilty, and Cedric lost his humour and anger both. “It’s… complicated Bae. I….he….you…” Doshiel gave a frustrated grunt.

“If you cannot tell me, if you truly believe it is better that I not know, then do not tell me. I trust you Doshiel.” Cedric calmly offered, willing to accept his son’s decision on this matter. He wouldn’t have before bringing Doshiel to Skyhold but his son had proven himself both reliable and intuitive in the time since joining him here.

Doshiel sighed, an irritated sound that Cedric was learning meant his son was starting to really behave like an adult. “I could See uthenera clinging to Hahren Solas in the Fade.”

Not a single thing came to mind for Cedric to say in response to that. Or maybe it was that too much occurred to him to say. Doshiel wasn’t supposed to be dipping into the Fade on his own yet, he was far too tempting a target for the corrupted Spirits. Cedric should berate him for such foolish risk-taking but he also realized that would explain the indomitable warding this room had; Solas had arranged a place for Doshiel to practice that was actually safe. He should demand explanations; if Doshiel could See the traces of uthenera lingering, that meant that Solas was a recently awoken Elvhen mage. The only Elvhen left walking the world from the Ages before were the Sentinels and Cedric had never heard of one electing to abandon their past entirely like Solas clearly had.

“That alone cannot be the reason to lock this all away.” Cedric left the state of who exactly Solas was alone and focused on the immediate issue he could resolve.

“And what if the information in these pages could make things worse for us?” Doshiel had regained his mental equilibrium, stepping inside the library to walk over to a book on the shelves. “What if the pages of our history told of how we were not laid low by the shemlen at all, but by our own actions? What if I could show you that the gods we’ve worshipped weren’t gods at all.”

His son opened a book and thrust it towards him deliberately, revealing a beautifully etched image of the Creators. Only they weren’t standing tall over all creation as gods, but rivalling each other bitterly as Generals grabbing for Power. Cedric took the book, hand oddly steady as he paged through it, looking at the words and images he’d never expected his son to offer him.

The pages and passages were older than anything Cedric had ever held before and he had to fight the urge to hurl the book from his hands, his brain not wanting to understand what his eyes were
reading. It was listing the worth of a slave based on whose Vallaslin they were wearing, the colour chosen to Mark them, and how intricately detailed the tattoo was. The blood writing that Cedric was so very proud of was the mark of a slave. He had been thinking forward to the summer when Doshiel would chose his own Creator to honor, had been ready to celebrate his son becoming an adult. Had been about to brand his son a slave.

“Bae? It’s alright. But now you understand.” Doshiel drew him out of the agony inside his skull and Cedric looked from the cursed book in his hand to his son. “Now you get why Hahren Solas has kept this away from prying eyes. It’s our history, but it’s also the record of what we no longer want to be.”

“And this is what he’s been teaching you?” Cedric sounded choked but he knew no water or wine would clear the tightness from his chest. He wanted to argue that it couldn’t be true, but Cedric hadn’t been that blindly naïve in a very long time.

“Actually he was upset that I had found some of it on my own.” Doshiel’s amusement did more to ease Cedric off the edge of panic than any careful words would have. “He caught me spying on the Harbinger in the Fade and when he confronted me about it I think it made him sad to realize I had no one to teach me about the extent of my particular magic.”

“So he started to, even though he is not a mage like you?” Cedric numbly handed Doshiel the book back and watched as his son carefully put it away exactly where he had taken it from.

“Not right away. It took him finding me trying to work in the Fade with Cole without a Hahren around before he finally told me that he expected me to be as disciplined a student as I was a bothersome pain.” Doshiel deferentially offered Cedric the sole chair in the room, plopping down onto a pile of pillows that must be his customary place. “I know it’s a lot to take in Bae,” Doshiel picked up on his unease but didn’t understand the true source of it, “but it’s not all bad. Like…the magic I use isn’t the same as a Healer’s magic, but if you have these histories it turns out that what Kaaras and I are separately used to be one thing. There was no division between Spirit Healers and Healers of Spirits; it was only after the Veil was placed that the two were forcibly separated. So I have been studying how a Spirit Healer heals the living to learn to help control my ability to heal the Spirits I can actually affect. It’s about knowing what I don’t know so I can start asking the right questions.” His son’s enthusiasm was a distant reminder of his own usually insatiable curiosity.

“Oh, this is one of the good things too!” Doshiel sprung up from his floor seat with the agility and akimbo of youth, retrieving a tome now that was less finely crafted than the first one but more visibly used. “In here it says that we used to work with the Durgen’lin before the shemlen appeared, and from what I could gather in the library Orzammar has Shaperates; some Dwarves that record all their history. If they do, doesn’t that mean that some of our history might be recorded in their Shaperates?”

Cedric carefully saved his own concerns and suspicions for when he was on his own, not wanting to taint his son’s enthusiasm, curiosity, or lingering innocence. “We have a Dwarf from Orzammar in the Undercroft, let’s go see if she can help.” He suggested for lack of a better plan and greatly wanting to leave this disturbing room behind. If his suspicions about Solas proved to be right in the end there might not be a better Hahren to protect his son. If he wasn’t actually the biggest threat around. If.

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He’d been prepared to travel with an army, prepared to leave his Chargers in Krem’s capable hands before helping Little Bas survive the battle ahead. Bull had been prepared for a lot of things. He had not been ready for steady winds, calm waters, and an utterly peaceful trip taking them across to
Val Royeaux. It left him on edge because experience taught him that no plan ever unfolded without something forcing it to change drastically. But Dawn was her usual self, singing for Isabela when requested and Bull had thought that maybe that would be where the problems arose. And the crew was unsettled, but not a single one of them made a move against her. He was tightly wound before they ever landed in Val Royeaux but Bull had no target to unleash it upon.

Even the Orlesians were behaving themselves, and despite his agitation it was amusing to see how they reacted to the presence of the Herald and Harbinger both. The core of hostile Orlais stared after Alena and Dawn both like they were wonders; Alena had their hearts for her heroism, and Dawn had their attention for her strangeness.

Their arrival off the ship and to the waiting suite had been a good gauge for how Orlais was going to react to Little Bas while the Boss was larking around doing her ‘side mission’. The throngs of people near them had whispered and crowded but still remained safely back. He wasn’t sure if it was out of fear or respect, but Bull knew that once Dawn went to the Chantry officially all bets were off. Either they would keep respectfully back or he would make them.

“What the fuck Leliana! What kind of representative am I supposed to be in this?” Dawn pulled his attention as soon as she entered the common room of the suite the Inquisition was using.

Dawn’s focus was on the Bard, her hands gesturing to the dress that had been packed for her. Bull certainly enjoyed giving the dress and Little Bas a proper look over. The material looked insanely soft, slinking up from her waist to curl over one shoulder, draping behind her back to wrap over her hips before falling to the floor. He appreciated the way the material hugged the curves of her body, shifting with her muscles as she moved. Green was a really good colour on Dawn, and it didn’t pass Bull up that someone had found an almost perfect match for the Boss’ hand. It was a pretty unsubtle way of showing the Harbinger was an extension of the Inquisitor’s will.

“An effective one.” Red had purred right back, sounding satisfied as she came over to inspect Dawn’s outfit.

Bull smirked at Dawn’s flustered state and looked over the rest of the group with an assessing eye. The Boss wasn’t going to be joining them on the way to Chantry because she had her own side trip plotted; someone had found the link between Blackwall and Rainier and insisted that the Inquisitor deal with it personally. He knew she fully intended to, probably with a fair amount of enthusiasm based on how she was dressed, but his job was to protect Little Bas as she visited the Chantry in Alena’s place. He was to guard her back, along with Solas, Red, and the Choir Boy. The rest would be watching the Boss’ back and looked more than ready for the job.

Despite the unavoidable reminder of her own painful arrival to Thedas, Dawn looked remarkably composed about the whole affair. Bull still felt like it was too soon to ask Dawn to be Harbinger again after the Winter Palace attacks but he’d kept his concerns to himself; this would be a good way to gauge Dawn’s steadiness before she dragged him through the upcoming battle ahead.

“I think you need more jewelry.” Isabela suggested even as she picked her nails clean with the tip of a dagger.

“You think everyone needs more jewelry.” Fenris actually sounded amused; apparently this was a common complaint.

“The ears are good but it’s not enough gold elsewhere.” Isabela continued as if Fenris hadn’t spoken and Bull decided to keep quiet, wanting to see how Dawn reacted to such teasing.

“I could be naked and dipped in gold and you wouldn’t think it was enough.” Dawn was smiling as
“Now that is an excellent suggestion.” Isabela even winked as she said it. “Wonder how we could pull it off?”

“That wasn’t-” Dawn tried to object and Bull wasn’t surprised when the Boss interrupted.

“We’re not sending my Harbinger in there naked. But Dawn you know you’re making a statement just by walking in there. They are expecting a sacrificial lamb, meek and mild and instead they are getting the Harbinger of the Inquisition. Don’t be afraid to show off a little bit, for all our sakes.”

“I…well…okay.” Dawn gave in with a shrug. She looked dubious and Bull wondered if Little Bas was ready to be a spectacle again.

So he crossed his arms over his chest and gave Dawn’s attire an obvious assessment. “Not going to get away with hiding any kind of weapon on you in that Little Bas, so you need to stay close if something happens; no heroics.” He warned and could see her start to argue immediately.

Solas of all people interrupted before she could start. “I may be able to assist in giving Ena’vun additional protections that cannot be seen and look solely decorative.” Everyone turned to regard the apostate and Bull wondered what the sly Elf was getting up to.

“Perfect, let’s get our girl shinier than the brightest star and then we’ll unleash her on those Chantry blowhards.” Isabela turned Dawn by the shoulders and scooted her towards Solas with a firm slap to the ass.

“That’s hardly appropriate Isabela.” Prince Vael reproved with a frown and Bull wasn’t sure if he was more upset over the commentary or the butt slap. Dawn just looked bemused, staying silent so Bull did the same.

“Regardless of what additional safety Solas provides the rest of you are going to be armed. We are there to show we remember, but this is far too likely to end in an ambush if we aren’t careful.” The Boss was clearly not accepting any arguments.

“The Left Hand of the Divine is bringing in an armed Tal Vashoth, Elvhen apostate, and reformed sinner with an unarmed Offworlder. Yeah, I can see how no one is expecting this to end entirely without fuss.” Dawn remarked into the open air. “At least you get to have fun skulking around instead of playing ceremonies.”

“Rogues don’t skulk, skulking draws attention. We either swaddle along in full view of everyone or go Stealth.” Varric gave a rejoinder making the Rogue heavy group laugh.

“Ena’vun, shall I try my additional protections?” Solas offered to Little Bas and it amused Bull that the once demanding apostate was being deferential.

Iron Bull said nothing as Dawn took a deep breath, set her shoulder back and finally nodded. “If I am going to be a living distraction again then by all means Old Wolf, let’s be dramatic.” It was the closest Bull figured Dawn would get to admitting how unsettled she felt, and even this little bit was better than nothing.

“If you’re the one behind the gold in her ears then more like that but all over.” The Admiral addressed her suggestion to Solas, ignoring everyone else with ease that Bull didn’t for a moment believe.

“I am certain Ena’vun will look resplendent.” Solas offered and left to retrieve whatever it was he
“Don’t you think sending two non-Andrastrians into the heart of the Chantry is a trifle… unorthodox?” Sebastien argued with the Inquisitor despite the audience.

“Three Sebastien, I am not Andrastrian either.” Dawn didn’t hesitate to correct the Prince’s concern.

“Neither am I; that hasn’t stopped everyone from calling me her Herald,” The Boss added in with a roll of her eyes.

“Are you saying I’ll be entering the Chantry with three known heathens as my companions?” At least the Prince sounded amused by the prospect. For a religious type he didn’t practice the proselytizing Bull was used to.

“Two heathens, a Bard, and a Harbinger dressed to kill, or did you want to stay here?” Bull jovially offered, still unsure of the Prince’s measure. If things did inevitably go sour on them, at least he’d get the chance to see the pretty boy in action.

“I have vowed to support the Inquisition however I may, I will accompany the Harbinger.” Sebastien declined politely, not looking at all offended.

Solas returned into the slightly tense silence with nothing more assuming looking than a thin paintbrush and a jar of something that looked like liquid starlight. Little Bas clearly knew what it was because she grinned at the sight of it. “Calligraphy?”

“In a fashion, yes.” Solas agreed and Bull wasn’t the only one watching in curiosity as he gestured for Dawn to take a seat.

Bull saw multiple looks of surprise as Little Bas slowly started to literally glitter while Solas worked, dipping the paintbrush into the starlight liquid and then carefully brushing it over Dawn’s exposed skin in specific seeming swirls. It took Bull a moment to realize that the designs weren’t randomly decorative but Solas had drawn glittering symbols against her skin.

“Didn’t think an Elvhen mage would use vitaar.” Bull finally stated, the first to figure out the apostate’s trick.

“I am nothing if not adaptable,” Solas corrected sounding pleased, “and unlike the paint your people use this isn’t intended to harden the skin or act as a poison on contact. Elvhen calligraphy isn’t just visually beautiful; it infuses power into the paint and forms used. This is a logical progression of that, only instead of warding a place it’s warding Ena’vun.”

“You’re experimenting on my Harbinger?” the Boss sounded unhappy about that and Bull let the shortest killer in the group take the lead, knowing there had to be more to it.

“I would not put Ena’vun in harm’s way.” Solas’ tone was flat, not at all impressed with the Inquisitor’s supposition. “I experimented on inanimate objects first, and then with the creature specialist’s assistance I tried on recently dead but once living objects. After that I progressed up to trying on myself and have found that without the ability to infuse additional mana into these protections they will thwart poisons and projectiles, reduce the impact of most direct assaults, and even cushion high falls. But like most things it cannot keep Ena’vun as safe as any of us would like.”

“Acceptable, let’s move people.” Alena shrugged aside her earlier concern and waved people into action. She might just be his favourite person to work for. No bullshit, just Bull hitting shit. He
could get used to that all too quickly.

They had only been waiting on Dawn’s preparations, the rest of the teams ready to go. The Prince was back into the white armour he had donned in case of battle, the road dust and detritus of travel all carefully cleaned away. Bull knew how hard it was to keep any gear clean, especially after repeated use, so he knew either a lot of money or a lot of effort had gone into getting this boy’s get up perfect. His whites were blinding, his silvers reflected light, and Bull could smell the faintly cloying scent of oils worked into it all to keep the man from creaking. Red was once again back into her Bard inspired armour, the emblem still Inquisition despite her status as the Left Hand. It occurred to him that with Little Bas unarmed he was the only Warrior the group had, but Bull knew there was no better configuration for the event ahead. Beyond the wards Solas was painting onto her, the mage was coming along as well and Bull knew that he was as interested in keeping Dawn unharmed as Bull was. And even if there was an issue they should be fine, as long as Little Bas stuck to his side and didn’t play the hero.

The Boss’ group headed out, their expedition even more likely to end in bloody combat than Bull’s was. At least they were all dressed for it, the entire group bristled with weaponry and armour. He’d certainly feel better if they could wrap Dawn in her armour and weapons, but the situation demanded that she appear peaceful and tame.

With the Inquisitor off, leadership of their little group was temporarily in the hands of Leliana; the one the Chantry would most likely respect. It still felt oddly like being the armed escort to a prisoner as they walked with Dawn towards the Chantry. He could hear people discussing them as they passed, the susurrations a constant annoyance as he tried to watch and listen for an attack. But none came. At least not a physical attack from the people watching them; the Chantry Mother waiting to greet them looked ready to chew rocks and spit diamonds.

“Reverend Mother Hevara,” Leliana stepped forward, smoothly pleasant in the face of the other woman’s obvious dislike. “It is my pleasure to introduce Dawn Wesson, the Harbinger for the Inquisition.”

“Is it now, Sister Leliana?” The Reverend Mother didn’t actually sniff but the derision came across all the same. “You have wandered farther than we imagined if that is the case.”

It was no struggle to keep his irritation to himself, and Solas and Leliana didn’t bat an eyelash to it either. Even Dawn simply smiled in the face of such hostility, but the Prince surprised him. “Reverend Mother, unlike many here in protected Val Royeaux the Lady Harbinger has suffered great personal loss due to the events of the Conclave and has spent every moment since trying to improve a world she wasn’t born to.”

Bull kept his smile on the inside, presenting a stony face to the world but he was impressed. It was an effective reprimand for her poor attitude, but couched in such a way that the Prince wasn’t actually offending anyone directly. He’d heard about the Prince’s diplomatic approach but considering Sebastien normally travelled with the infamous Hawke, it wasn’t actually hard to be seen as the diplomatic one. Bull was glad to witness Sebastien’s abilities first hand, next he wanted to see him fight. But only after Dawn was somewhere safe.

“So many have come to us with tales of their loss,” the Mother continued without faltering. “It is no surprise to hear that is has extended to yourself Dawn Wesson.”

“And it is good that there are those like yourself Hevara; here to help those in need.” Dawn replied with a polite inclination of her head.

“Please follow me, Harbinger.” The Reverend Mother caught the warning in Dawn’s deliberate
Maybe Little Bas was more ready for this than he was giving her credit for.

Walking into the heart of the Andrastrian faith as a Tal Vashoth felt about a strange as coming to Orlais as a Qunari had at first. Everyone stared at him as if never having seen a creature like him before. But unlike his initial experience so many years ago, this time he failed to keep their attention. Even Solas with his shining bald head and deliberate mages’ staff strapped to his back failed to hold their gaze. The reputation of the Inquisition and its Harbinger demanded that the focus of all these people was directed at the very well dressed and the emotionally scarred Dawn.

She ignored them all.

Instead of looking at the throngs of people collected, nobles all, or those left of the Chantry hierarchy Dawn looked up at the architecture of the building. The Chantry had been built to withstand siege and Bull could tell the moment he saw the actual weight to the arches and beams supporting the ceiling. The windows were limited, glass likely being prohibitively expensive when this place was first built and instead most of the light inside came from candelabras that glittered all over. He watched as her gaze dropped from arched ceiling, to thickly decorated walls, to the throngs of people collected and watching her. Unlike the Chantry at Haven, this room was clearly laid out less for humble worship and more for elaborate displays such as the one arranged in remembrance.

Now he was even more impressed by the dress Dawn wore. Because before them the entire mass of Orlesian nobility was a sea of white or blue with red Chantry in the richest, most ostentatious styles available. In her simple green dress Dawn looked nothing like anyone else present and she seemed to be instinctively in control of it. Little Bas became aware of the eyes and focus turned in her direction, and despite the disasters at the Winter Palace, Dawn simply smiled at once again finding herself the center of attention.

Bull could never forget the sound of her sobbing against his chest after the nearly fatal confrontation with Florianne and yet here Dawn was now, acting like it had never happened. As if none of the events she had endured thus far had ever or would ever touch her. It was a sobering reminder that Dawn was very capable of lying through omission, even to him. But Bull figured he knew what to watch for now at least, so he was satisfied that her display was only deceiving the audience. It still left him too tense to waste energy listening to the Reverend Mother discussing death and life and the moments in between. Unsurprisingly she stuck firmly to the Chantry line of denouncing both the mages that rebelled and the Templars that betrayed, but Bull was more interested in assessing everyone in his line of sight. And they seemed to be as interested in watching the Inquisition members in return.

The dissatisfied Mother struggled to command the entire attention of the audience, her position at the pulpit guaranteed that she saw all the distracted stares and huddled whispers that had nothing to do with the sermon she droned on about or the memory of all that was lost. Bull enjoyed watching the vein in her forehead distend and the flush of anger colour her neck as the Chantry filled with the building cacophony of the masses curiosity.

His enjoyment curled up and died when the Reverend Mother tried to turn it to her advantage though. “Since you are all so very fascinated with our...strange guest, why doesn’t this Harbinger for the Inquisition say a few words now?”

This was not a part of the plan, Bull had asked the Boss what would be demanded of Dawn before he’d ever gotten on the boat to sail over and he knew that there had been no preparation for questions or speeches. Dawn stood gracefully and ascended the steps to the pulpit without
hesitation, every eye on her. Even Iron Bull’s and he really should have been watching for assassins, thankfully none sprang out.

“Thank you Mother Reverend.” Dawn mistitled the woman and Bull almost believed it was accidental, until he saw the edge to Dawn’s smile. She softened it before turning to face the audience. Now he was very grateful to both be armed and sitting, he knew Dawn well enough to anticipate the quake she was about to cause. “I never expected to be here today. And I don’t just mean in this building, but as a part of this world. I didn’t come here alone, but my late husband didn’t survive your world for very long. It can be a cruel and heartless place for the inexperienced and under privileged, and at some point of time in our lives that describes us all. No one leaps from the womb fully formed and ready to go and that’s why we always, instinctively, come together. And since the Breach, since the threat to the entire world, this world has come together far more than ever before. The Imperial Triumvirate, Fereldan’s Monarchs, the Inquisition, every day farmers and Rulers alike; all came together. Regardless of age or class, culture or creed, all have risen into a united force. I may just be a heathen Offworlder, but I have to say it is a sight that gives me hope. The world won’t be saved by heroes from legend, it’s being saved by ordinary people. Mothers, Fathers, human, elf, dwarf and Vashoth, from the humblest pot scrubber to the highest authority; we are saving the world for each other. Everyone believes that there is nothing they personally can do to help, that no action they could take would make a difference, and yet here we are facing the tide of evil and standing in its way. Your strength and courage are changing the world, and on this day of remembrance never forget that one person can make a difference. You can choose at any time to be the hero you need to be, and I am so glad to see so many of you saying you are ready. The world needs us to be brave and keep hopeful, let’s not disappoint.”

They were eating out of the palm of her hand, right now Dawn could point at Empress Celene herself and say ‘tear her apart’ and these well dressed, supremely pampered nobles would do it without question. It was more than a little unsettling because Bull wasn’t sure Dawn was actually aware of the effect she was having. Half of what Little Bas did was entirely spontaneous but normally he could judge when those moments occurred. Right now she looked too calm to have made that speech up on the spot yet even Bull couldn’t tell what exactly was running through her head. For once he wished the Kid was here.

Dawn left the pulpit and without discussing it Bull stood up with the others of her escort and followed her right out of the Chantry. In utter silence. He could feel the eyes looking right past him to follow Little Bas out, and Bull was very grateful to have the door shut solidly behind them.

“I hated that.” Dawn spat as soon as she was clear and Bull breathed out in relief.

“You were a natural.” Leliana soothed, far more pleased with what occurred than Bull wanted her to be.

“I don’t entirely know what to make of that entire…exchange. It’s not like a Reverend Mother to treat a guest in that manner.” The Prince at least sounded as disturbed as Bull felt. Only Solas kept his opinion to himself, though he had a thoughtful look on his face.

“Let’s just get back to the Boss. The sooner we actually go save the world the sooner we can never visit this place again.” Bull urged them on, wanting to have more people around that were on his side because he still felt impending doom following them around.

Dawn didn’t argue, she simply fell into the center of the group for protection and let Leliana lead them to the suite. With the two Rogues guiding the way, Bull and Solas brought up the rear in pensive silence. At least until Solas caught Bull’s eye and asked, “We can continue the distraction if it’ll help?” The match had started in vicious anger, had turned into a challenging rivalry and now
seemed to have evolved into much needed comradery.

“We left off with my whole army bearing down on your King, and you were going to move a Pawn with some cryptic shit about how I needed to think about it.” Bull took him up on the offer, keeping his voice pitched low so the others wouldn’t overhear.

“It turns out Iron Bull, that I needed to think about it too.” Solas didn’t look towards him now, face still lined in pensive consideration.

“And what secrets did you discover after that?” he didn’t try to be subtle about his prying. He might not be a spy anymore but Bull had always liked figuring people out.

“Five moves.” That was even more cryptic than usual but before Bull could question it Solas actually continued. “In five moves I have your King. You’ll take A6 and I’ll move my knight to G7 for check. Your King would claim D8 and I would send my Queen to F6. Check; sacrificed. Because she’s too tempting and I know you’ll take her. And that’s when that Pawn Ena’vun warned us about will come into play.” He calmly, precisely dismantled the game with chilling emotionlessness.

And he was right; Bull played the moves out in his head. His Ben Hassrath would have taken Solas’ Queen without hesitation. Just like Solas once wouldn’t have hesitated to sacrifice her.

“New game, mage?” Iron Bull offered, carefully watching for the quick flash of a smile on his friend’s face.

He never got Solas’ response though because his instincts screamed even as someone bellowed, “NOW!” and shit went sideways.

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The world spun, a foul stench clogging his nose and choking the air from his lungs. His heartbeat throbbed so loudly inside his skull that for several pulses he could do nothing more than endure. Fear and dread flowed through his veins, filling the void of where his magic should be. Weakness stole the light from his eyes and still he fought against the pull of unconsciousness. Panic made him wonder if this was the wake up he always knew would happen. That uthenera was only now falling away and the dream he had finally given himself to would be wiped away.

And then the sounds of fighting started to make their way past the throb of his heartbeat.

Solas forced his eyelids upwards, the effort monumental and leaving him teary as light seared across his vision. The world was a blur, movement and light too much for his battered brain to decipher into meaning and his memory was staggeringly blank as to what had caused this failure in him. He couldn’t even feel the hands that were pulling him along, the movement of his body involuntary as someone all but carried him along.

“Move!” Finally his head started to make sense of the garbled words everyone was shouting, and even if it took all the effort he had to give, Solas blinked his eyes to try and clear them.

A gray wall writhed in front of him, a spinning dervish that splattered red all around. Stalking the edges was a flash of green, his magic dancing ever so slightly out of reach it seemed; taunting him to reach out and just reclaim it. As if he hadn’t tried to do that from the very start.

“You need stop struggling!” he couldn’t recognize the voice, brain too scrambled to makes sense of it properly.
“Here, Dawn just...take his other side. Maybe if you’re within reach he’ll stop struggling.” A female voice, accented. Did he know it? He felt he did. He wanted to shake his head, clear the mess inside of it out once and for all but whatever was done to him lingered.

The green was at his side, not his magic at all but the rising sun once again there to offer guidance. But why? What had happened? Solas didn’t even realize he’d mumbled the question out loud until she responded. “Red Templars attacked; I think it was a null field and mage bane.” She was under his arm, carrying him along as his body remained outside of his direct deliberate control still.

The next eye blink felt like it took the same eternity he’d slept through, but when he finally forced his lids back upwards he could more clearly see Iron Bull charging ahead of them. It hadn’t been a wall at all but the Tal Vashoth ferociously tearing his way through the attackers and scattering their blood before them like foam off the wave.

“He turns poetic when under the influence?” It was Leliana on his right, the strange woman’s voice now recognizable that he could see her as well. Strain had given it a different tone as she helped guide his useless body along.

With every second his head felt clearer, his eyelids lighter and thoughts less scattered but it was taking far too long for everyone’s sake. He felt much worse than either null field or mage bane alone could do, but he’d never endured both at the same time. He never wanted to again either. Now that he was more aware, the taste in his mouth was akin to the aroma from rotten garbage, building the urge to gag and vomit, souring his stomach despite his best efforts to ignore it.

Solas involuntarily cried out, pain and euphoria both as a flash of Power ripped through the air. Something very akin to a rip in the Veil forced its way into existence and peeled their opponents apart like plucking petals from a flower. But it felt even worse to him, the pathways where his power normally flowed ripped raw already from the assault that had left him so helpless that this sudden flood of untamed energy burned like the molten fire from inside the ground itself.

He couldn’t help the stagger, his knees quaking and giving out from the pain and all but collapsing to the floor. It was only the fact that Leliana and Dawn both had his arms across their shoulders that kept him on his feet. “Go help them!” Dawn barked out and suddenly he sagged to one side, the support gone without argument.

It took considerable effort for him to lock his knees and attempt to stand again, never wanting to drag Ena’vun down with him. “I’ve got you Old Wolf, never worry about that.” She soothed and he was still too disoriented to be ashamed about babbling his thoughts into the air for all to hear.

It was easier to lift his head now, less utterly draining as he tried to focus on her. It was the only reason he saw the Rogue Templar slip out of Stealth to try and attack her unprotected back. Even though he had been hit with null field, even though mage bane still soured his tongue, Solas tried to pull Barrier over them both. It shimmered for a second, a soap bubble in the breeze that shattered the moment the Rogue touched it. But it was enough to deflect the attack. Enough for Dawn to realize the danger and spin to face it even though it meant letting him go.

He didn’t want to blink, knowing that even if it felt like the world was moving in slow motion he’d miss everything for how quick it occurred.

The figure had a slender, delicate looking blade in one hand and a wide bladed dagger in the other; their thrust perfectly balanced to recover and follow through with a slice to the throat. Except Solas’ barrier prevented that from being the case. Dawn danced up the outside of the thrust arm, her hand gripping around the Rogue’s wrist and with calm confidence slammed her wrist into the Rogue’s elbow. Dawn caught the Rogue’s blade as it fell from pain loosened fingers, and followed
through to end the fight. He’d been so worried that when the time came to be lethal Ena’vun might hesitate. Humbled he realized that Dawn was protecting him and thus would not falter. She was already behind the Rogue, the dirk hammered up into the back of the skull with a solid crunch. As the Rogue’s body fell Solas finally blinked.

He opened his eyes to see beams overhead, the gentle sway of a ship telling him time had most certainly passed. His mouth tasted terrible, mage bane and the sticky sweet taste of a restorative telling him that someone at least had the presence of mind to treat his physical symptoms because nothing would help the magical ones. Lyrium potions would have just made him violently ill until the last of the mage bane worked its way out of his body. He could still it fogging up his thoughts, leaving his body leaden and dulled.

“You were unconscious for about twenty minutes. We’re only just onto the Siren’s Call and casting off.” A quiet voice informed, altering him to her presence.

“You watched over me?” he sounded dry and raspy though no water could alleviate the sensation and he knew it.

“No less than you did for me a year ago.” The Inquisitor smiled slightly. “Our enemies seem to have found a way to counter my mages.”

“There are ways to prevent even this now that we know. I…” he hesitated to admit it but he’d been so set to protect Ena’vun that he had left himself vulnerable to attack. It was careless and had put them all at risk, and forced Dawn into killing someone to protect him. “How is Ena’vun?”

Alena’s sigh offered no comfort. “She climbed the raven’s nest and hasn’t come down. Isabela kept everyone from going after her; it’s a small space and Dawn needs some time to process.” She sounded so emotionally void that Solas knew Alena was deeply bothered.

He wanted to go to Dawn and offer what comfort he could but Solas’ body was still weighed with fatigue. He could no more Step to her side than he could climb up to her. “What happened?” he managed to hold his impatient frustration.

“As far as I can tell you were ambushed on your way back to the suite. We got to your group not too far away but pretty much as soon as we did the fight dissolved and you were already on the ground. Bull carried you here and we should already be out of port.” The Inquisitor informed briefly.

A series of muffled noises from outside the door silenced them both, eyes moving from careful inspection to regarding the door cautiously. What new trouble was this? A flood of relief had him sagging back as Dawn stepped into the cabin room. Her eyes were red and puffy, tears likely only recently ceased. She was still in the green dress, a splatter of blood across the front the only other sign of her struggle.

“Ena’vun…” Solas didn’t hesitate to open his arms to offer a comforting embrace even with the Inquisitor present.

Dawn was silent as she walked over, sitting on the side of his narrow bed and hugging him tightly. Her skin was cold, chilled from the wind and emotion both so he wrapped his arms around her icy shoulders. He had no magic to will warmth into her, and no words would help settle her either, so he tried to soothe with the minimal strength found in his embrace.

“Barrier Old Wolf. You had no magic left and you still managed to do it.” Her voice was muffled against his shoulder. “Merrill explained that as a mage your body produces
magical energy constantly and needs its constant presence, like blood for a heartbeat. But when you tried the barrier, your body wasn’t ready and the strain should have killed you. Your body gave out and you just…dropped.”

“Ir abelas.” His thoughts and tongue were still clumsy, sliding into his native language but at least Ena’vun understood.

“Merrill says it’s going to take a day or so for you to properly recover.” Dawn lifted her tear stained face up to look at him with a serious expression. “You once said Haste could use me to get power because I circumvent the Veil, could you do the same thing to recover faster?” Whatever she saw on his face she took as answer, demanding “how?” in a way that wasn’t a question and Solas found himself laughing.

He wasn’t sure what would happen if he did try to take her up on the offer, something she had to already suspect. And yet Solas could read her face in return and knew that even if she did understand the risks, she didn’t care. Ena’vun would gladly shoulder the consequences if it meant helping him.

“I don’t know.” He closed his eyes and settled back, aware that at some time the Inquisitor had left but he couldn’t recall when.

“But you have an idea.” She sounded angry and he understood the real source of her ire wasn’t his ignorance on the matter.

“I know sleep and time will do the trick Ena’vun, and now I have the luxury for both because you took action to keep us alive. Thank you.” He targeted the true heart of her raw emotions. “Will you tell me how you’re feeling in regards to your actions today Ena’vun?”

He felt her settle her head against his shoulder again with a sigh even as she leveraged her legs up onto the bed so she was properly lying with him. “I don’t know.” She mimicked his words but he trusted her honesty. “I was so scared but… I just had to keep moving forwards. I had no weapon and I could only…and then you with the Barrier and I just…I did some of the same thing to Florianne you know? Dislocated her elbow. But I didn’t…I killed him today. Iron Bull has taught me to fight with purpose; I knew from Florianne that he’d drop the knife and Hawke told me how to make it quick and painless. It was the only way to keep you safe with the others all occupied. So I did it. I made the choice to kill him and I don’t know how I feel about it yet. What does that say about me?”

Solas didn’t give her an answer right away, not because he was tormenting her but because she’d likely reject anything he could say to help her on the matter. “It’s a complex matter and I’d be surprised if you did have it all figured out already. Like I have the chance to recover now, so do you. Take the time you’ve earned us to feel everything until you are sure and settled. Not one of us can tell you what is the right or wrong way to feel about it.” He knew there was no trick to handling the reality of killing another, thought he did feel mildly hypocritical because it’d taken him a year to come to terms with the consequences his own actions had earned.

“I want to take a hot bath and burn this dress. I keep ruining really pretty clothes and that’s pissing me off too.” She said it in the same tones as she’d once jested about acquiring a puppy.

“And yet you still manage to be more conscientious than Dorian in regards to wardrobe longevity.” He offered gentle humour back, ignoring the need to yawn.

Dawn gave a soft laugh. “Sleep Old Wolf; sleep and recover.”
“Will you still be here when I wake up?” he didn’t mean to ask; the mage bane was still ruining his better reasoning.

“Yes.” She didn’t seem surprised by the request and it occurred to Solas that she needed the quiet and comfort as much as he currently did.

So Solas settled, ceasing his struggle against fatigue and mortal limitations alike. And if he dreamt of chess and monsters, at least his body was so tired he could not move to wake Ena’yun up. She had killed to protect him, but Solas knew that Dawn had been training for a much bigger battle still to come and he would do everything he could to support her through those trials. Even if he knew better than any other living soul just how futile it was to believe one was prepared.

Chapter End Notes

Song Lyrics:

Looking up from underneath
Fractured moonlight on the sea
Reflections still look the same to me
As before I went under

And it's peaceful in the deep
’Cause either way you cannot breathe
No need to pray, no need to speak
Now I am under

Oh, and it's breaking over me
A thousand miles out to the sea bed
Found the place to rest my head

(Never let me go, never let me go
Never let me go, never let me go)

And the arms of the ocean are carrying me
And all this devotion was rushing over me
And the questions I have for a sinner like me
But the arms of the ocean deliver me

Though the pressure's hard to take
It's the only way I can escape
It seems a heavy choice to make
But now I am under, oh

And it's breaking over me
A thousand miles down to the sea bed
I found the place to rest my head
And the arms of the ocean are carrying me
(And all this devotion was rushing out of me)
And the questions I have for a sinner like me
But the arms of the ocean deliver me

And it's over and I'm going under
But I'm not giving up
I'm just giving in

Oh, slipping underneath
So cold and so sweet

In the arms of the ocean, so sweet and so cold
And all this devotion, well, I never knew at all
And the questions I have for a sinner released
In the arms of the ocean deliver me

Deliver me

Deliver me

Deliver me

And it's over
I'm going under
But I'm not giving up
I'm just giving in

Ah, slipping underneath
Wooh, so cold, but so sweet
Here Lies the Abyss

Chapter Summary

On the figurative precipice of war and the literal precipice of a cliff Adamant awaits the Inquisition’s arrival.

It will not go to plan.

Chapter Notes

Good news: I HAVE A JOB AGAIN! And this one sounds like they actually want to keep me! It’s close to home (I could walk home in an hour or so depending on speed of meander) it’s paying me more than what I thought I was going to get, and they are going to tutor me in second language requirements.

YAY NOT JOBLESS!

This chapter got broken in pieces because it's STUPIDLY long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fenris hadn’t seen all of what went wrong while they were in Orlais, but he had seen the end result of the ambush. It was almost as entertaining as the one the Inquisitor had knowingly led them into and as he sat at the prow of the ship, he mused over Hawke’s inevitable choice to throw in with the Inquisition. It was certainly her style though there was slightly more actual planning put in with the Inquisitor.

When they had left the suite Alena had led them from the richest quarter Val Royeaux had outside the Palace and took them into a part of the city so seedy Fenris was surprised they weren’t in Kirkwall. Or an Alienage. Though he remembered his history well enough to recall why this city really didn’t have an Alienage anymore; the disgusted looks shot towards him and the blood mage were an unavoidable reminder. They didn’t stop in the seedy part either, venturing into the absolute dregs of Val Royeaux and Fenris absently wondered if there was a Healer apostate hiding amongst these like Anders had dwelled in Lowtown. What would have been the slave quarters for the very lowest in Tevinter was merely the poorest section of the city in Orlais, and it was here that the Inquisitor led them for her ‘meeting’.

Rotting garbage, open sewage, and the incongruent scent of freshly baking bread all combatted to perfume the air and choke the breath from his lungs, and Fenris scraped something wholly unpleasant off the bottom of his foot without looking too closely at what it was.

The fun part about walking into an ambush was seeing how far along the other person would play until they thought they had you. Alena Cadash was dressed in bland looking browns and greyish
green, all but disappearing from view even without pulling Stealth over herself, and she marched out into the broken cobbled fountain area like she had nothing to fear in the world. If it had been Hawke, she would have shouted out about how pitiful the location was for a proper ambush, trying to draw the other side out in a hurry and get the confrontation going already. Alena merely stopped blending into the background as much and waited in easy looking silence.

Everyone the Inquisitor had brought with her was hidden, laced amongst the shadows like so many grotesque waterspouts but the only thing going to be spilled today was blood. Hopefully their enemies but Fenris was practical enough to know that wasn’t always the case. Especially since they’d brought the blood mage with them. He did find it curious that the Inquisitor had sent most of her own people to guard the Harbinger, leaving herself on a Rogue heavy team that she could not be all that familiar with.

“Inquisitor Cadash,” the oily tones of a self-satisfied noble announced the arrival of their contact. Fenris watched as some idiot sauntered out wearing the typical gilded mask, and far too many flouncy layers to be anything but a courtier. “I am so pleased you agreed to this meeting.”

“You want to blackmail me.” The Inquisitor went directly to the point, sounding as if the entire situation was predictable for her. Hawke could pull off sounding bored but she had never mastered the art of sounding utterly disinterested in the events unfolding; Alena had.

“Blackmail was the lure to get you to come here, far away from your support system. And lucky for me, you complied so very easily.” The courtier gave a limp wave of their hand, the flutter of a handkerchief clearly a signal for the mercenaries to come spilling out.

Even without all of the details Fenris could put things together. This Orlesian idiot had truly thought that whatever blackmail they might have would actually convince the Inquisitor to come alone. Arrogant. Fatally so if Fenris’ assumptions about Alena Cadash were even half close. Alena Cadash had not come alone, and she was certainly far from helpless. Fenris had been tasked with watching and waiting to attack; both his style and his Lyrium markings making any kind of stealth impossible but Isabela and Varric were both already in position to strike out before the mercenaries could.

As soon as Isabela started to move, Fenris did as well. Ten mercenaries came running in to eliminate the supposedly alone Inquisitor and fell to Fenris’ friends so quickly that he never even had to summon the lyrium strength hidden in his skin. Instead he used simple brute strength to bring his heavy sword up and gravity did the rest as it came down; crunching into the mercenary’s shoulder and shearing down through their body to get hung up on the ribcage. With a displeased grimace Fenris kicked the body off the end of his blade, knowing he’d have to polish out the notches later.

Once again the Inquisitor faced the Orlesian, not a hair out of place or a speck of blood on her because they had taken care of all the threats. “Still feel lucky?” Alena asked, just as disinterested sounding now as she had been at the beginning. It was slightly chilling because Fenris was left with the feeling that every moment had been anticipated thus far and the Inquisitor was disappointed by the lack of effort put on by her adversary.
The noble took a surprised, staggering step back and her mask did nothing to hide the shock and fear flashing across her face. And then her face went slack as the Inquisitor finally engaged, moving forwards so quickly Fenris never even saw the blade that slit the noble’s throat open. And that was why it was a bad idea to forget that before she was the Inquisitor Alena Cadash was the Carta assassin. Fenris had lived too long in Kirkwall to ever forget that her old employers had caused half of Hawke’s problems but if his friends managed to handle that fact, Fenris could ignore it just as easily.

Alena had turned to them as the body hit the floor, a slight smile on her face. “Shall we go see what kind of fun trouble my Harbinger has stirred up?”

As a wave crashed up against the Siren’s Call Fenris figured that if Alena had known then the truth of her comment she would never have made it. Because they’d made it back to their suite and found it still empty but before they could meet up with the other team they heard the commotion.

They’d made quick time to the other group, coming across a much more vigorous ambush than the one faced in the slums. A score of Red Templars were either dead on the floor or doing their best to get through the Qunari and Rogues to eliminate the Harbinger. Fenris had caught sight of Dawn holding the other Elf mage upright but his attention was pulled to the strange, howling green hole the Inquisitor opened right fucking next to him.

Fenris snarled out, pain burning across his skin as if he had fallen into a vat of boiling water. His vision went hazy, his body trying to blackout as a method of protection but he fought it off. The middle of a fight was no place for an unconscious Warrior. Whatever it was the Inquisitor had done thankfully ended, an eternity for Fenris but likely seconds to everyone else. It had been long enough for the Red Templar ambush to be foiled entirely though.

Even as his skin twitched and scalded with painful memory, Fenris had remained silent. He had watched as Bull checked on the Harbinger as she guarded the Elf that had fallen unconscious in the middle of battle, before picking Solas up and carrying him as if he weighed nothing. In her fancy dress only lightly stained from fighting, armed with a bloody dagger in hand the Harbinger looked like she could take on the world. Until Fenris caught sight of the look in her eyes.

The Inquisitor rallied her people and they made it back to the ship without a third ambush occurring and Fenris had taken up his post at the prow of the ship. It was the farthest he could get from the Inquisitor without going for a swim, and he wondered what was worse; the pain from the Inquisitor’s gift or the effect the Harbinger had.

Apparently the Harbinger had a similar idea to his own, she boarded the ship and to everyone’s evident surprise climbed the rigging swiftly to the crow’s nest at the very top. Since they were at port no one was up there, otherwise Fenris knew how precarious it could be to move bodies around each other so high up. Even hitting the water from the top of the mast was a death sentence, if she slipped and hit the deck it was going to be messy. Dawn didn’t slip and Fenris watched as Isabela talked the others out of trying to go after her.
But it got him thinking.

This had been her first kill, a fact that was as surprising as it should have been obvious. He had witnessed her weapons training and had bare handed against her enough times by now to know that she was a capable fighter, so he had assumed that she had bloodied herself in the past. Seeing the silent tears she’d shed even as she started to climb had been a startling reminder of how untested this Harbinger was in comparison to everyone else. And those that knew her far better than he did were just as wounded by today’s events as she appeared to be. They were prevented from offering comfort and thus seemed to be at ends for what to actually do.

“Normally I’d be angry that she climbed my rigging without permission,” Isabela was the only one to approach him, the rest were all anxiously waiting for their Herald to return from below decks. “But I’m still too impressed that she managed to climb it in that dress without falling.”

“Reserve your judgement for after she gets back down in good condition.” Fenris suggested, shifting his weight slightly so Isabela could share his space. It wasn’t an idle comment, he’d spied movement up at the top, the vivid green of Dawn’s dress sticking out amongst the brown and white of the mast with sails.

Everyone on deck watched, barely drawing breath as Dawn swiftly left the scant safety of the crow’s nest to once again scamper amongst the rigging as if born to it. She dropped back to the deck and said nothing to anyone watching her as she moved below deck.

“That is one wounded bird.” Isabela remarked lightly, seeing the huddled body language and tear streaked face. But Fenris had to disagree with his lover.

“No, that’s a bird of prey that finally realized it has talons.” He leaned into Isabela a little more, knowing she wasn’t going to like the next part. “I’m resuming our training, even on ship.”

“As if it has gotten any less dangerous?” she was at least arguing, arguing meant he could get a compromise out of her. If she had just said no it was a done deal.

“No, it’s even more dangerous now. But she needs me to do it. So does the rest of the crew; look at them.” He indicated the bunch.

Merrill had that concerned look on her face that she gave every wounded thing she encountered, Varric looked at a loss for words, the Qunari was wiping his blade down but hadn’t washed the blood off his own skin yet, and even Sebastien looked utterly disturbed. Only the redhead looked unaffected by anything, though when the Inquisitor came onto deck the redhead immediately went to her side for a low voiced discussion.

“Every one of them looks like they wanted to wrap her in a blanket and hide her somewhere safe.” There was no criticism from Isabela’s tone, which told him that even his ‘I don’t do attachments’
lover liked the Harbinger. If she didn’t make his skin crawl he would probably think more kindly to her, but Fenris could not ever forget how other she was.

“She asked me to make her tougher, get her ready for whatever it is she knows is coming. She’s not the only one that has to get used to her being hurt. They need to see it as much as she needs to endure it.” He knew what he had to do, and even understood why a little better now at least. Whatever and whoever Dawn had been before coming to Thedas, he had to admit that she seemed to understand how people worked better than most did.

Isabela didn’t say anything or look at him, so he knew she was taking his comments seriously. Admiral Isabela, all but a pirate Queen, was only quiet when considering the fate of her ship, her crew, or when she was taking things seriously. The rest of the time she was gloriously, noisily alive and animated. Even in her sleep.

“I won’t step in then.” She conceded the point to him without further argument. Either she felt as protective of the Harbinger as all the others seemed to or she trusted his judgement that much; he’d been expecting to have to convince her.

With the return of their Inquisitor the others settled and she in turn seemed to make a point speaking to them all, even Sébastian. Fenris figured she was gathering the missing sequence of events.

"Alright everyone, on me for a moment." Alena Cadash easily caught their attention without having to raise her voice much. Isabela ignored the call, seeing to her crew but Fenris came to witness; someone reasonable had to be on hand. "Clearly someone is tracking our movements and after today I cannot hide that the Red Templars have set a permanent target on Dawn's back." her statement was met with varied reactions; apparently it hadn't been common knowledge.

"After Halamshiral my agents got news that Corypheus' Templars are all determined that the Inquisition should lose its Harbinger," the red head spoke up now, "in addition to wanting to eliminate the Herald."

"So we can expect more of this? That'd have been nice to know before we sent her out there like a sacrificial nug. Again." Varric's scathing tone ensured no one thought he was joking.

"If you thought it'd be otherwise after the Winter Palace it was only because you wished to deceive yourself." Fenris usually enjoyed it more when Varric was put in his place but something about the redhead sat off with him still. Maybe it was the sense that she would be just as interested in watching an utter failure as she would be witnessing a triumphant success. "How do you want us after this Boss?" at least the Qunari stayed on topic.

"Nothing much can change. We try to keep her safe and we remain alert to the possibility of ambush.” the Inquisitor didn't shrug but Fenris wouldn't have been surprised if she had. "Solas already figured a way to prevent what happened to him, so next time we'll be able to react differently."

"Like maybe being able to avoid the whole situation?" Varric spat out.

"Do you really believe that for all the suddenness of what happened that Dawn wasn't ready?" the redhead again challenged Varric's anger.
"No one is ever ready," Sebastien spoke up now, "and no one can anticipate how they will react." Varric shot him that angry, frustrated look they all used to see a lot more of in Kirkwall.

"I know that Choir Boy," Varric stressed in carefully enunciated terms, "I'm just one of the people that were still hoping to prevent the necessity all together."

There was no satisfaction from the Inquisitor's counsel, no change to their plans that Fenris had to worry over and so he remained silent. Alena released them and although it was less painfully tense Fenris was glad to see Isabela's crew utterly ignoring the Inquisition's agony. Then again sailing a ship was far more straight forward than saving the world was. The Siren's Call was back out onto the Waking Sea proper and away from the port long before either Solas or Dawn reappeared. The crew had the ship under decent sail and wind, the Inquisition had scattered across the deck as each sought distraction in their own way; finally the hatch belowdecks opened to spit out the sour seeds of discontent.

Fenris saw that Dawn had lost the horrified look he'd spotted earlier, and despite still making his skin crawl Fenris had to respect the determination that seemed to endlessly propel this Harbinger forwards. Everyone else was giving her a thorough look over too, no less so for the very pale mage that came out close behind her. Solas had been lifelessly unconscious when Fenris saw him last and although he had improved enough to not need to be carried, Fenris could still see the exhaustion all but drip off of him. These next few days at sea would do him some good if no one else.

Everyone seemed to be waiting for the Harbinger to speak, afraid to say something that would break her into pieces. "Merrill, any chance you could pull the blood out of this dress so its not stained? I'm getting tired of ruining pretty clothes." Dawn remarked in a nonchalant tone.

"I can try, it doesn't always work." Merrill honestly answered, coming to do just that.

Either she was fiendishly clever or utterly vapid. Her people were lingering around, walking with silent bells, and Dawn simply elected to ignore it. She acted as if everything was going to be fine even if it clearly wasn't yet, and Fenris figured it was as much a lie to herself as it was to everyone else. He was still mildly impressed that she was trying. He was lessed impressed at the reliance on blood magic, though he knew by now to keep his mouth shut on the matter. Merrill had rounded him out on it once, one of the few times he saw her temper. She'd reminded him rather sharply that she was in fact trained to be a Keeper for a Clan and was not some foolish child grabbing at a shiny toy; had trained for over a decade to master her skills without succumbing to any temptation, and further more would take his concerns under consideration if it wasn't for the fact that she already knew he'd rather she be dead than safe. Ten years of always fighting at his side without a negative comment or concern, never faltering, and he had still made her feel like he'd be happier if she were dead. Fenris had reason to dislike mages and blood mages especially but Merrill's actions had always proven he could trust her. His apology had been awkward and painful for them both.

Merrill's magic rescued the dress Dawn had presented and released the Inquisition from tense silence. "Kadan?" The Qunari gave a single word querie that held so many more layers of questions.

Dawn accepted the dress back from Merrill, her eyes going to the one-eyed Warrior's. "I'll...be okay Iron Bull. I don't think I'll ever make a living as a mercenary, but I can live with making this choice." her voice held no trace of tears despite the evidence lingering around her eyes.

