Adamant

by SageFic

Summary

Part 2 of Daughters of Andraste
(Character death warning for Here Lies the Abyss.)

Adamant Friends, Faded Lovers
Inquisitor Katerina Trevelyan has one goal: to stop Corypheus from raising a demon army.

Okay, Kate has two goals: stop Corypheus, and keep Cullen from dying of lyrium withdrawals. She and the former templar have become friends now, after all. Just friends, mind you. But then Brigid Hawke and her entourage explode on the scene, Robert Trevelyan finds himself desperate to impress Cassandra, Colleen Lavellan stumbles into a love triangle.
(sort of?), and Leliana is spying on...everyone?

So you know. It's business as usual at Skyhold.

Welcome to my lore-friendly re-imagining of Dragon Age Inquisition, with multiple plotlines, 'ships, original characters, humor, slow-burn romance, smexy stuff, and more! Part 1 is complete, Part 2 (this bit) is ongoing. Thanks for picking up my fic and I hope you enjoy it!

Mobile friendly version at SageFic.com thanks to my awesome husband Bladewarden. Thanks for reading and drop me a comment to say hi!
Brigid Hawke might be many things, but subtle was not one of them.

As Anders stood before Hawke’s house, this became abundantly clear to him. For right there, on her door, hung a large piece of parchment. In bold, blocky letters, she had written this message:

**IF YOU ARE ANDERS, COME ON IN!!! I GAVE THE SERVANTS THE NIGHT OFF AND I’M WAITING FOR YOU UPSTAIRS!!! (INSERT HEAVY BREATHING HERE.)**

**IF YOU ARE NOT ANDERS, GET THE FUCK OUT!!! NO, REALLY, MY MABARI HOUND HAS BEEN TOLD TO SHRED ANYONE WHO TRIES TO RUIN MY NIGHT!!! HAVE A NICE EVENING EVERYONE! I SURE PLAN TO. (WINK)**

Anders stared in disbelief.

Hawke had posted that up her front door. She’d posted that on her front door in *Hightown.*

Maker’s breath, Anders thought. He was surprised there wasn’t a small crowd of the nobility gathered here, murmuring in disapproval and clucking their tongues. Hawke might as well have stood upon her rooftop and made rude gestures at all of them. She might as well have claimed Anders before the entire world. Anders had never known anyone so fearless in all his life.

And this was why he adored her, Andes thought. Hawke was wonderful. Hawke was a gift. In Hawke, Anders had found a woman who was completely…

*Reckless.*
Anders scowled. No, not reckless. Hawke was perfect. He had wanted her for years. And this afternoon, Anders had lost his mind at last. He had told Hawke how he felt. He had kissed her. And then he’d promised Hawke that if she left her door open to him, he would visit her tonight.

Judging by that sign, Anders suspected the door was open.

Anders felt his heart beat faster. Tonight would be one to remember, he thought. Someday, he would recall this moment with tenderness or regret - possibly both. He reached for the door.

_This is a mistake._

Anders’ eyes involuntarily flickered over with a ghostly blue light. He ducked his head, fighting back against the swift fury that filled his mind.

“Damn it all, Justice,” he hissed through gritted teeth.

_A mistake_, the Fade spirit whispered within him.

No, Anders thought, irritably. This was _not_ a mistake. Or if it was, it was Anders’ mistake to make. He and Justice had already fought this battle on the walk up from Darktown. Anders had explained that after three years, he was tired of resisting Hawke. He was tired of being alone.

But Justice was not satisfied with that answer. The Fade spirit that possessed Anders knew nothing of human needs or companionship. Justice already kept Anders from getting drunk, kept him from sleeping soundly. Most nights, Anders would lie alone in the dark, thinking about all the many, many injustices in this wretched city. His stomach would churn with anger.

To combat that rage, Anders would think of Hawke. He would picture her face in his mind, and then lust would burn within him. Desire would war with anger and rage and then, only then, would Anders finally fall asleep from exhaustion.

But tonight, Anders intended to fall asleep in Hawke’s arms. He prayed to the Maker - if that bastard was ever listening - that Hawke’s touch would take some of this anguish away.

_This is only a momentary obsession_, Justice said coldly. _Slake your lust and this feeling will end._

Justice was wrong, Anders thought. Justice had no idea what it was talking about. Anders knew how it felt to have sex with a stranger. He knew how it felt to have sex with an old friend. But sex would be different with Hawke. Anders knew it would be different. Hawke knew that Anders was a fractured man. But she was willing to have him in spite of his brokenness. Anders wasn’t going to let her down by rejecting her offer.

_You will let her down_, Justice warned. _And she distracts you from our purpose._

No, Anders thought. Hawke _was_ his purpose. But Justice couldn’t see that. Hawke answered to nothing and no one. She spoke boldly, lived daringly, loved fully. She was _free_, Anders thought. She was free as no mage had ever been free. And Anders adored her for it.

_She is attention-seeking and irreverent, foolish and selfish._

Anders shook off Justice’s words. Many people had said similar things. Alright yes, Hawke was a bit trying if you didn’t know her. But Anders knew her. He knew she was the leader the mages needed. He would stand by her side as she guided their people to victory against the templars.

_Hawke has no desire to lead a rebellion. She cares only for protecting her friends._
That wasn’t true. Hawke had helped Anders save a young mage just this week. She helped mages all the time.

*When they are right under her nose, Justice scoffed. When someone else hands her a plan. But what plan has she made to end the Gallows?*

Alright, Anders admitted. Hawke was a touch… unmotivated. Lazy, even. But she cared. Anders knew she did. And when they were lovers, they would support one another. They could work together, and build the revolution that Anders had been dreaming of.

*You see what you want to see, Justice warned. Hawke sees what she wants to see. You are both blind.*

*Shut up Justice,* Anders thought irritably.

Miraculously, Justice fell silent. Perhaps the spirit grew tired of arguing, or perhaps Anders had gotten better at foisting the spirit from his thoughts. Either way, Justice retreated. Though Anders could still feel the spirit’s presence within, it had settled down to a low place within him. Anders looked again at Hawke’s door. A new feeling flooded into the space Justice had vacated:

It was hope, a feeling so tender that Anders was shocked to find he could still feel that way.

Anders took another step to the door and took down the note. He carefully folded it up and put it into his pocket. Whatever happened tonight, he would always treasure this boldly-written sign. Anders put his hand to the knob and eased the door open. A sharp bark greeted him just inside.

*“Hello boy,”* Anders said.

Hawke’s mabari hound barked again, dancing from side to side in the entryway. The large dog then rolled over onto his back, angling for a belly-scratch and wagging his tail. Anders just shook his head.

*“Not tonight, boy. How about giving us some privacy, eh?”* He held the door open. *“I think Varric could use some company tonight. You could get him to teach you how to play cards. You’re smart enough. Ought to keep you both busy.”*

The dog barked once more, then trotted out the door. Anders let the door shut behind him, then turned to consider the quiet house.

Alright then, he thought, letting out a sigh. He was inside now. And Hawke was upstairs. Maker, why was he feeling so nervous?

Anders walked through the foyer and into the main hall. A fire was burning in the hearth - a bit low, as if it hadn’t been tended in a few hours. Anders set another log in as he passed - it sent up a flurry of embers into the chimney. Anders continued up the stairs, feeling his stomach knot with every step. This really was like old times, he thought - the anticipation, the growing excitement. It seemed Justice had not unmanned him after all. And how here he was before Hawke’s bedroom door. Anders raised his hand to knock.

*“There you are!”* Hawke cried, grinning widely. *“I heard the barking. Sent the dog out, have you? Good. You know, I was beginning to think you’d gotten cold feet. I’ve been trying to be all patient and seductive by waiting up here, though I did have half a mind to jump onto the chandelier and make a swinging entrance. That would have given you a show. I could still do it if you like.”*
She finished this rapid-fire greeting by opening the door wide. Firelight and candlelight flooded out into the hallway, allowing Anders to get a good look at Hawke. He had envisioned her so many times in his dreams, and yet Hawke had a presence that put all imaginings to shame. She was a petite powerhouse of a woman, all broad muscle and generous curves. She had wavy black hair, blunt cut to her chin, and slashing black brows that always seemed at odds with her warm, dark eyes. Her skin was smooth and brown, except for a few faint freckles that dotted her upturned nose. She currently wore a silken robe of bright crimson. The flimsy fabric clung to every curve and strained against her nipples.

Anders felt his jaw drop. He would wager anything that Hawke was naked under that robe. True, Anders had terrible luck when it came to calling bluffs, but he figured this would be a safe gamble.

“Like it?” Hawke asked, seeing at once where he was staring. “I ordered it in from Antiva months ago. Oh, and look! It’s got matching underthings!”

Hawke opened the robe wide. It would seem that Anders’ poor luck continued, for she wore something after all. It hardly counted as clothing, however. The ensemble was nothing more than a few scraps of silk and lace.

Anders did not answer. Instead, he made a series of choking noises.

“This is a mistake,” Justice hissed one last time, but it was just a whisper from deep down. Anders’ blood was running so hot right now, he couldn’t have heeded the spirit’s warning even if he’d wanted to. And he most certainly did not want to.

“Justice can go to the Void,” he murmured, staring at the freckles visible on Hawke’s breasts.

“Ohhh,” Hawke said, making a face as if he’d just told her there would be no sweets. “Anders, please tell me Justice isn’t coming to play. This wasn’t meant to be a threesome.”

“Don’t call it that,” Anders said, frowning at her. “I can’t take him out of me, but I pushed him down as far as I could.”

“Makes me feel like someone’s squatting in my man,” Hawke said, folding her arms over her chest with a pout. Anders felt his heart thrill at her words. ‘My man’ sounded possessive, and Maker knew that Anders felt possessive of Hawke in return.

“I don’t mean to share you with anyone, Hawke,” he told her. “Justice won’t go away, but you’ll be mine alone.”

Hawke gave him a quizzical look. “Uh, is this your way of bringing up Isabela? I told you, that happened once. Half a year ago, besides. Anyhow, I was mostly bored, waiting on you.”

“Mostly bored?” Anders blinked.

“You know what I mean,” Hawke said. “Isabela didn’t want me, and…” Something flashed in Hawke’s eyes, there and gone. It was like the lightning Hawke favored when summoning magic. “But why are we talking about this? Some date you are, showing up to screw me and then talking about other people getting screwed. Come on. Get in the bed, mage.”

She gave him a game smile and jerked her head at the bed behind her. But though she spoke casually - provokingly even, Anders heard something in her tone that made him pause. Or maybe it made
Justice pause. For a moment, Hawke sounded...nervous? Yes, but it was more than that. She sounded like she needed this, rather than merely wanting it.

Alarm bells went off in Anders’ head. Maker help them both if Hawke needed Anders as much as Anders needed Hawke. But no, Anders assured himself. Hawke was stronger than he could ever be. She would survive, no matter what happened to him. That was part of why he wanted her. She would forget him long after he disappointed her.

In the meantime, Anders planned to please Hawke. He planned to please her very well tonight.

“I’ve been wanting this for years,” Anders told her. “I’ll want you long after this night is over.”

This evidently was the right thing to say, for Hawke brightened at once. She grinned, looking both very wicked and very delighted.

“Good,” she said. “You’d better.”

Then she rose up on her tiptoes to kiss him. Their mouths opened at the same time: tongues seeking, lips pressing together again and again. Anders pushed her into the wall and gripped her arms tight. She pressed her lips to his, her body flush against his. Anders felt his erection straining against his small clothes. Hawke smelled of Antivan oranges and rosemary. She felt so warm and real. Her small, strong body was clinging to him now, and Anders felt he might never recover his wits again.

“I swore I’d never do this,” Anders murmured, hardly realizing that he spoke. He could see down Hawke’s robes, to the swells of her breasts, so inviting in the candlelight. He wanted to explore all that he’d just glimpsed, but he felt compelled to say this, to make her understand...

You cannot do this. You cannot say this.

Oh, but he would, Anders thought. Justice be damned.

“I love you,” Anders said, as he kissed his way down Hawke’s throat. “I’ve loved you for years. I’ve been so jealous of you - for you. I wanted you for my own. But in the Circle...” He knelt and turned his attention to her breasts, alternately murmuring against her skin and sliding his hands into her robe. Hawke gasped and threaded her fingers into his hair.

“We could not love there,” Anders told her, and somehow this confession seemed more dangerous to him than a confession of love. “It gave the templars too much leverage over us. We could be broken if we had something to lose.”

Now a kiss to the hollow of her throat. Now a small bite to her shoulder.

“Oh yes, keep doing that...” Hawke moaned, running her finger along the underside of his ear.

“I never allowed myself to love,” Anders said, not knowing or caring if Hawke was really listening to him. “I never dared to care for anyone as I care for you. I know I cannot be the best man for you,” He ran a thumb over her nipple through the silken robe and Hawke’s nails dug into his shoulders.

“Anders...”

“I have so little left of myself with Justice and the Blight inside my body,” Anders continued, pressing a kiss to her skin and standing. He stopped there and looked down at her solemnly.

“But all that remains of me is yours. It’s yours, love.”
Hawke looked up at him, her eyes so dazed with lust that Anders was not entirely certain that she even saw him. Then her right hand trailed down to his belt, tugging at it. Her left hand tangled in his long hair as she grabbed his neck, as she pulled him back against the wall.

Anders went willingly, sighing against her lips. He pulled the belt loose from her robe, and tucked his fingers into the ribbon fastenings of her panties. He tugged once, sending the scrap of silk fluttering to the floor. He swept his hands down the muscular curve of her stomach, down the smooth brown skin, reaching between her legs to cup the dark thatch of hair. Hawke gasped as Anders slid his long, deft fingers inside of her and then…

20th of Drakonis, 9:41 Dragon, Trevelyan Manor (7 months ago)

“Good book?”
Katerina Trevelyan gave a small shriek and snapped her book shut.

She looked around wildly, entirely disoriented. In her mind, she’d been in Hawke’s bedroom, about to play voyeur to the steamy love affair of Anders the Rebel Grey Warden and Hawke, the Champion of Kirkwall. Now, however, Kate found herself on the veranda of Trevelyan House. A stormy sky hang over the gardens and her cousin, Robert Trevelyan, was looking down at her with a quizzical expression.

“I’m sorry, what?” Kate asked. Her voice came out all muffled, like she had a cold.

“Have you been you crying?” Robert asked, cocking his head at her.

“So it would seem,” Kate said, rubbing a hand over her cheek. How embarrassing. She did so hate displaying her emotions to an audience.

“And you’re blushing,” Robert observed. “You were breathing heavy, too, almost like… Good Maker, are you reading another trashy romance?”

“No,” Kate said defensively. “Well, sort of. It’s just the Tale of the Champion, and…”

“Oh,” Robert said, rolling his eyes and dropping into the deck chair next to her. “Say no more. Your tea’s gone cold, by the by.”

“Has it?” Kate said, looking over at the saucer. And she’d forgotten to take the leaves out. Bother. Another cup wasted.

“So,” Robert said. “What part are you at? One of the bedroom scenes?”

“Um, yes,” Kate said, primly. And she did not feel she could read further if her cousin was staring at her like that. Not if she had been breathing heavily and crying about it. Kate slid her ribbon bookmark into place and closed the book.

“I’d just gotten to the part where Anders and Hawke begin their relationship.” She said it as though they’d negotiated the deal on paper. In her head, however, Kate was still picturing the exchange.

“Oh, right,” Robert snorted. “That part. Anders is such a prat.”
Kate made a small sound of protest and Robert glanced over at her with a laugh.

“What? You think he’s dreamy, too? You and all of the ladies in Ostwick.”

“I do not think he’s ‘dreamy’,” Kate said loftily, though she felt her face heat.

“You fancy Hawke then?” Robert asked. “Me too. She sounds like a wild one.”

“I think they both sound rather remarkable if you must know,” Kate said, trying to sound reasonable and refined, rather than breathless with admiration. “There aren’t a whole lot of heroes for us mages to look up to, you see. In most stories we’re either horrific villains or we’re minor character who die for plot reasons. It may only be fiction, but it does take it’s toll on one’s self-esteem after a while.”

“Hmpf,” Robert shrugged. “More the pity for you then, if that’s your best example of mage heroism. Hawke’s alright, I suppose…”

“She’s lovely,” Kate replied at once.

“But that Anders is…” Robert evidently couldn’t think up a good enough insult. Either that, or he felt Anders was beneath his notice. He just wrinkled his nose and shook his head.

“He sounds like a kind person,” Kate said, sticking up for the man as she would for any likable fictional character. “He was a hunted mage, horribly abused and forced into the Wardens. That’s his past, and what does he do?”

“Defected from the Wardens and broke all his oaths?” Robert suggested. “Oh, and got himself possessed, let’s not forget.”

“He opened up a free clinic in the undercity and helped the poor,” Kate replied. “Maker only knows what horrors he endured over the years. And yet he was generous and kind to people.”

“He was an idiot,” Robert said, rolling his eyes. “He has a good thing going with Hawke and what does he do? Blows up the Kirkwall Chantry and starts a war. No wonder Hawke leaves him in the end.”

“Don’t spoil it!” Kate cried, clutching the book to her chest protectively.

“Katie,” Robert said, looking at her in exasperation, “Everyone knows how it ends. It’s history. Rather recent history at that.”

“Well, yes,” Kate admitted. “But I still wanted to read it for myself. I wanted to understand how it all happened.”

“And you really think you’re going to get understanding from a storybook?” Robert laughed. “That’s just one author’s opinion. Fiction writer, too. Can’t trust any of them worth a damn. And the writer’s a dwarf.”

“What has that got to do with anything?” Kate wanted to know.

“They delight in smut,” Robert said, tapping his finger to his nose. “Oh, they look all ruddy-cheeked and wholesome, but down deep, they are horny as the Void.”

“That’s very unfair,” Kate said, frowning.

“How sheltered you are, in your Circle of elves and humans,” Robert returned. “You see? Here is my proof: Deeper and Deeper: The Roads of Lust. Dwarven erotic poetry. And all of it banned. It’s
not De Amatus, but I take what I can get.”

“Oh! Did you get my books, too?” Kate said, sitting up eagerly and turning in her chair.

“Patience,” Robert said, though Kate noticed he had a large satchel at the foot of his chair. “First, I must read you this prime example of dwarven debauchery.”

“Must you?” Kate wrinkled her nose.

“You need to get a dose of culture in with the fluff you’ve been reading all holiday,” Robert informed her, flipping through the pages.

“I study in the Ostwick Circle,” Kate replied, raising a brow. “As soon as this visit ends, I’ll be elbow-deep in tomes again.”

“And still, your prodigious education is not complete until you hear this howler,” Robert said. He stuck his finger in the air and assumed what Kate could only assume was meant to be a lecturing posture.

"Rise up one crack
And descend another.
Our bodies are molten:
sweat-slick and lava-hot
I delve again for the vein:
not lyrium, but treasure greater.
I open her legs like a Shaperate tome,
And go down again into the Kingdom of Hair."

Kate winced, her eyes screwing shut as if by blocking sight she could block the words, too.

“Was that really necessary?” she asked.

“Probably not, but neither is most of dwarven culture.”

“That’s rather prejudiced, you know.”

“Ask any surface dwarf you like, and they’ll say the same,” Robert replied. “But speaking of dangerously provocative literature: what is your plan to get this lot of forbidden books past the templars, Katie?”

With that, Robert finally dug into his satchel. Kate eagerly set aside the Tale of the Champion as Robert handed her four books, all weather-worn and dirty. One of them looked a bit burned on the side, suggesting it had narrowly escaped a fire. Kate ran her hands along them gently, as if they were small, injured birds.

“Oh, you poor things,” she crooned to them. “I’ll get you to Coll quick as I can. She’ll know what to do with you.”

Robert chuckled. “Nice to know they’ll be taken care of. As requested, that’s Veil Studies - volumes three and seven - and something Dalish-ish.”

The ‘Dalish-ish’ book, had no title, but appeared to be a handwritten account of a first apprentice from some tribe in the Anderfells.

“Oh, Coll will love this!” Kate cried, her eyes brightening. The formerly-Dalish under-librarian would likely copy it out word for word, Kate thought. And Coll would probably test out every single
spell when no one was looking. Kate would be right there with her, overseeing the whole process and taking notes. After all, research was what Kate did best.

“Well, you said to snap up anything remotely elfy,” Robert said. He started flipping through the dwarven poetry book again. “Check out what I hid inside the Dalish one.”

Kate carefully flipped through the pages until she found a small leaflet.

“Anders’ Manifesto!” Kate gasped, nearly spilling all the books off of her lap. “Oh Maker!”

Kate promptly slammed the Dalish book shut, stuffed it under her bottom and sat on it.

“Here now,” Robert said, frowning. “That’s a book. Don’t crumple it like that.”

“Sorry,” Kate whispered. She pulled the book out from under her butt and peeked in on the manifesto, tucked between the pages.

“How did you find it?” she hissed, looking up over the edge of the notebook.

“Not easily, nor cheaply,” Robert said. “Now admit it Katie: who is your favorite cousin?”

“As if that was ever in doubt,” Kate replied. “Oh, but Maker! Everyone will want to read the Manifesto. But if the templars find it…” Kate chewed her lower lip.

“Rethinking your literary criminality?” Robert asked, still leafing through his book of poems.

“Never,” Kate said. “But the false bottom on my luggage might be too risky for this one. Hmm… If I put it on my person, they’re sure to find it.”

“Surely they don’t strip search you when you return from visits home?” Robert laughed. When Kate said nothing, his smile faded instantly.

“You must be joking!” he cried, looking over at her. “What cheek! You’re a Trevelyan! You should tell your mother!”

“I’m a mage,” Kate said with a sigh. “And a rather silly mage at that to be risking tranquility for a few books. But then, if these books are burned, all their words will be lost. It’s like executing a person to end ideas like that.”

“Hear, hear,” Robert agreed, returning to his poems.

“Maybe,” Kate went on, “I could slide this into the binding of my copy of the Chant.”

“Oh, now there’s an idea,” Robert said. “It’ll be a miracle if your prayer book doesn’t spontaneously combust in it’s proximity to blasphemy.”

“Let’s hope not,” Kate chuckled. She considered the books for a moment more, then sighed and leaned back against the deck chair.

“What?” Robert asked, his brows furrowing.

“Nothing,” Kate said.

She stared out across the gardens, catching sight of the Vimmark Mountains in the distance. Somewhere far beyond those stark, rocky peaks lay Kirkwall, Kate thought. That was where Anders had penned this manifesto, where he had taken matters into his own hands and started the mage
rebellion. And all through the wide world, that rebellion had turned into open warfare.

It was hard to believe that a battle was going on out there in city streets and country lanes all over Thedas. Here on the Trevelyans’ house veranda, life went on as sleepily as it always had. And Kate was still reading about life in books, caught somewhere between life in the Circle and life in the ranks of the nobility. She was an ambassador to both sides, as her mother constantly reminded her. Kate was a bridge between worlds.

Bridges were lonely objects, really. They only had a few points of contact with anything and spent most of their time suspended in mid-air. And they were always getting stepped on, Kate thought. She let out a long sigh.

“Really Katie, what’s wrong?” Robert asked, and Kate realized her cousin had been watching her in concern.

“If you don’t want those books, I can take them back,” he told her. “I only got them because you asked for them.”

“No, no,” Kate said, waving a hand. “It’s not that.”

She picked up her teacup, then remembered it was cold. With a frown, Kate set the cup down again.

“It’s just… I’m sorry,” she said. “This book has me out of sorts.”

“The dwarven poetry?” Robert asked, holding up his book.

“No, although that didn’t help.” Kate said, attempting a smile. She brushed her fingers over the cover of the book in her lap. “Everyone said the Tale of the Champion was ‘a thrilling read.’ But I just find it… sad.”

“Not the best of endings,” Robert agreed. “But I guess the writer couldn’t change the tale too much without people protesting.”

“It’s more than the ending,” Kate said. “From the beginning, magic makes everything so hard for everyone. Magic makes Hawke strong, but it isolates her. She spends most of her life in hiding. Even when she’s living in a fine house and surrounded by money, she isn’t really safe. She still hides her magic, hides her thoughts and feelings - even from herself. So when Anders comes along…”

“He snaps her up like easy prey?” Robert suggested.

“That’s not fair,” Kate said, frowning at him. “You don’t know what Hawke and Anders had together.”

“And you do?”

“Well no,” Kate admitted. “But this writer… what’s his name?” She checked the front cover, then set the book back down. “This Varric Tethras perfectly captures what it’s like to be a mage in love.”

“Oh?” Robert straightened, interested now. “So mages really can do that electricity thing during - you know.” He raised his brows expectantly.

“What?” Kate blinked. “No! Er, I don’t know. I mean, I never tried… That’s not my point, Robert.”

“Sorry. Please continue.”

“What I mean is,” Kate said in exasperation, “If you’re a mage, you can never trust that anyone will
like you for yourself. You can’t trust that anything you have will last.”

Kate felt tears rising in her throat. It would seem that the book had not only touched a nerve, but left it exposed, too.

“You can’t trust that anyone will choose you for you,” she said. “And you can’t trust that anyone will feel safe around you. You can’t feel safe with anyone else either, because what happens if they betray you? What happens if the templars put pressure on them? Will your lover just toss you aside? Will they pull away and protect themselves? When the Chantry regards mages as something less than people, how can you ever hope that anyone will treat you with decency?”

Kate found a tear was running down her cheek and she quickly wiped it away. She also realized that her voice had been trembling. She now felt very foolish.

“Who treated you so badly?” Robert wanted to know. Kate shook her head.

“No one,” she said.


“Look, it’s not about that,” Kate said. “It’s just that I can’t leave the Circle. I can’t really live anything resembling a normal life. And then this story goes on to remind me that things wouldn’t be any easier if I lived outside of the Circle. I’d still have magic. Hawke and Anders aren’t sure if they can find true love, and they’re both free, Robert. They’re free, and it’s still not enough.” Kate nearly cried there, and stopped to swallow down the tears.

“Yes, but Hawke and Anders are also totally co-dependent,” Robert replied. “That’s the real problem with them, not the fact that they’re both mages. Hawke should have stuck with Isabela, in my opinion. The Pirate Queen was a better fit for Hawke - and the sex was steamier.”

“I… That… Of course you can dismiss it so easily. But really, Robert, it is hard to be close to anyone when you’re a mage. Even friendship is dangerous. The Circles are a dangerous world. If you slip up, you’re done for.”

“You think it’s all that different than living here?” Robert said, frowning. “Templars or the the patronesses of society - they’re all jailers in long skirts. Every last one of them.”

“What? It’s not at all the same!” Kate said, angry now.

“Sure it is,” Robert replied. “You remember Gwynna?”

“Gwynna?” Kate blinked at the sudden change of subject. “Gwynna Inglethorpe?”

“Exactly,” Robert said. “I absolutely adored her when I was fifteen. Completely mad for her. Followed her around for years.”

“Right,” Kate said, slowly. “But then you were off after Henrietta What’s-her-Name. That cousin of the Howes.”

“Because Gwynna left me for Percival Pennock. Old Percy seduced her to get back at me for winning our yearly wallop match. Then I lost Henrietta because she decided that Lorne Turner would - and I quote - ‘match better with her wardrobe.’”

Kate scowled at that. “She’s a twit.”
“Everyone in the world is a twit, Katie,” Robert replied. “Everyone except you and me. You think people like you for yourself, and then you find they’re shallow and fickle and they’re only at the party for the free drinks. Soon as the wine dries up, they’ll stab you in the back. So you have your fun while you can and you move on. You learn that there’s a few people you can trust and you hang onto them. Same thing as the Circles, I’d imagine.”

Kate opened her mouth, the forced herself to shut it and keep it shut. Her first impulse was to declare that no, being a mage was not the same thing as being a member of the nobility. She felt she ought to know, as she was both. But Robert had never spoken like this before, actually giving some sort of reason for his roguish wandering from bedchamber to bedchamber. Kate thought for a moment longer, then ventured:

“At least you don’t have the threat of death or tranquility hanging over your head.”

“Oh, sort of,” Robert replied, idly turning the pages of his book. “There’s always the trouble of being challenged to a duel if you sleep with the wrong person. And there’s the threat of being cast out of society entirely. Oh, don’t look at me like that. I know you’ve got it worse as a mage, but I don’t think my life is a picnic either. It’s dull as tombs around here when you’re gone. I tend to stir up trouble just to keep from getting bored. At least you have some friends in the Circle.”

“Some,” Kate agreed. But she still wanted… Well, what was it that she wanted?

“I suppose I just want to be liked for myself,” she said, answering her own question aloud.

“Me too,” Robert agreed. He re-opened the volume of dwarven poetry, evidently done with the subject.

“And to do some good in the world,” Kate added.

“I’ll leave that part to you,” Robert replied. “Ah, here we are. Perfect example of the human condition. Er, dwarven condition. Listen to this, Katie.”

“Yes,” Kate said after a moment.

“What is a kiss, if not a way
To steal a bit of breath away?
What is embrace if not a bind,
A snare which one cannot unwind?
What is climax if not a cry
A desperate call to come alive?
And what is love but short-lived storm
Howling all night, but gone by mom?

There was a long moment of silence as Robert just stared at the book.

“That’s sad,” Kate said after a moment.

“Life’s rather sad,” Robert replied. Without another word, he turned the page, lost in poems and language again. Kate watched him for a moment, then returned to her books. She considered the manifesto, but after hearing that mournful poem, it didn’t seem at all the right thing to read. Besides, she’d just reached the good part of the Tale of the Champion. Kate tucked the other books beside her and returned to her novel.

She and Robert sat side by side in the deck chairs, reading all afternoon. They scarcely noticed as the
sunset cast long shadows along the back garden, as the storm broke at last and lightning flickered in the clouds and thunder rolled across the sky. Rain pattered down on the back garden and Kate grew cold, but she was too absorbed in her story to notice.

When she reached the end of the book, Kate’s eyes filled with tears once more. She finished the last page, then then she slammed the book shut and abruptly stood.

“You alright?” Robert asked, looking over at her. Kate nodded sharply. She wadded up all the books - Tale of the Champion and the contraband volumes - into her blanket and held the mass of it to her chest.

“Great,” she said, her voice trembling. “I’m great. I’m going to find myself a cup of tea.”

“Kate?” Robert asked.

But Kate did not answer. As she walked into the house, she could only think of the ending of the Tale of the Champion, and a scene that she felt sure would haunt her for months to come:

“You’re leaving me?” Anders asked. The worlds caught in his throat and his eyes filled with tears. “But I thought… When you said I could stay, I thought…”

“Anders, I needed your help,” Hawke shot back. “I needed you with me to protect the mages of Kirkwall.”

“And we did,” he said, his heart soaring with triumph to think of it.

“So many died,” Hawke said, gritting her teeth. “So many. And now…”

She broke off there and ran a hand over her face. When Hawke let her arm drop, Anders saw she’d left a smudge of blood across her nose. It could have been a tattoo, or warpaint, perhaps. It would have made her look fierce, if not for the anguish in her tear-filled eyes.

“Maker save us, what do we do now?” she moaned. “I’ve got to get these people to safety. I’ve got to get our friends to safety,” she began pacing as she spoke. “Knight-Captain Cullen let us go. I have no idea why, but I’m not going to waste it. Aveline will be alright, but Merrill and Fenris… We’ll take Isabela’s new ship. We’ll leave tonight.”

“You’d just leave Kirkwall?” Anders asked. “Leave all the apostates who are in hiding?”

“Yes. No. Damn it, I don’t know!” Hawke shouted, whirling on him. “I don’t have some big plan, Anders. I never did! I was always making this shit up as I went along. And now… Aw, damn it! I don’t even know where to go.”

She threw her hands over her head, elbows bent and fingers threaded in her dirty hair.

“I know a place where the mages can be safe,” Anders told her. “Where we can all be safe. It’s in Ferelden - a place full of caves. I hid there once. Smugglers used it years ago, but they cleared out after the last Blight. We could hide there. You and me.” Hawke peeked out at him from between her arms.

“We could bring so many mages with us,” Anders urged, his words a lovers’ plea.
Hawke’s arms dropped to her sides. Her eyes were flashing fire.

“So many mages?” she repeated. Anders, desperate to make her see, pressed on.

“Think of how many we could save. You and me. This is only the beginning. The rebellion will spread. It has to spread. And the mages would follow you. With you as their champion…”

“I am not their champion!” Hawke shrieked, and a bolt of lightning slammed down into the ground just feet away from her. “I’m not anyone’s champion anymore! Don’t you get it? You just fucked up my city! You did! Here’s me, the Champion,” she held out one hand, fingers curled in a fist. “And here’s the monsters and the dragons and shit,” Hawke held up another hand. “And I fight them. Simple job, right?” She slammed her fist into her hand. “But not if my fucking boyfriend is the monster! Shit, Anders! Did you even think about what this would do to me? I should have killed you on the spot!”

Anders swallowed. What was left of his heart seemed to crumble within him.

“But I won’t,” Hawke said. “And you know why? Because I don’t operate on rules or ‘principles,’” she sneered as she made air quotes around that word. “Killing on principle is your gig, Anders.”

“I did this for you,” Anders whispered. “For us.”

“You didn’t do this for me,” Hawke spat. “Or for any mage. Not for any one mage, anyhow. You did this for the nameless, faceless mass of mages that doesn’t really exist. You did this for some stupid ideal that we non-possessed people can’t see.”

“I did this for Justice,” Anders said, growing angry now. He was sure his eyes were glowing blue, could hear the tell-tale deepening of his own voice. “For freedom.”

“You did this for yourself,” Hawke shot back. “You were always the one who wanted a fight. But I didn’t. And I sure as shit didn’t ask to be made into a general in your fucking war!”

Anders sucked in a breath, and Justice’s burn faded from him. It left him bitterly cold.

“The war was coming, Hawke, whether you want it to or not.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Hawke cried, throwing her hands in the air. In that moment, Anders finally realized there was no way to make her see. Even this - even this - the fall of the Chantry, the wrath of the templars, the slaughter of all those mages. And she still did not think the war was inevitable. Anders felt the sharp bite of disappointment, like fangs to the heart.

“You could have led us, Hawke,” Anders told her, his voice raw. “You could have made life so much better for all mages. Not just for yourself.”

Hawke’s eyes flashed. “I made life better for my friends, Anders. For my city. I wasn’t fighting for some damn idea. I was fighting for people. Actual people. But apparently, that’s not good enough for some.”

“How can you say that you’re fighting for people when most of the world is suffering, Hawke?” Anders wanted to know. “You hate me now, but someday,” he took a step forward and spoke with all the conviction he felt, “Someday, someone like me will love someone like you. And there will be no templars to tear them apart. That’s why I did this.”

Hawke stared at him.
“You tore us apart, Anders,” she told him. “No templars necessary.”

“I know,” Anders replied. And then, because it had to be said: “I’m sorry.”

“So am I,” Hawke said. Her eyes filled with tears, and she turned from him. She began to walk away, and Anders felt his own heart being torn from his chest as she did so.

“I warned you I’d break your heart,” Anders called after her.

But Hawke did not answer. She walked away and did not look back.
Chapter Summary

In which possession is nine-tenths of the spirit’s law

10th Harvestmere, 9:41 Dragon (one month ago)

The mage pressed onward into the forest. There could be no hesitating now, no pause in his pursuit - even if this path lead to his death.

As if death frightened him, Anders thought with a sneer. He’d seen much worse than death in his lifetime.

Anders stepped carefully around a boulder, then clambered over a fallen log. The ground was slick in the twilight, and yesterday’s snow was melting under the onslaught of falling rain. The weather had fluctuated between rain and snow for days, as if Ferelden couldn’t make up its mind if it should cling to autumn or free-fall into winter. Normally, it would be difficult to track through such weather, what with the rain wiping away all scent and the flurries of snow obscuring any footprints.

Good thing Anders needn’t rely on traditional tracking.

Instead, Anders reached inside, listening to the blighted song that hummed through his veins. Years ago, he’d joined the Wardens in a desperate bid for survival. But soon, he’d found that the Wardens were just another cage. Anders had run from them the first chance he got. Some of the Warden’s chains remained, however. The taint in Anders’ blood was like a shackle about his wrist - a constant reminder as to the cost of his freedom.

Then again, there had been times when the taint proved useful. The blight within the Wardens’ blood allowed them to sense other darkspawn - and one another. Anders had once saved a young man’s life because of that ability. And now Anders found himself using the blight-song to track Wardens once again.

Anders normally would have stayed the Void away from the Wardens. In the past, he had feared the Wardens might decide that he needed ‘re-conscripting.’ But these Wardens that he hunted - they were a different story. They had conscripted two mages under Anders’ protection, and Anders - or Justice rather - would see them pay if those mages were harmed.

And here Hawke had once said that Anders never helped any mage as a person. Well, if only she could see him now. For truthfully, this was Justice’s hunt as well as Anders’. Over the past year, both man and spirit had lived a listless, desperate sort of existence. They were always on the run, always seeking the next battle for freedom. They had spent several months hunting rogue templars in the Free Marches, until word came that the Circles had voted for their freedom – and the rogue templars planned to punish them for it.
Anders ought to have been thrilled with this news, but he wasn’t. It was so typical of the enchanters to vote for freedom. As if such a thing could be decided by committee. Freedom was the right of every mage, whether they embraced it or not. And many mages had not embraced it. Scarcely more than half of the mages voted for independence. With such lackluster support, the rebellion started crumbling before it even began. The backlash from the Templars was predictable - and brutal. Anders had fled to Ferelden in the dead of night, helping a band of twenty apostates board a smuggler’s ship.

Once in Ferelden, Anders had done what he could. He helped apostates to safety whenever he encountered them. He had healed them, helped them find shelter and lodging. He had kept his ear out for safe, isolated valleys, for villages willing to take in a trained healer or two. But Anders himself kept moving. He was still wanted for crimes against the Chantry, after all, and Sebastian Vael, Prince of Starkhaven had placed a target on Anders’ back. But even if Anders had been just any other mage, he would not have joined with the other mages. They simply wanted to rest. It was pathetic how quickly the mages had flocked to the Conclave that the Divine convened in Haven. Anders was not at all surprised to hear that it had turned into a massacre.

No doubt the templars had been behind it, Anders thought. The remaining mages had holed themselves up in Redcliffe Village, hiding behind walls as they were wont to do. Anders hadn’t heard much about the mage ‘rebellion’ since. Honestly, he wasn’t quite sure what to think of those cowards anymore. Mages who could not be bothered to fight for their freedom angered him as much as the mages who actively bowed to the Chantry’s laws. The whole thing made him furious, made Justice furious. So Anders had kept his head down and done what he could. He freed his few apostates, he hunted templars, and when he could, he traveled back through familiar villages and checked in on his former apostate charges. It was on his last such visit to the farms near Amaranthine that Anders had learned that two of his charges had gone missing.

An apprentice named Simon and his mentor, Lewis, had been nearly dead when Anders found them hiding in a cave along the Storm Coast. Anders had healed them, fed them, then convinced an Amaranthine farmer and her husband to take the mages in. Being Fereldens, the couple were suspicious of strangers, but compassionate and practical. They needed the help with the harvest coming in, and mages would do as well as anyone else, they supposed. The boy was strong, and the older mage could brew a good ale. So the farmers had agreed to help. The mages had a home, and Anders had gone on his way. But when Anders stopped back through, the farmers had grim news. Less than a week ago, Simon and Lewis had been conscripted by Wardens.

‘Strange Wardens,’ the farmers had said. One of them smelled funny, like iron and storms.

Bloodmagic, Anders had thought. But the farmer hadn’t been able to confirm that. All the farmer knew was that the funny-smelling fellow had been whispering to Simon and Lewis. The two mages had looked terrified and had gone off with the Wardens that very night. The Wardens didn’t wait for dawn. The mages took no extra clothes, no spellbooks, no bedrolls, no supplies and no food. Strangest of all, the lot of them had headed west. And yet, the farmer had heard rumors of darkspawn on the coast to the north. It didn’t add up, the farmer had said. It didn’t add up at all. The farmer would have gone after those Wardens, if she’d thought it would help. But what good was one person against three Wardens?

Anders could see her point. But Anders was more than just one person. So Anders and Justice had set out immediately.

It had taken Anders two days to pick up on the Wardens’ trail. He tracked the Wardens by the blight in their blood, even though weather had pushed back against him at every turn. He was deep in the heart of Ferelden now, a day’s ride from the coast, not far from the smuggler’s country of
Crestwood. And now, it seemed, Anders had found those ‘strange’ Wardens at last. There was a clearing ahead, and a fire burning within it. Most telling of all, the song of the taint hummed loudly in Anders’ blood, mingled with the harmony of those other Wardens. The blight-song was like a funeral dirge, melancholy and reedy.

The trouble was, the Wardens would be able to hear him as surely as he heard them. Though at the moment, Anders could scarcely hear the blight-song for the distant pulse of the Calling with him. The Calling felt like a stumbling heartbeat, or the flapping of ancient wings. It seemed Anders’ time had come at last, and a lot more quickly than he would have expected. He would die of the blight before long, and the taint would at last poison him.

So he was dying, Anders thought. Well, that wasn’t exactly news. He’d been living on borrowed time for a while now. And Justice took up so much space in his head that Anders felt stretched thin these days. For that reason, Anders meant to help what mages that he could for the rest of his miserable lifetime - however long or short it may be. And right now, the mages that needed helping were poor Simon and Lewis.

Anders crept slowly along the tree line until he was right at the outskirts of the camp. They’d pitched no tents, had no shelter at all. A smoking campfire burned in the drizzling rain - strange sight, really. Its light flickered red-gold against the yawning darkness of the forest. A short distance from the trees, a standing stone poked out of the earth like a gnarled finger. And there, huddled against the stone was Anders quarry: fifteen year old Simon, and Lewis, back-to-back with his apprentice. Simon clutched his hands together at his belly. His clothes were muddy, his face pale, but he had no outward injuries. Lewis, however, had a bruise upon his face and shadowed eyes. They both looked petrified.

Anders felt the burn of Justice within him, felt the hot, blue light build behind his eyes. Anders coaxed the spirit back - and his temper with it. Instead of charging in, Anders listened with his magic, listened with his blood as well. He did not sense taint around Lewis or Simon, so they must not have gone through the Joining ritual yet. But there was strange smell all through the clearing. The stone reeked of it.

**Bloodmagic.** Justice whispered within him. Anders felt a flare of anger, but still he remained cautious, watching.

Why did the Wardens not sense him, Anders wondered? Was the bloodmagic interfering somehow? Or perhaps Justice blocked Anders from their senses? Whatever the reason, the Wardens did not call out to him, did not seem to notice his approach. So Anders decided to take advantage of their lapse. He crept forward, straining his ears to hear what the Wardens were saying.

“Clarice wants us at the meeting point as soon as possible,” a gruff voice said. It belonged to a barrel-chested man, the kind who made up the bulk of the Wardens. No doubt this fellow was a former foot soldier, stronger than most and conscripted young. He looked worn and weary from his many years of service. “So I guess we’d better do the Joining on these recruits so we can get a move on,” the fellow said, hiking a thumb at Simon and Lewis.

“If they survive it,” the other Warden put in pitilessly. She was a sharp, weasel-faced elven woman, and she crouched by the fire, sharpening her dagger with a whetstone. “Dunno why you let that Vint talk you into takin’ ‘em.”

Vint? Anders thought, perking up at the word. What did a citizen of Tevinter have to do with the recruiting of Wardens?

“We ought to be conscripting everyone we see,” the gruff Warden replied. “Those farmers back
there - that woodcutter we passed, too. Gonna need all of ‘em, what with the song so loud.”

The weasel-faced woman frowned and continued sharpening with a vengeance. “Don’t see how those two are gonna help us with any of that,” she said, angrily. “The old one is slowin’ us down and the boy can scarce use his magic. But no. The Vint had to have mages. Mages. Pah.” Here she spat upon the ground.

“I know you don’t like ‘em, but we’re all on the same side once we’re Joined,” returned the gruff one. “So let’s get ‘em through the ritual and be done with it.”

They weren’t being very considerate of their recruits, Anders thought. Not that Wardens had a reputation for kindness, but these seemed more calloused than most. They didn’t seem to even notice that the mages were listening. Young Simon sat shivering. Lewis reached over to him, touched his shoulder and gave the boy a knowing look. It seemed to say, _Soon._

Anders stiffened in surprise. Were the two of them been planning their escape? If so, they were more daring than most - or more desperate. The Wardens didn’t usually let anyone leave a Joining ceremony. They didn’t usually let anyone leave at all.

“Fine then,” the weasel-faced woman sighed, stopping in her sharpening. “Hey Vint!” she shouted, “You got that blood-mix ready?”

“Nearly,” came the silky reply.

With that, Anders realized that there was a third person in the clearing. A sour-faced, dark-haired man had been standing by the stone, hidden by shadow and rain. He wore long robes - mage robes - but they were not from any Circle that Anders know of. This must be the Tevinter, Anders supposed. But he was a mage. Did that make him one of those infamous magisters? The fellow wasn’t a Warden, that was for certain. His blood was not tainted - yet. Perhaps he was another recruit.

“Get on with it, Vint,” the elf-woman said.

“I have a name, you know,” the Tevinter mage drawled, as Anders crept right up to the edge of the clearing and crouched in the bushes there. “Lord Livius Erimond of Vyrantium, Magister of…”

“Come off it,” the elf said, sheathing her blades. “We weren’t impressed by your title the first time you said it, and we’re not impressed now. You’re here to help, so help.”

So this fellow was some sort of advisor, Anders mused? That made no sense. The Wardens kept their own council, usually.

“Of course, madam,” Lord Erimond said, with just the faintest sneer. Anders was willing to bet he’d never been spoken to in such a manner by an elf before. He turned back to the stone, but then did the strangest thing. He looked right at Lewis and pressed his finger to his lips. Lewis nodded, and Simon went deadly pale.

Now what was that about? Was the Tevinter helping Simon and Lewis escape? Perhaps Anders’ rescue was unnecessary.

“Still sore that we lost Hannonth,” the elven woman grumbled to the gruff warrior. “Wouldn’t have to resort to usin’ an outsider’s help if we had him with us.”

She spoke low, but Anders was willing to bet the Tevinter mage still heard her. “Or if you’d ever bothered to learn the mixin’ of the Joining draught.”
“Don’t look at me,” the warrior said with a shudder. “I touched it once. That was enough.”

Anders blinked - both in surprise and from the rain pouring into his face. Lord Erimond was making the Joining draught? How did a Tevinter magister know a Warden secret like that? Even Anders had no idea how it was done. Though Anders recalled that the Seneschal of Vigil’s Keep had done mixing honors in Anders’ Joining, and that fellow hadn’t been a Warden either. Still, for a Tevinter mage to be involved in such secrets?

Anders didn’t like it. Neither did Justice. Together, they crept closer.

“And there we are,” Lord Erimond called out into the darkness. He was picking up a heavy-looking chalice now, and turned slowly. “If this works, I shall present myself to your Warden-Commander with news of my triumph.”

“Not sure she’d care about two more runty Wardens recruits,” the elven woman told him. “Don’t start braggin’ about nothings.”

“Oh, but she is quite desperate for a solution to your problem, isn’t she?” Erimond replied. “More pawns for the chessboard,” he murmured, half to himself. “Strategy for the game. Oh, and yes, your ritual is ready.”

“Bout time,” the elf began, but then she gaped. “Don’t pour it out!”

For Erimond held out the goblet, then slowly turned it upside down.

“Hey! Stop…!” the gruff Warden began, but then he stopped. Nothing came out of the goblet after all. The cup was empty.

“What the…?” the warrior said, looking about, as if he could spot the missing liquid somewhere in the mud surrounding them. “But I thought you said…”

“I lied,” Erimond sneered.

It happened so fast that Anders couldn’t have stopped it if he’d tried. As it was, he was too stunned to move.

One moment, Simon and Lewis were crouched against the standing stone. The next, they launched themselves at the Wardens with unnatural speed. Simon tackled the elf woman to the ground, and Lewis slipped right up behind the warrior. Before Anders could blink, Lewis had slit the warrior’s throat. Blood spilled from the wound like split wine. Lewis shoved the warrior, and the Warden fell face-down on the ground. At Lewis’ side, Simon stood. His hands were perfectly still, dripping blood mixed with rain. On the ground lay the elf-woman. A knife was stuck deep in her heart.

Anders surged to his feet. Rain poured around him, Justice burned within him. But the three mages in the clearing did not seem to notice him. That bastard Erimond was grinning at the bodies. Lewis and Simon stood still as if they had become statues.

Anders ran into the clearing. As he ran, he shouted something - something stupid like ‘Stop!’ or ‘Wait!’ but no one heard him. For in that moment, the small campfire suddenly burst into a bonfire. It turned red - a deep blood red that no natural fire could even duplicate. Then a demon - no, two demons, crawled out of the embers of that bloodfire. They were rage demons. They looked like upright slugs made of lava, but gifted with long, apish arms. The demons roared into the clearing, right toward Simon and Lewis. But the mages did not move.

“Simon!” Anders shouted, not caring that he’d completely given himself away by now. “Lewis! Get
behind me!

But they did not answer. They stood still, their eyes dead, as the rage demons slid right up beside them. But instead of eating them, the demons stopped. The demons turned around and stared at Anders. Simon and Lewis did the same. They all stood there, as if in ranks, staring straight into the storm. The rain pattered down on the rage demons, leaving scorching little ash marks in their glowing hide. The ground beneath the demons steamed. At last, the Tevinter mage looked at Anders, and his cruel eyes narrowed.

“I thought I sensed a glimmer of magic out there,” he said. He looked Anders up and down, taking in the torn clothes and worn staff. “I thought you were a demon at first, but it seems I was mistaken. Are you another mage come to join my army? I’m so sorry, but I’m fresh out of sacrifices at present.”

“What have you done to them?” Anders demanded.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Erimond asked, as if Anders was quite simple. “A clever mage can bind a demon to his will, but they become more difficult to manage the more you bind. Yet in my genius, I have found a way to bind mages to my will. Simple concept, tricky execution.”

“You did this as an experiment?” Anders gaped at the man.

“You haven’t any proper research facilities in this Maker-forsaken country, now do you?” Erimond sniffed. “So I’ve had to make do. And it seems my tenacity has finally payed off. A pity that those doubters in the Magisterium aren’t in attendance to my triumph. Still, a passing vagabond apostate makes a decent audience as well.”

“So this is just some game to you?” Anders spat. “You prey upon your own kind?”

“My kind?” Erimond said, as if tasting the word and finding it unpalatable. “No, no. I’m far superior to these base-born Laetans. It’s only you southern mages who dream of equality. Like these Wardens, with no proper ranks.” Here he sneered, and kicked the body of the dead elf.


Anders shook his head angrily. “Is that why you did this to them? Because they dared to seek freedom?”

“What? Not at all. Really, there is no need for me to keep the lower elements in their places when your Chantry had been doing an excellent job at it. Surely they’ll restore things to order soon enough. No, I have a bigger goal.”

“And what is that?” Anders wanted to know.

“I could tell you,” Erimond said, glancing at the skies. “But then, predictably, I’d have to kill you. Actually, I’ll have to kill you regardless. But I’ll tell you what. I can be sporting. Help me find another sacrifice, and I’ll bind you and use you in my master plan. Resist me, and I’ll let these demons torture you slowly. It will be a good test for them - see how well they perform under orders.”

“I will not be possessed by your paltry pets,” Anders said, glaring at the man.

“Oh, but my pet is not paltry,” the mage said. “My minion is Fear. Fear did this, you see. The mages were terrified of the Joining. They only wanted to stay at the farm. And I may have played up the danger of the Joining more than was necessary. And then, of course, the Wardens fear their Calling.
It’s singing to all of them, you see.”

“All of them?” Anders blinked. These Wardens had heard the Calling as well? He’d thought it had just been him who was dying.

“Oh yes,” Erimond grinned. “And how they fear it. With fear as my whip, I drive them to do anything. I can make these mages murder. I can feed the Wardens worry. And they do worry so much - about their small numbers, the impending Blight, the darkspawn, their limited days. So I encouraged these Wardens to recruit these two fool mages, then encouraged the mages to fight for their freedom. Really now, once Fear has taken root, all you have to do is stand back and let terror grow.”

“You lied to them.”

“Truth is rarely as frightening as lies,” the mage said. “Once you face up to it, truth loses it’s sting so quickly. As it was, this situation was easy to orchestrate. I’ve done something similar several times now, to many other Wardens and apostates. This is just the first time the binding actually worked.”

“You’ve done this before?” Anders gaped.

“I said that, did I not? By the Black City, you southern barbarians are thick. But then, that’s what makes you all so charming. You never seem to see a genius’ plan in the making. The Wardens least of all.”

“The Wardens will never fall for a charlatan like you,” Anders spat.

“Of course they will,” Erimond laughed, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “They already have done. The Warden-Commander herself bade me continue my ’research.’ Though I doubt she realized I’d be using her own people as the subjects of my experiments. Ah well. What she doesn’t know won’t haunt her, eh?”

“Who are you?” Anders demanded. “Who are you working for?”

“The name’s Erimond,” the man said, inspecting his fingernails. “Lord Livius Erimond, Magister of Tevinter, etcetera, etcetera. As for who I’m working for…”

Erimond paused there, then cocked his head at the blood on the ground. “Do you know,” he said conversationally, “I think I need a stronger bloodfire next time. And older ruins. Much older ruins. The sacrificial stone worked - casting near a shard of ancient evil was a brilliant stroke on my part. But the Veil is still too strong in this part of the world. Something thinner. Somewhere more blighted, perhaps.”

Erimond said this while tapping his chin. At his side, Simon and Lewis continued to stare into the rain. The demons remained rooted and still.

“Unbind them,” Anders commanded, pointing at the two silent mages. “Unbind them now. Or I will kill you. You’re not an abomination or spirit, so you’ll die easily. You’re only human,” he added in a sneer.

“Only human?” Erimond said, turning back to Anders as if he were a rare curiosity. “Why, my dear fellow, how you underestimate our race. The strongest creature in this world was once ‘only’ human. But his magic…” Erimond turned to the fire and his eyes brightened.

“I have seen my god rip the skies to tatters,” he murmured, all in a rush. “His magic made the Anchor - I saw the glory of it burst the sky before it was stolen. Now, while my god recovers his
powers, he allows me to test his dark magics on the unwitting. I am to hone, to craft, to build. I am the artificer of his will. I, a human - ‘only’ human, as you say - I know what it is to hold a god’s power in my hand. And when my master reclains heaven,” he added now grinning up into the rain, “will he not leave his servants the earth in recompense?”

“You’re mad,” Anders said, shaking his head.

“I’m a visionary,” Erimond replied, looking down and sounding perfectly conversational once again. “Though the one is easily mistaken for the other by simpletons.”

Anders growled. He was done being lectured by this monster who killed Wardens and enslaved mages and summoned demons. Justice demanded his due, and so Anders unleashed him. Justice roared through Anders’ throat, shone through Anders’ eyes. Anders felt himself carried aloft, as if floating on a hot current of rage. Everything burned, roared, as if he was underwater - as if he was far away.

“You will never cast such magics again,” Justice roared.

“Well now!” Erimond cried, his surprise distant to Anders’ mind. “This is new. A coherent abomination? How rare. And you hid it so well. I do wish I’d saved a sacrifice for you after all.”

Anders - or Justice, rather - stalked toward the mages, blue fire in his palms, black smoke pouring from him.

You will die, Justice leered. I will end all of you.

“Ah…” Erimond said, taking a step back. “Then again, maybe I was hasty in my victory speech. Discretion is the better part of valor, after all. And I am far more useful to my master alive. So…”

So the bastard ran. He dashed off past the standing stone, flicking his fingers behind him. The fire went out, leaving a glowing Anders alone in the dark.

Not alone, Anders realized. The two bound mages and the rage demons had been unleashed. As Erimond fled, they attacked.

Anders dodged the first demon’s blow just as it came for his head. He shot back ice from his finger tips, freezing the rage demon’s magma body, then striking the demon with his staff. The other demon slashed at Anders just as Simon threw fire. Anders ducked around the standing stone, narrowly missing the blast. Lewis lunged around the stone, a knife in his hand that was aimed at Anders’ throat. In his other hand, the old man had begun to summon lightning. Anders lunged at Lewis faster than a human body should be able to go. His muscles were being pushed by Justice, sped up by Justice. Anders felt his senses sharpening, his anger boiling. Justice gathered up that power and slammed it outward.

The standing stone exploded, shooting debris out in a circle across the clearing. A chunk of it slammed Lewis’s head, crushing the man’s skull. He fell to the ground, his face destroyed. Still Justice whirled around, aiming for the remaining mage and the demons. Justice drew even more deeply upon Anders’ reserves.

Too much! Anders thought wildly, You’re burning me down too quickly, Justice! I haven’t the mana to sustain this!

But Justice wasn’t listening. Simon lunged at Anders, hands swirls of fire, his demon roaring like a rabid dog behind him. Anders didn’t bother with magic for this one. The boy was a sloppy fighter, had never trained in his life. Ander slashed at Simon with the bladed end of his staff. An arc of red
blood spurted from the boy’s face. He didn’t even bother to clutch at his shredded eyes. A second slash slit Simon’s throat, and he fell into the mud. Still the demons remained.

*Slow down!* Anders cried to Justice. He didn’t bother to regret what he’d just done. Killing Lewis and Simon was a mercy, and Anders knew it. Still, *If we use all our magic, we can’t track that magister!*

Justice, however, would not be stopped. The spirit of righteous anger would not permit the survival of these blood-hungry impostors, these lower denizens of the Fade. Anders felt Justice reach deep inside, drawing up all of Anders’ power. Then Justice clawed further back - into the Fade itself. Wisps of healing always lingered near Anders, just beyond the Veil. No matter where he went, Anders could find them, could reach for them to help him cast spells of revival and regeneration. Even when he’d been turned into an abomination, those wisps had not abandoned him.

At times like this, however, Anders almost wished they had. The healing spirits granted Anders a burst of power - but Justice took hold of that gift. Justice sent the blast right through Anders, out his fingertips. A burning blue fire engulfed the clearing. Everything burned, blazed with with blue light: the standing stone, the embers of the bloodmagic fire, the trees, the drizzling rain, the dark underbelly of the clouds. As Anders looked, everything - even he - was shining with unholy Fade-light, burning on and on into the darkness…

Anders woke shivering.

He was soaked to the skin, face down in mud. Justice had gone quiet within him. All the world had gone quiet around him. Anders lifted his head, brushing back his muddy hair from his face.

The clearing was empty - of grass, of stone, of bodies. It was bigger, too, a perfect ring of even ground. Perhaps his fire had scorched it dry, but overnight, it had filled with rain. Still pools lay here and there in the mud, trembling in the early morning breeze. The sky overhead was gray and close, as if Anders could reach up and touch the heavy clouds. For a moment, Anders could not recall what he was doing here.

Then, quite suddenly, he remembered…

The bloodmage. The Wardens. Poor, stupid Simon and Lewis. Their bodies were all gone - burned to ash and sunk in the mud and rain.

Those fools, Anders thought angrily. The Wardens should have left the mages alone. They should have realized their traveling companion was no meek, ‘helpful’ mage, but a rogue magister, sent to prey upon them. And Simon and Lewis should have known better than to turn to bloodmagic. It never fixed anything. It only made everything worse. And to trust a magister…

A magister, Anders thought. What would a magister want with the Wardens? Who was the ‘master’ he’d mentioned? Was this simply Tevinter politics? And to think that Anders had once considered heading to that country, to live among those jackals. If this was an indication of what Tevinter mages were like, Anders would much rather remain hunted and hungry.

Anders pulled himself up to his knees. His every muscle hurt, his bones felt like they were all grinding in his joints. Justice took over with greater force every time. The spirit summoned deeper, harsher magic now, and it was breaking Anders’ body to hold it. Not that Justice cared, Anders thought with a scowl. Justice had never cared about Anders’ humanity, about his needs or his weaknesses.
An image flashed through Anders’ mind - a woman’s smile, freckles on a bare shoulder, laughter as sunlight came streaming in through the windows…

Anders winced at the memory.

Hawke was gone, he reminded himself. He let the words whip over him, a lash to his mind. He was on his own. Another lash.

And he would have to figure this out for himself. Because if this Lord Livius Erimond was targeting both Wardens and mages, Anders must do something. He didn’t owe the Wardens much loyalty, but he ought to warn them at the very least. They could fight darkspawn well enough, but bloodmagic and trickery was clearly something that had blindsided them.

But then again, if what Erimond said was true, then the Wardens had sanctioned his ‘research.’ They had allowed this man into their ranks in the first place, and they might fight anyone who tried to remove him from their cause. Anders would have to be careful in his warning. He couldn’t very well just walk up to a Warden outpost and march in the front door, not with the current price on his head.

A letter then, Anders thought. He would send a letter to… To…

To whom? He hadn’t seen a Warden in months. Old Stroud, perhaps? No, Stroud was likely still in the Free Marches. The local Wardens? That was no good. These Wardens - the now-dead gruff soldier and the elf - were the first Wardens that Anders had seen in months. He knew that Vigil’s Keep stood empty, and even if the Wardens had remained there, Anders didn’t know the new faces. Some fellow had taken charge of the place - Loghain? Was that his name? No, surely not. Loghain was the name of a traitor to the crown. So who was in charge now? Anders couldn’t recall. For the first time, he wished he’d kept up with his Warden contacts, because he could think of no allies at all. He knew no one in the Wardens except…

The name came to him suddenly, and Anders groaned aloud.

Oh blight it all. This would get thorny. Because even if Anders could get hold of that Warden, the surly ass was likely to punch Anders in the face on sight.

Anders shook his head and hauled himself to his feet. His legs nearly buckled under him.

It didn’t matter, Anders thought, as he leaned on his staff. He’d send a letter anyhow. More things were at stake than pride or personal history. If the Wardens were compromised, it might be that the whole world was compromised.

And if Carver Hawke couldn’t see that, then he deserved whatever fate lay in store for him.
The Trevelyan Who

Chapter Summary

In which one cousin gets a promotion and the other wants to get sacked

Chapter Notes

The smutty chibi-chapter The Lion’s Loft (NSFW!) would fall about here. Just FYI.

6th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon, somewhere in the northern Frostback Mountains (present day)

“You want to make Kate our Inquisitor?”

Cullen thought he’d spoken clearly. But Josephine and Cassandra looked confused. Perhaps they regarded his words as some kind of heresy. Leliana merely looked irritated. It was a common expression for the spymaster.

“We thought you would approve, commander,” Leliana told Cullen. “But if you have some objection to Lady Trevelyan’s qualifications…”

She let the sentence trail off there - like a rope she expected Cullen to hang himself with. Cullen frowned and shook his head.

“Of course I have no objection,” Cullen returned. “Kate has proven herself more than capable. After all, we’re here, aren’t we?”

“So we are,” Cassandra agreed.

Instead of remaining stranded on some freezing mountain, Cullen and the others presently stood within a fortress of stone. Kate and Solas had found this abandoned stronghold just days ago:

‘Skyhold,’ Solas had called it.

It was a silly name, but Cullen could let that pass. He supposed it was a bad translation of some rambling elven title. Solas had said that the place had been built by ancient elves - enchanted by those elves as well. Cullen could well believe it. Though wintry mountain peaks surrounded the castle, the grounds of Skyhold remained locked in a perpetual autumn. Cullen found it a bit unnerving, to be honest. But being a practical man, he wouldn’t quibble with sanctuary. The place might be enchanted, but it also boasted a single-path approach, a drawbridge, a reliable water source, and thick outer walls. Even as a ruin, this place was defensible. Once they finished repairs upon it, Skyhold would be nigh unassailable. Even Corypheus and his blighted dragon wouldn’t be able to reach them in here.
To that end, Cullen had been at his worktable in the courtyard, going over the latest plans with the Inquisition’s one surviving stone mason. Then Cassandra, Josephine, and Leliana had arrived and pulled Cullen aside from his work. It seemed they wanted to appoint an Inquisitor, after months of making do without one. Naturally, they had already conferred upon the matter. They had their proposed leader picked out and everything. All that remained was for Cullen to approve.

And Cullen did approve.

Sort of. It was just that, well…

“It is because Kate is a mage and you are a former templar,” Cassandra said, startling Cullen out of his thoughts. “That is why you hesitate.”

“It’s not that,” Cullen told her.

And it wasn’t. Cullen distrusted magic, it was true. Any sane person would. Magic had torn the sky open. Magic had placed a mark upon Kate’s hand - a mark that had the power to open and close the very Veil itself. Magic was the weapon Corypheus had wielded at Haven. But Kate wielded magic as well, and thank the Maker that she did. Kate probably wouldn’t have survived that attack without her powers to aid her.

No, Cullen thought, it wasn’t Kate’s magic that troubled him.

“Is it because Lady Trevelyan is a member of the nobility?” Josephine wanted to know. “I understand you are not enamored of the Grand Game, but the Herald is not at all like the rest of the Ostwick aristocracy. She is the Trevelyan who…”

“I have no reasonable objection to Kate,” Cullen said, cutting off whatever defense Josephine was about to undertake.

“You have an unreasonable objection then?” Leliana asked.

Cullen couldn’t tell if the spymaster was smiling under that hood or not. The noon-day sun was directly overhead, casting odd shadows upon Leliana’s face.

“What is the trouble, Cullen?” Cassandra wanted to know. “I thought you had warmed to Katerina in the past few months.”

More than warmed to her, Cullen thought.

But he couldn’t say that. Instead he said:

“If you recall, Corypheus corrupted the entire Templar Order with red lyrium. I had to fight against my former brethren at Haven. If I seem a bit out of sorts, that’s the reason why.”

There, he thought. Better to offer up a fraction of his frustration, rather than letting them guess the whole of it.

Josephine shook her head in confusion. “But what has red lyrium that got to do with… Oh my! Are you saying that because Kate recruited the mage rebellion, you think she is to blame for what happened to the templars?”

“What?” Cullen snorted. “How did you come to that conclusion? Of course not.”

“That is what you said, Cullen,” Leliana chided.
“I most certainly did not. I’m only saying that I’m preoccupied by the templars’ downfall. But I don’t blame Kate for it. ‘General’ Samson is to blame.”

“And Corypheus,” Cassandra added. “But you are right. It has nothing to do with Katerina. And I, for one, welcome her as our leader. Even if she is a mage.”

The Seeker said this far too loudly, causing a nearby enchanter to look up and stare. Cassandra seemed to forget that this was supposed to be a private conference - in a crowded courtyard. Not the best place for a meeting, really.

“I welcome her as well,” Josephine said more quietly. “The Herald has a good grasp of diplomacy. It would take me a lifetime to teach the etiquette that she has had bred into her from birth. And do recall that we are in a precarious situation here. We are the last of Divine Justinia’s faithful among the Chantry. Yet the mage rebellion has become our allies. As Herald of Andraste, Lady Trevelyen serves as our best bridge between these disparate two groups.”

“Not the most comfortable place for Kate, I imagine,” Cullen muttered.

“We must also consider,” Leliana said, “that Corypheus will strike again. He plans to amass an army of demons. We must gather our forces to meet him. I believe it would be best for Kate to stand against him, as she did before. She would send a message to that monster. She would send a message to the whole world.”

She would, Cullen thought. But also…

“It puts her in a great deal of danger.”

Cullen was a bit surprised to find he’d spoken aloud. Leliana cocked her head. For a moment, she looked a like one of her pet messenger ravens, gawking at something shiny. Cassandra waved a hand dismissively.

“Katerina is always in danger,” the Seeker said. “This has not changed from the moment she dropped out of the Fade. But we have soldiers enough to guard her. She is not much of a warrior, after all.”

“She is getting better…” Cullen tried say in Kate’s defense, but Leliana cut over him with a laugh.

“Josie isn’t much of a warrior either,” the spymaster said, “and yet our ambassador is deadlier than most trained assassins. We don’t need a battlemaster to lead our Inquisition.”

“True enough,” Cullen said, having already considered this several times himself. “What we need is someone who can run missions in the field, but who also has a clear view of what the Inquisition looks like from the top down. We need someone who can listen to all the options and make informed decisions. And it would be helpful if that person could inspire the troops - make speeches, that sort of thing. Organization would be a plus as well. Most of all,” he added, casually resting his hands on the hilt of his sword, “We need someone who’s politically neutral: someone who won’t raise too many eyebrows among the nobility or the remaining Chantry loyalists or the common people in either Ferelden or Orlais.”

The three women stared at him.

“I think you just described our Herald, commander,” Josephine said, raising a brow.

“Let us not forget the most important recommendation of all,” Leliana said. “The people believe that she is the Maker’s chosen.”

The women all nodded solemnly at that. Cullen, however, just frowned.

“Yes, and how much of that is your doing, Leliana?” Cullen wanted to know. “Everyone is talking about how Andraste shielded Kate in a pillar of flame. The story gets wilder with every re-telling.”

“You saw her that night as clearly as I did, Cullen,” Leliana replied. “You saw the manner in which she returned to us.”

“I did,” Cullen admitted. But it wasn’t the fire-spell that he remembered most. He remembered how he’d felt when Kate had stumbled out of the storm, looking frail and broken. Cullen shuddered at the thought.

“It still feels like we’re turning faith into propaganda if we let such rumors fester,” he said.

“But they sang to her, Cullen,” Josephine said. “When she woke the next morning, as the sun was rising. They sang to her. Not because of what we said, but because she gives them hope.”

“They were singing to Andraste,” Cullen replied, crossly. “I was singing to Andraste anyhow. Felt rather thankful we’d all lived, that’s all. And surely I wasn’t the only one on the safe side of blasphemy.” He looked around at the others, then frowned. “Well you weren’t singing praises to Kate, were you?”

“Of course not,” Josephine replied, as Cassandra flatly said, “I was not. But again we are losing sight of our goal. We need a leader for the Inquisition. We have been in need of one for months. Leliana and I searched for Hawke, but she could not be found.”

Cullen snorted. “I still can’t believe that was your original plan. Brigid Hawke would have been a disaster. She would have set fire to Haven long before Corypheus ever showed up.”

“She had her followers,” Cassandra returned.

“I know,” Cullen said, folding his arms over his chest. “I’ve met them. They would have helped her light the fuse.”

“Two months is a long time to decide things by committee,” Josephine put in. “And yet we have been trying to do just that. We need a leader - an official one. After all, we four always end up talking circles around each other.”

“We don’t always do that,” Cullen scoffed.

“Sometimes we do,” Cassandra pointed out.

“Only when Cullen is being stubborn,” Leliana said, arching a brow.

“I believe you’ve just proved my point,” Josephine said, glaring at each of them in turn.

“Then we are agreed,” Cassandra said. “We will appoint Katerina as our Inquisitor.”

“She will do well,” Leliana said. “I only wish Divine Justinia could have met…” She stopped there, her smile faltering. An uncomfortable pause followed. Josephine sniffed. Cassandra looked at the ground, her stern expression exchanged for one of sorrow.

“Are we in agreement, then?” Leliana asked, her voice more subdued now. Cassandra and Josephine
both nodded. Cullen opened his mouth, but for one moment, he did not speak. In that brief moment, as he drew a breath, Cullen allowed himself to admit the truth. The reason he hesitated was this:

Somewhere in the past two months, Cullen had developed a most unwise interest in Lady Kate Trevleyan.

‘Interest’ was not quite the word for it, actually. ‘Interest’ did not capture the complex sensations that rattled around inside of him whenever Kate Trevelyan was around. Most of the time, his feelings for her were fairly innocent: friendly and chivalrous and perhaps a little tender. Cullen would spot Kate across the crowded courtyard and his shoulders would relax. He’d think, Ah, there she is, and he would find himself smiling. But other times, Cullen’s desires grew hot and hungry. His ribcage would feel too tight and his hands would feel too large. Just last night, as he’d been falling asleep…

Best not to consider that misstep, Cullen thought. No, ‘interest’ wasn’t the word for it. But ‘infatuation’ was far worse. Really, this entire realm of - of- whatever this feeling was - it was like enemy territory. Dangers lurked throughout this uncharted place, and Cullen longed for a return to the safer paths of friendship and duty. However, he wasn’t certain how to make his way back to higher ground. He had thought he was past this sort of relational stumbling - a decade past it, to be exact. For many years now, Cullen had managed to work perfectly well with a number of attractive females. None of them had affected him with ‘interest.’ Take Cassandra and Josephine and Leliana, for example. His fellow advisors were all lovely, and yet Cullen had no designs upon any of them. Admittedly, they were beautiful the way that cliffs were beautiful: each woman afforded an excellent view, but a man would be wise to keep his distance.

Yet with Kate, there had been no sharp edge, no warning drop. Cullen had noticed that she was pretty in the same way that he’d noticed she was red-haired, freckled, and tall. It was a fact he’d acknowledged, then ignored. But as Cullen had worked with Kate, he had allowed himself a second look - and a third, and then a fourth. And somewhere along the way, Cullen had spotted it: that strange combination of quiet passion and wry humor that burned at the heart of Kate. It had piqued that interest of his - and left him wanting more.

‘More’ was another dangerous word, Cullen thought. ‘More’ and ‘interest’ had no place in his life. Because right now, Cullen’s mind was being made up for him:

Kate would become the Inquisitor, and Cullen could not harbor feelings towards his superior officer.

He could not harbor feelings for any member of the ranks, Cullen reminded himself. Then again, he mused, the Inquisition had no official rules about fraternization. There was a de facto understanding that soldiers and scouts were to comport themselves with honor and decorum. But generally, Cullen and Leliana had allowed the troops to do what they liked, so long as it was consensual and happened in off-duty hours. The system was a touch lax, Cullen had to admit. But as Leliana had argued, the Chantry’s strictures had caused all sorts of unnecessary trouble. ‘Let’s not enforce chastity at the expense of sanity,” she had said.

Cullen agreed. He didn’t want to waste his time knocking on tent flaps anyway.

But while Cullen didn’t care what his soldiers did on furlough, he could hardly take up such an attitude himself. It would set a terrible example with the troops. And if he were to pursue the Inquisitor herself? It would be unseemly at best, a dangerous conflict of interest at worst. Cullen felt his face heat at the very thought.

Maker’s breath. Why was he allowing himself to think like this? He couldn’t entertain such hopes, even in passing. Even if he had an inclination to explore the landscape that lay between friendship and desire…
No, Cullen thought sharply. There could be no such explorations - not for him. Besides, Kate could not possibly feel the same way. Oh, she had been perfectly polite to Cullen as always. On the journey here, she had checked in with Cullen daily. She’d asked after his soldiers and his injuries and so on. But Cullen hadn’t noticed any special interest on her part. Kate had likewise checked in with Leliana and Cassandra and Iron Bull and everyone. She probably had a list written out, reminding her whom she ought to chat with.

Actually, now that Cullen thought of it, Kate probably did have such a list.

Yes, Cullen mused, Kate was efficient like that. She was also determined and discerning, clever and conscientious. In short, she was about as perfect a candidate for Inquisitor as Skyhold was a fortress for the Inquisition. If Cullen hadn’t been so confused by his feelings for her, he might have suggested the promotion himself. But as he was confused…

Well, that couldn’t matter, now could it? Certainly not. These inclinations would fade in time - at least, Cullen hoped they would. Meanwhile, leaders like Kate did not fall out of the Fade every day. Cullen would not be so selfish as to deny his friend the honor of advancement, nor would he deprive the Inquisition of so fitting a captain.

Cullen looked up to find the others were all staring at him. Hoping that all these uncomfortable self-revelations had registered as nothing more than a momentary pause, Cullen cleared his throat and asked:

“Do you think she’ll accept?”

Kate stood in the guardhouse armory, looking out of the doorway at the courtyard before her. The refugees and soldiers were gathered there among the tents. It seemed like a lot of people when they were all together like that. Yet there had been a lot more people in Haven, Kate thought. They had lost far too many in that fight. Still, they had made it here, and that had to count for something.

Kate stood there on the threshold, caught once again between grief and hope.

She wanted to remember the dead. She also wanted to move on. She wanted to rebuild Skyhold, yet every day, she woke expecting to see Haven.

But most of all, Kate wanted to believe that things were going to get better from here on out. She knew she had absolutely no practical reason to believe that. Corypheus could attack them here. The walls might crumble, and Solas’ wards might fail.

Yet when Kate looked up at the sky, she felt reassured. Survival was a miracle. Survival had to mean something, didn’t it? There must have been a reason that she was spared to fight another day.

Kate had pondered this time and again over the past few days. It might be that the Maker had no plan for the world. It might be that history had no purpose, that the world was defined by chaos and death and a struggle for dominance. But maybe, Kate thought, maybe wanting there to be some sort of meaning to it all was the truest proof that such meaning existed. Or maybe it was the job of people like Kate to make meaning out of the loss. They had lost so many - Keran and Lydia among them.

Surely the survivors had to make the world better in repayment of that debt.

Kate stood taller at the thought. Then she winced as her legs twinged with the movement. Oh bother Iron Bull and his training, Kate thought. The qunari had made Kate run stairs for her morning exercise. And Skyhold had a lot of stairs. She would be feeling this all week.

“Uggh.” Kate groaned and rubbed her aching backside.
“Oh. Well, hello then Katie,” someone said with a laugh.

Kate jumped at the voice, then turned to find Robert standing behind her. Her cousin looked a great deal better than he had after the battle, Kate thought. His bruised eye was nearly healed, and his arm was no longer in a sling.

“I’m just sore from training is all,” Kate said, letting her hand drop.

“You? Training?” Robert looked at her in disbelief.

“It’s true,” Kate told him. “They’ve got me using weapons and everything.”

“Maker save us all,” Robert said, his eyes glinting with humor. “No, don’t glare at me. I’m tempted to join you, actually. Might as well stay fighting fit when I…” He trailed off suddenly, looking her up and down.

“Kate,” he said, in a very disapproving tone.

“What?” Kate asked, confused.

“What in the Void are you wearing?” Robert wanted to know.

Kate looked down at the outfit with a frown. She hadn’t thought it was that bad.

“It’s something Josephine found for me,” Kate replied, feeling a bit defensive.

“She dressed you in pajamas? In the middle of the day?”

“Yes well, they’re clothes, obviously.”

“No so obviously,” Robert returned. “And they’re beige. You look terrible in beige.”

“Why thank you, Robert.”

“Not your fault,” her cousin said, as if this made it better. “Pale as you are, you need something richer. The lower half of your face just seems to slough away in that.” He placed his hand over his own chin to demonstrate.

“They are clean,” Kate said, determined to see a bright side to the outfit. “Most of the refugees are wearing rags.”

“Green,” Robert told her. “Or that sort of wine-red color. What do they call it? Burgundy. As for me, I could use something in a brilliant red or a rich amber gold. Blue works, but…” He grimaced at the shirt he wore. It was an old-fashioned tunic and it was a tad too snug for him. His pectoral muscles were straining the fabric, causing the neck opening to gape wide.

“We could trade,” Kate suggested. “I’ll take that shirt and you can walk about in nothing at all. Can’t be more scandalous than what you’re wearing.”

“Hmm. That might help my cause,” Robert mused. “Hard to know.” With this, he gazed out into the courtyard. Cassandra stood a short distance away, talking with Leliana and Josephine.

Cullen was with them as well, Kate saw. At the sight of Cullen’s handsome profile, Kate’s heart skipped a beat.
There it was, Kate thought - that fluttery, bubbly feeling that she got every time she glanced at Cullen. It might have made her smile - if it wasn’t so completely hopeless.

She must be out of her mind, Kate thought. If she had met Cullen over a year ago, he would have locked her in the Gallows prison without a thought. If she had met him a month ago, he would have dismissed her as just another trouble-making mage out looking for a rebellion. But because Kate was the Herald, Cullen had spoken to her and fought by her side.

And Kate, foolish girl, had grown quite fond of him.

Alright, she admitted to herself. It wasn’t the fondness that was the problem. It was her school-girl fancy for him that was the problem. Surely Cullen did not feel the same. But Kate had not been able to help herself. Over the past few months, she had come to see that the commander was a lot more complex a person than he appeared. Cullen might be gruff and difficult at times, but he was also principled and honest. More than that, the commander was just as well-read as Kate, just as stubborn, and just as quietly observant about the troubles and the follies of the world.

In other words, Cullen was the last person Kate would have expected to find kinship with in the Inquisition. And yet, Kate found herself liking him better and better every day. She knew it was silly. Even if she had been the sort of woman to attract a man’s interest, it would do her no good. She was, after all, a mage.

Kate sighed. Oh, why was she tormenting herself like this, anyway? She had completely forgotten why she’d come into the armory in the first place.

“Maker, she’s a stiff one,” Robert muttered.

Kate had almost forgotten that Robert was standing beside her. She jumped at the sound of his voice. “What’s that?” she asked.

“Cassandra,” Robert said.

The way he said the Seeker’s name was enough. But then there was also the way that Robert looked at Cassandra. It was a sort of wicked, wanting stare that left nothing to Kate’s imagination. She could nearly see the fantasies unfolding in his mind.

“Oh, Robert, really?”


Maker save the boy, Kate thought. Was there any way to discourage him from making a dangerous error? Probably not, but Kate felt she ought to at least offer a fair warning.

“Robert, do you even know Cassandra?”

“Yes,” Robert said, looking affronted. “Well, sort of. We met before the Conclave explosion. Before I got captured and…”

Robert stopped there and frowned. Kate frowned, too. Her cousin had said little about his imprisonment in Therinfal Redoubt. He’d said little in general, which was not at all like him. So if Robert wanted to talk now, Kate was eager to listen.

“Cassandra seemed pleased to see you alive,” Kate ventured. Translation: she didn’t stab you on the spot for kissing her and calling her ‘Cassie’.
Robert just sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. “Whatever happened then, it doesn’t seem to be happening now.”

“What do you mean?”

“We fought together,” Robert said. “It was just like before. Without the kidnapping, of course. But there in the battle, Cassie was right at my back. She knew exactly where to strike, just how to give me an opening. It was... It was amazing.”

Kate had not found the battle ‘amazing’ so much as horrifying. But she said nothing as her cousin continued.

“Then I got wounded trying to block a blade for her. Stupid move on my part. She could have handled that knight much better than me. Anyhow, she helped me to the healer’s tents, stayed with me as they patched me up. One of the healers said she even watched over me as I slept.”

“She did?”

Kate was surprised to hear it. Maybe this infatuation wasn’t so one-sided after all.

“Then I got well,” Robert went on. “And everything went to the Void. She disappeared for three whole days. Off hunting or scouting or something or other. I caught up with her at last, asked if she was alright. ‘Fine,’ she said. In that sort of voice, you know? The one where you know it’s not fine. So I asked if I’d offended her. ‘Not at all,’ she said. Then I asked what was wrong. ‘Nothing,’ she said. Well, now I was sure something was wrong, so I asked her if she wanted me to back off? ‘I don’t know what you mean,’ she said. And then I said - jokingly, mind - did she want to shack up with me in my tent and check all my wounds for me? I told her I’d make it worth her while.”

Kate slapped a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. “Oh Robert, you didn’t.”

“I did. Of course I did. Just wanted to get some reaction out of her.”

“What did she say?”

“Oh, you know. Stammered that she couldn’t possibly and why would I ask her that and was I trying to mock her again? I told her I would never mock her. But she didn’t seem to believe me at that point. So I told her that I’m very serious about seducing her...”

“Maker’s breath, Robert,” Kate groaned. “Did you actually use the word ‘seduce’?”

“Of course I did,” Robert replied. “I’m not going to apologize for liking the woman. I told her she’s remarkable and I plan to pursue her.”

“You...? What? Pursue?” Kate blinked rapidly as she sputtered these words.

“That’s what she said,” Robert nodded. “So I told her it was her choice. I’m not going to bother her if she doesn’t want me. But if she was interested, I’d show her a wonderful time once I got back to full strength. Then she said ‘We’ll see.’ Her actual words. Then her eyes narrowed, but I couldn’t tell if she was wanting to rip my head off, or trying to see through my clothes. But she’s avoided me since we got to Skyhold. I’d give it up for a lost cause, only...”

Robert shook his head and sighed, and Kate took a moment to try and compose a fitting answer.

“Well,” she said. “Cassandra once told me she broke a suitor’s arm when he wouldn’t leave her alone. Considering that she seems both amused and exasperated by you, I’d say that’s a resounding
“maybe.”

“Great. I’m a maybe,” Robert snorted.

“What I mean is that Cassandra grew up in the Chantry. She’s likely a bit inhibited. You, on the other hand, came by your understanding of relationships from an intersection of the taproom and the ballroom.”

Robert frowned. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that Cassandra probably isn’t used to men like you. You can come off as rather flippant and sarcastic, you know.”

“I am flippant and sarcastic,” Robert said, shrugging. His shirt squeaked a bit with the movement. “No,” he said. “Maybe it’s simpler than all that. Maybe she just doesn’t find me attractive.” He frowned at the thought.

Kate resisted the urge to roll her eyes at her cousin. Robert stood there in the doorway, the noonday sun turning his skin a dark bronze and his eyes a glittering gold. He was tall, muscled and handsome. In that skin-tight shirt, he could have posed for the cover of a Portia Plume novel. No, Kate thought, Robert was not lacking in looks.

“Maybe if you just gave her some time…” Kate began.

“And how much time have I got?” Robert wanted to know. “I nearly died the last time I didn’t keep up with her.” Robert looked older as he said this - and sadder than Kate had seen him in a long while.

Kate opened her mouth, but found nothing to say at first. It was very strange for Robert to be so serious about a woman. Typically, Robert would cast his flirtations out upon a crowd as if they were so many gold coins. Then he’d just stand back and see what lady came trotting up to him for a good time. Those relationships never lasted, though neither Robert nor his paramours seemed to care. Kate did not understand it, but neither did she judge him for it. Robert never hurt anyone so far as she knew, and if it made him happy… Well, it didn’t make him happy, but it was the way he’d chosen to cope with the gilded cage of Ostwick. Kate couldn’t blame him for that, any more than she help him break free of that life.

But now, when Robert gazed at Cassandra with that wondering expression, Kate found that something about him had changed. Her cousin was staring at the Seeker in the strangest way, almost as if…

It was the expression he wore when he was reading poetry, Kate realized with a start. When Robert read his books, his lips would move slightly, as if caressing the words. In those moments, he wore this same look of hungry reverence. Robert stood there in the doorway - silent and awestruck, and Kate felt as if she’d stumbled in on someone’s confession to a priestess. She looked at the ground, if only to avoid intruding on Robert’s privacy.

“She’s lovely,” Robert said, mostly to himself.

“She is,” Kate agreed, and because he’d left her an opening, she added: “Cassandra also strikes me as very– She’s very intense, Robert.”

“That’s sort of the appeal, really.”

“As in, she’s the type who hates games and tricks. She won’t like insincerity.”
“Are you calling me insincere?” Robert asked, looking away from Cassandra at last.

“No,” Kate said. “I’m well aware that you’re the Trevelyan who gets weepy at the opera…”

“Hey, keep your voice down, will you?” Robert hissed.

“Look, Robert,” Kate tried again. “You know I trust you. And I know you’re loyal to a fault. But my point is that Lady Cassandra isn’t your usual viper of a fine lady.”

“Are you trying to warn me off or encourage me?” Robert wanted to know.

“I’m just saying that I highly doubt anyone has ever offered to seduce Cassandra in a tent.”

“The world is full of blind fools,” Robert agreed.

Kate ignored this as she continued: “Cassandra will likely take a long time to warm up to you. I mean a really long time, Robert,” she added, when her cousin didn’t seem to hear her. “Nearly a month passed before Cassandra began to trust me, and I was fighting by her side every day. So you might want to decide if you’re serious about…”

“Fighting!” Robert said, snapping his fingers. “That’s it! Katie, you’re a genius!”

Oh dear.

“What now?” Kate asked weakly.

“I’ll arrange for Cassie to train with me. This afternoon, maybe. Or right now, perhaps.”

Kate closed her eyes and let out a sigh. It seemed Robert was missing the point.

“Robert, what I meant was…”

“And if I just chanced to fall underneath her…” Robert went on, tapping his finger to his lips. “Yes, yes. This could work. Because once she has me pinned to the ground…”

With this, Robert strode out into the courtyard, headed for the empty space by the barn. They had been using it as a training ground, so Kate could only assume he was off to make arrangements for a practice bout. Kate watched him saunter away, his shirt straining as he swung his arms. A pair of mage-girls stared at him, then giggled when Robert gave them a jaunty salute.

“Maker help him,” Kate murmured, sending up a weary prayer to whatever deity was in charge of love affairs. She doubted it was Andraste. To date, she couldn’t think of a single person that had found romance through the Chant.

Oh well, Kate thought. She’d offered Robert her advice. She couldn’t force him to take it. Kate sighed, then headed out into the courtyard. She was on her way toward the healers tents when someone shouted, “Inquisitor!”

Kate kept walking, of course. That word meant nothing to her, especially not when a breeze picked up, bringing with it the smell of apples from the trees in the courtyard…

“Kate!”

Kate blinked, and turned to find Cassandra, Leliana, Josephine and Cullen all looking in her direction. Leliana and Josephine were laughing. Cullen had turned red about the ears. Cassandra, however, waved a hand at Kate.
Well this was odd, Kate thought. She turned on her heel and crossed the courtyard to meet them.

“Yes?” Kate asked, but even as she drew near, Cullen hurried away into a crowd of gathered soldiers. Kate’s steps slowed. Well then. Was Cullen trying to avoid her? Now she knew how Robert felt. But no, Leliana and Josephine walked away as well, whispering as they went. Only Cassandra stood her ground, her arms rigid behind her back and a serene smile upon her face. Kate glanced around. Robert was nowhere to be seen. He was gathering practice swords, no doubt.

“There is something that needs to be done,” Cassandra told Kate, before Kate could even ask for an explanation.

Kate laughed at that understatement. “Besides stopping a Siderial Magister from assassinating the Empress of Orlais and plunging all the world into darkness, you mean?” she asked.

“Yes,” Cassandra said, all seriousness.

“Oh,” Kate said. “Alright. What can I help you with?”

Cassandra gave her a mysterious smile. “You’ll see.”

That, Kate decided, was a very odd thing to say. Kate hadn’t thought of Cassandra as having a coy side. But maybe the Seeker did.

“Come with me,” Cassandra said, waving to the steps before her. Kate followed, climbing after Cassandra into the upper courtyard.

At first, Kate didn’t think anything of it. Instead, she allowed herself to admire the curtain of ivy that grew along the wall to her right as she climbed the stairs. It looked like a rustling tapestry of golds and reds. Kate’s legs ached with every step. She really ought to have a talk with Bull about trading out some physical training for magical training. As nervous as she was about testing out the mark’s new powers…

It was then that Kate noticed the quiet. The upper courtyard was deserted. She heard no one talking, no carts creaking, no hammers pounding on some building project or other. Kate was about to ask, “Where is everyone?” but Cassandra continued up the steps that led into Skyhold’s crumbling great hall. Kate hurried after. Just as she reached the landing, Kate saw them:

Every person in Skyhold was gathered in the courtyard below.

Well, every person except Cassandra, who stood beside her, and Leliana, who now stood before Kate. The spymaster held an elaborate sword across her outstretched hands, offered like a gift. Kate slunk back a step, expecting Cassandra to take the sword. Swords were Cassandra’s milieu, after all. But Cassandra turned to look at Kate. So did Leliana. In fact, everyone was looking at Kate.

And she was wearing pajamas. Beige pajamas. Oh dear.

That completely absurd, self-conscious thought was the first to register in Kate’s mind. It was followed by a perfectly reasonable explanation for this gathering. This must be some kind of award ceremony for her actions at Haven, Kate reasoned. Of course it must be. It was a thoughtful gesture, but Kate wished they could have told her beforehand. And what was with the sword? Did they plan to knight her with it? Did the Chantry even do that sort of thing? Maker, she hated surprise parties.

“Um,” Kate ventured in an undertone, “What are we doing here?”

“We are making you our Inquisitor,” Cassandra announced, loud enough for everyone to hear.
Oh.

A surprise party would have been better. As it was, Kate barely kept from squealing with shock. She felt as if her stomach had dropped through her feet and tumbled into the courtyard below. Now she really wished they had told her about this. Kate had wondered what her new duties would be now that the breach was closed. She had thought they might make her a liaison to the mage rebellion, or a member of the magic-dispelling units - the ones that still needed an official name.

But Inquisitor?

Inquisitor, Kate thought. As in, the person in charge of the Inquisition. As in, the leader of the faithful of the Chantry. As in the person who would be in charge of the Inquisition itself - it’s missions, it’s people’s, it’s alliances and treaties.

So, you know, no big thing.

Kate nearly gave a spurt of hysterical laughter. How could they possibly think she was qualified to do this? Yes, she had the mark, but besides that, she had no leadership training at all. When she thought about the responsibilities entailed with the job, Kate thought she might be sick.

“Are you both insane?” she managed, her voice hoarse. “I’m a mage!”

“Not so loud,” Leliana murmured. “Vivienne’s frowning now.”

Kate paused at that. She didn’t want to disappoint Vivienne - or anyone. But she really, really did not think this was a good idea.

“The people of the Inquisition need someone to lead them,” Cassandra said. “The one who has already been leading them.”

Yes, but Kate’s leadership had been an accident. She didn’t want to become the official Inquisitor. The first incarnation of the Inquisition had ended up creating the Chantry, after all. And the Chantry had created the Templar Order and the Circles. Kate didn’t want that kind of thing to be her life legacy. And besides, hadn’t first Inquisitor died or something? Or no, he’d gone missing. Kate could not remember the full story, but she was fairly certain it did not end with that first Inquisitor growing old and reading books in a quiet library until the end of his days.

Than again, Kate realized suddenly, her story wouldn’t end in a library either if Corypheus had his way. That monster had targeted Kate personally, and tried to kill all the people in his way. So maybe Cassandra had a point. As long as Kate was already in the line of fire, as long as she was already burdened with the mark, maybe she should lead.

But there was a great deal of difference between helping out and leading.

Yet even as she thought that, Kate looked down into the crowd. Her eyes fell upon Cullen, and he smiled at her. He gave her a slight nod, as if to say: Accept it.

Really? she wanted to call down to him. But she didn’t, of course. Instead, Kate let out a long breath. She tried to think rationally, in spite of the panic bouncing around inside of her.

If she did this, Kate thought, she would not do this alone. Cullen would still act the Inquisition’s general, as he had before. The armies would answer to him. Leliana would keep Kate informed of every rumor in Thedas and Josephine would manage the paperwork and the treaties and finances and Cassandra would do… Whatever Cassandra had been doing lately. Hitting practice dummies with a sword, mostly. And Kate would work with them as she had before. This wouldn’t be that big a
change from the way they already decided things by committee.

Oh, alright, this was a huge change and Kate knew it. She felt sick once again.

“They’re watching, Inquisitor,” Leliana whispered. “Please give them an answer.”

Kate slanted a glance at the woman. It was rather sly, the way Leliana and Cassandra had cornered Kate like this. But there was something in Leliana’s eyes that gave Kate pause. The unflappable spymaster looked worried. And it occurred to Kate that everyone down there in the courtyard was worried. They were frightened and leaderless and as much as Kate did not want this responsibility, someone had to take it.

She would die to protect these people, Kate thought. So why not live to lead them? For Keran - for all the fallen - she would do this. One step at a time, she would do this. And her friends would help her out: Cullen and Cassandra and the rest. That thought comforted her, gave her the strength to nod her head.

Right then, she thought. I’ll just… go and become the Inquisitor.

Kate straightened, and her training in etiquette snapped into place. She adjusted her posture instantly, drew her shoulders out and down, as if she was being strung up from a string attached to her scalp. Though her hands shook, Kate placed her arms at her sides, adjusted her feet slightly and made sure not to lock her knees. No fainting off of the staircase, Kate told herself. In less than a second, a familiar persona fell over Kate. She placed a more confident version of herself on display for the crowd.

“This is an honor,” Kate said. She pitched her voice in a more ringing tone than she usually used. She tried to sound confident and humbled, tried to look peaceful and assured. Kate supposed she must have faked something in that vicinity, because Leliana gave Kate a slight nod of approval.

“Now take the sword,” Leliana said, murmuring in a way so that her lips did not move.

“Uh, wait,” Kate faltered, “I’m not sure if…”

“You will make a fine Inquisitor,” Cassandra said, speaking at normal volume.

“Yes, but…” Kate began.

“Quickly now,” Leliana hissed, nodding to the blade.

“I heard you,” Kate said, shooting Leliana a look, “But I’m not sure I can lift that thing.”

“It’s not a real sword,” Leliana whispered back. “It’s just a decoration I found on the wall.”

“Oh,” Kate blinked. “Okay then.”

Nervously, she placed on hand on the hilt and lifted it straight off of Leliana’s hands. The spymaster was right. It weighed no more than a yardstick. She drew it before her, trying to remember everything she’d ever been told about how to handle swords. It wasn’t much. Bull was probably down there in the courtyard somewhere, smacking his forehead in disgust. No doubt she’d be training with blades next. Kate did her best to look confident as she turned and addressed the crowd.

“Corypheus must be stopped,” she said, speaking loud enough to make her voice echo off of the fortress walls. “He started this war, but we will finish it. It may take time, but our hunt begins today.”
Kate paused there, trying to think of what else she ought to say. That seemed sufficient. Were they done now? It seemed not, for Cassandra said, loudly:

“Commander? Are our people ready?”

Probably not, Kate thought. The Inquisition was not ready today, but maybe someday soon they would be. Still, Kate kept her stern, confident expression in place as Cullen shouted something at the crowd. Kate didn’t entirely register his words - something spirited and short. The crowd heard him however, and cheered in triumph.

Well, Kate thought. Cullen could certainly get a crowd riled up. She felt quite grateful for the vote of confidence, because she felt like a total impostor standing up here.

Cullen said something more and drew his sword. He stuck it up into the air, pointing the tip of it to the sky above. At this, everyone below erupted in one final cheer. Cullen looked up at Kate and their eyes met. Kate felt her heart skip a beat.

It then occurred to Kate that perhaps she was supposed to do that sky-stabbing thing as well. It looked like a good move. Very dramatic and all that. Best to imitate the commander on this, Kate reasoned. He knew battlecries far better than she.

Thankfully, the sword was light as a feather, so Kate thrust it upward. The crowd cheered again. Kate even heard Josephine shout ‘huzzah!’ over the noise. Leliana laughed, and Cassandra smiled widely. Kate kept her eyes focused on the tip of the sword. It probably wouldn’t be very inspiring if she let it droop. Out of the corner of her mouth, Kate said:

“You did this on purpose, didn’t you Leliana? You knew I couldn’t say no in front of all these people.”

Leliana smirked. “That was the idea, yes.”

Kate shook her head as the crowd shouted yet again.

“Let’s hope your idea was a good one,” she said.

The crowd went wild, shouting and cheering and making a great deal of noise for only one-hundred-odd people. The noise was deafening.

It was excellent, Cullen thought. He was rarely a part of crowds, but had been trained to observe them - to disperse them, direct them, command them if he must. And Kate could command a crowd as well. He could see these people’s hope, almost as if it was a physical thing. It was like a golden glow that shone upon the courtyard. Even Josephine threw a fist into the air and shouted in his ear. Cullen looked at her in amusement. A few feet away, Kate’s cousin, Robert, grinned broadly. Varric shook his head as if to say, ‘Can you believe this?’ Colleen Lavellen, Kate’s elvish friend, cheered at the top of her voice. It seemed she and Sera were locked in a competition for volume. Vivienne smiled politely as she clapped her hands and Solas…

Where was Solas anyhow? Typical of him to miss the celebrations. Still, Cullen thought, these people were inspired. By the Void, he felt inspired himself, and Cullen thought he’d developed a kind of immunity to these sorts of rallies.

It was Kate’s doing, Cullen thought. She had a knack for this sort of thing. He had noticed the exact moment that Kate had snapped into that battle-ready mode of hers. It was the same focus that she used when fighting. Cullen found her confidence quite arous…
Er, inspiring.

But as he looked up at Kate, Cullen couldn’t help but notice how tight her leather pants were, nor how perfectly they clung to her shapely legs. He could see every curve of her backside. As his body responded to that sight, another thought struck Cullen right out of the blue:

Kate now stood on a pedestal far above him, completely out of reach.

Cullen’s smile faded. Maker’s breath, not a minute past coronation and he was feeling again. This would not do. The best cure for emotion was action. To that end, he needed to get back to his work table. He needed to compile a list of soldiers best suited for promotion, to replace the officers they lost when Haven fell. He needed to look over that draft of proposed changes to the road system in and out of Skyhold’s valley, and most of all…

Most of all, he needed to get moving, Cullen realized. Hadn’t Leliana said something about conferring with Kate in the Great Hall? Yes, she had. Now the ceremony had ended, and everyone was milling about, smiling and laughing and heading back to their business. Someone slapped Cullen on the back and he didn’t see who it was. Josephine was already halfway up the stairs to the upper courtyard.

And Cullen was running late for his first meeting with the Inquisitor. Wonderful.

“Excuse me,” Cullen said, trying to push his way through the crowd. Cullen wound is way through the knots chatting mages and soldiers and scouts, then took the stairs to the upper courtyard three at a time. But once he reached the top of the stairs, Cullen found his way blocked yet again. Robert Trevelyan stood in a stone archway that let to the upper courtyard, right in Cullen’s path.

“Beg your pardon, Trevelyan,” Cullen said. But Robert didn’t notice Cullen or move an inch. Instead, the younger Trevelyan stood stiffly, looking as though he was being squeezed by his too-tight tunic.

“Hey! I know you!” a voice cried. Cullen edged to one side of the archway, only to see a young man and a young woman standing in the courtyard beyond. The pair of them were blocking Robert as effectively as Robert was blocking Cullen.

“If I may…” Cullen tried again, attempting to edge by Robert. But Cullen’s words were drowned out by the enthusiastic young man.

“You’re Robert Trevelyan!” the fellow said. “I’m Bobby Hanes. We met at the Grinning Gremlin two years ago, Hey Fran!” he went on, turning to the girl at his side, “You remember Robert Trevelyan, right?”

Fran said nothing. Her eyes just narrowed. Cullen wasn’t the best judge of such things, but he was willing to bet the woman had ‘known’ Robert rather well.

“Oh,” Robert said, cringing. “Um, did we? I mean, do I? Know you, that is?”

“Evidently not,” Fran said, folding her arms over her chest.

“Eh, er, yes,” Robert said, looking ever more pinched by his shirt.

Cullen checked the distance between himself and the courtyard. This was the shortest path to the Great Hall, but it was presently blocked by this uncomfortable encounter. Perhaps if he went the other way around, through the kitchens?
“That night in the Gremlin was sure fun,” young Bobby went on, oblivious to Robert’s distress. “You bought enough ale to drown the pub. I heard a lot of stories about you after that. Aren’t you the Trevelyan who drank two glasses of wine and then pleasured five women at the same time in Lord Smythe’s library during the Sennight Ball?”

“Uhhh…” Robert faltered.

Cullen was so shocked that he stopped and stared. Robert had pleasured five women at the same time? How did one manage such a thing? A man only had two hands.

Then again, if one used one’s mouth… Cullen knew it was wrong to imagine it, but his tactical mind was fascinated by the logistics. He could not quite get the variables to add up.

“Yes Robert.” A steely voice cut across the scene. “Are you that Trevelyan?”

That was Cassandra’s voice, Cullen realized. She was standing just behind Fran and Bobby. When she spoke, Robert’s expression went from sheepish to horrified.

“Er, that’s not quite accurate,” Robert said, tugging at his collar. “It was, um, the other way round. Five glasses of wine and only two women.”

Ah, Cullen thought. That person-to-apendage ratio made more sense. Still, he couldn’t imagine drinking that much without getting sick.

Bobby whooped with laughter. “Still impressive,” the young soldier said. “I heard the screams of pleasure could be heard all through the gardens.”

“Uh, I didn’t hear that part.” Robert said. “Er, I mean I heard the, um… But I hadn’t heard the story about it. That is, I’m not sure…”

Fran glared at Robert as he spoke. The young lady did not seem nearly so impressed with this tale as her friend was. Either she had been in the library with Robert and didn’t like the recounting of this tale, or she was angry that she hadn’t been invited to the orgy.

“Stories about me tend to get exaggerated,” Robert said, squinting one eye shut.

Maybe so, Cullen thought. Still, there was usually some truth to rumor. And to think that this Robert fellow was Kate’s cousin - Kate, who always seemed so reserved and proper. Though actually, Cullen mused, Kate’s prim demeanor might be an act. Cullen realized he knew very little about Kate’s private life. Perhaps she was just as causal about libraries and bottles of wine as her cousin was. It was entirely possible that Kate, too, had once slipped away from a raucous party, unbuttoned her shirt and…

Absolutely not, Cullen, he told himself sharply. He was not about to allow himself to wonder about Kate’s unbuttoning or her past love affairs. He certainly wasn’t going to imagine such things. Well, not any further than he already had.

“Excuse me,” Cullen said, trying to push past this awkward scene. At the same time, Cassandra came snarling into view, a murderous expression upon her face. She tried to shove past Robert just as Cullen did. For a moment, they all collided in a tangle of arms and shoulders in the archway. Then Cassandra punched past the two men with a growl of fury. Cullen popped through the arch as well. He found himself in the courtyard with Fran and Bobby - and Varric Tethras, who stood nearby, staring.

“Er, Cassie…” Robert began, but Cassandra was already stomping away down the stairs.
“Cassandra?” Cullen called after her. He did not really want to get involved, but felt he must point out: “We have a meeting with the Inquisitor is in the Great Hall, if you recall.”

From somewhere further down the stairs, Cassandra gave a disgusted snarl. Robert hurried down the stairs after Cassandra, shouting, “Cassie? Cassie! Hey!”

“I’ll give Kate your regrets then,” Cullen called after her. There was no reply. Fran and Bobby stood there, gaping. Varric scratched his chin.

“Ya know,” he said. “I’ve never seen the Seeker turn that shade of pink before. I wonder if I should nickname that kid ‘Librarian’ or ‘Death Wish’.”

“Or you could call him by his name,” Cullen suggested, though he didn’t care much either way. He hurried on toward the great hall.

“Nah, I’ll stick to ‘Ostwick,’” Varric said, climbing the steps alongside Cullen. Cullen shot the dwarf a warning look.

“This is going to be a private meeting, Varric,” he said, curtly.

“Course it is,” Varric replied. “I don’t plan to crash it. I just need to see Sister Leliana about borrowing a bird.”

“Borrowing a bird?” Cullen repeated with a frown. “Varric, your fights with the merchant’s guild are to be resolved on your own sovereign. I won’t have Inquisition ravens carrying your business papers to every corner of Thedas.”

“Okay, first of all, the creepy winged mail carriers are Leliana’s pets and not yours. Secondly, it’s just this one letter. Won’t take me more than a few days to settle this out.”

“Varric…”

“Hey look, Curly, the Inquisitor is waiting on you.”

It was a blatant ploy to distract him, but damn it if Cullen didn’t fall for it anyway. Kate came walking down the steps, and though that outfit of hers was the color of dishwater, it showed every curve. In that moment, Cullen forgot all about his resolutions of honor and duty and staying out of the no-man’s-land of desire. Instead, he just stared.

“You gonna answer the Inquisitor, Curly?”

Cullen blinked at Varric, then he blinked at Kate.

“I’m sorry?” he asked.

“I asked if you were ready for the meeting,” Kate said.

“Er-y-yes,” Cullen said. It was not the most eloquent reply. Varric looked as though he was watching a comedy unfolding. Cullen had half a mind to roll the dwarf off the stairs.

“I’m fine,” Cullen said. He ignored Varric and tried for an assured, commmanderly grin. “Perfectly fine now that you’re Inquisitor, Lady Trevelyan.”

Maybe he’d overdone it, Cullen thought. For Kate’s brows furrowed, and she swallowed hard. But all she said was “Thank you,” in a small sort of voice.
“Oooh,” Varric chuckled. “Nice save, Curly.” With a wink, the dwarf disappeared through the doorway. That left Kate and Cullen alone.

“To work?” Cullen asked, gesturing at the door.

“Of course,” Kate replied. Her voice squeaked, and she walked into the Great Hall before him. Cullen followed after, trying not to watch her backside as he did so.

It could have been worse, Cullen told himself. At least no one was telling Kate stories about Cullen that involved bottles of wine and darkened libraries. And perhaps it was unkind of him, but the thought of poor Robert’s misfortune made Cullen feel just a little bit better.
Hawke and Raven

Chapter Summary

In which Hawke finds a raven entirely too familiar

“And here she is folks,” Brigid Hawke announced to no one in particular. “The mighty Champion of Kirkwall. All alone on the Waking Sea in a friggin’ rowboat.”

Hawke shoved her wet hair out of her face. As she glared out at the steel-colored waves, her own words seemed to mock her. Champion of Kirkwall, huh?

“Champion of Fuckall, more like.”

And now she was talking to herself, Hawke realized. Less than an hour at sea, and already she was going loony. Hawke clamped her mouth shut and tugged at the oars once again. Storm clouds blanketed the sky, and a fine, drizzling fog filled the air around her. Choppy waves broke upon the prow of the boat, sending little droplets of salt water into her hair and down the back of her armor. With a scowl, Hawke craned her head around to see if she was making any progress towards shore. She saw only a gray smudge on the horizon. Either that was the craggy coastline back there, or she was headed into a bank of storm clouds.

Awesome.

There had to be some sort of metaphor in all of this, Hawke thought, as she resumed her rowing. Here she was, headed blindly into uncharted waters, forced to look back at the direction she’d come from. This would be one of those ‘literary devices’ that Varric was so fond of.

At the thought of Varric, Hawke felt a bittersweet longing. If Varric were here right now, Hawke thought, he’d probably be bitching about the weather even more than Hawke was. Actually, she amended, if Varric were here right now, she’d be the one bitching. She’d be bitching him out for abandoning her all those months back.

Hawke scowled and yanked harder at the oars. She knew she shouldn’t still be pissed about that, but she was still pissed about that. ‘We need to part ways for your safety,’ her friends had said. ‘The Chantry will have a harder time finding you if you’re on your own,’ they’d said. And maybe they’d been right about that last one. But what was the point of being safe from the Chantry if Hawke had to spend the rest of her life all alone? She had stood by her friends through all sorts of dangers. So why hadn’t they done the same for her? She should have fought them on this, Hawke thought. She should have told her them that no, they didn’t need to ‘protect’ her by keeping their distance. She should have stayed in Kirkwall, at the very least.

Then again, it was hard to champion a city if you became public enemy number one.

Oh sure, no one blamed Hawke for blowing up the Chantry directly. Varric had made certain of that. With just a few pen strokes, the dwarf had convinced people that Hawke wasn’t a monster. Unfortunately, thanks to Varric’s book, people now saw Hawke as some sad, lovesick dupe. And in Hawke’s opinion, that was a whole lot worse than being seen as a psycho.
Maker, it seemed like everyone in Thedas had read The Tale of the Champion. Complete strangers now had an opinion on Hawke’s relationship with Anders, on her proficiency as a lover, her choice of friends, how good a daughter she was, how neglectful a dog owner she was, and on everything Hawke had done for the past decade. People she’d never met constantly talked like they knew her, when really, they didn’t know shit. Hawke had even overheard some merc talking about how her bisexuality was ‘totally out of character.’

Hawke had characteristically fired a lightning bolt up his ass.

It was like she wasn’t real anymore, Hawke fumed. She now understood what Carver had meant when he complained about being overshadowed by a fictional version of himself. Hawke hadn’t believed it could happen to her, but it had.

Back when Varric had started writing those stories, it was all in good fun. Hawke still remembered those nights at the Hanged Man. Hawke would buy the rounds - she always bought the rounds - and Varric would pull out this battered old box, filled to the brim with notes and scraps of paper. If Hawke bought him enough drinks, Varric would read the latest chapter aloud. Then everyone would laugh at Varric’s dead-on portrayal of Seneschal Bran’s jackassery, or they’d drunkenly shout things like, ‘Nooooo! It happened like this!’ Varric would defend his right to artistic inaccuracy, Isabela would call out his lies, and Hawke would contribute a few horrible one-liners and raunchy ideas for the steamy scenes. Hawke liked to suggest the latter because it never failed to make Anders’ nostrils flare. Varric usually excused himself at that point - probably to go find a pen. Hawke wasn’t sure because Anders would always grab her by the hand and drag her out of the pub. Sometimes they’d even make it home before she and Anders started in on their own steamy scene.

Good times, Hawke thought with a sigh. Maker, how she missed those days.

This past year had been cold and empty compared to all that. Hawke hadn’t heard from her friends in months, and there had been no sex at all. And at this point, Hawke didn’t bother telling people who she was anymore. Either people wanted to sell her out to the Chantry (they didn’t usually live if they tried that route) or they would tell her that she ‘wasn’t how they pictured Hawke.’ Hawke managed not to kill the people who said that, but it was always a struggle.

Hawke had never given two shits about gossip. But that was before every person in the whole damn world had an opinion about her. And that was before her friends had abandoned her, leaving her alone to deal with all these gossiping strangers. Fame had made Hawke smug and confident. Notoriety had made her self-conscious. But being ignored by her friends? That had shattered her.

Yeah, Hawke thought, glaring into the rain. That’s what this was. This was a full-up identity crisis.

And it sucked.

Well fuck ‘em all Hawke thought, yanking on the oars with each burst of profanity. Fuck her stupid non-friends who never contacted her. Fuck Kirkwall, fuck the Chantry, and fuck Anders. Really, fuck Anders. Because of Anders, she was out here on the Waking Sea, bobbing around in this rowboat.

Bastard.

She hadn’t even heard about it from Anders himself. Instead, she gotten a letter from some shifty-eyed messenger. For a moment, Hawke had been thrilled. She’d thought one of her friends had remembered her at last. But then she’d read the letter.

And then she had wanted to hurt someone.
Dear Mistress Hawke,

My name is Stroud. You may remember me as the Senior Warden of Carver’s unit. I have some troubling news.

Rest assured that your brother was alive and well when last I saw him. But there are strange things going on in the Wardens these days. I cannot reveal all to an outsider, but I feel you ought to know this:

The mage Anders is accused of murdering two Grey Wardens. As of yesterday, your brother was dispatched to arrest him.

As you can imagine, this information is confidential to the Wardens. I would not normally inform an outsider, but I find I need your help. I have been relieved of my command and summoned to Orlais. Meanwhile, I fear your brother and his unit are headed into grave danger.

Your brother once hinted that Anders has powers far beyond those of a normal mage. Carver also explicitly asked that I not involve you in this matter. But I fear this manhunt will go poorly, and so I am writing to ask your help. Wardens’ lives hang in the balance, Mistress Hawke, and that is more important to me than shielding your feelings.

If you hold any sway with Anders at all, I ask you to assist your brother’s search. Anders was last spotted near Crestwood Village, in northern Ferelden. Carver and his unit are already en route, so I urge you to travel there in all haste.

Maker speed your travels, Champion. I am sorry it has come to this.

Hawke gritted her teeth. She was sorry it had come to this as well. She was sorry her brother was such a secretive prat, sorry Stroud couldn’t defy his orders and head to Crestwood to help Carver out. But most of all, Hawke was sorry that Anders was involved.