"Andraste's ass Sweetheart, you don't have to be." Varric burst out, tone exasperated despite his comments about not interfering.
"Yes, I do Sugar." she smiled but not with humour.

"What are you getting ready for?" Everyone seemed to hold their breath as Varric outright asked her the question likely they had all been wondering.

"Everything I can." she answered as if anticipating that someone was going to ask. Even as it felt scripted, Fenris suspected it was the absolute truth.

It was also a good time for Fenris to enact his little part in getting her ready for 'everything'. "If that is the case then, Harbinger, let us pick up where we left off."

Now everyone was shooting him surprised looks, ranging from startled to angry. Even Dawn was giving him a wide-eyed look, though he doubted that she'd argue with him on it. She didn't, instead Fenris was amused when the lovely green dress she'd been trying to save a moment ago was thrown in his face as a distraction now, letting her duck out of reach as he swung. Fenris chased after as she danced away, not giving her the opportunity for escape. The complicated hairdo she still wore kept the long mane out of easy reach but also gave him solid gripping anchors for when he did get close enough. Fenris managed to grab onto her and quickly connected a fist, missing a good kidney shot as Dawn twisted to lessen the blow. After that it was a grapple more than a fight, each one seeming to be intent to bring the other one to the ground to 'win'.

Fenris jerked his face out reach after sharp nails scratched close to his eyes but that only gave Dawn enough room to ram her elbow into his belly. Even as he grunted breath back he decided to start the second attack. Shit talk time; this was going to earn him some hate.

"Come on Killer, you'll have to do better than that." he growled out, loud enough that Dawn wasn't the only one to be stunned by it. "It's all well and good to kill a Rogue to defend yourself but what good is that if you can't stop an Elf from beating on you now?" he had been asked to toughen up her weak spots afterall.

Distantly he was aware of the reactions, not because he expected interference but because those around them needed to be toughened against her pain too. The Qunari had ripped through Templars like some kind of maelstrom but even though he had been training the Harbinger Fenris knew that there was no preparing someone on how to handle the after effects of battle. It was a struggle they all endured in unique ways and you could only expose someone to it and help pick up the pieces after. Varric was blistering the air with curses, saying several unflattering things about him that Fenris chose to ignore, focusing instead on how Dawn didn't react to it.

"So you've killed." he pressed, making eye contact.

"Yes, I did." he finally heard her admit.

"Finally decided to stop making everyone around do the dirty work of keeping you alive?" he knew that wasn't the truth so of course it was what he said.

She answered with a kick he saw coming from a league away. Her body language was sloppy and every move warned of what the follow through was going to be. It was laughable and expected in response to the emotional beating he was giving her and even as Fenris caught the kick he realized his mistake. Dawn's sloppiness disappeared, her body tightly twisting around so her free leg slammed against the side of his head.

Fenris blinked even as Dawn offered her hand to help him back up, his ears ringing in after-affect. "Yes, I did." Dawn gave him an answer he wasn't expecting to a question he hadn't really been asking.
He took the offered hand and let her pull him to his feet. The fight was done, a quick scrap that had done more to erase the signs of weeping than all the time in the world would have. Now Fenris just needed the dizziness to pass, that had been a well connected kick. "You going to turn into a monster now, go on a slaughter and kill dozens of people just because you learned you're willing to kill to stay alive?" he pushed, being a bit ridiculous on purpose.

"I would except it's really hard on my wardrobe and I'm getting annoyed at ruining such pretty things." Dawn licked a dribble of blood off her lip; one of his punches must have pushed the lip into teeth as there was no external wound.

Fenris' laugh seemed to startle life back into their witnesses, the brewing storm breaking apart as he picked up the green dress. "This one is a little battered but you didn't bloodstain it this time." he offered the dress the same way she'd offered a hand to pull him up earlier.

"It's a little sad how many aspects of my life right now that sentence could apply to." she admitted and accepted the dress.

"There are worse options." he reminded simply and fell silent on the matter. He'd done what he could to help, not just for the Harbinger or for the Harbinger's sake. The Inquisition had an undeniable weakpoint and their enemies seemed keenly aware of it.

Fenris shot Isabela a look, communication accomplished without words as he stepped away. The Inquisition was trying to save the world but Fenris had to wonder if it would even be able to save itself if they let their Harbinger die. Dawn was just a woman but Fenris now knew that to those around her she'd become something else too. Would they endure if they lost her? Could the world afford it if they didn't?

He needed a drink.

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There had been a fairly sharp and distinct drop off in the laughter and joking once Alistair and Hawke had borne witness to the atrocities at Gryphon Wing Keep. They had turned to the closest Inquisition camp, sent the report and then stared out at the desert like it contained their nightmares.

Victoria had spat some of the vilest curses Alistair had ever heard, and he'd had a pretty wide ranged education in that field. Kennel masters, Templars, Gray Wardens, and his own wife loved to swear in straight up blasphemies; all of these paled in comparison to Victoria Hawke's displeasure. The only saving grace was that she at least did not take it out on him. Instead Alistair had begged the requisition's master for duties and unleashed the full force of the Champion of Kirkwall on the wastes of the Western Approach. The King of Ferelden and the Champion collected blighted Dragonthorn, quillback leather, and Paragon's Lustre. If there was a raw material needed they were sent out to get it. And Alistair saw that the Amell temper was in fact a family heirloom because Victoria tore through whatever obstacle was in her path.

Although he felt the absence of his fiery Siobhan it was her personality and not her pyrotechnics he missed. Because apparently his cousin-by-marriage had learned the Rivani trick to lighting her daggers on fire.

He'd been happily bashing his way through a phoenix, ready to assist when it appeared that Victoria had suddenly caught fire. She'd laughed at his concern in a sharp manner and he'd dropped it entirely. The Tales of the Champion had made reference to her glowing blades of retribution but he'd always taken that for prose; trust Varric to tell the truth in such a literary manner. The longer it took for the Inquisition's Army to arrive the less sanity he saw in Victoria Hawke's eyes. With the
fake Calling haunting his every moment Alistair had really been looking forward to being the crazy one for a change but despite it all he felt stable. Just very tired of dreaming about helping turn his wife into a broodmare for darkspawn.

"Vic, this is the third time I've had to gently suggest that you stop stabbing a corpse." He called out in a pleasant tone, once again forcing the erratic Champion back into verbal engagement.

"I keep wondering when I'm going to see Bethany there, blank eyes and spirit stolen by some sick Tevinter bastard." by this point he'd known to anticipate the harsh edge to her tone but the confession caught him off.

"She seemed smart, definitely has more sense and survival skills than you do at least," he didn't have much comfort to offer but by Andraste's endurance he would offer this, "trust that if it got that bad she'd tell your Dwarf and he would see to her."

Something dangerous backed down in Victoria Hawke's eyes, the beast of her maddness held at bay for another day. "I'm starting to think you're smarter than you look Alistair." her taunt held no bite, the smile briefly stretching her chapped lips more than he had hoped for.

"Yeah well, don't tell anyone." he played along, "then they'll expect me to start doing things." he depicated easily.

"You are so full of shit your Majesty." Victoria laughed for the first time in a painful while and although it sounded rough Alistair felt better for hearing it.

"Siobhan calls it cheese." he had to share, desperate to feel normal for just a while longer. It was exhausting to feel so helpless for so long.

"And I'm certain Varric has another word for it entirely. Much more effectively descriptive and viscerally devastating." she wasn't wrong. "By the by, I know you have something to do with him disappearing for that stretch he claims was 'him avoiding his publisher'. One of you is going to tell me the whole story and you're both getting the easy way offered first. Varric wants to stick to his 'I was hard to find on purpose' story but it was during your 'extended visit' to Highever before my cousin disappeared. That's too many people that get shit done unaccounted for at the same time."

He had not been prepared for this. And he certainly had no intention of going over his encounter with Sten-now-Arishok or the whole sordid ordeal. If Varric and Isabela had kept their mouths shut even to Victora, he wasn't going to break rank either. So instead of talking about that, he did picked something else he really didn't want to talk about. "Just as soon as you give me an accurate account of how Bethany actually became tainted and offered to the Warden's." His vision flashed white with pain, his body reflexively stepping back and away even though she'd already retreated from the punch. His nose as definitely broken. "Your cousin is going to scream at you for that." he warned, sounding disgustingly congested.

"Eat my entire ass with a fancy fork Alistair." she snarled in response.

Before either of them could deteriorate the situation more, another blighted Red Lyrium monstrosity followed their bickering to them. Wisely Alistair stayed back, allowing the Champion to vent her rage on the doomed fool. It was a decent reminder that they were not in safe territory and should modulate their volume. The hulking red brute fell before Victoria like wheat before the scythe . She was not a mage but there were still painful flashes of inheritated traits she shared with Siobhan. Maker he missed his wife.

"Back to camp, they have to have news by now." Alistair didn't have to call her off stabbing a
corpse this time at least. It was a bad sign that she didn't argue.

The Inquisition camp did indeed have a Raven waiting with news by the time they returned. It was inevitable and anticipated and still Alistair dreaded reading the words.

*Expect first arrivals in the week. No word from the Inquisitor; anticipate trouble.*

-Cullen

This false Calling these blighted nightmares, and now another war. This time against his own. Alistair had taken on the mantle of King because it had been the best choice for the people of Ferelden at the time, though it had meant taking leave from his duties as a Warden; that did not lessen his dread over their deeds and the consequences that would ripple from them.

"Now you're the one that looks ready to stab a corpse." Hawke tried to joke but it sounded flat.

"They're coming. Seems the Inquisitor went her own way though." Alistair handed over the letter even as he spoke.

"I'm guessing Curly won't let us go in until she gets here either." Victoria's aristocratic features twisted into ugly distaste. "Piss, I'm not good at this waiting around shit." she flopped gracelessly to the ground, a boneless sprawl.

"Wonder what could be more important than this?" Maybe he should be a little more generous, Maker's Beard he even liked Alena. At least he thought he would if he could just get over both his fear that she could kill him in a heartbeat and his urge to treat her like the Herald of Andraste.

They fell back into silence, a duo left mostly alone by the rest of the Inquisition camp. He was a King and she the Champion from stories and they were both too haunted and hunted by what was to come. No one approached unless they had to but Alistair didn't blame them. Nights like this back in the day could only be alleviated by Cousland's mabari going after a hare. Or after Morrigan. But that only served to remind him of Dawn's warning so long ago; that Morrigan and her son were coming to Skyhold. He'd be a sturdy lad by now, Alistair knew the boy's father and so expected nothing less but it was a lot to swallow.

Only a small handful knew, not even all the Wardens he'd saved the world with, and apparently an Offworlder. He wondered if Aeducan would be there too, the once royal Dwarf had given him some very good advice before disappearing to find the Witch of the Wilds and it would be good to catch up. Alistair might not understand how his friend could love the heartless witch but Tedric knew that no matter what Alistair would have his back. Even if no one actually knew what effects the ritual was going to have on the boy or what would come as he aged.

"What do you think is going to happen in there?" Victoria dragged him out of the strange musings but even as distracted as he had been, Alistair didn't have to ask what she was talking about.

Adamant *loomed.*

"In War Victory. In Peace Vigilance. In Death Sacrifice. For a lot of Wardens that is all they have left, and these ones believe that their actions are going to save lives. I don't see how what's coming is going to be anything other than bad." it was too honest, too raw, but Hawke didn't look alarmed by his dour prediction.

"You had a team of baby Wardens against a Blight and high treason. I had a bag of cats that managed to destroy Kirkwall and start a civil war that's taken a turn for the wierd." Victoria's response failed to cheer him up. "Alena has the entire might of the Inquisition, three rather capable
Advisors to help guide her, and if you haven't noticed she is scary competent on her own. If anyone has a chance I think it's the Dwarf." she paused. "Andraste's nipple ring I thing I just cheered myself up." Hawke laughed and Alistair joined her.

"And for what it's worth, she has us." he wasn't sure if that was a boon or a burden.

"If I had had someone like either of you around..." Hawke's voice held echoes of the dead.

Alistair couldn't help think of Kieran and the heavy burden that boy's soul carried. If he could go back and change things, Alistair wasn't sure he would or could choose differently. Warden Riordan had been ready to die but Alistair and the others still alive were all desperately choosing life. It was selfish and terrible and so naively hopeful. That maybe Morrigan could be trusted, that they could live and still defeat the Arch Demon. They had but at what cost? He had no good counsel to offer and a blight ruined Kingdom to show for it, Hawke would have found no help from him.

After it all Siobhan had torn through the records available of other Blights, focusing on the heroes. Those that died but more importantly those that hadn't. Kieran wasn't alone in his heritage, something Alistair was certain Morrigan didn't want them to know.

"And she has Dawn," she sounded surprised to add, "who would have made a world of difference if her arrival had just been a few years earlier."

"I'm fairly certain the world wouldn't have survived having the Blight and Corypheus causing the Breach at the same time." just the idea of the devastation Corypheus could have caused with an army of darkspawn, his lyrium dragon, and an Archdemon gace him chills. Maferath's Mercy, what if Corypheus and the Architect had met?

"It's useless doing this to ourselves." he cut the conversation off, aware that none of their attempts to drag each other out of dangerous pessimism had worked.

"We could always ride out to meet up with the first branch of the army Curly Ravened us about." Hawke offered.

And even if the idea appealed to him about as much as having his nose reset did, it was still better than staying put. Waiting and doing nothing while the nightmares continued to batter at his resolve. He could only imagine Siobhan's loneliness, searching for answers in places and from people that had no intention of sharing their tales willingly. He'd so desperately wanted to go with her, had almost convinced her to at least take Tabris or Brosca with her but as always his headstrong wife had persisted with her own plan. He'd be more concerned except her determination had helped rebuild Ferelden after first saving it.

"Let's go, maybe Cullen will have pity on us and give us something to do." Alistair agreed, knowing that without further discussion they would leave after a quick breakfast in the morning.

Alistair vowed to never, ever tell Hawke she'd have made a good Warden. It would be both the plainest truth and biggest lie he could ever tell.

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For all that Dorian was used to being top-of-the-list, he was absurdly grateful to have been left off the list of people on the Inquisitor's team. He'd travelled with Alena on numerous missions, he enjoyed both her humour and her intellect, and had no issues fighting or forraging at her side. But Dorian was not the arrogant pretty bird he might occasionally pretend to be; he was pragmatic enough to realize that his skills as a mage were impressive but ultimately ill-suited to gallivanting
into the heart of an armed keep. He was a necromancer that had a great command of Virulent Walking Bomb, but he knew his best use would be in countering the mind controlled mages the entire Army had to contend with.

Sadly he knew all too much about both deflecting battle magic and dealing with the aftermath of mind control. Even if everything in the Inquisitor's plan went perfectly, a likelihood Dorian knew sat at utterly preposterous, there were still going to be dozens of Warden Mages dealing with post blood magic mind controlled guilt. Though Dorian did acknowledge that some of the guilt was well earned because they had decided to go along with sacrificing their peers.

Just like his own country had to face their guilt and consequence. It wouldn't be easy but it had to be done.

Of course Dorian was also betting good money on things not working out exactly to Alena's marvellous plan. It wasn't that he didn't have faith in the Inquisitor and her Advisors, Cullen was a dear friend, it was just that this far none of their plans had worked out exactly as anticipated so he was going with the sure thing. Mostly he was just grateful to have avoided another boatride. Yes taking a horse to the Western Approach was tedious but thank the Maker he never got horse sick. It was another matter entirely with boats and ships.

Cullen and Cassandra led the Inquisition Army through now peaceful Orlais, their ranks swelling with Chevaliers and Freemen alike. Dorian had assisted with dreary Sarhnia in the depths of winter but now the battered town fared far better according to Cullen's reports. And the landscapes certainly showed the peace their time in the Winter Palace had achieved in more than just the advancing seasons. Crops were high despite the tumultuous start to the year, and Dorian greatly appreciated encountering no more bands of shambling undead that refused to obey his Will. Instead he endured the tedious plodding through the days of summer as it trekked back towards cooler temperatures.

As sweat dripped its illustrious path down his clavicle, Dorian longed for the cold he'd bitterly complained about what felt like a lifetime ago.

"Is it always this blasted hot?" he was used to the kind of heat that wrapped around the body and encouraged easy afternoons and late nights. This felt akin to basking in a dragon's fireball.

Madam de Fer blinked her attention over to him, his complaint loud enough to draw her interest. Her favoured white attire showed no more sign of travel than her immaculate expression did strain from the heat. "By the time we all assemble again, the average daily temperature is going to be such that it would be ill advised to travel through sun's peak." her tone was faintly amused, as if the prospect were refreshing.

It wasn't news to him, Dorian was aware of the battle plans, Cullen taking into account weather, temperature, and so many other factors Dorian wondered how his friend wasn't prematurely gray. He'd be devastatingly distinguished with that lip scar and a little lightening of those gold curls at the temple. Dorian hadn't realized how he liked a little sign of wear until he'd noticed how many streaks of silver littered Cedric's hair, unashamedly stark against his heavy black strands.

"And at that point we will have to be all the more wary of darkspawn attack. They are, after all, more keen of nighttime skies." Dorian declined to engage in a battle of wits with the Grand Enchanter. He just wasn't in the mood to quarrel.

Vivienne seemed to read his state of unsettled discomfort and kindly chose to leave their usual roles of snipe and sarcasm with each other. "It is strange to consider that those we would have once wished to rescue us from such a terrible fate are now the very same we prepare to strike against."
As always the Lady of Iron had put her finger on the very pulse of the matter at hand. The Gray Wardens were the heroes of legends in Tevinter, Ferelden, and Orlais. Even the smaller Independents generally regarded them with grudging respect. All manner of rumours were flying about how and why the Wardens had been deceived but none of them offered a solution to end this without slaughtering the only people that could stop a Blight. What had happened in the decade between the end of the last and now to bring them to this?

"That's the folly in putting your trust in Man," at least the amusement had a place this time, "we are all doomed to being imperfect mortals striving for perfection." her smile was brilliant and honest. "Some of us more successfully than others of course."

Dorian laughed and conceded her the point gladly. "Of course."

"Darling, we are both capable battle mages, without question. But neither of us are suited to war." everyone overlooked how experienced Madam de Fer was in favour of focussing on her ambition, Dorian included, so it was uncomfortably humbling to be reminded now. "I am an educator and you a scholar and even the tasteless apostate is not a fighter by choice. We are all driven by need." he saw her scan the army to include the soldiers around them.

Outside of the mercenaries and career soldiers*, only half of all present, the Army had a lot of people turned soldier. Because just like him they had taken a look at the state of the world and said 'no, we can be better than this.' But he didn't want to wallow in the depressing mire of emotions still hounding him, not even to acknowledge that fact verbally so instead he deflected with, "it would be so much easier to consider barbaric Fereldens and ostentatious Orleasians my kindred if you all knew how to properly spice your foods."

Vivienne's laugh rang out, a beautiful sound that drew many interested looks. Including that of the ever tiring Sera.

"Wot's so funny ya? Anythin' tha makes the Iron Lady laugh has got to be rabid." Sera called out, not bothering to move closer but instead subjecting all in earshot to her queary.

"Culinary explorations and differences. It seems that our Tevinter altus here finds our foods to be wrongly spiced." Vivienne seemed innured to Sera's boisterousness.

Dorian preferred to absent himself from Sera's particular brand of socializing but he had been seeking a distraction afterall. "Not just wrongly spiced, the Ferelden over use of salted pork is a crime to all refined pallets. But also using spices that have no place in the dish! Sour grass has no place in a dumpling soup."

Sera rolled her eyes so dramatically that Dorian worried they'd fall out of her head, unscrewed. "Blah blah, snooty snooty. You've never been so poor you'd use boot polish to flavour your soup just to hide the taste of rot. Come back to me after tha and I'll let you criticize my spices ya." her scoff wasn't without merit.

"As if any of you cook your own meals." Surprisingly it was Cassandra sounding disgusted with them.

"Cook's banned me from the kitchen, hannet he?" Sera retorted as if it were a defence.

But Dorian's attention was pulled off the mostly friendly bantering because he spotted one of the guards escorting in two figures. He wasn't certain but for a moment he'd thought he'd spied infamously white blonde hair on the Rogue. Either hair that colour wasn't as rare as Dorian had always believed or the Champion had just found her way back to the Inquisition. He did the mental
math, figuring how far the lot was covering in a day. If that had been the Champion then she'd come to meet them; they couldn't be that close to Adamant already.

They just couldn't.

He looked back to the women continuing on the conversation without him easily, their words washing over him like the afternoon rains of spring. Oddly clinging but still somehow cleansing and yet passing on without leaving a mark. They were here to fight against people that should by all rights be their strongest allies. The Champion of Kirkwall was probably here with them and yet the Inquisitor was absent.

And on Dorian rode, sweating in the sun.

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The Valo-Kas were not thrilled to be left behind at Skyhold again. For the vast majority of them, they were lifetime mercenaries and ached to be bodily busy with violent glee. Kasaanda paced the camp ground relentlessly, held to the keep by their Ari's will but Kaaras knew his twin well and knew she longed for the battlefield. Especially against these vaunted Wardens, the ultimate test for her abilities. There was a reason Kaaras hadn't been too surprised to see Rage parodying about as his twin.

Instead Shokrakar kept them hold bound and Kaaras wasn't entirely sure it was just due to Taam-Kas' arrival. His leader was a battlemaster that plotted everything out many steps in advance, she had been prepared for her child for a while now though Skyhold was likely the safest place for a newborn Vasoth mage. This had never been the plan but maybe his leader had made it the plan, he could only trust her intuition and experience. It was surprisingly easy for him to do even as he missed the people absent from the once crowded feeling Keep. Shokrakar would not stop the Valo-Kas from being mercenaries, so she had to hold them in place now for a purpose she had yet to reveal to them. Patience wasn't his strongest suit, or any Qunari's for that matter, but he would wait to see what came of her decision.

He set aside the persistent concern, able to return to fretting about it later. Instead he was fullfilling a request for Dawn, grateful that she had given him something to focus on. As a Healer he should be at the front lines, helping those who'd inevitably be injured but he was obedient to his Ari's command. And since the Inquisitor hadn't insisted on him attending to it either, here he was with nothing better to do than follow Dawn's instructions. She had asked him to bring his sister to the Undercroft and help Dagna with a project that no one else was aware of yet, and both Adaars were bored enough to accept the strange request.

"Ah you're here!" a bright and cheery tone greeted them and Kaaras wasn't surprised to find a Dwarf even tinier than the Inquisitor.

It seemed Dawn had even though ahead enough to collude with the Archanist. "Hello Archanist Dagna, it seems we have a friend in common. I am Kaaras and this is my sister Kasaanda."

"Genetically inherited traits across different represented genders including colouration but nor horn curl. And you're both mages but different types," her comment caught him off guard and left Kasaanda looking baffled. "It'd be a better comparison if there were more controlled variables but it's still interesting. Tell me, did both of you plan on having kids in the future?"

"Fuck no." Kasaanda spat even as Kaaras replied, "that's a bit personal."

"Oh yeah, that's considered rude." Dagna didn't lose her smile even with the criticism. "So did
Dawn tell you why she thought you needed to work with me?" the Dwarf didn't even wait for an answer, "I know you're a Healer and you're a Necromancer; what I need to know is if either of you can help me with this."

Kaaras had no idea what was actually going on, Dawn had just asked him to help, but he was not ready for the Archanist to march over to a draped object and rip the cover away to reveal Red Lyrium. The same chunk he vaguely remembered them finding in a sheild at Haven.

"Why can't I feel it?" Kasaanda raised a good point, red lyrium had a discordant energy to it usually but even seeing it, Kaaras couldn't feel it.

"Containment parameters." That clarified nothing. "It's not perfect but so far I haven't had any overwhelming murderous urges." Dagna explained with a laugh. Kaaras was faintly disturbed because he wasn't sure it was a joke.

"Maybe you better go back to the beginning of the plan so it makes sense and isn't crazy. 'Cause I could use an explanation right about now." Kasaanda encouraged with her usual diplomacy. To Kaaras' utter surprise, Dagna didn't seem offended in the least.

"Dawn told me a secret, something not yet discovered in this world," that had both of their immediate attention, "and before leaving she told me I had to tell the two of you. Something about finding the trick to this being a 'big deal'." Dagna used one of Dawn's native phrases with an ease that left Kaaras wondering just how much time they'd spent together. "You see, red lyrium is so dangerous because it's regular lyrium but infected with the Blight."

"But that doesn't make sense." Kaaras immediately rejected, but to his surprise Kasaanda didn't look surprised. She read his reaction to that right off his face no doubt.

"Think about it, about what we've seen Kaaras. That fucking Dragon got within a foot of us and it was very much alive." his twin argued and he had nothing intelligent to counter with.

"But if it's infected with Blight that means it's alive." he finally, weakly pointed out.

"And that was the secret Dawn told me to share with you." Dagna proudly chimed in.

Kaaras looked from his stony faced twin to the gleeful looking Dwarf and then over to the contained chunk. "So what is it we're supposed to do?" he capitulated.

"Dawn wants us to try and figure out how to get the Blight out." Dagna clarified as if that were a simple task.

"Well then, her expectation of our abilities is a bit flattering." he remarked as if it would help.

The 'containment' was a complicated layering of runes and activated wards, the likes of which Kaaras had truly never seen before. More than that alone Dagna equipped them all with special safety gloves, glasses, and even a face piece to breathe through before she dropped the shield. And then Kaaras could finally feel it; like the first sip of hot tea after a cold day, the first odors of cooking food after a fast. But lingering in the very back was a sense of something off and rotten about it.

As sickening as it felt to him, Kaaras had mastered the art of swallowing down bile. Kasaanda grunted in her attempt to not gag, going so far as to shake her body as if shedding water. It would have been amusing if Kaaras didn't feel as pasty as she looked. Dagna meanwhile was watching them both intently, clearly anticipating the reaction.
"That seems to be the biggest side effect to the containment," Dagna didn't apologize for not warning them, "the effects build up and 'spill out' for lack of a better term. It immediately passes but it seems to affect everyone differently."

"I'm going to puke on your head." Kasaanda croaked, not entirely joking if Kaaras read her colouration right.

"Bucket's in the corner." Dagna waved to indicate, no judgement in her tone.

"You have a giant chunk of red lyrium dragon claw in the heart of Skyhold and its partially contained but can 'build up', and this doesn't concern you at all?" his voice was tight with anxiety. There were so many ways this could go wrong.

But Dagna gave him a disappointed look and sighed. "There are multiple layers of containment. Runes and wards at the door, around the floors and walls of the room and up the stairs. More so, the running water serves to actively deplete most potions and spells as it is moving too fast and carries too much total mass to properly affect. We can flood this entire chamber from either in here ourselves or upstairs if we're all lost. And I had the engineers build in air tight seals so nothing of what gets released in here seeps upwards. Why do you think the doors take so long to open?"

Maybe he should expect the professional nutjob to at least be a competent professional nutjob. "I apologize if my concern is offensive." why the bruised damn was he being so formal all of a sudden?

"Nah, it's all good. Better to be aware of the safety measures if it helps you feel better." and she was back to her effusive self again.

By the time Kaaras had bathed and crawled back into his bedroll that night he had learned two very important things. One was that Dagna came across as kind of strange because her brain moved so fast no one around could keep up. They had tried straight Healing magic to no avail, Necromancy had just as much effect. Neither fire nor earth could cleanse the Blight out. And every thing done was as measured and recorded as Dagna's tools could make them be. Some strange thermometer read the air for the heat of his fire while another tool kept track of his heart rate. Not even Kasaanda put up a fuss to these weird methods; both of them cautiously and curiously going along.

Because the second thing Kaaras had learned was that when he really thought about it, Dawn was scary. The things she knew and how she chose to use that information was a tapestry of interwoven patterns, the end result of which Kaaras could only hope was strong enough to hold the world together.

He remembered the broken woman they had rescued at the Conclave. Her scream when her husband had died, the fury she used only made her stillness after all the more heartbreaking. And yet he'd watched her put herself back together, had helped her to do so and in a strange way loved her dearly for their time together while she did that; but Kaaras had never really taken a step back from that to see all the ways the things she had done tied together. He just wasn't smart enough to put it all together. He wanted to talk to Shokrakar about it and for he first time in his life couldn't because there were huge implications to what it meant. Lyrium was alive enough to be tainted with Blight and if Dawn had kept this knowledge quiet for now... he was going to trust her. After this long he owed her no less. It was a little surprising that Kasaanda agreed with him, even if she wasn't as close to Dawn as he was.

And she was expecting them to somehow figure out how to banish or cure the Blight when no one else could. No pressure.
To say things had not gone to plan was an understatement but Alena prided herself on being adaptable. The Red Templars had followed through on their threats against Dawn, but no one on her side had been seriously hurt so it was technically a win. At least it was close enough she was counting it because Alena would take what she could get.

"She handled the Chantry surprises remarkably," Leliana briefed her on the events, "and I have every intention of that little speech making its way into the hands of the people that need to see it." there was a sadistic glee in the Nightingale's tone that Alena recognized.

"Mother Hevarra isn't one of your favourites then?" Alena smirked lightly.

"The whole world is crying out for help and she'd rather close the doors of the Chantry to protect their investments. She's the worst kind."

The judgement wasn't unexpected and it was entirely in line to what Alena had anticipated. After all of this, if they survived, Alena really was going to make her spymaster Divine. The world desperately needed someone like her and Alena was absolutely chuffed to be giving her friend the honor. If a small part of her was smugly amused to repay a certain sword scene Leliana had orchestrated, Alena wasn't surprised. "And you think Hevarra is going to try to cover up what Dawn said?" Alena let none of her scheming show but as always had no idea what Leliana actually knew already.

"Absolutely. It was a terrible gamble on her part and it did not pay off for her at all, to save face if nothing else Hevarra's going to try to sway opinions." Leliana's hair was the same scarlet in the sunset sky and Alena found her friend looking particularly lovely despite the topic. Long gone was the doubt filled lay sister in Haven, demanding that the Maker have answers. "Our greatest asset was that Dawn spoke to all the noble houses that could buy a seat in the Chantry. They are going to spread your Harbinger's speech faster than Hevarra could ever hope to quiet it."

"Send a Raven with a copy of it to Mother Giselle so Ferelden gets it passed around just as quickly. And see if Cedric Lavellan can get it out to the Free Marches through his Clan in Wycome." Alena instructed, knowing how reluctant both Fereldans and Marchers were to accept anything from Orlais.

"And with what's happened since the speech?" Leliana was alluding to Dawn's post killing quietness.

"Do you remember your first kill?" Alena wasn't trying to be rude, they were both professional killers even if technically retired. "Do you remember anything actually helping you deal with it?"

Leliana got a distant look to her eyes, memory taking her for a moment. "I was an entirely different person then, motivated by much more...naive notions." her confession surprised Alena a little, she sounded almost wistful.

"I was a lot dumber." Alena was brutally honest. "No impulse control, blind luck, and a knack for fading into the background. And somehow I turned it into a career. I outgrew the first quickly, learned patience so I stopped needing the second, and that third has been rather helpful."

"Her fight with Fenris settled some concerns at least." it was a slightly forced change of topic but Alena went with it.

"Fenris nearly had three different people throw his ass into the water." Alena countered without
"She is as ready as we all can make her," Leliana's vote of confidence was not easily earned, Alena knew that.

"You still wish I told her no." Alena knew the argument well. Dawn knew too much to risk, no matter who's life she thought she might save. Leliana was certain it wasn't the Inquisitor; with all of the training she's put herself through the best guess anyone had is that it's a civilian of import. As good as Dawn was, everyone else on the Inquisitor's teams had years of experience on top of being capable. No one could figure how her presence could save any of them, and ultimately all of them were expendable compared to the Offworlder knowledge Dawn had. At least according to Leliana.

"We'll hit shore before midday tomorrow, and then there is a relatively short trek from there to Adamant and your forces. We'll see if Dawn talks herself out of this confrontation or not." Leliana's deflection was nicely done.

Dawn didn't fall apart or bow herself out after the ship hit the shore, nor in the time after they set out to meet up with Alena's Commander and her Army. Alena hadn't actually expected her to and she doubted Leliana had either. Insistence was a consistent vein of Dawn's, Alena recalled her declaring she wasn't a spy while holding Leliana's blade. But Dawn was quieter than anyone had ever heard her be since she started to learn their language. She conversed when someone talked to her, and engaged almost as if everything actually was alright; Dawn functioned but it was a masterful lie of normalcy. They could only give her time, though Alena missed the humming and singing no one pressed. It had been a long, long time since she'd had to tackle her own moral stance on killing and her hands were far too bloody to do anything else. And despite all the possible complications from those that cared for her, the others all waited for Dawn to adjust at her own speed.

And then Alena's small team spied the distant pennons of an Inquisition camp. Even losing time to cross the Waking Sea and attend to the Chantry ceremony Alena was still ahead of Cullen, but not by much. Her Commander disliked being tardy or inefficient. And all the members of her Army knew what and why they marched for, so even if the faint hearted wanted to drag their feet too many were driven forward with purpose. They would be on time.

It almost didn't feel real to Alena, that this was all really happening. That she was the leader of a truly powerful and independent force that had the support of Ferelden and Orlais against a darkspawn magister and they were all about to do bloody war. It felt like any other regular string of days, her ass and hips hurt from riding her Dracolisk. Her back and shoulders also ached, an echo of the persistent crick in her neck because all these blighters were too tall. A part of her bemusedly wondered if maybe she was asleep and dreaming. The world couldn't really have gone so twisted that the hero of the story was an assassin and the bad guys were the Gray Wardens. It felt so wrong and not just because she was a friend of now Paragon Brosca's. At least she'd been Rati's friend way back when they were both impressionable and foolish children together, before Alena's family had escaped to the surface and the Free Marches. It felt wrong because Alena remembered the fear that had saturated the Ferelden refugees that had fled ahead of the darkspawn. And the stories of the smalll band of Gray Wardens that had fought back; against treason, against the Blight, and ultimately succeeded in saving the world despite the odds.

Alena met up with her Commander and the Army but still nothing felt quite real. Dawn hadn't sung since the attack, not even the soft humming she'd done without ever seeming to realize it and maybe that was part of the problem, but there was something else too. The brief meeting with Cullen on troop deployment and the upcoming plans was mostly a refresher as not much had gone awry on his end. She let Leliana catch him up on how very not according to plan their side trip was
and not even surprise over the presence of the King and Champion could burn away the disassociated fog Alena found herself cloaked in.

Hawke watched her like she knew exactly how Alena wasn't feeling at the moment, and likewise Alena could all but see Victoria vibrate with tension and restlessness. Even Alistair seemed to be aware of Hawke's instability but otherwise it seemed like no one else noticed. Or maybe it was too hypocritical to point it out in others; everyone felt wrong.

It wasn't until Alena found herself at her tent that the numbness enveloping her took its first hard hit. Blackwall was there, waiting for her in welcoming silence and a hug that stole her breath.

"You're troubled love." he added himself to the list of people that saw past her quiet to the unease within.

She stared at the man she loved, the man who bore a deadman's last name as a reminder, and finally figured out why she felt so unnaturally calm.

"I think I'm going to die in there Blackwall." The cold logic had numbed her. It was more than just wondering who else Dawn could be trying to protect, Alena couldn't forget the doomed Redcliffe future she'd done much to thwart. Orlais was far too stable now for Corypheus to take advantage of and she was about to rip his demon army away from him. In the deepest coils of her guts she doubted that she'd live to see the other side of this war. The Conclave. Redcliffe. Haven. The Winter Palace. And now Adamant. How many times could she survive? How lucky was she and who would die in her place?

"That would be a mighty cruel thing for you to do to me my love." Blackwall didn't argue or demand an explanation, he simply held her close and refused to let go.

"Do you not think your human Maker would allow the Dwarf titled the Herald of Andraste to rest at his side?" she tried for humor and might have succeeded with somebody else.

"I don't think I'd be allowed. But enough talk of death and rest love," his beard tickled as he pressed kiss to her forehead.

Like she'd taken off her boots and stepped into a braizer full of embers, Alena burned. Cold dread melted away to plainly magnificent desire and when he moved kiss from forehead to lips she was already ablaze. Maybe she would die in Adamant, maybe she wouldn't; tonight was about this man holding her desperately close.

Paragons and Dusters she loved this man.

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Victoria hadn't been surrounded by this many tents since her failed attempt at being a soldier, and the flashbacks to battling with Carver at her side did nothing to help settle her agitation any. He had been a baby, had no place in a war and yet he had wanted to serve and so she had joined too; someone had to watch his back.

The sound of metal scraping across stone could still make her flinch.

Alistair was worse as well and she felt guilty over being useless to help with that too. Bethany had explained the nightmares in detail, seeming to know the best way to battle them was to find support in something she trusted to be real. But knowing the kinds of torment her companion was going through didn't offer a method with which to ease his burden. So she gave him space to deal with it and tried to be there if he reached out. Not that she had any clue what to do if he actually
did.

Reaching Curly and his army had been a decent distraction for a couple of days. Alistair and Cullen knew each other just well enough for Curly to get over the fact that Alistair was incidentally his King, but not his current boss. If the Inquisitor decided to take over Ferelden Alistair would probably hurl the crown at her with a happy yell and lark off to join his wife. It almost made Hawke wish Alena had a conquering urge in her body.

But the closer they got to Adamant again, the worse Alistair began to look, as if proximity increased agony. His dark complexion gained a tinged, pasty hue and his eyes looked sunken but never did he waver. It was just enough to let Hawke hold it together too.

And then the Herald found them and everything changed.

Isabela, Fenris, Merrill, Sebastien, and Varric, all here. Her family reunited after far too long and still too many missing besides. But the ball of pain in her spine released some of its tension when she saw them all together.

People called her the Champion but the truth was she only cared about keeping her idiots safe. She was terrible at her job but she was willing to die doing it. They had claimed her just as fiercely in return and she knew it; Varric had the stabbed book to prove it too.

It felt so good to have her people again that Hawke almost missed the subtle change in Alistair. The first night reunited and Hawke got the story of their trials on the way here, Dawn's quietness and the reason for it, and a strange moment where Varric demanded they have 'a talk' after Adamant had been dealt with. There was too much to take in and process, too many tangled emotions to settle that Victoria had simply promised herself a quiet moment to contemplate it in the morning.

Instead she woke to find Alistair having a religious experience.

He was up at the ass crack of dawn, sitting at the embers of the fire and looking like he'd gotten a decade younger. Or like he'd had his first real good night's sleep in over a year.

"What happened?" her voice was low and rough, too much talking last night after so long quiet on the road.

"I slept." the ease they'd built over the last few months was still there, no time wasted on filter questions. Her cousin-by-marriage was smarter than he liked letting people know but moments like this revealed it. "And for the first time since... there was nothing. No creeping dread, no horrible... just peace. Rest." the King of Ferelden stared at her, looking utterly renewed after a single night. "It has to be the Herald," he insisted and Hawke fought a knee-jerk urge to argue, "she joined us yesterday and I finally have a reprieve."

"Did you experience it the last time you were around her?" she finally carefully let herself argue.

He frowned, not anger or doubt but thought. "No, I suffered at Skyhold. But what else could it be Hawke? Something has changed."

"Keep track and be wary, lots of traps are baited with sweet tidings." she had to warn, still not settled on the idea of the Herald of Andraste being the Herald of Andraste.

"I only wish Siobhan could have this reprieve as well." Alistair hadn't actually mentioned Hawke's cousin in a while but she never doubted his devotion to her.

"Rest well then cuz, when you reunite you'll need to use all that vaunted Warden stamina to keep
up with her and you know it." Hawke winked and saw Alistair's blush even through his colouration.

Her face hurt, the smile real but feeling out of place and she loved it all the same. Maybe the Hero and the Champion were a little more battered, broken, and crazy than people needed but they were still standing.

She clung to that as they reached Adamant. It had taken forever and yet they arrived before Victoria felt ready for it. She hadn't drawn Dawn out of her quietness though her friend was willing to talk and engage; it was obvious she was still working her way through her moral issue. It wasn't something Victoria could help with at all, she didn't even remember the face of the first person she'd killed. It had been some half wild bandit that had tried to ransack their little home while Father was away. She hadn't lost any sleep at all over protecting Mother who had been heavily pregnant with the twins and she had been so young herself. But Victoria knew for a long time now that she wasn't quite right in the head, that's why she needed her people so much. They kept her from losing the way. Dawn was surrounded by those that wanted to help but everyone knew this wasn't something they could ease. Bad timing right before a war though.

The Inquisitor called the strike team together, a final review of their next night. "Cullen's gate breakers and war machines are going to crack Adamant open for us. He has insisted that he sends a team in before us, but we will be second sent in." Alena was serious but had a calm that affected everyone; maybe Alistair wasn't wrong about her.

It certainly couldn't hurt to have a handmaiden to the Maker's wife on their side.

"We are going to be facing Gray Wardens, many of whom are being mind controlled. Our intentions are to try and subdue as many as possible if possible but if there are to be casualties I want them on their side. Victims or not their actions have brought forward an army of demons to contend with. At the center of Adamant is Warden Commander Clarel; if we can convince her we save the Wardens."

It wasn't a rousing speech. Victoria saw determination, concern; emotions more volatile and inherent all reflected in everyone. Dawn was quiet but present, the least tested but the greatest comfort because she has said they can do this; she's witnessed it many times before in her world story. She just wasn't going to tell them how they do it. Iron Bull loomed near her, watching her back even as she covered his blind spot. The mage Solas looked vaguely distracted but always answered a question when prompted, and Varric stared at his hands but was listening.

When it was clear Alena had nothing more to say, Alistair spoke up. "This is not going to be easy for any of us. These are my siblings-in-arms and I want nothing more than to save them if I can." she wanted to hit him, this wasn't helping. "Do not hesitate to kill them if you have to. They are battle tested, they have taken the vow to die for the cause and they will not hesitate to kill you. Protect yourself, protect us, and do not hesitate."

Victoria felt a little humbled, having yet again underestimated Alistair. Given the chance, no one here wanted the battle to happen but they were the best chance at saving as many lives as possible. Hawke had never successfully kept everyone alive but she was good at helping save as many as possible.

There were no grand speeches before the Army, no obvious mustering to warn Adamant of the looming attack. Everyone knew their role and was in their place as the sun set and light beguiled the eyes of the keep. They never saw the first trebuchet fire but the Inquisition's forces gave a mighty cheer as the first volley of attack smashed into the walls with devastating effect. More shots rained down and they were moving, the gate breakers acting in tandem to the ladders scaling the
Hawke had seen an army before, but the forces of the Inquisition were massive and driven by purpose. They broke the gates, the first team Cullen sent in only moments ahead and the Victoria followed the Inquisitor into the throat of the monster.

The Wardens still capable of free thought pulled back, recognizing the need for retreat. However those bound had no self survival left to them. They had to clear the first courtyard to a body before a moment's reprieve was given. Hawke noticed Curly come to confer with Alena but her attention focused on Dawn and Iron Bull, shamelessly eavesdropping.

"I can't kill them. I need to keep going but I..." her tone was quietly agonized. Hawke doubted anyone but the sharp eared Elf and herself had overheard the confession.

"Stop." Bull rumbled, voice just as low but firm. "Kill the demons, protect my blind spot, defend yourself. Leave the killing to me."

Hawke looked away as the Qunari spied her listening, but her eyes only caught on the Elf she now knew had heard the Harbinger's divulgence. It was an unfortunate turn of events, discovering a pacifistic compulsion in the middle of bloody battle but Hawke was almost glad to hear it from Dawn. She didn't want her friend to get used to killing, she wanted a different life for Dawn than that.

"I want to save them Iron Bull. It's not right that they can't choose." Dawn's compassion was going to get someone killed but Hawke loved her for it all the same.

"Then get through to them Kadan." she lost the rest of what was said as they moved forwards.

Seven fully trained and capable fighters moved forwards, the Harbinger deliberately shuffled to the center of the pack, and moved to clear the battlements. A single foothold on the walls could end this battle far quicker. Hawke couldn't spare a second to worry over anything, she had to give herself to the moment and the motions of survival.

Alistair talked the Rogues and the Warriors down, convincing those free of will to submit, surrender; survive. But so many demons poured forth, the wills and minds of Warden mages possessed and controlled. Those they could not get to stand down no matter how eloquently Alistair tried to convince.

They were close to the heart of the Keep when it occurred; Dawn had battered a demon down and turned to face her next opponent, sword raised. But it was a mage, eyes blank and will not their own. The mage wasn't hesitating but Dawn was and no one was close enough to intervene. "Please find the strength to fight it, you do not have to die today." the plea was so softly spoken Hawke wasn't sure she'd heard Dawn actually say it. And the mage stared at her, frozen in place without a shard of ice to do it. The others all fought on, oblivious except for Bull and Hawke as the mage did the impossible and dropped to her knees mind once again her own. Alistair had been wrong. Alena wasn't what had changed, Dawn was. Victoria couldn't think about it though, the reprieve gone as more demons flooded the area.

Miracles could wait, they could hear Warden Commander Clarel addressing her troops. Victoria's blades had a little poison left on them but she waited to let Alena try and convince Clarel before Hawke would take a more expedient measure.

"Clarel if you complete that ritual you're doing exactly what Erimond wants." Alena called out, the normally quiet Dwarf having no problem commanding attention.
"What, fighting the Blight? Keeping the world safe from Darkspawn? Who wouldn't want that?" Erimond argued and Clarel remained silent. "And yes, the ritual requires blood sacrifice. Hate me if you must but do not hate the Wardens for doing their duty."

Clarel still seemed convinced of the Tevinter's horseshit. "We make the sacrifices no one else will. Our warriors die proudly for a world that will never thank them." she cried.

"And then he takes your mages' minds for his real master, Corypheus!" Alistair interjected, too familiar to the Wardens to easily ignore.

Clarel obviously recognized the name, face shocked. "Corypheus, but he's dead!"

"These people will say anything to shake your confidence Clarel." Erimond hissed and Hawke got ready to just throw her blades and kill them both.

"Wait." Dawn's quiet command halted her though and Hawke shot her friend a surprised look even as Clarel commanded her Wardens to 'bring it through'.

The mages ripped Rift in the middle of the courtyard.

Alena didn't seem at all surprised and it occurred to Victoria that maybe there was a plan in place she might interfere with. So she held her blades but could not hold her tongue. "Please, I have seen more than my share of blood magic! It's never worth the cost!" she could only hope that maybe if it worked for Dawn it would work for her. No joy.

Something terrible pulsed in the Rift the Wardens had called, terror and evil trying to steal her determination away. And that was only with the door open, whatever it was they wanted to call forth was still on the other side.

"Be ready with the ritual Clarel. This demon is truly worthy of your strength." Erimond encouraged loud enough to be heard over the din.

"This doesn't work." Dawn's voice barked out, loud for all that was occurring. "The fighting and dying here today will not stop the Blight. You have been tricked and betrayed; you know this is wrong! The end does not justify the means if you become the enemy innocents need to be protected from!" she stepped up next to Alena, sword in scabbard and looking unafraid. "If you want to live up to your vow, overthrow Corypheus' hold on you, he is the living embodiment of its corruption."

And like on the battlements Hawke could see her words sinking in where no others would before. Even Clarel looked convinced so of course Erimond attacked.

"My Master thought you might come here Inquisitor, he sent me this to welcome you!" the Tevinter slammed his staff and everyone flinched when the lyrium dragon roared out.

The Inquisitor's team moved, dodging out of the way as it swooped low overhead, lyrium fire scorching at their heels. It landed on a tower, claws crumbling giant rocks to the battlements below. At least it gave Clarel the proof she needed. Even as Victoria scattered with the Inquisitor she saw the Warden Commander lash out at the Tevinter and Dragon both. Alone and she never hesitated to shoot lightning off to distract the dragon.

"Help the Inquisitor!" Clarel commanded before charging after the fleeing Erimond.

No word was spoken as they took off in pursuit. Whatever wanted through that Rift was horrible and to stop it from materializing Erimond had to die. Hawke was more than ready to do the job even if it meant doing a ridiculous amount of running and stairs to get there.
They barrelled around a corner to see Erimond and Clarel circling each other at a dead end, a collapsed bridge cutting off any retreat. They were locked in magical battle, the fury and power of which kept everyone back for fear of accidental inclusion.

"You! You destroyed the Gray Wardens!" Clarel charged forwards, driven and determined. Enough so that Erimond was overwhelmed by her last attack and hit the stones.

He laughed, wheezing from impact. "You did that to yourself you stupid bitch." he sat up weakly. "All I did was dangle a little power before your eyes and you couldn't wait to get your hands bloody."

Clarel didn't reply with words, she all but shoved a bolt of power up his ass. It made Victoria smile viciously, Clarel had this all wrapped up even though Erimond continued taunting her. "You could have served a new god!"

"I will never serve the Blight!" Clarel yelled.

And the lyrium dragon landed, it's jaws snapping down in consume Clarel.

Except a shield came flying out and hit Clarel's legs, laying her flat out enough to avoid the slathering jaws. But it left her right under it as it continued thrashing, stalking towards the larger group. Somehow Victoria spied Clarel still alive under it, bloodied but breathing and still sparking magical energy. It ignored her, facing the larger threat and Hawke had no idea what Clarel expected to do. All she saw was a sudden, massive explosion of light tearing up into the lyrium dragon's belly.

The broken bridge couldn't handle the abuse, explosion and dragon weight enough to ruin its already fragile integrity. Down the lyrium dragon went, Clarel with it. Unfortunately the rest of the bridge and them on it went with them.

Well shit.

Chapter End Notes

*Chevaliers, defected Templars, Knights and Guards
Nightmares and a Bloodied Dawn

Chapter Summary

Part 2 of Here Lies the Abyss

Trapped in the Fade, Dawn has to face the worst the Nightmare has to throw at the Inquisition. She failed to save Clarel, could she hope to save Hawke and Alistair; will she even be able to save herself?

Chapter Notes

Again, this is one of those chapters I wrote a LONG time ago and it has undergone many revisions.

And again, it’s broken into another part after this because I am WORDY.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Leliana,

Time for you to have a little faith again Nightingale.

To rest your fears I have left notes on all I could recall and was willing to write down in my footlocker at Skyhold, so if the worst should happen you still have what you need. They’re in my language and I have not written EVERYTHING I know but it is enough. Enough to help you, help the Inquisition, and hopefully save this world from what I know is coming. You will need Cole to help translate them but he’ll know to help.

This is your last chance to take the future as it comes to you; if you know what I do then I have to trust you to see my task complete.

Below is only a brief list of what is coming next. It is up to you what you do with this.

Dawn

The letter was much longer than the message scrawled at the top, though that was what Leliana had read repeatedly. It was a far cry from the woman that hadn’t spoken a word and had taught herself the fundamentals of reading their language, and Leliana would never tell her that her grammar still needed work because it was such a minor issue compared to mastering strange linguistics.

Leliana hadn’t read the whole note yet. She had been a spy or a Bard since puberty and yet now with a veritable font of knowledge available to her and her alone, she hesitated. Dawn’s warning wasn’t without merit.

Did Leliana really want to know for sure what was coming? Did she want to assume the burden of completing whatever it was Dawn felt she had to do, and if she chose not to, would she be worthy
of the Harbinger’s trust now?