*Because Maker help me, I still don’t know how I feel about him.*

Though really, Hawke found it hard to believe that Anders had murdered a couple of Grey Wardens. Templars, sure. Anders had always been itching to fight those jerks. But Hawke hadn’t thought that Anders cared much about the Wardens one way or the other. So long as he wasn’t being dragged back into the ranks, Anders was fine with them. So what in the Void had sent Anders around the bend like that?

*Better question, Hawke thought darkly, Was he ever sane in the first place?*

*I should never have left Anders on his own.* Hawke thought, with a pang of guilt and sorrow. And then, Actually, *I probably should have killed him when I had a chance. That would have been more merciful. But no, I couldn’t have done that. So I should have stayed with him. I should have kept him safe. I should have made him come with me. I should have made him set things right. I should have handed him over to the city for trial...*
“Ugh,” Hawke groaned aloud.

This was another thing Hawke hated about being on her own: without company, there was nothing to do but regret the past and worry about the future. And that just wasn’t Hawke’s style. She had never been a mull-it-over kind of person before. Introspecting was for dudes - like Carver, or Fenris, or Anders. Hawke had always been the cast-first-and-consult-the-spellbook-later type. It worked for her. Most of the time. Except when it didn’t. Hawke had never been able to figure out why.

Maybe it had something to do with the fact that she never bothered to introspect?

Nah.

Well, at least she had a plan now, Hawke thought. She was off to save her brother. The ungrateful punk would probably chew her out for her interference, but Hawke wasn’t about to lose Carver on top of everything else. And if that meant she had to kill Anders to save Carver…

Hawke frowned. Okay, maybe she could avoid killing Anders. Because Hawke didn’t know if she could kill her ex. Scream at him, yeah. Toss his ass a half a mile down the road, sure. That would be cathartic. Fun, even. But to actually kill him? Her stomach hurt just thinking of it.

And this would be why introspection was bad, Hawke thought. Denial was much better. So Hawke decided to ignore the whole messy problem until she found Anders. Then she’d decide what to do.

“You just gotta find Anders before the Wardens do, Hawke,” she muttered.

And there she went, talking to herself again. How long had she been out here anyhow?

Hawke tried to glance over her shoulder to check her progress, but just got a face full of sea-spray for her efforts. She shook her head and turned back around. The Siren’s Booty had long since disappeared into the mist, leaving Hawke without any landmark. No surprise there, really. The pirates hadn’t wanted to take her on board in the first place. What kind of fool sailed to the Storm Coast in the dead of winter anyway, they’d asked her? Besides, they’d added, there were rumors of a high dragons living on one of these islands. It had taken Hawke a good deal of charm to get them to allow her on board.

Actually, it had taken a bag of gold, name-dropping Admiral Isabela, and a minor lightning-bolt show. That had gained Hawke a ride. The pirates had taken Hawke within sight of the shore and even given her a boat to row the rest of the way. Of course, they’d neglected to mention it was a lot further than it looked. And that was before the fog had rolled in. For all she knew, she might be rowing herself out to sea.

CRAAWWW!!

A dark shadow swooped overhead with a piercing cry. Hawke gasped and ducked – then she scowled. For a second there, she’d thought it was the rumored dragon, but it was just a raven. A very large raven, Hawke added with a frown. It’s dark wings sliced through the mist and for a moment, Hawke thought she saw a flicker of green shimmer over it’s body. It looked like the bird was circling her boat. Maybe it thought that Hawke would die out here and then it would make a meal out of her?

“Try it, bird,” Hawke snarled at the creature. “Try it and fry.”

And now she’d gone from talking to herself to talking to the wildlife. Lovely.

Once again the raven swooped by, shrieking and flapping its wings right over Hawke’s head. If Hawke hadn’t known any better, it was like the bird wanted to get her attention.
Son of a bitch! There it went again! The raven made as if to dive-bomb Hawke’s head, but then pulled up at the last minute.

“Alright,” Hawke snarled, whirling after the creature. “You asked for… Oh shit!”

Right behind the boat was a large rock. Hawke’s jaw dropped and she lunged for the oars.

“Shit!” Hawke hissed. “Shit, shit, shit!”

With a jolting WHAM, the boat rammed into the rock, and Hawke felt her teeth clatter together. Thankfully, the boat didn’t break, but lurched drunkenly out onto the waves again. Hawke steadied herself, then glanced up at the lone rock she’d run into. It jutted out of the sea like a jagged pedestal. On top stood the remains of a dwarven statue. The water-worn paragon held a massive hammer in its one remaining fist, but its other arm and its head had been lost to time and tides. As Hawke watched, the large raven circled around the statue, then landed upon the statue’s stumpy neck. The raven gave a great, self-satisfied screech, as if to say I did try to warn you.

Hawke frowned. No, she thought. No, that was too much. It was one thing to talk to the evil-looking bird. It was another thing entirely to imagine that it was talking back. Besides, perched up there like that, it looked like a tiny feathered head on a massive stone body. Creepy, really.

Hawke shuddered and turned around, sizing up the foggy cove that she’d blindly rowed herself into. Behind her was a cliff of columnal rock, looking rather like a palisade wall made of stone logs. There were two more pedestal-like formations as well, with mist curling around them. Each pedestal was topped with a crumbling paragon. These statues, however, had fared less well than the first. One had only a torso and one appeared to be nothing more than a pair of feet. But Hawke didn’t pay them much mind. Instead, she squinted at the cave set into the cliff’s face.

The cavern looked rather like a yawning mouth, open wide as if to drink the entire ocean. A slick flight of stairs hung from it’s jaw, leading down to the spit of sand. Hawke could see solid dwarven columns and a shadowy great hall, but the rest of the cavern swiftly tunneled back into darkness.

Whelp, Hawke thought. This was the place. The old raider outpost that might or might not be inhabited. The pirates told her she was welcome to whatever gear she found there. They’d also told her that if there were monsters inside, she’d be clearing them out herself.

Fair enough, Hawke had thought. Monsters she could handle. If she had to choose between monsters and rowing alone, Hawke would take monsters any day of the week.

Still, no reason to rush in stupid-like. Hawke rowed more slowly now, watching the cave carefully. She thought she saw a red glow within. A fire, maybe? But there were no boats moored here, which suggested that no one was using the place for smuggling. Either way, there was something weird about this place. Hawke didn’t like it.

The raven didn’t seem to like it either. The bird gave a short croak and swept off of its perch. With outstretched wings, the raven circled Hawke’s boat, then landed insolently upon the prow. It gave a low, disapproving cluck in the back of its throat and cocked its head at the cave.

Was the raven trying to scout for her, Hawke wondered? She supposed she could use the help. She rowed cautiously, glancing back every few strokes to make sure she was headed in the right direction. Soon she felt a soft resistance under the boat as the hull hit the small spit of sandy beach. Hawke saw no footprints, no garbage, no sign that anyone had been here in a long time. The beach held nothing but driftwood and a few shells.
Alright then, Hawke thought. Wasn’t attacked right away. Always a good start.

Hawke jumped out of the boat, the toes of her boots sloshing in the shallows. She reached into the boat and grabbed a bit of rope, then put her back to the cave as she dragged the boat further up the shore. As she did this, the raven kept its beady eyes fixed on the cave. Hawke found that oddly comforting. Once she’d tied the boat to a crumbling pier, Hawke turned to consider the cave for herself.

“Atmospheric,” she remarked. “Got to give the Paragons credit for the decor.” The raven gave a small croak of assent.

And Hawke supposed that was a line crossed: both talking to the raven and thinking it talked back. Well what the Void, Hawke figured? She’d been going nuts without company. Having a creepy, feathered sidekick was way better than going it alone.

Hawke swept her wet hair out of her eyes, then drew her pack out of the boat. She threaded her arms through the straps, then reached into the boat once more for her weapon. It looked like an old fashioned poleaxe, but it was really a mage’s staff, enchanted to transfer all of Hawke’s considerable magic power into phantom blows that punched enemies from across a battlefield. And if that didn’t work, there was also the slicey end. Hawke always made sure the blade was sharp, and she wielded the heavy weapon with ease. The staff was part of her cover, actually. Everyone assumed that mages were tall and willowy. So Hawke - short and farm-girl strong - always took them by surprise. No one ever guessed Hawke was an apostate, since she looked like she could bench-press a druffalo.

Hawke hooked the weapon onto a holster on her pack, then strutted up the steps two at a time. Her boots made an echoing clank on the stone, and the waves outside continued to crash against the rocks. Hawke came to a halt at the top of the stairs and cocked her head. The cave was squarish, like any dwarven hall, but lit with a strange light. She’d seen that red glow from outside, but here it was brighter, weirder, and it seemed to… hum?

Hawke felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. She wasn’t easily spooked. She’d gone toe-to-toe with dragons without flinching. Call it the upside that whole not-introspecting thing, but because Hawke didn’t think things through much, she didn’t psych herself out much, either. She typically found herself in the middle of dangerous situations before she had time to worry about them. And by then, her survival instincts were far stronger than fear.

But this was enough to rattle even Hawke. The last time she’d heard that hum, it was in a dwarven thaig, deep in a dark tunnel. Wait no, the last time she’d heard that hum was when Knight-Commander Meredith of Kirkwall had up and turned into a red-lyrium zombie-lady. And if that stuff up there was red and glowing and humming…

Even I can put two and two together.

It occurred to Hawke that if this had been in one of Varric’s stories, he would have written that she walked toward the red light like she was in a trance, stretching out her trembling fingers and all those dramatic-tension-y-building things. But Hawke wasn’t a tool. She had her staff in her hands and she kept glancing from side to side as she crept down the line of columns to where the humming grew loudest. Then she lunged out of the shadows, bladed staff at the ready and lightning flickering in her hand.

Hawke stopped short, stared, then let the blunt end of her staff thunk to the ground.

“Aw, shit. Are you kidding me?” she groaned.
It was lyrium. *Red* lyrium. A whole pile of it, as if crazy old Meredith had taken a giant crap right there on the floor. It smelled just as rank as she remembered, too - sort of like sulfur and the nasty parts of the Fade. But what was it doing here in Ferelden?

*Not sure I really want to know the answer.*

As Hawke stood there staring, the raven fluttered over to the ground at Hawke’s feet. The bird hopped along the floor on one leg, back and forth in front of the lyrium.

“Don’t touch that shit,” Hawke told the raven. “It gets into *every* crack.”

The raven croaked back and continued hopping about right in front of her. If Hawke didn’t know any better, she would have thought that the bird needed to use the toilet.

“Well,” Hawke sighed. “Nothing I can do about it now. If I blast it with lightning, I might make it worse. Better to get a move on and then…”

“CRAAWWK!!”

The raven flapped up into the air and landed right on Hawke’s shoulder. Hawke swore loudly and only just kept herself from blasting the bird with lightning.

“Get off me, you stupid thing!” Hawke said, shoving it gently with her open palm. For some reason, she didn’t want to kill her company, but the raven was seriously creeping her out now. Its little claws scrabbled along her fur ruff, just inches from her neck.

“Get off me. Anders was the one who liked feathers on his shoulders, not…”

But here Hawke stopped short. Because as she shoved at the raven, she realized that it was only holding onto her shoulder with one clawed foot. It held its other leg out, and tied to that leg was a bit of red ribbon and a rolled piece of parchment. Hawke’s jaw dropped.

“Wait, you’re a messenger pigeon?”

The bird clicked its beak at her.

“Messenger raven, sorry,” Hawke corrected. “But that message isn’t… That’s not for me, is it?”

The raven cocked it’s head at her. Maybe it had been surprised by the eagerness in Hawke’s voice. Hawke certainly was. She didn’t realize she’d been this desperate for more mail. In order to cover for it, Hawke snorted and feigned nonchalance.

“Oh, come on,” she snorted. “Do you really expect me to believe that a messenger raven just happened to find me out on the Waking Sea in a rowboat? That’s ridiculous. That’s…”

Something flickered over the raven’s feathers just then - a kind of ghostly green sheen that sent an answering hum through Hawke’s mind.


The raven gave her what could only be called a superior look.

“Sure are a clever bird though,” Hawke mused. “Is it the spell that makes you so intelligent? Or were you a smart bird to begin with?”
The raven preened at that, ruffling it’s feathers and clicking it’s beak.

“You’re certainly a vain thing,” Hawke said. “Come on then, let’s have the letter.”

The raven stayed remarkably still as Hawke untied the ribbon, like an Orlesian show dog at a contest. It seemed to be holding it’s breath, as if it knew how very important this part of the job was. Hawke chuckled as she unwound the message from it’s moorings.

“You remind me of my old mabari,” she told the raven. “Fluffy passed on shortly after mother died, but he was just as determined to do every task right. Now who wrote to me…”

Hawke opened the letter, and she didn’t speak for a few minutes after. For first, it was hard to read by the dull, reddish light of the lyrium. And secondly, Hawke recognized the handwriting at once. That was Varric’s writing, and Hawke felt a sort of bitter tenderness as she imagined his voice saying:

Hey Hawke,

Okay, so look. I’ve got some bad news and some worse news…

Hawke read on. And on. And then her brows furrowed. She walked back to the mouth of the cave, and stood at the edge of the drizzling rain as she read the letter again. Then she read it again. Then…

“The Void!” Hawke snapped, glaring out at the waves. She turned her head to find the raven hadn’t moved from its perch on her shoulder.

“Corypheus is still alive?” she asked the bird. “How did that happen?” The raven fluttered its wings in what looked like a shrug.

“Maybe someone resurrected him?” Hawke mused. The raven settled its wings and cocked its head.

“Yeah, I don’t know either,” Hawke muttered, looking back to the letter. “Blast you, Varric. Captured by Seekers and you still didn’t send for my help? Jerk. And now he’s working with a Seeker? And the entire mage rebellion has joined with the Inquisition? And what the Void is an Inquisition anyway? Maker’s arse! I missed a ton! Let’s see here… Blah, blah, blah… Red lyrium has spread… Ahead of you on that one, Varric. And something about red templars. Red templars? Now they’re color coded or something? Fucking templars. Always so pretentious.”

Hawke sighed, then turned to the raven. “Why am I always the last one to know anything?”

The raven met Hawke’s stare. And maybe Hawke was just completely losing it, because the bird seemed to have dog-like sympathy in it’s beady little black eyes.

“Well then,” Hawke sighed. “Never let it be said that Brigid Hawke did not clean up her own messes. Actually, people say that all the time because of Anders and… Never mind. Yes, of course I’ll come help with Corypheus. But first I have to I deal with my insane ex boyfriend. I’m sure you
understand.”

The raven made a kind of guttural sound and bobbed it’s head, pointing it’s beak toward the letter in Hawke’s hands.

“What, send a reply? Oh yeah, good idea. I ought to tell Varric where I’m going, in case… Oh!”

Hawke brightened. “Yeah! Varric can come with me to Crestwood! The more the merrier when hunting former friends, right? That is, if he’s not too busy with this Inquisition of his.”

Huh? Had that sounded a bit jealous? Hawke hadn’t realized it until she spoke, but she was feeling a bit peeved at being left out of this Inquisition-thingy. Varric could have invited Hawke to his wild Ferelden party months ago.

But even though she felt annoyed, Hawke felt a spark of good humor rising within her. One of her friends had remembered her. He’d sent a friendly little bird to keep her company, if only for an afternoon. And okay, Varric had only reached out to Hawke because he needed her to kill something. But really, what was new there? That was simply how Hawke met people and made friends. Someone needed something dead, and she was the girl to do it. That was how she’d met Anders, for example.

And now Stroud needed Anders dead.

Now that’s what Varric would call a ‘plot twist.’

Hawke chewed her lower lip. Right, killing Anders. Not something she wanted to do if she could help it. Well, she’d blow up that bridge when she came to it, Hawke figured. No need to worry about that when it would just ruin her mood.

“Alright then!” Hawke said, turning to the raven. “Baroness Plucky, is it? If you just let me find a bit of pencil, I’ll send you back to…”

The raven shrieked right in Hawke’s ear and began flapping it’s wings wildly.

“Son of a bitch, Pluck!” Hawke shouted, reaching up to grab her ears. “What the Void was that for?”

But ‘Pluck’ zoomed off of Hawke shoulder, wings flapping wildly. Hawke whirled around just in time to see something red and glowing rushing at her. The raven shrieked as it swooped over Hawke’s attacker. The red thing shrieked right back, and Hawke added to chaos by shouting:

“Holy shit!”

Hawke didn’t have time to think, and that was probably a good thing. Thinking would have gotten her killed. She saw something rushing her, saw a raised sword, and smelled the bitter tang of bloodmagic in the air. Her hands came up of their own accord and Hawke blasted that whatever-it-was across the cave.

Or at least she should have. The spell she’d cast should have dropped three men, but as it was, it merely tossed the armored attacker back on his ass. The creature began to stagger to it’s feet, and that was Hawke’s cue to rush in. She raised her hand and and turned her palm over. A clang echoed through the cavern as the armored glowing guy slammed into the ground. But before she could slice head from neck (was there a neck in there? It was hard to tell), two shards of red lyrium came slashing out from the creature’s body.

Holy Maker, those are it’s hands! Hawke thought - and that thought almost cost her her ankles. Hawke leaped back, and the creature gave a low hissing sound that might have been a laugh.
Wrong move, asshole.

Hawke was pissed now. The thing had both startled her and laughed at her. It needed to die. Hawke slashed up with her halberd, then right back down. The mage-staff channeled her blows and the blade sliced off the creature’s pointy arms. It screamed, but Hawke didn’t stop there. She kept whacking off things that looked arm-like and head-like until the screaming stopped and the body no longer moved. Hawke gave the creature one last whack for good measure, then stopped.

As suddenly as it had begun, the battle-madness wore off of her. Hawke shuddered and came back to herself, just as she always did.

“What the fuck is that?”

The sound of her own voice startled her. She sounded as scared and squeaky as a child. But that was red lyrium on that guy’s body, and that meant…

Red templars, Hawke thought, shuddering as she wiped the blood from her face. Surely Varric didn’t mean…

Hawke kicked the body over, then felt her stomach knot in disgust. Her handiwork was pretty gruesome, but far worse was the sight of red lyrium growing out of a templar’s breastplate - and red lyrium circling what was left of the man’s face.

“I think I’m going to be sick…”

But before Hawke could vomit all over the red templar’s body, she heard a weak cry. It was more like a peep - like a baby bird who’d fallen from its nest. Hawke whirled around at once.

“Pluck!” she cried.

The poor thing was a mere flutter of wings on the floor of the cave. All thoughts of the attack were forgotten as Hawke dashed for the bird. She slipped a little in the pool of templar blood, then skidded to her knees beside the bird.

“Hey, hey,” Hawke crooned, reaching for the raven. “You’re not allowed to die yet, Pluck. You’ve got to take my message to Varric.”

The raven looked up at her, a wounded, watery expression in its beady eye. Hawke flinched to see its wing was bent at an odd angle.

“S’okay,” Hawke murmured, reaching a hand out and hoping to the Maker that healing worked as well on birds as it did on humans and elves and dwarves. Blue light filled her palms, and she settled her hands over the raven.

“Varric never bothered to tell anyone this,” she murmured, “but I’m pretty good at healing. Slaughter looks better on paper, though, so Varric played up the lightning and the punching and stuff. But rain comes from storms, too, right? Destruction is the flip side of life and all that shit.”

With this, Hawke raised her hand. The raven flapped its wings, and then, finding that it was not dead, fluttered to the air with a echoing cry. It did a victory lap around a nearby pillar and came back to land on Hawke’s shoulder. Then, to Hawke’s surprise and delight, it nuzzled its shiny black head against Hawke’s cheek.

“Aww, you’re welcome,” Hawke said, grinning like an idiot. “And nice work with the warning, Pluck. I didn’t even see that guy coming.”
Pluck responded with a low croak, but it was not a cheerful sound. Rather, the raven sharply turned and ducked its head as if pointing with its beak. Hawke turned, dreading what she would see.

And yep, *those* would be the monsters. Three of ‘em. All red templars, and all of them crawling out of a hole in the wall.

*Well there’s the exit, Hawke thought. Now I just need to fight my way out of here real strategic like.*

Hawke’s smiled turned dangerous.

“Hey Pluck,” she said, speaking low since the templars still hadn’t spotted them. “Wanna help me drop some color-coded assholes?”

The raven made a small noise in it’s throat.

“Come on,” Hawke murmured. “It’ll be fun. You be the distraction, and I’ll fry ‘em up and hack ‘em to bits. And tell you what: if you manage not to get yourself killed, I’ll find you a nice nug for dinner before I send you back to Varric with my letter. You haven’t lived until you’ve eaten lightning-fricasseed nug, a la Hawke. What do you say?”

The raven looked at her, and Hawke could swear that its beady eyes said, *You’re on.*
The Rebel Heretic Archivist of Skyhold

Chapter Summary

In which Coll makes history

Chapter Notes

This is a letters chapter, featuring Coll.

It may be slightly NSFW and it WILL be much, much, MUCH better formatting over at SageFic.com.

Really, read it over at sagefic. But pls come back here to comment. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Varric

Tethras

Kirkwall Avenger

This is Hawke The Champion Kirkwall's Nuisance Ser Freckles...

(letter sent on the 11th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon)

Meanwhile, back at Skyhold...

To Inquisitor Katerina and Ambassador Josephine and Leliana and Commander Cullen:

When Corypheus attacked Haven we lost all official records of the Inquisition. We lost more important things of course but our records were important too.

This is bad I think. It is never good when history is lost to history. Future generations will not know what the Inquisition was like. They may judge us unfairly on the rumors of others. I have also been thinking about rumors and how they...

We should write a history of the Inquisition as we make progress in our tasks. Or we should compile
What a marvelous idea, Lady Cassandra!

Would you be willing to oversee such a project? Normally, I would undertake such a task, but right now I have a mountain of correspondence on my desk. Most of it regards the shipment of rations and resources to Skyhold.

Food takes precedence over record-keeping, as I’m sure you’d agree.

– Josephine

I am terrible at writing and organizing writing. I am only saying that someone should do this. Perhaps Cullen or Leliana or Katerina.

– Cassandra

Allow me to point out that Kate the Inquisitor has her hands full. Leliana has every bird to the wind, and my first job is to make certain that we still have an army standing at the end of the week.

Ask Varric to write for you. Or ask Dorian or Solas. Last I saw, they were all poking about the bookshelves in the central tower. For the record, I wish that Skyhold’s previous inhabitants had thought to put protective wards on the larder as well as the library. I value books of course, but you try explaining to the soldiers why we have tomes aplenty and yet no decent food.

If anyone needs me, I’ll be overseeing the construction of our new war camp. Kate the Inquisitor said she has plans to deal with the weather down by the lake. I have no idea what she has in mind, but I hope it works. The conditions outside of the keep have proven inhospitable, even by Ferelden standards.

– Cullen

Please excuse me, Cullen. I’m running a little late. I need to track down my friend, Coll. She’s the one with the spell I need.

And no Cassandra, I can’t take on the archivist job. Under other circumstances, it would be a perfect fit. But with the Heraldng thing and the mark and the rifts and the Inquisitor work…

Well, I’m sure you understand.

– Kate

Cassie,

Cassandra

Lady Seeker

This is Robert
My name is Robert Trevelyan. Well, you know that, but
I hear you’re looking for an archivist. I’d be terrible at that, but do you know what I’d excel at? Any job that lets me spend time with you

Cassandra, I know we got off to a rocky start but
I was thinking perhaps if I gave myself a formal letter of introduction

I’m curious. How does one go about courting a Seeker? Is there an application process? Because I was thinking

So Cassie

(This paper was crumpled up and thrown into a wastebin.)

Katerina,

If you will not be our historian, I will look for someone else.

Not your cousin though. Even if he did ask me, which he has not.

– Cassandra

Don’t look at me, Cassandra. I, a historian? The very idea is laughable.

Don’t bother asking Solas, either. He can’t be bothered with history newer than a thousand years ago. Varric went off to hide the moment he heard you were on the warpath.

Or is it the archivpath?

– Dorian

NOTICE:

We need an archivist for the Inquisition.

Duties:

Keep records on Skyhold or compile records of Skyhold.

Secondary duties:

Organize the library.

DEER LAYDEE COSONDRAW

I CUD BEE A ARKIVIST FAR YOU. I AM VEREE GOOD AT KEPENG REKORDS AND I LIK LIEBERRY.
Don’t worry, Cassandra, Dorian… everyone. I won’t let Morris near the library.

I’ve given him a distraction, an occupation as Skyhold’s quartermaster. Please don’t point out to him that this job is a repeat of the requisitions officers out in the field. The post makes him feel useful. He can count shelves all day and keep a record of supplies; it works out well for everyone.

Just watch your step in the storeroom. Morris’ organizational system is somewhat haphazard.

– Cullen

Re: the Newly Announced Position of Archivist.

I, Ambrosius Flavius Grist, hereby apply for the position of Archivist. I have extensive experience, as I’m sure my attached recommendations will demonstrate. I expect to hear back from you within the day.

Ambrosius Flavius Grist
First Enchanter of Starkhaven
Order of Earthquakers, Founder and Grandmaster

So there I was, sorting out the books in the library, not bothering anybody. And then some eejit up and dropped a sheaf of papers on my head. So of course, I took the liberty of looking them over and marking up all the grammatical errors. Because what else does a body do, I ask you? Heap of red ink it took me, I’ll add. Those papers look like the floor of a blood mage coven now.

I think this was supposed to be a job application form? Clear it’s a first draft. Or a stupid draft. What writing wasn’t rambling was plagiarized - taken right from the Orzammar Business Manual, if I’m not mistaken (which, of course, I never am.) These letters of recommendation were forged, for damn sure. Shoddy work, too. Looks like the hen-scratch of the Tantervale coterie - worst screevers in the business. First Enchanter Gregoire was left-handed and wrote his g’s with a loop at the end. And Enchanter Harfin died in 38 Dragon, so I don’t know how the old bird could be giving out references without maleficarum involved.

Just thought I'd point that out. Anyone want their draft back? You can pay me for the time it took me to edit this. I take compensation in the form of coin, ale, or elfroot.

- Coll

Wait then. Are you shems hiring for a librarian? You may not have noticed, but I'm already sorting out your library (if you can even call it that) without pay nor nothing. You’re welcome, by the by.

I had to step in, you see, on account of the Vint, Dorian. He was making a mess of the shelving,
using his north-style cataloging everywhere. But don't you worry. I set him straight. That Imperial numbering will leave you confused as a horny nug in a rabbit warren. You've got to use the Genetivi Decimal System, else you'll never find nothing ever again.

This place needs some work on it, mark my words. A librarian might be the right idea. As I see it, you've got books that were left by ancient elves and books that were left by enchanters and even a stack of Avvar pornography from the looks of it. I'm assuming on that last one, as the women in the pictures are covered in furs and the men are all showing their diddies.

- Coll

Know what? You talked me into it. I'll be your archivist.

Now I know what you're thinking: wasn't Coll for to join the Chargers? Well, I was, only they never right asked me (This is me glaring at you, Krem. So help me I am.) Afore that, I was working in your infirmary, only they don't need me down there anymore. All your wounded soldiers either healed up or they went under. Also, I've no bedside manner to speak of.

So there I was with nothing to do, and someone mentioned that Solas was up in the library. My first thought was "How'd that gowl get himself a library?" And then I thought, "I want a library, too!" Only it turns out that this isn't a proper library (yet!) and Solas isn't even using it. He's just painting your walls without asking. So I started shelving your books without asking. I'm sure I don't need to point out which one of us is the more useful elf.

But sure, I'll settle in and be your archivist. You don't have to ask twice. I like it here fine. Excepting that Solas is a stone's throw away. And your Sister Nightengale hung raven cages overhead. Making a rookery of the library? Tis daft, that is. Birds are gonna shite all over the books.

Suppose that means they'll shite all over Solas, too.

Nevermind then. The birds aren't so bad.

Alright then! That's settled. And don't worry about an application none. Kate can vouch for me. I worked as underlibrarian at the Ostwick Circle for... oh, how long was it, Kate? Eight years or so? I would've been head librarian if the First Enchanter hadn't been such a nepotistic arselick. I've got recommendations somewhere. But seeing as how I'm the best person for the job, there's really no need to interview me, now is there? Of course not.

Alright then. I'm your Archivist!

Send me some reports and I'll copy them off onto vellum with my patented scribe-spell (keeps the original handwriting and everything). Then I'll bind it all up pretty for you in a book. The Chargers can testify: I'm good at binding things. Breasts or books or bandits that need killing. Leave it to me, and I'll get it done.

- Coll

or should I say:

Colleen Lavellan
The Rebel Heretic Archivist of Skyhold
(what do you think, Kate? Doesn’t that title look fine?!)
I do not care who does this job so long as it gets done and it is not me.

– Cassandra

Grand then! Ta, Seeker. Always knew you had a head on you that's as fine as your tail.

I'll be expecting my pay at the end of the month. Again: coin, ale, elfroot.

Colleen Lavellan
The Rebel Heretic Archivist of Skyhold

Lady Trevelyan,

Not only has Cassandra exempted herself from joining us at the war table each morning, but now she has filled the archivist position without holding an interview or checking letters of reference or anything! I do not wish to impugn your friend Coll’s reputation, but this is very irregular.

Sadly, I cannot deal with the situation right now. I am absolutely swamped. This trade deal with Lord Bennolt must take precedence, or we won’t have food for our soldiers. (I believe I may be able to blackmail him into giving me a cartload of chickens. It is a touch ruthless of me, but imagine it! Eggs for breakfast! Do you know how expensive chickens are this time of year?) Then I must look into the matter of the kitchen staff. I have heard that the cook struck one of the maids, so if that is true, then I must fire the cook and hire another…

No, no. I’ll delegate that hire, I think.

What I am trying to say is that I do not want to set a precedence were people just take jobs within the Inquisition. But if you can confirm your friend’s suitability, I’m sure it will be alright. I will schedule a time to review Coll’s performance next week.

Or maybe next month. Maker, I’m so busy!

– Josephine

Inquisitor,

You must allow your friend to continue her work in the library. The arguments wafting up to me from below are so entertaining! Between Coll and Solas’ bon mots, I am reminded of the court at Val Royeaux. Librarians have such eloquent insults, and the elvish curses are especially enlightening. Please do not deprive me and my scouts of our favorite source of entertainment.

Also, you may inform Coll that she needn’t worry about my ravens. They are properly house-enchanted, and only defecate as they fly over Cullen’s tower.

– Leliana
Is *that* why there’s a buildup of raven leavings on my windows? Can’t you make them hold it until they’re out over the Frostbacks?

– Cullen

Maker, you move quickly Coll.

But yes, I’ll endorse you as archivist. I know you’ll do a good job, and there’s no one I trust more when it comes to books. As for being our historian… That ought to be interesting. I imagine you’ll be more of a ‘keep the notes’ sort than a Brother ‘been there, done that’ Genetivi.

Oh, before I forget, thank you for teaching me those Dalish wards. I used them around the war camp like you recommended, and it really worked! The ground is bare and warm under the tents, even as the wind comes ripping off of the frozen lake at gale forces. I worried that the camp was still too chilly, but Cullen assured me that it’s best if the soldiers are not overheated. Something about how hot temperatures and warriors and close quarters don’t mix.

And you know, I think I may have impressed Cullen by doing something so useful. Not that this was why I did it, of course. I was worried about the soldiers.

But now I’m exhausted from that spellcasting. I’m going to go nap in my tent (or try to - those builders are so noisy!). Please wake me up so I don’t miss supper. I want to hear all about your first day as archivist.

– Kate

Thank you for the endorsement, Kate-lass.

However, I regret to inform you that your report on the lake camp wasn’t composed in *Starkhaven Style*. I’ll give it a pass today, but next time, use the right formatting or you’ll be writing it out again. No exception for Inquisitors.

Colleen Lavellan
The Rebel Heretic Archivist of Skyhold

Kate. You’ve unleashed a monster.

Coll’s put me to work like I’m a damn first-year quaestor at university. How Solas got out of shelving duty, I don’t know.

– Dorian

Get back to work, Vint-boy. We’ve got a bank of shelving to fix.

As for Solas, I don’t want to deal with him that rawny git interfering with my system. Besides, isn’t he’s too busy manking up the walls to pay attention to anyone?

Colleen Lavellan
The Rebel Heretic Archivist of Skyhold

*Ma banal las halamshir mar vhen*, Coll.
Min arla vallas dea suleven
Sul las elvhen. Ahnsul sul’ema ma
el enansal ris gara enaste?

Las halamshir elvhen, my arse! Abelas, da uth’masa. I didn't realize this was your library.

Oh, right. Cause it's not. This here is my library.

And since it's my library, I'm gonna follow the Code of Archivists. Don't know it, you poxy git? I'll lend you a copy. It says you don't Chantry-cut books none. Not on what's in them, and not on whom you give them to.

So ancient elves left some books lying around? Well then, they can't complain that I'm lending the books to shems, now can they? And don't you complain none, neither. It's secretive attitudes like yours and the Dalish and the fecking Circles is what's killing the world.

Wanna know my thinking? If you want to fight eejits, you start by getting your weapons in order. And your best weapons are always books.

Ma tel'elolasa em, Solas-son. I may've spent the past decade behind walls, boyo, but I won't let my mind be stuck in walls, too.

Colleen Lavellan
The Rebel Heretic Archivist of Skyhold

Ar’m abelas, Coll. Ma dirtha gonun.
It is rare to see Dalish reason thus.
Ar inana itha thu ma adara.

Sure, sure. I’ll be keeping an eye on you as well, edhis ava.

Colleen Lavellan
The Rebel Heretic Archivist of Skyhold

Surely you mean sa ehn ava edhis?
A pity you use your fine mouth to curse. Accents as pleasing as yours are quite rare.
Ar nuven mar dirtha, ma lethallan,
de la’var ina’lan’ehn la’var ma av.

Coll, I must have missed you at dinner. I was told you were ‘sulking’ in the library. I suppose Dorian meant to say ‘shelving’?

I’ll see you at breakfast and save you some tea - if you can call that stuff ‘tea.’

Maker, I hope we get something to eat other than apple-gruel soon. These rations are dreadful.

– Kate

Alright then. Starting off this archival book all official-like (opinions of self-righteous wankers be
The Histories of Skyhold  
Compiled by Colleen Lavellan  
The Rebel Heretic Archivist of Skyhold  
(hereafter just ‘Archivist of Skyhold, because it’s simpler)  
Begun 9th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon

DEER COLL HERE IS A REEPOWRT FOR U:

MORRIS IS KEPENG REKERS ON SUPLIES GUSS LIKE COLL IS KEPENG REKERD ON BOOKS. HE IS IN THE SKIEHULD KEP SUPLIE RUM WERKING FUR SER COLON AND SER RIELIN AND SER PRETTY MAGE INKwisiter Kayt. IF U NEED GUD SUPLIES COM SEE MORRIS. THANK YOU.

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 9th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

Well, that's not Starkhaven style or even half-legible, but I'll take it. Grand work, Morris. You're first in the records book.

Welcome to history, boyo.

Colleen Lavellan  
Archivist of Skyhold

TANK U COLL I WAS VEREE NERVIS ABOWT RITING FUR U.

YOR FRIND, MORRIS

I have no idea what Starkhaven style is, much less how to execute it. But I shall endeavor, in my own humble, Tevinter fashion, to stumble through a report - if only to get Coll off of my back. Let me report then, that the library proves to be the most chaotic place in Skyhold. There are birds flying in and out of the windows at all hours, Solas paints straight through the night, and Colleen guards the books like a dragon guards treasure.

Thus, I found myself a well-stuffed chair and made myself comfortable among the stacks. I am told that this chair was intended for Commander Cullen’s office, but surely he doesn’t need it. The man never sits down.

Now if you don’t mind, I shall get back to my research on Corypheus. That is a far more important task than relocating the collected works of Divine Ethelina. Wouldn’t you agree, Coll?

Dorian Pavus  
Altus of House Pavus, etc. etc.

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 9th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

Fine, fine. Do your researching. I've got an anatomy tome to translate.
Guess I'll find reports the old-fashioned way. By... request.

Colleen Lavellan
Archivist of Skyhold

Commander Cullen,

I’ve been threatened by a tattooed elf that if I don’t give her a report now and again, she will - and I quote - ‘burn my dick.’

Does she have the authority to threaten officers like that, ser?

– Capt. Rylen

I’m sure that was just a Coll-ism. Copy out a report for her of anything that you’d mark critical, but not confidential.

Thank you, Rylen. Pass the message along.

– Cullen

Seeker’s Report:

I think I made a mistake when I made Coll our archivist. I suppose I cannot take it back.

Now that we have a history book I will go to Haven and try to recover our old records. I plan to use the secret passage to enter the Chantry and salvage what I can. This is assuming that the tunnel did not cave in and that the Red Templars are not prowling the ruins but still I will take a team of soldiers with me and we will search the ruins. I will also bring mages with me to help move the snow and we will be careful of course.

– Cassandra

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 9th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

I’ve got twelve volunteers itching to go with you, Lady Cassandra. Let us know if you find anything useful. Take a healer or two, just in case you find any survivors. (Unlikely, but one may hope).

– Cullen

I’ll join you Cassie

Lady Cassandra,

I would be most happy to join your trek trip adventure expedition.

I have little experience working with recovery efforts or snow.
or working with a team

or tunnels. Other than, well, you know

I’m at your disposal.

– Robert Trevelyan

That will not be necessary, Robert Lord Trevelyan messere. I already have a full crew. And you are not an official member of the Inquisition.

However you should be able to find something to do in my absence. I just spoke to a young woman named Nellie down at the stables. She said that she once ‘worked’ with you for a few nights in Gwaren. She indicated that she would like to ‘work’ with you again.

Apply to her for a job. I have no use for soldiers who begin missions without any intention of finishing them.

– Cassandra

I damn well plan to finish anything I start with you

Cassandra, you can rest assured that I fully intend

Would it help if I told you that I don’t even remember anyone named ‘Nellie’? Probably not.

(This paper was crumpled up and thrown into a wastebin.)

Alright Kate, you have to help me.

I tried your strategy of ‘giving Cassandra some space.’ Terrible idea, that. In my absence, she ran afoul of rumors. Some of them are even true.

Now Cassandra thinks I’m some sort of cad.

And I guess I am. Or I was. Not that I intended to be. But then, it wasn’t like I meant anything by it. Women didn’t exactly look at me and think, “Ah yes. Lord Trevelyan’s scapegrace nephew. That’s the fellow I want to settle down with.” I was only a bit of fun to them, so why not enjoy it? Best I could hope for, right? At least that’s how I used to think.

But apparently, such thinking deeply offends Cassandra. Cole told me that the gossip began on the same night that Haven was attacked. According to Cole, the whispers began when I was unconscious. Hardly fair, that. I can just imagine it: there I was, lying on a sickbed in that little camp in the mountains. And there was Cassandra, sitting beside me in the healers’ tent. And then, right outside of the tent, some healer or refugee or somebody started whispering about me. Cole said…

Well, you know Cole. What he said was nearly incomprehensible, but the gist of it was that Cassandra overheard something very bad. I don’t know if she heard about that business with the templar and the dwarf, or if she heard about my summer holidays last year, or…

I suppose it doesn’t matter. Whatever she overheard, Cassandra now believes that I’m only interested in her for sex.

Well, I am interested in her for sex. But not just sex. At least, I don’t think so. I mean, if that’s all she
wanted, I suppose I wouldn’t mind. Too much. But I hope she wants more than that. Because she is rather wonderful, you know?

Ah! You see? I can’t even think straight. I’ve completely lost my footing with her. I keep trying to talk to her, but then I see her and I get all tongue-tied. I’ve tried writing letters, and that’s no good either. And damn it all, what am I supposed to say to her? “Yes, I slept with a lot of women, but in my defense, it was completely meaningless?” Or how about “But if I slept with you, I’m sure it would be different.” I can’t say that! It sounds like something from one of those awful romance novels that you like so much, Kate. It’s fine in fiction, but no sensible person would believe it.

The thing is, I keep thinking that for a moment there, Cassandra actually liked me. Me, you know? And not just ‘that Trevelyan fellow’ with the deep pockets and the wicked reputation. That would have been a first, eh?

But now she hates me. Or won’t talk to me, which might as well be the same thing.

It’s hopeless.
– Robert

Robert, it isn’t hopeless. You always tell me not to resort to dramatics, so don’t you start.

First of all, you can take comfort in knowing that Cassandra did like you. Or does like you. Or may like you. At least I think she does. Or might.

The point is, there’s a reason Cassandra isn’t speaking to you and it’s not you. Well it is you, I suppose, as the rumors are partly of your own making. But you know what I mean. She’s upset by the stories, don’t you see? She can’t tell if you’re serious about her or not. And frankly, Robert, you’d better get that sorted out in your own mind before you try your hand at pursuing her. I don’t think Cassandra would take kindly to being jilted. If you’re not completely certain about her, I would advise leaving her alone.

But if you are set on her, then don’t worry so much. You attracted her attention once. You can do it again. Just act like yourself.

Act like yourself when you’re around me, I mean. Not like yourself when you’re around your idiot friends or those horrible aristocratic ladies you flirt with or…

Perhaps that’s not the best advice.

Just be patient, Robert. You arrived at Skyhold in such a bold way, you were bound to cause a scene. Right now, you’re new and interesting and the soldiers would rather whisper about you and Cassandra than talk about Corypheus. In a month or so, they’ll move on to gossiping about someone else. All they need is a new romance to occupy them.

I’ll see if I can’t combat the rumors a little bit. I can’t outright deny the stories, but if I give the tales some context, it might help.

Though really Robert, you did bring this on yourself

I did try to warn you that your taste in women would come back to haunt you

I’ll see what I can do.
Hey, Ostwick.

I heard this crazy story about how you once seduced a Grand Cleric in a confessional booth during the Summerday Mass. They say the singing of the choir couldn’t quite drown out her final aria. Guess you go for the mature, self-righteous type?

Look, I know it’s not my business, but I thought you might want to know that there was a betting book down in the barracks and folks were wagering how long it’d take you to seduce the Seeker.

Then Cassandra heard about it.

She didn’t say anything. She just took the book and ripped it up into little pieces. The remains of it are stabbed to her practice dummy. You should probably stay out of her way for now. Friendly tip from a friendly dwarf.

– Varric

P.S. - You owe me for that last hand of Wicked Grace. You lost those sovereigns fair and square.

Forget about context, Kate.

I’m doomed.

– Robert

Kate,

Inquisitor,

I never did thank you for your assistance in setting up those wards down in the war camp. The soldiers are most grateful to sleep on warm ground. I’m sure they’d prefer to sleep on warm cots, but one thing at a time, yes? For now, they are able to return to their training. We’ll have them back in the field in no time.

Now that’s done, I was wondering if I could talk to you regarding another matter. I have a private concern.

Now that you are Inquisitor, it is probably best that I inform you of a situation.

Of course you know that templars take lyrium.

Like most templars, I used to take lyrium. But unlike most templars,

May I meet with you at your earliest convenience? After lunch, perhaps?

– Cullen
Cullen,

I would love to meet with you

I would be happy to discuss anything whatever you wish

Of course you may meet with me. This afternoon will not work, however, as Josephine wanted me to be present for a hiring decision. Something about an arcanist, I believe.

Join me for dinner?

We could meet at dinnertime, perhaps?

– Kate

_____________________

Kate,

Inquisitor,

I have an evening meeting with my officers, I’m afraid. Once that is done, I must finish a report for your friend, Coll. She threatened me with bodily harm asked that I set an example and submit a report for her histories.

Perhaps we can meet some other time? I have been thinking a great deal about how to explain

The matter is not easy to discuss.

I will be inspecting the work on the roads tomorrow, and will miss the war table meeting.

– Cullen

_____________________

Oh, that’s right. I wish I could go with you

I’ll see you later, then?

Best of luck.

– Kate

_____________________

Ser Cullen,

I saw you working on some reports after the officers’ meeting. You know, I could write out your reports for you, ser. It wouldn’t be any trouble to spend more time with you get notes from you take that off your hands, ser.

– Ser Cpl. Ruvena of Kirkwall

_____________________

No need for that, Ruvena. You’ve already taken on Keran’s old duties (Maker rest him). I’m not about to waste an officer on minor secretarial work. We need you training recruits.
P.S. - I forgot to mention that you’ve been promoted to lieutenant. You’ll be reporting to Capt. Barris from now on. He’s down at the war camp with your new roster.

But ser, I’d rather

Are you sure you don’t need me to

Yes, ser. Thank you, ser.

– Ser Lt. Ruvena of Kirkwall

Commander’s Report
10th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon
by Ser Cullen Stanton Rutherford

The following soldiers were promoted to the rank of lieutenant:
Corporal Vale
Corporal Ruvena

The following soldiers were promoted to the rank of captain:
Ser Byrony Gann
Ser Delren Barris
Lieutenant Lysette

The following projects were begun:
Paving the existing southern road
Building a new road down the western ridge

The follow projects were completed:
Tents pitched in lower war camp
Warming wards set in lower war camp (thanks to Kate Inquisitor Trevelyan for her efforts)

The following projects are required:
Inventory all weaponry
Requisition supplies to build new weaponry
Begin reconstruction of courtyard smithy
Begin reconstruction of the gate house
Construct gardens on the north side of keep
Set warming wards on gardens on the north side of the keep
Begin construction of chicken coops (Josephine is working on the delivery of said chickens)
Hire a new cook (why is this under my jurisdiction, Josephine? Wouldn’t it make sense to have someone else take point on this?)
Repair the stables
Repair the drawbridge
Repair the Inquisitor’s Quarters (high priority, Kate the Inquisitor can’t be expected to live in a tent in the courtyard indefinitely)
Begin repairs on the Great Hall
Repair the hallway leading to the war room (lowest priority)

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 10th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

THANK YOU CULLEN. At least somebody knows how to file a report right. Guess being uptight is good for something.

You all see this? This is Starkhaven style done like it should be. Get writing, people!

Colleen Lavellan
Archivist of Skyhold

You know what ought to be your highest priority Cullen? A tavern. That’s what we need. A TAVERN. The building in the courtyard used to be one. You can tell ‘cause of the beer stains on the floor and the piss stains on the wall out back. Let’s make that priority NUMBER ONE. Would be great for morale.

– The Iron Bull

Building a tavern is not our first priority, Bull. We have a whole host of other things to deal with, not the least of which is food production. I don’t want our soldiers drinking on an empty stomach.

– Cullen

That’s where you’re wrong, commander. We need bacon and beer.

Okay then, putting this in the official record: ALL IN FAVOR OF REBUILDING THE TAVERN FIRST, SIGN HERE!!
The Iron Bull
Krem
Varric
Dorian!
Madame Vivienne de Fer
Robert (do it.)
Kate (Apologies Cullen, but I think this is a good idea.)
Josephine (Agreed. Our Ferelden visitors want one especially.)
Leliana
Scout Charter
Scout Pellane
Scout Harding (yay! beer!)
Corporal Lieutenant Vale
Capt. Barris
Capt. Lysette
Captain Rylen (Please, ser. We need this.)
Harrit
Flissa (but I don’t want to serve drinks no more)
Blackwall
MORRIS THE REKWISITION OFFISER
Sera Sera Sera Sera Sera BEEEEEEEES!
AAAAAH! Bull! You done fecked my record! I ought to erase this, only Sera used Denerim ink and that never comes out of nothing.

Well, bollocks. Might as well add me own name to the list:
Coll (e'en Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold - and FECK YOU BULL for using my books for this divvy list of yours)

Commander’s Report
11th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon
by Ser Cullen Stanton Rutherford

The following projects were begun:
Construction of a tavern, to the delay of ALL OTHER building projects

The following projects were completed:
Hiring a new cook (And I don’t want to hear any complaints about the food. If you don’t like the cook, grouse to Josephine.)
Hiring of bartender (Flissa wasn’t available, so I gave the job to a sarcastic dwarf that I found in the courtyard. Next time, let the hiring of non-military personnel fall to someone else.)

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 11th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

YEAH! TAVERN!

Oh, hey, commander. Got one more non-military hire for you. We need an entertainer for the tavern. Used to have a bard down at Haven. Her music was kinda slow, but it made for good atmosphere.

Anyone got a line on that singer-chick from Haven? Did she survive or was she fried up by the dragon?

– The Iron Bull

Maryden fine, chief. I made sure she –

Yeah, she’s fine.

– Krem

Oh Krem checked in on her alright.

(He’s got a crush on her)

– Stitches

Shut it, you.

– Krem
Coll, please stay calm. I’m in the middle of a war meeting and I can’t leave just yet. Give me a half hour and I’ll slip out.

In the meantime, it’s okay. So Krem likes the minstrel. That doesn’t mean you don’t still have a chance. And no, I don’t think serenading him would be a good idea. I know you can sing, but that might strike him as odd. Though I do recall reading a story about how Leliana seduced the Hero of Ferelden by singing Dalish ballads. Maybe I’m remembering that wrong.

Nevermind, forget I said anything. Just take a few deep breaths, and I’ll be over to the library as soon as I can. Cullen wanted to talk with me after the meeting, but I’ll beg out and–

Oh dear. I have to stop writing and send this with the messenger. Leliana is giving me the evil eye from across the war table. I think she can read my writing upside down.

– Kate

9th Firstfall (I think? or is it the 10th already?)

Robert’s report for Coll.

Trevelyan’s report

Blast, I don’t know Starkhaven style. Format. Whatever. But here’s what I’m thinking:

Seeing as how Cassandra a certain person won’t speak to me, I’ve decided to make myself useful. Cole and I are going to follow up on an idea I had.

Oh and Katie, can I borrow fifteen sovereigns?

– Robert

(Report was recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 11th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

Robbie-lad, I know you only have eyes for the Seeker's pert arse, but I posted the formatting guide right by the library door. Look alive, boyo.

Mythal help me, no one reads nothing these days.

Kate, don't worry about the coin. I stole it from your tent while you were meeting with the builders. By the way, are you ever going to submit a report for me, or are you too Inquisitorial these days to do writing work?

Colleen Lavellan
Archivist of Skyhold

I’m swamped in meetings, Coll. And as my friends keep asking me for romantic advice, I end up writing more letters than reports. But if you can get me an hour free, and I’ll happily write anything you want in whatever format you wish.

– Kate
Spymaster’s Report
11th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon
by Leliana (aka, Sister Nightengale):

Messages sent to scouts:
Confidential

Messages received from scouts:
Confidential

Missions begun:
Confidential

Missions terminated:
Confidential

Missions completed:
Confidential, to be declassified in six months time

What is this shite, Nightengale? You think you're too good to write reports for me, is that it?

Colleen Lavellan
Archivist of Skyhold

Just following protocol, Coll. Unless you’d like to exempt me and my staff from your requirements? Or perhaps you’d like to come have a chat with me about your own oddly obscure personal history?

– Leliana

Nah, we’re good. Carry on.

– Coll

(Sister Nightengale’s report was recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 11th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

Iron Bull’s Report (Just a quick note. Don’t know this Starkhaven shit and I don’t care to.)

Now that we’ve got builders workin’ on the tavern, the only thing left to do is wait for the grand opening party. In the meantime, I’ve got the Chargers pitching in where they can.

If anyone needs me, I’ll be checking out Commander Cullen’s ASS.

– The Iron Bull

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 12th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

Attention everyone:

Allow me to clarify that “ASS” is shorthand for “Abomination Safety Squads.” This is the name that
Bull came up with for the the formerly unnamed mage/non-mage joint soldier/spellcasting units tasked with countering blood magic and demons. I can only assume that the name was Bull’s idea of a joke.

I repeat: ASS does not refer to my ass my bottom to any actual person’s body parts.

Allow me to further clarify that “ASS” is NOT an official title. I voted for “Anti-Magic Units,” but Kate the Inquisitor pointed out that “anti-magic” might offend our mage allies. We have not yet decided upon an appropriate name, but we shall do so first thing tomorrow morning.

Kate Inquisitor, let’s confer on my ASS.

I mean…

You know what I mean.

– Cullen

Ah ha ha!! This is why I signed on to be archivist!

Let it go on the record that the Inquisitor was reading the commander’s letter over dinner, and she snorted so hard that a pea came out of her nose.

IT'S ALL IN THE HISTORY NOW, ASHA'DHAREN!

Colleen Lavellan
Archivist of Skyhold

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 12th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

I'm not certain that nasally-projected peas are of interest to anyone other than you, Coll.

– Kate

Oh, I don’t know. I imagine Theodosian history would be a great deal more colorful if we recorded all the times that great leaders launched vegetables out of their facial orifices.

– Dorian

Duchess, I can attest that people love weird little details about the famous and the powerful. This is why The Tale of the Champion sold so well.

– Varric

First Varric, I’m not famous nor powerful. Secondly, the weird little details of my life are not nearly as interesting as those of Hawke’s.

– Kate
Give it time, Duchess. Give it time.

– Varric

Notice from the Office of Commander Cullen:

As of this morning, the formerly unnamed mage/non-mage joint soldier/spellcasting units have been named “Dispelling Squads.” Please desist from using any other title to refer to them.

Understood, ser. No more ASS, ser.

– Ser Lt. Ruvena of Kirkwall

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, ser, but ASS is here to stay.

Thing is, “Dispelling Squads” will never catch on. The soldiers have already trained their ASSes and named themselves. There’s a “Bad ASS” unit and a “Kick ASS” unit, the “Bitch ASS” unit (that one’s all females) and a couple of hefty dwarves and a qunari mage formed the “Skinny ASS” unit (as a joke, of course.)

Now they’re talking about getting their names embroidered on jackets and robes. You’d think it would be an insult, but somehow, it’s not. The squads have these rivalries going on - nicknaming each other the “Stinky ASS” and “Scrawny ASS” and such. Juvenile as teenage trainees, ser, but you know how that sort of thing builds camaraderie. It’s all in good fun. I have a whole bunch of promising recruits who want to apply for the new “Sexy ASS” unit.

Might require a bit of explaining to our allies, but I don’t see how we can stop it now that it’s started. And isn’t it fitting that the templars’ old job is now being done by the ASS end of the Inquisition?

(Sorry ser. I couldn’t resist.)

– Capt. Rylen

Bad ASS Squad Leader Rion reporting in.

All ASS units have been training for the following scenarios:
Demon attacks
Elemental demon attacks
Blood magic summonings
Blood magic ritual circles
Blood magic abominations and summonings and ritual circles
Blood mage mind infiltration (shudder)
And of course: Fade rift drills (aka, hold the rift until the Inquisitor arrives and try not to piss yourself)

Next week, we’re going to offer a training for any interested mages and/or soldiers. We’re calling it “Bloodmagic is Shit. How not to Get Dead: A Lesson from Your Local Bad ASS”

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 13th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)
Maker save me from the jokes of camp-bound soldiers.

– Cullen

Let them have their fun. I imagine the more we protest, the more jokes we’ll see.

By the way, did you want to join me for that seminar? We could go together and
That training sounds interesting. I think I’ll attend. Would you like to join me?
Will I see you there?

– Kate

If you’re going, I might

It does sound interesting, but I don’t have the time. I have a long list of requisitions to see to now that our smithy is up and running.

Are you planning to inform Fiona that her mages have joined our ASSes, or shall I?
Wait. I didn’t mean it like that. You see how difficult this ASS thing is going to be?

– Cullen

I’ll tell Fiona. I have a meeting with her tomorrow, right after the morning war meeting.

– Kate

Ah, I see. That is unfortunate, because I had hoped
I was planning to catch you after the morning war meeting and speak to you about
If you have time, could I borrow you for a meeting as well? I need to speak to you privately about my lyrium addiction my recovery efforts that matter I mentioned earlier.

– Cullen

I’d love to meet with you privately

Of course I’ll make time for you

Certainly, Cullen. I’ll check in with you as soon as I finish with Fiona.
Grand Enchantress' Report  
14th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon  
by Fiona:

As of today, the Free Mage Alliance signed a treaty with the Inquisition. We shall set up our base of operations in the northwestern tower of Skyhold keep. We will hold a ground-breaking ceremony on the morrow and begin modifications and wardings thereafter.

In memoriam of those we lost prior to this date, I, Grand Enchanter Fiona, submit to the Inquisition a list of all 407 known mages that were lost in the fighting with the templars, the fighting at the Conclave, the fighting in the Hinterlands, and the fighting at Corypheus’ battle upon Haven.

(A list of names follows.)

I further submit to the Inquisition a compiled list of all 118 surviving members of the Free Mage Alliance. Together, we represent thirteen former Circles and eleven guilds of Magi.

(A list of names follows.)

As you can see, some of our free mages have already joined the Inquisitor’s ASS. Mages of advanced years have taken on light support duties within Skyhold keep. Children and apprentices shall continue schooling and our best instructors will teach the children of Skyhold - both mage and non-mage children alike. Any free mages interested in fighting are to submit an application to Commander Cullen. Any mages wishing to refrain from combat will be given employment in the Inquisition as support staff. All appointments must be approved by Grand Enchanter Fiona.

The enchanters of the alliance will meet next month to draft a statement On the Proper Use and Study of Magic. All proposals will be submitted to the Inquisitor for approval. Until this task is completed, the Free Mages will continue to follow Chantry-approved practices regarding spells and summonings, as put forth in the Nevarran Accord. Let it be noted that the Free Mages do not believe that folk magics are inherently evil, but until such time as a proper consensus can be reached, we will continue to operate by standards known to all Circle-trained mages.

Grand Enchanter Fiona will set up her offices in the Inquisition library, at the permission of Colleen Lavellan, Rebel Heretic Archivist of Skyhold.

We thank the Inquisition again for its generosity, and look forward to our future together.

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 14th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

Proper report, that. Don't know how Fifi managed to write out that list of the dead. I could scarce bear to copy it into the book. And no, those aren't tear-stains on the pages, those are just...

Feck.

– Coll

I agree. It doesn’t seem right. All those names…
I added Enchanter Lydia of Ostwick to the list. It was the least I could do.

I must admit that I’m not thrilled with the idea of the enchanters conferring on the practices of folk magic (read: blood magic. That’s what this is really about.) I can only imagine the arguments that committee will get into. Vivienne was fit to be tied when she read that part of the report. Cullen just made a face: that one where his eyes go glassy and a muscle clenches in his jaw.

But we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.

– Kate

_________

Oh, come off it Kate. You’re not going to turn prissy about a bit of experimenting are you? Not after all the research that we’ve done.

– Coll

_________

Researching along the edges of magical theory is one thing. But blood magic takes that fine line and smears gore all over it. But as I said, we’ll deal with that later.

Speaking of magic, I need to get back to practicing. What with all these meetings, I’ve scarcely had time to train with Bull, much less sleep. Other than those warming wards, I haven’t cast a single spell since Haven. I almost miss being out in the field.

Hm, I’m going to regret saying that the moment I set foot out of Skyhold, aren’t I?

– Kate

_________

Sure you are. I’m putting that in the record, just so I can rub your face in it when you do.

– Coll

_________

First Enchantress’ Report
14th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon
by Vivienne, Madame de Fer, formerly of the Montsimmard Circle and presently of the Inquisition:

I may not be the “grand” enchanter, nor do I have any say in the lax magical standards of other mages. All the same, I have decided to help the Inquisition where I can.

To that end, I persuaded Leliana to lend me a raven, and sent a letter to some of my dearest friends: Jean-Laveau and Joan-Marie of Val Royeaux. Young, talented, and hungry for recognition, they are, without a doubt, the most underrated tailors in all of Orlais. I presented the Inquisition to them as a chance to land their first large-scale tailoring commission, and they have accepted us, thank Andraste. (As I said, they are very young and very hungry, otherwise they would never have agreed to travel to this wild place.)

I will notify you all the moment they arrive. We must begin work at once if we are to look presentable at Halamshiral.

– Vivienne
Tailors? Is this really necessary? You do realize that we won’t be able to meet with Empress Celene until spring?

Frankly, the whole Halamshiral situation is baffling to me. Sending word to the empress that her life is in danger ought to merit more of a reply than “Ah yes, thank you. Now wait in line and meet me at my open-door party in four months.”

And Orlesian peace-talks? Now there is the oxymoron of the age.

– Cullen

Commander darling, I know that Fereldens are allergic to the Grand Game, but please consider that we have only 4 months to prepare for the ball. In the world of fashion, this is an overnight rush job. Jean and Joan would never consider it, except for the fact that they are utterly penniless.

– Vivienne

Yes, because we couldn’t possibly save the empress in anything less that the height of fashion.

– Cullen

Naturally, darling. So glad to see you understand.

– Vivienne

I caught your sarcasm, Cullen. I think Vivienne chose to ignore it.

By the way, I’m so sorry that I missed our meeting. By the time I had finished with Fiona, you had left for the war camp and…

It doesn’t matter. I’ve cleared my evening schedule. I’ll come find you and we can slip off

Shall we meet after dinner?

– Kate

Kate,

Inquisitor,

That would be wonderful

That will do nicely.
I want you to know that this meeting
I probably should warn you that this conversation might leave you wondering about my fitness
I will see you then.
– Cullen

Kate,
Inquisitor,
No sooner had I replied than something came up that requires my attention.
I’ll meet with you tomorrow, perhaps?
– Cullen

Commander Cullen:
You just missed Lady Trevelyan. She went to inspect the food shipment.
But I have wonderful news! Tell your soldiers that we’ll have eggs and bacon for breakfast tomorrow. That ought to raise everyone’s spirits. Now if we can just get some Antivan coffee…
– Josephine

Lieutenant’s Report
14th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon By Capt. Lysette, formerly of Ostwick
Just returned from recovery mission to Old Haven. Submitting a report at the request of Lady Cassandra (who did not want to write one):

Village quiet and buried. No chance of finding bodies until spring. Tunnel into the basement of Chantry still intact. Chantry also intact - mostly. Nave roof was half collapsed, and you could hear the snow groaning overhead. Thank the Maker for the mages that came with us. They held up the ceiling while we worked.

Lady Cassandra said to leave the relics. Instead, we salvaged Ambassador Josephine’s old records and whatever books we could find. We delivered four crates of archival material to Colleen Lavellen as of this afternoon.

I’m glad the mission was a success, but frankly, I would recommend that no one go back to Haven for a long time. It was depressing, really.

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 14th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellen, Archivist of Skyhold.)
Oh sweet Mythal's gleaming knockers! Sure but Cassandra landed on me a heaping load of completely DISORGANIZED SHITE what needs filing and shelving. This is right hatchet, this is!

Dorian, get yourself out of that comfy chair! Kate, break out the party hats!

We've got cataloging to do!

Colleen Lavellan
Archivist of Skyhold

________________________________________

Colleen,

I absolutely will not spend my evening…

Well, what the Void. Why not? It’s not like I have any place better to be. This is why we need a tavern.
– Dorian

P.S. - I still maintain that you southerners are barbarians.

________________________________________

‘Course we are. But we’re fun barbarians.
– Coll

________________________________________

Coll, I’m sorry, but I can’t play assistant librarian tonight. I have a meeting with Cullen.
– Kate

________________________________________

No you don’t. Didn’t you see that message from him? I heard one of his corporals got into a fight with a mage. Flare up of old templar tempers, I guess. The commander's sorting out the eejits and won’t be done until late. Said he’d meet you tomorrow morning after the war meeting.

So lucky you, you're free for the night! And I'll even let you off the hook for not writing me a report this month - if you help me now. So come shelve already.
– Coll

________________________________________

Cullen,

I’m sorry to hear about the mess with the templar conflict among the soldiers.

Do you need me to help? I’m sure you have it well in hand, but let me know if I can be of assistance. Otherwise, I’ll see you tomorrow.
– Kate

________________________________________

Cullen,

I waited on you for nearly a hour after the war meeting
I guess you forgot

Did you sleep in or

I suppose we missed one another yet again. I can’t wait in the war room any longer, as I have a full schedule for the day. It seems all the pilgrims have found us at last.

They must have heard we have bacon.

I’ve given my agenda to Josephine, should you wish to track me down. If today doesn’t work out, I have a free hour tomorrow at noon.

– Kate

Kate,

Inquisitor,

I cannot believe that I overslept

Maker, you must think me completely

I had the worst headache last night. Seeing that former templar half-mad from a lyrium overdose

I am sorry I missed you. Can we reschedule for some other time?

Tomorrow at noon won’t work for me, however. I have a shield-wall demonstration to attend. Perhaps after dinner?

– Cullen

Not after dinner, I’m afraid. I’ve got a meeting with the cleaning staff. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned over the years it’s that you never miss meetings with the people doing the dirty work.

Tuesday at 11?

– Kate

You have a meeting with the Nevarran cleric then.

– Cullen

Oh, right.

Maker, this week has been wild. Maybe next week will work better, when everything has settled down?

– Kate
I would rather not wait a week

I suppose is this my own fault for not telling you earlier

I suppose I could explain this by letter

I’m sure we’ll work something out.

– Cullen

Commander’s Report
15th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon
by Ser Cullen Stanton Rutherford:

Soldiers added to the Inquisition ranks:
Belinda Darrow
Thornton of Ansburg
Pala of the Silent Sisters
Hall (just ‘Hall’ apparently)

Soldier added to the Dispell Squads to the ASS (fine. I’ll use ASS):
Cillian Ralaferin
Zither of Orlais

Commander’s personal notes:
Morning training regimen resumed
Repair request made (Will someone please fix the hole in the roof of my personal quarters?)
Meetings with officers scheduled for Tuesday, Thursday evenings
Still trying to schedule meeting with Kate the Inquisitor regarding lyrium personal matter

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 15th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

So are we using ASS after all, ser? Just want to be on this clear, ser.

– Lt. Ser Ruvena of Kirkwall

Yes. I suppose we are.

– Cullen

From the desk of Grand Enchanter Fiona:

We, the Free Mage Alliance, request an invitation to the grand opening of the Skyhold Tavern, scheduled for the end of the week. We are aware that rumors abound regarding drunken mages, but they are (mostly) inaccurate. We plan to have a buddy-system in place and all underage mages will remain in the tower (under supervision, of course).

As compensation for the invitation, we will provide a fireworks show, given by our enchanter-level
pyromancers. We mages are not keen on providing entertainment under normal circumstances, but in exchange for use of the tavern, we will make an exception.

– Fiona

‘Course you guys are invited! Aren’t they, boss? Would be shit if they weren’t.

– The Iron Bull

Of course you’re invited Fiona - you and all the mages. I assumed – But of course I should have extended a formal invitation.

Yes, everyone in the Inquisition is invited. We might have to figure out shifts so that everyone can fit into the tavern, but no one will be left out.

– Kate

The tavern grand opening? That’s at the end of this week?

Lady Trevelyan, you might have reminded me! I forgot to order the wine! And the ale!

Maker help me, I hate being unprepared for parties.

– Josephine

Relax Ruffles. I already sent out orders for ale and wine and even a bit of qunari whiskey. See, the dwarf is not entirely without his uses.

– Varric

Oh thank you, Varric. I shall have to send you a gift when I am not buried under a mountain of applications for internships.

– Josephine

Just make sure my mail gets straight into my hands without Cassandra hearing about it, and we’re square.

– Varric

Ser Cullen,

Do you really want mages attending the tavern opening, ser? It’s upsetting dangerous enough that they are staying in the keep itself, but if they are at a public gathering and alcohol is involved, ser…

Perhaps some of the former templars ought to be present, ser? I could exchange my shift down here in the camp in order to guard the keep? You and I could keep an eye on things together. We could pull a shift together, ser. Just like old times.

– Ser Lt. Ruvena
That won’t be necessary, lieutenant. I hear your concerns, but the mages are our allies. We cannot deny them the liberties we would extend to any other soldier.

Besides, **Kate** The Inquisitor will be there, and all of her personal bodyguards as well. I’ve no doubt she’ll keep things in order.

– Cullen

P.S. - Before I forget, please be sure to get me that list of the guard rotation for the camp. I need it as soon as possible. Thank you, lieutenant.

---

For the Maker’s sake, how obvious do I need to be?

Are you ever going to pick up on these hints, ser?

Of course, ser. I’ll send you the list at once.

– Ser Lt. Ruvena

*(Guard roster follows.)*

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**Kate,**

Inquisitor,

Can I meet with you? I still have that **lyrium problem** personal matter I need to discuss.

I know you probably don’t have much time

I very much do not wish to presume

I have a free hour this afternoon. Will that do?

– Cullen

---

Cullen,

I think our plan to meet is cursed or something. Not really cursed, but still.

I can’t meet now. Sienna Dennet just arrived down here at the stables. The clever girl threw open the paddock gates when the red templars were advancing on Haven, and a number of our horses managed to escape into the hills. Sienna and her father spent the past week rounding them up.

Miracle of miracles, my dear Flame survived. Your horse, I am sorry to say, was, um… Sienna has picked out a new horse for you. You should come see him. He’s a beauty. In fact, would you like to come riding with me?

I’m not sure if you remember our earlier conversation about horses, but I’d still love to teach you how to ride… Oh wait. Maker, that sounds
I don’t suppose you’ve thought about taking time to learn to ride? We could have our meeting and take a scouting tour all at once?

– Kate

Kate

Inquisitor,

I’d love to learn riding if you’re the one to teach me. Or wait, I didn’t mean I have no idea how to ride a horse and the idea of learning while talking about lyrium

Of course learning to ride is an important priority, and I thank you for the offer. But I have little time for pleasure self-improvement. Instead, I will meet with you when I can keep my feet on the ground some other time.

– Cullen

I guess that’s a no on the riding?

Certainly. I’ll see you tomorrow at the war table, I suppose.

– Kate

Kate, I saw you standing out there by the stables, staring off into space. Lass, you’re done jaded. Go take a nap already. Let someone else figure it out for an afternoon.

– Coll

Thank you Coll, but I can’t. I have that meeting with the cleaning staff that I need to get to.

And I wasn’t staring into space, I was just looking up at Cullen’s tower and

I’d better hurry.

– Kate

Report from the Desk of Valery, elf of Denerim, Head of Housekeeping for the Inquisition:

Met with the Inquisitor today. An honor, of course. The castle’s a big place, and we’re proud to serve in it. Been in places a whole lot nastier, I can tell you that.

Was pleased to tell the Inquisitor that we’d gotten her a proper room set up. It isn’t as pretty as we’d like, but it will work for now. Stairs up are still a sight, but we’ll clear that later.

We also informed the Inquisitor that her roommate moved in yesterday. The archivist elf asked for a bookshelf and a potions set. I got her a bookshelf, but I draw the line at potions. Those jars fall over and you won’t never get the smell out of the tapestries. I told Mistress Coll she could go to the undercroft for that kind of thing.
We hope the Inquisitor and her roommate will be very happy in their new rooms. Now we’re on to the Great Hall. I’m sure the Inquisitor will love what I have planned for the curtains.

– Valery

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 15th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

So, Coll…

You might have told me that we had a room, or that you’d moved into it. At least I’ll know where to find you if you aren’t in the library.

But a word about this bed you ordered for me… Can we cancel this order? I mean, what is this, exactly? From the requisition brochure, it looks like a sleigh being dragged out of the wall by a pair of golden qunari. Are these statues supposed to be guardians? Are they warding off bad luck? Is it a display of strength? If this is qunari art, then I don’t get it.

Can we please order something more - I don’t know… cozy? I suppose you’ll take the double bed they’ve got up there and I’ll sleep on the couch?

– Kate

Of course the qunari bed was a joke! Can you imagine? Some lover coming up to visit and they find you flanked by two gilded hornheads? Would kill the mood right off. Or maybe fire it up something kinky? You never know with some.

Then again, it’s not like I’ll find out, eh? Not now that Krem’s gone off for that bard lass. Bollocks, that’s what that is.

Still, in case I make a comeback, let’s have our signal worked out. I want to be able to warn you not to come into the room if I just happen to get lucky. My old stocking-on-the-doorknob trick ought to do. As for you... Well, you never did bring anyone home, now did you? So whatever. Leave me a note or something. Don’t want to disturb you if you’re getting a ride.

Oh, and don’t you take the couch none, Kate-llass. You get the bed, and I’m to have a mattress delivered to that loft - you know, the space you can climb up to from the ladder in the closet? (Folks that designed this place were mad Kate - pure dead loony.) But I like that space up there. Someone painted the wall Dalish-style. I’m going to place a bed beneath it and have the sweetest dreams.

Speakin’ on Dalish-style (not Dalish-style sex. Dalish style style), I put in an order fer new windows. I don’t like that chancy Inquisition eye looking at me from the stained glass. I want to see a nice pair of halla or something shining at me in the morning.

Oh, this’ll be grand, Kate! Best rooms we ever had! They’re huge, so I knew you wouldn’t mind me moving in. And someone cleans them for us. And no templars walking by at all hours! And I’ll be getting a hot bath now and again. And there’s no templars to stand guard while I bathe! This is the life, lass! Aside from that Corypheus problem and all.

– Coll

Lady Trevelyan,
A letter arrived for me today. It was a reply to the letter I sent to your mother. I recall that you were reluctant to apply to your family for monetary aid and I now understand why. This letter is somewhat inappropriate annoying to me so I can only imagine highly personal.

Would you like to submit a copy to the Inquisition archives? Or would you prefer to burn this? I support you either way. For what it’s worth, my family is also very difficult.

– Josephine

(A letter follows in a flowing hand.)

Dearest Lady Montilyet,

I received your letter asking about Financial Assistance for your Most Holy Cause. I am, of course, Honored to Aid You. I am So Pleased to hear that my daughter is of use to the Chantry At Last!

As a Mother, it broke my heart to know that my daughter would be Forever Afflicted with the Maker’s Curse. Yet it seems that her Burden may yet be A Salvation To Many. Praise Be to Our Maker that He Uses the Diseased among us to Render Health Unto the Masses!

We Joyously Bestow unto the Inquisition the following sum and lands, and profits from these lands. They are a Second Dowry for our daughter. The First Such Dowry was gifted unto the Chantry when they Took Her For Their Own, as a Man might take a Bride. And now, as you, The Inquisition, take her into A Second Marriage, so also we gift unto you a Second Bride Price. Take this money Of Us - and take you our daughter as well - that the Maker may do Great Works through her for All the Maker’s People.

Yours in Faith,
Lady Evelyn Trevelyan
Bann of Ostwick
Daughter of Our Beloved Andraste

Oh for the love of

Thank you for sending this to me, Josephine. I must admit that in my head, I am making that noise Cassandra makes when she is angry. You know the one.

You’d think that after all these years, my mother wouldn’t be able to get to me

It’s the stupid capital letters all over the place that drive me

When do we grow up enough so that these things don’t wound

You know what? It’s fine. I’ll submit it to the records myself.

It hurts, but it’s history.

– Kate

(Lady Trevelyan’s letter was recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 15th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Kate.)
Shit, Duchess. This could have come from my mom. Mage or not, I guess shame-turned-blame-the-kid is universal.

Hey, let me cheer you up. I hear the tavern will be done in a day or two. We can go get drunk and you can lose a few sovereigns to me at Wicked Grace. It’ll be fun.

– Varric

Ah, I see Varric beat me to a comforting letter. Let it me known that I had the idea first, but I was delayed by your friend Coll. She sends her regards, and tells me to remind you that ‘yer mum’s a sad wagon.’

Her words, not mine, but I’m sure I second the sentiment.

I also second Varric’s invitation to go drinking. The end of the week can’t come soon enough. Colleen won’t let me bring wine into the library.

– Dorian

THIS IS SER MORRIS REPOWRT. I HAV BOWZ AND SORDS AND SHEELDZ AND STUF IN THE REKWISISUNS RUM IF ANYONE WANTS SUM. COME GIT IT.

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 16th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

Notice from the Office of Commander Cullen:

All weapons orders must be submitted through the central requisitions office and approved by by Lieutenant Ruvena.

Also, everyone who got a weapon from Quartermaster Morris, please return it at once.

Just saw the commander’s notice. Need help sorting all those weapons out, lieutenant? I’ve got an hour free.

– Capt. Barris

Maker yes. I don’t know what Morris was thinking when he…

I never know what Morris is thinking. Hurry, will you?

– Lt. Ruvena

On my way.

Oh, and while I’m thinking of it, I notice that you aren’t on guard duty the night that the tavern is opening. Would you like to come get drinks with me and Robert Trevelyan? I owe him a pint. I’d be happy to buy you one as well.

– Capt. Barris
Is that a proposition?

Are you trying to ask me on a date?

I’m flattered, captain, but I’m actually interested in

Um, sure. Thanks. I’ll see you there.

– Lt. Ruvena

Ha! You’ll never guess what I…

Er, report from Robert. Or something. I still don’t understand how this is Starkhaven styling supposed to work. But guess what?

I FOUND A LEAD ON RED LYRIUM.

There. Got your attention, didn’t I?

So here’s what we did: Cole and I headed east into Ferelden and landed in a little village named Sulcher. We went to the local pub and did some reconnoitering, or whatever you people call it. I bought some pints (thanks for the coin, Katie), and Cole went invisible and babbled about what was in everyone’s heads. Didn’t take too long to ferret out a lead. Smugglers aren’t the brightest torches in the castle.

Seems that since the Chantry put a lockdown on regular lyrium, the demand for the red stuff has gone through the roof. Turns out that someone is selling red lyrium out of an abandoned villa in the Green Tombs. Or no. The Green Graves?

Ah, Cole is reminding me that it’s the Emerald Graves.

So there you are: there’s a red-lyrium smuggling operation in the Emerald Graves and I found out about it. Cole helped, of course. Actually, he did most of the work, but it was my idea.

Also! Let it be known that I did not get snockered, and I did not sleep up with anyone while I was in Ferelden. I’d like that on the record, thank you very much.

Look, I want to follow up on this lead. I know some people think I’m pretty useless, but I have skills. I know how smugglers operate, and I know how to get people talking. Let me join up as a soldier or scout or whatever, and I’ll track down your lyrium for you. My days as scoundrel may yet prove useful, eh?

– Robert

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 16th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

Well done, Lord Trevelyan!

You want a job? You’ve just earned one. Come see me and I’ll set you up as one of my scouts. We’ll swear you in and give you a dossier on everything we know about the Emerald Graves.
Admittedly, it isn’t much. We weren’t even looking in that direction.

Of course, if you’d told me about this plan of yours, you might have saved me the trouble of having you followed. But considering that you lost your shadow, I’m even more impressed. I like your initiative, but follow protocol next time or you’ll have me to answer to.

– Leliana

Ha! Claimed by the Nightengale! Did you see that, Katie? (More to the point, did Cassandra see??)

– Robert

Um, Cassandra did see, and she didn’t look too happy about it.

Robert, are you sure about this? Smugglers? Leliana’s scouts? You’ll have to learn that code of theirs. They write everything in cypher.

– Kate

That sounds like fun! Don’t you worry, Katie. I know what I’m doing.

No, actually I don’t. But do you know what you’re doing? Does anyone know what they’re doing around here? I didn’t think so. So let me help. And if I find Freddy and knife him in the back, that will be very healing to me and all that.

– Robert

Alright then. But make sure you get yourself some proper armor before you go. And pack some warm socks. Honestly, I would feel a lot better if you went with a small team, not by yourself.

(I know, I know. But once an older cousin, always an older cousin. I worry about you.)

– Kate

And I you. Make sure that whatever mission they send you on, you take a lot of bodyguards and elfroot potions. But enough of that. I hear the tavern is nearly done. If a certain Seeker won’t join me on opening night, will you, cousin?

Maker, it occurs to me that you’ve never been in a real tavern before. Not during business hours, that is. We’ll have to remedy that.

– Robert

P.S. - I saw the letter from Aunt Evie in the log book. Maker, your mother is something else. Be glad you were born a mage, Katie. Otherwise you’d have ended at finishing school like your older sisters and you’d be worthless to everyone.

Boss, you’ve never been in a tavern? Shit, we gotta fix that. Tavern opens night after next. Be there or be…sober. (shudder)
Leliana,

I want to know what mission you have given to Robert Trevelyan. He is a very impulsive person and I worry that he may get himself into trouble. Perhaps I should accompany him.

– Cassandra

I’m sorry, Cassandra. Information regarding Scout Trevelyan’s assignment is classified.

You are welcome, of course, to ask Robert about it. If he deems it critical to the success of his mission to bring you along, he will do so. As his bodyguard, perhaps.

– Leliana

Leliana, what fire spell did you put up the Seeker’s arse? She came blazing through the library like a nettled nug. Wouldn’t even listen to me as I told her thanks for finding me all these books. They’re such a mess that I still haven’t finished with them. Seeing as how I don’t offer my thanks much, I don’t like my compliments falling on deaf ears.

Colleen Lavellan
Archivist of Skyhold

First Enchantress’ Report
17th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon
by Vivienne, Madame de Fer, formerly of the Montsimmard Circle and presently of the Inquisition:

Jean-Leveau and Joan-Marie arrived today. The Inquisitor greeted them at the gate - in Orlesian, too, which made a good impression. It nearly made up for the fact that young Morris had mistakenly used their intended guest room to store cheese in. But we sorted that out and our dear tailors are ready to begin fittings in the morning.

I must admit that I am not at all pleased with Jean and Joan’s initial drawings for the Halamshiral finery. It simply will not do to put us all in red cavalry uniforms. They must have sketched these concepts with someone like Cullen in mind. The commander is the only person who would look well in this type of outfit. Perhaps it would suit Cassandra. It certainly would not suit me. I will have to work with them, I see. Jean and Joan are talented, but Maker are they young.

As for the Inquisitor’s armor, that must be dealt with immediately. Kate, what kinds of animal hides have we got on hand? And don’t say ‘nugskin,’ if you please. I know it’s practical, but we ought to use the pelt of some fearsome creature. How else can we demonstrate your power without uttering a word?

If only you could take down a dragon, darling. That would be marvelous. In fact, I’ll talk to Jean-Leveau about a design for a dragon-skin coat at once.

– Vivienne

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 17th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)
A dragon? Seriously? Are you suggesting that I wear my kills like some sort of walking trophy room?

– Kate

Of course, darling. What else is a wardrobe but a catalog of one’s sartorial assassinations? – items one sighted, hunted, and owned?

– Vivienne

Alright then. Added to my to do list: slay a dragon.

– Kate

YAAS!!!!

Take me with you boss. Please????

– The Iron Bull

Kate,

Inquisitor,

I hope you were joking about dragon hunting. Not that I doubt you could pull it off if given the right team and the right strategy, but we’ve got a few more important things on our schedule right now.

For example, I was hoping I could discuss that personal matter with you? The one we can never get around to discussing?

Not that it’s personal, personal, just something I need to explain.

If you have the time, of course.

– Cullen

I was being sarcastic about the dragon, Cullen. If I do get around to dragon slaying, it won’t be any time soon. I’ve told Vivienne she’ll have to make do with the great bear hides that we collected in the Hinterlands.

And yes, of course, I’d be happy to meet with you. I’m sorry this concern of yours keeps getting delayed. Maybe you can stop by during my fitting tomorrow and we can talk in the smithy? I’m sure Jean and Joan won’t mind. Much.

– Kate
So you’re saying there’s no dragon slaying? Damn it, boss.

Well fine then. In that case, I’m comin’ to your armor fitting. I don’t want Viv putting you in lace and cut-outs and molded metal boob plates with nipples and shit. At that point, you might as well go qun-style. Only wearing antaam-sar into battle takes decades of training, and you don’t have the time to learn how.

– The Iron Bull

Cut outs? Molded metal boob…?

Perhaps I should come to this fitting, too. To offer my profession opinion, of course.

– Cullen

First Enchantress’ Report
18th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon
by Vivienne, Madame de Fer, formerly of the Montsimmard Circle and presently of the Inquisition:

We had our fitting with the Inquisitor today, and it was…

Well, it was interesting to say the least.

I escorted Kate to the undercroft, and managed to snag her cousin, Robert, along the way. The blacksmith, Harritt, joined us, along with a cheerful little dwarf who spent most of her time blowing things up in the corner of the smithy. Iron Bull and Cullen were waiting for us as well, much to my surprise.

I at first doubted the wisdom of having Bull there. Yet the qunari provided more contributions than I would have thought possible for a person who wears so little clothing himself. Cullen also proved a boon. Given his Ferelden heritage and his attire of choice, I did not expect him to have much interest in costume design. Jean and Joan begged me to let them redesign Cullen’s armor, but I told them that he would never hear of it. It’s probably a good thing that our dear commander does not speak Orlesian, or he might have been offended at the language they used to describe his furry mantle. Or he might have been embarrassed at the observations they made about his physique. Jean-Leaveau, in particular, was quite taken by our commander. No doubt, he’ll soon be writing home to extol the virtues of the Inquisition and the attractions of ‘le commandant de l’ours.’

(I assume that Cullen does not speak Orlesian, but this may not be the case. The tips of his ears were very pink throughout the fitting. Then again, it gets quite hot by the forge.)

Kate’s cousin did not join us for very long. Robert had absolutely no patience for the fittings and fled the room as soon as he was able. But with his looks, we didn’t have much work to do. For Robert, we decided upon a “knights of old” sort of look: a red silk tunic and a white leather vest. His armor is a slightly more complex version of his day clothes: a cream-colored coat with crimson accents. I wonder what the ladies of Skyhold will make of it? At least one woman approved. Joan-Marie was half in love with ‘le beau coquin’ by the time Robert escaped.

Now Kate presented quite a challenge - and such a delightful challenge it was! I could practically see the wheels turning in Jean’s and Joan’s minds. Such a sweet girl! Such classic features! But what an unassuming manner! Kate’s face is far too friendly for jeweled headdresses or black leather spikes. But neither could we simply place her in the armor of a foot-soldier. She would be drowned in finery, but would disappear in common clothes. She must be impressive, but not overwhelmed;
striking, but never severe. In short, she is the most challenging client of all: a woman who cannot wear trends, but whose beauty would clearly shine if only placed in the right setting.

Jean and Joan saw this at once. They knew, as I did, that if they could dress Kate well, the entire fashion world would fall at their feet. (I encouraged this belief as much as I was able, for it means that Jean and Joan will work for free at present, and bill us later.)

It took us hours to complete a prototype of Kate’s armor, but it has been done. I attached a sketch below, and I am most pleased with the result. (As for Kate’s Halamshiral finery, we will continue work on that in the months ahead. It must be a costume to go down in fashion history! - but more of that later).

For Kate’s armor, we began with an autumnal palette. I found her a new pair of close-fitting leather trousers - ones that did not have odd embellishments about the thighs (A most unfortunate trend. I hope it ends soon.) Kate changed into this while the gentlemen politely averted their eyes, and then donned a sleeveless silk shift. We tucked the shift into her trousers, and the resulting silhouette was quite pleasing to the eye. Cullen and Iron Bull approved of the look, I noticed. Iron Bull growled, while the poor commander was rendered speechless. I’m not certain the Inquisitor is aware of just how tight those trousers are against her backside. Then again, a hint of sex appeal never goes amiss.

Jean and Joan then handed Kate a velveteen tunic in a lovely shade of wine-brown. The velveteen added the perfect touch, for it hints at nobility, but avoids the pretension of richer fabrics: nobility on walkabout, if you will. (On Robert, luxe fabrics are second nature. On Kate, they look ridiculous.) Kate tucked the tunic into her trousers (we didn’t want to lose the marvelous lines!) and over this she wore a brown leather vest. This vest was of Harrit’s making, and it was filled with reinforced panels and secret pockets and I don’t know what else. I insisted on providing Kate with a green silk neck-scarf to soften the overall look. Not only is such an accessory practical in the field, but the color matches the Inquisitor’s eyes. Leather gloves and over-the-knee boots completed the ensemble.

All this served as Kate’s in-camp kit. Over this, we added more combat-ready armor. Now, I at first made the mistake of trying to put Kate into a long, trailing coat. Iron Bull pointed out that Kate is rather clumsy and would trip herself with every step. Poor Kate looked a bit embarrassed by this accusation, but she agreed that it was true. Next, we put her in short coat and wound a length of silk around her middle. It’s a popular fashion in Nevarra, and it worked very well for Robert. But alas! The Inquisitor looked as though we’d trussed her up like a Frostfall goose. It was not a good look, and neither was the multi-tiered, furred collar that Harritt affixed to her neck. Cullen may be able to balance a hulking, hairy shoulder, but Kate just looked as though she’d gotten lost in a dire bear’s throat.

It was Cullen, of all people, who lighted upon a solution. In his very Ferelden way, he said, “Less is more, perhaps?” and he began handing Kate pieces of platemail to try on over her traveling clothes. I must confess, I had my doubts, but Maker, it worked. Who would have thought?

We began with a breastplate - just a beaten metal cuirass. We then added a skirt of sorts. Harritt called it a ‘fauld,’ I believe. It has interlocking metal plates set over large strips of leather. At first I thought it made Kate look as though she had been buckled into an ironclad banana peel. But as Cullen pointed out, it will protect her legs. We then added shoulder guards, which are excellent at conveying power. Iron Bull and I both wanted tall, imposing pauldrons, emblazoned with the symbol of the Inquisition. Kate and Cullen opted for something a bit shorter. In this, the Inquisitor and commander outvoted the enchantor and the bodyguard. But in the end, we completed our work and Kate looked…

Well, it wasn’t what I’d envisioned for her when I started. But I must confess, it turned out better
than I’d hoped. Different, perhaps, but better.

The design, you see, was constructed entirely of layers. As Kate is a complex little person, the layered attire suited her very well. She looked like herself in all that armor, but with this heavy mantle of power placed upon her. I think it was Cullen who remarked, “I can’t decide if I want follow her into battle or protect her.”

Dear Kate was clearly unused to all this attention, for she was blushing the entire time.

The one remaining difficulty is that the Inquisitor found it very difficult to move in her new gear. We will need to make some further modifications so that she can fight while wearing it. Harritt proposed using materials other than iron and bear hide - some lighter leather and silverite, as well as making the buckles and straps better suited to Kate’s frame. The mad dwarf in the corner suggested a few enchantments to help with the weight and Iron Bull and Cullen discussed a series of drills to help Kate get used to the bulk. I suggested that Kate add one piece at a time until she is used to wearing the whole of her uniform. Harritt says he will have the modified armor completed in a few days, and I must say that we got a great deal done in one morning - even if Kate and Cullen had to delay that meeting they had planned.

And do you know? Kate said the sweetest thing to me as we finished. She said: “Thank you, Vivienne. I could not imagine surviving this experience without you.”

She is a dear, truly. And I must say, I am positively thrilled when I think that the Inquisitor will go riding into the world in a design that I helped to fashion. Power is as power does, and few people recognize the role that fashion plays in expressing what words can never convey. Kate now looks the part of Inquisitor, and people will soon believe that she belongs in that role.

Maker willing, she’ll come to believe it herself.

Ah, look how long this report got! I’d better finish up, and then put in an order for a new pair of boots. My previous pair got damaged in the battle at Haven. Bull asked me why I fight in high heels, and I told him, “Because I can darling!”

Really, sometimes I think only the Nightengale and I understand these things.

– Vivienne

*(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 18th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)*

To whom it may concern (namely, Colleen Lavellan, the so-called Archivist of the Inquisition):

I am Ambrosius, First Enchanter of the Circle of Starkhaven.

I hereby CHALLENGE you to an ARCHIVIST DUEL. I see you in your UNEARNED POSITION of archivist. By the rules established by Calien d’Evaliste himself, I invoke the rights of mage combat, and I will SHELVE YOU TO THE DEATH!

Or rather, I will shelve a crate of books faster than you and thus prove my right to cataloging duties.

Come then! Let’s settle this once and for all, Colleen of NOWHERE and NO ONE.

Ambrosius Flavius Grist
First Enchanter of Starkhaven
Ha ha! Rumble in the library! Bring wine and… No. I’m being told no food in the library.
Ah well. Bring yourselves and prepare for entertainment!
– Dorian

Now this I gotta see.
– Varric

Wait. What is going on?
Cullen, I’m so sorry to cancel our evening meeting, but it looks like Coll is up to something.
Up to something again, I should say.
Meet me after?
– Kate

Rylen, cancel my evening meeting. I need to go to the library to referee a battle.
– Cullen

That’s not the strangest thing you’ve ever said to me, ser, but it’s close.
Does this battle involve reading Portia Plume novels, by any chance? Will you need back up, ser?
– Capt. Rylen

You’re getting latrine duty for that one, Rylen. Mark my words.
– Cullen

Why is everyone running for the library? Is it on fire?
– Cassandra

Not yet, but it may be soon.
– Dorian

Report from Robert (because I lost a bet with Varric. Never bet against Coll, that’s the lesson here):
Well that was the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen. A pair of mages, with a big crate of books - unmarked, uncatalogued - and a length of empty shelving. The mages made marks in the books and
added little bits of tape to the bindings. Then they put the books on the shelves and that…

That was the whole battle. For an hour.

No one spoke. It soon became obvious that Coll was the better librarian of the two. First of all, she cast spells with both hands - one to make a pen write for her, and the other hand waving about, sending books flying this way and that. She looked like Sister Nightengale, only with a flock of papers about her head instead of ravens.

At the end of an hour, Coll had filled two banks of shelving and her magical ledger was perfectly in order. The other fellow had ink all over his fingers and was curled up in the fetal position, sobbing. I never knew archival work was so cutthroat. Here Katie was worried about me working for the scouts. She ought to be more worried about the things that go on in her own library.

Speaking of the scouts, this will be my last report for a while. I leave for the Emerald Graves day after tomorrow. I have just one day left to pack my bags and catch the grand opening of the tavern. Then I set out for my first official job with the Inquisition. Not that anyone will miss me.

If Cassandra anyone is reading this, wish me luck.

– Robert

(Recorded in the Inquisition Archives on the 18th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon by Colleen Lavellan, Archivist of Skyhold.)

Announcement from the desk of Ambrosius Flavius Underlibrarian Ambry:

I have been defeated by Mistress Colleen Lavellan and hereby renounce all designs upon her position or upon the library generally. As set forth in the codes of Library Challenges, I am hereby Coll’s servant, until such a time as she releases me from service, or the library is in perfect order (which will never happen) or I die.

Maker help me.

That's RIGHT you little... Ach, you're such a shtate it's hard to hate you. Just make yourself useful and stay out of my way. But this is my library, you all got that? I WON THE LIBRARY.

Colleen Lavellan
THE SUPREME RULER OF THE LIBRARY
AND THE MOST BRILLIANT EVER HERETIC ARCHIVIST OF FECKING SKYHOLD!!!

(See that, Solas? This IS my library.)

A enasalin, Colleen Lavellan.
Nuva ver nehn in mar vallas arla.

Were you being sarcastic, Solas-son? Or were you actually

Are you trying to take the piss o’ me? ‘Cause I ain’t falling for
Ma serannas, Solas. I guess.

(This paper was crumpled up and thrown into a wastebin.)

Kate,

Inquisitor,

Your friend Coll is quite the librarian. Or the warrior. I’m not sure what to make of that display. It was unlike any oddity I’ve seen before. I certainly hope tomorrow’s grand opening at the tavern is not so contentious. If we mix librarians and alcohol, the results might flatten Skyhold.

By the way, I really must insist upon speaking to you about that personal matter I mentioned. Two weeks has been a very long time to mull over this meeting and what I should say.

I should not take much of your time. Can we please meet as soon as possible? Privately, if you please.

– Cullen

Oh my goodness. I am so sorry, Cullen. These past few weeks have been…

No. No more excuses. What about after the war meeting tomorrow? We can stay behind after Leliana and Josephine leave.

– Kate

That sounds perfect. Thank you.

– Cullen

So, hey, Duchess. Inquisitor. Whatever.

I probably should say ‘Inquisitor,’ since you’ll probably want to inquisit this lead I’ve got and…

Okay look, I don’t want Cassandra to hear about this, but I’m onto something big. I got a letter today - a letter I was waiting on, actually - and it says we need to get to Crestwood, stat.

You see, I found out that… Aw, shit. I’ll just show you the letter. Maybe we can talk about it after your war table meeting tomorrow? Right now, I need to see Leliana about buying one of her pet birds. Bet she’s gonna charge me a premium, too.

Meet me tomorrow and please don’t let Cassandra hear about this. I’ll see you later.

– Varric

(Letter follows.)

Varric
Tethras

Kirkwall Avenger,

This is Hawke The Champion Kirkwall’s Nuisance Ser Freckles. See? I’m trying for all that cloak-and-dagger stuff you love so much in your novels, writings. I got your message. Plucky said she’ll get this reply to you in about a week - so long as the storms don’t blow her off track. I ought to be in Crestwood the meeting place by then. I may have company, but in the interest of being hush-hush, I won’t say who. (Wink, wink.)

I’m still pretty annoyed at you for going off to Haven the free mage refuge that party without me. But if you let me keep this messenger bird as a pet, all is forgiven. I’ve gotten attached to her. Bring her along when you come find me.

Fondly,
Hawke
Ser Freckles

Cullen,

No sooner did I write to you than Varric wrote to me and… Well, if I understood him right, he and I have a lot to discuss tomorrow.

But you take precedence, as you’ve been waiting longer. I’ll see you after the war meeting, and we’ll make sure we aren’t interrupted this time.

We can even bar the door, if necessary.

– Kate

Oh.

I’m sure barring the door won’t be required. That might make people think

But yes, thank you for meeting me.

I will see you tomorrow.

– Cullen

Chapter End Notes

For funsies, here is an approximate translation of Coll & Solas’ elvish snarking (thanks to the various DAI Elvish Language geeks who have complied this stuff into lists and translators and what have you. You guys rock!):

Solas, first exchange:
You do nothing to further our people, Coll.
Why do you share/offer up this library (Lit. ‘writing house’) of our people to the humans?
Do you hope to to gain their favor?

Coll:
"I do nothing to further our people, my arse! Sorry, you eternal ass (Lit. ‘buttocks with no end’ - Coll’s elvish is deliberately “creative”)… then:

You don’t know me, Solas-son. I may've spent the past decade behind walls, boyo, but I won't let my mind be stuck in walls, too.

Solas:
I apologize, Coll. You speak rightly.
It is rare to see Dalish reason thus.
I look forward to observing your progress (Lit: I will watch how you pierce.)

Coll:
Sure, sure. I’ll be keeping an eye on you as well, penis eat (sic).

Solas:
Surely you mean one who eats penis?
A pity you use your fine mouth to curse.
Accents as pleasing as yours are quite rare.
I wish your speech, my kin,
was as beautiful as your tongue/lips.

Coll doesn’t reply to that.

Coll later says:
IT’S ALL IN THE HISTORY NOW, BITCHES! (Lit. female dogs)

Then, after the library duel, Solas says:
A victory, Colleen Lavellan.
May you take joy in your library.

Coll thinks about thanking him (ma serannas) but can’t bring herself to do so.

(And duuuuude, don’t ask me what’s up with those two elves - I’m not sure myself anymore… Cheers!)

-sage
Cassandra was not avoiding Robert Trevelyan. She was strategically side-stepping him, which was an entirely different thing.

“HrrrAAAUgh!”

Cassandra lunged at her practice dummy. She bashed it with her shield, then slashed it with her sword. She battered the mannequin again and again, hacking the straw-stuffed burlap, the wooden-pole frame, and stupid, stupid scraps of the betting book. She should not have pinned them to the dummy. Though Cassandra had ripped the ledger to shreds, she could still imagine the words in her mind:

5 silvers says Trevelyan beds the Seeker by the end of the week.

10 silvers says the Seeker spends the night in the lad’s quarters by Thursday.

20 silvers says the Seeker gives the boy the boot. Come on you lot - you’re talking about a woman who once drove a dragon INTO another dragon.

Bah. Love is more dangerous than dragons. 5 sovereigns says the Seeker falls for the kid before the year’s out.

“GAH!”

Cassandra snarled and slammed into the dummy once more. She attacked in a fury, sending all those little scraps of paper fluttering to the ground like fallen leaves.

Libelous nonsense, Cassandra thought. More dangerous than dragons, indeed! As if she would fall for such obvious ploys as Robert Trevelyan’s. And who said anything about love? How dare they suggest it? How dare they say it? How dare they write it down?

BOOM.

Bright light flashed and the dummy was gone. Nothing but a wisp of smoke rose from the ground. Cassandra stood there, panting for breath.

“Good Maker, that was impressive!”

Cassandra recognized the voice even before she whirled around to glare at the speaker. For there he was in person, looking just as calm and charming as ever. Robert Trevelyan came down the stairs behind her, then lazily strolled over to where she stood.

“Was that a Holy Smite?” Robert asked, sounding more curious than alarmed. “I thought only templars could do that. Useful trick in a fight, I’d wager.”
Cassandra said nothing. All she could do was try to catch her breath. But as she tilted her head up to look at Robert’s face, her lungs would not fill as they ought. Yet again, Robert looked as though he’d stepped straight off the cover of a Portia Plume novel. To be precise, he looked just like the prince in “Moonlight Over the Minanter River.” He had the white leather coat, the high boots, and even carried the longbow and quiver. But no picture could have captured Robert’s self-assured air. The man strutted about as though he was the handsomest man in the entire castle.

Of course, he was the handsomest man in the castle. But he didn’t have to act like it.

“Huhnnnn,” Cassandra snorted at him. The noise that came out of her sounded more like a beast than a person. Cassandra put her back to Robert, shook out her sword arm, and readied to strike the dummy once more. It was then that she remembered she had no dummy left to attack.

“Allow me.”

Before Cassandra could stop him, Robert strode over to where the spare practice dummies lay beside the wall. Without asking permission, Robert picked one up and set it into the smoking hole where the last dummy had stood.

“Beastly inconvenient that,” Robert said, dusting off his hands. “Skilled as you are, I bet you go through three of these a day.”

Cassandra regarded him warily. She had complained to Katerina just yesterday about the fragility of the practice dummies. Had the one cousin told the other? Was Robert’s interruption some kind of set up? But no, Cassandra thought. Surely Katerina would not do such a thing. Cassandra could not become suspicious of the Inquisitor simply because her cousin was a scoundrel.

Then again, there must be some reason why Robert had approached Cassandra after a week of ignoring her.

Perhaps Leliana had told Robert that Cassandra had asked about his mission. But if that was so, surely Robert would say something about it. It would be very like him to gloat over any indication of interest. Not that Cassandra was interested, of course. She was merely concerned about Robert’s suitability for scouting missions. Given how striking he was, Cassandra had doubts as to his ability to keep a low profile.

“Go on then,” Robert said, waving at the dummy before her. “Give it another smite.”

“I do not perform my skills as if I were a dancing bear,” Cassandra scowled at him.

“I only meant– Oops!” Robert lunged after the practice dummy, which had started leaning to one side. Robert caught it, then bent over to secure the thing in the ground. As he did so, Cassandra’s breath hitched. Good Maker, who had given him such tight trousers? Surely they had not been so form fitting earlier this week.

“I only meant to help,” Robert said, standing up again. “Though honestly, I don’t think this dummy will take much more abuse than the last one did. You ought to see the blacksmith about building one that lasts.”

“I had a lyrium-imbued mannequin at the Seeker compound,” Cassandra told him. “It did not break so easily.”

“Lyrium-imbued, eh? Well now I know what to get you for your birthday.” Robert chuckled. The remark was so ridiculous that Cassandra’s lips twitched. It was not a smile, she told herself. It
was an expression of irritation, a mere pursing of the lips.

“As if you would stay around long enough to see my birthday return,” Cassandra said instead.

“I missed it?” Robert frowned. He winced, then looked away. He said something that Cassandra did not quite catch, something like, “Therinfal strikes again.” But just as quickly, he recovered himself. He turned to Cassandra with a smile - a slightly less genuine one than before.

“Do you mind if I join you?” he asked her.

Cassandra instantly stood a little straighter. She could not say why, but she sensed a shift in Robert’s manner. It was subtle, but it was there all the same. He planned something. What he planned, she could not say. But Cassandra had been the target of many traps in her lifetime. She felt a familiar prickling at the back of her neck and a sinking in the pit of her stomach.

“This is no place for archery practice,” Cassandra pointed out. She watched him closely as he shrugged in concession.

“True, but it’s a long hike down to the war camp. Figured I’d save myself the trek, seeing as how I have a mission beginning tomorrow and all that.”

Cassandra said nothing. She just searched his face. His request was reasonable. Why then did she feel so uneasy?

“I’m thinking that’s a no,” Robert said, when Cassandra did not speak. “Will you reconsider? I’ve got a day to waste before they have a horse ready for me. I had hoped to spend it, um, practicing.”

Ah! There it was again! At the end of that sentence, Robert did not quite meet her eyes. Instead, he looked over his shoulder and back at the keep. But now he did not seem so sly. Instead, he looked tired. And lonely.

Cassandra frowned at that. Lonely? Surely not. She was making up layers to Robert’s character where there were none. And yet, clearly something was going on here. She had never mistrusted Robert like this before. Certainly she mistrusted the rumors about him. But Cassandra’s gut instinct had always told her that Robert was honest. Now, she was not sure. Perhaps she had allowed rumor to convince her of Robert’s deceit? Or was he truly deceptive and she was just now realizing it?

Maker, she did not like this uncertainty, Cassandra thought with a scowl. Mystery and intrigue were fine plot points in books, but in real life, Cassandra preferred people to be exactly what they seemed. She did not wish to spend her time sifting through reports and rumors and instincts to get at the truth.

Liar, her mind whispered at her. You love a good mystery. It calls to your Seeker soul.

Cassandra decided to ignore that part of her mind.

“Look,” Robert said with a sigh, “If you want me to shove off, I’ll shove off. It’s just that I’ve been told… That is, I thought…” He trailed off there.

“Practice where you will.”

Cassandra tried to sound imperious and indifferent. She was not certain that she succeeded.

“If you’re sure…” Robert began, but Cassandra did not let him finish. She went and grabbed a second dummy from the pile against the wall. She carried it past him, and set it up a short distance from her own. When Cassandra stood, it was to find Robert staring at her with raised eyebrows and a
slight smile.

“What?” she snapped.

“Nothing,” he said, but he was clearly fighting a grin. “Nothing at all.”

Cassandra stomped away from him. How very like Robert to act as though she’d shown him some special favor by setting up another dummy. She was merely returning the courtesy he’d shown her. She would have done the same for any other soldier. Cassandra considered telling Robert this. Then she decided it would be best to keep conversation to a minimum. She was here to train, not chit-chat.

So Cassandra ignored Robert as he walked several paces away and strung his bow. She ignored him as he began plucking arrows from his quiver and firing them at the target. She ignored him even more deliberately as he struck the target with devastating precision. And she was still ignoring him when she overheard him say:

“Ah, there you are. Been waiting on you.”

Cassandra started, then glanced over her shoulder. A woman was passing by in the courtyard, and Cassandra could only assume that Robert was trying to flirt with that woman.

That ridiculous rogue…

That ridiculous rogue was not her problem, Cassandra told herself. All the better for her if he did flirt with some other woman while Cassandra stood within earshot. Everyone in Skyhold would hear of it. Then the betting books would change their ledgers and Cassandra would be freed from the gossip. She ought to encourage Robert, in fact.

Instead, Cassandra felt her teeth click. She turned around and slammed her shield into her dummy. Unfortunately, she hit the thing with enough force to knock it to the ground.

“Maker’s breath,” Cassandra grumbled. She yanked the dummy upright once again, but the moment she let go of it, the form started leaning to the other side. Really, Cassandra thought with a scowl, maybe she should see about getting a stronger dummy built for her. She would anchor it to the very stones of Skyhold.

“Yes, I know exactly what you mean,” Cassandra heard Robert say. He sounded amused, and Cassandra could only imagine that the woman was now flirting back. But then, Cassandra was not listening to this conversation.

“But really now,” Robert laughed. “Surely it doesn’t work with a bow as well as a dagger.”

Cassandra didn’t know what that meant, nor did she care. She tried to secure the practice dummy in the ground, but it was no use. She’d blasted the ground so badly that the pole had no proper hole to fit into. When Cassandra let go of the dummy, it leaned over like slow-falling tree, then crashed to the ground. Maker’s breath, how had Robert gotten this thing to stand upright in the first place?

“Rrrrrgh…” Cassandra growled. In her fury, she glared up at Trevelyan, as if he was the one who’d caused her dummy to tip over. But instead of standing with some woman, Robert stood alone, conversing with the empty air.

“But how can you stand being forgotten?” Robert asked the space before him. “Horrible thing, being ignored.”

Cassandra blinked in surprise. What on earth was he doing?
“Alright then, I’ll try,” Robert said, nodding. He turned back toward the target and drew his bow. He took a moment to line up his shot, then let the arrow fly. There was a sound like wish and then thunk. The arrow punched through the dummy’s face.

*Good Maker,* Cassandra thought. She was no archer, but she knew a hit when she saw one.

“Still off,” Robert said, flexing his fingers. “Hairline fracture, my arse. Must have been worse than that, if I’m still listing left after a proper healing…” He paused as he reached for his quiver, then frowned.

“Of course I’m not nervous,” Robert said. “I’m perfectly…” He paused as he took out another arrow, put it to the string, and let it fly. The arrow hit the dummy just to the left of its painted heart.

“Calm,” Robert said, dully. To Robert’s right, something flickered slightly. It looked like a person - or the smoky outline of a person.

Suddenly Cassandra understood. *Cole.*

As soon as Cassandra thought of Cole, she could see him. Cole stood beside Robert, suddenly solid in the sunlight. His large hat shielded his face and he carried a dagger in each hand. So that’s who Robert was talking to. Cassandra could not believe she’d forgotten all about the demon. Here she’d been living in a castle with a spirit on the loose, and she’d done nothing. Some Seeker she was.

“They know they have to die,” Cole said. His voice was soft when he spoke to Robert, and yet Cassandra heard it clearly. “Deep down, the red templars know they’re already dead. But they don’t want to suffer.”

“I can help them with the death part,” Robert said, flexing his fingers before reaching for another arrow. “One shot one kill. That’s the goal, right?”

“Yes?” Cole said. To Cassandra’s ears, that word sounded like a question. “It’s kinder if they go quickly. They are here, then they go to wherever it is that they go.”

*They go to the Maker’s side,* Cassandra thought. But Robert, being less devout, said:

“And where *do* they go, Cole? I’ve often wondered that. As a Fade spirit, I assume you know.”

“They go out,” Cole said, vaguely.

“Out?” Robert repeated. “Is that a metaphor, or…?”

“Everyone is ‘in’ here,” Cole mused, looking around Skyhold with concern. “There’s a safety to in, but when you’re ready to grow up, you go out.”

“So more metaphor,” Robert said, lining up his shot. “A pity. I thought you might be able to enlighten me. ‘But all we mortals do is speculate/From womb to world to whate’er lies in Fate…””

Cassandra’s mouth fell open just as Robert’s arrow struck. That had been from *Verses of Dreams.* She was certain of it. It was a very obscure book of poetry, and yet Robert had just quoted from it. How curious.

“Maker’s ass,” Robert grumbled in a less poetic way. “Still with the tingling in the tips of my fingers. I really ought to talk to that healer.”

“You can hit the target harder if you go invisible,” Cole said.
Cassandra blinked at that. *Invisible?*

Robert made a face - as if he’d heard this suggestion before and did not like it. He looked down at his body - all six and a half feet of of it, and then looked up at Cole with a wry expression. The spirit stared back. Cassandra, however, found her throat had gone dry.

“Cole, I’m not a ghost,” Robert said.

“Neither am I,” Cole said.

“But I can’t disappear like you do.”

“No,” Cole agreed. “But you can disappear.”

Robert opened his mouth, but then looked up and looked over at Cassandra. He seemed to realize that she’d been staring at him all this time, for his face darkened with a flush.

“Ah, sorry,” Robert said, waving a hand at Cole. “Cole’s here. He’s been training me. I think half the people in Skyhold think I’m mad, talking to him all the time, but…”

“I see him,” Cassandra said.

“Oh,” Robert said. He looked from Seeker to spirit. “Well then.”

“But I do not approve of this,” Cassandra told Robert. “You cannot allow a demon to teach you archery.”

“Cole’s not teaching me how to be an archer,” Robert replied. “He’s teaching me how to be an assassin.”

Cassandra’s eyes widened.

“Hmm,” Robert mused. “That sounded worse, didn’t it?”

“He’s teaching you what?”

“Assassination,” Robert repeated. “Or more efficient killing, I should say. But apparently I have to become invisible. And as that’s not happening…”

“You’ll turn invisible if you stand still,” Cole told Robert. “Quiet things are often overlooked.”

“That’s very insightful, Cole, but you’ll find I’m not a very still sort of person.”

“I know,” Cole nodded. “Drinking, dancing, joking, jesting. Gilded doorways, mirrored hallways, a corridor of cages. Always looking for a window out - a bed softer than the cold marble of the ballroom floor.”

“Er…yes,” Robert said, glancing over at Cassandra.

Cassandra pressed her lips together and said nothing. On the one hand, what Cole described did not sound like a comfortable life of a lazy nobleman. It sounded like a prison. That made her feel sorry for Robert. But on the other hand, even the demon confirmed that Robert was a rogue. Trevelyan’s behavior demonstrated a complete lack of morals, a total disregard for rules, as well as irreverance and vivacity and vigor and passion…

No, not passion, Cassandra told herself sharply. It was only in stories that roguish men turned out to
be misunderstood poets. In real life, a rogue was a rogue. And Cassandra did not like rogues. She valued steadiness, solemnity, and sobriety.

_Sounds boring,_ that second-guessing voice whispered in her head. _What you really want is vivacity and vigor and passion._

_Shut up,_ Cassandra whispered back.

“‘You had to keep moving in that life,’” Cole said to Robert, still not looking in Cassandra’s direction. “‘You never existed in your father’s eyes unless you were loud and lawless. But you can be quiet here. You won’t fade away if you fade away.’”

Cassandra blinked as Robert flushed. What was this about his father? And just like that, Cassandra felt a stab of sympathy. She, too, had spent time as an unwanted child.

“Too small in the shadow, faded from sight,” Cole murmured. “Dark-haired child with deep eyes. The house lay quiet, old, and dead. ‘Maker hasten the day when a wedding gets that troublesome brat off our hands.’ But the child was right there, hiding behind the door. Overheard everything, wondered why the Maker makes children so small.”

“Yes, thank you Cole,” Robert said, with a sidelong glance to Cassandra. “But surely we don’t need to get into my childhood just now.”

But from the way Cole looked over at Cassandra, Cassandra wondered which person Cole had really been speaking about. Robert did not ask for clarification, however. Instead, he took out his bow and knocked an arrow.

“Alright then,” he said. “Going still and hoping for the best.” He drew back the string took a long breath. Then, for one moment, Robert Trevelyan disappeared.

Disappeared?

No, not quite. But even as Cassandra watched him, Robert flickered out of her vision. It was as though Cassandra forgot to see Robert for a moment - as though her attention had been called elsewhere. Then…

_CRASH!_

Cassandra blinked. She looked from Robert - who still stood there with his bow outstretched - to the target. Robert had shattered the dummy to pieces.

“Maker’s breath!” Cassandra exclaimed.

“Like that,” Cole said, mildly.

“Ah-ha-HA!” Robert whooped. “Andraste’s tits! Did you see that shot? Cole, did you…? Did you Cassie?” He grinned widely, all his teeth showing. “My God what a shot! If I’d done that at the Grand Tourney, I’d… Well, I’d probably have been carted off by the templars. They would have assumed I was a mage, but that…” He turned to Cole. “That was almost like magic.”

“It’s not mage magic,” Cole said.