In the end it depended on who Leliana wanted to be after this. Did she want to continue on her path as the Nightingale, or would she choose to be someone new in the future? That seemed to be Dawn’s goal in the end for them all; making the active choice of who they wanted to be. Leliana wanted to know, as Spymaster she absolutely should know, but she stared at the emphasized word instead of letting her eyes scan lower. Faith.

She had had faith once. In a person until Marjolaine had ruined that innocence, and in the Chantry until Dorothea had been struck down. Tug had paid the cost of her innocence, his death to protect Sketch the one act of love she could not deny from that entire ordeal. They had prevented war, saved lives, foiled plots and still Leliana had left that life behind gladly to become first a lay sister and then the Left Hand for the Divine.

But her path had not been that simple and easy, and perhaps Dawn had chosen to remind her that she knew it too. Between the Bard that was and the Nightingale she current is, Leliana had lived a thousand experiences that had changed her far too greatly to ever go back. Love and loss, bitterness and betterment, she had travelled with heroes and offered them hope, and now she advised leaders and found them rumours.

It wasn’t enough.

She knew the burdens Alena had been given, and she did not want those for herself. But she did know the whispers that made their way to the Inquisitor’s ear and so she knew that the Chantry was considering her for the Divine throne.

Was that what she wanted? Would that be the best for everyone?

The letter in her hand crinkled slightly, her grip on the sides giving away her agitation. Dawn had gifted her note after they had re-joined the army and Leliana had left it sealed as requested until the Inquisitor’s team had set out. Cullen was in Adamant, leading the forces under his Command, and Leliana was in the camp with those few that would not join the fray.

It was her task to watch and record history, in the hopes that their actions here would be successful and lead them to a future where there was a next generation to teach. She was also responsible for Commanding the Healers, both magic and alchemical, as injured bodies started to make their way back to camp and deciding what actions to take with the prisoners brought out in ever growing numbers.

Whatever else had happened because of the Harbinger, the Gray Wardens surviving their folly lay firmly at her feet; the soldiers of the Inquisition were here to rescue them instead of eliminating a threat. These men, women, and members of such a secretive force were saved because Dawn Wesson had been forthright about why they had been duped, and the result was that the soldiers begged them to surrender and live. Desperation and compassion weren’t such bad bedfellows after all. She had to wonder if the list of things to come included even this.

Leliana’s attention was pulled from the page only when the sounds of a Dragon roaring overhead made it impossible to focus on anything else.

The lyrium monstrosity being here was a bad development and Leliana raced outside of the Command tent to stand with all those in Camp, watching the night sky as if they could see the dragon framed against the dark. The flickering light of fires from within the Keep made everything a strange tableau of shadows and light, obscuring the depth and movements of those within and leaving the witnesses on the outside in tense waiting.
They were too far to hear the screaming, but not so far that they couldn’t hear the overall din of battle. The distant pop of magical explosions did nothing to settle the fear and unease of those watching from a distance, locked in place by fear and kept away by need. Haven had fallen to this beast in less than a handful of minutes and it had taken the Inquisitor collapsing a mountain on top of herself to stop it. They had no such luck this time.

When the Abyssal Reach flashed the same green of the Breach, Leliana heard so many people cry out that it deafened her. Her heart broke and yet even before it finished shattering the green was gone and there was no destruction.

Just silence.

They looked to her— the bones and structure of the Army that had stayed behind, the Healers, the soldiers, and the prisoners alike; all lost and scared and looking to her for guidance. She was the Seneschal and nothing ever surprised her and now they needed that more than they could ever use the truth of her concern.

“Our Herald and our Harbinger were prepared for this,” she might not be lying; Dawn had been preparing for something, “we will hold this line. We will wait for the army to return. And when the time comes, we will celebrate our victory.”

The weight of eyes on her was staggering and all that kept her from reading through the letter was the performance she was playing now. Her confidence was convincing and so those watching took strength from it. The panic that had filled them eased, instead of doom their whispers were full of wagers debating what had happened.

Dawn had tried to give her the luxury of ignorance, give her the choice of who she wanted to be. But like Justinia had underestimated the drive that had kept Leliana at her side, Dawn had not been aware of the reality of Leliana’s life. She had chosen who she wanted to be long ago. She would take the burden of knowing over the freedom of ignorance, every single time.

“So that flash is nothing to worry about then?” Dorian drew her attention to him, his face shrouded in the torch light.

“I never said that.” She smiled to ease her refute.

“You didn’t say a lot of things.” Of course the Tevinter noble would pay attention to the layers being discussed.

“You of all people should know by now, that nothing is ever as it first seems.” She redirected subtly, leading him back into the Command tent and discreetly tucking the letter from Dawn away.

“And that is why I don’t trust a thing coming out of your pretty mouth Spymaster.” Dorian dropped the friendliness he usually bore like a chip on the shoulder.

If he wanted to play with naked blades, the altus should have come more prepared. And not alone.

“I would take your mistrust more personally except for the fact that you only decided to be a decent human being in the last year; before that you were a privileged, entitled drain on the world. You want to question my motives or methods you need to make your time magic work again and go back four years to when your input would have been listened to. Now get back to your post and do the one job you seem capable of.” Leliana didn’t bother putting emotional emphasis into her words. She had never been impressed by the altus’ attitudes and she tolerated him because he served a purpose. Questioning hers wasn’t it.
“Criticize me all you want Spymaster, but we both know that letter you tried to hide isn’t offering platitudes.” Dorian was unfazed by her rudeness.

They were saved from her response as a rather injured Cullen was led into the Command tent.

“All continues to be well I see.” Dorian flippantly announced to the open air, about as subtle as an avalanche.

Leliana watched as Dorian ignored her to go help his friend and she let the argument go. It could wait; the blood soaked bandage wrapped around the Commander’s leg required her focus currently.

“A Shriek surprised me, it’s nothing serious.” Cullen grunted out utterly unaware of the tension between Leliana and Dorian.

Leliana tried to access how accurate Cullen’s comment was. The mere fact that the Healers had wasted neither potion nor magic on it did indicate that it wasn’t a terribly serious wound. “You do realize that taking you back to Josephine in this state is going to get me in trouble, don’t you Commander?”

“It’s just a flesh wound. I would have stayed at the Keep except Blackwall suggested I return to the Command tent so I wouldn’t bleed on everything.” He sounded annoyed and not at all concerned but there was a look on his face that Leliana had seen too often, he had more to say and was waiting until he found the right words to say it.

“Then let us get you situated my friend, and they can stick a cork in that.” Dorian cajoled and all but shoved the chair into Cullen’s legs to get him sitting.

“They already did.” Cullen sounded amused now, letting his friend fuss a little as Leliana stayed reticent.

He wasted no time on pleasantries, weight off the injured leg and the Commander once again assumed Command. “The Inquisitor and her team, including the Harbinger, are missing. Some… event happened and they are gone.” He should seem terrified, concerned, outraged but he wasn’t; there had to be more. “Blackwall found me after the incident happened and gave me this.”

He thrust a small scrap of paper with, by now, very familiar looking writing scrawled on it. Another note from Dawn, this one reading:

*Keep everyone calm; we should all come back soon.*

There was nothing else there but there really did not need to be. Dawn had seen this coming and had planned for it, and now Leliana knew just what it was the Harbinger had been preparing for. And why she had set up a fail-safe if the worst should happen.

Even without reading the note she had tucked away, Leliana recalled the warning Dawn had given about taking the future as it came to her versus knowing what the Harbinger knew. Dawn had known what was coming and hadn’t warned them, not completely. But she had taken precautions to counter the issues she could anticipate arising, all while deliberately withholding information from the very people who should have been the ones deciding what course to take. In another lifetime she’d have made an excellent Bard.

“So what do we do, Commander?” Leliana put the decision on Cullen reluctantly, knowing that the Army would respond to him in the absence of the Inquisitor far better than it would herself and that he would absolutely hate it.
The look her fellow Advisor shot her was proof of his disgust at the blatant manoeuvring. “We have to assume this is what Lady Dawn insisted on attending to herself, and we have to assume she knows what she is doing. The Harbinger said they should all come back soon; we prepare for that.”

“And if she is wrong?” Dorian demanded with a casual sounding drawl.

“Then we will have bigger things to worry about than morale.” Leliana interjected.

“What do you know?” Cullen squinted at her in suspicion.

“Nothing more than you do Cullen,” she wasn’t technically lying-she hadn’t read the letter from Dawn yet. “Dorian went through the possible future with the Inquisitor, perhaps he could speculate.”

“Orlais then was nowhere near strong enough to hold back the Warden-Demon army, now we’ve changed things. No one would be caught off guard, unsuspecting.” Dorian’s tone went strange and it took Leliana a moment to recognize the tonality of a scholar waxing poetic about one of his theories. “That’s the paradox of time magic; change even one little factor and it can have extensive effects going forwards. Without the Inquisitor we cannot close Rifts, but the Breach has already been sealed; as long as the Rifts don’t grow once open we could adapt.”

“We can worry about what to do if the worst case happens later, for now we need to finish actually defeating the army we’re facing.” Cullen made a pain filled grunt as he shifted his body into a more comfortable looking position. “For now Rylen is going to see to the troops inside and I want the two of you keeping me informed of everything here at Camp. Runners and Ravens better be flying until either the Inquisitor comes back to us, or the sun stands high in the sky.”

Leliana didn’t fight the urge to quirk an eyebrow at the blatant Command. Usually Cullen liked to ask or imply something should be done; it wasn’t often Leliana got to see him being, well, the Commander. If he could keep the bite to his words he might just have a chance convincing Josie’s family that he is the best suitor for her hand.

But that was a matter for when the world wasn’t potentially ending.

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Two months of boring.

Sera hadn’t ever been a soldier, and hadn’t ever wanted to be a soldier. That didn’t stop her from getting lumped in with the jackboots and forced to march across bloody Thedas to the sweaty armpit of the Hissing Wastes. She had a horse, called it Dog and fed it carrots, but her back end was not used to riding from sun rise to sun set and parts of her hurt.

“And not in the fun way either.”

“You’re whining. You’re not talking, just whining.” Jim pointed out, his stupid Inquisition helmet sitting crookedly on his head.

Sera mimicked his words in a high pitched tone, making an ugly face to go along with it before sticking her tongue out at him. “I’m a city girl Jimbo. Give me torches, laneways, walls and a roof ta work with and I’ll do ya proud. This’ not my bag.”

“Odd thing for an Elf to say.” He provoked and Sera tried to punch him in the shoulder for it but he shifted away, expecting the strike. He laughed at her discomfort and anger but immediately made amends for it by passing her the wineskin.

“Ignore the ears Jimberly, I ain’t no Elf.” She spat the first sour sip out, letting the still good wine
Jim snorted, rolling his eyes at her. Sera liked the guy well enough; he always laughed at her pranks but liked to fit people into neatly labelled jars. It was as frustrating as talking to the crazy hobo apostate. They both seemed to think the shape of her ears should tell her who to be more than her own heart did. Idiots.

“Fine, you’re not an Elf. But you are one of the Inquisitor’s Companions.” He said it as if the word should have capitals and Sera blinked, realizing this had to be another one of his carefully labelled jars.

“What o’it?” she sounded terribly suspicious, which was the point.

“I’ll trade you a story for a story.” Jim looked sweetly innocent so Sera knew he was after gossip.

“You first.” She insisted. Maybe telling each other tales would make the time pass faster.

“Only if you tell me about what it was like to go with the Inquisitor to the Fallow Mire.” Jim countered and Sera was more than willing to tell that tale. Alena had had to pry a leech off of her actual back end; there was no way to look big to the little people if they hear about you having to drop trou to de-leech.

But first she wanted to hear a very specific incident to which Jim had been the sole witness. “Tell me about catching Cully-wully and Ruffles.”

It became a thing after that; Sera would walk next to someone and make friendly-like, at least until she got a story out of them. Jim’s story about walking in on Cullen giving Josephine a foot massage was a lot less lascivious than Sera had wanted, but it was still a hoot to hear. Something about the socially proper Commander doting on the Antivan Ambassador just tickled her as funny. However, most of the soldiers were more farmer than fighter and had no fun stories to share, so Sera slid back towards boredom long before they got close to the end of the endless slough.

Jim didn’t reprimand her for whining this time at least, he simply handed her the wineskin with a pointed look. “You’re a right barrel o’ laughs lately Elf.”

“Piss up a rope Jimmy.” She finished the wineskin, wiping the dregs off her lip onto her sleeve.

“Fire-talk is that we’re a week and a half out,” he sounded casual but like too casual and Sera figured he was trying to get ‘Companion insider information’ out of her.

“Fire-talk say anything actually useful? Or true?” she demanded, feeling guilty enough to dig out her own drink to share.

“Lots of talk about the Herald and you guys, going off and being heroes.” Jim shrugged; a natural born gossipmonger.

“Boring.” Sera barked.

“Few theories about the Harbinger you might be able to put pound to.” He offered and Sera laughed.

“Psssh, like anythin’ she could do would be interestin’ enough for those like us eh?” Sera tried to jib but Jim looked downright sheepish. “Wha?” Sera pressed, chasing the tail of a story.

“I remember seeing her, on the walk out of Haven.” Sera hadn’t even realized Jim had been with
the Inquisition from way back at the start. “And…and I remember doing nothing when the people
around her turned ugly.” He was looking straight down at the dirt instead of looking up at Sera’s
reaction at first, but he looked up and looked almost desperate. “You think she’d accept an apology
from a soldier who failed her?”

“I dun think she’d see it that way.” Sera brushed the issue off, recalling much bigger insults and
injuries she’d seen Dawn flat out ignore. How Iron Bull hadn’t gotten spit-roasted for slicing up
her arm before the Winter Palace Sera would never know, but Jim was giving her this look like he
didn’t believe her. “See, the mistake you’re making is tha you’re callin’ her the Harbinger still.
Dawn is…” Sera made a weird hand gesture that really didn’t say anything at all. “Dawn is Dawn
and the Harbinger is the name she plays when there are those aroun that need to be impressed by
her.”

“And you’re not impressed by her?” Jim sounded amused and almost offended and Sera had heard
that tone of voice rather often in her life.

She just blinked, not really understanding the question. He was asking it as if Dawn had done
something to be impressed by. Yes Sera knew all the shite she was supposed to know all about, but
Dawn had pretty much kept mum on the whole thing, so nothing all that impressive. “Apparently
she throws a decent punch, I remember hearing about her socking the Commander tha’ one time.”
She shrugged.

Now Jim was staring at her like she was the one that was from another world entirely. “Quit it!”
Sera shoved his shoulder. “She’s Dawn. Tadwink came in with her and her brother was the one
lookin’ after her and yea, she may know things that seem creepy as all get out, but Dawn is just
Dawn.” Sera went off. “Maybe she’s got a lot of hair and a bit of music but that’s not something to
be impressed by.”

“You are absolutely terrified of her, aren’t you?” Jim grinned as he asked it.

“Fuck off.” Sera spat and stomped away, annoyed at his incessant labelling.

What was it with people trying to make someone bigger than they were? Sera was no more an Elf
because of her ears than Dawn was the Harbinger just because she knew weird shit. Sera may not
like sitting down and having drinks with her, but she’d never left the table just because Dawn
showed up either. Maybe that was why she didn’t seem to mind Sera being herself as well, but Sera
was certainly NOT afraid of her. It was just weird to think that someone knew everything about her
without Sera being the one to tell her. Creepy.

“You look like I feel.” Blackwall quietly rumbled, altering her to his arrival.

Sera looked up at him, seeing Dog led behind his horse as if he expected her needing to get away.
“Bloody buggerin’ blisterin’ fuck.” Sera launched herself into her saddle, making Dog shift at the
sudden weight.

She wasn’t sure he was smiling but the mess of facial hair moved in a way that made her think he
might be. “Be that as it may, if you were looking for a distraction you might be interested to hear
that we have esteemed guests with us now.”

“And wha’ do you think is esteemed while you’re the one laying the Inquisitor herself on her back
with her legs in the air?” she couldn’t resist the jibe.

“If you think I’m the one on top you’ve never met the Inquisitor.” Blackwall wasn’t at all
embarrassed by the topic, one of the reasons Sera liked him. He didn’t put himself higher than just
to try and impress hisself. “Serrah Hawke has decided to come back to the Inquisition.” He jutted that beard out and Sera followed the indication to spy someone very carefully hooded and huddled near the Commander.

“Huh.” She squinted, trying to see some of the famous Champion’s features across the distance and through the back of her skull. “Don’t tha’ mean Warden Majesty is back too?” they’d left together so it only made sense to her that they’d return together too.

“You tell me, who do you think is on Cullen’s other side?” Blackwall challenged and Sera looked to the less concealed huddled mass.

She didn’t even need to see the face to know Blackwall was right. Cullen looked like someone had shoved a hot poker up his back end, the only way to get that look out of him was to be noble or persistently annoying. Sera managed it frequently but she hadn’t seen it levied at anyone else since Saturnalia.

“It dudn’t matter, what’re the likes of them going to do to help? Think Majesty might be able to tell his fellow Wardens to drop their pants and put their butts in the air? Nah, they’re here because Big People need to be seen at these kinds of things- can’t let the actual soldiers who win the war take credit.” Maybe it was a little unfair but Sera had never been to war before. She’d been a child when the Blight broke out and living as a Red Jenny was all about avoiding direct confrontation. She wanted to go home, drink shitty beer at the Rest, and climb Kasaanda like a tree.

Red Jenny was a city girl and Sera was Red Jenny until someone pried it from her cold, dead hands. What was she doing here? Blackwall ignored her pessimism and simply rode next to her, letting the silence be comfortable while she stewed. Finally Sera’s limited patience broke.

“Ok, why d’you think they’re here?” she heard him chuckle slightly.

“Hope and madness; the kind that are indistinguishable from each other.” His response made her want to throw up.

“You’se been hangin’ around the muckety-mucks for too long. You’re starting to sound like a Bard’s tale.” Her criticism made him laugh.

“I think they’re here because like us they don’t know where else to go.” He shook his head. “People either do something about it or they hide and pretend it doesn’t matter. In these days and times there really isn’t an in-between.”

Sera knew his real story, how he was Rainier and had betrayed his employer, team, and morals. But she also knew that since she’d met him he’d been trying to be better. It was more than most people ever gave and it made her bite down on the nasty comment she wanted to reply with. Because in the end; he was right. Sera complained bitterly and focused solely on how bored she was to avoid thinking about what was coming in the next couple of weeks.

She was here to help do something about it, even if that meant being a city girl out in the desert.

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For some reason Blackwall got saddled with shepherding the Champion of Kirkwall and her friends around while the Inquisitor saved the world. And it started out even before Alena got back to him too.

Firstly, it was the Commander’s doing. When His Majesty Alistair and Serrah Hawke found them, Commander Cullen had taken the time to debrief them on the events that had transpired whilst they
were traipsing off around the Wastes. And then he had suggested that they fill Blackwall in on the events and movements they had to brief them on as the Commander was still coordinating the movement of an Army.

It made sense, Cullen was their leader until Alena’s return and Blackwall knew her habits better than anyone else. That didn’t mean he had a single tinkering damned clue what to do with a King and a Champion.

The only saving grace was that they seemed just as at a loss about what to do as he did. His Majesty was charming and friendly and lying through his teeth with every moment of the day. The smiles, the laughter and joking, Thom could see beneath all of it to a man that was waiting for the sword to be drawn. But Hawke, Hawke outright twitched and writhed with the anxious energy boiling within her. He’d seen it in other soldiers, those that had lived through too much, or even through one thing that was too much. Her eyes would not settle, constantly scanning and searching but he had no idea what for. They were in the middle of the Army, trekking through the middle of the desert, on their way to the Abyssal Reach. Nothing was getting to the Champion through all of that without them seeing it coming from leagues away. So she wasn’t looking for anything logical to see, instead the sands around them probably swirled with the skeletons from her mind and Thom saw King Alistair watch her as carefully as he did himself.

Just what the Inquisition needed, a pair of violently competent and batshit crazy heroes joining the fray.

Despite both of them outranking him in every way, shape, and form, Thom found it almost disturbingly easy to talk them into behaving. Alistair liked to get along with people, and Thom kept them in close contact to Cullen, but all the tales Varric has spun of Victoria Hawke paled in comparison to the real Champion. If she wasn’t so obviously brittle and on edge Thom had a thousand questions to ask her.

Instead he simply acted as interference to keep others that were less aware away. Her impossibly white hair was as recognizable as a flag, and Thom saw the individuals that made up the Inquisition Army stare after her like she could single-handedly guarantee victory. They wanted to hear from the Champion’s lips how she had saved Kirkwall with a single duel, how she defied the Arishok of the Qun itself with her daggers ablaze and a smirk on her face. They wanted to believe it was possible for a nobody to become a somebody to become the Champion because she had done it so why couldn’t they?

She could have done a lot of good, lying to these soldiers and giving them hope. But she was already past the point where she could bring herself to do it and so he kept them all away. Better that they have their Tales and Varric’s lies. No need to disillusion them with the reality of who Victoria Hawke had had to become to be the Champion.

And every time he met Alistair’s eye it was to see the acknowledgement that he knew it too. It wouldn’t take much to ignite the embers of Hawke’s madness into a full on conflagration but for now they were carefully banked.

“I’d heard about Warden Blackwall, from my mentor Duncan.” Alistair broke from his less easy chatterings and ventured them near a serious topic.

Not everyone knew who Thom had been before, though Alena’s core companions all knew he was no Warden, but it didn’t bother him for Warden King Alistair to know as well. It was strangely liberating to have this man, this King, know who he had been, what he had done, and elect to consider him a worthy travel companion nonetheless.
“I only knew Warden Blackwall for a short period of time,” Thom admitted freely now, “but it was enough to change a man for the better.”

“Duncan pretty much thought the same thing.” His Majesty grinned. “He used to say that anyone can become more than they are, all they have to do is try.”

Thom laughed softly, recognizing the saying. “I wonder if that’s something Duncan told Gordon or the other way around because it’s what Warden Blackwall said to the man I had become; and it worked.”

“He’d be proud of you.” Alistair offered easily, making Thom feel a bit guilty.

“Don’t know about that, but I do want to keep trying.” Thom dismissed the comment; itching his chin through the beard.

“I will shave that thing off of you in your sleep if you keep scratching like that.” Hawke warned, her hand reaching out and slapping his down.

“I’m certain the Inquisitor likes the man just the way he is Victoria, don’t go ruining his special kind of beauty with your meddling.” Alistair took the Champion’s sudden self-inclusion in stride. It spoke to how much they’d gotten accustomed to working together over the last few months.

“Special kind of beauty?” Thom had to ask.

Both Alistair and Hawke grinned at him in response, one far less sane looking but both vastly amused. He’d never been a vain man, and Thom knew the beard pushed him from handsome into ‘rugged’ territory, but he’d never been called beautiful.

“You’re a human bear Blackwall; it has its own special kind of appeal.” Alistair continued, awkward and endearing and Thom buried his laugh, trying to look offended. The beard might be bear-like but it had its uses.

His hand came up and stroked the hairs of his beard, not itching it this time but a habit he’d developed ever since growing it long. Part straightening the hairs out and part ensuring there was nothing caught in it. Alena liked his beard as it was, but only if it was maintained to a respectable degree. Otherwise she was likely to take a comb and scissors to it herself and the last time he’d let it get to that she’s made a point of trimming him unevenly.

“I wonder what has more hair, your chin or Varric’s chest.” Hawke mused, seeming fit to join in on the judgement. It was good to see the Victoria Hawke that had made the Champion possible.

“You’re assuming that the rest of me isn’t as hairy as this beard.” He threw in his own comment on the matter, enjoying the relaxed air the conversation brought. No one would be hurt by his beard, though someone might get hurt if they shaved it off of him.

Hawke was squinting at him as if she were trying to picture all that hair he’d mentioned and Alistair laughed, throwing his head back and sliding right off the rock he’d been perched on. The Army was moving mostly through the night at this point, the heat of the desert day making it suicidal to try and travel during the highest hours of the day and it was strange to see the sun come up and consider it bedtime but Thom took it all to heart.

He knew better than most that all it takes is one new day to remake a person.

Hawke wasn’t saved that night, but neither did she fall into the darkness hiding in her eyes so Thom merely endeavoured to keep any unfortunate incidents from occurring. It was probably a task that
could have easily taken the rest of his life because that woman was a whirlwind of chaos, but Thom was spared that burden by the arrival of the missing heart of the Inquisition.

Alena was back and Thom cared for nothing more than those feldspar eyes and those callous roughened hands. He could do nothing to ease the burden of what was coming from her and they both knew it so instead he sought to remind her of the hero’s triumphant return she would earn once she came back.

And then they went to war.

He wanted to be at her side, be the one watching her back but the team had been assembled long before they came to Adamant and all the time in between had softened the edges of his displeasure. Bull had quietly told him that Alena could be trusted to watch her own back but Dawn was far less capable of that, and even if Thom wanted to scream at him for it he knew Bull was right. So he had buried his fear of never seeing Alena again and insisted to both his lover and her Advisors that he would take lead of the Kirkwall crew while their titular leader was absent too.

Everyone seemed disturbingly grateful that he was willing to take them on and Thom really should have seen that as the warning it was.

Merrill had always been sweet and quiet, rather amenable for a blood mage, and Prince Vael was wonderfully charming. However Admiral Isabella and Fenris were another matter entirely; neither one understood why they weren’t going in with Hawke despite the logical arguments already given to them, and it was only the fact that they didn’t know when Cullen planned to start the attack that kept them from staying at Hawke’s side all the way through.

He wasn’t certain but Thom was fairly sure that if he let that happen Dawn might cry on him again. No one wanted that so instead he’d told them their job was to follow him in and keep everyone off the Inquisitor’s (and Hawke’s) tail. They were to make sure their loved ones still had an escape route if everything went wrong.

That, at the very least, got them to stop complaining about the whole ordeal. Not that the Elf ever actually did that much talking, but he always backed the pirate up. Merrill and Sebastien were just as happy as he was to be there but they were at least quiet about it.

The Archer insisted on keeping his attention grabbing white armour, Fenris literally glowed while he fought, the Admiral went into battle with her ridiculous plumed cap on, and only the blood mage showed any sense in her attire by the time the battle started. Thom was wearing his favourite pieces, aware that he may die today and so could the woman he loved but that neither of them would go out without a fight. It wasn’t a settling thought but it worked to help steel his nerves as the roar of attack cried out from the Army.

And in his belt pouch was a message from Dawn, hastily scribbled and handed to him the night they’d met up with the Army reading the slightly foreboding words of:

*Keep everyone calm; we should all come back soon.*

Come back from where exactly?

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Dawn was the only one in the group actually prepared to physically land in the Fade, and even still she ended up falling ass over teakettle into the dirt. Alena floated to the ground, Hawke stuck to a wall like some blonde and demented version of Spiderman, and Solas stood looking more real than
he ever had. The rest to come through with them had landings as graceful as Dawn’s; Iron Bull, Varric, and Alistair all groaned and grumbled as they righted themselves.

She felt a weight settle into her as the reality of where she was and why she was there set in. Dawn had trained to survive not just the battle leading here but what was coming next too. Her eyes sought out Hawke and Alistair, emotions carefully bottled down as she wondered if she would be capable enough to keep them both alive. She’d already almost failed them all on the way here; hesitating to raise her sword against the Wardens to the point where she had had to tell Iron Bull or risk them all. She had killed to protect and yet in the face of a literal army she’d faltered so hard. And then she’d thrown her damn shield as if she were Captain America with a chance of saving Clarel. It had been an impulse and all it had achieved was leaving her without her shield now. Clarel had still fallen and died under that dragon. Dawn tried to shake off the negativity so of course when she looked over it was to see Iron Bull inevitably watching her with a concerned frown on his face. She gave him a solemn nod; he knew a little of what was coming even if not the specific details.

Knowing all the details of what was coming was doing exactly nothing to help settle her nerves so she was glad to have kept quiet on the matter.

The Inquisitor and Solas quickly helped explain and organize the situation to everyone, though Alistair was bemoaning the fact that he was in the Fade again. To which Hawke slapped him up the back of the head. “From all the accounts I’ve heard you had it easy compared to my cousin, and way easier than I did. Last time I was here every single one of my companions except the crazed abomination waiting to happen lined up to betray me.”

“How many times have I apologized for that now?” Varric asked, sounding more amused than annoyed.

“I’ll let you know when you’re forgiven.” The Champion immediately shot back with a saucy wink.

“Ena’vun.” Solas pulled everyone’s attention off of the impossibility of the Fade around them and onto her as she patted the bandolier across her chest.

She could do this. “The demon they were talking about… it’s The Nightmare. Feasts on fear and terror and gets in your head to find the specifics that hurt you the most.” She warned, pushing her own concerns down to try and hide them. It would be futile she suspected but she had to at least try.

“I’ll fight anyone you want Boss, but no one said anything about being dragged through the ass end of demon-town.” Iron Bull grunted in complaint. Sometime later, when the scars of this were healed, Dawn wanted to rub his face in the fact that actually yes she had warned him about the demon-y shit happening.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad. A little walk, we kill some bad guys, and then we pop back out that rift that was in the castle. It’s gotta be nearby right?” Alistair offered with forced cheery ease.

“It sounds like our best option.” Alena spoke up, taking command of the group once more and no one objected. “There,” she pointed the way, “let’s go.”

Dawn was biting the inside of her cheek hard to keep from saying anything. Her goals were to change as little as possible and only interfere to save lives; she could do this. Her hand once again tapped against her insurance policy to ensure that things turned out as she wanted them to. Only Solas saw her do it but she offered no explanation to him when he frowned in curiosity. She was
surprised he let her keep silent on it; for now at least.

“This is fascinating. This is not the area I would have chosen, of course. But to physically walk within the Fade…” Solas sighed wistfully and only Dawn knew to listen for the homesickness in his words.

“Oh yeah, this must be a dream come true for your crazy ass.” Iron Bull retorted but it wasn’t hostile despite the words.

“Yes; literally.” Solas punned and Dawn saw his smile.

“Solas, you’re the expert on this place. Any advice?” Alena interrupted the banter.

Dawn watched Solas narrow his focus back to the reality of the moment; this had to be painfully bittersweet for the Elvhen mage. “The Fade is shaped by intent and emotion; remain focused and it will lead you where you wish to go. The demon that controls this area is extremely powerful, Nightmare as Ena’vun informed us.”

But before everyone could turn their questions to Dawn, they came across the façade of Justinia waiting for them. Dawn had never gotten the chance to see the Divine while alive but she was so much more than just a grandmotherly ghost. Her face was lined and leathery as only a lifetime of experiences could achieve. Her mouth was as marked by laughter lines as her eyes were crinkled with kindness, and even from a distance Dawn could feel the essence of Peace just radiate from the specter.

“Maker’s Beard…” Alistair whispered. “Could that be?”

“I greet you, Warden King.” Justinia’s accented voice matched her face perfectly; tempered by age and experience but so loving for it. “And you, Champion.” She nodded at Hawke.

“Divine Justinia?” Alena asked with clear suspicion in her tone. Unsurprising that the Inquisitor was not as blithely comfortable with this scenario as the others seemed to be; her time in the Fade was a unique experience for a Dwarf. “From the little I remember of what happened at Haven, I’m fairly certain you’re actually dead.”

“It is likely we face a spirit,” Alistair warned without preamble, his goofy disguise discarded, “or a demon.” He warned.

“You think my survival impossible, but here you stand in the Fade yourselves.” The specter countered without ever actually saying that she was Justinia. But instead of the usual urging for haste and trust, the Justinia spirit turned to face Dawn straight on. “Your own presence here shakes the definitions of reality; we have no time to waste.” She warned. “I am here to help you.” She turned to face Alena again. “You do not remember what happened at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, Inquisitor.”

“No, I don’t.” Alena hesitated to admit even if it seemed like the spirit already knew.

“The memories were taken by the Nightmare that serves Corypheus. The false Calling that terrified the Wardens into making such grave mistakes is it’s work.” She informed and Dawn felt the group around her suddenly realize the depth of the power this Demon had.

“I will gladly show this Nightmare why harming my Warden brethren was a poor decision.” Alistair’s tone was lighthearted but he meant every word of it.

Justinia looked at Dawn as if she knew the possible cost to Alistair before turning to face the King.
of Ferelden. “You may get your chance, Warden King. This place of darkness is its lair.”

“Can you help us get out of the Fade?” Alena jumped to the information she needed.

This time there was a kind smile on Justinia’s face. “That is why I found you. When you entered the Fade in Haven, the Demon took a part of you. Before you do anything else, you must recover it.” She turned to indicate faint ghost lights that looked like the after image left in the eye from staring at a fire. “These are your memories Inquisitor.” But even as she indicated the memories, Green Wisps appeared as well.

Dawn recognized them as the green ghost like bad guys from the game, but here in the Fade they were much more difficult to attack than they ever had been before. It was only when Dawn turned all her attention onto the one in front of her that the wisp lost its imperviousness and her sword quickly rendered it to nothing. Of course, it was the Fade; nothing about functioning in it was normal.

**BRING FORTH THE SACRIFICE.**

Corypheus’ words boomed through the Fade and Dawn flinched in unison to Alena. But then Alena was absorbing one of her memories and Dawn was simply watching her back. She had debated with herself over just telling Alena about the events that led to the Breach, but there was a weight that Alena’s own memories would provide to the answers she found here. And it would take away the power the Nightmare had.

**What’s going on here?** Alena’s voice cried out but not from the Dwarf. They were all bearing witness to her memories now.

**Why are you doing this? You of all people?** Justinia’s voice demanded.

Despite the disturbing content of the memories, Alena did not hesitate to reach for each one, absorbing them quickly. But when the last in the area was absorbed, they were not given just the words of the event; instead they saw it as if living the events themselves. The Divine held imprisoned by Wardens under Corypheus’ control. **NOW IS THE HOUR OF OUR VICTORY.** Corypheus droned on. **Why are you doing this? You of all people?** Justinia demanded of the Wardens as Corypheus stalked closer. **KEEP THE SACRIFICE STILL.** He demanded as he held the Orb in his hand out towards the Divine, even as she cried out **Someone, help me!** And as Dawn remembered from the game, everyone here got to witness Alena break open the doors and interrupt. **What’s going on here?** And the vital moment of inattention from Corypheus allowed the pain wracked and Fade ravaged Divine the chance to knock the Orb out of Corypheus’ grip. The sparking Orb clattered to the ground and rolled towards Alena where she instinctively picked it up. Seeming to sense his impending failure, Corypheus charged towards her but it was too late. The Orb chose it’s wielder and Alena had some of her memories back.

“So your Mark did not come from Andraste, it came from the Orb Corypheus intended to use in the ritual.” Alistair remarked, sounding disappointed by the fact.

“Corypheus intended to rip open the Veil, use the Anchor to enter the Fade, and throw open the doors of the Black City.” Justinia informed. “Not for the Old Gods but for himself. When you disrupted his plan, the Orb bestowed the Anchor upon you instead.”

“So this was all an accident; a ricochet in the middle of a fight where I was in the right place at the right time for everything to go wrong. That sounds about standard.” Alena sounded dryly amused by this revelation.
“If you believe in the Maker, then you believe He made everything, including your accident. If you do not, then nothing has changed.” Justinia offered sagely. “You cannot escape the lair of the Nightmare until you regain all that it took from you. You have recovered some of yourself but now it knows you are here. You must make haste; I will prepare the way ahead.”

“Anyone else disturbed to see Grey Wardens in that vision?” Hawke asked as Justinia vanished from sight.

“Common consensus is that they were under his mental control, like the ones you encountered the first time.” Dawn tried to cut off the impending argument between Warden King and Champion. Both turned to face her in surprise.

“Their actions led to the Divine’s death.” Hawke pointed out but the wildness in her eyes made Dawn wonder what she was really bothered by.

“They were not in their right minds.” Alistair interjected with a soft warning tone in his voice.

“They’re all dead so it’s not like we can ask them.” Alena interrupted. “Ghost lady said make haste, let’s move.”

Dawn had wandered in the sleeping Fade with Solas many times by now but this was her first jaunt through it in the physical flesh and there was a world of difference between the two states. In the game the Fade was all weird green glowing things and a mix of water and rocks from the Rift in Crestwood’s lake. Reality was that and so much more; like Escher stairs and David Bowie’s Labyrinth had crashed into each other to add disturbing lurches of vertigo and disorientation to the mix. Dawn had to watch her feet and the spaces around her because reality liked to change its rules between one step and the next frequently here.

“I’ve never met the Divine before, think that was really her?” Varric sounded thrilled at the idea.

“We have survived in the Fade physically, perhaps she did as well.” Solas offered despite knowing the un likeliness of it. “Or, if it is a spirit that identifies so strongly with Justinia that it believes it is her, how can we say it’s not?”

“She seems interested in helping us, that much is clear.” Alistair added his two cents in and something occurred to Dawn.

“Like Wynne.” She made the connection between the two. Only Alistair understood though and the rest turned to look at her in confusion. “Ah… there was a Spirit Healer named Wynne that helped Alistair and his wife during the Blight. She… had an uncommon connection to a spirit of Faith.” Only by this time Wynne was dead, White Spire saw to that.

“That’s great and all, but the Nightmare is the thing currently scaring the shit outta me.” Iron Bull interrupted gruffly.

“Sounds like it preys on fear by stealing people’s memories. That’s low, even for a demon.” Varric spat.

They heard the first sounds of the little Fears hunting them. “Fear is a very old, very strong feeling. It predates love, pride, compassion… every emotion save perhaps desire.” Solas warned, looking past the group to catch her gaze. “Be wary, the Nightmare will do anything in its power to weaken our resolve.”

Then the Fears had found the group and Dawn couldn’t hear what was being said at all. Instead all of her attention was focused on the impossible thing coming towards her.
Dawn felt her heart stagger as she realized the insidiousness of the Nightmare’s attack. All around her she saw not the spider Fears she’d anticipated but the faces of loved ones attacking and being cut down. Her mother, father, sisters; no one in her family spared their assault on those she loved now and Dawn closed her eyes to the sight for a moment. But the thing masquerading as her mama would not wait for her to settle and so Dawn tore her eyes open and swung her sword.

She tried to hold onto the awareness that what she saw was a lie, Wisdom had pulled this very same trick for a reason. But even knowing that Dawn couldn’t help it; every blow she struck true broke her heart. Each Fear she took down to help those she loved now ravaged her and Dawn fought the urge to cry as she pressed onwards. She was still struggling to settle on the idea that she would kill to protect her loved ones and now she had to face loved ones in battle; it hurt too much. Dawn never thought she’d miss the static inside so much. The old, familiar habit of counting her heartbeats was a background soundtrack inside her own head but it wasn’t enough. She could still feel every bunch of muscle, every moment of training that led to her cutting down her family.

Shades and Wraiths met them in the next area, the group spreading out to cover each other’s backs as much as possible as well as search out the way forwards. Her boots sloshed and Dawn pretended that it was only water matting her clothes and sticking to her skin. For the sake of her sanity Dawn stuck to Iron Bull’s blind side as they fought their way forwards but she was always keenly aware of where Alistair and Hawke were, frequently looking to see that they were both alive and well. And all of her other friends were still equally at risk and she could do nothing to help them. She should have planned better, harder.

Acid squeezed up from her belly, burning her esophagus and choking a cough out of Dawn’s throat. She forced a slow inhale and equally controlled exhale and tried to release the emotions sinking their claws into her psyche. Solas had said focus and resolve were the keys forward and she would not let her loved ones down, no matter how much the Fears she saw made her want to start screaming and never stop.

There was no banter as they moved forward, and before the silence was broken they encountered the first Fears of Dreamers trapped with them.

“The Pilgrim.” Dawn breathed as they bore witness to the man’s final moments of fear and darkness and pain. “A candle, we need to find him a candle.” She spoke up, understanding now that what had simply been Stat Boosters in the game were real souls bound to Fear. Just because she was stuck walking through this hellscape didn’t mean any others needed to be caught here too. Her companions looked at her, surprised at the insistence in her voice but despite frowning at her no one argued. She’d probably sounded too desperate for them to brush off easily.

Thankfully there was a candle found nearby that lit up the moment it was introduced to the table and they saw the soul of the Pilgrim settle and calm, fading away before their eyes peacefully. Even as the soul faded, the area around them lost some of its eerie fog and finally, FINALLY the way forward was clear. They pressed on and Dawn remained silent despite the curious, searching looks sent her way.

A dead end had them doubling back and once again they were attacked by Fears that Dawn could only see as her family. She swallowed a scream of outrage that the Nightmare would dare use her loved ones like this but she knew it was futile. Her friends were seeing their own Fears and not hers, fighting their own battles against the Nightmare and they did not need the burden of knowing what she witnessed. But she would not easily forget the sight of people she loved being torn apart, especially in this context. So Dawn tried to channel her helplessness into fighting, focusing on each
attack and trying not to SEE. She had to sink into her training to survive this, let her body run the show so she could focus on hack, slash, stab, block, survive. Her hands were shaking.

There was no proper passage of time here; no hunger or thirst, thought there was real pain and exhaustion from battle. They were physically in the Fade, but that did not make this their reality even though bleeding wounds were real. It was the only comfort Dawn could find at the moment.

**AH, WE HAVE VISITORS.** The Nightmare spoke directly to them for the first time. **SOME FOOLISH LITTLE DWARF COMES TO STEAL THE FEAR I KINDLY LIFTED FROM HER SHOULDERS. YOU SHOULD HAVE THANKED ME AND LEFT YOUR FEAR WHERE IT LAY FORGOTTEN. YOU THINK THAT PAIN WILL MAKE YOU STRONGER? WHAT FOOL FILLED YOUR MIND WITH SUCH DRIVEL? THE ONLY ONE WHO GROWS STRONGER FROM YOUR FEARS IS ME.** The Nightmare’s strangely sonorous voice called out with no anger to it. **BUT YOU ARE A GUEST HERE IN MY HOME, SO BY ALL MEANS LET ME RETURN WHAT YOU MAY HAVE FORGOTTEN.**

In the game that was the crux of the Nightmare’s monologue, but now it continued on. **LITTLE GIRL FROM THE WRONG WORLD, DESPITE YOUR BEST EFFORTS YOU’RE STILL HELPLESS. DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE ANYTHING? YOU CAN SAVE NONE OF THEM. YOU WILL FAIL THEM, AND YOUR LAMENTATIONS WILL ECHO HERE FOREVER.**

Dawn didn’t bother saying anything in response; there was no logic she could use to refute the demon trying to get inside her head. She stared straight ahead, trying not to notice how her friends watched her after the Nightmare’s words. Likely looking for the cracks it saw that should be obvious to them too. Dawn forced herself to take slow, deep breaths and move on, eyes darting to see Solas watching her even after the others looked away. She looked away quickly, not sure if anyone else saw the Hunt in his eyes or if it was just her.

It never became easier for Dawn to keep cutting down her family but she did so regardless, hating herself for every time she hesitated and every time she didn’t. Faces she knew could not be here, had never been here, all fell beneath her blade or the attacks of her friends and Dawn tried to sink down past where it could hurt her. Her hands continued to shake and she tightened her grip on her sword to hide it.

The next Fear of the Dreamers they encountered was The Freeholder. This time the group bore silent witness as his stubbornness and pride condemned his family, and yet all he needed was a sign of life after the Blight. Alistair was the one who found and laid the flowers in the vase, his eyes filled with sorrow for the soul of one of the people his Kingdom had failed to take care of. The group came together to shuffle the Warden King into their center, letting him be vulnerable for a moment.

When they approached a tormented figure frozen on the spot, caution and suspicion rode everyone. Dawn stared at it unblinkingly, not remembering this from the Game but unsure if it was due to her faulty memory or one of the inevitable changes she’d encountered since coming to Thedas. When the form erupted in what Dawn was convinced was a shower of blood, everyone went on the offensive immediately and Dawn felt absolutely no need to hesitate; this monster wasn’t masquerading as someone she knew. The Rage demon did not stand a chance but Dawn surprised everyone when she matched the demon with a fury filled bellow of her own. Even as it died and scattered to dust she stilled as unexpectedly as she had attacked, and tried to ignore the shuddering in her spine. Without looking at anyone else Dawn climbed the stairs upwards.
PERHAPS I SHOULD BE AFRAID, FACING THE MOST POWERFUL MEMBERS OF THE INQUISITION. The Nightmare laughed at his own comment. THE QUNARI WILL MAKE A LOVELY HOST FOR ONE OF MY MINIONS. OR MAYBE I WILL ENJOY RIDING HIM MYSELF.

The taunt came and Dawn was surprised when Solas laughed, a humourless sound that silenced the Nightmare’s tirade. “You cannot take over an unwilling soul Nightmare. No matter how domineering you think you are.” Iron Bull looked at him but remained silent, finding no need to speak up after Solas’ defence.

Despair demons and Fears poured into the area in response and Dawn wasn’t sure but she could almost feel a sense of childish petulance radiating the air now. She bared her teeth at the Fear hiding in her sister’s image and attacked, ignoring the guilt and pain she felt inside at her deeds. If Thalia were really here and really possessed by a demon, she would thank her for setting her soul free; Dawn had to hold to that belief now.

ONCE AGAIN HAWKE IS IN DANGER BECAUSE OF YOU VARRIC. YOU FOUND THE RED LYRIUM, YOU BROUGHT HAWKE HERE… The Nightmare changed targets.

“Just keep talking Smiley.” Varric brushed it off quickly.

Not Rage demons this time, in fact nothing but eerie silence met their defiance and they pressed on. It felt like for every step forwards they also took one to the side and backwards. Like time and gravity, direction and distance had no real meaning here in the Fade. Yet still they had to press forwards, their resolve the only thing actually gaining them any ground.

DIRTH MA, HARELLAN. MA BANAL ENASALIN, MAR SOLAS ENA MAR DIN. The Nightmare taunted Solas.

“Banal nadas.” Solas called back with the same ease he had used dismissing the taunt against Iron Bull.

A lifetime of walking later and the Nightmare decided that silence was boring. DID YOU THINK YOU MATTERED HAWKE? DID YOU THINK ANYTHING YOU EVER DID MATTERED? YOU COULDN’T EVEN SAVE YOUR CITY, HOW COULD YOU EXPECT TO STRIKE DOWN A GOD? The Nightmare tormented, sending a new wave of Fears to attack.

Mother. Father. Sister. Father. Little Sister. Dawn cut them all down, each strike preceded by a pain in her chest, and followed by a careful breath in to keep moving. Her hands continued to shake and no tightening of her grip could keep her sword from shaking with them. YOU’RE A FAILURE, AND YOUR FAMILY DIED KNOWING IT. Dawn knew it wasn’t aimed at her but she hurt for the pain it would cause Victoria.

“Those were little Fears. Tiny manifestations spawned by the Nightmare itself.” Solas explained as they slaughtered the last of Dawn’s not-family. “And they take the form of spiders, something so many fear."

“You saw spiders?” Iron Bull demanded. “Man, spiders would’ve been a massive improvement from what I saw.”

“Same.” Dawn rasped out, surprised to find her voice so rough sounding.
“Remember we walk in the Fade. Demons of Fear alter their shape to unnerve each of us.” Solas advised, watching Dawn as if he knew what shapes she was tormented with.

“That makes me feel so much better.” Iron Bull deadpanned.

The humour cut short as their supposedly safe space was suddenly overrun with Shrieks. They boiled up from the ground, lunged from shadows, and slithered out of spaces too small for creatures so gangly. Dawn drove her weight behind her armoured fist and knocked one away, gaining the distance needed to bring her sword into action. Someone cried out in pain and Dawn was no longer sure that the sound wasn’t just in her head after the screams of her family all day long. It was only when the Shrieks all finally fell that her fear was confirmed. Solas had bloody claw marks across his chest he pressed a hand to.

“If you think of trying to die on me right now Old Wolf, I will kick your ass out of the Fade and lock the door behind.” Dawn warned with real anger in her tone hiding the terror of losing him to the Nightmare.

“That,” Solas looked wane and pale but wasn’t dying, “would be cruel of you Ena’vun.” His voice was breathy with pain and the others stood guard as Dawn took it upon herself to help bandage him up.

“If it keeps you fighting to live, keep that thought firmly in front of your mind then.” She shot back, hands gentle despite the fear.

“The Nightmare is closer now. It knows you seek escape. With each moment, it grows stronger.” Justinia appeared to warn, cutting off Solas’ response.

More Terrors and Despairs, Wisps, and Fears spilled into the area, many more blocked off thanks to the Divine’s barrier. Dawn fought next to the wounded Solas and Alena took back more of her memories, finally understanding how she escaped.

The Divine’s past scream echoed in the Fade. Go. She urged. Keep running. Alena’s encouragement echoed as the pair scrambled uphill towards the rift. Now Dawn saw spiders chasing them and she almost wished she were haunted by those Fears instead. They bore witness to Alena’s struggle up the hill, Justinia’s aid and ultimate capture.

“It was you,” Alena addressed the spirit of the Divine helping them now. Justinia turned to face them, a serene expression on her face. “They thought it was Andraste sending me from the rift, but it was the Divine behind me.” Comprehension coloured Alena’s words, and gave them strength instead of robbing it from her. “And then you…she died.”

“Yes.” The spirit admitted. “I am sorry if I disappoint you.” She admitted and altered. Gone was the visage of the Divine and in its place glowed a figure with no face at all as she floated upwards, no longer bound by human reality.

“The only thing that’s important right now is getting out of the Fade.” Alena brushed off the apology pragmatically. “Whatever you are, you’ve helped us so far.”

“What we do know for sure is that the real Divine perished thanks to the Grey Wardens.” Hawke spat out angrily, her ire not lost on Alistair.

“As I said…” he started to argue.

“Stop.” Dawn interrupted to everyone’s surprise. “Corypheus is the enemy. No one is wholly to blame, or wholly without blame if we start looking close enough.” Dawn looked at Hawke. “He
wins if we tear ourselves apart.”

Victoria glared at her for a moment longer but Dawn did not back down from her friend’s righteous indignation. “Fine, we’ll figure out how the Wardens can make amends later shall we?” she turned away and stalked off to stand with Varric.

“You dare judge us?” Alistair started, turning to continue the fight.

“Yes.” Dawn cut him off, no room for patience because she was still fighting to keep them both alive. “I dare judge the Wardens as I judge the Champion, and even the Inquisitor.” She stepped a little closer, confident that Solas wasn’t going to let anything attack her blind spot. “I have put myself through all the options and all the outcomes you endured as well as theirs. I know the burdens the Wardens carry, and the secrets they harbor. And I know what cost that has on the world. The events transpired as they did because the world is not a simple place. Argue about that later.” She held onto her emotions by the barest of margins, the scream she captured behind her teeth trying to sneak out in her speech. Being in the Fade made it so much harder to censor herself.

Normally Solas came down on the side against the Wardens, his unease with their power and lack of oversight a constant. But this time he held his tongue, watching the entire exchange with the air of a man keeping his own counsel and it unnerved Dawn to see the blood painted across him being ignored so easily. Iron Bull was supposed to quip something about not judging the only people that could stop a Blight and Varric would comment on how some Wardens are good but most go crazy. However the companions stayed silent this time and Dawn wondered if her presence was changing that or if it was simply because they were not as scripted as their video game counterparts. And if those changes now meant there was more to come that she hadn’t planned for.