“So it might be some other kind of magic? Whatever it is, I’ll take it. Talk about break-throughs,” Robert laughed, looking impossibly cocky. Cassandra had to admit it was good look for him. “Well, if I can do _that_ in the Emerald Graves…”
“You’ll be the terror of Thedas,” Cassandra put in, dryly.

And now that she’d gotten over her initial shock, Cassandra was trying to process what she’d just seen. It had looked like magic - just a little. Was that Cole’s influence, she wondered? Or did magic flow in the Trevelyan bloodline? Perhaps Robert had some of his cousin’s gifts after all?

“I already am the terror of Thedas,” Robert told her, winking. “But now I’ll be stealthy. And I’ll… ouch.” Robert winced, rubbing his arm just above the elbow. “I’ll also be quite sore, I imagine. Still I’m making my way back. And thank you, Cole. Never thought to learn from a spirit before. You’re a damn fine teacher.” Robert clapped Cole on the back, and Cole offered Robert a sheepish, childlike smile.

Why is he so easy and friendly with a demon and not with me? Cassandra wondered. The thought hit her out of nowhere. But she could answer that question easily enough. Cassandra knew that she did not exactly invite friendliness or ease.

“Morning, Lady Cassandra. Trevelyan.”

Cassandra blinked and looked over as a flash of red and gold went striding by. It was Commander Cullen, she realized. He had come walking out of the store rooms with that odd fellow, Morris, at his heels. Cullen didn’t wait for a reply to his greeting, but continued on through the courtyard.

As she watched Cullen walk away, a question rose in Cassandra’s mind: Why didn’t she find Cullen as attractive as she found Robert? Cullen embodied all the things that Cassandra had once believed that she wanted in a romantic partner. Cullen was steady, solemn and sober. Definitely sober. Cassandra could testify to his sobriety. And he was handsome as well. Cassandra knew this as an objective fact. Yet when Cassandra looked at Cullen, she felt nothing. There was no flutter in her stomach, no desperate racing of her heart. Looking at Cullen was like looking at a golden-haired version of Anthony.

Yes, that was it, Cassandra thought. Cullen reminded Cassandra of her late brother. Both of them were focused and forthright and honest to a fault. Cassandra understood that sort of personality, and felt no need to delve into the deeper hows and whys of Cullen’s life. Cassandra knew Cullen as well as she wished to.

But with Robert, Cassandra did not understand. Trevelyan baffled her. Yet some part of her was wild enough to want to know everything about him. Robert was nothing like an older brother, what with his boyish grin, his rakish smile, and his…

Wait.

Older brother?

“How old are you?” Cassandra demanded.

Robert blinked, Cassandra blinked as well. She had not meant to ask that. But now all those words from the betting book came flitting back:

1 sovereign says the Seeker spends the night in the lad’s quarters by Thursday…2 sovereigns says the Seeker gives the boy the boot…5 sovereigns says the Seeker falls for the kid….

Lad. Boy. Kid. As though all those soldiers knew something Cassandra did not.

“Uhh,” Robert hesitated. “Are you asking me or Cole?”
“She’s asking you,” Cole answered for Cassandra. “She’s curious about you.”

“Are you?” Robert sounded quite pleased about it.

“I simply am curious how much older you are than your cousin,” Cassandra insisted, but Robert clearly didn’t need Cole to tell him that wasn’t true.

“That’s the illusion of height, I’m afraid,” Robert said with a smile. “Katie is older than me by a year.”

Cassandra cringed as she asked: “And how old is Katerina?”

“She’s twenty… Let me think. Twenty-nine on Wintersend. And I’m a year younger. My birthday’s on the 20th of Guardian, just a few weeks after Kate’s. For future reference,” he added, “I can always use new bowstrings and I like silk shirts. Hard to find clothing in my size, but if you can manage it, I’d be most grateful.”

Cassandra’s mouth dropped open.

“You are only twenty-seven?”

“Only? I’ll have you know I worked hard for each of those years.”

“I am thirty-seven,” Cassandra announced.

If Robert was impressed or dismayed, he didn’t show it. “But I missed your birthday, didn’t I? Next time then.”

“It bothers her,” Cole said, softly. Cassandra glared at the spirit.

“Cullen is almost thirty,” Cole added, speaking to no one in particular. “He thinks nobody will remember his birthday. He doesn’t know that Josephine plans to send him a sugar cake. He likes shortbread better. Leliana is forty-two. She sounds younger but feels older. She wants a pair of slippers she saw in in a shop window in Val Royeaux. She knows no one will buy them for her. Iron Bull is…”

Cole continued to rattle on birthdays and ages, but Cassandra ignored him. Instead, she glared at Robert. Robert, for his part, smiled back.

“I didn’t realize it bothered you,” he said.

“It’s doesn’t,” Cassandra insisted.

And it did not. Cassandra was not embarrassed of her years. She trained daily and remained as strong as ever. Every battle taught her something new and she’d been proud of that - proud of her experience and her veteran seniority among the Seekers.

But even as she thought that, a hint of doubt snaked into her mind. There was a rumor going around that Robert Trevelyan preferred older women. And if that was so, then everything began to make sense. Why else would Robert chase after Cassandra when there were so many younger, giggly sort of girls pining after him? Clearly, Robert had a type - an older type - and Cassandra fit it most closely. He’d singled her out for seduction because of his own preferences. It had nothing to do with her at all. Or perhaps he just wanted to bed a famous Seeker. He wouldn’t be the first idiot to have that idea.
He’d just be the first person since Galen who made you want to say ‘yes.’ Cassandra bristled at her inner voice’s uncanny insight.

“Of course it doesn’t matter to me,” she said, sharply. “Does it matter to you?”

“Maker yes,” Robert breathed. “Means you’ve reached your sexual prime.”

Cassandra’s jaw dropped. Her heart seemed to fall as well, and her stomach, too. If she hadn’t been so well trained, she might have stumbled back a step - or killed Robert on the spot.

“You… You… You!” Cassandra spluttered. “Who says things like that?

“He does,” Cole said, pointing a finger at Robert. It seemed the spirit had given up his birthday recitation at last.

“Sorry,” Robert winced. “Probably should have kept that one to myself.”

“Yes, you should have!”

“He keeps most of his thoughts to himself,” Cold said. “Especially the ones where you’re naked.”

“I-Ah-huh-um…” Robert seemed to cough and choke all at once.

“What?” Cassandra cried.

“All that golden skin,” Cole murmured. “Breasts full, bound in that platemail. Wish I could set them free. Wonder what the areola looks like. Pink? Dark? I bet she has a mole right under one of the curves…”

Cassandra’s jaw dropped open. “This what you think about?”

“Er, sometimes?” Robert winced.

“All the time,” Cole corrected. “Blush on her cheeks. Wonder if she blushes when she comes. Wonder what it takes to get her there…”

“Stop that!” Cassandra snapped at Robert.

“He’s the one talking” Robert said, pointing at Cole.

“You’re the one thinking!”

“I… Yes, well. Can’t help it, honestly. This is how my mind operates. But I usually have the luxury of keeping it private.”

“Private?” Cassandra repeated.


“Shut. UP!” Cassandra shouted.

“Cole, please stop,” Robert said. He sounded weary and embarrassed, as if Cassandra had just found him in bed with…

With her. Cassandra blinked, for in that moment, an image flashed through Cassandra’s mind. She saw twining limbs and desperate kisses and tangled bedclothes…
“Armor gone, arrows gone. Silk and skin and tongues tangling,” Cole said. “Hand on my hips, guiding me forward…”

“Cole, stop,” Robert said. “I asked you to get out of my head, please.”

*But that was my fantasy,* Cassandra thought in shock. That had been *her* fantasy, but Robert thought Cole was speaking of what was in Robert’s mind. Did she and Robert share the same desires? Did they like the same kind of bedplay? If they did, then…

No. She was not going to think of this.

“Your mind is very loud,” Cole said. He looked down at last, staring right at Cassandra. But Robert answered as though the statement had been made to him.

“Yes, but you’re making people uncomfortable,” Robert said, wearily. “I do apologize, Cole.”

“Why are you apologizing to him?” Cassandra wanted to know.

“Because I didn’t mean to give him an education quite like that, now did I?” Now Robert sounded irritated as well as embarrassed. “I figure *you* know about such things, but I’m not certain that *he* did.”

“Her breasts are bigger in your mind,” Cole informed Robert.

Cassandra snarled, and Robert hid the demon behind him - actually shoved Cole behind him and hid the boy, as if to keep the demon from Cassandra’s wrath.

“It’s not his fault,” Robert said.

“You’re a terrible influence on him,” Cassandra snarled.

“And here I thought the point was to keep mortals from falling prey to demons,” Robert replied.

“Are you saving the poor demon from the human now, Seeker? I didn’t know you cared for Cole.”

“She doesn’t,” Cole said.

“I don’t… That’s not…” Cassandra now felt badly, as if she had hurt the feelings of a teenager. She cast about, hoping to change the subject.

“How in the Maker’s name do you plan to find the red lyrium smugglers if you are both so careless?”

There, Cassandra thought. That sounded like a reasonable question. Apparently Robert did not think so. He blinked from the sudden change in subject.

“Smugglers? I don’t typically fantasize about smugglers, so I think I’ll be alright.”

“There was that one smuggler woman at the tavern…” Cole began.

“Yes, thank you Cole,” Robert waved that comment aside, “But I didn’t do anything about it,” he added, looking pointedly at Cassandra.

She felt glad to hear it. And why should she care anyway? She wasn’t going with Robert on his mission, after all.

*But what is his game in going to the Emerald Graves?* Cassandra wondered. There was nothing to be gained by it. The journey would not be fun. The mission would not be pleasurable. It would put
Robert in danger for the sake of a cause he did not seem to believe in. And why would he do that? It did not fit the rumors surrounding him at all. It suggested layers beneath the veneer of laziness and selfishness.

And now she was confused and doubting again, Cassandra realized. Maybe she should just investigate this puzzle for herself, instead of avoiding it.

“Cassandra wants to go with you to the Emerald Graves,” Cole informed Robert. He pointed at Cassandra as he said this.

“You do?” Robert brightened. He looked as though Cassandra had given him a gift - or as if she’d given him a glimpse into her earlier fantasy.

“Not that,” Cole said. “He’d be smiling more if you’d given him that.”

“Given me what now?” Robert asked.

“Nothing,” Cassandra said through gritted teeth. “I only worry about you getting the job done. Your mission will be of great import to the Inquisition.”

“And you don’t think I can manage a bit of spy work?” Robert sounded affronted.

“It is not that,” Cassandra said. “I am concerned because spy work requires…” She paused there, scowling.

“Requires what?” Robert wanted to know.

“Compromise,” Cassandra ground out, eyes narrowing.

Robert frowned. For a moment, he looked almost nervous. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Of course you do,” Cassandra said, nearly sneering now. “You think I do not know what spies do to achieve their ends? They… They…”

Robert raised a brow.

“They seduce people,” Cassandra told him.

Robert’s lips curled in smile.

“How do they?” he asked, eyes twinkling.

“How do not look at me like that!” Cassandra frowned at him. “I know how it is. They are like bards in that way.”

“I see,” Robert said. “And does this disapproval of spies and bards extend to your opinion of Sister Nightengale? I thought you respected her.”

“I do!”

“Ah, so it’s merely the low-ranking scouts whom you dislike.”

“I do not dislike them…”

“So it’s only me you dislike if I…How did you put it? Seduce people to achieve my ends?”
“What? No!”

“But I promise you, Cassandra,” Robert said, inclining his head slightly, “When I achieve my ends, the lady does as well.”

Cassandra found herself speechless once again. She could do nothing but blush.

“And what about you?” Robert asked, leaning away as if he hadn’t just said something so outrageous. “You worked as a Seeker. Did you sleep with anyone to find apostates or rogue templars?”

“No!” she fairly exploded. “I would never…”

“So you managed your job without seduction?” he interrupted. “Yet you don’t think I can manage the same. Because I’m a fool, perhaps?”

“I didn’t say that. But you will - or you must…”

“Must I? You seem to have given this a lot of thought, Cassandra.”

“She has,” Cole informed Robert.

Robert’s smile grew positively devilish, and Cassandra resisted the urge to throttle the demon.

“Well then,” Robert said. “I suppose there’s only one thing to be done.”

“And what is that?” Cassandra wasn’t sure if she wanted to know.

“You ought to come with me to the Emerald Graves and keep an eye on me.”

Cassandra opened her mouth. Then she shut it. She’d stepped right into that trap all on her own. The more she thought about it, it really did seem like a trap. That was that ambush she’d sensed right from the beginning, wasn’t it? Cassandra shook her head. She ought to have trusted her instincts and turned away from the first. But with Robert, she found it very hard to do that.

“I think not,” Cassandra said. “From all the rumors I’ve heard, you will take me with you into the wilds, then leave with another woman entirely.”

Cassandra regretted the words the moment they left her lips. First, they sounded jealous and bitter. And secondly, Robert was looking at her in a strange way now. It was as if he’d heard far more than she’d wished to say.

But “Oh,” was all that Robert said in reply. His lips tightened slightly, and he began fidgeting with the end of his bow. He seemed caught for a moment, then settled on:

“Don’t place too much stock in rumor, alright?”

“Why would I listen to rumor?” Cassandra asked, archly.

Robert looked up at once, searching her face.

“Why indeed?” he said, grimly. He let out a sigh. “Look, it’s not all true.”

“But some of it is?” Cassandra hadn’t meant to ask, but the question slipped out all the same.

“About… half?” Robert said, squinting one eye shut and wrinkling his nose. It was an expression
that Cassandra had seen his cousin make upon occasion. But what was cute and girlish on Katerina looked sinfully charming on Robert. Cassandra flushed and looked away.

“You have to understand,” Robert said, taking a step closer. “I never thought it would be a problem. Because if I’d known it would bother you - if I’d known there would be a you…” Robert stopped there, looking down at the pavement uncertainly.

“Be a me?” Cassandra repeated. Robert did not answer. He had gone quite still.

“I do not understand your meaning,” Cassandra said.

“I… It’s nothing,” Robert shook himself. “I didn’t think it through at the time,” he added, half to himself. “I don’t think most things through, really. Story of my life.” He shook his head and ran a hand over his short-cropped hair.

“Maker’s breath, what am I doing?” he muttered.

“I don’t know,” Cassandra said, a bit waspishly. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to invite you to come with me to the Graves and failing miserably, it seems,” Robert looked up then, giving her another winning smile. This one was not so false as before, but it still was not entirely genuine.

“You only desire my company for the sake of your ego,” Cassandra said.

“Oh, I assure you, my ego has nothing to do with it,” Robert said.

“His other parts, rather,” Cole put in.

“And you’d been doing such a good job of being quiet, Cole,” Robert murmured.

“Sorry,” Cole said.

“It’s alright,” Robert said, glancing over at the boy. “But if I’m going to shock Lady Cassandra, I’d like to do so myself. Feels more proper and civil that way.”

“Alright,” Cole agreed.

It was such a ridiculous thing to say that Cassandra couldn’t help but snort. Honestly, the man was incorrigible. And Cassandra almost… liked it?

No, surely not.

“So will you?” Robert asked, giving her a hopeful smile. “Come with me on my mission, I mean.”

“You do not need me,” Cassandra told him. “You have the demon to join you.”

“Actually, I don’t,” Robert said, glancing over at Cole. “Cole will be going elsewhere, or so I understand.”

“They need me in Crestwood,” Cole said absently, looking up at the clear sky. “Undead, rain, lightning in her hand. Waiting on a raven. ‘How long is Varric going to make me wait?’”

“Varric?” Cassandra frowned. Anything involving that dwarf made Cassandra suspicious.

“He’s telling stories in the great hall,” Robert said, glacing over his shoulder. “Or maybe fleecing
“Varric does not sleep, I find,” Cassandra replied.

“Really?” Robert asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Varric asked me to go to Crestwood with him,” Cole announced, looking down at Cassandra. “He needs me to support his morals.”

“Moral support,” Robert whispered. “Not quite the same thing, Cole.”

“Oh,” Cole said. “I see now. Yes. That makes more sense.”

“Varric is going to Crestwood?” Cassandra asked. The suspicion in her mind grew larger.

“I gather there are caves there,” Robert shrugged. “And you know how dwarves love exploring caves.”

“Varric hates caves,” Cassandra said.

“Does he now?” Robert asked. “And how do you know so much about Varric’s preferences and sleeping habits? Are you lovers, or do you just fancy him?”

“I-who-wha-me-VARRIC?” Cassandra said all this as one explosive shout.

“Is that a ‘no’?” Robert asked.

“That is a ‘don’t ever ask me that question again, Robert Trevelyann’!”

“So yes.”

“What?”

“You’re quite insistent about your dislike of Varric Tethras,” Robert said. “It makes me wonder.”

“Wonder what?”

“If you haven’t a secret fondness for the fellow.”

“I do not,” Cassandra insisted.

“Well, I don’t know. I can only assume that’s why you want to follow him to Crestwood…”

“I do not want to follow him to Crestwood.”

“Rather than coming with me to the Emerald Graves.”

“I don’t…” Cassandra drew up short. “I…” She shook her head. “You haven’t even asked me to.”

“Ahh, so I haven’t. Please excuse my manners,” Robert said, placing a hand over his heart.

“Cassandra Pentaghast, would you do me the honor of accompanying me to the Emerald Graves? I would be most grateful to have your assistance on my mission.”

With this, Robert bent into a ridiculous, courtly bow. Cassandra stared at him, feeling her temper rise to the boiling point.

“Now you’re asking me?”
“Begging you, more like,” he said, straightening. “After all, I haven’t the foggiest idea where to begin. Cole did most of the navigating on the last mission. And while Scout Harding said she’d set me as far as the Orlesian border, she can’t help me any further than that. She’s got to go check on something in the Salted Plains.”

“Exalted Plains.”

“That’s what I said.”

“How on earth did you get to be a scout with no sense of geography?” Cassandra wanted to know. “Left to your own devices, you’ll end up in Par Vollen, not the Dales.”

“I might,” Robert agreed. “I hear they’re both green and leafy.”

“You’re impossible.”

“I’m quite possible,” Robert said, gamely. “You should try me sometime.”

Cassandra drew back, both from the invitation, and from how much she wanted to take him up on it.

“That’s the other reason I should not come with you,” Cassandra said, angrily. “You’re just trying to get me into your bed.”

“No!” Robert said, holding up his hands. “I mean, yes. But not really.”

Cassandra folded her arms over her chest. Robert seemed a bit caught for a moment. Cassandra suspected it was because he was torn between lying to achieve his objective, or telling the truth to achieve the same outcome.

“I need your help,” Robert said, after a moment. “Or someone’s help.”

“If you cannot do this mission on your own, then Leliana should not have given it to you.”

“It’s not that,” Robert said. “I mean, yes, I’m not good at reading maps. Or camping. Or making travel arrangements…”

“All of these are things that scouts must do,” Cassandra pointed out.

“I’ll manage,” Robert told her. “Honestly, the truth is… er.” He grimaced.

“What?” she demanded.

Robert winced. “Look,” he said, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. “If you don’t want to sleep with me, that’s… Well, it’s disappointing, but it’s alright. If you don’t want to sleep near me, I understand. Bring your own bedroll, your own tent, even. I don’t care how you join me if you’ll just join me. I’d like your company. I don’t like to be alone.” He blinked then, as if surprised he’d made that last admission.

“You don’t like to be alone,” Cassandra repeated.

Robert looked like he might deny it, but instead he sighed and shrugged.

“I hate it,” he said, simply.

Just like that, Cassandra felt herself soften toward him again. And likewise, two things became perfectly clear in her mind: this was why Robert threw himself at women. He hated to be alone. And
this was why women threw themselves at Robert. They hated leaving him alone. That vulnerable expression on that handsome face was almost as powerful a draw as his easy swagger. He was such a strange mix of assured and alone, that Cassandra suddenly felt the need to settle him.

_Ugh_, Cassandra thought, drawing back from that thought. That sounded like something out of an Everly Epic novel. Cassandra read Epic’s books from time to time - when there were no Portia Plume novels on hand. But Cassandra disliked the Epic’s heroines intensely. They were much stupider than Plume heroines, and yet they still got the man in the end. Cassandra always disliked that. It struck her as unearned somehow.

Cassandra took a breath, trying to decide if Robert’s admission made her more or less angry. Cassandra found she did not know. She never knew what to think with Robert. She only knew that in the course of this conversation, she had felt suspicious, flattered, aroused, and off-balance in turns. None of these were typical sensations for her. Cassandra looked up at Robert to find him waiting on her answer.

“I do not want to be your joke,” Cassandra told him. “And I will not bed you. I will only travel with you to make certain you do it properly.”

“Oh I’ll prove you wrong in that, Lady Seeker,” Robert said, and a slight smile curled his lips. His tone was so confident that Cassandra felt her heart flip over.

“Prove me wrong in which part?” she demanded. “In bedding me, or…”

“In doing it properly of course,” Robert replied.

Cassandra found herself frozen. Was he referring to bedding her or his mission? Why would he not give her a straight answer?

“What are you saying?” she asked, very slowly.

“Just that I always defer to my lady’s wishes,” Robert said, smiling. “In all things.”

“I would wish you to be sensible,” Cassandra said, trying to quell the fluttering in her stomach.

“Ah,” Robert said, drawing back ever so slightly. “Then I will sensibly remove myself to the supply room and pack an extra tent for you and some additional rations as well.”

“I can carry my own weight,” Cassandra told him.

“Of course you can,” Robert agreed. “Well then, I’ll allow you to pack your own things. I shall simply let Leliana know of the change in the plans.”

Cassandra cringed. She could only imagine what Leliana would have to say about that.

“And I will see you in the morning,” Robert went on. “Unless you plan to join me at the tavern for the opening night.” He looked at her hopefully.

“I will be there, but not with you.”

“Then rest well, Lady Cassandra. I’ll see you in the morning.”

And before Cassandra could say anything more, Robert walked away.

Robert had to bite the inside of his lip to keep from whistling to himself. Now _that_ had been more
like it. That had gone very well indeed. He took the steps two at a time, grinning all the way.

“But you lied to her,” Cole said beside him.

“I did not,” Robert said, affronted. “I would never seduce a woman who isn’t interested. If Cassandra doesn’t want anything to happen, it won’t happen.”

But Maker please let her want something to happen, Robert added silently. He was resolved to bide his time until Cassandra made the first move. He hoped that she didn’t keep him waiting long.

“But you lied about Varric,” Cole said. “You lied about Hawke.”

Oh. That.

“I didn’t lie,” Robert hedged.

“You didn’t tell her the whole truth,” Cole said.

“That’s not the same thing as lying.”

“Cassandra thinks it is.”

Robert cringed. He suspected that Cole was right, but what else was he to do?

“Leliana was clear about this,” Robert said, speaking in a near whisper. “Certain parties are going east, and so a certain Seeker needs to go west. Leliana told me Cassandra wanted to go with me anyway, but couldn’t bring herself to ask. So all I did was make sure everyone got turned in the right direction.”

“But you didn’t tell Cassandra about the other direction,” Cole pointed out. “You made her think there was only one road.”

“Yes well, I couldn’t let Cassandra find out about Varric’s letter and everything, now could I? Sister Leliana would have my head.”

“Leliana doesn’t need your head. She already has one of her own. Hers is prettier.”

“That is true. Also, that is not what I meant.”

“You told Cassandra things to make her forget.”

“I did,” Robert said, feeling a bit annoyed now. “But that’s not a crime, is it? You make people forget things all the time.”

“But I don’t make them angry.”

“You make Vivienne angry.”

“I don’t make her angry,” Cole said. “She was already angry because she can’t hold all the threads at once. I just remind her of it.”

“There you are then,” Robert said, ready to be done with this conversation.

“But if you care for Cassandra, you should be careful with her,” Cole went on. “If you lie to her…”

“I didn’t lie,” Robert snapped, more loudly than he meant to. “I’m just not worrying about every last
consequence of everything. Maybe you should try it sometime.”

Robert regretted his outburst at once. Cole just looked at Robert sadly. Then the boy disappeared.

Robert sighed. Well that hadn’t gone well. And Robert had been feeling so cheerful, too. Now he felt rather uneasy.

Still, his orders were clear: keep Cassandra from finding out about Hawke until they’d secured Hawke’s information or Hawke’s help or whatever it was they wanted from the Champion. An autograph, maybe. Robert didn’t care either way. And he couldn’t see any harm in taking Cassandra on a little vacation. Leliana and Hawke and Varric would meet in secret, and Robert would enjoy his time with the beautiful Seeker.

And maybe, if I’m lucky, she’ll enjoy her time with me as well.

It gave him something to look forward to, anyhow. Much better than nightmares of dungeons and red templars and… Yes, best not to think on that.

Robert shrugged his shoulders, flexed his tingling fingers, and headed toward the tower to tell Leliana the good news.
Lyrium Protocols

Chapter Summary

In which Cullen swallows his pride

There was a certain irony in this situation, Cullen thought. Here he and Kate - the Inquisitor, rather - had spent two weeks shoring up Skyhold against every possible form of attack. They’d reinforced the walls with stone and spells alike. They had drafted plans for the training of their armies, spent hours studying maps and with Leliana and making lists with Josephine. They had signed an alliance with the mages, and made plans for further alliances as well.

Yet in all that time, Cullen had not spoken to the glaring weakness that he presented to the Inquisition. He dreaded speaking of it now. What was it the knight-captains had always told him? ‘Never let them see a chink in your armor.’ Well, Cullen counted his lyrium withdrawals as a chink in the Inquisition’s armor. And while he did not consider himself a prideful man, Cullen had suffered enough embarrassments in his lifetime to know that he did not care for vulnerability. But for the sake of the Inquisition, Cullen resolved to swallow his pride.

Better to swallow pride than lyrium, he mused.

At least he’d chosen a good location for the meeting. Cullen currently stood upon the ramparts of the northern walls of Skyhold. The walkway here ran wide, forming a sort of elevated stone courtyard. There were no towers or construction projects nearby, and Cullen had purposefully changed the guard rotations to maintain the privacy of this place. If anyone came this way by chance, Cullen would see them long before they got within earshot. He needn’t worry that his confession would be overheard. Furthermore, Cullen reasoned, if anyone did happen upon him and Kate, they would merely think that the commander and the Inquisitor were surveying a new building project or something. It was all very professional and aboveboard.

Best of all, Cullen had managed to get himself out of doors for the morning. If he had to announce his addiction, he figured that he might as well do so with fresh air in his lungs. Cullen took a deep breath, and gripped the wall before him.

“Good morning!”

She came, was the first thought that flew through his mind. Cullen chided himself for it a moment later. Well of course she’d come, he told himself. He’d asked her here, hadn’t he? And surely the thrill he felt was due to the fact that Kate had managed to sneak up on him. So much for spotting anyone who approached this spot. Cullen cleared his throat in an effort to compose himself.

“Inquisitor,” he said as he turned. “I’m pleased that you…”

Cullen broke off there. For first, Kate looked quite pretty this morning - short hair ruffled by the wind, cheeks pink from the chill. She wore her new traveling costume - the one that had driven Cullen to distraction just yesterday. The tight leathers were enough to make him forget what he’d meant to say.

But beyond that, Kate was carrying a rather curious burden: in one hand, she carried two large beer
mugs. They were massive dwarven tankards - the kind with hinged pewter lids. In the other hand, Kate carried a smallish bundle wrapped in cloth. For a moment, Cullen thought it looked as though she was carrying ale and her morning’s laundry. But such a combination struck Cullen as highly unlikely. So he asked instead:

“What’s all this?”

Kate smiled and nodded at the tankards. “This,” she said, “Is tea.”

“Tea?” Cullen repeated.

“Rather inelegant in it’s presentation, I grant you. But portability was my objective this morning, not sophistication. These were the only cups with a lid. Your map was excellently well drawn, by the way, I wouldn’t have found this place otherwise. Here,” she added, holding out the mugs. “One has milk and sugar, the other is black. I didn’t know how you took your tea, so I made you a choice.”

“Oh,” Cullen said, looking back and forth between the identical mugs. “Whichever you prefer is fine, I’m sure.”

“I’ll take my tea however I can get it. Which would you rather?”

“Milk and sugar,” Cullen admitted.

“That’s this one, I think,” Kate said, handing him the mug in her right hand.

Cullen took the offered mug and peeked inside. Sure enough, fawn-colored liquid swirled within. A bit of steam rose off of it, along with a wonderful smell.

“Maker bless Josephine and her trade deals,” Cullen said.

“Here, here,” Kate agreed, holding up the other mug in mock toast. “Oh, and I’ve got a bit of breakfast. Because tea isn’t really tea without a snack.” She set her tankard down on the wall and set the bundle down as well. She untied the knot at the top and unfolded the cloth to reveal several more cloth-wrapped bundles.

“Let’s see,” she said. “We’ve bacon and some potato cakes. I don’t know what’s in the potato cakes, but they smell delicious. The cook said they’re a Chasind recipe.”

“You brought breakfast as well as tea?”

“I hadn’t eaten,” Kate explained. “And I know you often forget to.”

Cullen blinked in surprise. He often did forget, but he hadn’t thought that Kate had noticed. He took a look at the offered food and went straight for the bacon.

“You took all this from the kitchens?” Cullen asked around a mouthful of pork.

“ Took?” Kate laughed. “I barely got away with this little. The new cook tried to send me off with an entire tea tray, complete with silver spoons and china cups and I don’t know what else.”

“That sounds bit excessive,” Cullen said, trying to imagine Kate carrying a tea tray all over Skyhold.

“You’re the cook’s new favorite, you know,” Kate said, gesturing at Cullen with one of the potato cakes. “She told me that she plans to spoil you from here on out. Thinks you’re too thin by half.”

Kate took a bite, then added, “Oh, I say, that is good.”
“The new cook means to spoil me?”

“You hired her,” Kate said, covering her mouth as she spoke around another bite of potato. “And she’s quite grateful for the job. Couldn’t stop singing the praises of ‘the dear commander who gave a hedge mage a chance.’”

“A hedge mage?” Cullen nearly dropped his second slice of bacon. “I hired a hedge mage?”

“I take it that didn’t come up in the interview?”

“Not exactly, no.”

“Well, I don’t expect it was relevant, now was it?” With this, Kate polished off her potato cake and leaned her elbow on the wall beside her. With her tankard of tea in hand, Kate looked rather as if she stood at the bar of some bizarre, out-of-doors tavern. But instead of a barkeep to take orders, there was nothing on the other side of the wall but a seventy foot drop and the wind and mountains for company.

“At any rate,” Kate went on, reaching for another potato cake, “Jana has won over the entire kitchen staff, and all the servants as well. She can make sugar stretch further than anyone I’ve met - though that may be sorcery, come to think of it. Mmm…” she said, moaning as she took a bite. “Chasind magic. Who knew?”

Cullen considered the food before him. He wasn’t sure if the addition of tea and bacon made his task easier or more difficult. It was very thoughtful of Kate, but his stomach now churned. He hesitated, then began:

“I, um… I need to speak with you about something.”

Cullen winced the moment the words left his mouth. Maker’s breath, what a way to begin. He’d certainly established that over the course of the past week. To hide that wince, he opened the lid of his mug and took a gulp of tea. It was hotter than he expected, and scalded his tongue going down.

“Please do,” Kate said, gesturing wide with her tea tankard. “I’ve cleared my morning schedule, so take all the time you like.”

“You cleared your schedule for this?” Cullen wheezed, mouth still burnt from the tea.

“Of course!” Kate said. She then blinked, as if she’d not meant to say it quite that emphatically. “I mean,” she said instead. “It seemed important to you.”

Cullen felt his chest constrict. “It is, rather.”

“Whatever it is,” Kate went on, “I’m sure we can work it out.” She gave him an encouraging smile. She picked up a scone with one hand, and held up her tankard in the other.

Can we? Cullen wondered. He rather doubted that. But there was nothing else to do but get this over with. As Kate lifted her tea to drink, Cullen let out a breath, then announced:

“I don’t take lyrium.”

There. Done. Out in the open and impossible to take back.

Kate choked.

She spluttered into her mug, coughing and gasping. To Cullen’s alarm, she set the tankard down on
the ramparts with one hand, then whacked her chest with her free fist. Her face had gone entirely red. Cullen, alarmed, paused for just a moment, then whacked Kate on the back as well. She coughed once more - twice more, then took a deep gasping breath. She looked off at the hills, face red and tears in her eyes - and went silent. Cullen looked to her in alarm, not certain what to say or do.

“Inquisitor?” he asked, hesitantly.

There was a long pause, and then Kate said:

“Oh.”

It was half-gasp, half cough. Kate turned her face to Cullen, eyes still watery and face quite red. One tear leaked down her cheek.

“Are you alright?” Cullen asked.

“Perfectly fine,” Kate wheezed. “Though I dropped my scone,” she added, looking at her now-empty hand. She glanced over the wall, then coughed once more.

“I do beg your pardon,” she said and thumped her chest.

“No, I beg yours,” Cullen said. “I should have waited until you were finished drinking.”

“I think I would have choked regardless,” Kate replied. Her eyes were watery now. “Did I hear you right? You do not take lyrium? Or did I make that up in my head?”

“No, that’s what I said.”

“But I thought all templars…” Kate broke off, and her eyes went wide. “Wait. You mean to say that you’ve quit?”

Cullen nodded.

“Since when?” she demanded.

“Since Kirkwall.”

Kate’s mouth dropped open. “But that’s been months!”

“Eight months, yes.”

“Eight months!” Kate cried. “Do you mean to say that you’ve been weaning yourself off of lyrium for eight months?”

“There was no weaning about it,” Cullen replied. “I quit stone cold.”

Kate’s eyes grew more watery, not less. Her face, however, paled considerably.

“Andraste save you,” she gasped. “Won’t that kill you?”

The question jarred him. Cullen didn’t know why he found it jarring. He’d heard the rumors, after all. He knew that he risked death with this choice. But somehow, it sounded much worse on Kate’s lips. Maybe it was because she looked so distressed by the thought - as if she saw him as a walking corpse already.

“It hasn’t killed me yet,” Cullen said, gruffly. Kate made a small sound - not quite a gasp. It was
more like a sharp intake of breath.

“Cullen, I’m serious.”

“As am I,” he said. “But as I’ve survived this long, I can only assume that the Chantry overstated the risk.”

“Or you’re very lucky.”

“That is also possible, yes.”

Kate swallowed. “Maker’s breath,” she said. “This wasn’t at all what I expected you to say.”

“What did you expect me to say?” Cullen could not help but wonder.

“I hardly know. That’s not important, anyhow. You don’t take lyrium anymore, and I… Maker’s breath. Lyrium.”

“What did you think I would say?” Cullen pressed.

“I thought you wanted to meet about something work related,” Kate said. “Something about the mage alliance, perhaps. Or give me an update on your ASS. I mean our ASS. I mean…” She blushed and ducked her head. “That name is impossible.”

“It is, rather,” Cullen chuckled.

“Or discuss my upcoming journey to find Hawke,” Kate went on. “I figured if anyone had advice about that…”

“Wait, Hawke?” Cullen interrupted sharply. He felt a sudden chill creep over him. “You’re going to find Hawke?”

Kate looked confused by his question. “She has information on Corypheus. I had quite forgotten about it, but when we spoke with Varric last night… Oh, I forgot. You did not join me and Leliana for that midnight conference.”

“No, I did not,” Cullen said, tightly.

Maker’s breath, he might have known. Of course Varric had known where Hawke was all this while. And of course Leliana had played cloak-and-dagger with that information. Andraste save him from self-appointed spymasters. At least Kate had seen fit to tell her commander the truth of it.

“I didn’t mean to leave you in the dark,” Kate told him. “Or anyone, really. But considering Hawke’s popularity, we thought discretion was advisable.”

“Notoriety, more like,” Cullen snorted.

“I do beg your pardon,” Kate said. “All of this is completely beside the point. You were talking about lyrium, and…”

“Where has Varric been hiding Hawke all this while?” Cullen interrupted again.

“I’m not certain he was hiding Hawke, exactly,” Kate hedged. “But she plans to meet us in a place called ‘Crestwood.’”

“Crestwood?” Cullen repeated, frowning. “That fishing village near Honnleath?”
“Umm…”

“I trust you have a proper guide?” Cullen pressed.

“We have a bird?” Kate shrugged one shoulder in a ‘Will that do?’ sort of gesture. Cullen was not reassured.

“Have you told Cassandra?” he asked.

“I have not. Leliana wanted to do it. Something about the Left Hand letting the Right Hand know what she’s doing. I think I’m mangling that verse.”

“I thought the canticles said that the Right Hand doesn’t know what the Left Hand is doing.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right. Leliana must have been referencing something else. Anyhow, I agreed to let Leliana handle the situation. I certainly did not want to be the person to tell Cassandra.”

“Nor would I,” Cullen agreed. “When do you set out?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow morning? As in tomorrow tomorrow morning?”

“That is the tomorrow I was thinking of, yes,” Kate said, a smile curling at the corner of her mouth. Cullen did not return the smile. He did not like the idea of Kate setting out from Skyhold, and certainly not so soon. Though really, that was a foolish notion. Kate was the Inquisitor. Of course she would return to the field as soon as possible. Cullen just felt worried because Hawke was a menace and Crestwood was a deathtrap. It was enough to make any commander nervous.

“I do beg your pardon,” Kate said, waving a hand as if to push all these words aside. “I believe I’ve driven us quite off topic. You wanted to tell me about lyrium and I… Holy Maker. Lyrium. You do not take lyrium.”

And with that, Kate looked up at him with a pitying sort of look. Cullen did not like it all. To avoid meeting her eyes, Cullen snatched up the last piece of bacon, shoved it into his mouth and chewed. As he did so, Cullen could feel Kate staring at him.

“I find I have a great many questions,” Kate said. She spoke slowly, as if tip toeing around him. “Ask away,” Cullen said, his mouth full. He took a swig of tea to wash the bacon down.

“That’s the trouble, I hardly know where to begin,” Kate said. Her eyes had gone unfocused. She stared at a spot just above her tea tankard. “I suppose the first question ought to be ‘Why’?”

A reasonable question, Cullen thought. And yet, for some reason, he hesitated to explain. Maybe Kate sensed that. She glanced over at him, pressing her lips together.

Alright then, let me try a more practical question: Can it be done? Breaking the addiction, I mean. Because of all the treatises written on the subject…” Kate broke off there.

“Well, there aren’t any, are there?” she asked. “Everything I’ve read is all hearsay and rumor. Even Brother Genetivi’s account is third-hand. Has the Order published any scholarly works on the subject?”

Cullen let out a bitter laugh. “The Chantry publish a work on how to recover from a lyrium
addiction?”

“Oh,” Kate said, frowning. “Yes, I suppose that would require admitting that addiction to lyrium is a bad thing in first place.”

“And they could never do that,” Cullen said, dryly. He spoke into his mug, then took another sip of his tea. As he drank, Kate’s gaze shifted to him, and her brows furrowed in thought.

“So,” Kate said after a moment, “You’ve taken this on without any sort of model to follow here? No prior accounts to guide you, no mentors in this endeavor? No hope that you might succeed?”

Cullen nearly choked on his tea at her frank assessment.

“That’s right,” he managed after a moment.

Kate nodded. She looked down at her tankard and her hands shook. All the same, when she spoke, her voice was stern:

“Well then. We’ve got our work cut out for us, haven’t we?”

She punctuated that statement by taking a swig of her tea.

“We?” Cullen asked.

“Of course I plan to help you,” Kate said, setting her mug back down.

“I do not need your help,” Cullen said. He regretted the words at once, for Kate flinched as if he’d splashed water over her. “I mean,” he amended. “I did not intend to make this your problem.”

“Then why did you ask me out here to talk about this?” Kate wanted to know. “Surely you didn’t intend to inform me of your decision and then pursue it alone?”

“Well…”

“You did?” Kate looked equal parts astonished and hurt. “You thought I would simply stand by without attempting to assist you?”

“I…er…”

Kate frowned. “Surely you know me better that that.”

“I actually wasn’t even certain if you’d approve,” Cullen admitted. “And if you did not,” he went on, though Kate blinked in surprise, “If you did not I would respect… That is to say, I would consider resuming…”

Now Kate was gaping at him. “Resume what? Taking lyrium?”

“I’d rather not,” Cullen managed after a moment. Now that was an understatement. The very thought made his blood run cold. “But I’m sure Josephine can find enough to spare.”

Cullen realized he’d said that last bit through gritted teeth.

“No!” Kate cried, stretching out a hand toward him. “Maker’s breath, I would never… No! Make you take lyrium? One of the most awful poisons that the Chantry ever conceived of? I hate taking the stuff and I’m a mage! I can’t imagine… Oh, for the Maker’s sake, Cullen! Just a month ago you were telling me how they used the draught against you in Kirkwall! You can’t honestly think I’d
encourage you to take it.”

“You remember what I said about Kirkwall?” Cullen said, feeling both relieved and confounded by her reaction.

“I remember everything you say,” Kate said. “Well, almost everything. And speaking of what people say,” she added, before Cullen could react to that surprising statement, “That reminds me of something Cole said about you. It didn’t make sense to me at the time, but now I understand his meaning.”

“Oh?” Cullen asked. He could only imagine the things that the spirit might have said about him.

“The other day,” Kate said, “Cole told me that you were ‘testing the chains.’ At the time I had no idea what he meant. I assumed you were outfitting the cells in Skyhold’s dungeons. But this is what he was talking about, wasn’t it?”

“Lyrium often feels like a chain,” Cullen admitted. And how odd that the spirit would have such insight into a templar’s struggles.

“Can we break that chain?” Kate asked. “Can it be done?” She sounded quite eager at the prospect.

Cullen drew up short at that. He did not know why the question startled him so much. It was certainly a question that he’d asked himself in the worst of his withdrawals. But to hear Kate ask it in that way - that rather shocked him.

“I have no idea,” he said.

“Obviously the primary concern is that you don’t die in the process,” Kate mused, half to herself.

Cullen sputtered at that. “A reasonable concern,” he managed.

“I wasn’t being facetious,” Kate told him.

“Neither was I,” Cullen replied, dryly. “Not dying is an excellent objective.” He picked up the remaining scone and bit off the end.

“You’re being sarcastic,” Kate said, pursing her lips. “But I’m serious, Cullen. The things they say about lyrium… Well, I’m sure I don’t need to repeat them. But you seem quite healthy and sound of mind. So surely the rumors are mistaken.”

“Leliana and Josephine might disagree with you there,” Cullen said.

“The fact that you can jest about your sanity proves that you’re in no immediate danger,” Kate said.

Does it? Cullen wondered. He chewed thoughtfully. But something in his face must have betrayed his thoughts, for Kate said:

“Oh. It’s not that easy, is it? I’m sorry, you just seem so fit, I would never have known this if you hadn’t said something.”

Cullen supposed that was kindly meant. Still, it rather implied that he was weaker than he looked. He felt his face heating.

“It is rather uncomfortable to have you discuss me in this manner,” Cullen said, irritably. He took another large bite of scone.
“Oh,” Kate’s face fell. “I do beg your pardon.”

“I can endure it,” Cullen added, mouth full. “All of it.”

“And so you have,” Kate said. She gave him another smile, and that was almost worse than her brisk assessment of before.

“Well there you have it,” Cullen said. His tongue felt dry and sticky-sweet. “Of all the things that were supposed to happen: crippling pain, insanity, memory loss and death, I suffer from nothing more than the occasional migraine or thrown back. Now you may quit your worrying and we can resume our duties for the day. Surely you have other things to do, Inquisitor.”

“If I’ve offended…”

“You haven’t,” Cullen lied, washing the scone down with tea. “Not at all.”

“But I have,” Kate sighed. “I’m so sorry, Cullen. I should not have said it like that. You’re not a problem to be solved.”

“Aren’t I?” Cullen said, setting his mug down with a hard clank.

“No!” Kate insisted. “I’m not trying to fix your or save you or anything like that. Anyhow, saving another person can’t be done. I know that better than anyone.”

Cullen paused at that. Something in her words did not quite sound right, but Kate had went on so quickly that Cullen could not figure out what it was.

“But you can cheer someone on as they save themselves,” she said. “You’re saving yourself, Cullen. And I want to help with the cheering.” Kate looked so earnest now that Cullen found himself re-assessing his annoyance.

“I’ve managed this so far,” he told her.

“Of course,” Kate agreed. “You’ve managed so far and I… Oh, I’ve made a hash of this. Look, you caught me off guard with this… revelation? Confession? Whatever it is. It startled me and it’s frightened me and I tend to get quite clinical when I’m afraid. It’s easier to treat everything like a puzzle. Then at least, there’s the hope of solving it.”

“What are you afraid of?” Cullen wanted to know.

“Of you dying, of course!” Kate said. The moment she said it, her eyes filled. Her lips trembled, and her whole face seemed to crumple. Cullen felt his stomach drop in response. He’d never seen someone so quickly overcome by tears.

“If you were to leave me – us, I…” Kate’s voice broke, and she looked sharply away.

“I’m not going to die,” Cullen told her. Though really, he couldn’t make that promise. “I’m not,” he said again, when Kate wiped her eyes with her palm.

“But Cullen, you did,” she said. She spoke to the distant hills, her voice cracking as she spoke. “In that future in Redcliffe. I saw you, and I… Maker, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to cry.” That last word came out as a sob.

“That wasn’t real.”

Kate was quiet a long time before whispering: “It was real enough,”
Cullen didn’t know quite what to say to that.

“If I came back from that nightmare,” Kate said, softly, as if trying to gather strength through each word. “If I came only to fail you again…”

“You won’t fail me,” Cullen said. “I will have failed if I don’t survive this.”

“Cullen, it doesn’t work like that,” Kate said, looking to him at last. Her face was red and splotched, her eyes were wet. “As inquisitor and commander, I’m responsible for you and you for me. And Maker, you got the worse end of that bargain. I’ve no idea what I’m doing. All week I’ve been running around like a complete fraud. The only thing that gives me courage is knowing that you’ve got my back. So you can’t…”

Kate broke off there, her brows furrowing, as if she had confused herself by what she’d just said. Cullen felt something twist and tangle inside his chest.

“All of us have your back, Inquisitor,” he told her. “Your advisors and your companions. Everyone.”

“Yes, I know,” Kate agreed. “But you… If we lost you…” She hesitated, then squeezed her eyes shut.

“If you lost me, you would not be left without a commander,” Cullen assured her. “I’ve made arrangements for Captain Rylen to take my post if anything should happen to me.”

Kate shook her head. “It would not be the same. I’ve no doubt that Rylen would make an excellent commander, but you’ve seen and studied so much. And the way you teach me as we go along… Cullen, I don’t know anything about soldiers or armies or military… stuff. I don’t even know what to call military stuff.”

“Protocols?” Cullen suggested. “Tactics?”

“Yes, you see?” Kate chuckled, though her laughter wobbled. “Yours is a viewpoint I need most of all.”

The words sent a thrill through Cullen, but he knew better than to trust it. Clearly she didn’t mean it like… Well, whatever meaning had made his heart leap into triple-time. She simply trusted him as an advisor. And that thought sent another thrill through him - one of pride.

“I will not leave you to deal with Corypheus alone,” he told her. “You have my word, Inquisitor.”

Kate looked up at Cullen with reddened eyes.

“Kate,” she said, scowling.

“I beg your pardon?”

“All this week you’ve been calling me by that ridiculous title. Please stop.”

“Oh, I…”

“Cullen, I respect what you’re doing. But I need you to survive this. I need you to survive so that I can survive. Oh Maker, that sounds just awful. I didn’t mean it like that. What I should say is that I want to help you as you have helped me. I know we haven’t always gotten along, but you’ll find I don’t give up on my friends easily. When I find someone who’s willing to put up with my oddities, I fight for them.”
“I… thank you.” Cullen said. He then paused and added: “What oddities?”

Kate snorted. “You’re sweet.”

Cullen blinked. Sweet? Surely he hadn’t heard her right. “What oddities?” he asked again.

“Crying at every little thing for one,” Kate said, pointing at her face. “Ugh,” she added, dabbing at her eyes with her thumb. “Exhausting as this week has been, it was only a matter of time before I burst into tears over something.”

“I’m sorry that I gave you occasion for grief,” Cullen said.

“It wasn’t you,” Kate said, shaking her head. “I mean it was, but not… You know what I mean.”

Cullen wasn’t certain that he did.

“I have good reason to do this, you know,” he felt he needed to say. “I would not want you to think I took this risk on a lark.”

Kate laughed, short and disbelieving. “Cullen, I would never think that. You’re the most cautious person I know. Surely you’ve got a hundred reasons why.”

“Not a hundred,” Cullen said, “But some good ones, I hope.”

“Of course you do,” Kate said. She wiped her eyes, then gave him a weak smile. “I’d very much like to hear them. That is, if you would be so kind as to tell me.”

And just like that, Cullen did not just want to explain. He felt he must. If Kate would support him in this - if she needed his support in return - then he felt he owed her. The explanation came tumbling out before he could quite consider how much he should reveal:

“I made the decision in Kirkwall,” Cullen said. “The Gallows had fallen. The rebels had fled. The city was in chaos, and the so-called ‘Champion’ ran off with her terrorist boyfriend…”

“Er,” Kate said, frowning.

“What?” Cullen stopped there.

“I’m sorry,” she said, holding up a hand, as if in the school room. “I didn’t mean to interrupt, but Hawke didn’t run off with Anders. She blamed him for what had happened in Kirkwall. So she yelled at him and then left him alone in the streets.”

“Did she?” Cullen said in surprise. “I did not know that. Huh. I suppose she has more sense than I thought.” A little bit more, anyway.

“This was all in Varric’s book,” Kate pointed out.

“Never read it,” Cullen shrugged.

“You didn’t?” Kate looked taken aback to hear it.

“I was too busy living that story to bother with Varric’s novelization of it,” Cullen said, dryly. “As for us templars, we were left in a state. There were only a few dozen mages left - all of them apprentices and the elderly. Any adult with ability ran off at the first opportunity. Rylen was with me then - and Ruvena and Keran and Morris and a few others. It was madness trying to keep order, because we kept being attacked every day. Citizens from Kirkwall kept sailing over in whatever boat
they could get their hands on, ready to lay siege to the Gallows. They wanted to finish off the last of
the mages - or the last of the templars, depending upon their politics.”

Kate nodded, as though she’d expected this part. Cullen paused.

“Was that in the book, too?” he asked.

“It was.”

“I’m surprised Varric included it,” Cullen said.

How curious. Maybe Cullen would have to reassess his judgment of Varric’s judgment of him.

“How awful!” Kate exclaimed.

“Yes, well, when Lady Cassandra arrived, she marched into town with a full battalion of Seekers
and a mountain’s worth of aid. Didn’t quite make up for the neglect, but it was something. But in that
month prior, I quietly gave my own lyrium rations to the other templars. Seemed the commanderly
thing to do. And I’d gotten used to irregular rations when Meredith was in power.”

“You were punished that often?” Kate’s brows furrowed in concern.

“In the beginning of my tenure in Kirkwall, I’d enjoyed a double dose,” Cullen said, trying not to
remember those days. “It got whittled down soon enough. Though really,” he added, “It was
probably a blessing in disguise. All those years of punishment gave me plenty of practice for what
I’m doing now.”

Kate said nothing, but her eyes looked watery once again. Cullen lifted his mug and polished off his
tea.

“In those first weeks,” he went on, “I was far too busy fending off attacks to think about the lyrium,
other than to give it to my officers. It’s hard to deal with supply runs or even burials for the bodies
rotting in the corridors when you’re fighting an active battle on your doorstep. But when things
settled down a bit…”

“Bodies in the corridors?” Kate looked appalled.

“It was a mess,” Cullen said.

“Sounds like more than a mess,” Kate said.

Cullen considered that.

“A fucking mess,” he corrected.

Kate gave a startled laugh.

“But once Cassandra arrived,” Cullen said, “I finally had a chance to go through Meredith’s files.
We broke down the door to her office - she had it warded and enchanted and double-bolted as well. I
set myself up at her desk for the day, started sorting out reports, trying to make sense of her ledgers
and notes. It was a mess.”
“A fu… I mean, that other kind of mess?”

Cullen might have laughed at the way Kate had so properly side-stepped cursing. But it was hard to see humor in what he had to say next. At his serious expression, Kate’s face fell.

“What then?” she asked, her voice soft and strained.

“I only wish that it had been a mess,” Cullen said. “But it was not. It was methodical and precise and…”

He shook his head, as if to shake the memories away.

“Meredith kept records on on all of it,” Cullen said. “Every tranquil branded, every punishment given. Taken one at a time, her decisions almost made sense. Each report had a reason - a cruel reason, perhaps, but a reason. But taken together? They painted a monstrous portrait of abuse and madness.”

Kate said nothing, but her lips pressed together in an expression of unease.

“But the worst of it,” Cullen said, forcing himself to go on, “The worst of it was that I had written dozens of those reports. I wrote more than reports, really. I’d filed complaints, inquiries, requests for an audience to meet with Meredith, even a request to meet with the grand cleric. They were all in my handwriting. But I didn’t remember writing them. Not until I saw them.”

Kate cocked her head at him, and Cullen saw that she did not understand.

“I wrote those reports,” Cullen explained. “And once I saw them, I remembered writing of them. I might have recited them precisely without reading them. But until the moment, I did not remember that I remembered them. Rather, I didn’t consider them to be important. I’d been dulled by lyrium, you see - memories and all.”

“Dulled by lyrium?” Kate repeated. “But you… You mean you do not remember your time as a templar? But… But in the Mire!” she sputtered. “In the Mire, you said that you didn’t hurt anyone. You said that you weren’t one of the templars who… But now you’re saying that you don’t remember?”

“No, I do remember,” Cullen said, quickly, holding up a hand to stop her. “That’s the trouble.”

Kate drew back ever so slightly. “What do you mean?”

“They say that lyrium makes a templar forget over time. They say it makes you forget. But that’s not quite true. Lyrium makes you to forget, because lyrium makes it so that you cannot feel. It dulls the emotion associated with a memory. While taking lyrium, you experience things, and you can remember them later with perfect clarity. But it’s hard to feel the importance of the memory.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s like remembering what you had for breakfast,” Cullen said. “I would remember this,” he waved a hand at the crumb-covered handkerchief upon the wall. “But it would be hard to remember the meal I wolfed down yesterday. It would be harder still to remember some supper I had a year ago. Without emotional weight, memories tend to slip away.”

“Do you mean to say,” Kate said, slowly and precisely, “That you do not feel anything at all?”

Cullen gave a dark, humorless laugh and shook his head. “No, I definitely feel things. Make no
mistake about that.”

“But you said that lyrium dulls feeling.”

“So it does. Over time, and with constant use, lyrium will shore a templar up against emotion. As a result, it fades a templar’s memories. But as for me, my use of lyrium was irregular, and my memories were rather, um, intense…”

But there he faltered. For in searching for the right words to say, Cullen stepped too near to his darkest memories. The scene flashed suddenly before his mind, real as the ramparts surrounding them:

_The crackle of lightning. Screams. Blood. A woman wept, and Cullen could not reach her. A man retched, and Cullen could not help him either. Clawed hands reached for him, a voice whispered in his ear: ‘Just a taste, templar.’ The voice was honey and thorns together. ‘Give us just a taste of the love you feel for her. You won’t hurt once you give in…”_

“Cullen?”

Cullen sucked in a breath as he jolted back to the present. Here he was safe, he reminded himself. Here, was no desire demon, angling for his soul. There was no blood, no one he’d failed to save. And standing before him was Kate - just Kate - with her eyes full of worry.

“Did I lose you?” she asked, warily. She did not say ‘to a memory,’ but Cullen heard the unspoken words all the same.

Cullen felt as though his lungs had still not caught up with the rest of him. Kate always saw too much, he thought wildly. He never knew what to make of that. No one else watched him so closely. He found it both addicting and unnerving to be seen so well.

“What was I saying?” he asked on a shuddering breath. His voice was hoarse.

“Something about lyrium and memories,” Kate said, though her brows furrowed further. “Truly Cullen, you look pale.”

“I’m fine,” he said, eager to put the memory behind him. He felt as though he was running away from it with his words. “That’s right,” he pressed on, “I was saying that lyrium dulls feeling, and so also memory.”

“Cullen…” Kate said with a frown, still looking at him in concern.

“And when you combine lyrium with our training,” he continued ruthlessly, “The templar’s mental and physical training, that is, it renders a soldier nearly impervious. I imagine it’s different for each recruit, but over the years, I taught myself to remember everything.”

“Everything?” that surprised Kate such that she stopped looking quite so worried. “You mean have a perfect memory? Well,” she added, half to herself. “That would explain your indifferent filing system.”

“I built a sort of filing system in my mind, instead,” Cullen told her. “I used to think of my experiences as books, all neatly lined up on shelves in my memory. When I was on lyrium, the books stayed put on their shelves, quiet and bound, unless I had need of them.”

“But when you are not on lyrium…” Kate began.
Cullen looked quickly away.

“There are many reasons that lyrium is addicting,” he said, heading off her question. “And the pains of withdrawals are not merely physical. Without lyrium, my mind - a templar’s mind, I should say - becomes a jot more untidy. Books everywhere. Memories springing up all over the place. Hard to keep order, harder to keep your composure.”

“In other words,” Kate frowned, “Taking lyrium keeps a templar from having a normal emotional reaction to anything.”

“Normal is relative,” Cullen hedged, “And emotion is a liability. Well it is,” he said, when Kate made a small sound of protest. “The Chantry would not risk it. Too many ways it could go wrong, when you’re trying to grow perfect holy soldiers.”

Hmm, he thought. That last bit had come out quite bitter indeed.

“So the templars have no shame to haunt them?” Kate asked, sounding quite bitter herself. “No burning, ‘What if I’d done that differently?’ to keep you up at night? No sense or remorse or fear or desire for something more.”