“Inquisitor!” Alistair’s voice called out a warning and that was all the heads up they got for the next wave of attackers. Fears crawled around with demons, and once again Dawn witnessed shambling versions of her family come forwards solely to be cut down. Now though her loved ones seemed to be Tainted; ghouls coming to claim their lost kin.

“The Nightmare has found us.” The spirit guiding them warned as she vanished from view and everyone forgot their argument to focus on staying alive long enough to escape.

“Real or not, it seems the Divine is the key to escaping from the Fade.” Solas called out as the latest assault was repelled. Dawn worried about his injury, knowing that the Fade had to be affecting him the longer they stayed physically there; he was still bound by the constraints of the Veil even being physically beyond it.

They were covered in gore, as much blood as it was other unidentifiable fluids and despite the awareness that it wasn’t real Dawn fought the growing need to scrape it off of her. Just to get it off. Her hands shook. Her body trembled too; heart throbbing equally with pain as it did blood.

The Fear of the Warden Dreamer was stumbled upon next, and to everyone’s surprise it was Victoria Hawke that flew into action, grabbing the tarot and rushing back to drop it in the cauldron. It seemed so at odds to how she’d spoken of the Wardens earlier but Varric at least understood. As Hawke stood shuddering over the cauldron, her eyes wide and distant, he carefully touched her hand. “Sunshine will be alright Hawke; this isn’t going to be her fate.” He spoke in a low voice but still the others heard and some even understood. The Champion of Kirkwall stared out at something no one else could see for a moment longer before turning her back on the cauldron and walking away without a word.

LITTLE KING, DID YOU THINK YOU COULD BE USEFUL? YOUR WHOLE LIFE YOU’VE LEFT EVERYTHING TO MORE CAPABLE HANDS; THE ARCHDEMON,
RULING FERELDEN... WHO WILL YOU HIDE BEHIND NOW? The Nightmare tried to insult.

“I’ve heard better taunts from Morrigan.” Alistair criticized easily. “You’re kind of just wasting my time here.” The Ferelden King called out, amused. Then again, this wasn’t even close to his first encounter with demons in the Fade.

The Nightmare stayed silent and they moved on, met with a field of the dead to walk through. They weren’t the shambling undead, or the peacefully at rest. These were the corpses and carcasses belonging to the people they had slain in life; or failed to save. The lives they had taken in pursuit of survival. Dawn tried not to recognize the countenance of her late husband amongst the bodies, but every time she looked away she found another with his face. And if she looked too closely they all had his face. Her stride quickened, taking her to the other end of the field of the dead faster than the group travelled, the rasping sounds of her unsteady breathing all too audible.

DO YOU THINK YOU CAN FIGHT ME? I AM YOUR EVERY FEAR COME TO LIFE! I AM THE VEILED HAND OF CORYPHEUS HIMSELF. THE DEMON ARMY YOU FEAR I COMMAND, THEY ARE BOUND ALL THROUGH ME! The Nightmare crowed.

“Ah, so if we banish you we banish the demons. Thank you, every fear come to life.” Their spirit guide stated and the Nightmare snarled at her in anger.

They pressed onwards and Dawn tried to shake off the vice slowly crushing her heart that matched the exhaustion trying to steal through her muscles. They were almost through; she would not let the Nightmare win. Thankfully Iron Bull stepped up next to her now and did not comment on her crowding into his personal space as she sought any course of comfort in this dismal plane. Varric made a comment about how things just felt like floating so they did, and then he mused about finding out what actually was up there. It left the seed of an idea in Dawn’s mind, but she didn’t know what yet.

More Wisps, Sloth Demons, shrieks; all were easier to kill now for none bore a loved one’s face. Dawn went through them like a hot knife through butter, her intensity seeming to surprise those that saw her attacks. She was so done with this experience, her confidence from earlier shattered along with her heart. But she kept on as they walked through a green tinted world.

“What’s with the water, trying to prey on my deep seated fear of wet calves?” Iron Bull joked to fill the tense silence.

“I’m fairly certain you’ve never been afraid of being wet.” Dawn played along but there was no humour in her voice. Her eyes picked out the boat drifting aimlessly in the water, the debris from Crestwood jarringly sharp looking compared to the Fade creations. Dawn tore her gaze away and realized what was coming next.

The graveyard.

There was a tombstone for each of them, their names and biggest fear listed. Dawn walked silently towards the markers, her eyes seeking out the secrets revealed therein. Sera’s was still NOTHING, Cole DESPAIR, Vivienne IRRELEVANCE, Dorian TEMPTATION, Cassandra HELPLESSNESS and Iron Bull’s MADNESS, but some of them had changed. Blackwall no longer feared himself, instead his fear was PURPOSELESS, Solas was LOSS, Varric’s became APATHY, Alistair’s was REJECTION and Dawn was surprised to see Tombstones for Alena and herself there. Alena’s tombstone revealed that her biggest fear was unsurprisingly FAILING, while Dawn hesitated to look at her own. But almost as if she were compelled to Dawn looked and saw that according to
The Nightmare, Dawn’s greatest fear was CHOICE. The sight of their fears had Dawn looking for Alena and as she did the Inquisitor looked back, nodding slightly.

These had failed to break them, instead Alena seemed settled by hers and Dawn accepted the implication of her own. She was afraid of all the decisions still left to be made, and the consequences of those choices, but she was still willing to fight tooth and nail to give people their chance to choose for themselves. This was designed to break her, to remind her of all the responsibility still waiting for her even if they were successful here and now; instead Dawn knew that she was afraid of the future and its unknowns but not willing to trade it in for anything less. She finally turned away without another look.

The only tombstone with no name and no fear instead held a vial of darkspawn blood. When Solas picked it up to examine it they all saw the Fear of the First Grey Warden. The agony of hopelessness seemed to touch upon the Elvhen mage like nothing Dawn had ever seen, suddenly Solas knew the burdens of a world without Wardens and the terror of that desolate reality was visible in his eyes.

“Banal’halam.” Solas growled out and strode forward to deposit the vial on a table, releasing the Scholar from his torment.

Dawn approached Solas cautiously, touching his arm. Fen’Harel jerked to face her, the Wild in his eyes slowly dimming as she refused to look away. The fate of the world after the Veil was created and he went to sleep was not his guilt alone to bear; he’d built the stage but the actors had put on the play without him. She could say none of that though; only hope to witness his redemption.

Demonic deepstalkers charged at them, their cries all too shrill and painful. The group was driven from the graveyard and rescued Dreamer, but no one made a comment on what secrets they’d seen of each other. There would be time enough to discuss it after they foiled the Nightmare. Dawn tore into the deepstalkers, unflinching in the face of their animalistic cries and uncaring to the wounds they inflicted in return. The dying cries of the deepstalkers echoed around them long after the bodies that had voiced them perished.

“Shit that’s big.” Iron Bull spotted the Nightmare first, his tone making the others look at the figure waiting between them and the way out.

“It wants our fear, deny it that and it has nothing.” Solas called out, kept to the center of the group by virtue of having the worst injury.

Two minor Pride demons snapped into existence, their pleased chuckles discordant and unsettling. They were already attacking as they materialized and Dawn tried to evade the one nearest her, but the lightening whip curled around her and she screamed as the agony of electricity rocketed through her blood. The pain cut off as the whip tore away, and Dawn staggered back trying to catch her breath even as her vision hazed out. Breathing hurt too much but her body insisted on trying anyways, pain shooting through it sporadically as she rolled to avoid the Pride’s second attack, sucking in air finally as her vision slowly cleared.

Dawn was forced back step by step and further and further away. Deepstalker demons crowded in around the pair of Prides, and Dawn finally found cover by sticking to Alistair’s side and letting him shield them both. It felt like eternity dragged on, got bored, went for a snack and finally came back before the Prides fell to their attacks. Without discussion, the group moved on.

This time it was Iron Bull that found the Fear of the Dreamer, and seeing the small child’s Terror cut them all deeply. He seemed enraged by the Nightmare targeting a child and no one dared stop him from retrieving the stuffed animal to deposit it on the bed. Unlike the others, this soul turned
to look up at the hulking Tal Vashoth as if they could actually see him. “Ser Snort!” they heard a happy cry from the child as they faded out of the Nightmare. Maybe Dawn would be able to find humour in it later, once the pain wore away.

Varric and Hawke were ranging ahead, scouting their way forwards while Alistair and Iron Bull brought up the rear. Dawn walked next to Solas and felt as much emotional exhaustion radiate off of him as must be coming from herself. The Nightmare fed off of their pain and fear and still Dawn was not able to defend against it.

“There it is.” Solas’ tone pointed towards the Rift and Dawn blinked, expecting it to be ugly like the rest of this hellscape. Instead it was like stained glass, beautiful and fragile.

YOU DID NOT THINK IT WOULD BE THAT EASY DID YOU, OFFWORLDER? The Nightmare taunted Dawn again. She wished there was still rage to fill her veins and power her forwards, but Dawn was blessedly numb for a short reprieve. WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF THEY KNEW WHAT YOU’RE CAPABLE OF? HOW EASY IT IS FOR YOU TO STRIKE DOWN THOSE YOU CLAIM TO LOVE?

“What the fuck?” Varric’s voice echoed from ahead. “Who are these people?”

Dawn’s numbness evaporated as she realized what the Nightmare had done. Her companions were looking from the Fears and then to her and back, and Dawn knew they saw the family resemblance between herself and those that masqueraded as her family. Iron Bull stared at her for a moment, ignoring the threats around him as he watched her. The Nightmare sought to break her, to break the will of those around her. She would not let it succeed, even if she had no idea how to stop it.

“Yes,” Dawn barked out while her allies fought her past. “I am capable of this.” Dawn adjusted her sword grip. “And so much more,” she spat. “I will face you Nightmare, and I will leave my mark on you too.” She bared her teeth like a wild animal. “You are not enough to stop me.” She declared; only silence from the Nightmare as she readied to charge back into battle. Her hands shook, shield long abandoned, sword unsteady; heartbroken and not stopping. There was no static because she did not need it now.

The Nightmare sent a Greater Pride Demon to counter her assertion. It stepped down a set of stairs that were actually above and on a perpendicular angle to them and it looked ready to rend them all asunder even as it stood in their way. They’d taken far too long turning two lesser Prides into goo, with their mage conserving his strength this was going to be neigh impossible. And then the back of her brain finally spat out the crazy idea it’d been working on since hitting Fade dirt.

“You can’t exist in the Fade without the Veil affecting you but
the Veil cannot touch me, so use me.” She challenged.

Dawn looked away to give him the privacy of thinking about her offer and saw that the Greater Pride getting ready to jump down on top of them. The others were all silent, some seemingly being to follow the conversation while the rest looked plainly lost. Her offer was serious, and likely holding far more consequences than she was even aware of and still she didn’t take it back. When Solas stepped up close beside her, she knew he had accepted. Whatever it was inside Dawn that left her marked as the Offworlder could be used here and now, even if she had no idea how.

Solas took her hand in his like when they had danced at Halamshiral, and for a moment Dawn mirrored his movements perfectly as he thrust an arm out; the Demon jumped but Solas swiped their hands harshly to the side and the floating rock off to one side smashed into the Demon, deflecting the Pride off to one side even as Dawn was driven down onto her knees at the aftereffects washed through her and the strength keeping her standing vanished.

“Woah.” She breathed, light headed and disoriented far worse than when it had been Haste. She tried to shake her vision clear even as Iron Bull charged into battle with the others.

“Ena’vun…” Solas’ concern was a soft breath of air, just as staggered as she was but injured on top of it. He let her hand go only because he seemed too weak to keep hold of it.

Dawn barely heard him over the rushing of blood in her veins, each heart beat painful but exhilarating. “Get up.” Dawn snarled at herself, pushing up onto one foot. Before she even knew if she was going to stay on her feet, Dawn charged forwards. Adrenaline helped propel her forwards but did nothing to help her hands steady as her sword struck out again and again against the Greater Pride.

When the Pride Demon lashed out with his whip, Dawn instinctively raised her shield arm. Her actual shield was gone but Dawn recalled the other lesson Wisdom had taught her; the whip connected to the silver dragon etched shield instead of her face. This was the Fade, all things were possible; she just had to make them happen.

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Iron Bull watched as Dawn barreled towards the giant, rampaging Greater Pride Demon. And he almost forgot to pay attention to keeping his own ass alive because she commanded attention greater than even the threat in front of him. As he dodged a casual side swipe from its claws, Dawn managed to hamstring the damn thing. Her sword was drenched in ichor but the Demon’s backhand caught her off guard sending her crashing against a statue.

With a blood curdling roar, Bull slammed his battle axe against the Demon’s exposed ribcage, crushing through bone even as he avoided the retaliation. The others clamored in, matching actions to words as one monstrous hand was severed. Hawke was somehow on the thing’s back, and she thrust her daggers into its eyeballs with a snarl that impressed Bull.

The Greater Pride Demon shattered into flakes of ash that Bull had to spit off of his tongue as he rushed to check on Dawn. The glowing NOT-Divine was helping her back to her feet, saying something as Little Bas recovered, looking thoughtful.

The Spirit glided away and Dawn looked up at Iron Bull, shaky despite her wild show earlier. “What’s did she say?” he asked bluntly.

Dawn looked down and he figured she wasn’t going to answer but she surprised him by looking back up with the most stunningly beautiful smile he’d ever seen. “That I am going to show the
Nightmare how dangerous Hope is.”

Iron Bull stared down at her for a moment, then his hand was cupping the back of her head and he was kissing her. Dawn held still against his lips for a surprised second but quickly kissed back. He pulled back after a moment but still held her close. “You better not be planning to die.” He stated firmly.

“As touching as it is to witness your moment,” Hawke drawled even as she pointed over her shoulder, “Bad Guys.”

Dawn flushed a pretty colour so Bull swooped in for another, quick kiss. Then they stepped apart and he focused on killing people he knew looked like her family. That was something they’d have to deal with the consequences from later if the shaking in her hands were any indication.

“You must get through the Rift! Get through and slam it closed with all your strength.” Justina passionately declared. “That will banish the army of demons…and exile this creature to the farthest reaches of the Fade.”

They fought their way forwards, one bloody step at a time. He could tell Dawn tried not to see the faces of corpses that had to look so real to her, so familiar. If the images he was seeing in the Fade were half as real as the ones tormenting her, it was no wonder that her hands shook. Dawn’s original shield was gone, the strange silver one that had replaced it vanished as well; her sword was unsteady but still she moved forwards and he stalked silently at her side. His careful eye on her almost a match for the astonishment the Elf watched her with. Whatever it was they had done to face the Pride; the Elf was still recovering from it while Dawn just kept moving.

“The rift, we’re almost there!” Hawke’s cry spurred them on, adding hope to their haste.

“Great Hawke, why not just dare the Old Gods to try and stop you?” Varric demanded incredulously.

She didn’t offer a response because suddenly they were at The Nightmare’s den.

The giant arachnid was far more deep sea creature now that they were close enough to see it; spikes and ridges marred its spine while tentacles and pinchers littered its body. And the pilot fish type body floating in front of them was almost entirely humanoid; considering what other torments the Nightmare had pulled from her past Bull had a dark suspicion he knew who it was pretending to be.

He took a quick second to look from monster to woman and judged that this had to be the late Larry’s form being used now.

“If you would, please tell Leliana ‘I am sorry; I failed you too.’” Justina’s spirit begged of Alena before she flew forwards and bore the hulking Nightmare back behind a barrier.

That left the Inquisition to attack the smaller Aspect of the Nightmare. Hawke vanished into Stealth while Varric stayed visible as he shot Bianca rapidly at it. Alistair called out a challenge, taunting the Aspect until its humanity melted away; one scorpion like stinger crashed into Alistair’s shield and Bull sank the edge of his axe into its torso.

“YOU ARE NOTHING!” The Aspect bellowed, but it lacked the resonance of the Nightmare. Then it bled acid out of the sky, driving them all back even as it started to heal. The moment the acid stopped, the Aspect shadow jumped, fleeing the immediate assault.

Alena used the Mark. It was rather awesome to watch though Bull was used to it by now; the air howling as a green implosion started inside the target, tearing it into pieces. But the damn Aspect
shadow jumped away, body slowly filling in the damage that they dealt. Alena gave a frustrated
cry even as she dropped the Mark attack and focused on extracting her vengeance one bloody piece
of flesh at a time. Bull swung in and crashed his axe down while Hawke hacked one of the
scorpion stingers off, only to then promptly stab the Aspect with itself. When spindly Terrors ran to
the Aspects defense and demanded to be dealt with post haste, they had to fall back to regroup.

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“They feed on fear!” Hawke called out as Fears arrived. They weren’t limited to Dawn’s anymore
either, she saw her family surrounded by spiders, creatures she couldn’t identify, maddened Tal
Vashoth, and many others.

Solas froze the creatures to one spot; halting the Aspect’s ability to flee and giving the others time
to eliminate the Fears. Dawn charged straight at the Aspect, trusting the others to keep monsters
off her back as she attacked what mostly looked like Larry.

The Aspect, it was just the Aspect, nothing more.

Alistair focused on the Aspect’s other side even as Varric started to pepper it’s skull with bolts that
barely penetrated into the bone there but distracted the hell out of it. And Dawn kept trying not to
see Larry’s bloodied face.

The minor monsters were dead, Iron Bull took massive chops at the Aspect’ neck while Hawke lit
a pair of daggers on fire before so she then casually lobbed them up to Alena.

“You WILL DIE IN AGONY.” The Aspect promised but the voice was wrong. It wore Larry’s
face but her late husband had almost never talked.

The Inquisitor was hooked on its back and she deftly snatched the daggers. One was gracefully
swiped across its neck and then sunk into its skull bone. The other she had already stabbed into its
torso, hoping for a heart shot. As it broke loose of the ice, Dawn suddenly knew what she had to
do.

She ran in, leaving her sword in its scabbard to free her hands. “JUST,” Dawn bellowed at the
creature that wore her late husband’s face. “FUCKING.” She grabbed one of the grenades off her
bandolier. “DIE!” She stuffed the grenade into one of the bleeding wounds they’d inflicted. When
the grenade erupted, the Aspect’s front half went with it. Dawn staggered backwards but Hawke
was there to steady her.

Solas blasted the Aspect with fire and finally the creature ran out of time. Like all the other
Demons it was vanquished unto dust, and that quickly scattered as they all ran toward the ascent
and Rift. Varric had been the closest and shot up to hold the point and provide cover. Injured,
Solas scampered up and through the Rift to warn the other side. Iron Bull barreled through,
actively hauling Alistair along with him. The Warden King got carried, kicking and screaming, to
safety.

Alena darted up the path, Hawke and Dawn coming on her heels but still they weren’t fast enough.
The Nightmare slammed down across the path, blocking their escape and it lashed out, scraping
past Dawn as she dodged.

I WILL FEAST ON YOUR DESPAIR OFFWORLDER. The
promise would have driven shivers down Dawn’s spine but she had been shaking for what felt like
a lifetime already.

As they retreated away from the Nightmare, Dawn realized it had knocked free her bandolier.
YOUR TRICKS ARE WORTHLESS HERE. It cackled out at her, one slimy tentacle bore the
belt aloft to swallow it whole and then it belched out flames. A single grenade had been enough to seal Deep Roads entrances. A single grenade had been enough to splatter the Aspect apart. She’d thought a whole belt of them would be enough to stop the Nightmare. She’d failed.

Dawn gasped, swaying as her blood went cold. Hawke was about to say something, likely offer to distract it while they ran. She had failed and had no back up plan and Hawke was going to die because of it. All this way, all this time preparing and for what? Dawn’s worse fear happening in real time and all her own fault.

The oppressive weight of failure tried to drive her to her knees, time slowing to an agonized crawl as all she had the power to do was feel her heartbeat and not fall into a thousand pieces.

YOU ARE NOTHING BEFORE ME. The Nightmare crowed its victory, breaking the silence locking them up but Dawn couldn’t look away to her friends. She’d failed them. YOUR WEAKNESS IS MY STRENGTH OFFWORLDER. I WILL FEED OFF YOUR PAIN FOREVER. This was why her tombstone had read choice; this moment when all her choices, all her hopes and dreams came crashing down.

“No.” It took everything she had but Dawn dare not hold anything back. For once it was about what she believed and how far she was willing to go to fight for it. She wasn’t a mage but this was the Fade and the rules were different. Wisdom had done everything she could to teach her that in a single encounter. And if she was right, then she knew what she had to do. Even with the crushing weight of the Nightmare’s entire focus upon her, Dawn forced the words out. “You have no power over me.”

Her voice was guttural and raw, the Will of the Nightmare trying to force her to submit. The edges of her vision were tunnelling down, survival instincts screaming at her with no clear direction, but still she persisted.

“You are a bad dream, nothing more; all Nightmares end.” She wasn’t sure if it was blood, sweat, or tears streaming down her face, her heart beat wild and erratic.

Dawn took a step towards the Nightmare.

“What you have forgotten is that there can be no nightmares without first having good dreams. You do not exist to defeat and consume me nightmare, because I have not lost hope.” She had, however, lost all sensation of walking, skin afire with pins and needles and pain.

“Fear is not the oldest emotion and in the heart of you, you know that. The cry of a newborn babe isn’t fear at the new world but hope that they are not alone. You cannot fear the worst without first hoping for the best. And even if there is only the Nothing of the Void there is hope. Because even Nothing has the potential for Something.”

There were ashes everywhere but she couldn’t see where from. She didn’t dare blink and she couldn’t worry about Alena and Victoria. “You have made so many others lose pieces of themselves because you have lost a piece of yourself; you are not only the nightmare. You can choose to be the dreamer of impossible dreams.”

The Nightmare had waited for her to bring herself closer. Within reach.

It struck out, pincers lashing out to crush her and Dawn’s battered heart stopped. So did the Nightmare. The ashes filled her vision, the last clear sight she had that of the Nightmare gone and in its place only her own face.
“What do you wish for when you see a shooting star?” without air the question was asked as the Nightmare scattered and Dawn collapsed to the ground.

All the rest was silence.

Chapter End Notes

Please keep in mind that people are unreliable narrators when you're reading their POV.
The Void Stares Back

Chapter Summary

Part 3 of Here Lies the Abyss Chapter

The Nightmare hunted Dawn but targeted them all. Some of them were even prepared. No one was left undamaged.

Chapter Notes

So I think this is the first time I go back into a POV for events you saw happening, but this time you're getting a lot more than I initially presented. Hopefully it makes sense once you read it :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were in the fucking Fade.

He had gone in, maybe not fully informed, but more in the know than anyone else on the team. And still Iron Bull hadn’t realized just how not prepared he was. It was one thing to know he was going to be going up against a demon army; they will bleed and die on his side of reality easily enough. But now he was in their turf and he had no idea what would actually work against all the little shits this place was going to throw at him.

What was he supposed to do with an axe against something called THE NIGHTMARE?

This was definitely what Little Bas had been getting ready for. He knew it the moment he looked at Dawn and saw her face. She looked sad, but also resolute. He just wished she had told him everything that was coming, there was so much more he would have done to get even himself ready for this. Fucking demons, in the fucking Fade.

“I’ll fight anyone you want Boss, but no one said anything about being dragged through the ass end of demon-town.” He directed the comment to Alena but looked at Dawn as he said it. She should have warned him this was coming; he’d certainly feel better having had a chance to prepare for it.

Like you prepared her He shook the thought off.

The others were more jovial, probably because they didn’t know for sure yet that this trip of theirs was going to end badly. Only the Elf knew to suspect something, and he probably actually enjoyed being here, “Oh yeah, this must be a dream come true for your crazy ass.” Bull put a lid on his concern, having given himself enough time for the little pity party in his head.

Ironic you calling someone else crazy

He watched their backs while everyone else conferred and so he was the first to see Dawn look past
their group as if expecting someone. She didn’t look afraid so when some...thing that was apparently human came towards them he didn’t just immediately kill it; even though he really wanted to. And he certainly didn’t believe it for a second that this was the Divine Justinia lady, though the fancy hat seemed right.

The only good thing to come out of the spirit’s mouth was that she knew how they could get out; if they were willing to trust the advice of something that was probably a demon. He wasn’t at all surprised when there were more spirits trying to attack them even as ‘Justinia’ claimed they need the memories the Inquisitor has lost. Funny that Alena seemed perfectly fine without those memories right up until the spirit lady says they need them. Bull wanted out of this place so bad he could taste it.

Because they will die

It didn’t help that he realized the whispering he kept hearing wasn’t actually his own thoughts, and no one else seemed to notice them.

You will fail

There was no echo, no susurration of breath. Whatever was speaking didn’t use a voice for it and instead Bull heard the continuous monologue in his own head.

She is going to die

He shook his head and ignored it, unable to keep his eye from looking over at Dawn to make sure she was still alright. The memories the Boss was taking back were interesting and yet couldn’t hold his attention, only his self-discipline keeping Bull’s ears open to the sounds past the constant whisper.

She didn’t tell you because she plans to die.

Hawke’s anger however was hot enough to burn through the fog filling his head. Enough so that he was aware that there was actual fog starting to obscure their way forwards; though no one else commented on seeing it any more than they seemed aware of the whispers Bull heard. He was seeing something not there and hearing a voice in his head no one else could hear.

You are already insane, why deny it?

Out of the corner of his eye, in the fog he was certain only he could see; Bull was forced to watch his own memory play out. Witnessing once again the entire spectacular failure that was Seheron; his friends’ unnecessary deaths, the blackout and coming to afterwards and how carefully the Qun re-educators had handled him. A broken tool reshaped to new use.

They would be safer without you near them

He focused on Dawn trying to help settle the argument between King and Champion but kept out of it, fairly certain his opinion was not going to help the matter. At least until he couldn’t keep his teeth locked around it anymore. “That’s great and all, but the Nightmare is the thing currently scaring the shit outta me.” They needed to focus on the matter actually at hand, on the thing trying to kill them all. Not worry about what happened over a year ago to bring them all here today.

Especially since the fog was getting thicker.

Your little thing would be safer if she never knew you
Only it wasn’t the Fog Warriors he saw shambling out of it. Bull swung his axe without thinking, the blow connecting solidly into the neck of a Tal Vashoth he knew he’d killed before; hard not to remember the face of a fallen friend. He could still see the others through the fog, their attentions focused on fighting off their own maddened attackers. He spared only a second longer to make sure Dawn was actually fighting these enemies, all too aware of how close they came to tragedy while still in Adamant.

Don’t worry, your little thing is following in your footsteps this time

He wanted to scream at the voice but knew it would be futile. Solas had warned them about Fear tricks; this had to be one of them. So Iron Bull ignored it to the best of his ability, ignored the fog that was curling around his boots and the sight of Tal Vashoth constantly grinning at him. At least he knew these were tricks, the dead didn’t come back to life and attack once you’ve burned their bodies and Bull always did like to leave a clean slate when he finished. Also the sight of burning the dead helped convince the locals to remain peaceful, though he didn’t worry about that anymore.

You just enjoy thinking about it

Dawn stuck to his side as they started to splash through puddles, the sound of it reinforcing for Bull how the fog couldn’t be real. It was thick enough that he worried about losing the others to it but did nothing to muffle sound like real fog would, so Bull crushed the concern down not wanting to feed the Nightmare more ideas.

It didn’t help.

Such a good little tool

Their months of training together was paying off, even without her shield Dawn stuck to his blind spot and kept him covered. He returned the favour by trying to keep the Shades and Wraiths far enough away that her lack of shield wouldn’t matter.

Still close enough for you to hurt her

He shook his head to clear the sound and kept on, trusting that the others had no reason to fear the fog and thus were actually useful as lookout. And then they walked into a memory playing that was most definitely not the Inquisitor’s. A ghostly image trapped in the dark, desperate for a guiding light.

Sounds familiar

Unsurprisingly it was Dawn that knew what to do to help. And of course she raced ahead, all but disappearing into the fog before coming back with a candle. Without spark or magic the candle burst into light the moment Dawn put it on the table near the shade and Bull wasn’t surprised to see the spectre fade away.

He was a little surprised to realize that as it did so, so did some of the fog; enough to let him breathe. It was short lived; their path forwards seemed useful until they were doubling back and wasting time. He wanted out of there and it did not help at all to know there was still worse yet to come. She would not have endured all the training she had simply to walk through the Fade.

So eager to bring her to me

Tal Vashoth that Bull had fought his entire life kept coming at them now, oddly comforting in their familiarity. He’d always been good at mindlessly killing them and it was a skill he sank himself into here and now. So much so that when the Nightmare finally did decide to address them out
loud he had nothing to say to help her.

Little Thing. Little Girl. It hurt to hear words he’d only ever meant as affection turned against her now and Bull tasted copper as he clenched his teeth together to stay silent.

It won't help, I know you

He was almost grateful when more demonic Tal Vashoth burst out of the fog to attack.

Nothing happier than a pig in mud than a Bull in Blood

The next tortured spirit they encountered wasn’t released by Dawn but instead Alistair, the Warden King almost as gray as Bull was. He wanted to focus on the scene playing out for them all to witness, wanted to remain vigilant for attack, but Bull could only see shapes chasing each other in the fog. Too small to be Tal Vashoth. Too small to be Fog Warriors. Children and ghosts of those he had seen slaughtered, the Tal Vashoth he fought always there first.

Look at what you made her into

Dawn’s scream of anger held too many familiar echoes of madness, the sound invoked as much from his own memory as the woman in front of him, ruining her sword edge. And he could do nothing to help her now.

Because you made her this way

When the Nightmare addressed him directly where the others could hear, Bull almost didn’t notice. **THE QUNARI WILL MAKE A LOVELY HOST FOR ONE OF MY MINIONS. OR MAYBE I WILL ENJOY RIDING HIM MYSELF.**

There was an innuendo in the choice of words and Bull knew it was deliberate, not a single part of his mind safe from the defilement of the Nightmare. “You cannot take over an unwilling soul Nightmare. No matter how domineering you think you are.” Solas spoke in his defence and Bull took a deep breath in. The mage looked at him as if aware of what the Nightmare was doing, his words the only defence he could share in this place.

It was a kind thought.

You’ll be his death too

Despair demons were mixed in to the Tal Vashoth and the fog, their screams often the only guide Bull had to strike out at. It occurred to him that none of the others were aiming their strikes so high, so hard. They weren’t seeing the things haunting him, their eyes and attacks aimed at something he couldn’t properly see so he knew it had to be as bad for them as it was for him. And he could do nothing.

You could always do nothing; you are a tool to be used, nothing more

He couldn’t keep track of time in this place and that was a problem. The dimensions they walked did not match up to the space around them, and even if he ignored the fog and what images it held it blocked his ability to look out past their little circle. Unseeable, the Nightmare taunted them on and he could only offer the protection of his silence and his axe.

Such stalwart defences

Until Solas commented on only seeing spiders.
“You saw spiders? Man, spiders would’ve been a massive improvement from what I saw.” He tried to make his tone joking and knew he failed.

As with so many other things

“Same.” Dawn sounded as if she’d been working in the mines her entire life, pain adding an unhealthy dissonance to her voice.

Your doing

“Remember we walk in the Fade. Demons of Fear alter their shape to unnerve each of us.” The mage sounded too damn calm and collected and Bull wanted to shake him until he was as unsettled as everyone else.

You’re the one that’s unsettled

“That makes me feel so much better.” It was bad that he wasn’t sure if he was addressing the voice of the mage or the voice in his head.

At least Shrieks came out to distract him from thinking about it. Dawn was pulled from his side, vanishing into the fog and Bull fought the instinctive urge to run after her. Seconds or a lifetime later and he heard someone cry out in pain but she was back at his side already.

Just like you taught her

He focused on swinging his axe until there was nothing left to kill. The edges of the fog seemed saturated in blood now and Bull wasn’t sure if it was the Nightmare, his bloodlust, or something else entirely.

It’s all you

Solas was hurt.

You failed to protect him

Dawn was there to help, her concern burning through some of the incessant whispers plaguing Bull even though she was talking to the Elf. Bull stretched his neck out, feeling it pop but there was no release to the tension encasing his spine. Half of the enemies he struck at faded to nothing more than figments in the fog and Bull worried about accidentally attacking a friend now.

Accidentally?

The Boss took back more of her memories and Bull knew he should watch them carefully but he couldn’t.

He was watching the memory of becoming Hissrad. The years of his life sped and bled together until his childhood ran bloody with the actions of who he was now and still the whispers continued to remind him that he was always and nothing more than the weapon wielded; the tool to be used. And that he had tried to make Dawn exactly like him.

Hawke didn’t scream or snarl but the look in her eyes pulled Bull from even the incessant susurrations of his endless failures whispered inside his head. She looked more insane than he’d ever felt and he knew that he wasn’t the only one hearing their litany of loss. He never expected it to give him hope.
“Ah, so if we banish you we banish the demons. Thank you, every fear come to life.” Justinia called out and Bull tried to cling to the humour in the spirit’s words.

He stepped closer to Dawn again, seeing her almost trembling but persisting at his side. The fog was easier to ignore but everywhere, and now they were in an area where he couldn’t trust the ground to remain the ground.

Your instincts can’t be trusted, pet

Wisps and Sloths and Shrieks, smaller than the Tal Vashoth he’d been swinging at but never easier to fell. And then there was Dawn, rampaging through them.

Your Little Thing is a little killer

Water splashed his calves, far deeper than the puddles they had encountered thus far. Deeper and a lot colder, all too real like a slap in the face. He wanted to dive into it and let it take him away from this place. “What’s with the water, trying to prey on my deep seated fear of wet calves?” he forced the words out, not even sure if he’d tried to make them a joke or not.

You should be afraid; there’s an ocean of blood spilled by your actions

“I’m fairly certain you’ve never been afraid of being wet.” Dawn’s joke felt about as light-hearted as his.

Little Thing is a good little tool

He followed Dawn’s attention to see a graveyard laid out for them. His one eye spied out their names, his feet bringing him closer to read the rest. His grave was first, as big and graceless as he was in life, and Bull saw a single word etched under his name like a brand. Madness.

Your fate. Always your fate.

The others were there but though he tried to look he couldn’t see them. His mind too busy with the fate he’d always denied. Qunari need the Qun, it was the only thing keeping them from the rage and violence filling their blood and driving them forwards. He’d seen it, time and again. He’d fought those that had denied it, having killed friends that lost themselves to the madness.

He didn’t want to believe it.

But you do

He wouldn’t let it happen

You can’t fight it

He wasn’t alone. He wouldn’t have to face it alone.

No, you’ll bring her down with you

Solas set the next ghost’s memories to playing, the terrible reality of the first Wardens biting at them all. They had come together, worked past the boundaries separating them all to fight the Blight as one. It wasn’t enough.

It never is

He watched as Dawn helped settle Solas, the mage’s reaction wildly out of proportion to what Bull
had seen. It wouldn’t surprise him if he couldn’t even trust that what he witnessed was the same memory they all saw.

Because you’re already insane and you know it

The deepstalkers that came out at them now were so numerous he should be cautious but Bull couldn’t help but viciously kick one hard enough that it launched it out into the fog with a scream.

You enjoy it

He tore into the deepstalkers, his Axe almost more useful with the flat side, even as Dawn danced around him. They were an effective team to clear out the endless swarm and he stomped the last one underfoot long before their cries stopped echoing.

Good little killing tools

“Shit that’s big.” Surprise pulled the words from him. The fog was gone, not fading away but vanishing entirely because it had never been real.

Just in your head with me

The Nightmare was huge, too many legs to be like the spiders, and something was off about the shape but they were still too far away for Bull to tell for sure.

Hello my pet

“It wants our fear, deny it that and it has nothing.” Solas reminded; face paler than normal thanks to blood loss.

Come to me

Two smaller Prides came out and Bull heard Dawn scream in pain.

Give in to it

His vision nearly went entirely red and he lashed out without thought to where his allies were. He needed to hurt something in return for hurting Dawn.

Bring her to me

Her scream cut off and Bull couldn’t see her for the swarm of deepstalkers that surged around the Prides. He swung, precise and carefully controlled now, weapon an extension of his will and nothing more.

You don’t have to hide what you are

They finally battered the prides and stalkers down; their ashes sticking to the sweat, blood, and ichor splattered across his skin.

Your favourite decorations

Dawn was by Alistair, safe and protected by his shield.

My little mad bull

He knew they had to be close for how desperate the Nightmare battered at his mind but it did
nothing to make it easier to endure.

Then don’t

He pulled his focus to the space around him, looking for something real amongst the madness. Only to see a child held in torment to the Nightmare’s Will. A child. One of the babies he had seen walking through the snow from Haven to Skyhold.

One of mine, just like you

All the kid wanted was their toy, their stalwart protector. He held the red in his vision at bay only because he did not wish to scare the child further and delivered them from the demon hunting it.

Hollow victory because you know that can’t you save yourself; can’t save her

Dawn was here to protect Hawke and Alistair and he was here to protect her. The Nightmare might try to muddy things up but Bull held those facts as resolute. Hawke was upfront with Varric, Alena was guarding her back, and Dawn was in front of Bull so he stood at Alistair’s side. If he could do nothing else to help his kadan; he would keep the King alive.

Such a sweet sentiment

And then the Nightmare showed them just exactly what it had been doing to Dawn the entire time.

Her family.

What’s left

Her loved ones

So easily slaughtered

He could see the family resemblance between them all and knew without having to be told that this was the life Dawn had been stolen from. He could see her wide eyes and understood the trembling now.

But she keeps on killing

In the face of it though, Dawn defied the Nightmare. “Yes, I am capable of this.” Of course she is, you made her a killing tool “And so much more; I will face you Nightmare, and I will leave my mark on you too.”

Like you did on your Little Thing

He couldn’t close his eye to the sight of her charging into battle against her own kin, and knowing it was a lie did nothing to help.

Your perfect little killing thing

He charged in at her side, having nothing better to do and no argument for the voice in his head.

Because I’m right and you know it

Then the Nightmare sent them a bigger obstacle to clear. The conversation between Dawn and Solas snagged his attention only because the Nightmare allowed it.
What will you do when I take everything away from you?

“So use me.” Dawn insisted and it broke Bull’s heart to hear her saying anything that could agree with the Nightmare.

She’s mine as are you

You made her into a weapon to be wielded

He was helpless, silently holding himself in place while Dawn and Solas were magic together. As if rehearsed they moved in unison and it was achingly beautiful to see. Their combined grace thwarted the Greater Pride’s jump, keeping it from landing on them and Bull could only take advantage of the opportunity they’d given him.

See how you made her nothing more than you are yourself, a tool to be used and discarded

She hit the dirt but Bull watched as Dawn regained her feel and barrelled towards the Greater Pride Demon. And he almost forgot to pay attention to keeping his own ass alive because she commanded attention greater than even the threat in front of him.

Watch all your hard work in action

As he dodged a casual side swipe from its claws, Dawn managed to hamstring the damn thing.

Watch as your little thing is unmade

Her sword was drenched in ichor but the Demon’s backhand caught her off guard sending her crashing against a statue. This time when she hit the dirt she didn’t move.

She came here to die and you know it

It was too much. With a blood curdling roar, Bull slammed his battle axe against the Demon’s exposed ribcage, crushing through bone even as he avoided the retaliation. The others clamoured in, matching actions to words as one monstrous hand was severed and he held his blood lust away through sheer will alone. Hawke was somehow on the thing’s back, and she thrust her daggers into its eyeballs with a snarl that echoed Bull’s.

The Greater Pride Demon shattered into flakes of ash that Bull had to spit off of his tongue as he rushed to check on Dawn. The glowing NOT-Divine was helping her back to her feet, saying something as she recovered. And for once the Nightmare had nothing to say.

The Spirit glided away and Dawn looked up at him, shaky despite her wild show earlier. “What’s did she say?” he asked, desperate.

Dawn looked down and he figured she wasn’t going to answer; a part of him horrified that the Nightmare might have been right about her coming here to die, but she surprised him by looking back up with the most stunningly beautiful smile he’d ever seen. “That I am going to show the Nightmare how dangerous Hope is.”

How adorable her defiance is mad bull

Iron Bull stared down at her for a moment, ignoring the taunting of the Nightmare so he could finally cup the back of her head and kiss her. This was probably the worst, most selfish timing but he did it anyways; had wanted to do it a thousand times before already. Dawn held still against his lips for a surprised second but quickly kissed back. “You better not be planning to die.” He all but
begged.

She is

“As touching as it is to witness your moment,” Hawke drawled even as she pointed over her shoulder, “Bad Guys.”

Dawn flushed a pretty colour so Bull swooped in for another, quick kiss.

So distracted by your little thing

Then they stepped apart and he focused on killing people he knew looked like her family.

And she’s killed them all

That was something they’d have to deal with the consequences from later if the shaking in her hands were any indication.

She doesn’t have a later

They fought their way forwards, one bloody step at a time.

You like the blood

He could tell Dawn tried not to see the faces of corpses that had to look so real to her, so familiar. If the images he was seeing in the Fade were half as real as the ones tormenting her, it was no wonder that her hands shook.

You made her just strong enough to last, now bring her to me

“The rift, we’re almost there!” Hawke’s cry broke through the echoing whispers of the Nightmare in his head.

“Great Hawke, why not just dare the Old Gods to try and stop you?” Varric demanded incredulously.

She didn’t offer a response because suddenly they were at The Nightmare’s den.

Welcome home the Iron Bull

The giant arachnid was far more deep sea creature now that they were close enough to see it; spikes and ridges marred its spine while tentacles and pinchers littered its body. And the pilot fish type body floating in front of them was almost entirely humanoid; considering what other torments the Nightmare had pulled from her past Bull had a dark suspicion he knew who it was pretending to be. He took a quick second to look from monster to woman and judged that this had to be the late Larry’s form being used now.

Don’t worry; soon it’ll be your form I use

“If you would, please tell Leliana ‘I am sorry; I failed you too.’” Justinia’s spirit begged of Alena before she flew forwards and bore the hulking Nightmare back behind a barrier.

This won’t be enough to stop me

That left the Inquisition to attack the smaller Aspect of the Nightmare.
Hawke vanished into Stealth while Varric stayed visible as he shot Bianca rapidly at it. Alistair called out a challenge, taunting the Aspect until its humanity melted away; one scorpion like stinger crashed into Alistair’s shield and Bull sank the edge of his axe into its torso.

“YOU ARE NOTHING!” The Aspect bellowed, but it lacked the insidiousness of the internal diatribe.

It was all too easy to attack the thing in front of him simply because if he got through it, they could leave this place.

You wish

They fought in the silence of every battle, grunts and snarls, cacophony of clashes but nothing actually said. You will NEVER leave If the others spoke he didn’t hear or heed them, needing to destroy the thing in front of him if only to keep it out of his head. I belong here More things attacked them now, the Tal Vashoth he thought gone never, Dawn’s family, spiders and more. Things that had never and could never exist but looked just close enough to have once been real. I unmake everything and rebuild it to my needs, as I will you and our Little Thing He chopped at its neck but that didn’t stop the words in his skull. I will enjoy the sounds of your sorrow

And then Dawn was screaming at it and he saw her shove a jar into a gaping wound. Marvellous The explosion and smell of burnt sulphur left him snarling, too familiar. Gaatlok. Your little killer is about to die

Even as the Aspect scattered into dust the words in his head continued. I will take you and then use you to take her, it will be glorious She was here to save the King and Champion and with all the noise in his head and around him Bull did the only thing he could.

She is mine

He grabbed Alistair, threw him over his shoulder and ran for the Rift.

Yes, leave her to me mad bull; she is a perfect tool now thanks to you

The words chased him through the Rift.

Iron Bull wanted to turn around the moment he got the struggling Warden King to safety. The Nightmare had been wrong; Bull was able to help Dawn solve this. It felt almost strange to not have a voice in his head trying to refute that thought.

“By the Maker’s shorthairs, what are you doing?” Alistair demanded.

“Saving your life and hopefully Dawn’s sanity too.” Iron Bull answered gruffly. His statement shut the human up even if it did nothing to settle his unease.

Thankfully there were plenty of distractions in the form of demons trying to rip their throats out; Iron Bull used them to keep his attention off of the worry stabbing in his kidneys. He believed Dawn to be capable and he knew listening to the Nightmare’s taunts was a bad idea, but that didn’t stop him from striding forwards to re-enter the Rift the moment he cleared a path.

“Don’t, it’s already unstable.” Solas warned, halting Bull. The much shorter Elf seemed not at all intimidated by Bull’s hulking size or angry scowl, and it was the knowledge that Solas would have gone back to help her as well that let him redirect his fear.
“She’ll be pissed if you’re still bleeding that much when she comes through.” Bull grunted at the mage, seeing blood darkening the bandages around his chest. He couldn’t spare more worry than that yet.

Alistair was still fighting demons with the other Wardens, his experience as one of the Ferelden Heroes and King giving him a natural command that the others followed. Despite a decade of secure living his skills were not in the least bit rusty and he flowed across the battlefield with a grace even Bull could appreciate, but only peripherally as he focused on the Rift. As if his attention could pull Dawn through it already.

Just as despair started to whisper to him Varric surged through, the Boss barrelling along right beside. Hawke legged it out behind and Dawn was slung between them limp as dead meat. As soon as they cleared the Rift Dawn was set down and Alena pulled with the Mark, sealing the Rift closed.

The Demons shrieked and wailed before scattering to ash and dust, and a heartbeat later the Inquisition soldiers and Wardens alike let out a victorious cheer. To a person they all turned to celebrate Alena as the Inquisitor stood with Hawke over their fallen friend. Bull wanted to see to Dawn but stood locked in place, actually shaking instead.

She didn’t look like she was breathing.

“The Divine was right, without the Nightmare to control them the Mages are free and Corypheus loses his army.” Hawke sounded terrible as she spoke, cradling Dawn carefully while Solas looked over her for injury and Varric held his crossbow like he desperately wanted to keep using it. “Though, as far as they’re concerned, The Inquisitor broke the spell with the blessing of the Maker.” She prompted Alena carefully.

Boss shook her head. “Once they understand what really happened…” she protested but Hawke cut her off.

“Honestly after all the death, and what we’ve just seen… perhaps it would be better to let them believe the legend.” She sighed as she spoke and Bull knew he was missing something.

A runner pelted towards them with news from the front while Bull hovered near Dawn but Solas sat back and commanded his attention. “She is alright, just unconscious. I don’t know what happened but it seems her body shut down as a survival tactic.” The Elf explained softly, sounding relieved.

“Make sure, I couldn’t find a heartbeat earlier.” Hawke demanded roughly and Bull felt a sharp stab into his guts.

“Inquisitor, the arch demon flew off as soon as you disappeared. The Venatori Magister is unconscious but alive; the Commander thought you might wish to deal with him yourself.” The Runner finished informing the Boss, loud enough to interrupt Bull’s attention. “As for Wardens, once the Arch Demon left every one of them helped us fight the demons.”

“We stand ready to help make up for Clarel’s… tragic mistake.” Alistair promised as the other Wardens seemed satisfied with him speaking for them.

“You’re still all vulnerable to Corypheus, and possibly his Venatori, but there are plenty of demons that need killing.” Alena accepted the Wardens and Bull stared down at Dawn’s unconscious face, letting the Boss worry about their new allies.
“I’ll send Stroud to the Wardens at Weisshaupt; I’ve got enough responsibility already.” Alistair smiled disarmingly.

Bull had picked Dawn up from Hawke’s lap, cradling her unconscious body against his. He had to trust the Elf knew what he was talking about as Dawn’s head rolled limply. He hated this Fade shit. His eye met Solas’ concerned gaze. “You’re sure she’ll be alright?”

“I cannot promise that, I need to see how she is when she awakes.” Solas replied without looking away. His answer wasn’t a lie, nor was it satisfactory, but Bull let it go. It was hard to know how to react when the person you’re in love with was hurt, Iron Bull was learning that only slightly slower than the Elf was.

“Go to the Command tent, Cullen will call a healer for her there.” Alena released Bull from staying as the others figured out the details between Inquisition and Wardens.

He didn’t argue, just left and strode towards the Command tent as ordered. Half way there he got more impetus when Dawn thrashed weakly in his grip, suddenly awake even though she was not cognizant of the world around her. “Settle Dawn, settle. I’ve got you.” He soothed.

“’Bull?” Dawn’s voice was crackled and harsh, as if she’s been screaming, and exhaustion only slurried her accent further.

“You did it Dawn, they’re both alive.” He informed her in a carefully quiet tone. “Rest kadan, you did it.” She’d already gone limp in his arms again and somehow Bull found himself moving even faster, the people he passed by ignored entirely.

Iron Bull found Commander Cullen arguing with a blonde mage that was moulting feathers off of his outfit. They fell into an uncomfortable silence as Bull strode in.

“You’re back!” Cullen declared in a relieved exhale, his body almost collapsing in on itself in relief. There was a bloodied bandage discarded on the map table, but Bull couldn’t smell new blood so it was either someone else’s or a wound had just been Healed.

“I’m a Healer.” The blonde mage declared, ignoring the Commander and confirming Bull’s deduction.

“You’re a menace.” Cullen muttered but didn’t interfere. “What can you report Bull?”

Iron Bull watched the mage as he approached them. “Solas couldn’t confirm if she was fine because she’s unconscious.” He growled out, too tense to explain anything yet.

The mage’s hands glowed blue and hovered over Dawn without touching. Colour seemed to seep back into her skin slowly, like the sky at sunrise. Dawn didn’t wake up but Bull could almost swear she started to breathe easier. “I take it this is the infamous Offworlder.” The mage stepped back as the light show from his hands faded. “Whatever it was she did, I can’t tell what damage has been done. Other than the sensation that she is most certainly not from this world, she feels fine.” The Healer gave an unsettled laugh. “All I had to do was boost her energy levels back up and ease some bumps and bruises. Some sleep and she might wake up eating everything in sight for a few days, but she should be alright.” Bull got the feeling that the Healer was keeping something from him but he stayed silent, not trusting the man and not wanting to reveal the depth of his concern to a stranger.

“What happened?” Cullen demanded as Bull remained quiet.

“I’ve got a better idea of that than Tiny here.” Victoria Hawke declared as she strode into the tent
with Red at her side. “Long time no see Blondie, nice of you to join the party.”

“Hawke,” the mage nodded with a smile, “came as soon as the Calling stopped. Justice Fade stepped us here.”

“That must have been one doozy of an argument.” Hawke laughed and Bull found himself irritated at the human. Normally they got on well enough but right now he found her jittery humour annoying. Before Cullen could have an aneurysm or Bull could lose his last reserve of patience, Hawke turned serious. “Take a seat and I’ll tell it from the start.”

Before she could though, Alena and the other Inquisition members from the experience strode in. Solas looked to see Dawn still in his arms and gave Bull a nod, as if already aware of everything the Healer had said. With everyone around and nothing better to do, Bull settled on a camp chair hearing Cullen sigh at the inevitable delay. Leliana remained silent and watchful and Bull didn’t doubt for a second that every word being spoke was also being memorized.

“Oh good; let Hawke talk.” Alena grunted, going straight to one foot locker and pulling out a jug. She unceremoniously opened it and took a long drink from it before handing it over to an amused Varric.

“This is why we’re friends,” Hawke gave the Inquisitor a wink; “you share booze and let me shine.”

“You just love collecting Rogue Dwarves, Hawke.” Varric teased and most of the tent seemed to relax in their light-hearted banter; things could not be dire if people were joking.

The last to arrive was Warden King Alistair, he stumbled in and Varric thrust the jug into his grip. “Ooof,” the King looked at the jug for a moment then shrugged with a bland sounding “eh” and took a swig. He handed it to Solas after making a face to the taste of the contents. “The Wardens are standing ready Commander.” He stated. “I’ve sent word to Acting Warden Commander Howe to come take charge of the forces here and act as Rylen’s liaison.”

“Excellent,” Cullen leaned on the foldout map table, “now will someone please tell me what happened?” he demanded, voice agonized with impatience.

“I’m about to Curly.” Hawke took center stage again and pre-empted her story with a long pull from the jug. “So we all fell to our doom, except Stabby here,” she indicated Alena with her chin as her hands passed Bull the jug, “decides to open a rift and we relocate to the ass end of the Fade. That ended up being a bonus because the False Calling, demon army, and general all around Fade Bad Guy back up came from something called The Nightmare. We were in its bedroom and it turns out that this prick is the one responsible for Stabby’s missing memories. Also, there’s a spirit wearing Divine Justinia’s face.”

“Hawke, your story telling skills are heinous.” Varric interrupted with a laugh and Cullen just drank heavily from the jug Bull passed him.

“Bite me Dwarf.” Hawke shot back.

“Not in public.” He retorted with a waggle of eyebrows. But Varric took over the narrative, and for once he didn’t embellish the details too extravagantly though Cullen still bore a look of disbelief and astonishment at the story. Dawn remained restfully unconscious during the entire narration, “So I take the top of the hill, laying down a truly spectacular carpet of cover fire for my stalwart friends. Solas flies past me, the first of us through to ready the other side. Then Tiny here grabs King Alistair, fully armoured and armed still, and pulls his Majesty to safety. But even as I watch
“Oh Maker…” Cullen rolled his eyes at Varric’s verbosity.

“Be grateful Cassandra’s not here.” Red finally spoke, sounding far too amused by it all.

“Everyone’s a critic.” Varric brushed off the interruption. “The Nightmare itself slams down onto the trail. I told you how massive and ugly it was, but up close only made it all the worst.” It was not comforting to hear the serious tone to Varric’s words. “She stood in the face of it and the Nightmare fell into ashes. I could see as it started in the massive body, just disintegrating into a rainstorm of ash as Dawn walked towards it, but I couldn’t hear what she was saying.” He admitted with obvious reluctance.

“At first it was like Dawn was expecting it to happen,” Hawke took over the tale again, voice less agonized this time and her hands nimbly passed the jug on its third round, “but not like this.”

“She did.” Bull’s admission pulled all eyes to Dawn’s still form. “When she asked me to train her, I managed to get pieces of what was to come from her; not everything but enough.” He knew he had an attentive room. “She knew that the Nightmare would cut off the Inquisitor, Hawke, and Alistair.” He looked down at her peaceful seeming rest, keeping to himself how she hadn’t trusted anyone with the knowledge about her little jars of exploding.

She’d told him the most of what was coming and now he knew just how little she had actually confided. At the time he’d felt so clever getting the information out of her, but now he just felt sad. She was right not to trust him back then, and now Bull worried about if she should trust him at all. Fresh wounds from the Nightmare no doubt.

“But that’s not what happened, you carried me out of there like so much luggage.” Alistair objected and helped Bull refocus.

“Exactly; either you or Hawke was supposed to be left behind; a self-sacrifice to provide a distraction. I carried you out to keep it from being you and trusted Dawn to keep it from being Hawke.” Bull explained succinctly. “That’s what she’s been getting ready for.”

There was a long silence as those collected took a moment to let that sink in. Everyone had wondered- had thought they’d figured it out; what was the Harbinger preparing for? The reality was that every day Dawn had gotten up and gone through numerous attempts to be ready, solely to save the King and the Champion. And despite all the odds and all the obstacles between her arrival and now, she had succeeded. Bull could feel the woman in question stirring lightly and was absurdly grateful even though she didn’t yet wake up.

“Dawn had a sweet plan, even if it didn’t work.” Hawke filled in the blanks. “She’d come through all of Adamant, and the Fade, with explosives like none of us has ever seen and for a moment I thought it’d actually work.” Hawke shook her head as she stared at Dawn and Bull was deeply unsettled by the reminder that his kadan knew how to make gaatlok. If the Qun ever found that out it wouldn’t just be Red Templars trying for her life. Then again if he’d kept them informed of all that Dawn was capable of, something he hadn’t done even while still being Ben-Hassrath, the Qun would have long ago tried to kill her or take her. Dawn was too unpredictable a resource to allow her uncontrolled freedom and interference. “One alone splattered the Aspect but The Nightmare swallowed the belt of ’em whole like they were nothing. So Little Miss Badass there just…talked it down; like she did the controlled mages on the battlements. Then she dropped like a stone.” Hawke concluded finally.

“Talked it down?” Leliana carefully questioned and Bull didn’t like that he couldn’t read her
“Ena’vun has an indomitable Will in the Fade, likely a side effect of her Offworlder status.” Solas provided an explanation. “She connects better than any mage I’ve ever seen even though she seems unable to use it as a power source. Being physically in the Fade it is likely her Will was an active tool for her to use.” Bull knew the Elf was lying about something, his eyes gave it away, but he wasn’t sure what it was the Elf said that was the lie.

“She woke a little as I brought her here.” Bull admitted, trying to draw out more information and aware that Dawn was starting to move slightly, waking up completely this time.

“That’s a good sign,” The Healer spoke up, his presence seeming to surprise a few people, “Because even I can’t tell what was done to her.”

“She had defences, even there. It is likely one acted to take the damage she should have.” Solas explained and Bull wanted to believe it, he just wasn’t sure he should. His unease wasn’t settled when Solas immediately redirected the topic either. “The spirit that helped us did more than just hold back the Nightmare; she was trying to free all the souls it’d tainted.”

“Was it really the Divine?” Leliana asked pointedly, her focus on Dawn letting Iron Bull know that she had obviously woken up again. He wanted to let her rest but knew everyone needed answers still.

“I’ve never known. It was her, or a spirit that identified so strongly with her that it’s as perfect a reflection as can be. I didn’t know her; you tell me if any of this is out of character.” Dawn sounded exhausted despite the Healer’s work earlier and she made no move to leave Bull’s grasp, so he gladly held onto her longer.

“What happens now?” Cullen was at least still logical about everything.

Bull noticed Dawn look towards Red before answering. “Corypheus has no demon army, and no civil war. His next move will be to the Arbour Wilds. There’s an ancient Elven Temple for Mythal, Morrigan will know about a possible Eluvian he wants there.” Dawn answered, much to everyone’s astonishment. “I don’t know where the Temple actually is in there though, and I doubt now is the time and place for plotting.”

He was watching the Nightingale closely; likely the only one to see in her eyes that she’d known the answer Dawn was giving. It wasn’t likely this was common knowledge so Bull guessed that somehow Dawn had found a way to inform the Spymaster without telling anyone else. She was certainly full of surprises today.

“How are you feeling?” Alena asked, ignoring the debriefing going on around her to focus on Dawn.

Bull watched Dawn’s smile bloom, exhausted but brilliant. “I feel fuzzy and tired, my ears won’t stop ringing, but I’m good.” She looked towards Hawke and Alistair. “You’re both still here.”

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She had walked through the literal valley of shadows and death, and come out the other side; still alive, slightly crazier, but absurdly grateful to hear that the woman she thought was dead had pulled off another miracle. It was too much to consider, that this woman had endured so much simply because she wanted to save Victoria and Alistair. Vic knew she wasn’t worth the sacrifice, she had too much blood on her hands to be worth saving, but Dawn had considered it a necessity
anyways.

Hawke all but hauled Dawn out of Iron Bull’s arms to hold her in a tight embrace; hiding her tears against Dawn, not wanting the room to see but unable to fight them as she whispered, “You asshole. You’re not allowed to let me love you and then trade your life for mine.”

Dawn petted her blood matted hair while they hugged and Victoria could hear her smile, “I wasn’t going to let the Nightmare have you.” Such a simple statement but enough to steal Victoria’s breath away. “Now get your charming ass over to your Dwarf and take your god damned moment already.”

Hawke laughed, feeling the jagged edges of her heart settle as she stepped back and discreetly wiped her face. “Now that’s a very good plan.” She agreed and sauntered back over to sprawl next to Varric.

After everything they had endured, it was oh so easy to finally lean over to whisper to him, “I was supposed to die today Varric.” Hawke studied his silky hair; it was still perfect even after all they’d been through. “That would have been it; too late to say that along the way I fell in love with you. That I, Victoria Hawke- Champion of Kirkwall, am entirely and willingly yours.” She felt the familiar worry thrill through her; that telling him this was signing his death sentence. But Varric was wholly and without a doubt her best friend and had been her life line when her world fell apart. Over and over he had never let her down, and she trusted him with even this; that he could survive her love.

Again, he did not disappoint. Varric faced her with a fantastic smile. “It’s the chest hair, isn’t it?” he asked and Hawke laughed. Before she could quip back though, his hand rested on her jaw. “I absolutely love you Victoria, so what took us so long?” Dawn and several others cheered when they finally kissed, and Hawke flashed a rude hand gesture.

“Go celebrate everyone, you’ve all earned it.” Alena dismissed the tent and no one objected.

Her friends were almost all here, Anders finally re-joining them with Justice carefully controlled. And immediately put to good use as the Healer he was meant to be. She saw Sebastian standing with Isabella and Fenris, their relieved grins beautiful. And Merrill made an adorable little sound of excitement when she spotted that Hawke held Varric’s hand firmly in her own.

He’d been right to wonder what had taken them so long; according to the looks on their friends’ faces this was a long expected outcome. And despite having gone through an ordeal, Hawke wanted a little time with Varric before anything else could interfere. So Varric and Hawke walked as they always did; a little too close and utterly aware of each other, she led and he had her back and neither spoke as they disappeared into their tent.

What had been over ten years in the making was not something either one felt the need to rush but neither were they satisfied with waiting any longer either. Their friends quickly sealed off the area and Victoria knew that they would keep it strictly off limits for the foreseeable future.

Maybe there was hope for the future after all.

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He hadn’t wanted to let her go but Bull knew Dawn needed to be taken care of by a Healer and he was as far from that as a body could be. Besides, she wasn’t his only responsibility now that they had survived.
And maybe Bull needed a moment to himself too. What the shit had they just gone through?

Outside the Command tent, the air of a hard won victory kept the celebration subdued at first. But from the Chargers’ area of the camp, grief and joy flowed freely. The Inquisition had come out the other side victorious but the Chargers had lost Mac in the battle. Bull tried not to feel too guilty over not being there to keep one of his people alive; they were mercenaries and chose to take the work despite the risks. Maybe if he repeated that to himself enough he’d convince the guilt in his guts to believe it.

The Avvars left their dead outside on rocks to be picked over by the birds; it was how they returned their dead to their Mountain god Korth and Mother of the Skies. As Balmac “Mac” Arcillsen was an exiled son of Avvar, the Chargers treated his body as he would have wanted. They drank to Mac and told stories of his life while laying his body out for the birds.

Iron Bull presided over the loss of one of his people solemnly, trying to understand everything that he had just endured and what it might mean was next. He had felt prepared for what was coming until he had ended up in the middle of it, and now at the other side he was left with more questions than when he had started. But grief deserved his entire focus and so he set the questions aside for later, focusing on the friend he had lost.

“To Mac; long may your spirit soar with the birds!” Bull lifted his glass and saw Krem shamelessly let the tears of loss slide down his cheeks. Others in the Chargers cried freely for the members that could not or would not cry now. Some had no tears left, others too many.

They raised their glasses and took toast to the life lost today. And then Iron Bull took a long drink in thanks for the life not lost today, the Chargers drinking their own celebrations right along with him.

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Before facing the ordeals of Adamant, Alena had told Blackwall she felt she might die in there. Instead she’d come out the other side of the Fade feeling strangely reborn. The Mark in her palm burned with a searing pain that reminded her that it wasn’t naturally a part of her body, and maybe it was starting to remember that too.

But she wasn’t afraid. She’d seen where and why it had come to be there in the first place.

Not from a god, but from a monster wanting to be god. Come what may, she was fiercely glad to deny Corypheus even a drop of the Mark’s power. For all the pain and agony he had inflicted on the people Alena had now come to love, she planned to extract as much suffering and pain from the Corrupted Magister in return. She would bide her time but then reap bloody revenge. For now it was enough to be Inquisitor, foiling darkspawn and demon alike.

She’d dismissed her team, seeing the exhaustion and trauma etched in all their faces, and faced two of her Advisors. Only to be told that she too was dismissed. With a grateful smile she left.

Her feet led the way and Alena found Blackwall helping the mounts settle; when he saw her whole and hale he fell to his knees and declared, “Thank the Maker.”

She said nothing; flinging herself into his arms despite her gore soaked attire and kissed his face all over. She had no words to give him, the horrors of what she and her people had had to endure in the Fade not a burden he needed to bear yet. The memories she had recovered were still settling into their proper place and Alena wasn’t sure where to even start even though she’d just listened to Varric recount their trials.
And Thom didn’t press for answers or demand explanations as to what had happened. Instead he let gladly took the weight of her body in his arms, and Alena let him use lips and tongue, hands and heart to remind her that she was alive and loved and not lost to the Nightmare. Eventually she would explain to him what she had seen and thought and survived but now was not the time. She needed to taste victory and love to get the rot of Fear out of her mouth.

He seemed just as needing of that as she did.

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Alistair sought his bed after only a perfunctory bath, and in his dreams he waited for his Somniari wife. These events would disturb her greatly and he knew she’d have no few things to say on the matter. He might have been the Warden longer than she, technically, but Siobhan had been raised in a way he never had been and she took attacks on their people rather dismally.

Knowing that while she searched for a Cure the leaders of their Order had been slitting the throats of Rogues and Warriors to perform blood magic had left the already excitable Queen of Ferelden livid. Alistair was not ashamed to admit that he found his wife’s passion arousing, as long as the anger was aimed at someone else at least, but this was one brace of enraging news he wasn’t sure if the Wardens would ever recover from.

He believed in the Gray Wardens and what they were supposed to do for the world, but that wasn’t what they were anymore.

They’d discussed the reality of the Wardens many times in the late hours of night, but this was the first time Alistair truly considered the implications of why the Wardens had to be drastically altered from what they were now. Weisshaupt had either ignored or betrayed the Orlesian Wardens; there was no way Clarel would have been wooed by Erimond if Weisshaupt had listened to her calls for help.

Why had the Orlesian Wardens been cut off and left to die? What was Stroud going to find when he went to their headquarters?

Maybe it was time he had another long conversation with Dawn about what it was she knew. Once she’d recovered. And he figured out how to thank her.

Siobhan would probably have a few things to say as well.

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It should have hurt, leaving the Fade behind once again, but it didn’t and he knew absolutely why.

Ena’vun.

Solas retreated from the activities, needing the desolate solace of the desert. Walking physically in the Fade had affected him deeply but the actions taken there unsettled him even more, and he spent hours staring out as if looking for an answer. He had been so confident about so many things not even a day ago and now felt filled with doubt.

Ena’vun wasn’t a Spirit or a Demon, wasn’t even a mage but Solas had mistakenly assumed he knew all of what she could do in the Fade. She had still done the impossible so that others may live.

It was more than what she had apparently done to the Nightmare. The lingering sensation of her energy still tingled through his aura and would for some time. No Mark, no possession; she had
found a way to give him the energy that filled her without the Veil being able to touch it and even after all he had expended it upon there was more left than he could conceivably explain. It terrified him that he didn’t know what this would do to either of them, the exchange of something between them like nothing he had ever experienced and could not name.

He was too cautious to assume there would be no consequences for their actions, especially not with Wisdom’s warning rattling around in his mind. When he’d heard something sought to possess Ena’vun he had always imagined a Spirit trying to command her mind; he had never anticipated this.

Dawn wasn’t affected by the Veil, and when she had connected to Haste it too had free access. Only for a time and only when she actively gave it permission. What she had done in the Fade with him was much more…complex.

After the incident with the mage bane and null field, he had felt the agony of power slowly creeping back into his body. It had been all too familiar to his return to waking after uthenera, and Solas had used the time leading up to Adamant to test the edges of his power like he had then as well. As he had suspected his Power had grown from the moment of waking. And it hadn’t been his own doing; Solas had neither grown in ability nor recovered his access to greater magic.

He’d suspected it was Ena’vun doing it back when they’d taken her to a Rift, now he knew for sure. When the Shriek had slashed him in the Fade, he had been bleeding out more than just his life’s blood though no one else knew it. The Nightmare had known who and what he was and had spent the entirety of his time in its home trying to drain Solas of every scrap of energy he could naturally produce. It would have been worse than fatal in combination to the blood pouring out of his chest but then Ena’vun made her offer. Again.

The Nightmare had not been able to cloud his mind, read the worst of what chilled his blood through his defences, but neither could Solas keep it from attacking his friends. Instead he tried in vain to allow them their privacy as the shapes of their fear overlaid the actual demons flooding towards them.

But it broke his heart to see Dawn forced to face down her family, to hear the incessant whispers it directed to Iron Bull alone, peer behind the laughter disguising the Champion’s trauma, and see what it was that Varric hated most in the world. Spiders were far too easy to handle after their fears and Solas said nothing about bearing witness to them all.

When Dawn had offered him whatever power was within her to use, this time he’d known he was going to accept. He could do no less in the face of her determination through the pain the Nightmare was causing her, causing them all. And when he had taken her hand in his, Solas had felt the limitation on his Power get painfully wrenched open.

Like ripping a scar open long after it had scabbed closed.

Ena’vun had charged back into battle but Solas had been too overwrought by sensation, like having a feast after a yearlong fast. His chest continued to bleed but now it was just a wound. Not a method for the Nightmare to drain his will dry. And the sensation of Power did not fade away even once she’d released his hand.

It was with him still, stirring in his blood and calling him to explore the breadth of it in the Fade.

Ena’vun had stared Fen’Harel in the eye and offered him kindness and Power. And Hope. Nothing about the world had actually changed at all. But he had.
want to make yourself cry? Go reread the Fears of the Dreamers in correlation to these chapters. My poor heart.
http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Codex_entry:_Fears_of_the_Dreamers

Also, fuck the formatting. I want to cry. Word let me minimize the words easy, I had to go through and mini each sentence of this manually. And it only made the words 1 font size smaller. IF IT'S TOO CONFUSING LET ME KNOW AND I'll go back in and alter the formatting again to something more legible.
Sunrise

Chapter Summary

Those that survived Adamant now find themselves on the other side of the experience with more answers, and the scars to prove it. Now the Inquisition and those that power it have to decide the next steps to seal the fate of the world.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the delay - life is being a bit screwy lately. I hope things will settle for me soon :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The man with the beard had a plan, and enough guile to get away with it too. Isabella still wasn’t convinced that she shouldn’t ignore everyone else’s ‘good advice’ and find a way to stick to Hawke’s side and the hairy man seemed to know it.

It wasn’t that he was trying to stop her from doing what she wanted; else Isabella would have already flown to her friend’s side. Instead the hairy beast of a man was just there with the quiet reminder that they, including Isabella, were the team going in immediately after the Inquisition’s team and were their first line of defence to fall back to if things went screwy. And since Victoria was insisting that ‘this was her shit pile to help un-shovel’ and was going in with the Inquisitor and the Harbinger, Isabella knew she was going to do what she could to help keep them safe.

Or as safe as anyone with a pulse could be inside a giant stone keep designed to house killers and monsters. It reminded her far too vividly of Akhaaz. She still had no idea what anyone with any form of good sense or survival skill was doing here, the thousands strong army outside with her were all bristling with the need to do something. Even though no one had the first clue what it was they could actually do.

Isabella knew what she wasn’t going to do, and that was die here today. Or let any of the people she cared enough about die either. Her crew was safe this time, back on her ship and away from the violence but there were others she still watched for. The quiet way Fenris checked the straps of his gear told her more than words could have how ready he was to see them all through to the other side too. Merrill, the darling kitten that she was, had as much place in the middle of an army in the desert as Sea Captain Isabella did but was probably the most prepared for bloodshed. And Sebastian glittered so very prettily in his white armour and flashing silver belt buckle.

It was all painfully poetic and more than a little nauseating because this was the kind of imagery Isabella had always associated to those idiotically heroic people that died in ballads and Bard’s tales. The sun was below the horizon, the light no longer trustworthy and failing by the minute; and finally the attack began.

She ran.
Into the fray; through the broken wooden shards of the splintered gate, over the bleeding corpses of men and women and Warden alike while the ashes of felled demons stuck to her boot heel. Isabella moved, knowing that somewhere ahead of her Victoria and Varric were fighting for their lives and that it was her place to keep the way back open.

She fought.

Her blades ripping through the armour and barriers of the Wardens as if they did not exist; the keenness of her edges ensuring the one act, while mage bane on the blades ensured the other. At her side Fenris snarled and flashed, his sword cleaving through those that dared approach her blindsides and cleared the way so that Merrill and Sebastian were just as protected.

Somehow they were never close enough to actually see Hawke and the Inquisitor as they tore their way through the ranks of the Wardens and demons, only the trail of the dead behind them marking the way. The screams of the living, the screams of the dying, none of them were the screams Isabella wanted to hear and she preferred them all the same to the scream of a dragon arriving.

She trembled.

But no one could ever know, her will to fight stronger than her fear of death. The hairy man called sometimes Thom and sometimes Blackwall fought ahead of them all, his brute strength no match for Fenris’ lyrium attacks but impressive all the same. As was the dogged determination she saw in the man’s eyes as they chased after the always retreating figure of the Inquisitor, sometimes the glow of her hand their only guiding light.

She killed.

Those that tried to get to her friends; to get to the hairy wall of a man fighting to give his lover a way out, Isabella enjoyed the greatest pleasures of life because she knew in moments like this there was only ever death. But it would not be here today, and she would not let it lay claim to the people around her either.

She prayed.

Not the hollow comfort of the Andrastrians, the mindless intoning Sebastian was known to do. Isabella had no beads in hand, no markers to count her worships, but the words that had gotten her through Rasaan’s attentions once again echoed in her head and her heart now. A prayer to herself to hold strong and never relinquish, never submit.

Because they were at the crumbling edge of a bridge where the Inquisitor and Hawke were supposed to be and now there was nothing but the screaming echoes of the Abyss below them.

Blackwall turned to them with a grim smile, the blood matting his beard doing nothing to add a sense of sanity to his look now. “She knew this was coming, we prepare the others now. They will be back.”

Fenris looked blank, like the life had been stolen from him and he was nothing more than a puppet without the animating hands to work his movements. Merrill was crying, silent tears dripping down her cheeks in terrible mimicry to the drops of blood that pattered off her fingertips to the stones below. Sebastian looked like a statue, come to life for so long and given agency but now returned to lifeless marble.

She followed.

“They better be back, if I have to find a way to get into the Fade after them no one is going to like
the mess it leaves behind.” Isabella warned; her voice far too harsh to sound nonchalant.

“They will come back.” Blackwall growled again, as barely contained as Isabella felt but she followed him away from the edge and back towards the fighting.

“Until then, let us take advantage of all these demons in need of dying.” She cajoled, watching her friends grab on to the hope that their leader and friend would be back soon.

They scrambled back into battle, fears and tears on hold but not forgotten. Her breathing was short, pants and grunts instead of the carefully controlled exhales she needed but Isabella ignored the ragged mess they had become and focused instead on every move she had to make until Hawke came back.

And she did.

It had been minutes. It had been hours. A lifetime had passed. No time at all was lost.

Hawke was back and the demons were gone and Isabella could breathe again. If the beast of a man could hold himself back from his Inquisitor love, Isabella wasn’t going to make a spectacle either, but it was a struggle. She wanted to slap Hawke for making her fear the worse, and hug her tightly for coming back to them despite it all.

Instead she stayed silent and stood with her friends all around as Hawke looked away from the Inquisitor’s people and found her own.

Isabella had followed this woman for over a decade and had never once really thought about leaving her behind. The pain that she saw in Victoria Hawke’s eyes made her want to run now, but Isabella knew it was an old wound she was seeing bleeding freshly in her friend’s soul. They had been gone for hours and minutes and not long at all, but Isabella could see the lifetime it was going to take Hawke to recover from it.

The Kirkwall originals stayed back while Hawke and the Inquisition settled their needs and people, but Isabella wasn’t alone as she lurked outside the Command tent waiting for Hawke to be released. Fenris was always silent and always at her side, as dependable as the tide. Merrill was tracing symbols into the air, little flares of magical light keeping Fenris to the opposite side where Isabella could be a physical barrier between them. And Sebastian knelt in the dirt to pray, the one most obviously disturbed by all they had endured.

She waited.

And for once Isabella thought about what life could be like if the people she loved actually stayed alive. Stayed safe. Stayed in place.

She was a Captain and the sea was in her blood, but Isabella wasn’t necessarily the vagrant wanderer she wanted people to believe. As Hawke and Varric came out of the tent, finally hand in hand, Isabella gave a loud whoop and tossed her fancy hat into the air.

Life was good.

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After all that had happened when the others were dismissed, Dawn didn’t know what to do with herself. Everything hurt but in a way that maybe was more in her heart and head than her body. Luckily for her Varric was an extremely unreliable narrator and Anders was still alive; he was very obviously waiting for her to take her to the Healing tent.
She was not the only one in there but apparently a recovery area had been set aside for those that
had gone with the Inquisitor. She should not have been the only one to utilize it, she certainly
wasn’t the only one to have been hurt in the Fade, but Solas had vanished before Dawn could
assure his wound had been tended to too and Hawke was probably very distracted from any injury
she might have.

So instead she sat in the recovery area alone; dealing with the consequences of her walk in the Fade
and watching Anders try not to stare at her as he worked with the other Healers.

“I don’t know which one of you has more questions for me, and I’m too tired to sort out who is in
control so just get on with it.” She finally spoke, her voice harsh in the sleep filled tent as Anders
did yet another unnecessary pass-by.

He looked at her directly, eyes and skin glimmering blue briefly. “You’re the Offworlder.” Justice
declared softly. “You should not have been able to do this.”

“And yet I did.” Dawn shrugged even if she wasn’t as settled as she was trying to seem. She wasn’t
sure what weight her actions would carry for having been done IN the Fade, but she accepted
whatever consequences they would bring.

The Nightmare had tried, and failed, to stop her. The consequences wouldn’t either.

“It shouldn’t have been possible.” Justice seemed petulantly angry.

“According to whom?” she tiredly challenged and Dawn watched the blue get absorbed back into
Anders as he resumed control. It seemed that neither Spirit nor man had an answer to her question.
“Maybe it’s because I’m an Offworlder and there is no Fade or Veil in my world, or maybe it’s
something else. I just… did what I thought was the right thing to do; I couldn’t see any other way.”
Dawn gave a brief attempt at explaining how she’d made it from one side of the Fade to the other
with everyone still alive at the end but knew it had no answers in it at all.

Her only advantage was that Dawn had heard the debrief Varric had given and knew no one really
understood what she’d done to the Nightmare, so at least no one was demanding fine details yet.

“How did you know it would work?” of course he pressed, this was Justice!Anders.

“I didn’t.” she shrugged but looked down, knowing she was going to have to explain it to someone
eventually just so they could help her understand it herself. She just wanted it to be with Solas
instead of a virtual stranger.

Anders stared at her for a silently assessing minute before asking, “Is it true that you know things
that people generally wouldn’t want others to know?”

“Generally…” Dawn repeated, grateful for the topic change if not the direction of conversation. “I
saw the paths that the future could take, starting a little before the fall at Ostagar.” Anders let her
speak without interrupting. “But not everything I saw was a definite reality, and some of it was
unreliably narrated - especially around you and Kirkwall.” And once she thought about it, Origins
was fairly unreliable too; more than one Hero had gone through it.

“So how insane did you think I was?” Anders smiled as he asked it.

“On a scale of one to ten? Fifty.” Dawn teased. “Not really, but it does make me wonder who you
actually are. I’d like to get to know the real you now.”

“Really?” Anders turned flirtatious almost habitually and Dawn huffed out a laugh that sounded
wretched.

“I’d like to hear what really happened in Kirkwall, if you’d like to tell the story.” She hesitated for a moment but then forged ahead. “And after that...if you or Justice has questions I can try to answer them, but no promises.”

Anders gave her a hard stare; it reminded her that he had survived as a mage, apostate, Warden, and Justice. And then he told her the abbreviated truth of Kirkwall*. When Anders stopped talking Dawn wasn’t sure if she should say anything because the internet had been right; Varric was a supremely unreliable narrator. But Anders blinked and focused in on her after a moment longer. “Now I do believe it’s your turn.”

Dawn didn’t bother denying it, and talking some of it out might help her face the wounds the Nightmare had gifted her with. Especially since anyone that had been there that could understand her experience definitely needed time to recover from their own. She settled back on the cot, eyes burning as she fought the urge to sleep. “I’m just me, nothing special. But...I’m also not the same as everyone else either.” She took a breath and slowly released it, “by now I’ve had a couple of instances that make me think I don’t even know the half of it yet. So with Adamant being Adamant, where the Veil is so thin and then being IN the Fade, I used that fact; because where else than in the Fade could I be both myself and everything people needed me to be?” that wasn’t the explanation for what she’d done, but it was part of it. Anders and Justice probably wouldn’t think she was possessed if she told them the truth but they could make her life more difficult than she needed it to be so Dawn remained silent on the matter.

“That understanding alone shows you’re not from this world.” Anders’ resentment was exactly as the games presented, understandable and biting.

“In the Fade everything is just... so much MORE you know?” she didn’t know how to explain it but Anders nodded, the pulse of blue in his veins Justice agreeing as well.

“I...the Nightmare...” the words were there and trapped in her chest, refusing to come out where so many could overhear and misinterpret. So instead she gave the emotions without the actions taken. “I realized that if I wanted everyone to come out the other side I couldn’t hold back out of Fear.” She had acted out of instinct, and it had worked, but she had no way to explain how.

“You cannot fight Fear that merely makes it stronger.” Justice confirmed for her.

“I’m used to being afraid. Back home I was afraid of so many things I never even realized it but here... Here I can be afraid but still act. I wasn’t going to let it have Hawke, or Alena, or me; so I reminded the Nightmare that even nightmares are still just dreams.” She nodded and looked down at her hands. “I don’t know what everything I did will mean now, but I don’t regret any of it.” She quietly confessed.

“You may come to.” Anders warned with the painful weight of experience, his empathy making her realize he suspected something about what she’d experienced and what it would cost.

Then again, what he and Justice had become wasn’t the same as what she had done at all so Dawn met his worried gaze. “There is always hope.”

He had no argument in the face of her conviction, nothing to say to convince her that she was right or wrong for her actions. Anders was a Spirit Healer that became Vengeance; his own actions made any judgement more than a little hypocritical.

Anders left her to settle into bed, checking on the other patients and Dawn had her first moments
alone. It was almost inevitable that her mind turned towards her loved ones, confronting the terrible things the Nightmare had done to her instead of hiding from it. Every memory she looked at was covered in blood, the twitching exhaustion in her muscles not letting it fade. She had used her new life and skills to rend and destroy the old but it had never been real.

The Nightmare had done its worst and she had persisted anyways; it gave her relief to acknowledge that but rest still wouldn’t come.

Exhaustion gave her a headache and finally Dawn shoved her blanket aside, feet shuffling her over to Anders’ cot. She stared down at the fitfully resting Healer, seeing the bags under his eyes that the game had never made pronounced enough, and decided to let him sleep. There was nothing he could do to help the turmoil in her head, and the Healer was still trying to find a way to make amends for his own actions; he didn’t need to worry about hers. Besides, she’d have more than enough time to sleep on the return trip to Skyhold; missing a single night wasn’t going to kill her.

Dawn slipped out of the recovery tent without waking anyone and found herself looking at a crisp desert sunrise. Her sense of time had been utterly ruined; in the Fade had felt like days passing but in the waking world it had been hours only. Less than a night even; now Adamant stood on the edge of the Abyssal Ridge, the flag of the Inquisition flying along with the Wardens’ in the early morning breeze and the shadows hid the evidence that any horrors had happened. At least until you looked a little closer.

Needing a happier distraction than shadows and memory, her feet took her to a fire already stoked and the Hawke beside it. The blonde rogue didn’t seem at all surprised when Dawn sat down and cuddled against her, though the rest of the Kirkwallers still slumbered. Dawn had wanted to give her friends time to recover from their own ordeals but still she found herself here.

“Thank you.” Victoria simply stated without any preamble.

“Any time, though I should warn you that I have no idea what you do from here on out.” Dawn promised; relieved to be thinking of happier futures.

Hawke just smiled, looking more settled than Dawn expected her to be. “I’ll be following a certain handsome writer home finally I think. Aveline will head back once I get word to her, and I figure Bethany will stay around for a bit. I’ll most likely talk Alistair into posting her there to keep an eye on the entrances to the Deep Roads near Kirkwall.”

“I’m happy for you, but I’m going to miss you.” Dawn admitted easily.

“We’re not leaving until everything here is done. You know His Nibs is going to want to witness the whole thing so he can write about it and lie properly later.” Hawke reassured.

“I’ll have to come visit once everything is settled, let you show me around.” Dawn offered.

“Yes you will; I’ll inflict the Hanged Man on you.” Hawke poked at the pot with porridge bubbling in it.

They ate in silence, their spoons scraping across empty bowls before Dawn could think of anything worthwhile to say and Hawke was just as quiet. They were both doing a great job of acting like nothing in the world was wrong but Dawn noticed how often Victoria’s eyes looked for things that weren’t actually there, and she kept searching for sword or grenade just in case herself. Several people were going to be jumping at shadows for the next while and even though Dawn was glad to have saved her friends, she was also sad she hadn’t been able to prevent their trauma entirely. Not that anyone could have done that.
Hawke brought a bowl to the tent for Varric; the Dwarf still grumbling in his bedroll and Dawn followed along for lack of anything tangible to do. “Oh narrator of my tale, I bring food.” Hawke called out.

“What?” Dawn’s tone was strangled, shock at their words dragging her back into the moment.

“You’re too kind, story of my heart.” Varric winked before shooting Dawn a grin. “We’re trying on pet names, apparently by going through the fanciest ones first.” He explained and sat up to eat his porridge in bed.

“This shouldn’t surprise me.” Dawn teased, noticing more than one or two signs of passion dotting his body as he ate his porridge. She was happy for them, and fairly certain they were going to be in for a lifetime of friendly ribbing from the other Kirkwallers.

Varric laughed. “You hear that Hawke, we’re too sappy for Sweetheart here.” He joked before turning back to Dawn, “You could always make some suggestions if you’re going to criticize our methods.”

“Not even if you paid me; I will definitely leave you two to your flirting.” Dawn turned immediately on her heel and marched off, hearing their laughter at her actions. It felt good but Dawn felt weirdly out of sorts; they’d endured the same thing she had but her friends were recovering from it much easier.

She shook off the negativity, knowing it wasn’t fair to herself or her friends.

Her head was too noisy, her body was too tired, and her heart too damn heavy to be wandering on her own but she also had no desire to be near people. At least the soldiers of the Inquisition didn’t know her well enough to recognize her as the Harbinger so Dawn wandered amongst their tents and clusters; just another shadow in the desert.

She’d faced the Nightmare and won but the real enemy was still out there. People had been trying to kill her even before she did weird voodoo shit so she wasn’t expecting life to get any quieter now that things had gone strange; at least that thought didn’t fill her with freezing dread. Instead she put some actual planning into how she could start making it safer for those around her when the next attempt came.

Because there would be a next attempt, she knew better than to assume otherwise now. And she would be prepared this time. To be fair, Dawn HAD gone out of her way to have a backup just in case the worst had happened at Adamant; the Inquisition and Alena would not be left without the limited knowledge Dawn had had. But this was a different type of preparation.

Dawn’s wandering took her to the guarded ‘prisoners’, the Gray Wardens still waiting to be verified as safe. She knew the mages wouldn’t succumb to the Nightmare now, and the Warriors and Rogues had never been under the control of demons, but none of them seemed to resent the need for caution; merely endured its necessity.

“I heard you, when nothing else came through, I heard you.” A voice called out to her and Dawn’s attention was pulled to a woman that looked the same age as her sister Aisha.

One of the Inquisition guards watching over the cluster of ‘prisoners’ came closer to intervene but Dawn saw Dorian call him off. She gave Dorian a little wave of thanks and turned back to the Warden that had caught her attention. It took Dawn an actual moment to place the face; the mage she’d nearly killed on the battlements. One of the many she hadn’t been able to lift her sword to but the first one she’d thought to try to reach a different way.
Dawn did not want to be yelling this conversation across a distance and stepped closer, aware of the eyes watching her do so. “You did, and you fought for your soul back.”

“I was consumed, not even a single thought left to myself of who I was.” The mage looked down, unable to meet her eyes. “There was only the demon that had claimed me left inside until I heard you talk to me.” Now she looked up, the look in her eyes one Dawn couldn’t name. “How?”

There wasn’t an answer Dawn could give her because she didn’t know herself exactly how it had worked. Her explanation to Anders had been enough for him but Dawn knew she was still only feeling the edges of the reality of it. “Because they had tricked you into compliance and that means you never truly consented. You fought for your own freedom; I was simply a reminder that you could.” She could see the frown on the mage’s face and did not feel like trying to get into this conversation with a stranger. “What is your name, Warden?”

“Cierra Tontiv.” She inclined her head and extended her hand formally.

“Dawn Wesson.” Dawn replied taking the woman’s hand without hesitation.

“You know that you don’t feel like anyone else right?” Cierra carefully tried to inform and Dawn couldn’t help but smile slightly.

“I have been told that yes.” Her ease only seemed to make Cierra more unsettled though.

“Will we ever earn forgiveness for our sins?” Cierra blurted out the question she had clearly meant to keep for herself, hands coming up to cover her mouth in a move so familiar to Dawn’s own habits that it was jarring.

“That’s not up to me.” Dawn was not the right person to be talking to about this. Maybe she should call Leliana over to handle the spiritual fallout these people were going through. “I’m a heathen and an Offworlder; my views and opinions are more than a little biased.”

It was honest but offered no comfort if the look on Cierra’s face was anything to go by. “But everyone knows; the Inquisition came to save the Wardens because their Harbinger said they could.” The Warden insisted.

“Wow gossip gets things wrong and fast.” Dawn smiled, trying to hide the flare of panic Cierra’s comment gave her. “I was only aware of why you all had been tricked, so I informed the Inquisitor. That’s all I did; the real work was done by the people you see around you. These soldiers and Chevaliers and every literal body in between marched across the desert because the Inquisitor asked them to, not because I said they should.”

“It’s not just that you arrived,” a different Warden interrupted, having clearly been listening in. Dawn looked over to the grizzled man and saw that there were others lingering around him, the elected spokesman. “I was there in the courtyard; I heard what you said. You were right, we knew this was wrong but lacked the ability to fight back. You gave that back to us.”

This was not turning out how Dawn wanted it to; these people were not supposed to place the deeds at her feet. The heroes were the ones that had actually been useful, had actually saved lives and subdued without killing. She hadn’t even been able to do that. Emma’s shield had been lost, again, because Dawn had tried and failed to save Clarel. She’d been able to save Hawke and Iron Bull saved Alistair, but the Wardens had been saved by the Inquisition; not her.

She shook her head, ready to deny it when someone else spoke up, “I saw you carried out of that Rift, that pit of monsters, limp as a dead body and yet here you are now, checking on us not even a
day later. How can you think you didn’t save us?”

Dawn felt wildly uncomfortable with the turn they were taking. She hadn’t done anything worth the tone of voice being used, the look in their eyes. “Dudes, no.” she shook her head a little frantically. “There are several thousand people that deserve all this; if you want to thank someone for fighting to keep you all alive, sane and whole - thank Alistair and Stroud and Hawke, both Hawkes. They’ve been trying to find the answers we all need for a lot longer than I’ve been on Thedas. Don’t give me credit for it just because I showed up with a flashy entrance.”

Cierra was still giving her that look like she didn’t believe Dawn’s protestations but remained silent with a more senior Warden speaking for them now. The grizzled one that had interrupted continued for the rest, “Harbinger, we know what it is to swear to die for the cause. Some of us still hear the Calling even with this round of liars defeated,” that kept her quiet like nothing else would have, “and I can only speak for myself but I feel much better knowing that I might die but it’s to leave a world with people like you running around in it behind me. Vigilance, Victory, and Sacrifice mean nothing if the world falls to shit anyways.”

“There are those looking for a cure for the Calling, don’t give in yet.” Dawn blurted out, unable to face the man’s quiet acceptance of his own death.

He smiled, grim and yet still holding humour, “After your rallying call to fight yesterday, I think I just might be able to last.”

Some of her distress had to show on her face because the senior Warden turned to the crowd that was gathering around them. “Let’s leave the Lady in peace, you got something to say, write it down.” He waved the others away and no one argued; letting Dawn know this was probably one of the last senior Orlesian Wardens left. Cierra gave her a silent wave goodbye but left with the others.

Only the senior Warden remained. “I understand if you’re not comfortable with the regard you may be held in, but you must understand that your actions are not as small as you think they are.”

Dawn looked at the man, seeing him as well as all the Wardens in the game she had watched die. Duncan, Riordan, even the Heroes and Thom flashed across her mind for a moment. Their actions had changed the course of history; she had simply told the people who could do something that they had the chance to. She wasn’t sure how to say all that to a man who was probably supposed to be dead though. “I’m just Dawn.”

He laughed! “And I’m still just Josep Korenic. Who we are doesn’t change because of the title people call us. Who we are is entirely because of the actions we take.” He shook his head as if she were being adorably obtuse. “Were you a soldier in your life before being here?” he switched topics and Dawn blinked.

“Not even a little bit.” She admitted with a soft head shake no.

“Did it ever occur to you to stand back and do nothing?” he pressed thought it didn’t really sound like a question.

She pressed her lips together because it hadn’t occurred to her to do nothing. Maybe back on Earth she would have felt too insignificant and powerless to do anything, but here she had been in the right place, with the right people, to help. So Dawn shook her head no even as Warden Korenic smiled at her.

“And that, Harbinger Dawn, is why the Wardens are going to say thanks on your name for some
time.” He bowed his head respectfully and walked off, leaving her silent and stunned.

It was too much to think about, her head and heart too tired and sore to even think about processing her morning so far. She had killed, chosen not to kill, and persisted in fighting her way through demons that had looked like her family; the last thing she needed was to learn that the Gray Wardens considered her actions special. She hadn’t done anything to really earn that respect so it just added to her growing sense of guilt.

So far this little walkabout of hers was doing the exact opposite of what it was supposed to do; help her settle her thoughts. Dawn could feel the frown marring her features now, but at least the expression would keep anyone else from approaching her for a while. And it reminded her of whom she should to speak to next.

Dawn sought out and found Cassandra, unsurprised that the Seeker had a practice dummy already set up nearby. She didn’t understand why it had so much candle wax on it, but maybe that was to help waterproof the whole thing; one day she might even remember to ask her about it.

“Hello Cassandra, fighting the good fight today?” Cassandra was huddled over a scrap of paper, looking agonized, and scrambled to hide the letter away once Dawn announced her presence.

“Hello Harbinger,” the Seeker was definitely flustered, “I am trying to summarize the entirety of everything that has occurred and once again find that I lack the eloquence to even explain the basics.” She sounded so disgusted with herself that Dawn knew it was a personal matter instead of professional.

“Trying to keep Kaaras in the loop?” Everyone in Skyhold was rather enamoured with the courtship between Healer and Seeker, Dawn was rooting for them both

Cassandra sputtered, her awkward denial stopped before it was ever actually uttered. “Yes.” she admitted finally and then laughed softly. “How was it easier to write to him before and so much more difficult to do the same now?”

“Because a letter doesn’t tell him everything you want to say, doesn’t hold him close when you say I love you or give that certain smile when you admit you miss him.” Dawn’s reply earned her a dumbfounded look from the Seeker.

“It is that, exactly.” Cassandra’s shoulders slumped, loosening their constant tension before her posture straightened up again. “But you did not seek me out to help me write personal correspondence, how can I help you?” she gestured to take a seat and even if there were no chairs, Dawn crossed her legs and sat on the ground.

“I used to help co-author most of my friends’ text messages so this is actually familiar territory for me.” Dawn remarked with a small but real smile, recalling the last time her friends had all pitched in to help Lenny get laid. “But I did search you out to run a series of questions past you, and I might need your help with the experiments these questions could lead to.” That was so vague it even made Dawn confused.

Thankfully, Cassandra was either used to people leading up to their questions or had perfected a patient enough expression that Dawn didn’t feel like a complete idiot as the Seeker asked, “Is it a matter for private discussion?”

They were in the middle of an Army and unless Dawn dragged the Seeker into blood soaked Adamant, there was no actual privacy to be found. Still, the Seeker looked ready to offer the scant anonymity of the inside of her tent. “No, I don’t think it’s more than a series of questions about to
be asked at this point, so I’m not upsetting anything.”

That damage had already been done months ago when Dawn had decided to talk to Dagna about what lyrium actually was, and would likely come to bite her in the ass once they all got back to Skyhold and learned what the Archanist had found about lyrium and the blight. Dagna was bubbly and intuitive, and so intelligent it was actually intimidating until Dawn forgot to think about it. She could easily ruin this world by telling the Archanist too much about her own; Dawn knew Thedas needed some updating but putting them through an Industrial Revolution right now would be a very Bad Thing. So instead it was a constant game of ‘do I say the thing?’ In this case, she knew she had to; bringing the scientific method to combat a magical plague.

“If I understand your ability as a Seeker, you can manipulate the lyrium in a mage’s blood.” Dawn started with the basics.

“Or a Templar’s, but generally yes. Some Seekers have greater or more precise control in their manipulations; however I can merely ignite the lyrium in the blood.” Cassandra gave her utter focus and it was intense. “Your world story has the secrets of even the Seekers, I already assumed as such.” She smiled to show Dawn no criticism in her words.

“Can you affect lyrium in its unprocessed form?” Dawn figured it was a long shot.

Cassandra shook her head with a thoughtful frown on her face now. “I’ve never been around unprocessed lyrium. It’s fatal to mages in that form and possessively controlled by Orzammar regardless. Even the Chantry can only lay claim to processed lyrium.”

Dawn scrunched her face; she’d probably known that already and just forgotten it over time. “Well that’ll make experimentation harder. Okay, have you tried to affect those inflicted with Red Lyrium?” she blurted it out in an ugly mess despite her best intentions to lay it out in careful sequence.

The look on Cassandra’s face was too complex for Dawn to decipher and her silence was unnerving. She had warned Cassandra a long time ago to try and save the Seekers so this wasn’t utterly unexpected, just out of the blue; especially since the Seekers couldn’t be ‘corrupted’ by the red lyrium merely killed by it.

Even as she sought answers to this question Dawn wondered if she should ask the Wardens if any of them had been ‘infected’; they were technically already carriers for the Blight. But she could only face one problem at a time. Adamant was done; she could focus her efforts on getting Alena ready for the Arbour Wilds and then start getting the Inquisition ready for whenever the earthquake was supposed to happen that triggered the Descent DLC.

Once Thedas started to understand the ore that ran it, things were going to get screwy so even if Dawn wanted to focus on other immediate actions, she needed to work with the Seeker now. They had to try and see how to mitigate the damage being done. Thankfully it was a long trek back to Skyhold from here and Dawn desperately wanted to keep her head busy so she wouldn’t sink into the unhealthy mess the Nightmare had left her with.

Bad dreams can be banished but that only makes them gone, not forgotten.

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He’d known it was going to be trouble to give the Chargers an explanation of what had happened while he was off in the Fade with the Inquisitor, but Bull hadn’t anticipated the reaction he actually got. They had sat, they had listened, and then they had asked questions. The kinds of questions he
hadn’t even realized they had picked up from him until they turned them against him now.

He was unbearably proud.

And perhaps knowing it was entirely necessary; Bull had been honest with them. He even tried to recall everything the damn demon in his head had said so he could explain why he was suddenly very uncomfortable with the idea of anyone calling Dawn Little Bas anymore. They took the explanations and briefing in stride, only interrupting to ask questions that got to the heart of the matter.

When the explanation was done, they knew and understood his experiences as well as Bull himself did. No detail had been spared; no emotion had been left to hide a shred of dignity behind. He told them the unvarnished truth and they listened.

It was only when he was done, and they were sure he was fine, that the Chargers gave him grief.

“Permission to speak freely Chief?” Krem sounded frustrated and Bull suspected it was with him. Bull sighed, bracing for it, “Speak freely.”

“You’re an idiot.” Krem’s bluntness kept him quiet, not expecting things to be that dire but the Chargers were all nodding in agreement. “No offense but that seems to be the problem with the Qun; they tell you what you do and where you belong and you don’t know how to make relationships outside of those roles.” Apparently his second in command had a list ready for just this moment.

“Explain.” Bull crossed his arms over his chest, not actually upset but taking what his friend said seriously.

“You started calling her Little Bas,” he managed not to visibly flinch at the name now but it was an act of effort, “and it looked to the rest of us like you were taking her to bed, but instead she shows up at training.” Several Chargers nudged each other with knowing looks and he tried not to roll his eye. “Not the first time that you’ve rescued someone and brought them into the Chargers,” Krem gave a self-deprecating smirk, “but that wasn’t what you were doing with her. Chief it was obvious from the start that you were training her for something specific even if no one was saying what. But you never stopped calling her Little Bas; you never made the change of looking at her outside of what you kept expecting her to do. If you had, you would never have hurt her when you came back from The Storm Coast.”

Bull knew his silence was saying things he didn’t want it to but had no actual words because Krem was right and they all knew it. The Chargers remained silent, supporting the assessment and Krem continued as if aware of Bull’s acquiescence, “I’ve only ever seen you get that angry at someone whose carelessness has put other Charger’s in danger. Now we let the matter drop back then because it’s what Dawn seemed to need but I’m not letting you walk away from it now that it’s come back up.”

The Chargers knew what that trip had cost Bull, knew the reality of the decision he’d been given and the options Bull had faced. Krem and the other’s had all heard Dawn’s apology about knowing the risks and how she’d sent them in anyways, and they’d settled the matter with her months ago.

Apparently Bull was still earning forgiveness, and not only from Dawn.

“I know back then you thought she should have told you what was coming,” Krem had talked this out with him, he knew that Bull considered himself only as good as the information in his head and
the will to live in his muscles. Dawn had sent them in blind on the assumption that her information was the only one that could be right; it had panned out that time but it was a gamble. “Do you think she should have told you about all of this, Chief?”

If Dawn had told him everything of what was coming in Adamant, he’d have done everything he could to talk her out of going. Maybe even going so far as to find a way to ensure she wasn’t going along with them at all. As if he had the right to decide that for her. If nothing else having the Nightmare in his head taunting him had removed the last bit of ignorance Bull could claim towards how he had repeatedly treated Dawn. He owed her apologies for things she wasn’t even aware of; the scar on her arm was just the most noticeable. Iron Bull knew he had thought he was doing what was best but his own biases had worked their way into his method and now he had to face the reckoning.