“Not if you’ve been taking lyrium,” Cullen said. But the words crept too near to the edge of that blood-stained memory. Cullen quickly stepped back.

“When I was on a regular diet of the stuff,” he said instead, “I’d remember what I’d done, but I would feel rather distant about it. It was like a story that had happened to someone else. But if I was off the lyrium for a week or so, the feeling came rushing back. It was better to stay drunk on it,” he said, softly. “At least, I thought so at the time.”

“And so the templars fulfill their duty,” Kate said, her words deceptively soft. “March your patrol. Brand your tranquil. Strike some mages in the face, and feel nothing about it. But you remember it all.”

“Down to the day and time and place and the mage’s name,” Cullen muttered.

Kate’s mouth dropped open. She looked horrified, and Cullen cursed his unthinking words.

“I did not mean…”

“Who?” she gaped at him.

“I did not brand tranquils,” he said, quickly. “But you knew that. I marched on patrol quite regularly, but…”

“Who?”

Cullen groaned. “Please don’t ask me that.”

But Cullen realized he could not avoid the question. Why had he told Kate all this, Cullen wondered to himself? He should never have tried to explain his reasons for quitting lyrium. He’d let his guard down around Kate, only to reveal some of the ugliest parts of himself. And Kate, with her searching eyes, did not miss a single blemish. Yet here he went again, making it even worse:

“A mage named Grace,” he said, and the words felt like they’d been pulled from him. “She attacked an apprentice and I was not gentle in breaking up the fight. Benn. No other name than ‘Benn.’ He tried to run from the Harrowing Chamber and again, I was not gentle. A mage name Thomas -
similar story. Bennet - similar story. Tahroni - she attacked a templar. And Jowan.”

Cullen scowled to remember that one. “Jowan was a blood mage and an fool. They made him tranquil, but I took a swing at him first. I did so on principle, for he’d betrayed a friend. No, not a friend. She was… It does not matter. Jowan deserved it. And then there was the old woman. But that one was a mistake.”

“Good Maker,” Kate whispered, covering her face with her hands, as if she couldn’t stand to look at him. Cullen felt his temper flare.

“I was a templar, Kate, what the Void did you expect me to say?”

Kate stared at him his shock, her hands coming defensively before her chest. Cullen ran a hand through his hair with a curse, feeling like the lowest sort of vermin. He hazarded a glance at Kate, only to find her standing with her head bowed, her arms crossed over her belly.

Just like that, Cullen wanted to take it back. He wanted to take all of it back: his past anger, those errant blows, the vows to the Order, the lyrium addiction, and most of all, this extemporaneous confession.

No, Cullen realized. He didn’t want to take these words back. They were true, and he did not want to lie to Kate. He just wished he’d been flawless back then. That was all.

“A templar hit me once,” Kate said, startling Cullen from his thoughts.

It took Cullen a moment to register what she’d said. When he did, he felt as though ice had slid into his gut.

“I…” he began. But he did not know at all what to say. His throat had frozen, just like his limbs.

“That’s how I got this,” Kate said, reaching her left hand to trace a small scar by her left eye. As she did so, the mark cast its eerie green glow on her skin. “And if it had been you…” Kate went on.

“It wouldn’t have been me,” Cullen said automatically.

Kate just looked up at him, looked at him as though he was a stranger. Because the words were a lie. Kate knew it and Cullen knew it, too. He would not have cared. With the lyrium in him, he most certainly would not have cared. And because he would not have cared then, Cullen now cared very much. Perhaps too much, he thought.

“This is why,” he said, though the words seemed to stick in his throat. “This is why I don’t… This is why I can’t…”

Blast it all, was he giving her an excuse or a confession or what? And for the Maker’s sake, she’d just told him that a templar had given her that faint scar. Cullen tried again:

“Are you alright?” he asked Kate. “I mean, obviously you were injured at the time. But later, did the templar…”

He couldn’t think how to ask her what had happened. But Kate seemed to understand his halting question all the same.

“My parents found out and had him sacked,” she said. “Trevelyan tithes accounted for nearly a fourth of the Ostwick Chantry’s operating budget, so my family had a great deal of leverage. No one dared touch me after that. They all whispered about me though: ‘the Trevelyan brat.’ But I never got
hurt again. No mage ever got hurt when I was around. But I often wondered what happened when I was not there. It made it hard to go home. But I knew that if I didn’t go home from time to time to visit my parents, the templars might have started hitting people again. It was difficult to know how best to protect everyone. I knew I couldn’t,” she added sadly. “But I wanted to. I always wanted to protect everyone.”

Cullen could understand that. And yet, that desire to protect had driven him to become a templar.

“I heard that the templar who struck me died of a lyrium overdose,” Kate went on. “He bought a bad draught from a smuggler. Robert told me about it. He thought it would make me happy. But it didn’t.” She took a breath, then said: “It didn’t make me happy at all.”

“That templar did not deserve your pity,” Cullen said, his voice thick.

“And you do?”

Cullen drew in a breath, for the words were like a blow.

“I’m sorry,” Kate said. “I should not have said that.”

Cullen couldn’t find words to reply. He shrugged instead.

“I keep thinking,” Kate said, speaking to a spot on the ground between her boots. “That we’ve gotten past this. I keep thinking that I’ve got the blame all lined up and accounted for. And I keep thinking,” she said, her voice nearly breaking, “that you won’t say something that will anger me or hurt me or shock me. And then you do. And it makes me so…”

She shook her head, her hands clutching her elbows tightly.

“I’m sorry,” Cullen offered. It was all he could say, really.

“I know you are,” Kate said. “And that makes me angry, too.”

Kate raised her hands to her mouth, then to her face, then ran her hands through her hair and clasped them across her belly again.


Cullen stood there in silence, feeling far too cold. He was on the other end of his confession now, and things had not at all turned out like he’d wanted. For now that Kate had looked at him with fear - had looked at him with fear again, Cullen thought with a curse - he found himself desperate to banish that look of distrust from her eyes. And yet, what could he possibly say except the truth?

“I feel it now,” he said, as if that made any difference.

“Good,” Kate shot back. “You should.” But then she shook her head.

“No, that’s cruel. No one should feel pain. But neither should they feel nothing at all.”

“I can’t speak for all templars,” Cullen ventured. “But speaking for myself, I grew to hate the lyrium. When I was on it, I felt like my head was sealed in stone. When I was off it, my temper grew shorter, and my memories less manageable.”

“Since when are memories manageable?” Kate wanted to know.

“They are for templars,” Cullen said. “That’s the whole point of lyrium.”
“It sounds like the Chantry made you half-tranquil.”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that. But there does seem to be a parallel.”

“Quite likely, if lyrium is involved,” Kate said, looking both angry and thoughtful all at once, “And so the Order builds itself an army without fear or regret, completely dependent upon the Chantry for their addiction.”

Cullen pressed his lips together. Kate’s words rang true, but it still galled him to hear it. Because even now, Cullen felt strangely disloyal to speak this way. It had been ingrained in him never to question his training, especially before mages. Every word Cullen said felt like poison spewing from his mouth. But still, he forced himself to go on:

“Those outside of the Chantry don’t know the half of it,” he told Kate. “I was a member of the Order, and even I did not realize the full dangers of lyrium until that day in Meredith’s office. But then I saw the truth of it. All of her records ended the same way: ‘Templar reassigned and given a healing draught.’ Every one of them ended like that: ‘Mage confined. Templar given healing draught.’ ‘Mage branded. Templar given healing draught.’ ‘Mage executed…”

He didn’t have to finish that one. Kate closed her eyes and whispered:

“Healing draught.”

“It’s a fine euphemism,” Cullen said, though the words came out like a growl. “Take the lyrium from the templars who are being punished and give it to the ones who toes the line. Kept order exceptionally well, I must say. I didn’t realize how much until I saw all those reports, all lined up in a row. There’s a reason that templars take a double-draught before Harrowings, you know. The templars need to recall everything that goes on - down the the letter. But no one wants to feel the horror of it. Hence, the lyrium. You keep the memories, but no templar need fear waking up in a cold sweat after.”

Kate’s mouth dropped open. “Maker’s breath,” she breathed. “Forget the templars’ memories of Harrowings! Did anyone stop to think what happened to the mages? We have nightmares for years after! Or we are made tranquil and wake up with no feelings at all. And that’s assuming that we lived to talk about it!”

“And that’s why the Order does it,” Cullen said. “No templar wants to endure the horror and guilt of a Harrowing - either in the moment, or in the recollection of it.”

“Cowards,” Kate hissed, her voice thick with passionate anger. “They act so stoic and calm. But how is it courage if you haven’t got any fear to begin with? It’s hardly a fair fight.”

“The Order did not want a fair fight. The whole point was to keep the mages from fighting at all.”

“It’s awful!” Kate cried. “Golden City above, how on earth does the Divine allow for this? How could anyone allow it? How could you allow it?”

Cullen had expected the accusation, but it still stung. “It’s not like I could change the entire system myself,” he said. “That’s how things were done. Efficient and practical.”

“Practical?” Kate gaped at him.

“Think of all our troops after Haven,” Cullen said. “Even now, they are traumatized, struggling to sleep at night. If you could hide that memory away from them, if you could give them courage in a vial, wouldn’t you?”
“No!” Kate cried. “I mean…” She paused, then said again: “No! At least, I would not do that with lyrium. And you wouldn’t either! Would you?” She sounded appalled by the idea.

“Of course I wouldn’t,” Cullen said. “I know better than anyone what it’s like to live that lie. And that’s what lyrium is: it’s a lie. I was made into something less than human for years. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone else.”

“Made into something less than human so that you could treat mages less than human,” Kate returned. “But really, I find I’m not surprised to hear any of this. It explains why templars are such indifferent mage-hunters. You lot are remarkably unperceptive. And why not, if you’ve grown hearts and heads of stone. You’re basically human-shaped golems. With lyrium to wash it down, I imagine Chantry propaganda becomes quite easy to swallow. You can’t even taste the lies.”

“No,” Cullen said, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I mean, yes. I mean, it’s not like that.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Templars don’t want this. I did not want this.”

Kate pursed her lips, as if she did not quite believe him. But all she said was: “All strength and no feeling? Sounds ideal for a soldier.”

“It’s a living hell,” Cullen said, angrily. “I don’t know what diabolical cleric dreamed up this madness, but no decent person would wish to be made so indecent.”

“Wouldn’t they?”

“Not at all,” Cullen said. “And most templars don’t know. They join the Order with dreams of protecting the innocent - or simply making a respectable living. They have no idea what they are in for, not until it’s too late. No truly, Kate,” he said, when she looked like she would argue with him. “They don’t know. Yes, there were bastards like Ser Alric, who joined the order because they were already sick and twisted inside. But most of them are not like that. They joined not knowing the cost. Think of your cousins, Kate, or your friend Lysette. Think of Rylen and Ruvena and Barris. They signed up for a sacred calling. They didn’t expect to be made dead inside. They didn’t ask to be addicted to their own chains.”

“Then why do templars keep taking it?” Kate demanded.

“Because this is what happens when you stop!” Cullen exclaimed, pointing at himself. “Headaches and muscle spasms and nightmares. Every horrible memory you’d forgotten flying off of the shelf and staring you in the face. You saw what happened to me just minutes ago: a memory returns and suddenly you’re lost to the world. There are days when I find myself hiding in my office, trying to gather up the courage to open the door. Very commanderly behavior that,” he added with a scowl, “When the general of Skyhold is so weak he can scarcely face his past.”

Cullen realized what he’d said when Kate went silent. She stared up at him, all wide eyes and trembling lips.

“I… Oh my Maker. Cullen, I’m so sorry.”

“I’m fine,” he said, feeling shame crash into him. “It’s fine. Really, it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” Kate insisted. “And…” she paused, as if she was caught between two thoughts, unsure which one to voice aloud.
“This shouldn’t have happened,” she said after a moment. “None of it should have happened. Not to you, not to the mages. Nor even to those templars - if they did mean well.”

“Then that makes the Chantry’s actions so much worse, doesn’t it? Don’t pretend that any of that was alright.”

Her fierce words make Cullen sigh. She was right, he thought. And he was tired of defending the Chantry’s mistakes.

“I hate it,” he admitted. “Everything was easier with the lyrium, but, it’s become so much harder. Back in the Gallows, I took beatings like you would not believe. I got this scar,” he pointed to his lip, “in the week after Hawke left Kirkwall. I’ve no idea how I got it - from the board or the wine bottle or the Mabari or a sword. It could have been any of them. I don’t remember. Face bleeding all day and I didn’t flinch. And yet Morris made contact with me in a practice bout just yesterday. I’m still aching from it.”

“Ouch,” Kate wrinkled her nose.

“I can handle it of course,” Cullen said quickly.

“Of course,” Kate nodded.

“But I must admit that the lack of lyrium has left me feeling rather fragile. Imagine if you wore armor every day of your life, and then one day, someone took it off of you by degrees. You’d feel rather exposed, you understand.”

“You’d be human,” Kate said.

“I… Well, yes.”

Cullen hadn’t thought of it like that. The very idea made him stop short.

“Human hurts,” Kate added. “I can see why you’d avoid it.”

Cullen didn’t like to think that he was avoiding the task of being human, but there was truth to her words.

“It certainly makes things uncomfortable,” he hedged.

“And all of this,” Kate said, thoughtfully, “is why you left the templars. You truly left it all behind when you left it all behind.”

She understood. The thought rushed through him, sweet and staggering in it’s relief. Cullen let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding.

“That’s right,” he managed.

“So you quit the lyrium in Kirkwall?” Kate went on. “Or when you left the city?”

“No, I quit that same day,” Cullen told her. “After going through Meredith’s papers, I grabbed my lyrium kit from my room. Threw the damned box into the Kirkwall harbor. It took longer than you’d think to sink.”

“One more wreck beneath the waves,” Kate said.
“Just so,” Cullen said. “Lyrium was the rope that bound me. It was the lash set to my back to drive me on when I might have questioned my orders. I’m not trying to excuse myself,” he added, when Kate’s brows flickered together with a frown. “Maker knows I made my mistakes. I joined the Order. I took the lyrium. I knew I was on the wrong side of that fight. On some level, I must have known.”

“Must you?” Kate asked as she searched his face. “How many of your choices were made by the lyrium, and how many of them were your own?”

“That,” Cullen said, bitterly, “sums up my dilemma perfectly.”

The corners of Kate’s mouth tightened, and her eyes narrowed. She looked as if she expected to see right through Cullen’s skin and all the way down to nerve and bone. He hastily looked away from that expression of judgment and added:

“When I look back on all those years. I can’t recall if it was choice or reaction that drove me. That lack of agency terrifies me. It’s why I mean to maintain self-control now. Because I often wonder if I would have been a different sort of man - a better sort of man…”

“Without the lyrium?” Kate asked.

Cullen nodded. In retrospect, none of this was what he’d intended to say - nothing beyond the initial confession. Yet, nothing he’d said was a lie. It was all truth and more truth. And so he could not regret it, even if it drove Kate away.

Cullen sincerely hoped that it would not drive Kate away.

“If you could take it back, would you?” Kate’s sudden question startled him.

“The lyrium, you mean?” Cullen asked.

“All of it: Joining the Order. Striking those mages.”

“I should not have harmed those mages,” Cullen said with a shake of his head. “There should have been another way. Jowan though? I’d still flatten him in a heartbeat. But I would gladly un-take the lyrium if I could.”

“And un-join the Order?” Kate wanted to know.

Cullen hesitated, and Kate frowned. Clearly, she thought that hesitation was the wrong answer.

“It’s not that simple,” Cullen told her. “I can’t undo the past. And it would make me mad to think like that. I can only go forward. And for all the Order took from me, it gave me the skills that I now use to lead the Inquisition’s armies. My mistakes led me here. If they hadn’t, I would not have met…”

I would not have met you, Cullen thought. But he stopped himself from saying so, lest he present himself as sentimental or unprofessional. As it was, Kate looked away, blushing. Maybe she’d guessed his intent anyway.

“What about you?” Cullen asked, trying to cover for his slip. “Would you do things differently if you could?”

“Wouldn’t we all?” Kate sighed. Cullen didn’t know quite what to say to that.
"But then," she added, "I never had much choice in the first place. That’s probably why it’s hard for me to feel sorry for anyone who used their choices so…” She broke off there.

"Poorly?" Cullen suggested.

"Yes, but I was trying to come up with a nicer way to say it."

Cullen chuckled at that. "Fair enough. Still, I hope you might forgive me my poor choices," he said. "I hope you might forgive me in general, actually."

As soon as the words were out, Cullen stopped short. That was certainly not what he meant to say. Asking for forgiveness from a mage? That was weak, by templar standards. An apology made for a gaping hole in his armor. And yet, Cullen found he did not care. He only cared that Kate might see fit to look past what he’d done.

"I don’t know that forgiveness is mine to offer," Kate said.

"You do not think that I deserve it," Cullen said. His chest felt quite hollow at the thought.

"Well, no one deserves forgiveness, do they?" Kate pointed out. "If you deserved to be forgiven it wouldn’t be forgiveness."

"Very philosophical of you," Cullen said, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Then he frowned. "But would you, if you could? Forgive me, that is."

"Do you need my forgiveness?" Kate asked.

"I suppose not," Cullen said. "But I should like it all the same."

Kate pursed her lips as she considered him. "Well, I… I suppose I should, shouldn’t I? And in a way, I do. But then…" Cullen’s stomach churned as she shook her head.

"How can I forgive you when the blame is so unclear?" Kate asked him. "I forgive the man who joined the Order with good intentions. I forgive the man who’s standing here before me, fighting his way back from a lyrium addiction. But the man that you were under the Chantry? The man who struck those mages, who might have struck me? I don’t care for him, Cullen. I can’t."

Cullen felt as if something had gotten stuck in his throat. "I don’t care for him either," he admitted thickly. "Thus," he added, "I quit the lyrium. Better to risk death and madness, than to be that man again."

Kate said nothing to that. She just continued to look at him with that searching, yet unsearchable look.

"Would you at least believe me when I say that I regret it?" Cullen asked, when he could stand her silence no longer. "That I did not intend to be cruel? That I wanted to do right? And I will do right, if I can."

Kate smiled then, and it felt like fresh air from over the mountains. "That," she said. "I most definitely believe."

"Good," Cullen breathed.

"Good," Kate nodded. Then, to Cullen’s surprise, her eyes welled with tears.

"What?" he asked in sudden alarm. Blast it all, he thought they’d gotten through the worst of it, so
“Just tell me you have a plan to survive this,” Kate said, her voice strained.

“Survive what?” Cullen said, now completely thrown off his guard. “Our arguments?”

“No,” Kate said, laughing as she sniffed and wiped at her eyes. “Though now that you mention it, I might need a plan for dealing with that, too.”

“Surely it’s not that bad,” Cullen frowned.

“It’s bad,” Kate replied. “But I suppose I shouldn’t expect that we could get past all the ugliness of the Circles with just a conversation or two. If only it were that easy. Forgive me for my outburst. It was aimed mostly at the Chantry.”

“Mostly?”

“Alright, it was aimed at you as well,” Kate admitted. “But I will remain your adamant friend, in spite of our differences.”

Cullen didn’t know quite what to say to that. He felt as though something had shifted inside of him during this conversation - a door unlatching, maybe, or perhaps he just felt a breath of fresh air from the mountains. He and Kate had spoken of friendship before. And yet, this moment felt like friendship. Or rather, Cullen imagined this was what friendship felt like. He had nothing but soldierly camaraderie and familial tolerance to compare it to. He’d never felt this much gratitude for someone’s understanding before. He’d never felt so understood, either. Oddly enough, that just made him feel all the more exposed.

“So how do we keep you alive?” Kate asked. The words startled Cullen, and not just because they sounded both businesslike and tearful at the same time.

“I beg your pardon?”

“What's our plan?” Kate said. “For helping you with the withdrawals, I mean. Obviously you’ve got a good head start, but how do I help?”

“Oh,” Cullen said. Right. Kate had promised to help him. Cullen still wasn’t sure what to make of that promise.

“Surely you’ve figured out a thing or two if you’ve survived this long,” Kate went on, sounding more controlled now, and less wavering. “Diet, exercises, supplements…”

“Not really,” Cullen said, thinking it over. “Fortitude, mostly.”

“What, just grin and bear it?”

“What else am I to do?” Cullen shrugged.

“You must be doing something more than toughing it out.”

“Not really. I mean, work helps. It’s good to have a meaningful challenge for my mind and steady exercise.”

“That makes sense.”

“I do better on a schedule as well,” Cullen added.
“Schedule, exercise, work,” Kate repeated, as though filing these items away in her head. “And when those things go away, it’s worse? You had more headaches on the journey up from Haven, didn’t you?”

“Oh…”

“Oh, but the battle itself, without lyrium to aid with the memories…” Kate broke off, then winced. “I’m sorry. That was rather tactless.”

Cullen had flushed as soon as she’d mentioned Haven. “It’s quite alright,” he said, tightly. “Really,” he added, lest she prod. “It’s not a problem.”

“Is there a pattern to the memories and the pains and such?” Kate asked.

“Erratic as the Void, but I make do. Work helps. And prayer helps. Prayer has always helped,” Cullen added thoughtfully.

“Prayer helps with the headaches?” Kate asked. She did not sound disbelieving - only curious. “What does your healer think of all this?”

“Healer?”

Cullen realized his mistake at once, for Kate’s eyes went wide.

“You do have a healer watching over this process, don’t you?”

“Oh…”

“Cullen,” Kate said. Now she sounded angry again. No, not angry - exasperated. And worried.

“Do you mean to tell me that you quit lyrium - quit it ‘stone cold’ as you say - and never thought to have someone observe the process?” Her voice rose considerably at the end of that sentence.

“I told Seeker Cassandra,” Cullen told her, lest she think him completely foolhardy.


“Yes, well obviously I did not consult her for medical advice.”

“Obviously,” Kate agreed.

“I made it a condition of my joining the Inquisition,” Cullen explained. “When I took up the post of commander, I told Cassandra that I had given up lyrium and would not take it again. I wanted to serve out of loyalty, not blind obedience.”

“And what did she say?”

“She said she approved. But you know Cassandra. Her response was quite perfunctory. She told me that if my abilities were compromised in any way, she would relieve me of duty.”

Kate’s lips twisted wryly. “That hardly counts as observation,” she said. “Who is keeping an eye on you?”

Cullen cringed. “I didn’t want to be fussed over,” he said.
“That I can well believe,” Kate said. “So who else knows about it? Leliana, Josephine? Your officers?”

“They might have guessed,” Cullen said. They probably had, but he didn’t want to think about that.

“But you’re the only person I’ve told since Cassandra,” he added.

“I am?” Kate sounded pleased to hear it.

“Of course,” Cullen said. “I mean, you’re the Inquisitor.”

Kate’s face fell. “Oh,” she said. “Right.”

Cullen realized at once that he’d made a misstep. “That’s not the only reason why I told you,” he said.

“Isn’t it?”

“No,” Cullen said. “I told you because I felt you ought to know. But I certainly didn’t intend for this to become your problem.”

“It’s my problem regardless,” Kate returned.

“Yes, but I don’t mean for it to be.”

“Of course you don’t,” Kate said. “Just as I don’t mean for this” - here she held up her left hand - “To be your problem.”

For a moment, Cullen did not understand her, but then the mark upon Kate’s hand glowed an eerie green.

“That’s different,” he said at once.

“How?” Kate asked, raising a brow.

“That’s Fade-magic, for one.”

“Isn’t lyrium a form of Fade-magic?”

Cullen shook his head. “My addiction to lyrium and your possession of the Mark of Andraste are worlds apart.”

“We don’t know that this is a mark of our prophet,” Kate replied. “Given what Corypheus said about it, it’s probably a spell of some sort.”

“Yes, but it’s necessary for our mission.”

“And the health of the Inquisition general is not necessary for our mission?” Kate asked, placing a hand on her hip.

Cullen tried to think of a reply to that. Maker help him. He found Kate quite attractive when she resorted to logic.

“You are far more essential to the Inquisition than I am,” Cullen said. There, that was a sound rejoinder.
“I beg to differ,” Kate replied. “The Inquisition could make do without me far more easily than it could make do without you.”

“Don’t say that,” Cullen said. His chest seemed to constrict at the very thought.

“You’re right,” Kate agreed. “The truth is that all of us are necessary to the Inquisition. From the newest recruits to the gardeners to those of us who putter around the war table each morning. Even the ravens have their part to play. And that’s why,” she added, before Cullen could get a word in edgewise, “If one of your former templar officers wanted to quit lyrium, you’d surely help them in any way that you could. And certainly you’d want them to consult a healer.”

Cullen realized she had a point. “Well yes, but…”

“But what?”

Cullen frowned. “I don’t much care for healers,” he admitted.

“Why?” Kate returned. And with that, her tone shifted: less argumentative, and more concerned. Maybe she’d caught the tension in his voice. Blast. He’d been trying to hide it, too.

“I find… I’ve had indifferent aid at the hands of healers,” Cullen said. He hoped Kate would not press him for details. Thankfully, she didn’t. Instead she said:

“I see.”

Cullen worried that she might.

“So surely there’s no need…” he began.

“Will you allow me to examine you?” Kate asked.

Cullen was so surprised, he forgot the excuse he’d come up with. He just stared at her.

“I do beg your pardon,” Kate said, and if Cullen didn’t know any better, he would have said that she was blushing. “I only meant that I should offer myself - my help. As a healer, that is.”

The hair on the back of Cullen’s neck stood on end.

“Surely there’s no need for that,” he said.

“All mages are trained in the basics of lyrium protocols,” Kate reasoned. “We must keep our jailers fighting fit, after all.”

She caught herself there with a wince.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I should not do that.”

“Do what?” Cullen wanted to know.

“Resort to the bitterness. It will turn to poison in me as surely as lyrium was a poison in you.”

“It’s alright.”

“No, it’s not,” Kate sighed. “And I’m sorry. Just let me check you. Or I suppose we could go and find Coll. She might be the better option. Only she was out rather late and I wouldn’t want to wake her. She’s a trifle cranky in the mornings.”
Cullen did not like the sound of that. And between submitting himself to the examination of Skyhold’s sleep-deprived rebel archivist or dealing with Kate here and now, Cullen knew which one he’d choose:

“You’ll do fine,” Cullen said.

Kate’s brows shot up.

“I mean,” he corrected. “If you please, I’d rather… Um, you do know what you’re doing, don’t you?”

Kate’s lips curled in a small, knowing smile. Cullen had no idea what that meant, but the sight sent his mind racing.

“I do, actually,” Kate said, sounding like her usual, scholarly self. “In theory,” she added.

“In theory?” Cullen scowled.

“Oh, it will be alright,” Kate said, more to herself than to Cullen. “A field-test, as it were.”

“Field test?” Cullen didn’t like the sound of that either, but feigning confidence, he made himself stand a bit straighter as he said:

“Alright then. Check me.”
Cullen regretted his casual words the moment he uttered them. Because when Kate took a step toward him, Cullen felt his chest tighten. Something tangled in his rib cage and squeezed his lungs. He felt his breathing go shallow, but his heart rate sped up. And Cullen cursed his own foolish reaction.

Maker’s breath, what was wrong with him? It wasn’t like lyrium protocols allowed for a great deal of intimacy. But then, even thinking the word ‘intimacy’ set Cullen blushing.

“It’s just rudimentary first aid,” he muttered to himself, the better to remind himself why he’d agreed to this.

“Er, sort of,” Kate said, evidently thinking that utterance was meant for her ears. “A simple laying on of hands.” As if ‘laying on of hands’ weren’t a phrase to heat Cullen further.

“No need to disrobe,” she told him. “Or disarmor, I guess.” It might have been Cullen’s imagination, but Kate seemed to be blushing as well.

“No need to disrobe,” she told him. “Or disarmor, I guess.” It might have been Cullen’s imagination, but Kate seemed to be blushing as well.

“Of course not,” Cullen agreed. “But usually you’d just check my lyrium level and top me off. But as I don’t take lyrium, you won’t be topping me…”

He stopped there, realizing there was another way to take that phrase. Cullen was certain his face was now the color of his crimson mantle.

“You’ve done this before?” he asked, his tone precise.

“Um, sort of?” Kate said. “I’m not quite as talented as Coll. She volunteered in the infirmary all the time. And a master healer could examine you by blinking. But it might take me a while to get a good read on you. Though if you allow me to touch your skin, that might help speed things along.”

Cullen felt his shoulders tense. “Touch my skin?”

“Just your hand. Is that a problem?”

Cullen could not answer. He felt an oily sensation run down his back. It was probably just sweat. But for a second, it felt like the tip of a claw. Cullen knew what came next. He gritted his teeth and tried not to give in to memory. Sweet Andraste, you’d think that he’d have gotten past this by now.

“Or we could go get Coll,” Kate offered, hesitantly.

As if that would make things easier. Cullen didn’t want anyone else involved in this debacle. The world around him went strangely distant then, and a voice seemed to slither into his ear:
“Come on then, templar. Just one touch. You’ve gone so long without, haven’t you? Just a touch. Just a taste…”

“Good Maker, Cullen! You’ve gone white as a sheet. Alright then. Never mind this. Let’s go down to the infirmary.” Kate’s voice seemed to echo across a chasm. But much closer was the voice of nightmares:

*Just a taste, templar. Just a taste…*

“No,” Cullen said, sharply.

The whispers of memory went silent, but so also did Kate. Cullen blinked his eyes and found himself standing on the ramparts. Sunshine glowed mockingly around him, and the wind whistled over the stones. Kate stared up at him in utter confusion.

“Cullen?”

Cullen opened his mouth to explain himself, but no sound came out. What could he say anyway? “Oh that? That’s just a little residual trauma. Curiously enough, Inquisitor, if you combine a naturally shy young man with a tower full of desire demons and blood mages, he’s bound to come out the other end of that ordeal with all sorts of nightmares and phobias. That’s assuming he survives at all. Yes, I know. Not something one ever forgets, but I manage to repress my way through the years.” He could hardly tell Kate.

Besides, Cullen thought, it wasn’t that he disliked touch. Quite the opposite, really. He liked touch a little too well. It was lack of control that he did not like. And therein lay the problem. Demons of desire and pride did not take. Their prey was sweeter when willing. None of the spirits in Kinloch Hold had bested Cullen or rode his body, but he feared that they’d broken something in him all the same. Cullen could never endure touch without a twinge of fear - without the worry that if he wanted the contact too much, he’d been lost.

One-sided desire, Cullen thought. That was the root of all damnation. If you allowed yourself to want something, then it owned you. Better to accept whatever the Maker granted. The trick was not to want anything at all.

But again, he could not say this. So he said the only thing that he could:

“I’m fine.”

Cullen yanked off his glove, though it took him two tries to do so. He shoved his hand right under Kate’s nose. She jerked back to avoid being smacked by his fingers. “Let’s do this and be done with it.” He knew he was being rude, but right now Cullen couldn’t care.

“Cullen,” Kate said softly, “Look at me.”

He did not, and maybe that was why Kate took his hand in her own. Cullen flinched at the contact, but he did not pull away. To his surprise, Kate’s hands were freezing cold and dry as paper. They felt nothing like the hot, oily claws of his nightmares. Without thinking, Cullen’s fingers curled. Kate squeezed his hand right back.

“We don’t need to do this,” she said. She held his hand as if she was praying around his palm.

“No,” Cullen said. “I…”

He could manage nothing more. Instead, he looked down at their fingers, studying the differences.
Kate’s hands were freckled and slim, covered in new callouses. By contrast, Cullen’s hands were
tanned and rough and crisscrossed with many scars.

“Did they teach you that mages are unclean?” he heard Kate ask. “Because you know that’s just
ignorant superstition. Mages can’t poison you with a touch.”

Cullen looked up at her in surprise. “What?”

“Fade-magics don’t crawl along our skin,” Kate told him. “We don’t have lyrium for blood, or any
such nonsense. Surely you know that.”

“People think that?”

“People think a lot of stupid things.”

“Of course I don’t think that,” Cullen snorted. “I was a templar, not a moron. And it’s nothing to do
with magic. It’s merely that I don’t…” Cullen again tried to find the words to explain himself, and
again came up with nothing.

“Does physical contact cause you pain?” Kate asked him. “Because of the withdrawals, I mean?”

“I… Sort of?”

But not in the way she thought, Cullen added silently. He could still remember the last - the only-
time that Kate had touched his bare skin. After the battle of Haven, she had held his hand for just a
moment. Cullen had felt the heat of her for days after.

“I’m fine,” Cullen insisted, willing it to be so. “And I ought to be checked, oughtn’t I?” he added,
when Kate still looked doubtful. “If the lyrium changed things or broke things…” - Maker forbid - “I
ought to know.”

“I don’t need to touch you,” Kate said, though she still cradled his hand as if it were an injured bird.
“I really don’t.”

“But it would help.”

“It helps me focus, yes,” Kate admitted.

“Then please.” Cullen attempted to smile as he flexed his fingers within her grasp. But Kate
continued to look up at him with concern. Cullen stood there, unsure if he should pull his hand away
or just hold his ground.

“Lyrium gives me odd aches and pains,” he went on. “I’ve gotten jumpy about what might set me
off.” It wasn’t quite a lie, but the truth was far more than he could articulate right now.

“Please excuse me,” he finished. “My worry wasn’t entirely rational.”

“Worry rarely is,” Kate returned. Her slight smile had Cullen relaxing and tensing all at once. On the
one hand, he was relieved that she accepted his explanation. On the other hand, her kindness was as
tempting as touch.

Oh, come now, Cullen thought irritably. He was being ridiculous. Kindness was not a form of
temptation. Besides, this was Kate, not a breast-tassel-wearing demon. She’d offered him a a medical
examination, not a seduction.

“So,” Cullen said, crisply. “Lyrium protocols.”
“Lyrium protocols,” Kate agreed. She sounded a bit flustered, but perhaps that was Cullen’s imagination. With that, Kate turned Cullen’s hand up. Her right hand hovered over his palm, glowing with a faint golden light.

“I’ll try and make this as quick and painless as possible,” Kate told him. “I just want to get a better understanding of what’s going on inside of you, see if the vibration coming from your augmented neural clusters has reversed polarity or if it’s even singing at all. Create a baseline for further observation, if I may.”

“I… Augmented what?”

Alright then. She’d completely lost him. Cullen thought he knew lyrium protocols, but this sounded nothing like his past examinations. And what was this about further observation? Surely Kate wasn’t planning on making a habit of this.

“The vibration of the lyrium… Oh, right. That’s sort of, um, obscure.” Kate’s brows furrowed. “Never mind. I’ll just check you. Without the commentary.”

“I think I’d prefer the commentary,” Cullen said, all seriousness. “If there’s something seriously wrong with me…”

“No, no!” Kate said, looking up at him. “At least, I don’t think so. Not beyond the usual problem of drinking a dangerous foreign substance like lyrium and completely altering your internal predisposition to Fade-song. And, of course, the danger of stopping drinking lyrium and whatever falls out from that. But otherwise… Hmm,” she caught herself and frowned. “Yes, I can see how the commentary might be helpful after all.”

“It might be,” Cullen agreed, trying to keep his tone even. “Perhaps if you explain what you’re on about, it would put my mind at ease.”

Of course, Cullen wasn’t certain if anything could put his mind at ease, not with Kate re-adjusting his hand in her grip. But Kate nodded all the same.

“Alright,” she said. “What I’m trying to check for is…”

But as she spoke, Kate stroked her finger along the inside of Cullen’s wrist. Quite suddenly, Cullen heard a dull roaring in his ears. He felt an inferno sweep through his nerves, as if his body had caught fire and begun to sing all at once. It wasn’t until he managed to take a few breaths that he even realized Kate was looking up at him in alarm.

“Too much?” she asked.

“I… Yeah… Yes.” Cullen swallowed, then looked down at his hands.

“Sorry,” Kate said, “I’ll try again. How’s that?”

The burning had faded to a mere prickle. Cullen almost imagined he could hear a tune in it, but that must have just been the wind. He couldn’t tell if he’d just been swept full of Kate’s magic, or if that had been reaction to her touch. It might have been both, Andraste save him.

“Better,” Cullen said, though that was only partially true. He shifted his feet, trying to plant them more firmly on the stones. Kate looked up at him nervously, then turned her attention back to their hands. The buzzing in his hand became stronger, vibrating up Cullen’s arm. His shoulder ached in response, and Cullen let out a small noise of pain.
“Sorry,” Kate said again, frowning. “Ugh, it’s the iron in your armor. It’s causing an odd echo. There’s a reason mages wear robes in the classroom. You can compensate once you’ve learned the frequency, but otherwise the polarity can backfire if metal is involved.”

“Polarity?” Cullen repeated. That was the second time Kate had used that word. And as much out of curiosity as from a desire to distract himself, he asked: “Is that something to do with my lyrium problem?”

“Maybe?” Kate wrinkled her nose, which only confused him further. For she fell silent and said nothing more.

“I thought you were going to explain what you were doing,” Cullen prompted.

“I’m trying to decide how much to explain,” Kate returned. “Coll and I had to keep all this secret before. Feels odd to even mention it to someone else.”

Cullen frowned. “Keep what secret?” he asked.

“Our research,” Kate said, still inspecting his hand. “I mean, it wasn’t exactly forbidden.”

“Wasn’t exactly forbidden?”

“All right. It wasn’t exactly sanctioned, either. It just…” Kate trailed off, as if trying to make up her mind about something. For a moment, Cullen found himself holding his breath. He wasn’t sure why. After all, it shouldn’t have mattered to him if Kate trusted him with her research or not. And yet, for some reason, it did.

“All right,” Kate said, startling him. “I’ll try and keep it simple, but this… It’s just… This is my theory, you understand?”

Cullen didn’t understand. For Kate had said ‘my theory’ in the way a mother might say ‘my baby.’ But he tried to nod encouragingly. Kate looked around, as if someone might be standing nearby. Even though they were alone on the ramparts, she leaned forward and lowered her voice.

“Coll and I theorize,” Kate said, and Cullen had to lean forward to hear her, “that the Veil is really a kind of vibration.”

“Um…” He tried to think of something suitable to say, and could not. He opted for honesty instead. “There are other mages who think the same,” he told her.

“Yes,” Kate agreed eagerly. “But we’ve made some additional developments that… Have you ever read Leonardo of Vincinium?”

Kate asked this last question more loudly. Cullen drew back, startled by the sudden change of topic.

“The Tevinter inventor?”

“That’s the one! There was a book of his in the Trevelyan house library. My old tutor was quite taken with his writings on dragons - the wing construction and so on. But Leonardo also had theories on why dragon roars might be heard from miles away. He theorizes - Leonardo, that is, not Master Frederic - He theorizes that sound travels in waves.”

As Kate said this, her eyes lit up. For some reason, Cullen felt an answering thrill inside of him. It might have been that Kate’s excitement was catching. Or it might have been that she absently traced her finger along his wrist again.
“Waves?” he said, trying to focus on her words.

“Like on the ocean,” Kate said. “I quite forgot about those writings, until years and years later. When Coll arrived at the Ostwick tower, she smuggled in this old Dalish, er… theory. The ancient elves also thought of sound as a kind of wave. More than that, they suggested that the Veil itself was made of waves.”

“The Veil is a kind of ocean?”

“Not quite. The elves referred to the Veil as ‘sulahn-manen’. Please excuse my elven, Coll mocks my pronunciation endlessly. ‘Singing-sea’ is the closest translation we could puzzle out. Might be ‘singing waters’ or ‘singing waves’? Ugh, we must have gone over that passage a hundred times. Of course, in another passage, it reads ‘soulen-manen’ - ‘lightning-waves’. Not certain what lightning has to do with sea outside of storms. It might be allegorical. The point is, we worked out from the text that the Veil pushes the Fade away somehow. Repels it, in fact. Sort of like how a lodestone pushes away another lodestone.”

“Lodestone?” Cullen frowned. “So the Veil is like a magnet in a compass?”

“No, no. The Veil is like the um…’ Kate held her hands out, acting as if she was trying to press her palms together, but could not do so. “The Veil is the pushy-away thing. The sulahn-manen. Maker, we need to work on better vocabulary for this model, don’t we? Think of it this way: the Veil is like the force between two lodestones set wrong-end together. It’s the thing that keeps them apart. Only instead of pushing iron from iron, the Veil pushes the Fade away. With song.”

“The Veil pushes the Fade away with song,” Cullen repeated.

“Sound waves, more accurately. This is all very much theory at this point,” Kate added, resting her hands on Cullen’s once again. She did not inspect him, however, but seemed to just be holding his hand out of habit now. Evidently she’d forgotten all about the examination in light of her theory. Cullen didn’t bother to remind her about the lyrium protocols, however. He found he liked the pressure of her hand on his.

“The practical upshot,” Kate went on, “is that the Veil sings in one direction, and mages sing in the opposite direction. Put it another way, a mage’s Fade-polarity allows her to draw Fade-energy across the Veil.”

“So the Veil isn’t a magnet, but mages are?”

“Er, yes? I suppose that’s one way to look at it. More accurately, lyrium is the magnet and it all depends on which way you point it. Lyrium has a kind of hum - Fade-resonant or Fade-dissonant. And I think - even though I can’t prove it just yet - but I think that the sound waves and the magic are interrelated. And that’s what allows mages to cast magic - lyrium’s hum.”

“But mages can do magic without lyrium,” Cullen pointed out. “After all, they don’t let apprentices have draughts until they’ve been Harrowed.”

“Ah!” Kate said, holding up her finger in an ‘ah-ha!’ sort of gesture. “But can mages do magic without lyrium?” She looked at Cullen expectantly.

“Uh… yes?”

“No!” Kate said, triumphantly. “How could they? How could anyone? And this is where my Veil-theory meets Coll’s anatomy studies! Coll theorizes that mages have tiny bits of lyrium all throughout our body - far too small to be seen or even felt by all but the most attuned of healers. ‘Bio-nodes’ she
called them - or was it ‘biotic-nodes?’ She needs to work on her vocabulary as well. I preferred ‘crystalline nervous-cluster lyrium deposits,’ but Coll says that’s too wordy. But this is her area of the research, so she won that debate…”

“Hang on,” Cullen interrupted. “Mages have lyrium in their veins? Didn’t you just say a few minutes ago that that’s just ignorant superstition?”

“No, no,” Kate shook her head. “Mages having lyrium for blood - that’s ignorant superstition. Mages having a lyrium-mutated nervous system that’s attuned to the polarity of the Fade and can reach across the Fade-dissonance of the Veil? Absolutely. That’s our working theory, after all. Unfortunately, there are some holes when it comes to explaining…”

“I’m sorry,” Cullen said, holding up his free hand. “I’m not sure I follow. I did take magical theory,” he added, lest Kate think him simple. He refrained from adding that he’d gotten top marks in the class. “You’ve got lyrium in your blood - er, nerves. Whatever. And the Veil as an ocean of song? This isn’t quite how they speak of it in Chantry.“

“No, it’s not,” Kate said, wryly. “The Chantry prefers to speak in the language of judgment and punishment and unhelpful fabric metaphors. But I find such semantics do little to promote proficiency in the magical arts. The Veil is real enough. The Fade is real enough. It stands to reason that they can be studied and understood. If the Maker did create it all, one would expect him to do so in the most elegant manner possible. That’s what good artists do, yes? So it stands to reason he would use the simplest tools in the most varied manner. Thus, we suspect that lyrium is the root of it all - the source of the song.”

“They do say that lyrium is the waters of the Maker’s creation,” Cullen agreed.

“Yes!” Kate said, squeezing Cullen’s hand as her eyes lit up again. “Yes, they do, don’t they? Water… waves. I wonder. Maybe there is some truth to the metaphors after all. Andraste’s tears. Now I’ll have go back and re-read the Canticle of Threnodies…”

“So then lyrium is some sort of humming lodestone?” Cullen tried not to be distracted by the way that Kate was still holding onto him like they’d stopped mid-handshake. “Templars drink a kind of magical magnet?”

“More or less,” Kate said, looking up at him seriously. “That’s how the lyrium shifts your internal neural polarity.”

“It does what to my what?”

“Oh, sorry,” Kate said. “That’s… Now be warned, this gets into Coll’s end of the theory, and she’s always correcting my explanations. But if you get her going on this subject she’s likely to rattle off in elven and completely forget to translate for you. What Coll worked out is that… Well, the simplified version is that Coll spent a lot of time volunteering in the Ostwick infirmary. That’s how she got a reputation as a healer. More accurately speaking however, she’s a anatomist. She always preferred it when she got called in to work on corpses. Oh dear, that sounds grisly. What I mean is that she likes to be able to poke about in people’s nervous system without them complaining. Hmm… That didn’t sound much better.”

“That explains her bedside manner,” Cullen said, dryly.

“Yes, it does, doesn’t it?” Kate laughed. “But for all her nettlesome ways, Coll is very good at what she does. She sensed right off that I had something odd about my nerves. That’s why she wanted to study me in the first place.”
“Your nerves are odd?”

“After I survived…” Kate cringed. “Actually, I was never a strong mage. But I learned to be a subtle one. Coll says that a dancer is just as powerful as a berserker in her own way. Of course, that was before this mark got in the way and fouled up my magic.” Kate glared at her left hand accusingly.

“I thought you were casting rather well,” Cullen offered.

“That’s kind of you to say. The truth is, I’ve been stumbling all over the place. Like an apprentice learning every spell all over again. The truly annoying thing about this mark,” Kate added with a frown, “Is that it completely undermined at least half of my Veil-theory just by existing. It isn’t Fade-harmonious nor Fade-discordant. It’s like nothing we’ve ever seen. Not that we’ve got time for research, what with all the missions going on. And I do beg your pardon. Here I am, getting long-winded and off-topic. I’ve completely forgotten to check you.”

“It’s quite alright,” Cullen said.

“My point in all of this,” Kate said, as she turned her attention back to Cullen’s hand, “is that lyrium is the source of all magic. Thus, we theorize that there must be lyrium present in the body of any magic user. In mages, this must be some sort of natural mutation. Hm,” Kate cocked her head.

“Natural mutation. How’s that for an oxymoron? But it’s true. Lyrium gives us mages a kind of additional sense. Like hearing with your body - and singing with your body, too.”

“Singing with your, um, body?”

Cullen tried not to imagine himself singing along with Kate’s body. It didn’t help that she chose that moment to gently brush her fingers across his hand again. Cullen felt an answering melody thrum in his blood. Whether it was magic or desire, he could not tell.

“Not every mages feels magic like that,” Kate went on, though Cullen was only half-listening. “And many of them don’t even bother to learn proper magical theory. But then, an opera singer might have no understanding of sound-waves, yet she could belt out an aria. And by all accounts, Leonardo himself couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket. Theory and application of the theory are worlds apart.”

Cullen wondered if Kate was referring to herself in this metaphor. But before he could ask this, she went on: “Either way. A mage’s lyrium growth is natural in its origin. A templar’s growth, however? That’s completely artificial.”

Cullen drew himself up. “My growth?”

“The growth of lyrium within you,” Kate said, as if he should have been following this. “By taking draughts as you do, templars build up Fade-discordant lyrium in their nerve endings. You’ve turned the lodestone around, so to speak.”

“What, so I’m a magnet now? The south to your north?”

“Er, no. That would mean we were attracted to one another. Magically speaking, that is,” Kate added, flushing.


“In lodestones, yes. And in magic, too. Coll and I theorize – well, no. Coll’s confirmed it. By taking lyrium in prescribed doses, templars effectively turn themselves into walking Veils.”

“Walking Veils?” Cullen repeated. “That’s how you see me? A walking Veil?”
“That’s not how I see you,” Kate frowned. “That’s just… Look. What I meant to say - through all my twists and turns - is that the Veil - that soulen-sulahn-manen - is a kind of hum or vibration. Lyrium likewise hums. Mages have lyrium in their bodies that hums in such a way to attract energy through the Veil. Templars have lyrium in their bodies that hums so as to reinforce the Veil and keep Fade-energy from getting through. And there you are. Eight years of research in a nutshell. Maker’s breath.”

“That’s…” Cullen paused there. How did one respond to all that? Kate had gone rather still, as waiting to hear what he would say in reply.

“That’s interesting,” he said.

“Is it?” Kate asked, “Or are you just saying that?”

“No, it’s interesting,” Cullen assured her. Mostly heretical, but interesting. “So,” he went on, “This is why you wanted to check me? Because of your research?”

“Oh, no!” Kate said, eyes widening. “No, I’m not trying to use you for some sort of experiment. Good Maker, I wouldn’t want you to think that. No, no,” she shook her head. “I just wanted to check you because, well…”

“You think I still have traces of lyrium inside of me.” Cullen did not like that idea one bit.

“Traces?” Kate looked confused. “There’s no ‘trace’ about it. The lyrium draughts have swollen all your nerve endings. After a decade of use, the bio-nodes must be in a rather advanced stage of mutation. That is, they ought to be, if I could get a proper read on them.”

“I… Swollen… Bio… What?” Cullen could scarcely choke out his astonishment.

Kate made a face. “Maker’s breath. This is why I tend to write things out before I say them. The words sound perfectly logical in my head, but I don’t always realize how they’ll be heard on the other end. I do beg your pardon. I should have said that sustained lyrium intake will eventually coat a templar’s nerves in a kind of lyrium paint, causing a sort of mutation in the nerve clusters that mimics a mage’s… Ah. That’s not an improvement, is it?”

It wasn’t. Cullen felt like the bottom of his stomach had dropped out. He stared down at Kate as she held her glowing palms out over hands.

“No one. Ever told me. Any of this.” Cullen couldn’t quite keep the rage from his voice.

“I know,” Kate said, softly.

“Maker’s breath,” he cursed. Cullen wanted to run his right hand through his hair, but Kate was holding onto it. He tried smoothing back his hair with his left hand instead, but that felt quite awkward.

“So this lyrium,” Cullen demanded. “It’s humming inside of me?”

“Do you hear the hum?” Kate wanted to know. She looked up in interest.

Cullen considered that. “I used to,” he said. “It was more like a song. A battle-march, really. At times it was so familiar I thought it was my own heartbeat. But it’s gone now. Instead, I hear a buzzing, or just an echoing quiet. I don’t like the quiet.”

That was an understatement. The moments of silence reminded Cullen of those awful times he’d
spent in solitary confinement. Odd whispers came hissing in his ears then. It was like being haunted by ghosts. Only the voices seemed to come from inside his own head. He preferred the throb of the headaches to that misery.

“But I keep myself busy,” Cullen assured Kate, for she was looking up at him with concern. “The noise of the troops drowns out the quiet.”

Kate didn’t look comforted by that. Her lips thinned, and she said:

“So, are you hearing it now?” There seemed to be a strange emphasis on the question.

“Why?” Cullen asked.

“Well, it’s um…” Kate shook her head. “I may be setting my magic to the wrong vibration. I’ve never met a templar who was off the draught for more than a day or so. In a normal templar - er, in a templar on lyrium, I mean - the lyrium in you would be humming loudly with Veil-song. At worst, we’d find a dull, quiet spot in the system. But if you give a templar the right amount of lyrium, the song starts right up again. With you, I’ve got nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Not yet. It might just be a fluke. Or I’m not finding the right pitch. May I check your legs?”

“My legs?” Cullen started, but Kate had already knelt before his boots. He sucked in a breath, trying to process two thoughts at once: one, that he had some sort of dead-lyrium-paint-magnet stuck inside his body. And two: Kate’s face was mere inches from his crotch. Not that she seemed interested in his crotch, Cullen thought. She seemed far more interested in running her glowing palms down the outside of his legs. That, too, was extremely disconcerting.

“Hmmm…” Kate said, scowling. “I don’t… Oh, there it is. Found it. I’d accounted for the iron, but not the leather. Residual life force and all that. Ought to have had you strip down after all. Wait. What the Void…?”

Cullen hardly registered the word ‘strip.’ At the moment, he felt a tingling in his legs, like the sensation when one’s foot fell asleep. Only in this case, the tingling shot up his leg and into his arm. Cullen gripped the wall beside him to maintain his balance.

“What in Andraste’s name is going on in there?” Kate murmured. The tingling sensation raced through Cullen’s fingers now. “Either someone gave you draughts in the most erratic manner possible, or your neural clusters are entirely falling apart.”

“Or both,” Cullen choked out.

“Good Maker, I guess so,” Kate muttered. She went back to running her hands down his legs.

“So,” Cullen said, the better to distract himself from both Kate’s touch and his own worry, “Do you often check templars in this way?”

The question sounded much stupider once it left his mouth. But Kate shook her head, eyes focused on his knees.

“Never done anything like this,” she replied, absentely. “Lyrium protocols tend to be less exploratory. Er.. You know what I mean. But if I’m understanding this right….”

Kate shot back to her feet, so quickly that she almost hit Cullen’s nose with her forehead.
“Here. Hands again,” she said. She yanked Cullen’s hands forward, placing her palms directly over his. He still wore one glove, but Kate didn’t seem to care. Cullen felt power radiating up his arms, and hissed at the burning sensation of it.

“Oh, sorry,” Kate winced. The power faded a little, but Cullen still felt singed.

“Sorry, sorry,” she muttered, as she traced her hand along his palm. “I’m getting careless in my haste. But wasn’t looking deep enough at first. I thought the song would be pitched higher. But it dropped in register.”

“Dropped?” Cullen asked. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but he still asked: “Dropped how?”

“From tenor to baritone,” Kate said, frowning. “Magically speaking, I mean. It used to be here,” she wiggled her finger in the air beside her head, as if drawing a wave in the air. “And now it’s here.” She wiggled her finger down by her waist. “Or… Maker. Vocabulary. I need words. What I think is happening is… No,” she shook her head. “I shouldn’t throw about theories until I know for certain.”

“Go right on ahead and theorize,” Cullen told her.

“I’m prone to do that,” she said, wryly. “A proper healer wouldn’t say a thing until she knew. But so long as we’re talking like fellow researchers, here’s my worry: Lyrium gives templars their Fade-dissonant powers. Your resistance to magic, your ability to dampen magic. Yet you haven’t taken lyrium in eight months. So what do the lyrium mutations do when they’re not fed a regular draught? Could it be that the neural growth just dies? Or does it wilt? Or does it fuse with your body and try to sustain itself? Some kind of blood magic, feeding off of your insides?”

Cullen must have made a strangled sound, for Kate looked up at once.

“I… Maker. I did it again. Please ignore me.”

Cullen shook his head. “I’m not about to ignore you,” he said. “If the lyrium is using my body to… to…”

“To keep singing its magic at this peculiar pitch? I’m not sure if that’s what it’s doing or not. But don’t worry,” Kate said hurriedly. “There are ways of surviving this. I’ll make sure you survive this. May I check with a little more force? This might sting a little.”

Cullen nodded. At this point, he’d strip to his small clothes if he thought it would give him some answers. So he tried not to flinch when Kate stepped closer and pressed a hand to his belly. Cullen felt like all the blood in his body rushed south of that hand. At the same time, a bright, burning sensation flooded his stomach, and a ringing sound filled his head. Cullen swallowed and willed himself not to step away. Maker’s breath. It felt like Kate had stuck a Chantry-bell over his head and set the bell ringing.

“So all of my withdrawals symptoms,” Cullen blinked, as his eyes had started watering, “All the symptoms of all templars in general - that’s just lyrium trying to… to live off of me? Like a leech?”

“Maybe?” Kate said. Her voice rang oddly through the noise in his head. “I don’t know. Again, I’ve never met a templar who stopped taking lyrium. I do know that once lyrium begins to build up around the brain, that’s the final stages. Coll and I suspected…”

Kate stopped there, but she didn’t have to finish that thought. Cullen finished it for her:

“That’s what makes us go mad in the end?”
“That’s the theory,” Kate said with a grimace. Mercifully, the ringing in Cullen’s head subsided. Sadly, that did nothing for the cold dread settling inside of Cullen’s chest.

“But I don’t think we need to worry just yet,” Kate told him. “I mean, I’ll check your brain in a moment, but… Oh, my. There’s that bruise you got from Morris.”

“He got me good, didn’t he?” Cullen snorted.

“And he struck one of the places where the lyrium is still ringing,” Kate observed, running her hands along the side of Cullen’s ribs. “Huh. That’s a loud spot. I wonder…”

Whatever she wondered, she didn’t say. Instead, she set her hands over Cullen’s breastplate. The golden glow reflected off the iron, shining back on Kate’s face.

“You wonder?” Cullen prompted after a moment. He tried to ignore that the prickling sensations had resumed.

“Oh?” Kate said, as if she’d half forgotten she’d been speaking. “Nothing. Are there any other aches or symptoms you can think of?”

“Dozens,” Cullen replied. He found he could breathe a little easier now that Kate held her hands over his armor. From here, the magic was a mere pressure, and he could not actually feel the touch of Kate’s hands.

“Such as?” Kate prompted.

“Headaches, back pains - lower back is the worst. Shoulder aches, but that’s the life of a soldier. There’s always some ache. And the withdrawals are… bad. But I don’t want to complain.”

“You’re not complaining,” Kate said, glancing up at him. “You’re telling me what’s going on.”

“But I hardly know what’s going on,” Cullen said, not even sure where to start. “It’s not the presence of pain so much as the absence of the lyrium. I just feel… empty.”

Kate paused, her fingers curling slightly as she drew her hands back from his chest. “Empty in what way?”

“Just… empty.”

Cullen tried to find words, throwing out the first ones that came to mind: “You want lyrium. Food tastes too thick. Water tastes too thin. The silence at night is too quiet and the roar of conversation is too loud. It’s like you have something comforting there for years, and now you have to live with its absence. And the absence is a presence. I’m sorry, that makes no sense.”

“That makes some sense,” Kate said.

“No, it doesn’t, but it’s kind of you to say so.”

“I wasn’t just being kind.”