A part of him wondered what would have happened if he hadn’t gotten the bit of information out of Dawn that he had; if he hadn’t insisted on going in at her side. The Chargers had lost Mac, his hulking size and quiet humour painfully missing from amongst their ranks. If Bull had gone in with his men, would they all have survived? He frowned, knowing this was a self-flagellating thought pattern that served no purpose. From what the Chargers had told him, Mac had barrelled into a fight he knew he couldn’t win to save Dalish and Spike and had nearly gotten them all out of there alive anyways. If neither Dalish nor Spike were allowed to feel responsible for their friend’s death; Bull knew he wasn’t either. Mac had chosen his path.

“I want to think that we could have found a different way to do this, that I could have avoided having a demon in my head.” It was the truth but he wasn’t giving a straight answer and they knew it.

The Chargers gave him understanding looks mixed in with annoyance while Krem laughed lightly, “We all know that if Dawn had told you everything you needed to know, you would have tied her to a chair and left her behind to take care of it for her.”

It made Bull very uncomfortable to realize that if he had kept Dawn away then the Nightmare might have won. Because it wasn’t until part of the way through the Fade that Bull knew he had stopped thinking about what he had to do to finish her plan for her and started thinking how he could help her succeed.

“Shit.” Bull grunted with disgust at himself.

“I know you’re trying to give her space right now, but you need to talk with her. Away from everyone else.” Krem’s usual irreverence was nowhere to be found this time. “And Chief? No touching until you’re not angry, she has enough scars.”

Bull shot his second-in-command a scowl but didn’t fight the chiding. He looked out at the other Chargers, “Anything else you want to let me know while we’re all being so honest with each other?” he wasn’t being sarcastic, he wanted to know and asking when they were all pretty much equally traumatized was the most even playing field he’d ever get with his men.

“I’ve been having sex with Grim since Saturnalia.” Rocky called out into the silence, a beat later and everyone was laughing.

Grim just grunted but smiled, blowing the sapper an air kiss in return.

“We’ll survive, go speak to Dawn.” Krem insisted and Bull nodded.

He knew he could find Dawn easily enough; she was getting recognized more frequently now.
Apparently being carried out of the Fade by the Champion and the Boss was enough to get her noticed. Added into that were the rumours he’d heard about the Wardens talking to her, and about her, and Iron Bull knew she’d started to stick close to safe people.

Though safe was a loose definition, Hawke and Varric were already beyond unhealthy levels of co-dependence and he suspected she had already sought them out. Especially since their abomination was the Healer taking care of Dawn with Fix-It back at Skyhold.

He was not expecting to find Dawn sitting with Leliana, their heads bent close in a clearly private conversation. Old habits had him wanting to listen in but the moment the ladies saw him their conversation fell silent. It wasn’t likely that they were discussing him in any manner, but more possible that they were discussing future events that were not wildly known yet. Bull desperately wanted to know what it was they talked about but he knew better than to pry.

“Hello Iron Bull,” Leliana’s accent purred like a pleased wild cat, “how can we help you?”

“Sorry Red; I was hoping for a chance to speak to you Dawn.” He redirected easily, spying just how tired Dawn looked even two days after leaving the Fade trip behind.

“Of course Iron Bull,” Dawn managed to give him a smile, “we can pick this up again later Leli; we have time.” It thrilled him to hear Dawn say something like that, he was still so afraid of watching her sacrifice herself.

She walked beside him easily, patient as he led them somewhere ‘private’. In the middle of an army, while neither one of them was exactly anonymous. At least Bull’s expression kept people back; he’d long ago perfected the ‘don’t talk to me’ look. And to keep from having an unfair advantage, Bull didn’t bring her back to the Chargers either. Instead he brought them to the mounts, the Bog Unicorn immediately trotting over to see Dawn.

He’d known he had to speak to her, known he owed her apologies and explanations; that didn’t mean Bull actually knew what to say now that he had her alone. Dawn looked like she would patiently wait out whatever it was he had to say despite the bags under her eyes proclaiming her exhaustion.

“In the Fade, the Nightmare was in my head – talking directly to me.” He did not want to be sharing this again but knew he had to give her the context of his experience if he wanted her to understand.

“I know it’s a bad idea to listen to a demon but some of what he said was the actual truth that I didn’t want to see.” She was watching him with a serious expression but didn’t interrupt, “I won’t be able to call you Little Bas anymore Dawn. And it’s nothing you’ve done wrong; you’re not a little thing. You’re not a tool to be shaped and handled. And I owe you several very specific apologies.” It wasn’t the clear message he wanted to give, her confusion obvious in her expressive eyes.

He shifted weight carefully, body still a pile of aches that two nights sleep and a bucket of healing potions couldn’t banish. Maybe a year of sleep and a trough full would. Dawn just quietly listened, giving him the chance to speak his piece. Bull suddenly understood her emotional pain; she’d had to watch him walked into the Qun’s betrayal without being able to help because to do anything else was to take his choice away. He could have kept quiet on everything he was about to say, she would have never known; but that wasn’t who he was now.

“I’ve manipulated you, altered things to suit my needs and that has had a profound effect on your life, and you don’t even know it.” Dawn lived to give people a chance to choose their own path and
he’d repeatedly done the opposite to her.

“I don’t understand Iron Bull, what do you mean by you manipulated me?” she sounded calm despite the topic.

“Back before Saturnalia, when the Valo-Kas were coming back from Haven, I redirected the Healer’s attention by making him aware of a possible alternate interest in the Seeker. I didn’t want the two of you developing a romantic relationship and all the indicators were there for that to start.” He saw her eyes go wide with surprise.

“That was when you started calling me Little Bas.” He didn’t flinch at her saying it and she somehow managed to make it a neutral statement instead of accusatory, so he continued.

“Not too long after that you broke out of your shell and I took advantage of your unsettled emotions to keep you interested in me. Even as I got you to tell me about Hawke and Alistair’s possible fate I used your friendship to keep open the possibility for something more once you were ready.” She needed to understand the immensity of his actions.

“Did you kiss me because that’s what the Qun told you to do once upon a time and you’re used to following orders, or because it’s what you wanted to do?” she asked in a careful manner and Bull felt relieved that she wasn’t waving off his deeds.

“I kissed you in the Fade because the Nightmare was telling me you’d come there to die but I was choosing to have hope in you instead.” He admitted honestly and in that vein continued, “And I’m not sorry for kissing you Dawn, though I was being utterly selfish in there. I would gladly show you the difference when I take my time,” it was harder to tell when she was blushing now that all the sun exposure had darkened her complexion to look more Rivaini, “but that’s not where I intended to take this conversation, sorry.”

He redirected them back to the proper topic, “It wasn’t until then that I’d really started to focus on how I could help you solve the problem instead of trying to find a way to solve it for you. All this time, all that you’ve shown me and I have constantly approached you as if I had the right to take decisions away from you. I hurt you because I was angry and I was angry because you had defied my rules for your behaviour. It’s taken me this long to understand how wrong I’ve been and I am sorry.”

It hurt to say, but like most pain Bull also found an odd pleasure in it too. He had been honest, not knowing what Dawn would say or do next and trying not to read her emotive body language or those give away eyes. He only had the one secret left from her but while explaining his misdeed was not the time to confess his love. He wouldn’t pull that kind of emotional manipulation on her again.

Dawn was frowning, not jumping to forgive him like she had in Orlais and Bull appreciated the difference.

“I panicked, before we ever got to the Fade.” She finally spoke, making sombre eye contact. “I couldn’t lift my sword even to protect us and I couldn’t use you as my executioner either.” Her simple statement kept him quiet; she was always so careful with how she treated people and sometimes it was staggering to realize just how much thought Dawn put into things without ever seeming to. “It was you that reminded me I had another option; to try and get through to them. Every mage I saved was because you first reminded me to try.” He felt turned to stone as she reached out and touched his wrist. “They want to call me a hero for saving them when all I did was listen to your advice.” She went thoughtfully silent for a moment.
“Yes, you’ve manipulated me Iron Bull, and I’ve let you do it.” Bull felt his eyebrows lift in surprise at her confession. “I also asked you to train me. If you thought of me as a tool, don’t forget that you warned me at the outset to be careful calling myself that around a man like you.” She gave a smile that held no humour, “see I knew how you manipulate you too, and I needed to get you to agree so my plan could work.”

Now she gave a devastating laugh, “And we all saw how effective my plan turned out to be. It failed but somehow everyone lived.” The painful smile faded from her face. “And while you’re apologizing I need to thank you for making sure Alistair got out. It was hard enough with Hawke still there.”

This was not going how Bull had thought and feared it would, and he felt strangely at a loss as to what to expect next. He still needed time to process everything he’d been through and Bull didn’t figure it was different for Dawn, but even if he felt guilt over adding this to Dawn’s burdened shoulders he knew it was utterly necessary; for both their sakes. He owed Dawn truth now if he wanted the possibility to pursue any kind of real relationship with her. But again that was a concern for the future, after they put some distance from the Fade trip.

“I’m sorry it spoke to you in your head Iron Bull,” despite everything she still offered him comfort, “I’ve never seen you get possessed in any of my world story lines.”

“I’ll recover kadan,” he always did, “and I believe you will too, even if I don’t understand everything that happened to you in there.”

Dawn looked down, confused and thoughtful; as lost as he was and still so tired looking. He’d tell her to try and rest but Bull knew better than most how necessary it could feel to keep busy. He’d be there for her in whatever capacity she allowed when the time came for her to share what she chose.

“We have a fairly long return journey; it is all right to take time. I’m going to be travelling with the Chargers, we need some of that time I mentioned together, but you can always come find me there. Don’t hesitate if you need me.” Bull’s people were his priority and he knew from her own actions that Dawn understood that.

“Thank you Iron Bull, I expect it may happen. I’m sorry about Mac, he was a good person.” Dawn didn’t try to sweeten it with useless sentiment but her barely muffled yawn ruined the effect.

“You haven’t slept since have you?” he guessed.

“I’ve slept,” she lied and seemed to read the expression on his face well enough to realize he didn’t believe it. “In bits and pieces; but not too long.” That seemed to be more honest at least.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” he meant it more broadly than it probably sounded and he had no idea if he could actually do anything even if she did ask.

“Not unless you know on how to fly; I miss airplanes.” She purposefully complained in her language and Bull smiled, saving the awareness that her world had flight or some kind of expedited travel for later.

“From what I’ve heard, you could take the Bog Unicorn and make it back to Skyhold in no time at all.” Bull alluded to the Halamshiral trip even though he hadn’t personally witnessed it.

“Yeah, but then I’d be lonely waiting for all you slowpokes to catch up.” She had a real smile this time.

He still felt unsettled and guilty but didn’t press for forgiveness; whether she did or not was entirely
up to Dawn. It was enough for now that he’d been honest, and had given her the respect to decide for herself.

“I trust you Dawn, I just wanted you to know that.” He rumbled out awkwardly, aware that his words and actions in the past were to the opposite; aware that her arm bore a scar in flagrant reminder of his misdeeds. “And thank you for telling the Boss to save the Chargers, to save me.”

Now Dawn threw herself at him as she had in Orlais, her hug strong and determined. And even if he wanted to give her time to process and decide, he also cherished the feeling; Bull hugged her tightly back. "You are worth saving, all of you. And you are very welcome.” She leaned back to say without stepping away completely, leaving Bull to fight the desire to kiss her again.

“Can I ask how you learned to make gaatlok?” his curiosity flared up now that the emotional matter was dealt with, and he stepped out of the hug to avoid further temptation.

“My sister,” he’d not been expecting that, “she’s a scientist, like the alchemists here but still so different. The mixture is for something my world calls black powder. It’s existed in some form for thousands of years.” He blinked, thinking about the advantages gaatlok had given the Qun and what a thousand years or more to perfect it could give them. “Though once Dagna got involved, she incorporated runes into it so it’s not the exact same as gaatlok.” Dawn continued, oblivious to how little that distinction would make to the Qun.

“They’re going to learn you know about it Dawn, that puts you at risk.” He had to inform her.

“I know,” she answered seriously, “but let’s be honest- I’ve been at risk simply for existing here when I shouldn’t. I finally understand just how hard it is to survive here.”

He cupped her face gently, ensuring he had her complete attention. “No you don’t Dawn, and I hope you never have to either.” He wasn’t trying to demean her efforts to be prepared, and Bull was relieved to see understanding in her eyes as he stepped out of the hug to avoid further temptation. “I want to keep you safe, not because I think you can’t do it yourself, but because the thought of seeing you hurt fills me with dread.” He had meant to wait to admit all this but Dawn just watched him with searching eyes and pulled the words from him. “Shokrakar tried to help me understand my own actions after I hurt you, to understand why I was so angry and scared that I’d break my promise to you that you’d be taken care of. But it wasn’t until the Winter Palace that I figured it out.” He stopped himself from adding another emotional burden for her to deal with. They had enough time to deal with it after processing the trauma he knew was keeping him up at night; the bags under her eyes proclaimed the same.

“Are you still angry with me Iron Bull?” Dawn didn’t press for an explanation of what it was he’d figured out, she simply seemed to accept that he had.

“No, I’m not mad anymore,” this time he hugged her, seeing her need for comforting now. “You’ve done astonishing things Dawn,” he’d told her that on a balcony in Orlais but repeated it anyways. “I’m proud to know you and witness what you can do.”

“Are you afraid I’ve been possessed?” the question gave him pause, her arms still wrapped around him and her face against his chest.

It had occurred to him when Varric had described her confrontation with the Nightmare, but Bull found himself really believing that she wasn’t. Dawn was just too much for the Nightmare to dominate; he’d place his bets on her even against the Ariqun – though he also fervently hoped that confrontation never happened.
“No,” he brushed a few wispy hairs back behind her ear. “I think that you’re still you. And you are amazing.” He remembered how fragile she’d seemed the day he’d seen her panicked run from the Main Hall. She’d brought out a protective urge from him but not because she wasn’t capable; he simply knew how precarious life really was.

“You can be forgiven Iron Bull,” she stunned him. “But no more manipulations, we need to communicate.” She insisted firmly.

“Yes,” he agreed wholly, feeling her squeeze him tighter in response. “Are you going to want to continue training?”

“Yes.” Somehow he’d known she was going to say that. “Even if I don’t think I’m charging into any more battles myself, it’s too useful a skill to give up.”

“Agreed.” He forced himself to let go and step back. “I’m not going to start running the Chargers until we’re on our way back to Skyhold though. While we’re on rest here, we’re resting.” He emphasized purposefully.

Dawn smiled, hearing the rebuke in it. “I still need to talk to Solas, after that I can go rest.”

“Last I saw of him, the feathered Healer was checking his abdomen.” Bull had been looking for Dawn and found the apostate instead.

“He should have had those checked immediately.” She frowned and Bull hid his smile, knowing the Healer had been saying almost the exact same thing to the mage.

“Go check on him kadan, no doubt we’ll all be on the move again soon.” He encouraged.

“You can say that again,” the phrase made no sense and she continued so he let it be, “thank you Iron Bull.” Dawn bid him farewell and he watched her head off to find the mage.

It was going to be an interesting trip back.

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Staying behind in Tarsyl’an Te’las while the Inquisition was off fighting a war was far less exciting than Doshiel wanted it to be, and yet he found that he simply had no time left to himself.

From the moment he woke up until he crawled back into his bedroll at night, Doshiel had somehow found himself acting as his father’s Second. Before it had been his task to stay silent, listen, learn, observe…all the verbs that could be used for the student’s role and he had done it. But then his Bae expected him to instruct the newest of mages, those that didn’t even have the basic understanding of what they were.

He’d expected young mages like himself; instead he’d gotten a lot of scared people in various life stages. Doshiel’s students were nothing of what he expected and yet they truly did need even the little he could teach. One was an adult of over twenty summers- only just discovering that he could call fire. There were several mages that had shortly lived at what Shems called the Circles before the rebellion started, and they were closer to his age at the very least but had the worst discipline he had encountered. And the only two he was actually older than were the little flat eared Felassan, and the son of a Witch Kieran.

Felassan could Hear things the way Doshiel could See them, which meant that Doshiel could really help the little boy even if he couldn’t entirely understand the uniqueness of Felassan’s magic. It felt good to be the ‘expert’ in a topic but Doshiel was also keenly aware of the fact that Felassan was
all but a baby still. Even the Dalish rarely presented magic that young, especially for such a rare skill; but trauma has been known to startle early magic out of even the youngest mage. Kieran was closer to Doshiel in age, and even though he wasn’t actually a mage himself he was sitting in Doshiel’s classes because the moment Doshiel had Seen him he’d Known.

That was not just a little boy in there.

Doshiel had been teaching the others for over a month before he even managed to encounter Kieran; he’d heard that the Court Witch had brought her son with her but even if they were in the same age range Doshiel had been too busy to be social. He’d intended to seek the other boy out but it just hadn’t happened. Until fate decided they needed to meet regardless of Doshiel’s overly busy schedule.

His Bae had taken command of the new mages along with his own class so that he could send Doshiel on the task to collect the garden’s limited bounty of medical use herbs. Doshiel was to collect one each of the most used herbs, and the most useful herb even if it wasn’t the most commonly used. It was both a test of his understanding, as well as a teachable skill for the others to become familiar with the herbs themselves.

It also forced Doshiel into a series of revelations that no one intended.

Firstly - it had been a subconscious decision for Doshiel to avoid the Witch of the Wilds and he realized that because she roamed there he had not entered the gardens since she’d arrived. Secondly - Doshiel could See the layers of protection woven around her, the purple glow of her Power not quite blending in to the brighter violet that scratched marks around the outside in a language Doshiel couldn’t read but viscerally Knew. Thirdly - some god had claimed that woman. And Doshiel knew from Hahren Solas’ library that the gods weren’t actually Divine; they were just enormously Powerful, which seemed somehow worse.

Despite these realizations, Doshiel quickly went to the herbs and collected the clippings he’d need to fulfill the Task his father had set him. He’d decided to ignore the Witch and leave if it seemed like she was starting to notice him. Instead he had his handful of herbs and stood up only to drop them all on the ground in shock.

In front of him stood a boy with an elegant but foreboding red coil curled around him like choking vine. And it had Eyes.

“Mother is not going to like this.” The boy had declared in a concerned and yet still bored sounding tone, but Doshiel had Seen the pulse of anger flash through the beast.

“I don’t like it any better.” Doshiel had declared, surprised that his voice didn’t break. “I’ve seen what it looks like in healthy and unhealthy bonds, this isn’t that. This is so much weirder than that.”

“No one can know,” the boy had demanded imperially, his accent odd and formal sounding.

“This is kind of a Big Deal kid.” Doshiel did squeak that time, wondering just how it was that he was the one collecting all these secrets; the Offworlder’s strange effect on the Fade, Solas being a woken Sentinel, and then this.

“My name is Kieran. And trust me- I know exactly what is going on.” He insisted and Doshiel couldn’t help then breathy laugh that escaped him.

Kieran had looked SO offended by it too, which only made Doshiel laugh harder. The kid looked
like a lot of the noble shems did whenever Doshiel’s Clan had been around, though he was politer by a small degree.

“No one knows exactly what’s going on; anyone who says they do is trying to sell you something.” Doshiel quoted the wisdom he’d heard repeatedly from the Hahren of Lavellan.

“No.” he was the one to teach the kid his first truly valuable lesson; Kieran didn’t get his way. “I don’t know you, and from what I can see I have no reason to trust you.” He’d tried to sound like his Bae did during lessons.

Kieran had blinked at him, as if needing a moment to translate that into a language he could understand. “What you can see is something you ought not be aware of. Mother did not plan for this and I don’t want you to upset her.” Despite the reasonable explanation Doshiel had waited, some instinct telling him there had to be more. “Or give her a reason to send me away for my safety’.”

Kieran could probably see the understanding on Doshiel’s face; he knew all too well how much it sucked to be left behind because the adults thought it wasn’t ‘safe enough’ for him. As if he were too fragile and delicate to endure the real world, and yet ignoring the fact that he’d never get ‘tough enough’ if he was never exposed to it. “Let’s go to the Offworlder’s turret - and tell no one about this.” Doshiel made the demands that time, taking the younger boy’s hand and doing something he’d known was a little dumb to do; he showed off by Stepping them to the tower top.

It wasn’t the smooth glide of his Bae’s Step, but unlike his father Doshiel wasn’t constrained by line of sight. He could Step to places he could also see, and the Offworlder’s energy had saturated the very spaces she lived in like some kind of aura echo. Hahren Solas warned him against experimenting with locations out of Skyhold on his own, because if Doshiel could see it so could Others, so Doshiel had practiced stepping to all the places he could within Skyhold as frequently as possible. Still, even with all his careful effort, Doshiel’s Step jolted them and left poor Kieran gagging from the disorientation.

It passed quickly, Doshiel knew because the spaces saturated by the Offworlder’s energy always felt good despite whatever terrible state he entered in; like when he’d lay in the grass, soaking up the sun and watching the clouds play across the sky. Kieran recovered and then made Doshiel promise on his life not to tell anyone before agreeing to explain things.

An Old god soul, an Offworlder, and a Sentinel.

Doshiel knew his gods weren’t really gods; so how did these separate, awesome things come to exist all at the same time, in the same place?

It had kept Doshiel quiet for several days, and not because his Bae was disappointed that Doshiel had forgotten all about the clippings. Almost inevitably Doshiel and Kieran started to spend more time together – always away from the Witch’s notice. Doshiel wouldn’t betray Solas’ secret, nor would he Kieran’s now, but not one had said not to discuss with the odd boy the strangeness of the Offworlder. And all the other things Doshiel could see. But Doshiel had duties to attend to, and Kieran had lessons to learn; their time was limited.

So Kieran decided to join the classes Doshiel was teaching, and little Felassan could hear the Witch boy’s weirdness like Doshiel could see it. Inevitably their little duo became a triad, even though Felassan was a literal child. And after classes were over the three of them were left to be in charge of their own time together.
His Bae probably thought it’d keep him out of trouble, and help him realize all the Duties that would someday be his responsibility to execute. And it did, but not for the reasons his father and the other adults were expecting.

Doshiel had to keep the other two safe.

The Witch of the Wild had brought a fully intact and working Eluvian within Terasyl’an Te’las and even if she thought it was ‘locked’, between the three of them they had found a way to partially activate it. Not enough to go through, or leave it open for something else to come in, but enough that on the surface they could See things. Things that hadn’t happened, might not happen, were happening –they couldn’t always tell. And although they had resisted the temptation to try and unlock the Eluvian, none of them could resist watching what it revealed.

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Solas wandered the Fade, once again only a sliver of his true presence but for once he didn’t feel the loss; he’d walked the physical Fade and still found his Power bound - until Ena’vun offered had offered hers.

“I told you that your Ena’vun was not what you thought she was.” Wisdom drew his attention, the necklace of the Unbound clasped around her throat still. He recognized the face she wore now, a simulacrum of Dawn’s mother.

“Did you know this was coming?” Solas didn’t have to specify the bundle of energy still swirling within him, a mere echo of Ena’vun.

“I warned you that it sought to possess her as much as she sought to possess it in return.” She sounded pleased.

“I have not possessed her!” he sharply denied. “Ena’vun is not a thing to be possessed; you of all beings should know that.”

“And yet you carry a piece of her within you now.” Wisdom, of course, continued to pry.

“To match the piece of myself now a part of her.” He confessed to his oldest friend.

Wisdom just smiled as if she had already known and Solas was no longer certain she hadn’t. “Do you see her with new eyes now ma falon?” she pressed, relentless and unstoppable.

And damn him, he did.

How he felt, with her energy still vibrant inside, combined with how Varric had described her beating the Nightmare – Solas couldn’t help but realize a staggering truth. Dawn was not a mage, her world had no magic; but if it did he suspected she’d be formidable. Enough so that he theorized that she had played a part in being brought through the Eluvian. She had touched it, admitted to Willing it to activate even if she’d superficially disbelieved. Her Will had defied the Nightmare, what if combined with the Power released at the Conclave it had been enough to pull her through?

He had borne witness to the torturous replay of her last moments in her old life; he’d seen the impossibility of his People’s Eluvian in her world. Solas needed to discover the truth behind its presence there, see if his theory had any basis in reality. If he was right; Ena’vun truly was the key to unlocking a plan he no longer wanted to go through with.

Dawn had implied repeatedly that she might not know everything that was to come, but she still knew some of it. He had no true, solid hope in the future but for the first time in Ages, he felt
curious about what was to come.

“I see her.” Solas finally answered Wisdom.

“And you are certain of that?” she challenged as if he were still a wilful child.

“That is a matter for her and I to discuss.” He refuted but Wisdom just waited out his patience. “We have not even recovered; there is time to determine what has altered.” He hated to admit to ignorance.

“You know, you just don’t want to say.” Wisdom wouldn’t let the matter lie. “Your Ena’vun offered you Power before, and you rejected it. But now you’ve accepted it; why? Were you afraid to lose her to the Nightmare?”

Solas fell silent, aware that he had been afraid but not only about losing Dawn. He’d been furious over how the Nightmare had hurt each of his companions. They were HIS.

“I am not afraid of losing Ena’vun ma falon,” and because he faced Wisdom in the Fade Solas found himself being utterly truthful, “she and I will endure regardless of obstacle, I know that.”

And Wisdom grinned at him in triumph, the expression so similar to Ena’vun that he couldn’t ignore that his friend was wearing the face of Dawn’s mother. And he had watched her tear through the demons masquerading as the same woman without hesitation to keep them all safe. Ena’vun did a lot of things that seemed impossible in the name of how much she loved; Solas’ continuing survival was evidence of that alone.

Dawn had offered him Power, he had accepted and it bound them together – something she had to allow and he knew it even if she didn’t. Solas had felt too much magical energy fail to contact Ena’vun in the past to not have realized that her unconscious Will had to permit it to fully affect her.

Her trust in him was humbling, and Wisdom would not let him hide in the face of it.

His own Power was slowly rousing; a glacial rebuild to what once had been a natural state of being for him. Ena’vun utterly ignored his Veil and the Fade was constantly swirling in reaction around her, and yet she was constantly adapting to it in return, growing her ability to manipulate it like a mage could. For all that he knew, or thought he knew, Solas was starting to suspect that he was still woefully ignorant.

Solas woke from the Fade feeling as disturbed as he had been after uthenera. His uneasy mind was not at all settled by the current state of his physical body either but that was at least easily rectified, so Solas sought out the Healer’s tent.

It was just supposed to be a quick visit to have his dressings changed, the act of wrapping them himself hurt far too much to bother with for now. But he was perturbed to discover that his simple rest had in fact taken the length of an entire day and then some for him to rouse from. His time with Wisdom had felt far shorter than that, and Solas hurried to the Healer’s tent, worried for the state he’d find the world in this time.

The Healer that had taken care of Dawn, the one possessed by a Spirit, approached him as soon as he entered. Solas could feel the dual souls crowded into one skin and he sorrowed for the strain it put on them both. They were woven into each other, the task of unravelling them neigh impossible.

“This should have been seen to already, there’s going to be scarring now.” The Healer chided, subduing Solas’ sympathy as he lead him to a less populated area of the tent.
Solas bit back a comment about how he was accustomed to seeing to his own recuperation. The truth was that the wound had ceased to be fatal once he’d tapped into Dawn’s aura – he’d bled for a while but the Nightmare couldn’t pull the life from him through it any longer. His injury had become low priority after that in the face of conquering impossibility.

He just wanted it tended to so he could have his discussion with Ena’vun; she would worry over his injury so he’d have it already addressed to ease her concerns. “I just require new dressings, when I washed I saw no signs of infection.” He kept his commentary practical as he removed his shirt.

But the Healer was just giving him this look, “You can’t tell can you?” he sounded amused and awed at the same time.

“Speak clearly; I did not come to you for riddles Healer.” Solas reprimanded.

“Anders,” the mage introduced briefly, “and I meant that I can feel that the Offworlder has Marked you.” That kept him silent; Solas had expected many new challenges and consequences but this had not been one of them. It would make matters more difficult that others were able to feel the difference. “It’s like a golden, fiery thread tracing around your personal shielding,” Anders continued to explain, “and it matched the fading glow in your wound so I know whose Power helped seal them in the first place. Now Dawn is my patient until she’s recovered, so I need to know how this is going to affect her.”

Solas had no answer to give him, and only partially because he refused to divulge secrets to a stranger. He wasn’t actually sure what was going to happen next. The silence stretched on past expectant, through awkward and was firmly into uncomfortable when Iron Bull arrived to interrupt their stalemate.

The Tal Vashoth saw Solas’ torn abdomen being tended and gave an approving grunt, unaware of the scene he’d waylaid. “Good that you’re here, shit that she isn’t. Has either of you seen Dawn?” despite his easy seeming manner, Solas detected a thread of sombreness to Iron Bull’s tone.

“Not yet, though I doubt she wandered far.” Solas gave an answer, waiting for the Healer to do his work now that there was an audience.

“How are you holding up?” the ex-spy pried but Solas expected it.

“Things could have turned out far worse than new scars Iron Bull, I will be fine.” He ignored Anders rolling his eyes at that statement, “am I safe in feeling assured of your wellness too?” he queried.

“It takes more than a walk through demon town to stop me.” It wasn’t a direct answer and they both knew it, but Solas didn’t press. He knew what Iron Bull had endured from the Nightmare and Solas could only respect the fortitude the Tal Vashoth had shown.

Iron Bull left without further commentary, eye curious – as if he knew they were keeping something from him. Solas found it amusing considering that they truly were so the spy wasn’t being paranoid.

Despite his insistence Anders decided that Solas’ ablutions were not sufficient and he took a healing root infused poultice to the wound before binding Solas’ abdomen back up. “I suspect that you will ignore my instructions to try and rest both your physical body as well as your magical pathways until you better understand whatever it is that’s affected you, so I won’t waste my time.” The Healer bit off the words, annoyance and exhaustion radiating off of him.
“Ladarelan,” Solas surprised them both with the respectful term, “your experiences are not universal; my connection to Ena’vun may not be all consuming.” He firmly believed that too.

And yet when Dawn sought him out shortly thereafter, Solas knew he wasn’t the only mage that could feel the energies shift because of her. The edges of his personal aura, the protective barrier he’d carried through battling the Evanuri and Eons alike, did absolutely nothing to stop the energy that was Dawn from sinking into him as she gave him her customary hug and sat beside him.

“I am glad to find you getting looked after Old Wolf, “she confessed and chided all at once, “though I expected it to be done a couple of days ago.”

“I might have been able to prevent scarring if he had.” Anders intruded.

“Although I appreciate your care, I do not require the additional commentary.” Solas reprimanded the Healer in a calm tone.

“To be fair,” Ena’vun interjected, “he’s the Healer that’s kept Victoria alive for so long.” She tried to helpfully inform.

“THAT’S my reputation in your eyes?” Anders demanded incredulously, and even Solas laughed at the man’s surprise.

“Keeping that woman alive is FAR more impressive than any mere explosion could be, I grew up on Mythbusters.” Ena’vun explained, using a word in her native tongue that left both mages confused. She didn’t clarify either, forging ahead regardless of their ignorance. “But since I’m actually here to steal Solas, I guess it doesn’t matter what your reputation is because it isn’t stopping me.”

Ena’vun smiled so there was no threat to her words, but Solas was aware of the Warden-possessed-by-Justice regarding her in a serious, speculative manner. And when the Spirit assumed control of the body, Solas pulled energy to his fingertips-ready to take action.

“The Fade is still recovering from your conquering of the Nightmare.” The Spirit intoned in a not-quite biting tone.

“No need to be a dick Justice.” Ena’vun sighed tiredly, but her words clearly did not deter the Spirit.

“On the eve of the event I stood down on the belief that you required the time to recover, not that you remained wilfully ignorant of your own deeds.” Justice reached for Dawn.

Solas took action.

Two Barriers thrummed to life; one around the trio and one protecting Dawn. Now there was no need to conceal his effect on the Fade from the twisted Spirit-Healer because Solas wanted Justice to know how serious he was.

“Vis masila dira’asa, ma’emadara oveem I’arena’sal’in.”. He knew the press of Power was noticeable to the interwoven pair.

If the man didn’t understand Elvhen the Spirit did, and it brought forwards its own power only to realize the truth of Solas’ statement. Blue power had been surging under Anders’ skin with his fluctuating emotions, but now it steadied to a calmer constant as the Spirit-Healer watched them both for a moment longer. When it became obvious that Solas wasn’t backing down, the possessed Healer freed itself of Solas’ Barrier and left without uttering another word.
Ena’vun, however, felt no need to remain silent. “I know Anders has a shit bedside manner, but I thought you were better at making friends than that.” She still kept her seat next to him, not demanding an explanation for the scene she’d just witnessed.

“He has made me aware that our actions in the Fade have left a discernable mark upon me.” Solas admitted, understanding Wisdom’s behaviour better now at the very least. He saw Ena’vun’s eyes go wide with concern so he smiled to show it didn’t bother him. “I was not anticipating others being able to detect the change but it is a matter easily adjusted to.” He patted her back comfortably.

“I’m sorry if it bothers you; I didn’t know it’d have a discernable effect.” Ena’vun offered utterly unnecessary apologies. “But I am not sorry that it helped keep you alive. I know what happens when Somniari die in their sleep, and I have a suspicion that you actually dying IN the Fade counts as catastrophic.”

Her estimation of his abilities was a fine stroke to the ego, but Solas focused instead on her concerns. “I am not bothered by it at all Ena’vun, thought I do need to make you aware of the actualities that have occurred.”

“That’s not a word I know, sorry.” She easily informed and Solas felt his smile mirror hers, this was familiar territory.

“What I meant was that I can tell you what I think has happened, and how I interpreted it, but as with so many things regarding you ara Ena’vun, I cannot guarantee that I am correct.” He clarified.

“Good, because I have questions and assumptions – so let’s see how far off the mark I was.” She had faced the very worst the Nightmare could do not even a handful of days ago, and yet she seemed remarkably grounded now; a far cry from the broken woman he’d held so long ago.

“Firstly- when I was injured the wound was not just physical,” he decided to not censor himself this time, no longer hiding from the truth. “The Nightmare recognized what I am and used the wound to draw the Power out of my blood.” It was time for that particular dance to end - it was time to confirm she knew who and what he was. He believed she already did, so this was just the final verification.

“I never did understand why something like the Nightmare felt safe trying to take you on, but then I lived the experience.” She didn’t directly answer, but her lack of questions and hesitation spoke volumes. “Iron Bull said it was in his head, you had it going all psychic leech on you, and we all saw its attempts to stop me,” she shook her head sadly, “I can only imagine what it did to the others that I can’t See.”

She leaned against his side, her head settling on his shoulder so he rested his cheek against her crown of hair. “To accept your offer as I did, in the state I was in, an exchange had to occur. In simple terms you offered me Power and to take it I had to give a piece of my own Power in return.” He expected her to pull away, retreat in either confusion or offence. She did neither, Dawn remained at his side.

“But I’m not a mage, so what does this mean?” She simply accepted his actions.

“I don’t entirely know Ena’vun,” Elvhen were still inherently magical the last time this kind of exchange had occurred, “before the Veil such things were how Ghilan’nain was elevated but now with the Veil such things are gone.” He wasn’t even sure of his own immortality at this point, “I would expect your status as an Offworlder also alters possible expectations.”
“And I’m human too, Ghilan’nain was at least Elvhen.” Her utter ease with the topic was the confirmation he needed that she knew his history too.

“There is nothing at least about you Ena’vun,” he pressed a kiss to the ridiculously glorious chain of hair she wore braided around her head as she fought a yawn. He curled his arm around her shoulders, estimating that Dawn hadn’t truly rested since their return.

“Okay Old Wolf, so what side effects do you think our little ‘trade’ is going to have if I’m not going to be suddenly ageless?” his careful manoeuvring paid off as Dawn ended up reclined with him as she continued their discussion.

He wasn’t exactly tired but Solas suspected that Dawn hadn’t been able to sleep much like on their return from Halamshiral. They were already contained within a Barrier, so he pulled it closer to them and kept Power thrumming into it; it had worked the last time to help her feel safe enough to sleep and he could maintain it long enough for her to recover. No one around them would even know he was doing it either.

“So far Wisdom and Justice have been able to detect the change within me, I suspect all Spirits and those bound to them will feel it. And those with special Sight like the young Lavellan Elgar’ladarelan as well.” He cautioned, aware of how very much that young Doshiel could See.

“Hmm… I can think of a few others in that case.” She remarked, already sounding drowsier than before. “When Haste tapped into me, I felt it pretty immediately, especially after a big jump. But I don’t….feel any different. Do you?”

“I can feel Power, not the same as I’ve been used to but somehow I can still use it. I can feel the energy you always radiate ignore my barriers. But to me you feel no different Ena’vun.” He explained as she gave a yawn. “I haven’t had a chance to test it in any measure so I cannot guarantee that we both won’t find all of this to change.”

“The silver lining is that no one else has a clue about what I am in this world either, so at least I can’t be doing it wrong.” Her fatigue blunted any self-recrimination her tone would have had, “I know I’ve become a kind of symbol to some people whether I want to be or not – I think I used that in the Fade without really being aware of it.”

The fact that she was only recently cognizant of what people thought of her surprised Solas; the child Felassan still referred to her as Princess even after having been corrected repeatedly on the matter. “Rest Ena’vun.” He tried to encourage, her exhaustion making her accent slurred. “Neither one of us has to face the unknown alone.”

“The Nightmare seemed to know though,” she ignored him, “it wanted all of me – it wanted all of all of us. But it seemed determined to, at the very least, take me.”

Solas could understand why exactly the Nightmare would have wanted all of her to take; even the small ball of energy Ena’vun had gifted to him felt like nothing he’d known before. In the most inescapable of ironies - it felt akin to basking in the warmth of the sun but from the inside out. But the Nightmare was vanquished and no other, internal nor external, would haunt her rest; he’d see to that if nothing else.

“But you didn’t let it win.” Solas spoke gently, feeling her body going softer towards sleep despite the topic of conversation.

“No- I didn’t fight it at all.” Her confession stunned him; he’d thought her Will had undone the Nightmare. “I simply let the Nightmare choose; it could have all of me and continue to forget, or it
could keep itself and remember. Justice was wrong, I didn’t conquer the Nightmare. The Nightmare woke up.”

She considered it a lesser act but only someone like Solas, or a Spirit like Justice, could know how much more impressive her deeds were. He could wake any dreamer from their sleep because he was a Somniari and had Ages of experience over even the best the current world could offer. Likewise, his experience with manipulating the Fade gave him an edge over any other mage because they simply lacked the symbiosis with magic Solas had lived with. Dawn had woken a Spirit, with the Veil in place.

Solas had no clue what that would mean next.

Chapter End Notes

*I do plan on writing out Hawke’s story that ties into this one, so that means I might reference it here but I don’t want to spoil it entirely, or slow do the flow of this story.

Translation
Elvhen
Ladarelan= Healer
Vis masila dira’asa, ma’emadara oveem I’arena’sal’in.= If you think to harm her, you will have to go through me and I will win
Elgar’ladarelan= Healer of Spirits
Not Quite Homecoming

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition triumphed in Adamant but has a long march towards the next battle; but catastrophe waits for no plan of action.

Chapter Notes

Hello all, sorry for the long pause.
Life got hard for a while there but things are trending in the right direction at the moment, so I have the mental energy for writing again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They had successfully saved the world; and their reward for doing so was to get to SAVE THE WORLD AGAIN. Alena wasn’t even all that surprised to hear from her Harbinger that sometime soon there would be another pitched battle for the Inquisition to get through. This time in the Arbour Wilds.

At least it wasn’t the Storm Coast.

Alena wanted to focus on the next task, the next goal to accomplish, but she had needed some time first. The Fade had been...unexpected. She was a Dwarf, dreaming in the Fade was weird enough to adjust to but she’d managed that well enough. Alena was certain she’d get used to the idea that she’d walked in the Fade as a Dwarf and had come out the other side still alive, still sane, and still with a soul. Whatever one of those were worth anyways.

But her memories were jumbled and unsettled, fighting each other against the assumptions she’d made to fill in the blanks. Not the Herald of Andraste - the survivor of Justinia. Not chosen - just randomly in the right place. Not cured of this thing in her hand at all - instead condemned to endure it for life it seemed.

She wanted a drink, a week off, and for people to stop looking at her like they were waiting for her to perform another miracle. Paragons and Dusters she could only imagine what it must have felt like to watch them all fall off the bridge. Despite the emotional effect that would have had, the Inquisition had found it in them to keep fighting against demons and Wardens alike– it was impressive and not a little bit terrifying. In the face of despair, her people had rallied and won.

Her people, even over a year later and the thought felt weird. But not bad.
Alena was the Inquisitor, and even if it was a job she hadn’t wanted it was one she would not let go of until she felt certain the world would keep going without her fighting whatever it was that needed to be fought. Oddly enough her life as the Cadash assassin had prepared her for this; to plot and plan, to see the action all the way through regardless of the possible consequences to herself. She was an implement through which the will of others was acted - only this time the others were HER advisors and she was the one making the decision on what action to take.

Having a drink and ignoring the world was not it.

Instead she let everyone rest for a handful of days before pulling Dawn and her other Advisors in. It was time to discuss their next steps.

They all still looked so tired though. And young, painfully young.

“You made reference to the Arbour Wilds the other day, would you be able to expand upon it?” Cullen asked, his tone patient sounding despite how desperate he must be for information.

The fact that the Nightingale wasn’t as insistent told her that Leliana already knew some of whatever it was Dawn was going to share, so Alena didn’t worry. She’d have rather given them all another week to recover.

“When you return to Skyhold, Morrigan is going to come to the war table and inform you of Corypheus’ next target, an active Eluvian at the Temple of Mythal. This is only part of the truth, he would gladly take the Eluvian, except that there is also something called the Well of Sorrows there – a…. physical repository of memory. Like a living library where the voices of ancient Elves still linger for someone to claim.” Alena could see Dawn struggle to offer the information, but she wasn’t certain if it was the language barrier, or if Dawn was still carefully editing everything she spoke about.

It made her reflect on how far Dawn had come from the broken warning she’d tried to issue a lifetime ago in Haven. Dawn had had no practical skills at first and barely spoke the language, but had most assuredly proven her worth and place with the Advisors since – even after repeatedly withholding information. They had not listened then, Alena remembered a lot of discussion over the potential Dragon appearing and the way they’d all rejected the idea as impossible; many had died because of that disbelief. Now though, Alena trusted her even if she couldn’t wrap her head around everything Dawn had lived through; whatever Dawn had been before she was the Harbinger now, and Alena’s dear friend. That was more than enough.

“I have to tell you though; I have taken steps to help with this series of events.” Dawn’s next comment finally snapped Leliana to attention; whatever she’d been pre-informed of, this wasn’t it. “The Well of Sorrows is an Elvhen artifact, and to claim it grants power over the Eluvian – but at a cost. I have spoken to Merrill about the Well, the Eluvian, and the consequences. She’s agreed to be the Host if the Inquisitor has no objection.”

“Are there other workable options?” Alena cut off whatever comments Cullen or Leliana could
“Yourself or Morrigan are the only two I’ve ever seen.” A helpless shrug accompanied the admission.

“What are these consequences you reference?” Leliana thrust in.

Dawn didn’t immediately answer and Alena worried that there was a life trade for power or knowledge. “I can’t answer that completely – there is far too much information it touches on both in the far distant past and the soon to come future. I took a big risk telling Merrill, but I had to.”

“You told a known Blood Mage but can’t tell us?” Cullen barked out in demanding disbelief.

“It’s her People’s History;” Dawn shut him down without effort, “she has fought, bled, and lost loved ones to the desperate need to reclaim even a little of her heritage because it has been actively and deliberately destroyed by the Chantry. I’m not apologizing for not giving even more to be taken by an outsider.” Her passion on the matter made Alena wonder if there was a shared history of oppression from her own world too.

“Is that why you didn’t think to take the burden yourself?” Leliana asked, voice gentle but eyes too intense to not be digging for some piece of information.

“Leliana, I can’t even look in a regular mirror let alone try to walk through a magical one.” Dawn retorted, not even realizing the slip of information. “Whatever brought me here left its scars, I’m not at the point where I could be any help there – so I’m arming you with what knowledge I can and stepping the fuck out of the way.”

“And yet you went into Adamant knowing what could happen, and you took measures in case they did.” Leliana pointed out and Alena started to catch the edges of what the Nightingale was hunting for.

“What is this a problem?” Dawn demanded and Alena realized that she wasn’t even aware of how prepared she’d been to die in Adamant.

“She left letters at Skyhold; information and instructions on what we could do should she have died at Adamant.” Leliana’s bland statement left the Commander silent. “And she sent a letter to me the day of the battle so that I would know about the Arbor Wilds and help prepare the Inquisition.”

“Why is this a problem?” Dawn demanded and Alena realized that she wasn’t even aware of how prepared she’d been to die in Adamant.

“It’s not,” Leliana gentled and Alena let the Spymaster take the lead. An unlikely, but suitable,
“We are glad to work with the information, Harbinger, and will use it most excellently.”

“Then why am I getting the third degree?” the question was plaintive and even if Alena didn’t understand the phrase she used, she understood the confusion.

“Dawn, why did you insist on going into Adamant?” Now it was Cullen guiding her to understanding.

“Because there I could help!” Alena felt bad for the frustration so obvious in Dawn’s tone. This wasn’t criticism at all, but the kind of mentoring Dawn would need to thrive if they managed to save the world.

“Dawn, I was there. Other than volunteering to stay behind yourself, what else could you have done to help by being there?” Alena hated to ask but knew this was the conclusion Leliana had been leading towards.

Dawn opened her mouth to retort and snapped it shut without having an answer. “I didn’t go there to die.” She carefully stated.

“No but you were prepared for it, maybe even anticipated it as being the end result despite everything else you’d done to help us get ready.” Leliana took over again.

It felt like they were flaying an ally but Alena didn’t stop them. “So was Alena, so was everyone else that came out to fight.” Dawn shook her head, still not acknowledging her actions fully.

“Trained soldiers, lifetime fighters, those that have the most to gain.” Leliana wasn’t being insidious but it was just cruel enough to leave Alena uncomfortable. “Your actions are not without worth, your readiness to sacrifice yourself even if needed…. What possible consequence could there be to this Well of Sorrows if you feel it is too much for you to take on?”

“It’s nothing like that!” Dawn burst out, her emotions now mixed and jumbled enough that Leliana would be able to get more information out of her. Alena had seen the Nightingale do it to many opponents, but never a friend before. “There is a connection that is forged between the Host and the Well; the Host will literally have the voices of long dead Elves in their head. I couldn’t take that away from the Elvhen still alive in this world – anymore than I could stand back and watch Alena be forced to choose between sacrificing Hawke or Alistair.”

“Your interference in Adamant saved lives, you say there is no life to save here merely a burden to take – why interfere if you know the predetermined path will lead to where you need to go?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do.” Dawn shrugged as if it were that simple, “Leliana, you once thought you had the voice of the Maker guiding you. It shaped the actions you took, led you to
working with the Wardens through the Blight to where you are now. When you believed Alena was the Herald of Andraste, were you hurt that Andraste chose a non-Human? Someone not of the faith?” the silence was enough of an answer. “I know what the Arbour Wilds is going to cost, to a lot of people, and I still know NOTHING. I can only try to make the world a better place to live in, and by that process make myself a better person. Because to me, that is the right thing to do. I don’t know what answer you want from me Leli, so just ask me what you want to ask.”

Alena wondered if this was an angle she could take; play the Game by not playing the Game.

“Having heard from the Wardens and what they think, and seen how so many others are reacting to you now – why don’t you reach for some of that Power being offered?” Leliana finally demanded, not cruelly but seemingly honestly confused.

Dawn looked disturbed by the idea of veneration, “I don’t want it.” A beat of silence where no one knew what to say. “I’d rather keep helping Alena wield her own Power and help you with the changes you’re making.” Now Dawn gained a slight smile, “If you haven’t already been told, the Chantry is considering you for Divine; you, Cassandra, or possibly even Madam de Fer.” Alena had already discussed the matter with her Spymaster, and seemed to be in agreement with Dawn about which of the three was the best candidate, so she let her Harbinger take the talking points. “All respect to Vivienne but she serves herself with the position, and Cassandra serves to the best of her ability out of duty. But you… you actually try to make the Chantry better. You, the Inquisition, the people that are now my new family…you’ve all taken me as your own but the truth is I am, and will always be in some form, an Outsider. I could only rebuild from the ashes, not save it from burning.”

“If we could, perhaps, return to the matter at hand…?” All appreciated Cullen’s redirection. “Can you tell us where in the Arbor Wilds this Temple of Mythal you referenced is at?”

Alena had a lot to think about suddenly. Far too much for one simple Dwarf who liked to carve soapstone and stab things. Cullen was gathering what limited tactical information Dawn could provide about the physical nature of what was coming so Alena focused on planning the team she’d take with her to the Arbour Wilds. A temple of Mythal, an Eluvian, and this Well of Sorrows…clearly Solas should go, which definitely meant Sera could not. Those two together, at a place that was most assuredly ‘Elfy’ would drive her around the bend. And having caught word of Varric and Hawke’s long awaited coupling, Alena defaulted to Cole as her other Rogue – which meant the Valo-Kas were finally getting back in the field. Kaaras might be very handy to have along if there was going to be a staggered battle front so that worked on two measures. And call her selfish but Alena wanted Thom with her.

Her head hurt from trying to think of every angle but it was just as common place to her now as the ache in her neck. “Cullen, I can see you hesitate – just say it.” Alena prompted when her Commander faltered.

“It makes no sense to return across Orlais home only to turn the army around and come back out. We may not know exactly where in the Arbour Wilds this Temple of Mythal is but we can position our forces in strategic locations to react quickly to the discovery of either enemies or the Temple.”
It was a good idea, but he had hesitated for a reason. It would be obvious to Corypheus what they were doing and would leave Skyhold under-numbered for even longer. Not to mention they had no clue what to do with either the Eluvian or the Well of Sorrows Dawn had mentioned. Morrigan had brought her own Eluvian to Skyhold, a fact the Witch though Alena unaware of in an amusing display of arrogance. Solas had been the one to inform her of it, and promised to take measures keeping it from being a major security risk, but now they were going to be gaining another one.

That seemed like a big deal for some terrible reason she hadn’t figured out yet. Like the ever growing ache in her Marked palm, Alena could do nothing to solve the matter so she elected to do her best to ignore it. Until she had better options or more information she could do nothing anyways so it was the pragmatic choice.

“We can drop off small units of the army as we go through the Arbour Wilds,” Leliana suggested, “the very nature of the forest will help shield some of the decrease in numbers which should delay discovery of our tactic. Adding to the disguise is the turbulent nature of the Orlesian countryside still; the civil war may be over but not everyone has returned home yet.”

“I can’t help with this end of things, but if you’d like Alena I can start showing you the steps you’ll need to get into the Temple peacefully, and that should help recruit the Guardians of the Temple to your side.” Dawn interjected carefully and Alena suspected this was one of those things she was going to insist on.

“I have no issue with playing nice, and I’ll take all the help I can get. Please show me,” Alena agreed and Dawn looked so grateful. “Cullen, Leliana, I trust that you’ll devise a suitable plan before we reach the Arbour Wilds – but for now let’s just get this army started on the way.”

It was long past time to get out of this place of sand and nightmares.

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It was all just a dream. He knew that. After this many years together, Alistair knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was dreaming, and this was the Fade, and that was his wife. He still nearly hit her with a half prepared Smite because of all the Maker-cursed demons he’d been facing lately.

“Still that troubled my love? You said everything was ‘handled’.” Siobhan demanded in a tone Alistair knew was a threat -just not to him. It sounded sweet on the surface but lurking underneath in the subtext was the warning that she would absolutely come handle the situation if she felt she had to – and NO ONE would like the outcome of that.

“I think it’s going to take me another lifetime to settle, but things are and have been handled, yes.” Alistair soothed, opening his arms wide so he could catch his astonishingly diminutive wife. Compared to her reputation, she was a tiny woman.
The grin on Siobhan’s face was its own special reward as she hurtled into his arms, burrowing against his body as if she couldn’t get warm enough otherwise. “Maker’s misery I miss you.” The muffled words were spoke against his chest but no less true for their smothering.

He squeezed her tighter, missing the weight of her being really there with him. “And I you, my rose.” But despite the time they’d been apart, it wasn’t the moment for just themselves. “But I have to go back to Kingly business now. Unlike some I could mention that have larked off and abandoned their Queenly duties…” he teased, knowing that if she could have him at her side, Siobhan would in a second.

“I still resent that we can’t put you on the throne wearing nothing but your crown so that I could finally see if the mental image matches the reality.” She deftly out maneuvered him in the teasing so he moved them back onto business.

“I did have a work related question first… are you able to find Dawn in the Fade now?” it made Siobhan step back from the embrace so he could see her frown.

“To be honest I stopped trying when nothing I DID worked to get through to her, why has something changed?” Siobhan used her dangerously sharp mind to tear into the puzzle in the same way Alistair had seen her cousin Victoria use her blades against enemies.

“I told you everything I had seen while we went for the Fade walk - and that truly never gets old,” Alistair referenced the incident from Kinloch many years ago, “but it seems that I was a left in the dark on a couple of things that I have since worked out.”

Siobhan smiled and waited, she knew better than most that Alistair was often overlooked or considered somewhat dim, but that that was a front he deliberately used. It was astonishing what people were willing to discuss within earshot when they thought they were smarter than you were. “She was able to break the mind control being used on the Wardens – I’ve confirmed with Josep that the mages amongst their rank all agree. Even if she didn’t speak to them directly, once she freed one of them, the rest found it easier to throw off the mind control as well…” he hesitated to share the last bit because it was more a gut feeling than a verified fact.

“My love, what else?” she knew him well enough to read everything off his face.

“I can’t tell for sure but…she feels weird to me now, different than she did before.” Now he was frowning.

Siobhan didn’t dismiss his concern right away, a fact he appreciated. He’d been so used to being discarded or ignored that even though she changed his life a decade ago he was still getting used to having someone trust his instincts. Still, he didn’t want to ask her to look into Dawn’s sudden new strangeness when he knew Siobhan had to be focused on what she was actually doing.

Neither Tabris nor Aeducan could do this task on their own; not if Siobhan had had to call in the
other Wardens for backup. There was a reason he’d let a brand new, baby Warden run the show back during the Blight and it wasn’t just his dislike of authority. She was just able to figure things out, and that combined with the same ability to draw in people that he saw in her more Roguish cousin meant it would have been stupid NOT to let her take the lead. But now that meant to search for the lost and impossible, it had to be her.

His wonderful wife was half a world away but at least he could still have her like this.

“After going through a huge trauma, I’d be surprised if her emotional state didn’t make her feel weird to you now.” Siobhan carefully explained. “She’s not a mage, but you’ve also said she’s also not like anything the Fade and the Spirits within it have ever encountered before either. And from the sounds of it, you all went through the ringer in there – so unless you’re worried about possession I’d suggest to let it be for now.”

He nodded, knowing to trust her experience on the matter.

The Circle had forced her through Harrowing at a very young age; apparently because she’d discovered their pet Demon. And despite her youth and inexperience, and lack of overall Power – she’d survived. And then a few short years later the Circle betrayed her again. Siobhan was not the most powerful mage he’d ever encountered, not even in the top ten; but she was the most dangerous. When her beloved mentor had offered her up to be made Tranquil despite her doing absolutely no wrong, Siobhan had learned to be ruthless – and how to plan for the unpredictable. Because like Alistair himself, Duncan had saved her from a fate worse than death. She would not win in a direct fight, not with magic nor weapon, but that was the danger of Siobhan- she’d find a way to AVOID the expected and find a different way to eliminate her enemies. If she could reach a hand out to help someone up, then she would- but if it wasn’t an option she went for the kill. Victoria shared that trait as well he’d seen.

It had always impressed him, how fast a severely sheltered Circle mage had adapted to life out as a Warden. Siobhan had been taken young, as had her siblings, and she’d been noble before hand – nothing of Warden life had been familiar. But she had asked question after question, listened to stories and challenged people’s opinions. Always to find as much information as she could. If she was telling him to let things be with Dawn, he was going to follow her lead. And maybe he felt Dawn had earned a little time to rest as well. Not only because she had saved the Wardens from extinction and corruption, but also because he’d realized the Nightmare was using the shape of her family to attack them all… it’d broken his heart and did every time he thought of it now.

He was slightly shielded against the Nightmare; Siobhan was more than a little possessive herself, and as a Somniari she’d layered protections around him if he’d ever venture in the Fade without her. Kinloch had taught them all many lessons and this was one he was infinitely grateful for. He’d seen the poisoned Mabari from Ostagar, the cave spiders from the Deep Roads; even darkspawn. But he’d known what they were, the ghostly images of the Nightmare’s illusions hanging over the formless demons attacking at his command.

Dawn had had to kill those that looked like her family, her lost loved ones. Even knowing it was a ruse, Alistair wasn’t sure how he would have reacted had he seen Siobhan’s form being used by a demon, and been forced to kill her to save them all. The kind of love it took in her heart to have the strength to do it was awe inspiring, but also left him wondering just how much hurt she was now
hiding so they wouldn’t know the cost.

Because that’s what he did. It’s what Siobhan did as well, and Duncan had tried the same.

“I’m the one related to Hawke, and yet I suspect you’ve picked up her habit of adopting strays.” Siobhan teased and Alistair ducked his head, laughing.

That was most certainly a family trait Siobhan and Victoria shared; Sio had made Oghren and Anders and others Wardens after all. He didn’t have that same drive to collect people; but he did understand the impulse a bit better now. The outcasts and castoffs always had a place for each other.

“I think I’d have to get in line behind a good few people first. And I don’t even want to think about trying to fight Alena for that position in Dawn’s life.” Alistair grinned, glad to be reminded that Dawn had a family here now too.

“Excellent, now that I have your mind cleared of all worries you can focus on the important things. Namely me.” Siobhan’s tone turned from serious business to much more enjoyable things.

“Yes Ser!” Alistair actually saluted with a grin that made them both laugh.

Maker he missed his wife.

Stroud was going to Weissaupt to deliver news and maybe find answers as to why the Orlesian Wardens were hung out to dry like they’d been. Howe was still acting as Warden Commander while Siobhan was away, and the other Heroes from the Fifth Blight had positioned themselves to be as useful as needed in response to the new weirdness of the world. So now it was time for Alistair to do his duty and go home.

And he’d keep to himself, for just a while longer, that even though the Nightmare had been felled he still heard the Call.

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There were times Kasaanda loved to break the rules and expectations, and times she luxuriated in belonging to the arms of tradition. What she had done and discovered in the bowels of Skyhold with Kaaras and Dagna had shaken her and so she retreated to the comfort of expectations. Sometimes following the path was less terrifying than forging her own.

This was the one time Kasaanda was glad to be left alone. She ached to see the familiar fighting and action, but all the forced stillness had served its purpose and given her the time to accomplish an overdue task. She had to create the skull used to find a spirit appropriate for her skills. Even if the idea of working with spirits left her skin crawling, Kasaanda knew her own magic well enough
to know that she needed the guidance - learning what lyrium was hadn’t lessened that. Despite all of her effort and self training, her magic only worked if she concentrated on it to the exclusion of anything else and that wasn’t her skillset.

She knew Wrath and Envy well after all.

Kasaanda didn’t scream when the thing in front of her suddenly appeared without warning. It wasn’t even through her iron willed discipline that she didn’t make a noise, but instead Kasaanda had kept quiet because she’d been too stunned to make a sound.

It was the first time she’d ever met a Spirit that felt whole and contained.

“What the jagged end of a broken horn are you?” Kasaanda demanded of the woman who looked vaguely familiar but was very much not a human like she appeared.

“One you are not used to seeing young one, but someone you should get to know.” The pretentious Spirit insisted.

“Begone, I have no time for this.” Kasaanda tried to reject but was staggered to feel her magical dismissal go around the Spirit as if she did not exist.

“I am Wisdom, and the Harbinger of the Inquisition you serve gave me the gift of Unbound.” The Spirit, apparently Wisdom, lifted her hand to touch at a truly ugly piece of jewellery as if it were the most precious thing in the world. “So I looked for one that would also appreciate being Unbound, and through the whispers of the Fade I was led to you. You were going to call a Spirit anyways,” it was absolutely blood chilling to realize that Spirits were watching her in the Fade without her being aware of it.

Kasaanda had spent her entire life being terrified of being possessed, so the irony of being a Necromancer was not lost on her. To master her craft, she had to create a relic; a Nevarran ceremonial skull that would somehow convince an already dead Mortalitasi Spirit to live in it and teach her the last of their secrets. She’d even gone as far as collecting everything she’d need. The Storm Coast had supplied the skulls needed to practice on and eventually craft; only Kaaras knew of the grim and macabre trophies she’d claimed. And when the others had gone to Val Royeaux Sera had brought Kasaanda back a package from Wilven – the texts she’d been missing and that had cost over a half year’s salary to buy.

When Sera had opened the package to see what she was delivering, it had spurred a fight that Kasaanda wasn’t sure had actually ended. Her canary had no love for ‘that Fade shite, muckin’ abou’ wid demons an’tha’like’, but it wasn’t like Kasaanda could just stop being a mage. This was the only way to make herself safe again – things had changed after Kaaras had bonded to Cole and not just in the obvious way. Her brother had made himself a target and had bore the brunt of the Spirits’ attacks. Cole had been the one to save him; not Kasaanda.
She had failed to be the shield she was supposed to be. The role that their mother had assigned long before their magics had appeared. The guilt and doubt it had raised in her still burned like a hot signal fire to the Spirit-laden Dreadnaughts haunting her dreams. Wrath was a safe haven beckoning with deceptive strength, its own shield against Envy who hunted the darker places of her mind. But if Kasaanda completed her training the soul of that dead Mortalitasi would ward off other Spirits. And maybe, just maybe, let Kasaanda keep her individuality. For some reason, looking at the strangely familiar human Wisdom chose to appear as, Kasaanda suspected this was all known to her already.

“So if you’re Wisdom, when did I fall asleep?” Kasaanda demanded, knowing that she was neither Kaaras nor the little Lavellan – she could not see Spirits while awake.

“You’re not asleep, I am really here.” Wisdom lifted her hands for mutual inspection. “I was, and remain, Wisdom.”

“Vashedan.” Kasaanda swore lightly, then threw one of the skulls she’d so carefully collected at Wisdom.

To both of their evident surprise, Wisdom caught it. Wisdom looked awed at the reality of having a physical form, while Kasaanda decided to try pinching herself really hard. “I really am here, and you really are awake.”

“What the fuck?” Kasaanda used Dawn’s phrase and it finally clicked in her head whom Wisdom resembled. She wasn't wearing Dawn’s face, but it could easily be a relative.

“I am Wisdom, and thanks to Dawn’s actions I cannot possess or be possessed.” Wisdom continued and Kasaanda squashed the jealousy that even this Spirit need not fear possession.

“Congratulations, would you like a cookie?” she went defensive in a way Kaaras would have pestered her over.

“Yes please, I’ve always wondered how something made by imperfections can taste just perfect.”

That had not been what Kasaanda expected in response, “Let’s go to the kitchen.” This was her life now; brother possessed by Compassion and Wisdom randomly dropping in on a munchie binge. If this wasn’t a dream Kasaanda had to wonder if ‘her horns were going soft’.

“I see this is going to take some work. And some more detailed explanations.” Wisdom assessed with little aplomb.

“Why me?” Kasaanda demanded of the very air around her, as if the Lady would offer answer.
“Because helping you helps me.”

That pulled her up short; win-win she could wrap her head around. She was a mercenary after all. “I’m not asleep,” Wisdom shook her head negative, “You’re really Wisdom.” This time a nod. “Then why are you here for me?”

Kasaanda had many flaws, but being self deluded wasn’t one of them. She was not a beacon for Wisdom to be drawn in by. Wrath, Envy, Sloth, Lust… those she knew fairly well. Some more, and some less as she grew up and gained experience.

“You suffer from the malady of youth only; given time you will be a Master of your craft. I have simply come to offer you an unusual alternative for your consideration.” Wisdom walked like she knew where she was going and Kasaanda tried not to resent being led around.

“And how does this help you?” it wasn’t a bad question at least.

“I’m apart from things in a way that changes my…perspective. If I want to be true to the essence of what I am, I need to immerse myself to keep learning.” Somehow that made a peculiar type of sense to Kasaanda; in the same way that she could talk the dead into playing mischief for her.

She stayed silent as they entered the kitchens; it was the smaller hours of the morning so not many were awake yet. It gave her some time before people would wonder who the blazes she was talking to, but it also meant no success on their hunt. Day old dinner buns were their only choice so neither one bothered complaining, taking some to chew on in contemplative silence.

It was a new habit Kasaanda was trying to form, actually thinking about things a bit first.

“Why did Dawn help you?” she finally broke their silence.

“I don’t know.” That must have rotted her pride a little bit.

“What’s this offer you want me to consider?” she felt ready to listen.

“We learn together; I help teach you how to Master Necromancy and you help me understand how to exist as a Spirit Manifested in the mortal plane.”

“No possession?” she had mentioned that point repeatedly but still Kasaanda needed reassurance.

“On either side.” Wisdom confirmed again.

“Can I think about it, or is this a one time offer?” sarcasm dripped off her question in a suspicious
“I plan on staying in Tarsyl’an Te’las for a while longer at the very least. Changes are afoot that I need to Understand.” Wisdom looked out at the gray morning cresting over the Frostbacks.

“Sera is not going to like any part of this.” It slipped out without much forethought.

“I am Wisdom, I claim no knowledge on Love.” Was that a fucking joke?

Kasaanda felt her eyes narrow, “Let me think.” She didn’t thank Wisdom before she left to go back to her tent.

For the first time in a very long time, the sound of her twin’s snores did nothing to offer comfort or familiarity. Kasaanda wanted security against possession, but was the deal being offered by Wisdom really any different?

She was a Necromancer that was afraid of the very power she wielded, it was a sick joke that Kasaanda felt like everyone but her was laughing at. So much for the comfort of the familiar.

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News reached Skyhold quickly once Adamant fell and the Wardens were saved. So many ravens had filled the air that Cedric almost missed noticing the one that was only sometimes a bird. However, ravens do not have violet eyes and reek of magic. Lavellan did not boast any shapeshifters, and had not in Cedric’s lifetime, but he knew what he had spotted and knew too that the shapeshifting mage was searching for him specifically because it dove towards him immediately. A most curious development in an otherwise staggeringly boring series of weeks.

He wasn’t surprised that it was the Witch of the Court feathering about; she seemed to take pleasure in thwarting the expectations of those around her, and yet still somehow remaining compliant to their regulations. The fact that she was sent to be the Court’s Liaison with the Inquisition did not mean she couldn’t also be looking out for her own best interests.

“Hello Witch.” He acknowledged carefully when the dark haired woman stalked towards him purposefully. The Dalish Clans she had encountered in the past had warned to remain wary, that the Witch was an ally but only so far as it would suit her needs. She would pillage their knowledge and history and leave without recompense or care. Of course, to counter balance that reputation was the simple fact that her son was here as well; he did not anticipate her being willing to risk her child.

Cedric wondered how staggered she would be by his son’s library and Hahren. And then he wondered if that might be why she was seeking him out now.
“First of Lavellan,” her accent was Korcarian and so out dated he blinked without anything clever to say. “Tis perhaps a bit late to be making introductions, but ‘twould be most beneficial to us both to garner familiarity with the other.”

It took a moment for his brain to translate the Witch’s words from fancy to common, and then common to Elvish but once he did he actually understood her intent. He also already understood her motivation; their sons were spending a fair frequent amount of time together.

“Please Witch, call me Cedric.” He offered with a respectful nod of his head. He might have a powerful Force Cage but this was one of the Heroes of the Fifth Blight; he had heard the stories of how she had stood with the Wardens in the face of an Arch Demon and that was a decade ago - there was no telling what secrets she had have mastered since.

“Then I may be addressed as Morrigan as well.” She returned the favour as expected.

Cedric was trying to decide how to approach a woman like this; her reputation from various sources warned that she was particular type of person and more than willing to take measures for her own success. “Our sons have become constant companions; I suspect this is why you’ve come to find me?”

“Tis.” She confirmed without a smile. “Kieran is a…precocious child. His friendship to your son is not one I object to.”

Even if she had, Cedric was very certain that wouldn’t have stopped either Doshiel or Kieran from remaining friends. His son inherited a stubborn streak wider than Frostbacks. “They are boys; it is good for them to feel like they have a place to themselves where no parents tread.” He obliquely agreed, finding her flowery way of speaking oddly distasteful but useful.

“It is to this end that I have sought you out,” Morrigan worked them towards the point of this little visit and Cedric was amused that for all her ‘wild ways’, this Witch was very much trying to play the Orlesian Game on him.

“It is, how interesting?” Cedric encouraged and hid his smile. He’d seen this kind of arrogance in the young and Powerful before, had shown that arrogance himself no doubt when he was her age.

“Your son has the Gift of touching Spirits,” like most shemlen Morrigan did not understand the vast expanse of what being an Elgar'ladarelan entailed but now was not the time to educate her, “as such I felt it would be prudent to warn you that there is an active Eluvian being held securely here at Skyhold.”

Cedric’s gut dropped, the only outward reaction was the flaring of his nostrils as his body thrummed into alert. Eluvians were once as common as mushrooms after the rain, but no more. They’d been the bridge connecting the far corners of the Elvhen world together but had been lost as had so much else once the Chantry waged war against them. He’d encountered burned out relics,
and one bloodstained mirror that had been shattered into thousands of pieces, but never an active one.

Did this Witch truly have one under her control? Or was she assuming she had control of it? Would it be a risk to the general populace of Skyhold – was it a risk to Dosh? All of these questions and many more swarmed his mind like angry bees and Cedric breathed carefully through the surge of panic, letting none of it show. She claimed it was safe; he would be the judge of that once this conversation concluded.

“I thank you for the information Morrigan, am I to assume that like yourself it’s a transplant from Orlais?” that could make sense; Orlais was built on the corpses of his People’s History.

“Whence the Eluvian came is of no concern,” she refused to answer but he let it be, “that it is here is more than enough to know. My son knows to treat such a relic with the respect it deserves, t’would be no insult for me to assume the same of yours.”

“Even if I was insulted you’d say it, I am too old and experienced to expect a Player like you to waste empty apologies on me.” Cedric smiled as he said it but looked away from her face.

He had no doubt at all that Doshiel had already sought out this Eluvian. If Kieran knew of it then Doshiel must know and if nothing else Doshiel was Curious. A part of him wondered how something that Ancient must look to his son’s special Sight, a part of him worried greatly that Curiosity went hand in hand with Foolish Decisions.

“You do realize that all of our careful parenting will not stop either one from seeking it out if they believe they’ll ‘be careful enough’?” he dropped the extravagant language and spoke honestly.

The Witch took herself too seriously to sigh at his statement but he could feel the weariness it stirred in her. “I am all too aware of the youthful exuberance for defying one’s parental decrees.” She spoke with the awareness of experience.

“Forbidding such a thing to them will only provoke them further,” he found himself warning regardless of necessity.

“Tis the very reasoning I use in my approach with my son.” Morrigan agreed the unspoken admonition that it was up to him to keep any foolishness from happening to her Eluvian in her tone.

“So I am going to go ahead and assume they’ve already investigated the damn thing.” He purposefully needled the Witch, wanting to see how she’d react to such a flagrant disrespect to her command.

She stared at him, unblinking as an owl, and Cedric wondered if it was a habit picked up from her time as a fowl creature. “Though I detest admitting as such, you are possibly correct.”
Cedric managed not to snort in derision but it was only due to his discipline as a First. He’d make use of the lower library that Doshiel was building so he could research Eluvians as much as possible before confronting his son on the matter. Now was not the time, and Morrigan was certainly NOT the person to admit it to, but Cedric was enjoying the opportunity to learn his People’s History at the same time as his son. This Witch seemed like the type that would never admit to enjoying ignorance, she tried so hard to project an aura of self-reliant competence.

Morrigan looked like she was going to just walk away without another word but the Witch surprised him by staying, “As the children will do as they deem they are ready for ‘tis perhaps a necessity to inform you; Briala in Orlais has reactivated one as well but no longer controls it nor the others it once connected to.”

That was less comforting than some would assume; like Morrigan Briala had a reputation amongst the Dalish. She was essentially a shemlen; her pointed ears meant nothing to her and thus nothing to them all. But she was also not a mage and thus not the one that had actually activated the Eluvian. “Are you concerned that your Eluvian will meet the same fate?” he asked knowing the question itself would bother her.

“Twould be quite impossible,” Morrigan actually ever so slightly smiled but it wasn’t a happy look, “she was betrayed by those she trusted and I do not make that mistake.”

Of course she’d believe that – it was the inherent hazard of being young and powerful. “Briala had an active, connected Eluvian network?” his mind jumped to one of the passages from a book explaining the mechanisms of Arlathan and how little the Elvhen of the time actually understood of their own transportation web. Not that the contemporary Dalish had any better understanding. It was utterly unlikely that a non-mage with no formal training on the matter had been the one to truly activate or connect the Eluvian, so Cedric had to wonder whom had actually done it – and how. “To connect the Eluvians she would have had to attune them together with a link phrase. Would you happen to know what that phrase was?” he didn’t bother confirming that Morrigan had assured her own Eluvian could not be linked by that phrase, she would not leave a vulnerability that great and implying that she would was likely the start to an argument.

Now Morrigan definitely looked amused, not so much by smiling but the satisfied gleam in her eye proclaimed she was enjoying knowing something he didn’t. “Fen’Harel enansal; it seems that Briala cares neither for her own People nor the gods they once feared.”

“It’s easy to be brave when you still think he isn’t real.” Cedric scoffed, going quiet when he felt something inside his mind try to force his concentration away from the topic.

“I have seen no evidence that any god of any people actually exists.” She insisted but Cedric was all but ignoring her now.

Although he had bled and trained to be the First of his Clan, preparing to take over as Keeper, until very recently Cedric had been as disbelieving about the gods as the Witch of the Court was. And
for the life of him he could not recall why it was he now believed. The more he tried to remember, the sharper the pain in his head became.

“Excuse me.” Cedric rudely turned and hurried away from the Witch, refusing to let go of the nebulous trail now that he had it again. Previously any time he tried to think on the matter he was distracted from it - and this pain was agony but the only solid proof he had that something had happened even if he wasn’t able to recall.

He had to follow the pain even as his mind tried to shy away from the sensation, seeking to protect itself. It had to be a ward of some kind, nothing else could explain the missing memory as well as the driving pain and distractions all tempting him away from focusing on it. Whomever had ensnared his memory was Powerful and very subtle in their machinations; he couldn’t even remember when he’d lost a memory – a skill he knew that somniari sometimes mastered but he hadn’t been aware of facing off against any such mages.

Chasing the edges of a ward this complex was almost beyond Cedric’s ability, he understood the theory well enough but had had so few instances to practice it that now he had one of such complexity to face he didn’t know where to start. So he used the same approach he had used to work through the wards guarding Doshiel’s library- he approached each layer of the warding with deliberation. The ward to redirect his focus fell apart as he kept pushing past the pain to seek answers, and the agony scalded his brain but damaged nothing as it finally broke apart.

Months ago.

He had woken up in a room with the wards burned out and his memory a painful gap, and he had forgotten about it entirely. Cedric pushed against the next layer of wards holding his memory hostage even as blood dripped down his nose. He was not skilled in this but he would persevere regardless – some part of him knowing that whomever had done this hadn’t wanted to hurt him or else he’d simply be dead. Or brain dead- a mage skilled enough for this could have easily wiped his entire mind clear.

There was a high-pitched ringing in his ears, the sound of his heartbeat a distant thunder nearly drowned out by the sound. He’d walked to a quiet corner of the Keep, where repairs to the wall had only recently been completed so his sole company was a sentry and the birds – and let his mind ignore the body that supported it so he could break into his own memories.

Why had he set wards to wander the Fade?

Why had he woken up knowing his memory was missing but then done nothing to retrieve it?

Cedric pulled in his power, weaving it tightly together into a single, concentrated strike. He could use neither Mind Blast nor Force Cage as he had on the external wards, so instead Cedric tried to use a method he had learned from the Avvars; Power without form. He took the mana the flowed in his very veins and instead of building it into the spell he required or the action he wished, he let it collect together – churning and turning like the waters of a rapid. He could feel the strain of holding it, the added stress of not forming it, and ignored it all to focus on the blank in his mind.
And just as he was prepared to release the power in an incredible rush, Cedric heard a snarl from the Fade and the ward evaporated. The Power he had just been about to release shattered like fragile glass and Cedric dropped to his knees with the weakness it left behind.

Even that was a distant annoyance compared to the memory he now had back, and the sudden dreadful realization that Cedric had caught the attention of the Wolf.

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A Ship’s Captain had no place in the desert, and Isabela had been so dry amongst the sand that she’d wondered if all of it would ever wash off. There had been grit in her teeth, and every breath of air tasted dull. She had missed the tang of salt and a breeze that would actually cool things off instead of just move sand against skin in a painful scrub, and returning to her ship felt like waking from a bad dream. Home was the rocking of the waves against the prow and the sound of her people screaming obscenities, and the sight of Hawke leading the way.

The only thing Isabela had found dissatisfying about her returning was that her ship was a little too full of people.

The Inquisition was heading towards home and she was carrying their most important members. Isabela liked to believe that she was a worldly, experienced woman. She had survived a childhood in Rivain, being sold to her first husband and his inevitable death, and being a Raider – she knew how to roll with the waves. From dreary Kirkwall, beyond sand blasted Wastes and salt saturated Seas, Isabela had tasted life and all its glorious agonies. She had still never seen such a truly strange group as what made up the heart of the Inquisition – even though they were the same people she had shipped to Adamant something had fundamentally changed in several of them.

So Isabela watched.

Their Harbinger remained quiet, but at least she kept her ass out of the rigging this time. Merrill pestered their Elf mage about something in their language, and Sebastian stuck with the Inquisitor while Fenris had gotten chummy with their Qunari.

Just under the surface Isabela could feel some kind of unresolved tension radiating through most of them. One of the mountains islands of Rivain had been like that - constantly rumbling warning that the islanders felt more than heard; until the moment it exploded in fire and ash. It had been devastatingly compelling to see for those far enough away to survive; a blast that reduced the mountain’s height by half while vomiting liquid fire. And she had a crew of them on her ship.

Hawke had tried to explain some of the cause; they’d gone walking through the Fade again but this time so much worse than the last. Apparently, they’d won; and even better, they’d survived. But the Inquisition didn’t seem to know how to stop and recover because they were hauling keel back to the Frostbacks so they could then rush back to the Arbor Wilds.

If she didn’t already have a fat purse of coin for all this effort, she might have complained about it to someone.
Varric leaned against the rail next to her on their second day back to Sea, his face had lost some of his tightness but the new gray at his temples belied by the calm. “I thought you’d be pestering me with questions by now.” He’d pried.

“Sometimes you cannot look at a blessing too closely my friend.” She had honestly replied and he’d let it be. Another change.

The weather held fair and yet Isabela couldn’t help but feel as if the world were drawing in its breath, readying a scream; the quiet before the storm. She spoke of it to no one, hoping that if left unsaid it could then be left unlived; wondering if maybe it was a belated sense of guilt or morality come to battered life at a poor time. Fenris watched her watching the ship and still she waited to see what this looming catastrophe would be.

They landed in Orlais without issue.

While on board, Merrill had been in constant consultation with the mage Solas to the point where Isabela should have teased about a lover’s interest – except that it was clearly no pleasurable matter for either of them. Now that they were riding towards Skyhold the two of them rode a pair of Harts that should have made them look like a matched set – and yet they didn’t. She could not perceive the apostate with her Dalish friend; he seemed like an entirely different type of Elf. It was a gentle, bemusing thought and left her utterly unprepared for what came next.

A Rogue’s bomb exploded, the smoke a choking, churning mess obscuring sight. Isabela could barely see the flash of blue lyrium in Fenris’ skin through the black air but she could hear mounts squealing even as Warriors barked orders. She melted into Stealth when Qunari wearing their bloodied red square charged through in a precise, silent ambush to assassinate the Inquisitor. A magical shield went over Alena but fluctuated in and out of visibility as a wave of something passed Isabela; it felt like a Smite but at the same time very different than the ones Isabela knew had been used against her friends in the past. She was a Rogue, not a mage, but a Smite was something even she could tell when used.

The Warriors were glorious, shielding the Inquisitor from every attack the Qunari could think of to try, even with the magical shield holding despite the Smite. The Rogues danced around, ensuring that no surprise attack could be successful and a ring of the dead littered the ground marking their strike zones. And thanks to the incident in Val Royeaux, the mages were ready to bounce back from this far faster than they had any right to. The smoke cleared. Hawke was with Varric, a bloodied lip and standing too close together. Fenris had stood guard over Merrill while she recovered but Isabela saw him step back and away before her Dalish friend could realize her protector. Sebastian stood with the furious looking Inquisitor.

Over a dozen dead Qunari, their Karasaad and Aquamaad expended like so much excess meat to lose. Because the ambush had failed even as it succeeded; the Inquisitor stood untouched and unbleddied. But her voice promised murder, “Where is my Harbinger?”
Their Isskari hadn’t failed – they’d taken Dawn.

Chapter End Notes

Translation
Qunlat
Vashedan- shit
Karasaad – mid-rank infantry soldier
Aquamaad- mid-rank rogue operative (I created the word - lit. glove, light forearm guard + aad to create a ‘person’)
Isskari - a title/rank in the Ben-Hassrath, duties include the retrieval of magical artefacts

Elvhen
Elgar'ladarelan – one who heals spirits
Fen’Harel enansal – The Dread Wolf’s Blessing
Dawn wakes up to an unpleasant reality while the Inquisition scrambles to recover its Harbinger.
All is not well, will not be well, and yet hope is not lost.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: this chapter is going to have canon-normal levels of violence described. I WILL be marking the disturbing passages with *SKIP HERE*. Please feel free to skip past those sections if descriptions of violence (physical and mental) will cause you distress. There will be NO non-con.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something was wrong; Dawn knew that even before she was fully conscience. Her head hurt - a sharp pain and a strange befuddlement that she didn’t like at all. Her tongue felt thick and sticky, as if syrup had been poured down her throat; adding support to her belief that someone had been manhandling her was the growing awareness that she couldn’t separate her wrists.

Her hands were bound together.

Dawn kept her body relaxed, the rocking motion and how her hips ached telling her that she was on horseback and had been for some time.

Stay calm and access. Victoria Hawke’s voice whispered in her head, not truly there but the memory of her friend was helping Dawn try to figure out what had happened to her.

She kept her eyes closed, trying to listen past the ache in her skull and the fog still leaving her dizzy. Horse steps, the beast she was on and at least two others because there were echoes of clip-clop ahead and behind her. There could be more; she’d have to open her eyes to confirm.

Test your bonds. This time it was Leliana’s voice guiding her, the Nightingale an expert escape artist.

Dawn didn’t want whoever had grabbed her to know she was awake yet though, so she had no clue how to see just how tied she was. But thinking of Leliana’s voice had reminded Dawn of what the Redcliffe Future Leliana had been capable of – and she tried to think ‘what would Leliana do?’

This was going to suck if she wasn’t actually tied on; Dawn carefully leaned to the side and let gravity do the rest.

Roll. Iron Bull’s reminder this time as Dawn heard someone swear in Qunlat, her body hitting the dirt a second later and she was already turning the momentum into a roll.
Dawn was on her feet and running, awkward with her hands still tied together and with her legs so stiff. Every step was a struggle, the befuddlement in her head keeping her dizzy and Dawn suspected that they’d drugged her. Still she ran - more glad than ever that she’d started the habit at Skyhold with all those stairs. Around her Dawn saw the high grass and endless seeming hills of the Frostbacks whipping past, offering the illusion of concealment without providing any actual cover. Behind her and rapidly approaching was the inescapable sound of hooves thundering in pursuit.

‘COLE!’ Dawn screamed as loudly in her head as she could, knowing already that this escape attempt was going to fail.

As the hooves got close enough that Dawn could feel them she turned suddenly to face her captors. A Qunari heavily armed but nearly naked on his horse was closest, a second Sten further behind because his horse had been hobbled to hers. And calmly behind them all watched a Tamassran Dawn recognized from the comics; Rasaan.

This was very bad.

Her head swam with whatever it was they’d doused her with and Dawn had to lock her knees, lungs heaving for air as they slowed their horses to encircle her.

“The struggle is an illusion, little bas. Save yourself pain and submit.” Rasaan called out in Common and Dawn swallowed.

“It’s not in my nature to make being kidnapped easy on those doing it.” Dawn blurted out in English; the drug they’d given her compelled honesty but like she’d mentioned to Victoria a lifetime ago, no drug could compel her to speak Common.

A flicker of something in Rasaan’s eyes- probably annoyance – flashed before she casually replied, “I have to say, I am impressed at how well you’re functioning with the serum in your system. Most bas can’t function around the euphoria.” Rasaan rode closer while the Sten dismounted, approaching Dawn carefully.

“Basshok.” The order was barked out and the two mammoth Sten moved to grab her.

Dawn danced back from the one wearing weapons, and the scraps of what was probably pants, all too aware that the other Sten was still moving to intercept her. And her body felt so heavy and slow.

**Fight.** Fenris’ hiss of anger had her spinning to slam her bond hands into the naked Sten’s collar bone with a loud yell.

If he’d been human Dawn would probably have broken it easy with her attack. As a heavily muscled and well trained Sten of the Antaam, Dawn got a grunt of pain out of him and broke her pinky for the attempt. They’d taken her armour and weapons away and bare fists simply weren’t cutting it. Even as she failed, the Sten grabbed her bound wrists and Dawn brought her knee up – driving it into his unprotected crotch.

Naked Sten went down with a gasp but stars exploded across her vision and Dawn’s body was no longer under her control as something heavy slammed into her head.

The next time Dawn woke up, the pain in her head made sense. Like the first time she woke in captivity, she felt the sway of a horse under her, and the discomfort of bound wrists. However, this time there was the added abrasion of ropes around her waist, hips, and thighs; all obviously binding her to the horse’s back. Her skin felt tight and dry, her mouth once again filled with sticky
aftertaste from another serum. Either Rasaan had given her a lot more of it, or that blow to the head had done damage because Dawn struggled to even open her eyes this time.

**Breathe and think.** Solas’ encouraging whisper brought little comfort but helped settle her panic.

Something had woken her, her broken focus slowly putting the pieces together. The horses were stopped, low grunts and rustling likely the Sten dismounting and unloading their tack. She didn’t even think about it, Dawn drove her heels into the horse’ side and hollered to startle the others’ as well. Her beast leapt forwards, and like she’d guessed it was still hobbled to the now equally alarmed horse of the Sten guarding her. The reigns tore out of his hands as he yelled and then she was passed him; galloping off.

While tied to a horse and drugged into near insensibility.

It was a terrible idea, but that didn’t matter. Only escape mattered; the panicked part of Dawn’s brain had taken control. Right now her only advantage was that a spooked horse will run, and at least these beasts had the brains to not just immediately plunge off a cliff.

And for one hot second she thought she might just succeed.

The horse she was on thundered close on the back of the lead horse and Dawn saw something land on the ground in front of them, too close to avoid. A plume of smoke erupted from the grenade and the cloud choked them all. The horses scrambled; Dawn felt the one under her stagger, suddenly weak. She coughed - eyes tearing from the purple smoke and utterly unable to hold upright as both horses collapsed.

They were at a camp the third time she awoke.

She was stripped to just her shirt and leggings, even her boots and tunic taken this time. Dawn also found herself chained to a peg that had been hammered into the dirt. The fire crackled, not needed for warmth but by the smell used for cooking; the succulent odor left her empty stomach cramping.

“Ebasit-ast.” A Sten rumbled out and Dawn acted ignorant of Qunlat, looking at her bound wrist and the broken fingers she didn’t remember hurting.

The hand was puffy and hot, looking somewhat mangled but not a bruised as she expected. All tough action heroes just pulled them straight to set them, then continued like it had never happened. Dawn fought not to show how much it hurt to try to pull the cuff over her hand - failing at both.

“Ebasit venak hol.” The other Sten spat and Dawn felt someone nudge her sharply with their foot. “Quit that.” He growled down at her in accented Common.

Her head wasn’t as fuddled this time, less drugged or at least less sedated. Across the fire Rasaan watched with a satisfied smile on her face. Apparently Dawn was failing to hide how terrified she really was. This was the Tamassrann that’d broken Isabella; she knew what kind of horrors were coming.

“What do you want?” Dawn made a point to ask in Common, having to carefully think around the serum they’d given her.

“You know the secret of gaatlok and apparently the events of the future, Harbinger. What do you think I want from you?” Rasaan demanded casually and Dawn fell quiet.

Dawn had known it was a risk giving Dagna the mix for black powder but it had felt like her only
option at the time. Now on the other side of Adamant, Dawn knew that she hadn’t needed the grenades at all but the awareness that she could make gaatlok had gotten out regardless of how successful her attempts had been. The end result was that the Qun wanted everything else she knew that they could possibly use and they would never believe that gaatlok was it.

And they’d be right; Dawn hadn’t really thought of the technology and science from home lately but she’d absorbed a lot of information without really being aware of it. And eventually she had to assume she’d break and give it all to them.

They ate in silence; neither food nor water offered to Dawn, a deliberate move to keep her weak and complacent. So Dawn ignored their feasting as much as possible to try and figure out where she was.

There were no obvious trails, so other than knowing that they were out of the foothills of the Frostbacks and somewhere where trees could grow Dawn had no other clues. She tried to remember the layout of the Thedas map, wishing she knew the topography better than ‘desert’s on the west side’. Lacking geography skills when you have Google is forgivable; here it could be fatal – Dawn had NO idea where she was.

Or where her friends were.

The last time Dawn had a clear memory before being kidnapped, they’d been on their way back to Skyhold. The bulk of the Army was going to wait near the Arbor Wilds but the main Companions were going home to get a plan together. Dawn remembered passing along the Imperial Highway, but that was it. However Rasaan had gotten her hands on her, Dawn had no clue how or what state the Tamassran interrogator had left her friends in.

“You look alert enough for us to begin.” Rasaan broke into her focus, standing finally. In her hand were a small knife and a whip.

“No thanks, I’d rather not.” Dawn babbled out, all pretence at calm flying out the window; she grabbed the length of chain that stretched from the cuff around her wrist to the peg in the ground, frantically trying to break free.

“Shok ebasit hissra. Meraad astaarit, meraad itwasit, aban aqun. Maaras shokra. Anaan esaam Qun.” Rasaan intoned out at her and Dawn ignored her, making her wrist bleed with how hard she struggled against the chain.

The two Sten helping Rasaan grabbed her despite Dawn’s attempts to struggle free. No blows landed hard enough to incapacitate her this time, so there was no escaping what was coming. Dawn was roughly flipped over onto her stomach, a Sten on each side to hold her in place.

She tried to squirm free. She tried to wrench her wrists away, or buck their grip off. Nothing worked. Rasaan cut the back of Dawn’s shirt almost all the way so it flapped open and left her back and shoulders bare.

Rasaan petted the skin exposed and Dawn flinched, unable to stop the tears from welling in her eyes. “Shok ebasit hissra. Meraad astaarit, meraad itwasit, aban aqun. Maaras shokra. Anaan esaam Qun.”

Dawn felt Rasaan carefully spread the fabric so it wouldn’t mar her lashings, Dawn’s legs and arms were held so her struggles proved useless, and the dirt under her greedily drank the tears dripping
off of her face. “Nonononononono……” she hyperventilated into the dirt, no helpful words of wisdom from her memories to get her through this.

The whip cracked - the sound only half as terrible as the pain flaring across her back and Dawn screamed.

This time Rasaan spoke in Common, “Struggle is an illusion. The tide rises, the tide falls, but the sea is changeless. There is nothing to struggle against. Victory is in the Qun.” She struck again and again, endlessly chanting the same thing over and over while Dawn screamed and thrashed.

*SAFE HERE*

An eternity later and Dawn’s body hit its limit; she dropped into unconsciousness with Rasaan’s words chasing her down.

Pain and hunger woke her repeatedly but whatever they kept drugging her with kept folding her back under, enough so that Dawn couldn’t tell how long she’d been a prisoner for. Her back was hot agony; the skin split and scabbed in some places or raw and tender in others. The wind flapped the cut pieces of her shirt in teasing slaps and the ropes tying her to the horse exacerbated her back immensely, leaving Dawn too drugged or too paralysed by pain to try and escape.

Her compliance was rewarded immediately when they made camp; a bowl of food and a cup of water finally offered to her. A very not subtle bit of behavioural conditioning that Dawn was aware of and unable to fight against; she cleared both bowl and cup eagerly, ashamed but too drained to stop. **Food is energy; energy gives you the chance to act later.** This time it was Kaaras’ voice guiding her, the comment from back when he’d had to force her to eat and she barely understood him at all.

The Sten spoke only to each other or Rasaan, sticking to Qunlat but Dawn was on the edge of shock still and couldn’t focus enough to listen in. Instead she huddled carefully into herself, instincts hoping that by being a smaller target she’d be overlooked today.

Rasaan watched her from across the fire, that same satisfied smile as she ate or discussed with her guards. And when she stood up again, Dawn’s instincts fired.

“NO!” the screech tore loose as Dawn scrambled backwards, careless of the pain in her back in her need to get away.

Once again the cuff and chain anchored her like an animal to the peg in the ground.


“No!” Dawn screamed again, her arm cramping from how hard she pulled it against the chain.

**SKIP HERE**

The Sten came to grab her again and Dawn fought with a viciousness she hadn’t suspected she was capable of before. She caught the one Sten by surprised, Naked Sten again, and tore her fingernails from his eyelid down to his lip, actually drawing blood even as it tore her fingernails.

They still managed to toss her to the ground, grass today, and press Dawn down to leave her back exposed.

Rasaan repeated herself in Common, once again gently peeling Dawn’s shirt open and petting her
already abused back. “Please don’t.” Dawn begged, unable to stop crying as Rasaan ignored her. “Please please please…”

They weren’t asking her any questions. They weren’t telling her what she could do to stop this. Dawn was utterly helpless as Rasaan once again started her speech, “Shok ebasit hissra. Meraad astaarit, meraad itwasit, aban aqun. Maraas shokra. Anaan esaam Qun.” She struck in the pauses, pain adding terrible emphasis.

Dawn didn’t black out this time.

She screamed herself hoarse, cried until her body couldn’t produce tears, and Rasaan paced her blows more cautiously so that Dawn rode the pain all the way but never escaped.

**SAFE HERE**

When Rasaan stopped, Dawn couldn’t move. The Sten left her there, no need to hold her in place because her body simply would not stop shaking. They said nothing to her as they returned to the fire, tending to the injury she’d caused the Naked one. Rasaan stayed with her though, running her hand across Dawn’s spine like she was a pet.

“Your defiance is expected,” Rasaan finally said something new, “and ultimately futile. You will tell me everything I want to know.”

Despite her shaking, Dawn slowly managed to pull her arms in, trying to crawl away from the horrid woman but her body wouldn’t do it. A distant part of her head screamed at her to get up, fight, but she shook and shook while Rasaan stroked her bleeding skin.

“And once you have given me everything, you will willingly give yourself to us too. The Qun can use even such strange skills as yours.” The Tamassran promised before lifting her small knife into view. “But first you need to know that there is nothing special about you as an individual; your worth is only in what value you bring to the Qun. Pride has no place within us, and you are far too full of it. So let us remove your pride and rid us of its burden.”

Rasaan grabbed Dawn’s hair, pulling her up painfully by it until Dawn’s neck and back were arched tightly backwards. And then she cut it in one harsh stroke, letting Dawn drop to the ground before Rasaan walked to throw the braid into the fire. And then she sat down, ignoring Dawn entirely.

For the first time in an unknown number of days Dawn wasn’t forced unconscious. She lay, unable to move and too hurt to sleep until exhaustion finally took over her survival needs.

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And everything had been going so well.

They’d left the ruins and desolation of Adamant fortress behind, slowly crawling their way out of the oppressive heat of the desert wastelands to the Sea. Victoria had finally claimed the author of her Tale as Hers and life looked like it could actually turn good on her.

So of course things had to go terribly, horribly wrong.

It was no one’s fault.
It wasn’t HER fault.

It took all of her friends literally knocking her down and holding her in place before she’d hear that though.

“You can’t go chasing off after them!” Sebastien cried.

“We don’t know where they’re taking her; we have to gather information first.” Varric pleaded.

“We can use the Inquisition’s resources to find her!” Fenris reminded.

Isabella knelt down next to her and crouched over to whisper, “I suspect I have been the victim of the one that has her now. We will find her. We will bring her back, and we will help her put herself back together. But we can’t do that if you don’t LEAD US.”

It was enough for Victoria to grab onto, her last shred of sanity badly abused.

Then she made Varric and Isabella tell her what the bloody fuck had happened. Sten that was now Arishok. Rasaan and her weeks of torture. Isabella confessing that the Qun had BROKEN her.

And now they had Dawn.

Sweet, passionate, hope-filled Dawn. And they were going to strip her of everything that made her wonderful. Hawke couldn’t let that happen. Wouldn’t let that happen. Her friends were right; they needed her to focus so that she could rain the wrath of Kirkwall down on the Qun at least ONE. MORE. TIME.

Victoria Hawke pushed open the doors to the Inquisitor’s War Room and was unsurprised to see the haggard, drawn faces of all those that had failed to protect Dawn look at her as if they’d been waiting for her.

“So who do I need to kill now?” Victoria demanded, using her reputation, all of her acting skills and the best control of her life to appear as if she was confident she was going to get Dawn back without a struggle.

The ex-Qunari looked the least affected but she suspected was the hardest hit by this. Iron Bull was calm faced and stony eyed and Victoria knew he had probably punched a hole in a wall somewhere already. Just not in front of anyone.

Unlike her rather public freak out.

Cadash looked like she’d very gladly go wading back through the Fade if it would bring her Harbinger home safe. Adding to the sense that the Inquisitor was utterly unsettled was murderous gleam in her eyes still there since the attack that had let the Qun steal Dawn.

They had killed every warrior, mage, and rogue the Qun had left to slow the pursuit of the Harbinger and it hadn’t been enough.

Leliana was normally utterly unruffled but now the Nightingale looked dangerous; her agents had failed to warn of the attack coming. Her experience had failed to thwart their ambush so close to Skyhold itself. Her blades had worked to stop them from hurting the Inquisitor but failed to stop them taking the Harbinger.

But it was quiet, soft, scholarly Solas that left Victoria worried. He looked…delighted. Not that Dawn was gone, but that he finally had a real, legitimate enemy to vent his spleen on. Carver used
to carry that same look into battle against the Darkspawn many many years ago, when Victoria still believed she could be a hero - a soldier.

He looked ready to rip the world apart and dance in the ashes.

Victoria might even hold his coat for him if it brought Dawn back safe.

“Whomever we have to Champion.” Alena Cadash finally answered her question and Victoria knew that whatever the Qun had thought they were going to get out of this, Calamity wasn’t it.

But that was what they were going to get.

--

Every bone in her body and fibre of her being was demanding that she find a way to go rescue the young woman that had been taken, and yet Alena knew she couldn’t do just that. She wasn’t just the Carta assassin anymore, wasn’t just the anonymous Cadash killer that could slip away. She was now the Inquisitor, and she had to lead her people through this issue and prepare them to be ready for the next.

Because even if Dawn wasn’t with them now, her warning was; the Arbour Wilds was going to be a pitched battle that even if they won wouldn’t end well.

Corypheus and his Lyrium Dragon. Sentinels and the Temple of Mythal. The Well of Sorrow and the Eluvian, and the potential for it all to go wrong.

She had to lead them to that, through that, and out the other side. Because unlike Adamant, Dawn had clearly stated how necessary it was to stop Corypheus from getting his hands on the Well or the Eluvian.

Cullen, Alena, and Leliana had agreed to slowly peel the bulk of their army away to leave it hidden in chunks throughout the Arbour Wilds as they returned through them. Unless observing spies had a very accurate head count that they could compare against immediately, no one would really notice the slowly diminishing army. Cullen would once again stay with the army while Leliana returned with Alena to Skyhold.

It would leave them underpowered compared to the numbers that had marched towards Adamant but no one had anticipated that being a problem. Orlais was friendly. The Dales were friendly. Even ravaged and hopeless Sahrnia was friendly.

They had made it to within a day of Skyhold when those watching for their opportunity found it - only the small group that had come ahead by ship were there. No soldiers were still with them; the Army left behind to prepare for Corypheus, and the Guards left at the ever growing tent city in the foothills for those that did not or would not make the trip into Skyhold proper.

It had been a multipurpose ambush- they really had tried to kill Alena and she knew how close they had gotten and failed. But they’d successfully taken Dawn, sacrificing all but two of their Sten and the Tamassran to do it. Alena had to trust to others to find her and bring her back; she had to stay at the Keep, and plot and plan. And lead. Alena was supposed to ready the Inquisition to tear through Corypheus’ forces and manage the fallout of Dawn’s abduction.

The Kirkwall crew was literally chomping at the bit to be unleashed after her, and there was a parcel of Grey Wardens that had also volunteered to retrieve the missing Harbinger. Alena wasn’t certain the world would recover if she actually did send either team. The Valo-Kas was her best bet though she had wanted to use them in the Arbor Wilds; the Tal Vashoth team both intimately aware
of what the Qun could do AND how/where they would prefer to do it.

Alena was not the only one to think the Tal Vashoth had the best chance.

Shokrakar didn’t so much ask Alena’s permission to retrieve Dawn as she did walk in and put her baby in Alena’s arms with the comment, “You take care of my child and I will return with yours.”

“Take Hawke, she wants in on this.” Alena warned, not wanting the Champion’s ire aimed in her direction, she had enough to deal with as it was.

“We don’t need another Kirkwall.” Was the rejection and Alena sighed.