“Anyhow, it’s uncomfortable, but I’ve managed to go on.”

Painfully, resignedly, and in spite of unrelenting strain, Cullen added silently. But yes, he’d gone on. “And there are some upsides,” he added. “I don’t need as much food now.”
“Because you forget to eat.” Kate glanced over at the abandoned tea tankards on the wall.

“Yes, well, alright. But that just means I don’t have as much of an appetite,” he said, determined to wipe that worry from her face. “Some appetites are gone, others have returned. Like…”

He broke off there, not wanting to say what appetites had returned. But unfortunately, Kate pressed:

“What appetites?”

“Er, it’s nothing.”

“What appet… Oh.”

Kate blinked. Then her eyes flicked down to the font of his trousers.

“No,” Cullen choked out. “That’s not… I mean, yes. Lyrium suppresses emotion and desire, but it doesn’t render templars *entirely* impotent. I wouldn’t want you to think… Not that you *do* think… And not that I couldn’t,” he added, not sure why he felt compelled to clarify. “Given the right ratio of lyrium to ale, I found… Not that I often… Nearly never, really. It was just harder… Er, not harder. That was the trouble. I never woke hard. But now mornings are harder… Not harder!” he nearly shouted, when Kate’s mouth dropped open. “More difficult. Mornings are more difficult, I mean… Er, you know what I mean.”

Evidently Kate knew exactly what he meant. Her eyes had gone round as saucers, and Cullen felt as though his face was on fire.

“No,” Cullen thought in mortification. He had not meant to take this discussion down this particular path. He certainly had not meant to reveal that he woke most mornings with a painful erection. He would much rather keep that mortifying fact to himself. He would rather deal with it himself, too.

Dealt with it just this morning, Cullen thought. With military precision, no less. One of the more challenging aspects of his desire-related hangups was trying to take care of his physical urges. It was no small feat to avoid fantasizing and to get off at the same time. Especially when a certain Veil-theorist figured prominently in his thoughts.

Best not to think of that, Cullen decided. Best not to think on any of that. He cleared his throat, hoping to clear his mind as well.

“You were checking me for lyrium,” he reminded Kate in clipped tones. “Are you done?”

Kate jolted. “I, oh… Not quite.” Her voice squeaked. “It just need to check your back.”

“Must you?” Cullen asked.

“Well if you want me to make certain that the lyrium hasn’t calcified within your spinal column, then yes,” Kate said, matching his tone.

“I… Right,” Cullen said.
He probably ought to apologize for snapping at her - or for giving her such an inappropriate insight into his morning schedule. But as he couldn't manage speech just now, Cullen said nothing.

Kate ducked around behind him and began bobbing around behind his back. Now that he couldn’t see her, Cullen felt even more exposed. For one moment, he felt nothing. Then Kate’s hands were pressing at his sides, and he felt a melting sensation in his lower ribs.

“So,” Kate said, a moment later. “That thing about lyrium and, um,… certain appetites.”

Cullen cringed in dread. “Yes?” he asked.

“The Chantry should have put that on the recruitment posters. No one would have signed up to guard mages after hearing that. Would have saved us the trouble of this whole mage-templar war, don’t you think?”

Cullen laughed, but sound came out loud and somewhat strangled. At least Kate was willing to make a joke of it. They were silent for a minute more, until Kate muttered:

“Oh, well that’s not good.”

“What?”

“Inflammation in the joints,” Kate replied. “Blood composition isn’t quite normal, either. It’s like your body thinks you’ve got a fever.”

“I’m cold most days,” Cullen admitted.

“That would explain the fur mantle.”

Cullen couldn’t tell if that was a joke as well, or not.

“Lyrium is singing more loudly in your right shoulder,” Kate went on. “How odd. It’s like someone poured lyrium into your veins there by the bucketful, rather than brushing it on coat by coat.”

“That would explain the ache,” Cullen said, turning his head as if he might actually see the glowing lyrium inside of his body. Of course, all he saw was his own furred mantle and the top of Kate’s head. Then, quite suddenly, Cullen felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his lower back. It was like someone had run him through with a sword.

“Ah!” he cried, reaching out to catch himself on the wall. “Void take it!”

“Oh, Maker, I’m so sorry!” Kate said. She raced around to his front, then placed her hand on his belly. As she did so, a coolness swept through his middle, rather like water on a burn wound.

“Sorry, sorry. I’m so sorry,” Kate said. “Blast it. I’m not as talented as Coll, that’s for certain.”

“It’s alright,” Cullen said, though the words came through gritted teeth. He still couldn’t quite stand up straight. “You’re kinder with your words, if not with your magic.”

Kate clearly didn’t find that funny. “I’m so sorry,” she said again.

“It’s fine,” Cullen grunted as he drew himself up to full height. “Just what did you do to me?”

“Found a knot of lyrium,” Kate said, frowning. “A broken up chunk of it, right at the base of your spine.”
Well *that* didn’t sound good. But Cullen tried to be stoic about it.

“Explains the back pains,” he grunted. Kate continued to press her hand to his stomach. She looked worried, and her expression had Cullen straightening at once.

“What’s wrong?” he wanted to know.

“The lyrium chunk is singing to itself,” she said.

Cullen frowned. “Is that bad?”

“I don’t know.” Kate winced. “Oh, Maker, that’s going to be my litany for the morning: ‘I don’t know.’ But I don’t know. I’ve never felt anyone like you before. Oh, um… That didn’t come out right.”

“I understand,” Cullen said.

“May I check your head?”

Kate scrunched up her face as she asked this, as if she was worried about what she might find. Cullen was worried as well, but he nodded. Kate raised her hands to just above his shoulders, her hands on either side of his ears. It was as if his head was a crystal ball, and Kate was trying to scry his future. Only crystal balls did not blush, Cullen mused. And he was certain he was still red in the face. Thankfully, Kate closed her eyes, so she didn’t see Cullen’s uneasy expression. This near to her, Cullen could see the veins in her eyelids.

As she searched in silence, something seemed to shift in Cullen’s chest. He felt a tendril-like fluttering just over his heart. It might have been Kate’s magic. Or it might have been attraction. Or maybe it was just panic. Right now, Cullen couldn’t tell the difference between those three.

Without warning, Kate laid her left hand on his right upper arm, and squeezed slightly. Her right hand curled around his neck, fingers threading in his hair. Cullen sucked in a breath, his arms gone limp at his sides.

“Um, Kate?”

But Kate didn’t respond. She now drew her hand downward, thumb at the base of his throat.

*Oh dear Maker,* Cullen thought. He felt as if he couldn’t breathe. Kate’s nails were at his neck, and every instinct had him wanting to run in the other direction.

*Come then, templar. We can smell the need on you…*

Cullen held his breath and drew back.

“Hold still, Cullen,” Kate said. Her annoyance sounded nothing like the demons of his memory. And perversely, her show of temper made Cullen relax. Certainly a desire demon wouldn’t be so prickly.

“This isn’t terribly comfortable,” he returned, equally annoyed.

Kate said nothing. Instead, her fingers teased along the back of his neck, up over his hair, and grazed the tips of his ears.

Alright then, Cullen thought. He’d made his judgment too soon. This felt rather seductive after all.

*Not a trap, not a prison…* he reminded himself. Kate continued to run her fingers through his hair.
“Kate…” he said, when the stroking became too much to bear.

“Sorry,” Kate said, not sounding sorry at all. “But really, this isn’t what I expected. The lyrium song should be harmonious. But it’s not. It’s all…”

“All what?” Cullen asked.

“Off,” she scowled.

She stroked her fingers forward from his neck, along the sides of his jaw, and down his throat. Cullen felt all the blood in his body answer that touch, the hot, pounding chant following call of her fingers.

“Shit! I wish I had something to compare this to.”

Coming from Kate’s lips, the expletive sounded like an explosion. Cullen stumbled back, and Kate let him go this time. She pressed her fingers together over her mouth, thinking hard. Cullen used the distance to try and regain some of his composure. It was just lyrium protocols, he reminded himself. True, they were the most intimate protocols he’d even enjoyed, but still.

“So?” he prompted when he regained speech. “How bad is it?”

“I don’t know,” Kate said, irritably, “If you’d gotten a healer to check you at the beginning, I might know more.”

“Well, I can’t help you there,” Cullen said, matching her tone.

“You’re right,” Kate said, holding up a hand, as if to stop both Cullen and herself from fighting. “You’re right. And it’s… Well, what’s done is done, isn’t it? Here’s what I know now. And it’s not much,” she added.

Alright,” Cullen prompted.

“What I know,” Kate said, “is that normally, lyrium intake would build up a neural augmentation within you. It ought to have grown quite regularly, and it ought to be set at a particular cadence, tone, and pitch. Compared with the usual Fade-discordant song of templars, however, your insides are much more… messy.”

“You don’t have to be polite, Kate,” Cullen said. “It sounds a great deal worse than ‘messy’.”

“Fair enough. You’ve got a disastrous cacophony of discordant vibrations going on throughout your body and your nerves are taking the brunt of the noise. You’ve got inflammation all through the spinal zone, lyrium bits flaking off through your hands and feet and even some lyrium calcified along the lower ribs. And then there the matter of that loose singing bit in your lower back. Some of the lyrium seems dead and quiet, but some of it is grafted to your primary nervous system, and that bitch Meredith was either completely incompetent or a monster or both, because your draughts were obviously of poor quality as well as erratically administered. As for whether any of this is an improvement on your condition eight months ago? I have no idea.”

“No one will accuse you of pulling punches,” Cullen said dryly. “Is there any hope for me then?”

“Plenty,” Kate returned. “Because if we were going off of lyrium protocol manuals, you’d be dead and insane and dead again. According to the textbook, you’re a walking miracle.”

“Forgive me if I don’t find that diagnosis terribly encouraging,” Cullen said.
“Yes, but we’re not going off the textbook, now are we?” Kate said. “We’re going off of Coll and my theories. How’s that for encouraging?”

Cullen’s expression must have answered that question, for Kate frowned.

“Well, I’m trying,” she said. “There are three scenarios as I see it: A good one, a not-so-good one, and a bad one. I think the good one…”

“What’s the bad one?” Cullen interrupted.

“You want to start with the bad one?” Kate blinked.

“I’d like to be prepared,” Cullen told her.

Kate gave him a strange look - half amused, half-pitying, then said: “It might be that the neural mutations in your body cannot survive without lyrium to sustain them. And so…” She didn’t seem to be able to finish that thought.

“So I die,” Cullen concluded.

Maker. Somehow, knowing how his body would die was much worse than suspecting that it might.

“You die,” Kate agreed. “But I don’t think… Cullen, don’t look so panicked. I don’t think…”

“Is that likely?” Cullen demanded. That was the important question.

“I think madness would set in first,” Kate answered. “Give us fair warning.”

Cullen snorted.

“Yes, I know, that’s not very reassuring. But that’s the worst scenario. In the best case…”

“What’s the not-so-good-scenario?”

“You really want to work your way from worst to best? Alright. The second best scenario is that the lyrium never goes away. It lingers within you, perhaps fusing more fully with your body, perhaps breaking down and floating about inside. Either way, it remains. It might be that your body adjusts to the disharmony, somewhat, but it’s also possible that the lyrium hum will continue to cause you discomfort. If Coll and I…”

Cullen didn’t quite hear her next words. Suddenly, it seemed there wasn’t enough air in his lungs. It was one thing to face a single headache, or a persistent discomfort in his back. But to face this relentless pain and need for the rest of his life?

Cullen felt like the ramparts had started spinning.

”…Elfroot potions or some such,” Kate was saying. “Coll would know. But again, that’s still not the best scenario. It’s… Cullen, did you hear me?”

“What?” he looked down at her.

“I was saying that the best case is that your body returns to harmony. Either the lyrium stabilizes in its resonance, or, better yet, your body breaks down all traces of lyrium within you, and passes them.”

“Passes them how?” Cullen asked, cautiously. “Like a kidney stone?”
“Let’s hope it’s somewhat less painful, but yes, that’s what I was thinking. The polarity reverses itself and you’re back to normal. As if you’d never taken the stuff.”

Cullen felt hope rise within him, bright and sweet. “Is that possible?”

“It might be,” Kate said, though she sounded doubtful. Cullen felt as though that hope-bubble had burst. Cold reality sunk in.

“So I face pain that doesn’t end, pain that ends, or death.” Cullen ticked the possibilities off on his fingers, one by one. “My chances are one in three.”

“You did ask for the truth,” Kate reminded him.

“So I did.”

“But there’s reason to think you’ll beat the odds,” Kate went on. “Your lymph nodes are inflamed. Here, feel them.”

She took Cullen’s fingers and pressed them to the underside of his jaw. At first he wasn’t sure what she was on about, but then he felt something that hurt when he pressed at it. There was a sort of lump along his throat on either side. Kate looked up at him with an encouraging smile. “You see?”

“This is a good thing?”

“That’s your lymphatic system. It regulates the… Never mind. Yes, that’s a good thing. Swollen lymph nodes suggest that your body is trying to break down the lyrium. It looks like we’re on the best path.”

“But wouldn’t that chunk at the base of my spine suggest that the lyrium is ready to break me down as well? I rather worry I’m going the other way.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Kate said. “You’ve made it this far. And I’m going to do everything I can to make certain you get better, not worse.”

“And yet, the process of lyrium addiction has never been reversed,” Cullen said, voicing his worst doubt.

“Not yet,” Kate agreed. “But then, no one else has gotten eight months into the process and lived to tell about it, now have they? At least not that I’ve ever heard of. You may be a first in many things, Cullen.”

“I don’t want to be an experiment,” he scowled. “Maker’s breath, I don’t even want… I just want to be a man again. A normal man. But this…”

What was wrong with him, Cullen wondered? Kate was optimistic. So why was he feeling so resentful and cold?

Because this is harder, Cullen thought. Before, he didn’t know if he’d die the next morning, or fight on for another day. Now it seemed he would fight on - and the fight would be far longer than he’d anticipated.

“Hey,” Kate said. She stepped close to him, placed a hand on his shoulder. Evidently she could read much of his fear in his face. When Cullen wouldn’t look at her, she gave him a little shake.

“You got this far, Cullen. You’re not dead. I mean, your lyrium system is partially dead. And singing
off-key. Or maybe it’s was never properly tuned to begin with. But it’s not so bad.”

Cullen had to laugh at her words. “Not so bad?” he repeated.

“Oh,” she said. “Yes, that sounded worse once I said it aloud. Sorry. I’m not being much help.”

“No,” Cullen hastened to assure her. He placed a hand on her arm in return. “No, you’ve been lovely. I’m just so…” He sighed.

“I’m so tired.”

“Of course,” Kate said, looking up at him. “Maker’s breath, of course you are.”

And then, for some strange reason, Kate wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him.

Cullen had not expected it. So he stood there, entirely shocked. Kate’s breasts were crushed to his chest, though he couldn’t feel the softness of them through his breastplate. He could feel the heat of her, however, and the temperature was enough to make him burn inside. Cullen swallowed hard, not sure what to do. But curiously, the demon-hisses from his memory remained silent. Maybe they were as shocked as he. Maybe they didn’t know what to make of this. Perhaps they didn’t know how to pervert a friendly hug. Or maybe he’d just gotten lucky for once.

Cullen waited a moment. The hug still felt comfortable. His head still remained quiet. And so, awkwardly - very awkwardly - he allowed himself to wrap his arms around Kate in return. He kept his touch feather-light, as if Kate was a dwarven explosive and the slightest jostle might set her off. Kate made a sound in her throat - a little hum, Cullen realized - and she squeezed him more tightly around the middle. Cullen sucked in a breath, but he did not pull away. He did hope that Kate would not notice that he hadn’t been lying about certain functions resuming. One particular function had resumed in his trousers just now.

Then they just… stood there. The breeze whistled overhead and a crow cawed in the distance. Kate’s head was just below Cullen’s nose, and he could smell her hair. She smelled wonderful. Cullen couldn’t quite place the scent, but it seemed familiar. Incense, maybe? It reminded him of cold mornings in the Chantry chapel. She also smelled of wind, that kind of scent people have when they’ve been walking around outdoors in the cold. Kate squeezed him once more, and then she pulled back. She looked up at Cullen and smiled. She didn’t let go of him, and Cullen didn’t let go either. Instead, a faint thought began stirring in the back of his mind:

This felt right, he thought. This wasn’t one-sided want. This was acceptance. Cullen accepted Kate’s smile, just as he accepted the sunlight, accepted this embrace, accepted the cool breeze on his face and the merciful relief from the whispers of demon-memory. And he accepted the fact that Kate fit in his arms quite well. He also accepted the fact that Kate had the most inviting mouth that Cullen had ever seen. Her lips looked full and soft. He’d noticed that before, but it occurred to him that he’d never really investigated this phenomenon. He wasn’t sure if appearance matched reality in that regard. Now, he was curious.

If he’d been thinking more clearly, Cullen might have questioned the way everything seemed to shift. He might have questioned the sudden look of interest in Kate’s eyes. But in that moment, the only thought that occurred to him was that this embrace felt safe, and it felt comfortable, and so he leaned toward Kate. Her lips parted. Cullen’s heartbeat sped up. He bent his head, Kate’s chest rose on a breath…

Kate let out a gasp. She lurched back from Cullen, breaking out of his embrace. Cullen let her go, and his arms fell slack to his sides. The air felt shockingly cold around him. His body felt shockingly
warm inside of his armor. Meanwhile, Kate folded her arms over her chest and looked around wildly, as if she couldn’t quite figure out how she’d gotten up here, standing on the ramparts with a man who’d just tried to kiss her.

_Holy Maker._ He’d just tried to kiss her.

Thought and guilt returned to Cullen in a flash. Sweet Andraste save him. He’d almost kissed her. He’d almost kissed _Kate._ The Inquisitor. Right up there on the ramparts, with no one to stop him or warn him that this was a stupid idea, or that he surely risked his heart…

_No, no_, Cullen told himself. He hadn’t tried to kiss Kate. He’d just held her for a moment too long. And he’d looked at her mouth for a moment too long. It was an honest mistake. He hadn’t actually meant to…

Alright, fine. He’d meant to. Even now, the fantasy was tormenting him. All Cullen could imagine was him and Kate, back in that embrace, doing far more interesting things than lyrium protocols.

“I, um… I’m sorry,” Kate’s nervous voice brought him back to the present. “I’m sorry,” she said again. “I wasn’t trying to inspect you again. If you thought that was what I was doing. Trying to inspect you, I mean. I wasn’t trying to do that. I was just giving you a hug.”

“Oh,” Cullen said, stiffly. “I… Of course. I got a bit, um… confused.”

He was still confused. Worse, he could tell if he’d frightened her off or if she hadn’t even noticed that near-kiss in the first place.

“I can see why,” Kate said, with a nervous laugh. “I mean, here I was, running my hands all over you… Not that I wanted to! Or that you wanted me to. Or that you were enjoying it. Or that I…”

“Not at all,” Cullen spoke over her.

At his words, Kate stopped short. “Oh,” she said, frowning. “You didn’t?”

_Didn’t what_, Cullen wondered? He hadn’t caught what she’d just said. He now couldn’t remember what he’d said back. Maker’s breath, his brain felt like it was stuck in quicksand.

“I didn’t,” he repeated, muddling his way through. “Naturally not.”

“Naturally,” Kate repeated.

Hang on. Why was she looking at him like that? “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” Kate said. She didn’t sound fine. “So, we’re just… Lyrium protocols.”

They were just lyrium protocols? What did that mean? Cullen had no idea, but he went with it.

“Lyrium protocols,” he said, latching onto the words like a lifeline. “That’s what this was all about yes?”

“Right,” Kate said. Her voice sounded hollow. Now Cullen was certain she was upset.

“Well then,” Kate said, letting out a shaky breath. “I um… Well. I suppose I ought to write down my findings, then.”

“Write? What? Findings?”
The words were only somewhat coherent, mirroring Cullen’s scattered thoughts. Why was she upset, he wondered? Had he said something wrong? Had they really almost kissed, or had he imagined it? What was going on? Cullen wanted to ask her these things, but didn’t dare.

“My findings from just now,” Kate told him. “About the lyrium and the protocols and the resumed urges and… Oh, I probably shouldn’t write down that part.” She blushed and ducked her head. “I’d like to monitor you, however. If you don’t mind. Check on your progress now and again. For science, of course. Next time it needn’t be so, um, thorough.”

Sweet Maker, let it be thorough. Cullen’s body reacted before his brain quite had the chance to.

“For science,” Cullen repeated. He hardly recognized that strained voice as his own. “I don’t know. I’m not sure if I can handle much more, um…”

What was the word he was looking for? Excitement? Arousal? Stimulation? Pained longing?

“Medical attention,” Cullen said. “Too much of a good thing and all that.”

Kate gave him a very odd look.

“Given how unusual your situation is,” she told him, “I think we’d better follow up on this. And I’d like to ask Coll for a second opinion. If you please.”

“Must we involve her?” Cullen had no desire to reprise this conversation in front of that elf. And if Kate were to touch him with the elf looking on, Cullen was certain that the archivist would be getting quite the show.

“I understand that you don’t want to share something so personal,” Kate said. “But Coll is a professional. As am I. Or I’m supposed to be,” she added in a grumble.

Kate folded up her notebook, tucking the pencil inside. “I’ll tell Coll the abridged version,” she said. “Leaving out the um… personal parts.”

That would be most everything, Cullen thought.

“Look, I know you don’t like this,” Kate said, frowning at his expression. “But I’m worried about you. Please let me ask Coll about this. I know what you’re going to say. Coll is loud. And opinionated. And she’s deliberately difficult. She does it to keep people from bothering her. But if you get past all that, she’s the most loyal, intelligent person you’ll ever meet. And she’s able to keep a secret, I promise you. She is,” Kate insisted, for Cullen had continued frowning. “She keeps all of my secrets, and she’s told me almost nothing about her own past.”

That made Cullen less inclined to trust the elf, not more. But he did trust Kate. He supposed that counted more than anything else. “Alright,” he said. “If it sets your mind at ease.”

“It will,” Kate said.

A pity that setting Kate’s mind at ease was likely to unsettle Cullen a great deal. Even so, he felt he ought to say:

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

Kate looked up at him in surprise. “You do? I mean… You’re welcome.”

She seemed genuinely confused by his gratitude. Cullen mentally kicked himself. Had he really
come off so brusque? He hadn’t meant to. Cullen tried again:

“Yes, I do. This situation has been weighing on my mind, and you’ve, um… You’ve been very kind. Not at all what I expected.” That was yet another understatement. “So please allow me to express my thanks. For all of this.”

Kate smiled shyly, and Cullen felt the sudden desire to wrap his arms around her again. He snatched up the tea tankard from the wall instead, and held it before him like a shield.

“Shall we go?” he asked.

“Oh,” Kate blinked. His sudden change in manner seemed to startle her. Or maybe Kate simply forgotten that there was a castle surrounding them.

“Right,” she said. “Skyhold.”

“Skyhold,” Cullen agreed. It was rather strange to think they’d never left the place. Judging by how high the sun was in the sky, his officers would soon be prowling the castle, looking for him. It was surprising that no search party had interrupted their meeting. Thank the Maker that they hadn’t, Cullen thought.

At this, Kate grabbed her tea tankard from the ramparts and turned toward the walkway. Cullen fell in step beside her, keeping pace with her strides. But as they walked, Cullen didn’t feel any more at ease. It wasn’t just the near-kiss that bothered him, nor the way it had been spectacularly aborted. Rather, something else had happened just now - something more than the lyrium confession or Kate’s offers of help or the protocols or even that awkward embrace at the end. That unknown something-more excited Cullen and frightened him all at once.

“So,” Kate’s voice startled him out of his thoughts. Cullen glanced over at her. She walked beside him, eyes on the ground, her tea-tankard dangling from her fingers.

“So?” Cullen prompted. He realized he’d been matching her steps, stride for stride.

“I’ll see you tonight at the tavern opening?” Kate asked.

Cullen started. In fact, he was so surprised, he stopped short at the top of a flight of stairs.

“Tavern opening?” he repeated.

“Hadn’t you heard? But of course you’ve heard. You’re the one building the tavern.”

“My men are,” Cullen agreed. “I just didn’t plan to go.”

“Ah,” Kate said.

She paused for a moment - just a moment - and then began walking again. Cullen hurried down the stairs after her.

“Wait,” he called, “Are you…?” She turned and looked up at him, and Cullen stopped short.

What was going on here, Cullen wondered? Was she asking him to join her at the tavern? Or was this something else entirely? As far as Cullen knew, superior officers did not ask their subordinates out for drinks. None of his Knight-Commanders had ever done so. But perhaps the rules were different for Inquisitors. Then again, the history books were notably silent on the subject of Inquisitor Ameridan’s drinking habits.
“Will you be going?” Cullen asked Kate.

“I figured I ought to,” Kate said. “As the Inquisitor, I should make an appearance for an hour or so. I thought as commander, you might do the same.”

“Oh,” Cullen said. Of course that was what Kate meant. He should have realized that her question was professional in nature, and not a personal invitation.

“I don’t drink,” Cullen said, with more bitterness than he’d intended. “With the lyrium addiction, it’s unwise to…” He stopped himself there. No need to burden Kate with the details.

“Oh,” Kate said. She looked up at Cullen with something a little like concern - or pity. He flushed.

“It’s just that large crowds tend to overwhelm me,” he said, walking on. Kate fell in step beside him. “I don’t mind people,” he added hurriedly. “I like company, in fact. When there are clear expectations and I know how to behave. It’s just that at functions where alcohol is involved, everyone seems to know what’s going on except for me.”

Cullen ended his explanation there. He was certain sounded like an idiot. To his surprise, Kate smiled and nodded.

“I feel the same,” she admitted. “But then again, I’ve never been to a real party before. I mean, I’ve been to balls and festivals and the opera. But I’ve never been to an real tavern to have real drinks with real people. I think it will be exciting.”

“Aristocrats aren’t real people?”

“I didn’t mean it that way. But you know how it is. A mage can’t just go places. Not on my own, with no one to escort me. Not that I was asking you to escort me,” Kate added hurriedly. “Not as a templar monitoring a mage or anything. Just, as a friend. I thought that maybe we could go together. Moral support for the troops and all.”

“Moral support is important,” Cullen agreed. “For you as well as the troops. After all, if this is your first tavern opening…”

“Yes, you see?” Kate said, brightening. “And if you come with me, I’ll buy you a drink. I’ve always wanted to buy someone a drink. At house parties, the punch is just sitting there. It takes all the fun out of it. I won’t buy you ale, if you don’t want it. But milk, perhaps. Or tea. If you don’t mind taking tea in a tankard.”

“I rather liked having tea in a tankard.”

Kate blushed and looked down at the mug in her hands. “I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you,” she said. “And I understand if you don’t want to go to deal with the crowds. But I thought, well…”

What Kate thought, she did not say. And against his better judgment, Cullen found himself saying:

“I think I could spare a half an hour.”

Kate’s answering smile was entirely worth that stupid promise.
Do you want ALL my meta? You know you do. Here's the full Veil theory and then some (Titans! Solas' plot! More!) at my tumblr blog.
Piss Poor Aim

Chapter Summary

In which Carver gets caught with his pants down.

This was the worst tavern in all Thedas.

The room was too cold, the beer was too warm, and the smell of rotting fish filled the air. And as for this... Was this supposed to be a sandwich? Maker knew what was in it. Cabbage and moldy cheese and maybe that was mustard? It looked too lumpy for mustard. The meat smelled like pickles and the pickles smelled like meat.

Andraste’s tits, Carver Hawke was sick of Crestwood.

Carver glared out of the storm-lashed windows. According to the locals, this tavern was just a stand-in. The ‘real’ tavern stood by the shores of the undead-infested lake, having been built into the upper floor of the dam. Who put a pub on top of a dam, Carver Hawke wanted to know? Idiots, that’s who. Served them right the place had been overrun by zombies and they’d had to retreat to this sad shack.

Outside, the rain pounded down on the mossy roofs and muddy streets of the fishing village. In the distance, one paunchy farmer stood guard by the wooden gates, armed with nothing but a crude bow and a pitchfork. Hardly a match for the corpses crawling out of the lake, Carver thought. Certainly no match for the bandits that roamed the hills. This town gave new meaning to the word ‘pathetic.’ But Carver had no time to help these people sort out their troubles. He had troubles of his own.

“Another drink, dearie?” the barkeep asked him.

Carver shook his head. The ale tasted like swill, but Carver managed to keep that fact to himself. Politeness and all that.

“You’ve scarce touched your meal,” the woman said.

Carver eyed the plate. “Not hungry,” he lied.

He hoped the barkeep didn’t hear the way his stomach growled just then. But then, the woman had ignored every question he’d asked her. Either she was deaf or difficult. How was Carver supposed to interrogate the villagers when no one would speak to him? He tried again:

“You’ve seen no strangers but us Wardens? No other travelers of any kind?”

“Yes, yes,” the woman nodded. “Fierce storms for weeks. Oft happens as winter’s comin’ on.”

Carver scowled. There she went again.

“Strangers,” he said, loudly. Probably too loudly. “Walking through the village.” He walked his fingers across the dirty bar.

“’Course we have a heap o’ storms in spring, too,” the woman went on, as if Carver had not spoken.
Maker, he thought, glaring at the leaky ceiling. She was impossible. Carver wondered if his fellow Wardens were having better luck searching in the rain. Carver hoped not. If anyone was going to find Anders and beat the Void out of him, it would be Carver. He turned back to the woman and nearly growled:

“Apostates? Seen any?”

“No need to shout, dear. I’m registered at the local Chantry.”

Carver drew back. Was this woman saying she was a mage? Surely not. The woman grinned toothlessly and began wiping down the counter.

“You gonna eat that, dearie, or should I feed it to the dog?”

“Huh?”

The woman pointed at his sandwich. Carver held his hands up, as if to indicate he’d given up. The woman dumped the food on the floor at her feet, where it landed with a wet ‘splat.’ Some furry thing shuffled out of the corner and gobbled it up in a flurry of slurps and snuffles.


Had the barkeeper flinched at that? Carver was fairly certain that she had. Not that it did him any good. The Maker had given Carver all the perception in the Hawke family, and his sister had gotten all of the charisma. Carver could read people well enough, but he never had any luck in getting them to open up new pages.

“If you can just tell me where he’s gone…” Carver began.

The woman ignored him. Instead, she ducked below the bar to pick the plate up off to the floor. To Carver’s disgust, she wiped the plate down with her greasy rag, then set it back on the pile of plates behind the bar. The dog-like-thing trotted back to the corner, flopped down, and snorted itself to sleep.

“Look,” Carver said, watching the woman closely. “I know that an apostate was coming this way. If you can just tell me where he’s gone…”

“Thought you Wardens only looked for darkspawn.”

Carver jerked upright at that, his hand landing on his sword. Some idiot had sneaked up behind him. Carver glared over his shoulder. It was the old man who’d been sitting in the far corner. Carver had thought the fellow was a fisherman, the way he’d been staring mournfully down at the lake. But it seemed the fellow had given up his chair by the window.

“What’s it to you?” Carver said.

“I’m the mayor of this town,” the old fellow returned. “My business to notice who comes and goes.”

Carver raised a brow at that. This was the mayor? No wonder this town was such a pile of shit.

“We don’t see Wardens around these parts much,” the man went on. “Not since the Blight.” When he said ‘the Blight,’ the man choked on the words like a hairball.

Carver turned away with a huff. Typical civilian. Lots of Fereldens thought they knew the horrors of
the darkspawn, just because they’d fled a village way back when. Carver had been like that when he was younger. But after years of living with the Blight inside of him, after hearing the Calling singing long before it’s time, Carver had grown colder. These people knew nothing of darkness or of death.

“Look,” Carver said, his attention back on the bartender. “I need to find that mage.”

“Would like to have some tea for servin’,” the woman said. “But it’s dear these days.” She broke off in a fit of coughing. It sounded like someone letting steam out of a kettle in stops and starts.

“Better move on, son,” the mayor warned, taking a step toward Carver. “We don’t want trouble. Seen enough trouble to last us a lifetime.”

“Maker’s breath,” Carver grumbled. Was the man trying to threaten him? That fellow was no fighter. Carver could take him out with a butter knife.

“Go on then, son,” the man said. His voice quavered, and his hand shook as he made a shooing motion. Carver snorted at the display.

It occurred to him that maybe he’d taken the wrong tack with these people. His sister would have tried to flatter information out of these two. Compliment their horrible little town. Buy them a drink. Maybe seduce the… No. For all her faults, his sister had some standards.

But what was Carver supposed to do now? He’d feigned a fever, had persuaded his fellow Wardens to go out searching on their own. Carver had hoped it would give him time to question the villagers in private. Only now it looked like he’d botched the effort from the start. For either Anders wasn’t here, or Anders was here and he’d already convinced these people to lie for him.

Carver’s eyes narrowed. It wouldn’t be the first time that Anders had convinced people to lie for him.

“I’m looking for a mage named Anders,” Carver said, giving up all pretense. “I need to beat some information out of him.”

Had the barkeep flinched at that? Carver couldn’t tell. The mayor didn’t look happy though.

“Young man,” the mayor said sternly, “We do not condone brawling in this town.”

Carver snorted. If a fight broke out in this town, this fellow wouldn’t be able to stop it. The mayor would be the first to lose teeth.

“Storms have a way of movin’ on,” the barkeep said, turning around and looking right at Carver.

Wait. Was that meant to be a conspiratorial wink? Or did the woman have a facial spasm? Carver didn’t know, and by now, he was too annoyed to care. Let Anders find his own way out of his own mess, Carver thought. He shoved himself away from the bar.

“I’ve got to piss,” Carver said by way of farewell.

“Aim away from the building, love,” the barkeep called after him.

Well at least she’d heard that.

Carver tossed a few coins onto the counter, then looked back when he heard the bartender gasp. Belatedly, Carver realized he’d left a little too much money. Oh well, he thought. He couldn’t very well take it back now. It would make it look like he hadn’t intended to drop a half a sovereign on lunch. And Carver hated to appear thoughtless. He let the coins lie.
It took Carver a minute or two to find a good place to relieve himself. He walked a distance away from the village until he came to an open road. There were no travelers on it. It seemed that in Crestwood, the merchant road was the most deserted place around. Again: pathetic.

Carver crossed the road, then made his way down the embankment on the far side. He found a spot that was hidden from view of everything but the lake. Once he’d reached a level patch of ground, Carver glanced around, then yanked off his gauntlets. These he tucked into his armpit, then he flipped up the front flap of his tunic. A moment or two later, Carver had unbuckled his codpiece and unlaced his trousers. He sighed, looking out over the lake as he relieved himself. But when he went to shake himself off, Carver heard a sound behind him.

Carver whirled around, hand going to his sword. He found himself standing with a blade to his throat.

“Poor choice of toilet, Carver.”

Void take it, Carver thought. The only thing worse than being caught with your trousers down was literally being caught with your trousers down.

“Anders,” Carver growled. But really, it was hard to sound fierce when he had his dick hanging out.

There was no mistaking the man on the other end of that bladed staff. Anders’ face was pale and covered in stubble, half-hidden by his hood. But Carver would know those flickering eyes anywhere. Besides, the fool was wearing a feathered short cape over his coat. As if that didn’t give him away to every bounty hunter in Thedas.

“You look like shit,” Carver said, glaring at him.

“And you look…” Anders glanced down, then grimaced. “For the love of the Maker, Carver. Lace up.”

“Didn’t ask for you to sneak up on me while I took a piss,” Carver returned. But when Anders lowered his staff, Carver put himself away as quickly as he could.

“Might as well have,” Anders said, his eyes turning swiftly back to their usual brown. “You were careless. What do you mean asking after me like that?” He jerked a thumb back toward the tavern. “And stumbling off by yourself? That’s just asking for trouble.”

“Didn’t ask for your advice either,” Carver said. He flushed, both from anger and from knowing Anders was right. He grabbed his gauntlets and shoved them back on.

“So where were you?” Carver asked, unable to keep a sneer from his voice. “Hiding out in that old woman’s attic?”

“Yes,” Anders said.

“What, really?”

“I’ve got a camp set up a bit further in, but I needed supplies.”

“A bit further where?” Carver wanted to know. Anders didn’t answer that. He was looking around, as if checking the air for signs of an ambush.

“So you heard the whole thing back there?” Carver asked. “Just listening in on me?”
“Saw you drop a lot of coin to find me,” Anders said, turning back in Carver’s direction. “What was that about? The Wardens never had deep pockets before.”

“Er, yes, well…” Carver didn’t want to get into that. “Hang on, how come I couldn’t sense you? Ought to have been able to, what with the Blight in our blood and all.”

“I don’t know,” Anders said. “Maybe Justice hides the song. Or perhaps your taint is stronger than my taint.”

Carver cringed. He’d never liked that term. The ‘tainted’ blood of the Wardens made for all sorts of awkward conversations.

“Why didn’t you just say that I’d sent for you?” Anders asked. “Would have saved you a lot of trouble - and the coin.”

“Because I’ve got two Wardens with me,” Carver returned. “Couldn’t risk someone telling them that I was looking for you all friendly-like, now could I?”

“Orders to kill me on sight, is it?” Anders’s eyes flickered again, and for a moment, his voice deepened unnaturally. Carver wanted to take a step back, but he’d be damned if he let Anders knew how much Justice unnerved him.

“Who are they?” Anders said.

“Orlesians. No one you know.” Carver didn’t have to elaborate. They both knew that the Orlesian wardens were conservative, rule-following, and not terribly fond of Fereldens.

“So tell me,” Carver said. “Why is it that I get a cryptic letter from you - unsigned, no less - just days before my unit gets the order to hunt you down? What’s going on?”

“Hunt me?” Anders stiffened. “They’ve actually sent Wardens to hunt me?”

“Don’t think that makes you special,” Carver said. “They’ve locked up anyone who questions orders these days. That’s why I’m keeping my mouth shut around the others. Took lot of work to convince them to let me come along on this mission. Had to make a good show of hating you.”

Anders raised a blond brow. “I’m sure that wasn’t difficult.”

“It wasn’t,” Carver assured him.

They stared at each other, the rain pouring down around them. Carver waited a moment more, until Anders’ watchful silence became too much to bear.

“So what’s going on, Anders? Dangers to the Wardens? Some secret evil? You’re as bad as Varric with your vague foreshadowing.”

“I ran into a magister on the way here,” Anders said, his eyes flickering once again.

“Magister?” Carver jerked his chin back. “As in, a Tevinter mage?”

“He was in the company of Wardens,” Anders said, watching Carver closely.

Carver frowned. That sounded unlikely, but then, a lot of unlikely things had been happening lately.

“Explain,” he said.
Anders did. Quickly and brutally, he told Carver of the mage named Erimond, and what he’d done
to a couple of Wardens and their recruits. Carver’s gut churned with every word - though that may
have been the sandwich.

“Erimond is working for someone,” Anders finished. “Someone who’s trying to trap the Wardens,
get them to… I don’t know. Something to do with raising demons. Lots of them. And the Warden-
Commander knows about it. She ordered it. Not the Hero of Ferelden,” he added. “Some other one.
Orlesian name.”

“Warden-Commander Clarel?” Carver asked. The churning in his gut grew choppier.

“I’m not sure,” Anders said. “Might be. I don’t remember the details too well. Justice was screaming
in my head the entire time.”

Well that was helpful, Carver thought.

“Warden-Commander Clarel ordered us all to western Orlais,” he said.


Carver paused for a moment before admitting; “Because we hear the Calling. All of us. Every
Warden in the world.”


“You hear it, too?” Carver asked.

“Like an itch,” Anders said, scowling. “But if every Warden is dying at once… If they all died…”

“No more Wardens, no more protection against the Blights,” Carver said with brutal efficiency.

“Are they trying to make Wardens immortal with that demon ritual?” Anders stared into the rain with
unfocused eyes, as if he’d find answers in the mist. “Stave off the Calling? Maybe the blood magic
can stop the…” His eyes flashed blue, and he ducked his head as if in pain. “No, no,” he muttered.
“That makes no sense.”

“Nothing in the Wardens makes sense,” Carver said. “All I know is that we were supposed to look
for you and kill you. Then we’re supposed to sail to Val Firmin and head west along the Abyssal
Road. No final destination given. ‘They’ll find you,’ was what Stroud said. Cagey emphasis and all.”

“Who are ‘they’?” Anders wanted to know. “More Wardens? Or magisters?”

Carver shuddered at the thought. “I don’t know. They don’t tell me anything.”

“The Abyssal Road?” Anders murmured. “There’s nothing out there but…” His eyes went wide as
he answered his own question: “Blightlands. He wanted a place where the Veil was thinner.”

“Dunno why a cold desert would make the Veil thin,” Carver said.

“There must be some ruins out there.”

“There’s ruins everywhere in Thedas,” Carver said, waving a hand at the statue of Maferath that
stood on a nearby hill. “Take your pick.”

“No. Erimond wanted something older… Something with more blood spilt on the stones. When he
summoned the demons, he… Ergh!” With a grunt, Anders grabbed his skull. Carver drew back, his
hand straying to his sword.

“Justice?” Carver asked.

“Eternally,” Anders huffed. But when he looked up, his eyes were brown.

“We have to warn the Wardens,” Anders said.

“We?” Carver snorted. “What ‘we’? You and me? The rebel apostate and the Ferelden refugee? In case you’d forgotten, you and I aren’t exactly respected in the Wardens. Especially not after I broke ranks to help my sister at the Battle of Kirkwall. I’m lucky they keep me around to swing a sword at darkspawn. And as for you…”

“We have to try,” Anders pressed.

“Try and convince every Warden in the world to ignore the Calling and worry about some ruddy magister?” Carver asked, incredulous. “You’ve got to be joking. They won’t listen to us. We haven’t got the clout. I couldn’t even convince Stroud to keep my sister out of this.”

Anders froze. His eyes went fully blue as he ground out: “What do you mean?” It was Justice’s voice that spoke.

“S-stroud sent for her,” Carver said, embarrassed by his own stammering. “I saw the letter.”

“You would put her in danger?” Suddenly, the bladed staff was at Carver’s throat again. Carver took a step back, his heel slipping, and he nearly fell into the mud.

“It wasn’t my idea!” Carver said, holding his hands out wide. “But it’s too late now. She’s already on her way.”

Anders jerked back at that. His eyes flashed brightly for a moment, and then the light went out of them. He let the bladed end of his staff fall to the ground with a ‘squish.’ The rain poured down around them, like melting twilight.

“Hawke’s coming here?” Anders gaped.

Carver might have felt pleased by how dumbfounded Anders looked just now. But instead, he frowned. Carver didn’t like Anders. He really didn’t like Anders. But he still owed the man for his life. And in a way, Anders had been like a brother-in-law to him for years. An annoying, overbearing, trouble-making, possessed brother-in-law maybe. But then, family was family. Out of foolish pity, Carver reached into his pocket.

“Here,” Carver said. “Have a look at this.”

He handed Anders a scrap of paper. Anders latched onto it as if it was a lifeline. His lips moved as he read the words. Carver had no need to check the letter again. He’d memorized it by now:

C -

Heard about crazy uncle A. Poor slob. On my way to help you sort him out. Meet you in Crestwood. Bringing some friends to the reunion.

– B
“Poor slob?” Anders said, looking up from the letter.

“Have you looked in a mirror lately?” Carver returned. He snatched the paper away and returned it to his pocket. Stupid mage had gotten it wet. It was rather foolish of him, but Carver didn’t want any of the messages from his sister to get ruined. There weren’t that many letters in his pocket, after all.

“When did you get that?” Anders wanted to know.

“A few days ago. We were camping up the coast a ways. Woke to a shout in my ear. Or a croak, more like. This letter was by my bedroll, but I never saw a messenger. Maybe she sent it by magic? At least the others didn’t see it.”

“So Hawke is coming…”

“With friends,” Carver added.

“Isabela, no doubt,” Anders said, his eyes flashing blue. Carver snorted at that display of jealousy.

“We could use all the allies we can get,” Carver told Anders. “On our own, we aren’t going to get very far. Much as I hate to say it, we need my sister’s help.”

“And what can Hawke do? Besides put herself in danger for my sake?”

Carver gave Anders a withering look. “I dare you to say that to her face,” Carver said. “No, go on. I dare you. See what she says. Because most likely she’ll say…”

“ROCK OUT WITH YOUR COCKS OUT!” A voice shouted from the road above. “You undead wanna shake your rotting dicks at me? Just gives me a better target for my LIGHTNING!!”

This last word was half-sung, the note rising on a crescendo. Anders’ head whipped around. His eyes flashed blue and his nostrils flared. Carver groaned.

“And there she is. Like a punchline. How does she always manage to do that?”

“Hawke,” Anders whispered. His voice took on a desperate edge. Could he be more dramatic, Carver wondered? Honestly.

“Anders, wait,” Carver said, reaching for him. “If she’s fighting the undead in front of the village…”

But of course, Anders didn’t listen. He took off at a run, and Carver had no choice but to follow.

There was truism for you: Carver had never had any choice but to follow.

Carver went running up the hill, slip-sliding every other step. How Anders had managed to run in this mud, Carver didn’t know. By the time Carver had scrambled up the slope and crossed the road, he was several yards behind the mage. He dashed up the road, rounded a corner, and found a battle going on before the village gates.

Actually, it wasn’t much a battle. It was a light-show. The paunchy gatekeeper was no use - just shooting arrows at corpses and not hitting a single one. But in the center of the scene was Hawke, facing off against two dozen shuffling zombies.

Unfair odds, Carver thought distantly. Like zapping fish in a barrel.
His sister looked exactly as Carver remembered her. Her armor was that same spiky mess of metal and leather that she favored in Kirkwall. You’d think she would go for something less distinctive, but no, not Hawke. She was accompanied by an entourage of lightning bolts, which shivered in the air around her like a bunch of back-up dancers. Hawke’s hair stood on end, her hands were stretched wide, and as Carver watched, she whipped her arms around and then shot her hands out at an advancing line of zombies. A beam of pure light slammed into the mass of them, burning everything to ash and making the mud bubble underfoot. Hawke shouted in triumph, but it was drowned out by the loud CRACK! that split the air. An answering BOOM of thunder rumbled out over the road.

Carver stuck his fingers in his ears to try and stop the ringing. Damn it. He’d forgotten how his sister’s magic took a toll on his eardrums.

“Hawke!”

As Carver had been standing there, Anders rushed right in to the battle. Fool, Carver thought. He was likely to get himself…

CRACK!

Fried.

BOOM.

Or no, Anders had put an arcane barrier on himself. That was lucky for him. He merely got thrown back onto his ass in the mud.

“Oh, shit!” Carver heard his sister yell. Then: “Anders, you stupid prick! Don’t run up behind me like that when I’m fighting. Only you deserved that! You totally deserved that. And you… Carver! Baby brother! Behind you!”

Hawke’s greeting was cut short as she shot her hand in Carver’s direction. Carver knew his sister well enough to know what came next. He dove for the ground, belly to the mud, as a bolt of lightning fired over his head.

The CRACK and BOOM of Hawke’s lightning shattered the air in a single blast. Maker, Carver thought, shaking his head. He should have packed earplugs. Anders had managed to get himself back on his feet. He started shooting fire from his fingertips, burning up all the nearby corpses. His fire was less noisy than Hawke’s lightning, but it was also less precise. To avoid damage to flesh or ears, Carver got out of casting distance and began hacking up the shambling creatures with his greatsword.

The battle only lasted a minute or two more, but it reminded Carver of all those old times. His sister and Anders fell into step at once: backs together, fighting in perfect synchronization. Carver sped around the perimeter, picking off the stragglers. If only that gatekeeper could actually fire an arrow, he might have stood in for Varric.

Carver snorted. You knew the Wardens were a rough gig when you sometimes missed being a desperate refugee, scrounging for a living in Kirkwall’s Lowtown. And sometimes, Carver did miss it. Not that he’d ever admit that to his sister, of course.

The last zombie fell. It was Hawke who killed it. She finished it off with her knife, which seemed silly to Carver. But she often did that. A bit of showing off, he suspected. Then, slowly - dramatically - Hawke turned to Anders.

The moment her eyes met his, Anders stood straighter. He’d thrown his hood back in the fighting
and rain streamed down his face. His hair gleamed a dark, burnished gold, and he’d managed to tear his jacket open somehow. Also, he’d managed to tear off the shirt beneath. Or no, Carver realized. Anders wasn’t wearing a shirt beneath. He just had on leather pants, leather boots, and a long leather jacket with feathers on the shoulders. What kind of man dressed like that? Anders, apparently. His chest was white as bone, as was his face. He looked half-dead, in Carver’s opinion.

But his sister must have seen a different man. Her eyes went wide. Her lips trembled. Hawke’s chest rose and fell to the same tempo as Anders’ chest. They seemed to be breathing to the same rhythm. Anders took a step closer. Hawke lifted her chin. Anders opened his mouth. Hawke’s lips parted and she said…

“Guuuuuuuuuh.”

She turned on her heel and walked away.

“Hawke?” Anders looked utterly dumbfounded. “Hawke!” he called after her.

Hawke kept walking. She held up her right hand, middle finger pointed at the sky. Carver laughed out loud.

“Serves you right, you bastard,” he told Anders.

“That was for you, too, brother,” Hawke shouted. She still didn’t turn around.

“Oh thanks for that,” Carver shouted back at her. Anders, however, stared after Hawke, his bare chest still heaving. Entirely too dramatic, Carver thought with a sneer. Maker, what a fool.

“Hawke!” Anders called.

This time, Hawke stopped. She didn’t turn around, but stood at the corner where the path met the merchant road. Anders ran down the slope, and Carver followed at more leisurely stroll. Anders reached Hawke’s side and grabbed her shoulder. Hawke whirled around. She had lighting gathered in her palms and her hair stood on end in a sudden cloud of static.

“Don’t touch me,” she snarled.

“Hawke…” Anders backed away, his hands out wide.

“Next time you touch me,” Hawke warned. “You… Just… Shouldn’t…” With each of these starts and stops, Hawke shook a sparking finger in his face.

“Don’t touch me,” she concluded, but it didn’t sound like she meant it.

Carver frowned. If Hawke couldn’t deliver a good comeback, then she wasn’t taking this well. And while Carver didn’t always agree with his sister, he wanted her to handle this well. *Handle Anders into the lake, preferably.*


Hawke swallowed hard.


“Hawke, I understand that you’re angry…” Anders began.
“You understand that I’m angry?” Hawke said, eyebrows raised.


“Hawke. Love,” Anders said. He reached out and rested his hand on her arm. “Dearest, please.”

Hawke cocked her head and looked down at Anders’ hand. Carver smirked. He folded his arms over his chest, ready to watch his sister let loose. But to Carver’s dismay, his sister placed her hand on top of Anders’ hand and she whimpered.

Maker’s breath. She actually whimpered.

“You’re not supposed to be so cute,” Hawke said.

Anders blinked. “What?”

Carver groaned. “Maker’s sake, sister. Have you no pride?”

“Shut up, Carver.” But Hawke didn’t look at Carver as she said this. She looked back up at Anders’ face.

“I mean, look at you, Anders,” Hawke went on. “You’re spattered in mud. You’re soaked in rain. Justice is flickering in your eyes every other second, and it’s clear you’re not eating and you’ve caught a cold. And yet, you’re sexier than ever. How is that even possible?”

“I…” Anders looked baffled. “Hawke, I don’t… I’m not trying to…”

“Of course you’re not. If you were trying to be sexy, it wouldn’t work. But it is working. It always works.”

Carver smacked his forehead. Maker save him. His sister was an idiot. And Anders was an idiot. Those villagers were idiots, too. For even now, Carver could see them up by the gate, pointing down the hill at where he and his sister stood. Morons, every one of them.

“I won’t kill you yet,” Hawke said tenderly, patting Anders on the arm. “But I’m going to get answers from you. And believe me, love. I. Will. Get. Answers.” She squeezed Anders’ arm with her clawed gauntlet. Anders didn’t even flinch.

“Whatsoever you wish,” he said, staring right back at her.

Ugh. Carver thought. You could cut the sexual tension between these two with a knife. And seeing as how this was his sister, Carver wished he had such a proverbial blade about him.

“We don’t have time for this,” Carver told them. “In case you hadn’t noticed, we’ve got an audience up at the top of the hill.”

“We do?” Hawke looked up eagerly.

“The villagers are staring,” Carver warned her. “And any minute now, they’re going to figure out who you are…”

“The barkeep already knows who I am,” Anders said. “She’s Circle rebel. I helped her escape to this place. So’s the elf living just outside the gate.”

“The elf I’m staying with?” Carver said, incredulously. “She’s the one who told Michel and Chernoff to go looking for you up north. Maker’s breath. So you were playing us for fools!”
“It’s not that hard,” Hawke said, patting Carver’s arm. “Anyhow, who are Mitch and Turnov?”

“Michel and Chernoff,” Carver said. “My fellow Wardens.”

“I can explain everything once we’re safely in hiding,” Anders told Hawke.

“Excuse me,” Hawke sniffed. “Who said I was going anywhere with you?”

“You did,” Carver said. “Said you were going to interrogate him.”

“Oh,” Hawke said. “So I did. Wait. Where are we going?”

“There’s a cave near here…” Anders began.

“A cave?” Hawke groaned. “I was promised a tavern. Alright maybe I wasn’t. But I’d prefer a tavern.”

“Not that one, you don’t,” Carver said, pointing up the hill.

“I can’t stay in the village,” Anders told Hawke. “The Wardens want to kill me on sight.”

Hawke didn’t sound surprised to hear it. “What’s the reason this time? Because you ran away from the Wardens or because you blew up the Chantry or because you’re an abomination or…?”

“Because I know too much,” Anders said.

“That’s a new one,” Hawke said with a snort. Just then, a voice called “You there! Young people!” Carver recognized that as the mayor.

“Blast,” he hissed, glancing over his shoulder. “You two need to get going.”

“Oh, look at them,” Hawke cooed. “Awed, nervous, curious. Afraid to approach, but unable to stay away for long. My favorite kind of crowd. Look, can’t we just reason with them? Talk to your Wardens, maybe?”

“No,” Carver said.

“No,” Anders said.

“No!” Carver and Carver snapped.

“Okay then, we’ll all hide out in the cave together. The usual escape route. I’ll call down some fog, we run for the caves, and then we…”

“No,” Anders said.

“Fine, then I’ll go with Carver and his Wardens and I can charm them into…”

“No!” both Anders and Carver snapped.

“Alright,” Hawke said, clearly miffed.

“I’ve got to stay with the Wardens,” Carver told her. “Find out what’s going on. If either of you show up, it changes everything.”

“But you’re terrible at playing the mole, Carver. You know that.”

Carver glared at his sister. This was why he never missed her for long.

“So then we’ve got to split up,” Hawke concluded. “Balls. I hate splitting up. And how are we supposed to meet up with Varric is what I’d like to know?”
“Varric?” Anders asked. Carver did not fail to notice the tension in his voice. “He’s the friend that you’re bringing along?”

“Varric wrote to me,” Hawke shot back. “Unlike some people.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Carver told them, with another glance over his shoulder. The mayor had given up on shouting at them and had started making his way down the corpse-strewn hill.

“Right then,” Hawke said, clapping her gloves together. “Anders, I’m coming with you, and Carver, see if you can stall your Wardens until Varric shows up.”

“Stall them?”

“Pretend to search for us. But, you know. Don’t actually find us.”

Carver gritted his teeth. He didn’t like this arrangement, but he couldn’t think of a better one.

“You there!” the mayor called.

“Too bad my bird isn’t here yet,” Hawke pouted.

“Your bird?” Carver shook his head. Never mind. He wasn’t going to try to make sense of that.

“The Wardens will be suspicious if Carver lets us go,” Anders pointed out. “And if the villagers tell him we were chatting…”

“Good point,” Hawke agreed. “Better not give Carver a choice in the matter…”

Carver understood their meaning at once. He tensed. This was going to hurt.

“Better make it look good,” was all he said.

“Don’t I always?” his sister replied.

Hawke grinned and stepped back. Lightning began crackling in her palms, growing brighter, growing more dense until it formed a ball of white-hot light. Out of the corner of his eye, Carver saw the mayor stop short. The man might be a fool, but at least he knew to stay out of the way when a mage held a storm in her fist.

“You… Young lady,” he called, his voice quavering. “If you’ll just settle down…”

“Dear brother,” Hawke said, her lips curling in a smile. “I’m going to kick your ass and save my boyfriend from your clutches. All of these villagers are going to watch me spank you. Then you’re going to be so angry, you’ll join your Warden friends and try to hunt us down. But you won’t find us. Got it?”

Maker, Carver thought. Could she be more obvious? But apparently, her acting fooled the mayor. The old man gulped and backed away. Lightning coiled between Hawke’s palms.

“M-miss…?”

“When a raven brings a message from our dear Aunt Revka,” Hawke told Carver. “Follow her advice to the letter.”

“Raven? Revka?”
“It’s alliterative! Easy to remember.”

“Young woman!” the mayor shouted.

“Hawke…” Carver warned.

“Trust your big sister, Carver.”

Carver closed his eyes.

**BOOM.**

The world exploded in sound. Carver managed to shield his eyes, but not his ears. He went flying backward into the mud, landed on his shoulder, flipped over to his side, then skidded to a stop in a pile of zombies. Carver sat up, head ringing. A corpse lay before him, its mouth open on a bloodless scream. Carver glared at it.

“She hit me harder than you, I swear,” he told it.

He shook his head hard, then looked around. Mist enveloped him, as if someone had set off half-a-dozen smoke-bombs at once. Carver wasn’t certain if that was Hawke’s magic, or a little something she’d been carrying in her pockets. Carver tried to wipe the mud off of his face, and only succeeded in smearing it through his hair.

“Warden!” Carver heard someone call. “I say, Warden! Are you alright?”