So now Alena had to guide the Inquisition, heal from her new memories, gather intelligence, figure out how to make a teething, fussy Tal Vashoth baby eat his mushy peas, and then explain to the Champion that she wasn’t allowed to go after the Qun just yet.

This was not the life she was expecting after defeating Adamant.

If there was a god she might even consider praying to it if Dawn came back alive and safe. Alena knew better to hope for unhurt; the Qun was infamous for how it treated bas and foreigners.

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The brain washing started shortly after Rasaan hacked her hair off.

“Say it with me Bas,” Rasaan crooned during her daily ministrations to Dawn’s back, “say it and if I believe it I’ll stop.”

It was a tantalizing promise; Dawn was so tired of pain. The drugs they kept giving her made concentration hard but managed to never be enough to let her escape the whipping. Her back felt flayed.

Dawn wasn’t certain if her silence after that first offer surprised Rasaan or not because the Qunari didn’t hesitate to continue. But now the idea of it being within her power to escape the pain festered in Dawn’s mind.

They washed her back, a stinging, stinking treatment that kept infection at bay and encouraged quick healing- a mockery of care. It allowed them more time to break her will and Dawn knew that eventually it could happen. She would try her best to hold out but the pain was becoming all she could think about, washing away even the voices from her friends.

And then they woke her, hours past sunset and with no moons to brighten the sky. She was roughly flipped, no words spoken in the blinding dark, and she was held while Rasaan’s whip slithered in the dark. “Shok ibasit hissra. Meraad astaarit, meraad itwasit, aban aqun. Maaras shokra. Anaan esaan Qun.”

Sometime before sunrise, Dawn’s broken voice chanted along with her.

--

He hurt. He hurt in ways he knew were more than just physical. He hurt in his head and in his chest and everything seemed terrible until Shokrakar found him. And she brought him back to usefulness with the simple phrase,

“They may have her, but they will not keep her.”
After Adamant and the Fade. After everything that had happened. After Bull himself had thought about having faith in Dawn to take on even the Ariqun. Shokrakar was right. The Qun might have Dawn, but they would never succeed at making her give up – they could not take away the things that made Dawn DAWN. She was just too grand to be diminished in that way.

But that was something they would have to LEARN, and that mean Dawn was going to be in a very bad way if they didn’t get her back from the Qun soon. He knew. HE KNEW what they did to the tools they needed to reshape. So did Shokrakar.

Less than a day after the Qun had taken Dawn and the ex-Qunari were already moving to intercept.

Because even if the others could understand, or those forsaken few like Isabella that knew, they still wouldn’t entirely understand just what was going to be done to Dawn now that the Qun had her.

They weren’t trying to break her to discard her after – they were going to try to reshape her into their tool and Iron Bull was placing his bets on Dawn, but it wasn’t something he would abandon her to endure.

He hurt.

He hurt because he knew that even if they did get her back there was going to be damage.

After the Qun had tried to break her, how could Dawn look at him and not see the enemy?

--

Not trying to escape during the day got Dawn rewarded with a single meal and just enough water to keep her going. Trying to break free in any form got her beaten mercilessly. Either way, Dawn was subjected to Rasaan’s ministrations and constantly force fed their mind fouling serum. She had no idea how long they’d had her in their possession, or where they were in the world.

Dawn wasn’t even always certain what language Rasaan was using anymore, the Koslun passage repeated so frequently in Common and Qunlat that it was the same to her ears now.

The nights felt colder now that her hair stopped in a jagged line around her neck. The weight it used to have held it flatter but now it sprang up around her, the fluff of wave no longer contained by a braid.

Her scalp prickled with drying sweat, her back was one giant throbbing pain when it occurred to her that she might not be rescued in time. Dawn never doubted that her friends would TRY but she worried that what would be left of her by then wouldn’t be worth saving.

She parroted the words of Koslun along with Rasaan but it was never convincing enough, it was always her fault the pain continued because if she’d just speak the words with her heart it could all stop.

So Dawn once again stopped eating. This time a deliberate attempt to shut her body down. The first night her food and water sat untouched and they all ignored it. The second night they didn’t bother putting them out at all. Third night. Fourth. They offered food and Dawn nearly took it but held, her headache blocking out her back and nausea kept her from speaking at all. And like Kaaras and Kasaanda had done so long ago, eventually they force fed her to keep her alive.

But Dawn didn’t break. Pain and hunger and despair. But she didn’t break. Though she did still inaudibly whimper when the Tamassran stood up, “You are ready.”
There was no whip in her hand today, instead only a small and terrible scalpel. Even though she knew it was useless, Dawn tried to struggle.

*SKIP HERE*

The Chatty Sten was used to it by now and his ease gave her the chance to kick his knee, before Nudey grabbed her by the neck and picked her up to choke until he dropped her again.

Begging wouldn’t work, screams were ignored and tears were inevitable. She could do nothing but endure, and now Rasaan was changing the stakes again.

“I’m going to carve the wisdom of Koslun into you so that you’ll always have the truth with you. Isn’t that satisfying to know, that when you’re wholly ours you’ll be the Qun’s Harbinger to the world?”

Nudey and Chatty were already holding her in place, long prepared for the best of her struggles by now. Dawn had suspected that after this long she’d have given up trying to break free but every single day she was conscious for it, she fought.

It changed nothing.

“Struggle,” the pain as Rasaan used both surgically precise tools and movement to carve the words into her stole her breath - a silent scream locked in her chest, “is an illusion.” The words scrawled across her shoulder, near her neck and the blood burned her raw skin as Rasaan continued, “The tide rises, the tide falls, but the sea is changeless. There is nothing to struggle against. Victory is in the Qun.”

She didn’t finish carving the words before the ground violently heaved.

*SAFE HERE*

Prostrate on the ground and Dawn was still thrown from her position, tumbled end over end with the Sten and Rasaan as the earthquake shattered everything.

The peg, chain, and cuff keeping her bound were torn away, skin along with it but Dawn mostly kept her hand at least. The Chatty Sten was impaled by shards of a tree before the quake ended, the violent heaves easing slowly.

Somewhere the horses screamed, or someone screamed, maybe even the very ground beneath her, Dawn couldn’t tell. She was focused on the scalpel lying in the dirt nearby.

Everything hurt and her ears were ringing, so she crawled.

Her hand reached for the scalpel, feeling the metal under her fingers as the Sten stomped his boot down onto her hand, viciously grinding the broken bones he caused. He lifted his foot up to stomp down again but Dawn lifted her mangled hand, scalpel in her grip. She drove the blade up into his groin, tearing it along the femoral artery as she went. His back hand sent her flying but he bled out before he could finish her off.

The quakes nearly did it for him.

Her chunk of dirt collapsed, a void opening suddenly that her mad scramble couldn’t escape. But Rasaan grabbed her and hauled her to safety.

Dawn still had the scalpel, in her good hand now, so when Rasaan had pulled her away from
immediate death Dawn pressed the blade to the woman’s throbbing jugular. The Tamassran froze — eyes wide with alarm as she realized that Dawn had gotten the drop on her.

“Shok ebasit hass-toh.” Dawn’s voice was as shattered as the landscape around them. Her broken hand was beyond pain so she used it anyways, grabbing the golden necklace Rasaan proudly wore as a badge of rank and tearing it from the Tamassran’s neck. “Victory is in Hope.” She tasted blood, smelled it, felt saturated by it.

Dawn let Rasaan live.

She staggered away, leaving the shaken Tamassran behind as the aftershocks battered the world. Or maybe Dawn was less stable than she needed to be. She didn’t know where she was so it didn’t matter where she headed; her instincts just drove her to keep moving. Dawn didn’t question the instinct, she didn’t have the strength left to.

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Rage.

Hot. Shimmering.

So intensely close.

He could Call it.

Solas’ eyes opened from his mediation with a jolt, air sucked in with an audible gulp as sweat beaded on his scalp. He wasn’t startled or scared though, the Rage was powerful and tempting.

They had taken her - were abusing her, and he was useless to stop it. But he was no fool to call on Rage, to lose himself to destruction and sure pandemonium.

At any other time the irony of that sentiment would amuse him but his humour was absent.

There was no music either.

Skyhold hadn’t known how to react, the Inquisitor returned triumphant and yet terribly angry. Cadash’ rage wasn’t shown with boisterous yelling or thrashing about. No, the Inquisitor went quiet and sharp – an impossible to ignore reminder of her bloody past.

His was not without its own sanguine stain, so he understood the compulsion to turn murderous if it would only mean Dawn’s safe return.

The Fade churned too chaotically for him to believe she’d be whole and unharmed; whatever it was Ena’vun was enduring bled over to the Fade despite all he knew she did to avoid ‘hurting’ the Spirits that dwelled there. Even with their strange new bond, Solas did not know where they had taken her but he knew with unwavering certainty that Dawn was alive and still herself.

All that Rage was hers after all.

Wherever she was, Ena’vun help helpless but far from hopeless and her righteous anger beckoned Rage closer. Solas was moving before he’d even recovered from the startling jolt to this side of the Veil – he could Hunt that Rage to find Ena’vun.

They’d made it from the ambush back to Skyhold in reality breaking time, and he’d only been in repose to search the Fade for an hour at most, and still Solas found Iron Bull, and his elder Tal
Vashoth mercenary, as he was preparing the mounts to leave. It gave Solas no time to gather his own supplies but he’d go regardless.

Shokrakar and Bull regarded him as he whistled to the Hart and mounted - no saddle or bridle for control and absent any gear. He could feel the professional curiosity radiate from them but everyone seemed to realize that stopping for explanations would take too much time. They would wonder, and since they were both very good spies and he had no time to waste of subterfuge, they would inevitably learn that he was not constrained to two legs all the time. It was just most unfortunate that to Hunt the Rage, he had to have his higher reasoning available and that meant not staying Wolf and running right to her.

It was not a secret parted with easily, for it would stir Curiosity and questions, but any other option stole too much time from Dawn; he would sacrifice his secret for her safety. The fact that Iron Bull made no comment to dissuade Solas revealed his emotional ruin - there was no glib joke about his ability to keep pace or not be a burden. None of the playful banter he was so well known for.

As they silently left a brooding Terasyl’an Te’las behind, Kaaras and Cole joined them. They were laden down with Healer’s gear, warning Solas that none of the Tal Vashoth expected Dawn to be unharmed either. It did nothing to ease the knot of burning terror eating away at Solas’ resolve; the fear that they would arrive too late for him to save her – for any one to save her. He’d lost so many already, lifetimes ago and yet he knew he wasn’t ready to survive this loss now.

The world would, he would not.

It was no surprise to any involved that the Qun had seized their opportunity to grab Dawn; she was certainly a high interest target. No, there was instead a terrible outrage that the Inquisition had gotten no hint of the ambush, and it had been sizable, and that it had occurred so close to ‘safety’. Either they were betrayed by a series of people at several times, or the Qun had found a way to move a large number of people across distances without leaving a trace of it anywhere. Like with the Eluvian network.

The crossroads were still passable; he knew that. They echoed empty and barren, the silence driving him from the place as much as the disorientation did non-mages, but they could be traversed. Few connected Eluvians had responded to his search and an even smaller amount of those had been able to be activated from the crossroads side. And of that small amount, he had lost a few since too.

With the Qun’s obsessive interest in controlling all superior weaponry, he could conclude that they’d likewise want to have superior magical arsenals. A woman from another world would be a huge draw for them alone – add Dawn’s by now staggeringly diverse reputation for astonishing things to it and this was an anticipated action. But none of their defense plans had expected the Qun to have access to the Eluvian network; to willingly sacrifice an entire contingent of Sten in an attempt to delay any pursuit yes, but not that they could move a force of that size without any trace getting out.

The Inquisition was not full of utter buffoons- if the Qun had tried to just take Dawn, everyone would have rallied around her. The Qun had been trying to kill Cadash, but they had also planned a synchronized abduction to coincide with the assassination. The chaos it would have caused the Inquisition to lose both their Inquisitor and the Harbinger at once would have been catastrophic.

Solas wouldn’t underestimate their discipline and coordination skills again.

But neither could he ignore the idea of the Qun having mastered the way into and through the
crossroads. He would have to do something about that, and apparently sooner rather than later.

Bull and Shokrakar had been the Qun, knew how to think like the Qun. Solas was content to allow them to lead the charge to rescue Ena’vun as long as their process took them towards the Rage he knew was hers. They rode until second moonrise before stopping to rest the mounts, and it was only then that their painful silence was broken.

“Iron Bull, may I treat your injury?” Kaaras spoke in his Healer tone.

It was the first Solas had realized that Bull was hurt; the attack from the Qun had had multiple targets indeed. He had a bandage all but hidden by the wide belt around his waist. Someone had tried to shuck Bull like an oyster, and here he was charging across the Frostbacks anyways. Not that Solas was entirely recovered from the ambush either, so he couldn’t criticize.

Besides, Iron Bull could tolerate being left behind on this about as well as Solas could have and they both knew it.

Bull regarded Kaaras for a moment before consenting, “Go for it Fix-it, I’m going to want to be ready.”

Solas watched with an almost clinical detachment as Kaaras stitched the skin of Iron Bull’s abdomen back together, and the muscled flesh underneath, without moving from his seat across the fire. Iron Bull breathed deep, testing his newly reformed belly while Solas felt his own eyebrows creep upwards. It was an impressive display of control and Power, all the more so for the realization that Kaaras wasn’t doing it to show off. He’d probably been aware of the injury all day and had simply waited for the most opportune time to address it, this level of Power and skill seemed to be normal for him.

For some reason that eased some of the tension coiled in Solas’ gut.

The second night there was more talk between them all, but nothing of matter – Solas could no more recall the details of that day than he could describe the taste of sunshine. They moved, and he felt that Rage circle tightly around where he hoped Ena’vun to be.

The third day started with Cole declaring, “The rattle and shake, deep down inside and building. Soon it will wake, soon it will search. The ground trembles, but not yet.”

“Well that isn’t ominous as shit Kid,” Bull broke the tension by acting like he wasn’t worried, “but until ‘not yet’ is ‘now’, it can wait.”

“They cut her hair.” His statement had no further explanation but they all knew to whom he referred.

Of course, the Qun had cut Ena’vun’s beautiful hair – they wished to diminish her individuality in every way and that cascade of long hair defied their utilitarian aesthetic. Still, Solas hurt because Dawn had chosen to keep it long despite the effort it required, and they’d taken that from her. Such a simple thing but Solas felt the distant Rage shadowing Dawn pause to consider the sudden pulse of fury Solas radiated. He buried it quickly, not wanting to pull it away from Dawn’s trail.

He revealed to the little group that night exactly why he required no gear for the journey. His wolf shape was neither as large nor as terrible as legend would suggest, though he gladly used the necessity of hunting food to bleed out some of the pain inside. And maybe a small part of him was pleased to see the flash of surprise in Iron Bull’s expression at the realization that he had NEVER suspected Solas could do it.
That was the last day he could distinctly determine because after that they all blended into an agony of them not having rescued Ena’vun yet. Silence fell amongst them again, tension wrenching painfully higher every day they moved. At some point they picked up signs of a physical trail, the Qun not expecting pursuit to have made it this far already. Solas had only had to redirect Iron Bull and Shokrakar a few times when their training wanted them to go one way but the Rage pulled Solas in another, and the two ex-spies took his corrections with silent acceptance.

Until the day Cole declared, “Not then is now Iron Bull.” A moment before the entire world quaked.

Their mounts staggered, stumbling at the jolts. Solas cast Calm, bringing them to order and giving everyone the chance to dismount; they needed to get low before things got worse.

And they certainly got worse.

The ground heaved and trembled, a rumbling bellow that rippled through the ground. It was terrible, but not the thing that brought proper dread to his heart; what did that was a sense of something older than even Solas Awakening.

Once the tremors settled, the entire group looked to assure they’d made it through whole, then mounted and continued. It was even slower going after the quake, great crevasses had opened up in the ground and giant tears left the trail useless.

A frantic energy had seized Solas despite the need for caution, a strange certainty that he would soon see Ena’vun again. He could almost feel the Rage pressed against the Veil, straining to touch the flaring beacon of Dawn.

And then all of that incredible Rage was just gone- burned away without being used.

They found Dawn all but shambling, barefoot and bloodied. They’d surprised her, coming up on Dawn from behind and startling her enough that she spun to face them, snarling a warning and brandishing a scalpel. Her shorn hair fanned like a crown about her head, matted in places with blood and yet she was ready to fight. Barefoot, bloodied; but unbowed.

The moment Dawn recognized them, the snarl fell from her face but the scalpel stayed raised. With the glassy look in her eyes and the amount of fresh blood Solas could smell, he figured Dawn was not operating with the entirety of her higher reasoning. She grinned, bright and feral and Solas worried despite her survival.

“The struggle is everything.” Her broken voice roughed out as she triumphantly displayed a medallion in her mangled hand.

“Holy fuck, is that what I think it is?” Kaaras’ strained question earned Shokrakar shushing him. Solas would have to inquire into what that emblem meant later.

“Healer…” he prompted carefully, looking at just how badly damaged her aloft hand was.

Kaaras’ voice once again that professional tone, “Dawn, can I help you please?”

All the Vashoth seemed frozen, assessing Dawn carefully for just how far the Qun had taken her mentally. Solas was not as intimately aware of what they could do but neither could he simply stand back now that Ena’vun was safe; so he decided to do something that was potentially rather stupid and impulsive.

“Ena’vun,” he spoke in Elvhen, “you are safe now. What can I do to help?”
She blinked at him for a moment and he felt a curl of despair at the lack of awareness behind the pain in her eyes. He’d seen her break before, but this wasn’t the same at all. And then she took a deep breath, despite the pain it probably caused, and her whole body relaxed – the scalpel was finally lowered.

“Take me home.” It was heartbreaking to hear.

“Let Kaaras heal you, you may not make it home in your current condition.” He hated to bring her attention to the pain but with her strange affect on the Veil, the Healer needed her to open up to his help.

He could see Ena’vun slowly pull all the errant pieces of herself back together with every eye blink, even as he saw the pain growing in them too. Kaaras didn’t heal her from a distance, whatever his power felt seemed to require a proper inspection first and Solas was agonized to see the professional face break when Kaaras inspected Dawn’s back.

“Lady…” Kaaras breathed before seeming to pull himself together. “I…I won’t be able to stop all the scarring at this point, but I can reduce the pain.”

Solas locked eyes with Iron Bull and knew both of them were contemplating just how much effort it would take to wipe the Qun off Thedas entirely. He might just enjoy working with the ex-spy on that project.

But only after they brought Ena’vun home.

Chapter End Notes

Translation

Qunlat:

Ash= to seek, to think, to know

Basshok – subdue her, lit. Struggle-thing

Ebasit-ast= it is waking up, lit. it is rising

Ebasit venak hol= it is a wearying one

Shok ebasit hissra. Meraad astaarit, meraad itwasit, aban aqun. Maaras shokra. Anaan esaam Qun= Struggle is an illusion. The tide rises, the tide falls, but the sea is changeless. There is nothing to struggle against. Victory is in the Qun.”

Atot= to tell, will tell, told

Shok ebasit hass-toh= the struggle is everything, lit. the struggle is the purpose
Chapter Summary

The Inquisition has lost its Harbinger and yet it is more than just an institution that suffers. The people who play the roles find themselves recovering even as they learn to appreciate what they have.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No. NO NO NO NO NO!

Felassan ran, his bare feet slapping at the ground but he didn’t stop even with the stinging pain it caused.

They were back, finally back. But she wasn’t with them. The Princess was gone. Like Bae. Like Mae. He was alone again. He wanted her to come back though. She had made the dark angry song go away, the whispers and mutters left him alone when the Princess was around. And her voice wrapped around him the way his Mae used to.

Others tried to help make the hurt go away but he didn’t want the hurt to go away. The hurt meant he still remembered. Not like how his Bae had forgotten everything about Mae, never speaking of her, never saying her name.

A harsh bark sounded with his broken gasp for air, tears rushing down because he couldn’t remember her face. Or voice. He remembered her hugs; how safe he was in her arms and warmth, but that was it.

How long until he didn’t remember the Princess either?

Tears blurred his vision but Felassan didn’t care to see where he was running, as long as it was away and the stinging slap of his bare feet helped keep him from thinking about the pain in his tummy and chest. He wanted to scream, kick and thrash about until someone told him that it was just a bad dream. That the monsters would go away and he would wake up to the light of a candle and the Princess being home.

“Felassan!” Kieran’s startled cry matched the hands grabbing at his arm and shoulder.

Felassan wanted to shove his friend away, still unable to see through his tears and wanting to be away. Alone. Not alone. His throat ached from the noises he couldn’t stop making.

“Shhhhh.” Kieran tried to sooth, the hug awkward even if he had stopped trying to run away.

Felassan curled into the small warmth, unable to stop from sobbing against his friend. “She’s gone, she’s gone, she’s gone…” he hiccupped and gasped, trying to cry and speak and run away and be comforted all at once and it was all too big.
He could feel Kieran walking them even as he kept his face buried against his friend, not caring and unable to care and the tears wouldn’t stop.

A second set of hands trying to comfort, to hug or hold or calm. But it wasn’t making the empty pain go away. Felassan could hear Kieran and Doshiel quietly whispering but none of their words made it past his keening noises. His tears hadn’t brought Mae back, hadn’t saved Bae. They wouldn’t help the Princess now but he couldn’t stop them.

He was hiccupping more than sobbing, Doshiel picked him up like he was still a baby but Felassan didn’t struggle. Instead, he felt Doshiel’s magic wrap around them like his hug attempted to do and with a weird flip-flop they were suddenly somewhere else.

Somewhere that sounded like the Princess’ humming and felt like he was welcome to stay forever.

His head shot up from Kieran’s shoulder, hoping that somehow she was here, had found her way home. She wasn’t, of course she wasn’t, but it helped make the painful ache inside go away a little bit.

“You can’t tell anyone I brought you here,” Doshiel warned in an almost adult tone, “this is Dawn’s turret and I come here when I really miss home.”

Felassan hadn’t really thought about Doshiel missing home or needing anything but it felt good to be here, their hugs matched by that warm sense of the Princess. It was enough that he could finally stop gasping for air, the tears almost burning his eyes with their unstoppable dripping slowing too.

Kieran finally stepped out of his awkwardly clinging embrace and stepped over to one of the closed chests, pulling free several pillows and blankets. “As long as we don’t light the braziers and we put everything back after, no one ever knows we’ve been here.” Kieran wrapped him in the blanket and it helped - the air much colder in the mountains than the city he knew.

“You lost your mom a long time ago, but you only just lost your dad.” Doshiel scooped Felassan up after Kieran had cocooned him and even if he didn’t want to feel like a baby it felt nice to be cuddled. Auntie Mahala tried but she was always crying herself now and he only made it worse when he cried too.

But Kieran and Doshiel weren’t crying. They were just hugging him until he could stop crying, and there was no judgement or expectation that he do anything other than feel sad until it went away.

A knock at the trap door a few feet away made Felassan cry out in alarm, jolting the sadness to a quick end because they weren’t supposed to be there. Hahren Cedric popped his head up a moment later. “Sorry to interrupt lads, but Kieran your mother is looking for you.”

“Bae…” Doshiel hissed but Felassan liked his friend’s father.

“Dosh, no one’s in trouble. But Morrigan wants Kieran back to lessons,” Cedrick smiled as he spied Felassan looking at him. “Can I ask what brought the comfort pile on?”

“Princess is gone…” Felassan couldn’t help the whine now, even after all the love his friends had covered him with.

“Oh da’len, she’s gone but I believe she’ll be back. If you only knew who was going out after her…” he sounded so confident in it that everyone went quiet. “I can promise you Felassan, if anyone on the face of Thedas can bring Dawn back to us right now, it’ll be Solas and The Valo-Kas with him. I tell you now; Dawn will be back with us before snow sets in.”
He said it with such calm assurance that Felassan heard the truth in it and felt better. The Princess would be home soon then.

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There were five things Dagna knew she loved without any trace of doubt.

She loved the feel of rain on her face, a truly surreal reality for an Orzammar Dwarf. She loved the smoky bite of a well-aged liquor, especially paired with her third love – fresh bread smothered with smashed bulb and melted cheese. She loved her Family even if they never wanted to see her again, but most of all she loved the thrill of discovering new things.

Except this discovery was both bittersweet and strange.

While the Keep had been mostly empty, she’d worked with both a Healer class mage, as well as a Necromancer class to try and determine whatever they may about the Blight infected Lyrium. The twin Tal Vashoth mages had proven to be of significant contribution in testing the properties of the stone but those properties thus discovered were what bothered Dagna.

A Healer could not cure the Blight, even with a Spirit for extra power – there was no ‘patient’ to cure despite the reality that Lyrium was living stone. The Necromancer had geomancy ability, but that proved ineffective enough to purify the Taint either. Additionally their gifts had not proven capable of combining in any reasonable fashion either, though that had been a fun day of testing.

They had tried everything in the end; fire and dirt magic, Health and Death, they even tried their limited air and water – and while those may need to be replicated with more skilled wielders later – nothing had proven capable of flushing the Blight. Although they had learned that undead were immune to Red Lyrium, it still interfered with Necromancy if the body had been infected prior to death.

That was the strange.

Ultimately the trio had exhausted even Dagna’s multiple variables in trying to solve the riddle of Red Lyrium’s cure. She knew the Offworlder had to have more information, or more likely, a different understanding of things to try for them to gain a resolution and they had a pile of data to provide once Dawn returned.

Dagna took the news of her friend’s abduction rather logically, if she did judge so herself. She’d retreated from the hubbub of people gossiping and running about, assuming that her little shared space with Harritt would be ignored and she would have time to calmly process this unfortunate turn of events. She’d heard that a rescue team had already been dispatched, so really there was nothing she could do to help.

Apparently, that idea had never occurred to the gorgeous, explosive Victoria Hawke. The Champion of Kirkwall threw open the heavy and heavily warded door and stormed into the Undercroft as if she owned the place – or could find some answers.

“Hi! Please don’t kill me.” Dagna blurted out, wanting to be friendly but intimidated by how attractive the Champion was with a reputation that dripped blood.

“Oh go fuck yourself sideways with a spiked mace.” Hawke snarled back and Dagna felt an almost undeniable urge to give way and make peace. The same way she’d obeyed her father’s edicts all while dying to discover the answers to all the questions she could ever ask.

She stood her ground.
“You burst into my workspace and spit and snarl at me; you go fiddle yourself.” Dagna rejected.

“I just wanted to go somewhere I could scream and shout and no one could bother me about it.” The beautiful blonde all but wilted, suddenly looking nothing like a woman that was capable of saving and condemning Kirkwall for a decade.

Dagna knew what it was like being frustrated by something she was choosing to do to herself, so she opted to share the wisdom being an Arcanist provided.

She walked over to Harritt’s anvil; put one of the inert Ice Mine Runes on its impermeable surface. The Lady Hawke watched her with despairing curiosity as she then grabbed one of the hammers that wasn’t his current favourite, and walked back over to the rune. Without further ado, Dagna heaved the hammer with a raucous yell and slammed it down onto the Rune. The Undercroft was already brimming with the sounds of the waterfall, further contained by various shielding and wards to contain whatever could go wrong; it swallowed both yell and the hammer’s clang as if she’d simply sneezed.

The Rune was now glowing, the kinetic force used to charge energy to it without needing magic. She cleared the now useable Rune and set it aside carefully, grabbing the next inert Rune, placing it on the anvil, and finally walked the hammer over to offer it to Victoria Hawke.

“Scream away.” She extended the handle out.

And it was as the Champion of Kirkwall tried to beat blood out of a stone that Dagna had a mental perspective shift about the Blight infused Lyrium.

“I’m an idiot. Give me the hammer and kindly get out; I have to do something really risky and dangerous.” Dagna interrupted the percussive therapy.

Sweat was now keeping the little hairs framing Hawke’s face stuck in place, but there were longer wisps flailing about her head, the beauty gone after all that exertion. She was still attractive, but it was no longer intimidating.

“You,” she was panting, they’d been at this awhile, “need better bedside manner.”

“And we’re back to where I pointed out that you came here,” Dagna smiled as Hawke handed the hammer over, “come back tomorrow.”

She all but shoved the Champion out the door.

Even if she was in a hurry, Dagna activated every safety precaution and ward available before she started. Hasty notes scrawled outlining her hypothesis and intended experiment, so should this go horribly wrong the others could figure out why or how.

Finally set, Dagna uncovered the Red Lyrium chunk. As always she pried a small fragment from it and locked the larger chunk away. And with no witnesses around to see her succeed or fail, Dagna tried something only distantly logical.

She dropped the piece of Red Lyrium into one of the small vials of blood Dawn had allowed her to collect. There was no instant reaction, no puff of smoke or screech of banished demon. Just a clink of the stone hitting the bottom of the glass vial. Dagna let it sit there, counting the seconds until she was certain enough time had passed for any special properties of Dawn’s Offworlder blood to activate and do their things.

Keeping all the safety procedures in place, Dagna carefully drained the now possibly tainted blood
for further review later, and focused on the Red Lyrium chunk.

It was still red, though it had just been soaked in blood. It was still a chunk of ore covered in a missing woman’s blood, and Dagna was still no more useful in getting her friend back than she had been when the news was first gossiped about.

Dagna’s scientific resolve dissolved as tears bubbled up despite her adherence to the pursuit of knowledge, her worry for Dawn stronger than her desire for answers. And it was while she took a moment to try and let the tears stop that Dagna realized the bitter sweet. Her harebrained idea to try using Dawn’s Offworlder blood to affect the Red Lyrium had worked; there was no sickly song from the stone.

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Dawn’s retrieval presented Shokrakar with a series of minor challenges to overcome; some expected but a few utterly unanticipated.

Tracking the movements of the abductors wasn’t difficult, even when they deviated from the standard Qun practices, thanks to the Elf that was sometimes a wolf now. The tracking wasn’t unusual; the Elf into a wolf was a little but even that was within the constraints of ‘normal’. Because mages, especially Elvhen ones, were known to be wily and full of strangeness so Shokrakar was more than willing to ignore it.

She could not ignore how exceedingly hard it was to be away from her babe. There was a screaming, agonizing emptiness where Taam-Kas usually hung; bundled against her. She was used to leaving him with his father but that was for hours, not weeks. She ached in a way that had no words and tore at her focus, a possessive instinct that Shokrakar mused was the core of the Qun’s rejection of family units. It was only her steadfast belief that Alena Cadash would tear any assailant apart before the Dwarf would allow Taam-Kas to come to harm that gave her the comfort to leave the babe. Taarlok already had his hands full trying to understand the strangeness happening with the Adar twins and their Spirit …companions.

Shokrakar would have gladly betrayed the Qun time and again for the sake of her child. A part of her better understood the fear such a concept would have driven into the Triumvirate running the Qun, the ‘bestial nature’ that they always accused everyone of bearing in their heart was nothing more or less than a possessive instinct to protect. Not their great Plan, but the need to protect her own. Her mate, her babe, her Valo-Kas, and now her Harbinger and Inquisition.

The quake was another unexpected occurrence that Shokrakar had to work around, though it certainly honed her focus to the moment. It wasn’t her first experience with the heaving and shuddering, but it was her first chance to see the ground ripple as if as viscous as water. She’d really rather never witness that again. The Spirit-boy’s warning had not proven timely, but none of their side were hurt so Shokrakar didn’t worry.

Worry was saved for the moment they caught up to Dawn. The thick, cloring scent of clotted blood, the sour reek of panic and sweat, the lingering tang of infection, and then the chemical bitterness of adrenaline. Dawn smelled like prey run to ground.

But cornered animals will fight.

The scalpel and amulet were brandished as if equally dangerous, and in their own way they were. She remained silent while Kaaras and the Elf spoke to Dawn, gentling her down. Shokrakar knew what drugs were likely used and she’d tell Kaaras how to best manage that once they got Dawn somewhat stabilized, but it was hard to see the condition her little human friend was in.
Until Dawn met her eyes the morning after the retrieval.

It was earliest sunrise, that silvered false dawn that warned of more light to come, and Shokrakar was on watch when Dawn left the Healer’s tent. Her mutilated hand was carefully bandaged and maneuvered; yet despite the discomfort Dawn seemed determined to stand up, facing the world after surviving the Qun. Dawn looked out at the small camp, catching Shokrakar watching her, and Shokrakar saw no fear in her eyes. The Offworlder’s first true actions in this world had been to grab a broken mage’ staff and beat a Rage demon to ashes with it; there would have been no surprise to see anger in Dawn’s gaze now but that’s not what Shokrakar found there. In spite of the traumas Dawn had repeatedly endured and the abuses heaped upon her, Shokrakar found Dawn’s eyes still held a determined, driven hope for whatever future the Offworlder knew of.

The Rasaan hadn’t broken her – the Heir of the priesthood, the next to become Ariqun, had failed – and Dawn seemed not one whit deterred from doing what she had to do.

But that hair had to be addressed.

“Sit.” Shokrakar softly directed, pointing to the space in front of where she was sitting.

Curiosity pulled Dawn closer, her expressive eyes still a dead give away, and Shokrakar surprised her by setting Dawn close so she could comb out the wild helmet of waves and curls Dawn’s shorter hair had proven to be.

“Taam-Kas has teeth coming in,” Shokrakar kept the conversation inconsequential as she finger combed and started to set Dawn’s hair to see the jagged ends. Her hair had clearly been braided back when it had been cut, there were odd lengths sawed into it that left a messy shag. Once back at Skyhold the Ruffled one would probably pretty it up but for now, she wanted to help get it out of the way until Dawn was in a place to decide for herself what to do with it.

“Cedric found a way to freeze elfroot paste into a gnaw toy that’s seeming to help.” She discussed the banal realities of motherhood while braiding Dawn’s wild mane of hair into a semblance of control, and ignored the fresh bandages at the base of her neck. She also ignored the others awakening and moving about.

“Taarlok is convinced he’s about to go into a growth spurt; Taam-Kas is always grouchy and crying.” Shokrakar took her time with Dawn’s hair, letting the simple topic and physical ritual provide a sense of grounding.

“My mom used to joke that they used whiskey on our teething rings.” Dawn’s voice was still harsh, the familiar coarseness caused by screaming until it gave out. In the face of her other injuries it was irrelevant and Kaaras was right to focus on the more immediate needs, allowing time to rectify this one – and yet it remained unsettling.

Shokrakar knew Iron Bull was watching their exchange with hidden curiosity, carefully constructing breakfast where he could still witness. Kaaras was the last to rise, the Healer having done the lion’s share of the work to get Dawn recovering.

“What is a teething ring?” Shokrakar could logic it out, but getting Dawn talking was a good sign.

“Basically an item that can be cleaned easily, with a soft exterior, and an interior filled with fluid that can be cooled. Generally in a ring shape so there are no hard edges and the babe can hold it themselves. Having it cold soothes the gums where the new teeth are cutting through; it takes down the inflammation.” Even with the unfamiliar word Shokrakar could picture what Dawn described.
The silence that filled after was contemplative, not awkward, so Shokrakar let it be. She finished twisting Dawn’s hair into flat braids that sat close to her skull, and tapped her shoulder carefully once done. “Go eat, your body needs the energy.” She kept it simple, watching how Dawn moved as she stepped away.

Of course, every eye in the camp was on her and she knew it, Shokrakar saw the moment Dawn realized. Dawn’s eyes scanned and saw Spirit, Elf, Healer, and Bull all watching her with varying levels of obvious concern, and Shokrakar was no less guilty of observing.

“Thank you,” Dawn seized the moment they’d all so conveniently provided, though no gratitude was required. “I knew someone would come, but more than that, I had you all with me in here and here.” She tapped her head and chest.

When Iron Bull moved, Shokrakar knew he was testing to see if Dawn would react with fear. When Dawn calmly watched him approach with a plate of food, she knew her former pupil lost some of the despair that’d been haunting him.

“Once you feel ready to tell what you want to tell of what happened, we are here to listen.” He carefully promised.

Shokrakar felt proud of the man Iron Bull had grown to become; he’d been promising as an Imekari, he’d excelled as an Ashkaari, but now he wasn’t playing a role for obedience’s sake. It would be fascinating to watch how their relationship continued to unfold. She expected it wasn’t going to be simple.

“But for now, eat. You need the food to replace all you lost so we can keep Healing you.” Kaaras prompted, utterly unaware of the undertones of the moment.

He was so young still, or maybe Shokrakar was just feeling old. And missing her babe.

Some instinct was telling her that although they’d successfully reclaimed Dawn, it wouldn’t be to return to a calm and easy end of autumn. They’d been lucky not to have early snowfall in the Frostbacks so far, and Shokrakar hadn’t ruled out the possibility for more quakes either. Though she did distinctly hope that no new developments would occur until after she got back to Taarlok and Taam-Kas.

Shokrakar also knew how unlikely that was.

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Varric stared at the paper before him, knowing he had to chronicle the loss of the Harbinger and yet not wanting to write it down. Make it real. Even weeks after the fact.

He wanted to believe that Dawn would be rescued, brought back and be safe again but he’d lived through too much, had been disappointed by too many deaths to ever really believe he’d see her again. As much as that idea hurt him to consider he’d seen how emotionally broken it had left Victoria. Especially with the rescue team leaving her behind to stew with her worry.

So of course, his life had to be made MORE complicated by the arrival of a… not unexpected but rather unanticipated-at-this time guest. Even with Dawn missing, her warning was proving useful.

Bianca had finally arrived.

He hadn’t seen her in years. They had communicated rarely, and even then, it was through letters. He was seeing her for the first time in so long and his heart didn’t stir, there were no butterflies. All
the things he’d once associated with love in his youth now firmly belonged to his love for Victoria and it was oddly soothing to realize that Bianca no longer laid claim to any part of his heart. Just a few fond memories. And a few not fondly remembered scars.

Even though he knew why she was here, and that she was the cause of the issue she was reporting, Varric played it ignorant. He didn’t feel like going into Dawn’s warning and how he knew everything Bianca was trying to tell him about now. He just wanted the woman before him to go away and the one that was missing to come home.

He wanted to see Victoria have hope again.

“I appreciate the warning but you shouldn’t have come yourself,” he knew the frustration he felt bled through into his words but there was no need to hide it anymore, “what if the Guild found out or…what’s his name?”

The satisfied smirk on Bianca’s face would have once sent his heart rate thrumming, the excitement of her attention a rare treat. And yet now…he just exhausted by it and she hadn’t even gotten to the point of why she’d come here yet.

“Are you worrying for me, or for yourself?” she taunted, the tone of voice one he was used to stringing him along for a lifetime.

“I should say a little of column A, and a little of Column B, as I AM the expendable one after all.” He pointed out, not laughing.

Because that was the crux of it. They couldn’t and wouldn’t touch Bianca. She was too valuable to them and always had been. It was why their relationship had had so many hurdles to begin with. She was supposed to marry and breed more Dwarves just like her – intelligent and creative but in the way that Bianca was creative. Writing words that made people think of things larger than themselves, or the purpose they are supposed to serve, went counter to that.

He had always been the one with his neck on the line and Bianca had been happy enough with the arrangement to do absolutely nothing at all to change it. For decades. She always did like it when things went her way.

“Aww,” she laughed his concern off, “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you, we’ll just have to-” she cut off whatever lascivious comment was inevitable with her tone as the Inquisitor herself was suddenly there.

Sometimes his boss was a little scary.

“Well this is a surprise!” Bianca immediately moved to schmoozing the most influential person in the room as she always did. “You’re the Inquisitor right? I’m Bianca Davri, at your service.”

He used to enjoy watching her work but now Varric found himself wondering just how much of Bianca was going to remain once Alena was finished with her – and if Hawke would want the leftovers as a gift.

It also occurred to Varric that this was probably the most Dwarves he’d been around in a long time.

Alena wasn’t making it easy on Bianca either, the Inquisitor just looked at Bianca as if trying to determine if the other woman was worth the effort. It made him very glad to have already told Victoria the whole sordid affair, and giving Alena the heads up of what Dawn had warned him about.
“My Harbinger told me to expect you, Bianca Davri of the Merchant’s Guild. Welcome to my Inquisition.” Alena finally spoke in a friendly tone that Varric suspected wasn’t fooling anyone.

And Varric could see Bianca hesitate for a heartbeat, she wasn’t expecting to be expected; whatever little mental script she had been planning to follow was thrown out the window. And he couldn’t help but feel a little proud at that. It wasn’t that he wanted Bianca to suffer, he’d loved her for so long he really didn’t wish her ill, but it was somewhat satisfying to look at the woman that had consumed the best years of his life and realize he had truly moved on.

“If your Harbinger prepared you for my arrival, I assume you know what the news is then?” Bianca’s tone was just shy of challenging, her usual approach to those in authority.

“That the location of the Thaig discovered by Varric and Victoria has been leaked and is now the source of Corypheus’ Red Lyrium. We need to deal with this; as long as he has this source Corypheus will use it.” Alena took the opening Bianca had given her and Varric found himself smiling again.

“I couldn’t agree more.” He chimed in, knowing that the Nightingale was in charge of tracking it and all the players that touched into it.

“Good,” Bianca adapted quickly, “I’ll keep an eye on their operation; if you’re interested in shutting it down you’ve got my help.” She offered and this was where Varric hesitated. Dawn had made the entire trip to Valammar unnecessary, and Varric wasn’t certain how to proceed now that the current time had caught up to Dawn’s warning.

“Oh I think we all know you’ve done more than enough for this situation already.” Alena’s polite refusal came through a smile and Varric knew his Inquisitor well enough to read the threat that implied.

Bianca did not like being told what to do, “I do have my own work to attend to, so don’t think I won’t leave this for you to handle if you take too long.” She dismissed herself, sauntering off before they could comment.

Varric didn’t watch her go, “That’s going to be trouble.”

“Just wait until she catches wind that Dawn is missing and that you’re banging the Champion, your piece of trouble is going to live up to Dawn’s warning.” Alena warned, unnecessary but appreciated.

“Want me to send her away?” Varric offered, not even sure how to get Bianca to leave without a fight.

Too much of their history and fortunes were still tied together. Less so his, he turned to her for favours only rarely because the Guild would take him out if needed. But she’d invested time and effort into his life and Varric knew Bianca well enough to know that she did not like losing something she considered ‘hers’.

“Paragons and Dusters no; I want to see that show down. How often do I get the kind of entertainment watching your ex go after your lover is going to provide?” Alena’s smile was sharp but not cruel and Varric laughed at his own situation.

“If Dawn was here to see it, she’d probably be offering to chaperone that fight.” He ruefully added.

Alena wasn’t looking at him though, she looked serious. “Leliana has tracked every shipment and all the people involved from that source – it’s just about time we bring the whole thing to a close.”
Somehow Varric knew she wasn’t just discussing the Red Lyrium either. Bianca would be sent back to her Guild and her own jobs, the Inquisition would shut down the Lyrium with overwhelming prejudice, and Varric could finally close that chapter of his life.

For good.

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There was no sleep. No matter how tired, how spent his magic got, Kaaras couldn’t sleep. His mind would not stop chewing on Dawn’s rescue and mutilation. It wasn’t just that she’d been tortured that bothered him either - though it didn’t sit well, but it was that he hadn’t felt her pain until she’d been within eyesight, and even then it had been muffled somehow.

Until Solas had spoken to her in Elvhen.

Then whatever she had been doing to hold back her pain had fallen away and he’d felt every lash, every cut, every bruise. The hunger, the pain, everything. It was one thing to see the damage done to Dawn’s body – it was another level of challenge to be able to feel the pain she was too abused to properly express. As a Healer now bonded to Compassion, Kaaras also had the unique agony of feeling the wounds to Dawn’s psyche as well as skin. Not a surprise but a terrible reality to witness.

Her quietness was also giving him uncomfortable flashbacks to how she was when they first found her. The only thing offering relief was that he could still see Dawn’s awareness in her eyes; a steady determination that he had no desire to go against.

Even if what she was asking him to do was beyond insanity.

“You want me to cut on you more to finish what Rasaan started.” His flat tone surprised him; he expected to be furious.

She couldn’t feel the pain that standing with her shoulders back, chin raised was causing – his magic saw to that - but Kaaras knew without being told that he could drop the magic and let her feel the pain and she would not falter. “I’m taking their words and turning them into my weapon,” she wasn’t angry and that was even more surprising than his own calm, “as you said you can’t prevent the scarring, but I can take their injustice and strip it of its power. I’m asking you to help me with this so I can avoid more pain or infection.”

And even if she never said it, he knew her well enough to know that if he refused she’d find a way to go ahead without him. Either by asking one of the others to bear the burden or taking it on herself.

Rasaan had started to carve the words of Koslun into Dawn’s back but had only gotten part of the first phrase completed, ‘the struggle…’ Kaaras recalled Dawn’s guttural snarl when they’d found her; he knew what the message should say to strip the words of the Qun’s intent.

The Struggle is everything.

Lady forgive him, he knew he was going to do it.

Kaaras prayed to his abstract Lady, the Fade, his connection to Cole – everything. The others wouldn’t see him cutting on Dawn, but the effect was going to be the same once they saw the words finished on her back. They would either understand or they would not, and he would face grief for this for a long time to come.

“Are you sure you’re ready to be face down with your shirt off while a Qunari with a knife cuts
“you?” he had to ask it as harshly as possible, hating to do it but needing to know.

“You’re Vashoth Kaaras, and this is different than that.”

He felt no guilt using his magic to brush over her, needing to assure that this wasn’t a thin shield about to break under the pressure. “How is it different?”

He saw the glorious corona of her aura burn, “I never submitted; this I allow.” Truth, staggeringly true. She had been in the fires of the Qun and came out tempered, honed to a sharper edge but still beautiful and bright.

“Alright,” he capitulated, knowing that this wasn’t as easy as just writing the words would have been on paper.

He had the tools and the steady hand, now he just had to have the willpower.

Her back was a quilt of abuse, patches and lines of agony spanning every inch. They had washed her with a potion, sealing the skin and allowing recovery to occur – to undo healing for the sake of aesthetics went against his instincts as a Healer so he had let it be. But to help her mind he now had to cut into her already battered back.

Cole was there, watching them both with his grave, sad eyes. Kaaras knew if it bothered him so much, he could ask his companion to erase the memories. But he also knew Dawn wouldn’t abandon even these latest terrible memories and so he would face his own with courage.

“You could never say it right to convince her because it was never true.” Cole lay down so Dawn could see him while Kaaras worked, “your actions spoke words she wasn’t ready to hear but now she can’t chase the echoes away.”

Oddly enough, it helped.

Magic easily sank into Dawn’s back now, allowed as she had said, and he knew she felt nothing as he took one of his surgical knives to make the message hers. And laying with her focus on Cole, Dawn seemed strangely content. He decided to seek some answers at the very least.

“So that was really the emblem of the Ariqun you have then?” he couldn’t help but sound impressed; it was both a badge of rank and a mark of favour. And after weeks of torture and brainwashing, Dawn had been the one to come out the other side triumphant, with that badge from around Rasaan’s neck.

While Rasaan still lived.

He was very impressed and more than a little intimidated – the Qun had declared war on Dawn personally and she had instead shaken the heir of the Ariqun. How?

After helping Dagna dig into the mystery of the Red Lyrium, he was aware of some of the vast secrets Dawn held. The secrets that the Qun wanted so desperately. He simply had to trust that Dawn knew what she was doing, anything else felt like he was working against her.

His magic knitted skin closed, unable to erase all the scars but at least able to ease their pain and ensure they healed fully. Rasaan had chosen to write in Common, to better send and spread the message; Kaaras wasn’t sure if he would have preferred to see Qunlat scarred in there instead, but it left him cold to finish and regard the precision of his work.

“I think I know how Bull felt after he cut up your arm,” Kaaras muttered, needing to break the
silence.

“You fixed it as much as you could to my specific request. If anyone wants to come fight with me over what I am and am not allowed to do to my body, they are more than welcome to try.” She didn’t seem worried at all and Kaaras realized this new edge was probably going to ruffle some feathers.

She’d lost weight, a gauntness to her face that was only emphasized by the shorter hair. Of course she’d also lost part of the fingers on her left hand too, from mid knuckle up on the inner last, and the top of her littlest. He’d been able to set the bones of the hand but the fingers had been mangled beyond repair due to infection in the bone. They’d treated her back but not her hand – harder to escape with one hand completely out of commission.

And no Healer alive today could erase all of the damage they had done to her, not even one bound to Compassion. It wasn’t about Power or Willpower, but a simple limitation of how much forced healing a body could take.

All new skin is agonizingly tender and runs the risk of not meshing with the older skin. Forcing the healing of the flesh under the skin would tighten all parts too harshly and lead to bodily damage. He had to control for blood loss, shock, help her body process the trauma of amputation, ease the pain but not lock her in a coma, and try to flush the drugs from her system. That was all before he even got to treat the mess that was her back; she’d looked damn near flayed. And he knew the back was one of those systems that affected everything else; how you moved, how you breathed, even if you slept. Bolstered by Cole, Kaaras was more than able to do it but there was still a limit to what Dawn’s body could take. She didn’t have the bodily resources to recover immediately; the Qun had deliberately underfed her to keep her weak and now Kaaras couldn’t feed her fast enough to recover what she’d already lost, let alone force heal.

“Thank you Kaaras.” Dawn broke into his somber reflection, touching his hand. “I know it was a lot to ask, but I hope you understand.”

He did, so Kaaras simply nodded. Not that understanding why she’d asked him was going to spare him any of the trouble the others were going to sling his way in light of his actions. Some would understand, some wouldn’t care to, and a few wouldn’t care at all. By the Lady Kaaras still wasn’t entirely sure he’d done the right thing.

It was a long ways back to Skyhold, relatively; their speed greatly slowed by Dawn’s injured state and the condition of the road. They had to go around fissures in the ground more than once, although the quake had been far away, it had had an affect on the topography nonetheless. Their Keep was still standing, nothing looking out of place but an absolute swarm of people were ensuring that it wasn’t going to collapse.

Shokrakar had ensured that Skyhold knew its Herald was returning, but Kaaras didn’t know what to expect in terms of reception. If Dawn had just been Valo Kas, they’d bring her home and surround her with those that loved her and wouldn’t hurt her, but Dawn was also the Harbinger. She wasn’t theirs alone to help and care for, and Kaaras wasn’t brave enough to try and tell the Inquisitor she had to wait. They certainly didn’t strike an impressive image, looking like nothing more than any of the other wild-eyed mercenaries coming through the gates to complete a job.

Dawn certainly looked nothing like the figure she’d cut before, but somehow she drew more eyes to her now – unarmed and unarmoured. The bruises that discoloured her complexion weren’t a priority to heal, but they were awfully visible, as was the careful way she sat astride Kaaras’ dracolisk. Even with his magic holding the awareness of pain away, her mind knew what she had endured and wanted to protect itself.
The Harbinger was home, now was the Inquisition ready?

Chapter End Notes

TRANSLATION
Qunlat
Imekari – child
Ashkaari – one who thinks
ELVHEN
Da’len – little one, child

FOOD
Smashed bulb = garlic

End Notes

I fully and without hesitation blame the following people for inspiring me to write my own DA:I UA (check out their stories, seriously)

Mary Dragon
Eisen
Coffeeguru
Aelie
RogueLioness
l8rose

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