“No,” he called back. The paunchy gatekeeper appeared, and held out a hand, but Carver was already clambering to his feet. The mayor came trotting up, bow-legged and scowling.

“What happened?” the mayor demanded, pointing all around them. It looked like he was trying to poke the air. “What happened here?”

“Family feud, that’s what happened,” Carver said. But neither of the others were listening. The farmer looked at the mist in awe.

“Was that…? Was that *Hawke*? The Champion of Kirkwall? And Anders? She saved him. Just like in the stories. Wish a woman would save me like that,” he added, wistfully.

Maker, Carver thought. The man said his sister’s name with such reverence. Of course, no one in this town had recognized Carver. He knew he should be grateful for that, but it was hard to feel thankful with a face full of slime.

“The Champion of Kirkwall?” the mayor snorted. “Oh come now! She’s a myth! Made up by apostates to frighten you into giving them a bed for the night. ‘If you don’t help us, Hawke will get you’ and all that rubbish.”

Carver’s gaze slid over to the mayor.

“Well isn’t she a myth?” the mayor asked. He did not sound so confident as before.

“She’s a myth alright,” Carver said. “A mythological pain in my ass.”

And even when she pulled her punches, his sister hit too hard. All the muscles in his shoulder ached.

“I’d better go search for her,” Carver announced to no one in particular. The world ‘search’ came out as a sneer. Yeah, he’d search all right. He’d wander down to the lake for a while, pretend to look for
Hawke, and then go back to his fellow Wardens with word of his defeat at the hands of his sister. With any luck, they’d believe him.

Who was he kidding? Of course they’d believe that Hawke had trounced him.

And now Carver had to wait for word from his sister, and *she* was waiting for a bird. Whatever that meant. Maker’s breath, what a mess. This entire plan was stupid. All of Hawke’s plans were stupid. The only thing stupider was that Carver never had any plans of his own.

Carver stumbled down the road, not caring what the villagers thought of his performance just now. As he walked, Carver heard the Calling in his head. The funeral dirge fit his limp perfectly.
“Feck me, but ain’t that the best tavern in all Thedas?”

Coll looked up at the building in satisfaction. Kate stood beside her, similarly impressed, though a bit more apprehensive about going inside. Judging by the noise, half of the Inquisition was packed inside that pub. The other half of the Inquisition had shown up for the party anyhow, spilling out into the upper courtyard and the lower courtyard, too. Paper lanterns floated peacefully above the crowds, enchanted to bob along as if on the surface of the sea. Enchanted banners waved from every spare wall, flickering with golden light. Guitar music wafted from the tavern windows, and a reel fiddled up from down by the stables. A few tipsy couples tried to dance to the discordant songs, but mostly ended up laughing and tripping on one another. A nearby bonfire was crowded round by people talking and laughing and roasting sausages. Over by the smithy, someone had set up games of chance: darts, horseshoes and some type of fire-breathing competition between mages. Meanwhile, a few lone couples walked about on the ramparts, their conversations private under the twilight sky.

Kate watched those lucky couples and sighed. If only her walk about the ramparts had gone so smoothly, she thought. Kate had been thinking about her conversation with Cullen all day - thinking about it, and then blushing furiously.

Because just this morning, she had nearly kissed Cullen.

Kate still wasn’t quite sure how it had happened. She remembered giving Cullen a hug - a bit forward of her, perhaps, but defensible in the name of the friendship - and then the world had gone fuzzy around the edges. Kate had looked up to find that Cullen was smiling at her. The sunlight had glinted off of his armor, and the breeze had tumbled a single golden curl across his forehead. Kate had wanted to touch that curl. She had wanted to touch him. So she’d gone up on her tip-toes and…

A horrible little voice in her head had hissed “How dare you!” And Kate had yanked herself away.

How dare she indeed, Kate thought? Cullen had come to her with a problem, and she had… what? Run her hands all over him? Lectured him about lyrium? Oh, and blathered on about her research, she couldn’t forget that. Then she’d gone and mauled the man. She still remembered his expression of shock when she’d pulled away. Cullen had seemed so angry. Well, and why not? He had told Kate something in confidence - and she’d thrown herself at him.

At least she had a chance to make things right, Kate told herself. She would behave more professionally from here on out. Cullen had agreed to join her for drinks tonight, and she fully intended to make things up to him - even though Kate had no idea how.

“Is that the name of the place then?”

Coll’s abrupt question drew Kate’s attention back to the present. Kate turned to find Coll was looking up at the side of the building. Kate looked up as well.
“The Herald’s Rest?” Kate frowned. “Well that’s unnecessarily exclusive. Surely this place isn’t just for me.”

“Bang up picture of you though,” Coll snorted.

Kate considered the sign. From an artistic perspective, it was well painted. A crowned woman in white, carried a shrouded figure on her outstretched arms. The invalid’s face could not be seen in that tangle of blankets, but the outstretched hand glowed with green flame.

“Is that supposed to be me?” Kate asked. “There in the blankets?”

“Perfect likeness,” Coll said. “Pillow-face an’ all.”

“Am I being set upon a pyre or dragged to the healers?” Kate wanted to know. “Or am I dead in this scenario? Is Andraste carrying me to the Maker’s side? What a morbid thought.”

“Sure but that’s you after two drinks. Lightweight that you are.”

“I can handle more than…” Kate trailed off when Coll raised a brow. “Fair enough. Either way, that picture hardly puts one in the drinking spirit.”

“Depends on what you’re drinkin,’” Coll said. “But as it clear ain’t been painted by Solas, that’s good enough for me.”

Kate glanced over at Coll in curiosity. “Oh? You don’t care for Solas’ art?”

Coll said something in elvish that Kate couldn’t quite translate. She heard the words for ‘paint’ and ‘excrement,’ but not much else.

“How is Solas these days?” Kate asked instead.

Coll’s eyes narrowed. “You done talked with that elf just yesterday. Whatcha really askin’, Kate?”

A crowd of drinkers pushed their way out of the tavern and into the courtyard. Kate and Coll stepped aside to let them pass. Once the party-goers were out of earshot, Kate asked:

“What’s going on with you and Solas? I asked him if he was coming tonight and he said, ‘Let Mistress Colleen enjoy such revelries.”

Coll’s lips puckered in a frown. “Pox-bottle, that’s what he is. Dhrua is on’el em’an.”

“Come again?”

“Thinks he’s better’n everyone.”

“I’ve found Solas to be quite humble, really.”

“Then you ain’t payin’ attention,” Coll said. “He’s got this way about him. Won’t come drinkin’ with me for one, even though I asked him.”

“You did?”

“Well, yeah,” Coll said, looking away as she pushed an errant braid out of her face. “He’s not so bad when he’s helpin’ a body translate a book or somethin’. An’ sometimes by late candlelight, he gets this look in his eyes…”
Coll caught Kate’s surprised expression and scowled. “Never mind.”

“Does Krem know?” Kate asked.

“Know what?” Coll said in exasperation. “That sometimes Solas ain’t such a feckin’ feck? What does Krem care? He’s off makin’ eyes at some bard-lass. Anyhow, enough on this. What about you, Kate? What’s goin’ on with you and your lyrium-skivin’ templar?”

“Keep your voice down, Coll,” Kate said, looking around. “I told you about Cul– about that lyrium thing in confidence.”

“Yet now we’re standin’ here in the chill, waitin’ on Cullen,” Coll said, not lowering her voice in the slightest. “So what’s goin’ on, Kate? You’ve been right wary about that templar. Scarce told me nothin’ beyond that you did the protocols on him this mornin’.”

“Nothing else was relevant,” Kate returned. “Oh, did you remember to mix up some elfroot elixirs for Cullen? You said that would help with the inflammation.”

“Sure, sure. Bottled up a batch this afternoon. But that’s dodgin’ the question, Kate. Is this really ‘bout keepin’ your commander fightin’ fit, or is it somethin’ else?”

Kate supposed she could pretend that she didn’t know what Coll was driving at, but that would just inspire more awkward questions.

“Cullen is just a friend,” Kate said. “He is,” she insisted, for Coll looked unbelieving. “And I’m worried about him. The lyrium thing… It’s hard for him.”

Coll’s mouth curled in a devilish smile. “I’ll bet it is. Did you know, Kate - an’ I’m sure your boy didn’t mention it - that lyrium oft has the effect of makin’ a man…?”

Coll held her index finger out straight, then curled it to point downward at the ground. Kate felt like her throat was seizing up.

“Lyrium don’t make ‘em all like that,” Coll assured her, “But sometimes at Ostwick, the templars would visit the infirmary to stock up on some, ah, persuadin’ potions. Take a bottle or two with ‘em on leave. Tonic made of rashvine and vandal aria - same base as in rock armor potions - then you add in amarita vein. That plant looks like a willy a-poppin’ up from the earth, so’s it only makes sense, right? Thing is though, now that your boy ain’t on lyrium, he’s like to have the need somethin’ fierce. One stumbling block gone, aye?”

“N-no! Coll, no!” Kate didn’t answer so much as explode. “That’s… No!”

“What?” Coll said, tossing her braids over her shoulder. “I’m just sayin’ that your boy won’t need help gettin’ a stiffy on. No help but your own, that is.”

Kate didn’t say anything to that. She tried to ignore Coll’s words. She tried not to think about helping Cullen in that regard.

She failed miserably.

“But iffin’ the two of you ever need help with such things,” Coll went on, oblivious to Kate’s stunned fantasies. “There’s herbs for it. There’s herbs for everything.”

“I was not asking for help with…” Kate shook her head and tried again. “I… We… I couldn’t possibly.”
“Sure you could,” Coll said. “Just take the boy off somewhere private and stick your tongue down his throat.”

Kate squeezed her eyes shut. Maker’s breath. Coll and her advice. And yet, hadn’t Kate tried something very similar just this morning? She had, until that voice in her head had reminded her how selfish that was.

How dare you?

Kate tried to make herself speak reasonably about this.

“Cullen is going through lyrium withdrawals. He’s got all sorts of aches and pains.” - And horrible memories, but Kate didn’t mention that. - “That makes for more stumbling blocks, Coll, not less. Besides, it would be entirely self-serving of me to turn our lyrium protocols into some sort of…of…”

“Seduction?” Coll suggested.

“I was going to say ‘courtship,’ but close enough.”

“Might be fun,” Coll said, waggling her brows. “An’ why ‘self-serving,’ I’d like to know? What’s so wrong with servin’ yourself anyhow?”

“Coll, I’m serious!” Kate hissed, trying to keep her voice low. “I’m the Inquisitor now. Cullen is the commander. He and I are supposed to be working together to save the world…”

“‘Savin’ the world,’” Coll rolled her eyes. “What a shem thing to say.”

“It’s true,” Kate said. “I can’t afford to be distracted by a passing fancy. And it will pass,” she insisted.

“So you fancy the boy?” Coll said, amused. “Sweet Mythal, lass! Listen to yourself! Iffin’ you are to save the world, that’s all the more reason to get a leg over. You need to let off some steam!”

“No, I… Alright, fine. I probably do. But not like that.”

“Then how?” Coll said, folding her arms over her chest. “‘Cause the way I see it, you’re gonna burn yourself out. No, listen to me, lass,” she said, when Kate frowned and turned away. “Yes, we gotta save the world. Feck, sounds just as pretentious when I say it. But you’re right. Only we’re savin’ the world together-like and we’re doin’ it one day at a time. Not all at once. So you’ve got to take a rest now and again. That’s why we built a tavern, right?”

“That’s true,” Kate said, pausing to think about that.

“So let the Herald have her rest already,” Coll said, smacking Kate on the arm.

“I see what you did there,” Coll said, side-eying Coll. “But I still say it’s a stupid name for a tavern.”

“What’s wrong with the name of the tavern?”

Kate and Coll froze, each looking at the other with an ‘Oh shit’ expression. That was Cullen’s voice.

“How long has he been there?” Kate whispered.

“Just showed up,” Coll whispered back.

Well thank the Maker for small favors, Kate thought.
Kate turned around just in time to see Cullen walking up into the lantern light. *Speaking of favors…* Her jaw dropped.

“Oh *wow,* Cullen. You look amazing!”

Coll snorted with laughter, and Kate bit her lip in embarrassment. She hadn’t meant to blurt that out in lieu of a proper greeting. Still, it was true. Cullen did look rather amazing. He had forgone his massive armor, and wore only his leather trousers, his boots, and a leather jacket over a linen tunic. Without the imposing mantle and iron armor, Cullen looked like any other man. Any other gorgeous man, Kate amended. And she was staring like a fool.

“You look nice as well,” Cullen said, though he wasn’t really looking at her. Kate thought he might be looking at her… chest? Surely not. The bobbing lanterns in the courtyard made it hard to read his expression properly. All the same, Kate was certain that Coll had smothered a fit of giggles behind her tattooed hand.

Kate said, “Thank you, Cullen,” for that was expected, but she didn’t really believe his compliment. She hadn’t had time to do anything more than change out of her sweaty tunic, and the only clean shirt on hand had been far too big for her. She had tied the tails around her waist and rolled the sleeves up to her elbows, but it was no use. Coll had said Kate looked ‘Mighty fine,’ but Kate suspected she looked like she’d draped herself in a ship’s mainsail.

Oh Andraste curse her vanity. What was she worrying about? It was just Cullen. He’d seen her in nothing but her corset the other day in the smithy. And if he hadn’t cared then, he wouldn’t care now.

“Sure don’t no one have a compliment for me?” Coll asked. Kate turned to Coll, grateful for the distraction.

“Stunning as always,” Kate said. “That’s the new armor you had commissioned, isn’t it?”

“Robes befittin’ a Dalish keeper,” Coll said, twirling in place. “Gonna show that boy Krem what he’s missing. Ready to get plastered?” With this, she hiked a thumb at the tavern doors. Cullen drew back.

“Oh, um… I wasn’t planning to get *plastered,* per se.”

“She doesn’t really mean ‘plastered,’” Kate told him. “For reference, Coll would say that before study hall.”

“Oh, but I mean it tonight,” Coll said. She turned toward the tavern with a grin.

“So how are you, Cullen?” Kate asked, falling into step beside him. “I mean, I know I saw you just this morning, but…”

Kate didn’t get any further than that. For just then, Cullen strode ahead and opened the tavern door. He stood aside, making room for the ladies to pass. Coll said, ‘Ta, templar’ and walked in at once. But Kate came to a sudden stop, nearly tripping over her own feet.

“Inquisitor?” Cullen called, looking at Kate expectantly. Kate gave herself a little shake.

*Oh, for the love of Golden City,* she chided herself. *It’s just a door.* But then again, she mused, when was the last time she’d seen a man open a door for a Dalish elf? Exactly never, that’s when. And people rarely opened doors for Kate, either. She found it rather remarkable.
But as Kate didn’t know how to say that - or if she should say that - she simply said, “I, uh, thank you,” and slipped past Cullen and into the tavern.

It was like walking from darkness to daytime. Lantern light and fire light flooded the room, so bright that it seemed the sun had been smuggled inside. A roar met Kate’s ears: the laughter and conversation of hundreds of voices, threaded through with a golden strand of guitar music. The bard, Maryden, strummed by the fire, largely ignored by the crowds. There were three stories open to the center of the room, and people had packed every floor. A group of dwarves stood along one of the balconies, their heads scarcely reaching the railing. Two massive Tal-Vashoth mercenaries stood laughing by the bar. Humans and elves filled every table and chair, a small legion of servers slid back and forth through the crowd with drinks in their hands, and over all this, Kate heard a small voice say:

“Hello.”

Kate looked up. Cole sat on the balcony above her, his feet dangling down over the crowd. None of the other patrons seemed to notice him.

“Hello, Cole,” Kate said.

“They’re waiting for you over there,” Cole said, pointing. For a moment, Kate thought he was pointing at the fire. But then she saw that there was a space behind the stairway, a kind of alcove opposite the entry door. A booming laugh echoed from that space, and Kate spied a large set of horns. Krem stood at the edge of the stairs, a bottle of wine in his fist. He watched Maryden strum her guitar, oblivious to the crowd behind him. Coll’s eyes narrowed at once.

“There we are,” Coll said.

“I thought you weren’t…” Kate began, but Coll was already elbowing her way through the crowd.

“This way, it seems,” Kate said over her shoulder to Cullen.

Cullen followed Kate, as Kate followed Coll. The three of them came up alongside Krem, only to find a group of people had packed themselves into the space under the stairs. Morris and Sera sat at the far table, eating a stack of meat pies. Dorian and Vivienne stood at a tall table, with a flight of wine goblets between them. Varric, Iron Bull, and Robert were playing at cards. With them were two other humans: a dark-skinned, green-eyed young man, and a tanned, blue-eyed woman who seemed to have lost interest in the game. As the woman stared, Robert dropped a card on the low table between them and said:

“I swear, it’s true. The woman had the biggest…” He held his hands out in front of his chest, but when he saw Kate, he finished with: “Hands.”

Kate snorted. She’d heard this story before.

“Katie!” Robert said, grinning. “There you are! And you, Coll! And the… templar?”

Robert cast Cullen a curious look. In fact, several people cast Cullen a curious look - especially the blue-eyed woman there. Cullen nervously rubbed his neck, then held up his hand in greeting.

“Evening,” he said.

Kate did not know the proper form of greeting for a tavern-party, so she took a cue from Cullen and gave everyone an all-purpose wave:
“Hello,” she said.

“Howya,” Coll said, nodding at the crowd. “Aneth ara, Krem.”

“Oh, hey Coll,” Krem said, barely bothering to look over. Coll gave a disdainful sniff and perched herself on the table right beside Krem.

“Oi, here Kate,” Coll said, waving Kate over. Coll kicked out a chair and placed it beside the table. “Here’s for you, templar,” she added. Kate took a seat on the table beside Coll, and Cullen took the offered chair on Kate’s left. The blue eyed woman continued to stare at them both.

“Captain Ruvena,” Kate said, suddenly remembering the woman’s name. “Congratulations on your promotion.”

Ruvena flinched, as if she hadn’t expected Kate to speak to her. But she said, “Thank you,” all the same and turned hastily back to her cards. Robert looked up from his game and waved a hand wide.

“Oh, right,” he said. “Introductions. So that’s Katie, my cousin. Herald of Somebody. Wait. What I am doing? You know these people better than me.”

From the slur in his words, Kate guessed that her cousin had several pints in him. In fact, everyone under the stairs had that wine-loosened look. Dorian and Ruvena were visibly flushed, and Krem’s wine bottle was half gone. Iron Bull’s legs were spread wide as he sat splayed in his chair. Even Vivienne looked more relaxed than usual.

“Kate, dearest,” the enchanter said, “Good to see you! But I must ask, what exactly was the thinking behind this, um…” Vivienne pointed at Kate with her pinky finger, her hand still clasping her wine glass. Kate looked down at herself, then she realized what the enchanter was on about.

“Oh, this?” Kate grimaced and tugged at her tunic. “Everything else was packed. I know, it’s um… Not exactly the thing, is it?”

“It’s a look,” Dorian said. Rather unhelpfully in Kate’s opinion.

“So, um, I think I know everyone here,” Kate said, turning her attention away from her clothes. “Except for messere, um… I’m so sorry. I’ve forgotten your name.” Kate addressed this to the green-eyed man.

“Ser Barris,” he said, rising to shake Kate’s hand. As Barris did so, Robert rather shamefully tried to sneak a peek at Barris’ cards. Kate stood to shake Barris’ hand, then sat back down. Coll shouted out to a passing waitress: “Oi! Couple pints? Ta!”

“Oh, no drinks for me,” Cullen said.

“Here you are,” a voice said beside Cullen. It was Cole - there and gone. A mug had appeared in Cullen’s hands. Inside was a white liquid. Milk, Kate supposed. And here she’d hoped to buy Cullen a drink.

At least Cullen looked more comfortable, Kate thought. Maybe now was a good time to engage him in some small talk. Try and smooth over what had happened this morning, perhaps? Or simply ask Cullen about his afternoon? But no, Kate realized, as she looked around. Small talk was quite out of the question here. This tavern was nothing like the edges of a ballroom, where two people might have a civilized and somewhat private tête-à-tête. The conversations here were either very public - or very private, judging by that couple in the corner. It seemed that Kate had entirely mistaken the venue.
Before Kate could think of anything to say, Varric looked up from his cards and called out:

“So Curly, I gotta ask. What pulled you away from your desk? I had it on good authority that you weren’t coming.” Varric’s gaze slid over to Ruvena, who studied her cards with great interest.

“I’m wasn’t planning to come, no,” Cullen replied. “But the Inquisitor convinced me to make an appearance. Opening night of the tavern. Morale and all that.” He inclined his head to Kate as he said this.

“Is that why you came?” Ruvena asked, looking up from the game.

“With all the noise outside of my office, I realized I wasn’t going to get anything done this evening, anyway.”

“Now that’s more in-character for you,” Varric said. Beside him, Ruvena relaxed.

“Want to join us for the next game, commander?” Ruvena asked Cullen.

“Uh…” Cullen had been about to take a sip of milk, and looked up from his mug. “What’s the game?”

“Wicked Grace,” Robert said, rearranging his cards.

“Never played it,” Cullen said.

Iron Bull, Varric, and Robert exchanged sly glances before looking back to their cards.

“We’ll teach you,” Varric said.

“They’ve promised to teach me as well,” Dorian put in. “Not sure it’s a favor.”

“Hey,” Varric said. “Everyone ought to know how to play Wicked Grace. And don’t worry. I’m not the kind that’ll take you for your small clothes.”

“Who plays for small clothes?” Robert wanted to know. From his tone, Kate wasn’t certain if her cousin wanted to avoid this player, or perhaps learn some pointers.

“Just you wait, Ostwick,” Varric said, waving a finger at Robert. “I’ll introduce you. As for you, Curly, I’ll deal you into the next round. You too, Sparkler. Soon as I take these suckers.” Varric hiked a thumb at Robert and the others, who all protested this statement. Iron Bull just snorted and said, “You wish.”

Just then, a server appeared, her hands full of mugs. She leaned over Cullen to hand Kate and Coll their drinks. In doing so, the woman shoved her breasts right under Cullen’s nose. Cullen jerked his head back. The server straightened, winked at Cullen, and sashayed away. Cullen’s head swiveled around to follow. But then, Kate noticed that Iron Bull, Coll, Krem, and Sera all turned to stare after that server as well.

Kate frowned. Then she caught herself. It was none of her business who they stared at. Kate turned her attention to her drink. The mug held an amber liquid that smelled strongly of paint. Kate said, “Cheers” to no one in particular, and took a swig.

Her throat caught fire. Or at least, that’s what it felt like. Kate’s eyes watered, and she barely managed to keep herself from spitting the drink into Cullen’s lap. Maker’s breath! How did they manage to put an inferno into a mug? Kate swallowed it down. The heat settled into her belly, and
she came up coughing.

“What is that?” she gasped.

“Maraas-Lok. Had the barkeep set it aside for you.” Iron Bull held up his own mug, his eyes still on the busty server as she made her way around the room.

“Aww, chief,” Krem said, turning around to glare at his employer. “That’s cruel.”

“Take another swig of it, boss,” Iron Bull said. “The first drink kills all your taste buds. But the second one goes down smooth. It’ll hit you in about a quarter hour though, so you gotta time the second glass just right.”

At this, Cullen finally turned around. “You’re not going to keep drinking that, are you?” he asked Kate.

Kate had been about to set the drink aside. But because she didn’t like the censure in Cullen’s voice, she said: “It’s… interesting,” and took another sip.

She came up wheezing this time. Her lips felt numb.

“Give off,” Coll said, turning to Kate with a frown. “You wanna be sleepin’ under the table before the night’s begun? Here lass, trade me.”

Coll handed Kate a drink - a mug full of something similarly amber-colored. Kate eyed it warily. Meanwhile, Coll took a long pull of the maraas-lok.

“Oooch!” Coll said, licking her lips. “That’s brilliant, that is.”

“Told ya,” Bull replied. He downed the rest of his mug and called for another. Coll went back for another dram. Meanwhile, Kate tried a sip of Coll’s drink - a very tentative one. This time, she didn’t bother to hide her reaction.

“Ugh,” Kate said, holding the mug away from her. “What is that? It’s like drinking bread.”

Robert sighed. “‘Like drinking bread?’ Maker, Katie. Have you no appreciation for the finer things? That’s a Highever bitter you’ve got there.”

“I’m getting the bitter,” Kate said.

“Absolutely no appreciation…” Robert began, but Varric cut him off with, “Hey, Ostwick. Your play.”

“I know, I know. I just don’t have anything.”

“So fold already and lose your coin to me,” Iron Bull suggested.

“No chance, Bull.” Robert threw another marker on the pile. “I never give up.”

“Would you prefer some wine, Kate-darling?” Vivienne asked. “Krem there took the liberty of raiding the Skyhold cellars. Found an Antivan red - ancient vintage, you couldn’t ask for better. Or there’s a Rivani Riesling, if that’s more to your taste.”

“Oooh, I’ll take ‘em!” Sera said, though she already had a mug beside her and half a meat pie in her fist. “Give it here, Viv!”
Madame Vivienne curled a lip as Sera launched herself across the space and swiped two bottles right off of the table.

“Really,” Vivienne said. She turned to the remaining bottle - the one she’d grabbed hold of in Sera’s assault - and regally poured out a single glass. This she handed to Kate.

“There you are, my dear,” Vivienne said, with a pointed look in Sera’s direction. “For those of us who don’t chug straight from the bottle. No offense, Krem dear.”

“None taken,” Krem replied, saluting her with his flagon.

“Er, thank you, Vivienne,” Kate said. She set her mug of ale aside, and took a sip of the wine.

“Ohh,” Kate said, nodding at the glass. “That’s much better.” Vivienne toasted Kate. The rings on the enchanter’s fingers winked in the lantern light.

“So Curly,” Varric said, playing another card. “I heard that you’re comin’ with us to Crestwood tomorrow.”

Kate had been about to take another sip of wine, but instead sputtered her drink all over her trousers. Coll whacked Kate on the back, and Cullen looked from Varric to Kate and then back again, as if he wasn’t sure whom he was supposed to speak to.

“That’s not exactly common…” Cullen began.

“What?” Kate said, looking down at Cullen from her seat on the table.

“Hey, Varric,” Robert said, sharply. He jerked his head back, and Kate now noticed a couple of people she’d missed before. Cassandra and Leliana stood nearby, their backs turned toward the card-players.

“Oh shit,” Varric hissed. He put his cards over his mouth in a child-like gesture. “Good catch, Ostwick.”

“You’re coming with us?” Kate said, turning to Cullen. She tried to sound neutral, but the maraas-lok must have numbed her tongue. The words came out lisping. The qunari drink must have affected her stomach as well, for the thought of traveling with Cullen again made Kate feel oddly fluttery.

“I… Um, yes.” Cullen glanced around as if he wasn’t certain he should be talking about this in a pub. Ruvena, in particular, watched him closely.

“Since when?” Kate said, lowering her voice.

“Since this afternoon,” Cullen told her, his reply equally low. “Leliana and I discussed it. Those smuggler’s caves are a labyrinth. You’ll need a guide to find… you know.”

“Yes, but you?” Kate could not help but ask.

“Why not me?” Cullen said, sounding offended. “I know the area well. I was born in Honnleath, the next village over.”

“You were?” Kate blinked.

“Didn’t I mention that this morning?”

“No,” Kate said. “Of all the things you said…” Kate almost said something about lyrium, but she
caught herself.

“No! I mean yes. I mean, that’s fine. I just…” Kate glanced over at Leliana and Cassandra. Had anyone told the Seeker about the reason that they were going to Crestwood? Kate didn’t know, and she wasn’t about shout Hawke’s name to a crowded tavern. So instead she whispered:

“Considering the company we’ll be keeping, do you want to?”

“Considering the company,” Cullen returned. “I don’t want you going alone.”

Kate blushed and ducked her head, telling herself that Cullen didn’t mean anything by that. He was just thinking of the mission - as he should. As she should.

It was then that Kate realized she had spit wine all over her shirt. She tried to wipe the splotches away, but it was no use. Red wine on white cotton was hopeless. Kate also realized that she was feeling rather buzzed now. The tavern had taken on a slightly blurry glow.

A new voice interrupted:

“You are going to Crestwood, Cullen?”

It was Cassandra. Either mention of Crestwood had drawn her into the conversation, or else she’d been listening all along. Kate saw Robert flinch. Varric went quite still. At Cassandra’s side, Leliana turned around lazily, inspecting the tips of her gloves.

“Commander Cullen and I spoke about it this afternoon,” Leliana told Cassandra. “The fortress of Caer Bronach has fallen to bandits. It would enhance our standing in Ferelden if we were to recapture it.”

Ah, Kate thought. Well that made sense. And that was probably the real reason that Cullen was going to Crestwood - not because he wanted to protect Kate in some knight-like way.

“Exactly,” Cullen said, nodding at Leliana’s words. “We need to secure the roads eastward if we’re to establish ties with Denerim.”

“And I hope to use the fortress as a base of operations,” Leliana added. “I’m sending Charter along, as well as Varric.”

“What about me now?” Varric looked up from his cards as if he hadn’t the foggiest idea what was going on.

“Ahh,” Cassandra said, and her expression eased. “So that is why… I see.”

“Wait,” Sera snorted from over in the corner. “You lot are going to Crestwood just because the Nightingale wants a castle?”

“I want a castle,” Morris put in.

“Morris, we talked about this,” Cullen said.

“Seems a poor choice of priorities, Ser Cullen,” Ruvena put in. “We only just got Skyhold sorted out, and now you’re headed into the field? The recruits need more training.”

Kate blinked in surprise. What was Ruvena on about, questioning Leliana and Cullen like that?
Evidently Cullen thought the same thing.

“I’m sure you can handle the recruits, Ruvena,” he said, managing to sound both complimentary and stern at the same time. “Our borders must be secured and capturing the keep will be good practice for our soldiers. Our ASSes need the exercise. Er…” Cullen flushed as several people around the circle chuckled.

“Hear, hear,” Dorian said, holding up his glass in mock toast.

“Stupid name,” Cullen grumbled.

“You’re welcome,” Bull grinned. He held his mug high, then took another drink.

“Very good, ser,” Ruvena muttered, and she looked back to her cards. Cassandra continued to stare at Cullen with a thoughtful expression, her eyes narrowing once again.

“Still,” Cassandra said. “Perhaps if I came along…”

“What, and leave me high and dry?” Robert said. “Come on now, Cassie. You and I will have plenty of our own adventures in the Emerald Graves. I promise to show you a good time.” He looked over his shoulder and gave her a roguish wink.

Cassandra turned a deep shade of purple and whirled back around. Varric’s eyes went huge, as if he was thinking, “Ohhhh shiiiiit!” And it might have been Kate’s imagination, but it seemed that Leliana smiled at Robert before turning around as well.

“So… You two are cousins?”

It was Barris who asked this. He looked at Robert - then up at Cassandra - then over at Kate. Kate opened her mouth to answer, but Robert beat her to it.

“Not seeing the family resemblance?” Robert asked, playing another card.

“Er, no,” Barris said. “Either in looks or manners.”

“Family resemblance is a myth,” Varric said, playing a card that had Ruvena groaning.

“Eh,” Bull said. “Humans all look the same to me.” He made his play and shuffled his cards around.

“Well I see the difference,” Dorian said. “You Trevelyan’s don’t look a thing alike.”

“It’s true,” Robert said. “Everyone says that I have the better breasts.” He cupped his cards over his chest.

Kate rolled her eyes as Coll snorted into her ale. Cassandra turned around with a sputter - evidently she had never stopped listening in - and Cullen said, emphatically:

“Not a chance.”

The laughter trailed off.

“Oh?” Robert said, raising an eyebrow at Cullen.

“Well, no,” Cullen blanched. “I mean, not that I…” He stuck his nose into his mug. Robert eyed Cullen for the briefest moment, then laughed and shrugged.
“I dunno,” he said. “Maybe that mark has improved your figure, Katie. Shall we compare?” Robert made as if to stand and unbutton his shirt. Cassandra turned beet red and whirled back around. Dorian looked up from his wine glass with interest.

“Stop, Robert,” Kate told him. “Really, that’s enough.”

“Oh no, please continue,” Dorian said, his mustache going as lopsided as his grin. “I was rather hoping for a demonstration.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Kate said to Dorian. “And don’t encourage him,” she added, looking at Robert and pointing at Dorian.

“Well, if no one is going to disrobe,” Robert said, “I think I shall get myself another ale. Excuse me! Barkeep? I… Oh, thank you,” he said, as Flissa came by and handed him another mug. “What excellent service you have in this establishment.” Flissa giggled, Cassandra looked over her shoulder with a scowl, and Kate shook her head.

“Is this what a tavern is like?” Kate asked. “Robert, this is no different than when you hold court in the drawing room at one of mother’s parties.”

“I tried to tell you so,” Robert said. “But you insisted on romanticizing the whole thing. It’s nothing but people drinking and talking over each other and bragging about their sexual conquests.”

“Don’t hear you bragging much,” Varric said, looking at Robert thoughtfully.

“Er…” Robert cringed, made as if to turn around, then stopped himself. “I can be discrete.” Kate heard a ‘tsking’ sound from Cassandra.

“Yeah,” Bull said. “This tavern’s not bad.” He placed a massive hand on the back of Robert’s chair, and leaned back in tipsy satisfaction. “Not bad at all for a rush job. Good work, Cullen.”

“Uh, thanks,” Cullen said, looking up from his milk. “Though my men were the ones who…”

“Still,” Bull said, putting his other hand on the back of Ruvena’s chair, “It’s missing something. Tamassran,” he snapped his large fingers. “That’s what it is. Ah well. Guess you Chantry folk don’t go for that sort of thing.”

“Don’t go for what now?” Kate asked. Coll gave a short laugh and turned to Kate as if to explain, but Bull got there first:

“Sex workers. Ya know.”

“Oh.”

Kate had not known. Her face heated, but she willed herself not to sound embarrassed as she said: “I suppose that’s something each person can work out for themselves.”

“That’s the problem though,” Bull said. “Hard to take care of stuff like that in a place like this. Everyone packed into tents and bunks. Training hard, pent up. No good place for ‘em to have sex. Or masturbate. Either one.”

Beside Kate, Cullen made a sort of choking sound into his milk. Kate stilled as she remembered what Cullen had said to her just that morning - and what Coll had said to her just a little while ago. Kate picked up her wine glass and took a sip. She was careful not to glance either to her right or her left.
“Too true, Bull dear,” Vivienne said, sadly. “Even the Orlesians deal with such things better than Fereldens do.”

“Hey, we Fereldens take care of ourselves just fine, Viv,” Sera said, looking up in annoyance. “I mean, I dunno about them,” she waved a hand at the others, “But I get mine often enough.” She cocked her head, then added:

“Speakin’ of which, when was the last time you lot had sex?”

That question brought every eye swinging around in Sera’s direction. Even Cassandra and Leliana turned around. The rest of the tavern continued to rumble with conversation and the bard continued to sing, but everyone under the stairs had gone quiet. They looked to Sera first - then to one another. No one said a thing.

“Come on then,” Sera snorted. “You’re not all such prudes.”

That got people talking again.

“Surely not,” Vivienne replied. “But it’s no secret who my paramour is.” She sipped her wine with a regal air.

“Me? Last had sex about an hour ago,” Bull said with a shrug. “What about you guys?”

“Who?” Dorian asked, as Krem turned around to say: “Way to put that out there, chief.” Coll opened her mouth as if to ask Krem when it had last been for him, but he’d already turned back to Maryden’s song. Coll snapped her mouth shut and took another swing of the maraas-lok. On Kate’s other side, Cullen stared at the others as if they’d sprouted extra heads.

“Is this a common subject of conversation in a tavern?” Kate asked him, for she did not know.

“Maker, I hope not,” Cullen replied. But unfortunately, their side conversation drew Sera’s attention. She turned to them and said, loudly:

“So, Inquisitor. What about you?”

Cullen froze like a startled deer, but Kate, numbed by both wine and ale, just said:

“What about me?”

“When’s the last time you…?” Sera made a series of hand gestures, each growing increasingly more lewd.

“Care to translate that?” Coll snorted.

“Sex,” Sera said, ignoring Coll’s sarcasm. “Rollin’ in the hay. Two-backed and up against a door. When’d you do it last, Quizzy?”

“Oh come now, Sera,” Kate said, lisping a little as she spoke. “You can’t just ask people things like that.”

“You can’t, all Heraldry of Andrastry. I can.”


“Ohoh!” Sera said, brightening. “I like guessing games! I’m thinkin’…” She tapped her chin.
“Cassandra? Never.” Sera hiked a thumb at the Seeker, who sputtered. “With the crossbow, that’s kinky, right?” This, of course, was directed at Varric.

“Maker,” Kate groaned. “Robert, I think you made it worse.”

“Or more fun,” Bull grinned.


“Barris, never. Ruvena, never. All you templar lot, never,” Sera waved at hand at Morris and the rest. “Krem…” She pursed her lips, then shrugged. “No idear. Cullen? Templar. Still never. Inquisitor…” She paused here, squinting her eyes at Kate.

“You were a mage, right? Orgy or somethin’. You an’ Coll both.”

There was a moment of silence, and then everyone burst out talking at once.

“Can we please change the subject?” Kate asked, as Coll shouted over her, “You think I’d feck the whole Ostwick Circle? I had my pick o’ the lot, I’ll have you know.”

Krem turned around at that and raised a brow, Maryden momentarily forgotten.

“That’s your guess for me?” Dorian glared, as Ruvena said, “Not all templars are blushing virgins, you know.” Barris glanced sideways at Ruvena at that, and Varric said, “Prostitute with a bad leg. I’ll have to remember that one.”

“You’re terrible!” Bull cried, drowning out the protests. “Sera, you can’t read people for shit!”

“You think you can do better?” Sera snorted.

“I know I can,” Bull slurred.

“Please don’t,” Kate begged, but Bull started in at once:

“Cassandra - long time back. You were in your what, your twenties? Mage. Your first and last.”

Cassandra’s mouth dropped open, and Robert whirled around to stare at her. She went stiff as a poker, but she did not deny it. Bull moved on:

“Krem? Nah, that’s too easy.” Coll opened her mouth like she might ask, but shook her head and stuck her nose back in her drink.

“Dorian? Friend of yours. Half a year back. But they forced him to get married to some girl he hated. Tried to do the same to you, right?”


“Varric? Three years, or there about.” The dwarf inclined his head. “Alright, the templars,” Bull pointed at Barris and Ruvena in turn: “Five years, four months. Really Barris? Five years? Damn.”

Bull shrugged. “Ben Hassrath,” he said.

“Wait,” Kate said, as Cullen sucked in a breath beside her, “What do you mean, ‘Ben Hassrath?’ Are you saying that the qunari have some kind of file on each of us in this regard?”

Every eye swung to Bull at that.

“Yeah?” Bull said. He took a swig of his drink.

Cullen sputtered. “Qunari spies search out that sort of information?”


The Nightingale said nothing. She just stood there with a smile, her hood casting shadows on her face.

“Yes, but…” Cullen’s gaze swing from Leliana to Bull and back again. “That’s preposterous.”

“It’s all part of the business of knowin’ people,” Bull shrugged.

“Oooh, ooh, what about me?” Sera said, sticking her hand in the air.

“You got laid the week before you joined us,” Bull told her.

“Yes I did,” she grinned proudly.

“Now Morris,” Bull continued. Morris looked up as Bull called his name. “Escort service. Every year on his birthday. Present to himself.”

“Is it my birthday?” Morris asked, delighted by the prospect.

“Not yet, kid,” Bull told him.

“Blast.” Morris deflated, and turned back to his meal with a sigh.

“On me birthday,” Coll muttered, nodding to herself. “Gonna have to remember that one.” Cullen just stared at Morris, stunned.

“Now Robert here,” Bull said, hiking a thumb to his right, “Got a full report on him.”

Varric snorted. “I think we’ve all heard more about Ostwick than we wanted to.”

“Indeed.” This came from Cassandra.

Robert flushed. “I’m sure we don’t…”

“Been keepin’ tabs on the Free Marchers for ages,” Bull went on. “Specially the nobility.”

“There are Ben Hassrath in Ostwick?” Robert asked. “They must file down the horns to keep a low profile.”

“Nah, not horned ones,” Bull said. “Converted ones. Your maid Beth, at Trevelyan Manor? She’s one.”

“She is?” Kate said, eyes wide. “Well,” she added, mostly to herself, “That does explain a few things.”
Robert, however, went quite still. Kate groaned.

“Oh Robert,” she said. “Please tell me you didn’t.”

“It was after your father kicked me out, obviously. I don’t pester the help. Conflict of interest and all that.”

“Didn’t conflict with her interest in the least,” Bull told Robert. Cassandra’s face now looked like a thundercloud. Robert cringed, as if he could feel the Seeker’s disapproval from behind his back.

“Now Cullen there,” Bull said, pointing across the circle. “I’ve got almost nothin’ on him. Just that one orgy.”

Kate squeaked. Several voices around the circle cried out, “Orgy??” and a few nearby tables stopped their conversations to stare. Cullen looked at Bull in horror.

“What?! I never…”

“Oh, no, my bad,” Bull said, slapping his leg. “Sera said that word and it got stuck in my head. Not an orgy. Orgy’s everyone all at once, right?” Bull placed his hands together, meshing all his fingers. “What do you call it when it’s a different woman every night?” Bull fanned his fingers out.

“A different woman every night?” This came from Coll. It certainly didn’t come from Kate. She was too stunned to speak. A different woman every night? That didn’t sound like Cullen at all.

“No!” Cullen said. “It wasn’t… Just a misspent furlough in Denerim. Nothing more.”

“Mis-spendin’ all over the place, sounds like,” Sera snickered.

Coll burst out laughing into her drink, and Varric said, “Bah. Orgy makes for a better story.” Ruvena just stared.

“Ah,” Robert said, nodding knowingly. “The Pearl?”

“No,” Cullen said, tightly. He didn’t elaborate, and there was no mistaking his embarrassment. Kate opened her mouth to say something - she hadn’t planned what - when Bull cut in with:

“Whatever it was, it musta been good. Held ya ten years, didn’t it?”

“Ten years?” That exploded from Robert.

And Kate found she was speechless again.

Ten years? Cullen hadn’t had a lover in ten years? Was that because of lyrium-related impotence, Kate wondered wildly? Or had Cullen taken those ‘extra’ vows that pious templars favored? Had he regretted that misspent furlough in Denerim? Or was there some other reason he’d gone from feast to famine? Or maybe Bull was mistaken, and Cullen had had some lover that the Ben Hassrath knew nothing about? But no, judging by Cullen’s silence, he really had been celibate for a decade.

Well, that answered one question, Kate supposed. She’d been wondering if he was single.

No! Kate told herself. What a horrible thing to think at a time like this! She was not wondering…

Alright fine, she wondered. Kate wondered a lot right now. But Cullen’s fingers had curled tightly
around his mug, and his face had gone completely red. Kate felt her stomach drop in sympathy. Surely that was why she snapped:

“Alright, that’s enough!”

“Oh sure,” Ruvena said, glaring at Kate from across the circle. “Stop the conversation before it gets to you.”

“I’ll tell you anything want to know,” Kate shot back. “Just leave off Cullen, alright?”

Everyone looked at Kate in surprise, no one more so than Cullen.

“Oh well I like that,” Robert said, after a beat. “You didn’t stop them from talking about me.”

“We all knew about you anyhow,” Cassandra said, glaring at Robert.

“You don’t know bollocks about me, Cass,” Robert returned. Cassandra blinked as if he’d slapped her. Kate blinked too. Robert rarely showed temper like that.

“Oh, stop it!” Kate cried, glaring at the lot of them. “Stop it all of you. I thought that the point of this evening was to enjoy each other’s company. And this…”

Kate felt her face go hot, and she didn’t know what else to say. She wasn’t sure if it was drink or anger that drove her words now. But she felt furious. And hurt. And mortified. Here she’d wanted to spend time with Cullen, and had only exposed him to ridicule.

“I’m sorry Cullen,” Kate said. “And you, too, Robert.”

“Why are you apologizing?” Cassandra wanted to know. “Sera and Bull started it.”

“Started what?” Bull said, pausing with his mug to his lips. “What’s the problem? I was just talkin’.”

“You’re embarrassin’ the shems,” Coll told him.

“Was I?” Bull sounded genuinely surprised to hear it. “Well shit, guys. Why didn’t you say so?”

“Humans, chief,” Krem said, shooting him a look.

“Huh? Guess so.”

“It’s fine,” Cullen said, though it didn’t sound like he thought it was fine at all.

“Yeah, you heard ‘im,” Sera said. “It’s fine. So I wanna hear about Cullen’s orgy. And her… Whatever.” Sera pointed a finger at Kate.

“It wasn’t…” Cullen said, through gritted teeth. And Kate, rather stupidly, threw herself into the conversation like a shield:

“You want to know about me? Fine. I only ever had one lover, and it ended rather suddenly when he introduced me to his wife.”

“What?”

This came from Coll - and half a dozen other voices besides. Robert’s brows raised in astonishment, and Ruvena’s eyes went wide.
“Kate-lass, you were ridin’ on a married man?” Coll punched Kate hard on the arm.

“Ow!” Kate said, rubbing her shoulder. “No! He got married. That’s why it ended.”

“Ah,” Coll said, drawing back. “Good then. Was thinkin’ I’d have to drag you out behind the tavern and beat some sense inta you.”

“No, Coll. I’d never… No.”

“Alright, Duchess,” Varric said, folding his arms over his chest. “You can’t just throw out an opener like that and not tell us the story.”

Of course she couldn’t, Kate thought. And that had been her reasoning, right? She’d begun this tale as a way to keep the others from pestering Cullen. Only now, that seemed like a very stupid idea. For Cullen was staring at her in astonishment, and so was everyone else.

“So, this was some mage, right?” Robert asked. “I mean, you never kept company with any of the nobility.”

“Nah,” Coll shook her head. “Musta been someone outside o’ the Circle. ‘Tweren’t no one in it allowed to marry. Exceptin’ the templars,” she added, sliding a suspicious glance over at Cullen.

“Must’ve been a templar then,” Robert said. “Right, Kate?”

Kate’s face grew even hotter. She found it difficult to form words. Having kept the secret for so long, it seemed strange to say anything now. But then, Kate reasoned, Ostwick was miles away and this had happened years ago. She supposed there was no reason for secrecy now.

“Come on, Duchess,” Varric pressed. “Give us a story.”

Kate took a sip of wine - to wet her throat as well as for courage - and began:

“Um, well, I was nineteen. We started, uh… Courting, I guess you’d say? No, not courting. Anyhow, it all started on…”

“Wintersend,” Bull put in.

“Oh.” Kate drew back. “Well, if you’d like to tell my story for me…”

“Nah, that’s all I had on you. Unconfirmed, too. Didn’t mean to interrupt. Carry on.”

“Wintersend is your birthday, Katie,” Robert put in.

“There is something special about birthdays,” Morris sighed.

“Let her talk!” Cassandra glared at all of them. Robert held up his hands in surrender. Kate swallowed and began again:

“So, um, yes. So I’d just turned nineteen, and there was a boy - man, I should say. Nobleman. I’d known him since I was young. He…”

“Ha! ’Twas a nobleman!” Coll pointed a finger at Robert.

“But I kept the affair secret,” Kate continued, “Because he… Because we didn’t want any trouble.”

“Ah, see,” Robert said, pointing right back at Coll. “That’s why I never knew. Hang on. A
nobleman? Why didn’t you tell me, Katie?”

“That’s sort of the point of a secret affair, Robert,” Kate said. “You don’t tell people about them.”

“Who was it?” Robert wanted to know. “It wasn’t Freddy Stanhope, was it? Dear Maker, please tell me it wasn’t Freddy Stanhope.”

“Ew, no.” Kate said, wrinkling her nose.

“Good,” Robert breathed a sigh. “Was it Samuel Islington?”

“No.”

“Harold Penrose?”

“No.”

“Gavin Smythe?”

“Hey, let her tell her own story, Ostwick,” Varric put in.

“Oh sweet Creator,” Robert said, his eyes going wide. “Alan Tilney. The teryn’s son.”

Kate squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn’t deny it. “Yes?” she said weakly, cracking one eye open.

“Maker’s breath!” Robert gaped at her. “How’d you land Alan? Every girl in Ostwick was after him.”


“It’s a Ferelden title,” Varric explained. “Kirkwall has a Viscount. Wycombe has a duke. Starkhaven has a prince, and Ostwick has a teryn.”

“Your lover was a prince?” Dorian asked, brows raised.

“Er, no,” Kate said. “Not a prince.”

“Nobles only go for nobles, is that it?” This came from Sera.

“No,” Kate said, frowning. “I didn’t care about…”

“Well done, dear,” Vivienne said, holding her goblet up as if in toast. “If your Alan is anything like his uncle in Val Royeaux, he must be quite the catch.”

“I thought so at the time,” Kate muttered.

“Wait, wait,” Robert said. “If you and Alan were together since your nineteenth birthday then…” His eyes went wide.

Kate sighed. No way to avoid that question, she supposed.

“I broke things off at Great-Aunt Lucy’s Feast Day ball. The one where Uncle Connell fell down drunk and broke the gift table.”

“Seven years?” Robert gaped at her. “You had an affair with Alan Tilney for seven years?”
“You needn’t to say it like that, Robert.”

“‘Seven Years with a Prince,’” Varric said. “Sounds like the title of a bad romance.”

“He wasn’t a prince,” Kate said, but no one seemed to care about that detail.

“Quite the catch,” Vivienne said, murmuring over her glass. “But really dear, if you’d made a conquest like that, why keep it secret?”

“Wasn’t my idea,” Kate said, unable to keep from grumbling. She realized everyone was waiting for her to elaborate, so she added: “It was bound to cause trouble. Alan’s family had the title, but they also had a habit of spending a lot more than they could afford and, well…”

“Precarious situation when blackmailers are about,” Vivienne said, sympathetically.

“You and Alan,” Robert said, shaking his head. “I would never have guessed.”

“Yes, well, that was the goal,” Kate said. “No one was supposed to know.”

No one was every supposed to know about any of this, Kate thought. And yet it was far too late to stop. Not that it mattered anymore, she supposed.

“Alan and I had known each other for years,” Kate went on, letting a sip of wine ease her way. “He wasn’t afraid of my magic - well, not too much, anyhow. We got to talking on my birthday and then slipped off to…” Kate caught herself there.

“That’s when it began,” she said instead. Beside her, Cullen had been openly staring. Now he looked sharply away.

“And it lasted for seven years,” Robert pressed.

“Yes,” Kate said. “But we saw one another very rarely. Worked out to only a handful of, um… meetings.”

“Dont’ bother bein’ vague, Kate-lass,” Coll said. “I know you’ve got all that time added up in your head.”

“Fine,” Kate said. “Two weeks, four days and five hours together if you must know.”

A murmur went up from around the circle. Cullen made a sort of choking sound.

“The point is,” Kate went on. “It’s quite difficult to have a long-distance secret affair. Especially when you’re a mage and live under lock and key most months of the year.” Kate punctuated this with another sip of wine.

“Hear, hear,” Vivienne said. “Though as a lord’s son, your Alan ought to have had the influence to make you his mistress-in-residence.”

“Er, maybe he did,” Kate said, and her face grew even hotter. “I don’t know. I never thought to ask him about it.”

“Not all of us poke around for a way outta the Circle, Vibs,” Coll said, raising a brow.

“I did not ‘poke around’, dear,” Vivienne said. Her tone was polite, yet sharp as steel. “I merely recognize something of my own situation in the Inquisitor’s. Love is difficult when stretched across shifting social sands.”
Kate didn’t deny it, either the difficulty or the love. She simply said: “Well there you are. That’s it.” She took another sip of wine.

“That’s not it,” Varric said, leaning forward in his chair. “You didn’t get to the good part. You said things ended when your teyrnling introduced you to his wife.”

Oh yes, Kate thought. Of course the storyteller would want to hear about that.

“It wasn’t as exciting as you’d think,” Kate told him.

“No, it wasn’t,” Robert agreed. “Because I was at that party. And I don’t recall any catfights or fireballs.”

“Do you really think I’d resort to such dramatics?” Kate said, a flash of annoyance rising in her. From the corner of her eye, Kate saw Vivienne lift her chin with a look of satisfaction.

“Who was it that Alan married?” Robert asked. “I can picture her face, but can’t recall the name. Doll-like thing. Ruffled dress. Bitch, as I recall…”

“Olivia Olgethorpe,” Kate said, flatly.

“That’s the one,” Robert snapped his fingers.

“Ahh,” Leliana said, her voice quiet, yet somehow audible all the same. “That explains it.”

“Explains what?” Dorian asked. “Do edify those of us who don’t know the ins and outs of the Ostwick nobility.”

“They’ve got ties to the coterie,” Leliana said. “It’s wise you didn’t get on their bad side, Inquisitor.” She looked almost impressed under that hood.

Kate looked down at the floor, staring at the stones below her dangling feet. She could still remember that evening perfectly. Moments that shattered one’s world tended to stick in one’s mind.

“The wedding happened rather hastily, as I understand.” Kate heard her own voice speaking as if from far away, telling a tale that had happened to someone else. “I hadn’t heard anything before that night. News came slowly to the Ostwick Circle, when it came at all. I’d just arrived at Great-Aunt Lucy’s that morning - hadn’t seen the papers. And Alan and I had kept our affair secret, so no one thought to warn me. Alan walked into the ball with Olivia on his arm. I didn’t think anything of it at first. As a teryn’s son, he often escorted ladies around. But then Olivia dragged Alan right up to me and waved her wedding ring under my nose. That’s how I found out.”

“Shiiiiit.”

Varric’s drawn-out curse made Kate’s stomach drop. Huh, she thought. This story sounded rather maudlin when she said it out loud.

“He did what?” Cassandra gasped. It occurred to Kate that the Seeker had been hanging on her every word.

“Not such a princely way to break things off,” Dorian observed.

“Olivia said something to you, though,” Robert said, his brows furrowing. “I didn’t quite catch it at the time. Something about a harp?”

Kate flushed. Oh, right. That.
“Not a harp,” she said. “The conservatory.”

Robert whistled low.

“I don’t get it,” Sera said. “That noble-code or somethin’?”

“Conservatory is a little music room where aristocrats keep their pianos and shit,” Bull said. “Also where they go to bang each other during fancy parties.”

Several eyes swung round to him. Bull just shrugged. “What? By all reports that’s where they usually end up shaggin’.”

“Doesn’t that get noisy with all the instruments?” Morris wanted to know.

“Not unless you get creative,” Dorian chuckled.

“You don’t play the instruments,” Robert explained. “There are settees and couches set up for a daytime audience that make for very soft midnight, er…” He realized Cassandra was glaring at him and stopped there.

“Never mind that,” Robert said. “So anyhow, what was it Olivia said?”

It was a deliberate attempt to keep Cassandra from glaring at him and Kate knew it. And though she frowned at the memory, Kate answered her cousin’s question all the same:

“‘Sorry mage. You’ll have to find another place to spread your lips and sing’.”

“Oooh,” Dorian and Varric winced in unison.

“Yeowch,” Sera cringed. “Hate to say it, but that’s a good one. Your Olge-bitch probably practiced that for a week.”

Kate didn’t doubt it. But curiously enough, Olivia’s words had had the opposite effect of what the woman intended. Seeing that wedding ring had felt like a slap in the face. But the venom in Olivia’s voice had plunged Kate underwater. And Kate had an affinity for water. In that moment, she had floated within her own body, looking out at the party as if from a distant sea.

“What did you do next?” Cassandra asked breathlessly.

“You tore that Ogle-wench’s wig off, right?” Sera said, fiercely. “Kicked your Alan-boy in the balls, yeah?”

“No,” Kate said. “I took a deep breath to keep the room from spinning, and then I wished them joy.”

Everyone was gaping now. Everyone except Morris, who nodded as if Kate’s calm reaction was to be expected. Vivienne and Leliana looked surprised, but smug. Sera shook her head in disappointment.

“That’s not near as good as the Oogly-witch,” she said. “We need to work on your comebacks, Inquisitor.”

“My dear Sera, that was a comeback,” Vivienne said.

“A dumb one,” Sera grumbled.

“I wished them joy,” Kate said again. “Then I asked after Alan’s uncle, or maybe I commented upon
the weather. I don’t quite recall. I’m babbled a lot of polite nonsense and then I excused myself. It was all very civilized.” Kate paused, then added, “It had to be.”

“Why had to be?” Sera wanted to know. “I’dve punched ‘em in the face.”

“That would have accomplished nothing,” Vivienne said, with a withering look in the elf’s direction.

“Might’ve made the party more fun,” Sera said.

“No, it wouldn’t,” Kate told him. “It would have been disastrous.”

“Why disastrous?” Sera wanted to know. “Just ‘cause a few noble pissers would have pissed themselves?”

“Because Alan’s family owed the Oglethorpes a great deal of money,” Kate told her. “And Olivia was always a conniving bi… er, young lady. I saw at once that Alan had agreed to the marriage as a way of settling his family’s debt. I wasn’t about to make things worse for him by antagonizing her. And I certainly wasn’t about to ruin his reputation by making a scene. Or my reputation, for that matter. My family would never have let me come home from the Circle again if I’d caused a fuss. My freedom hung in the balance - such as it was.”

Kate found her hands were shaking and she took another sip of wine. Beside her, Cullen stared into his mug, grimacing as if the milk had gone sour.

“So I went back to dancing,” Kate said. “Went back to handing out gifts. By the end of the evening, everyone who’d ever speculated about me and Alan was convinced we’d never been together at all.”

“Ah, see,” Bull waggled a finger at Kate. “That was why I didn’t have shit on you. Did you have anything on her?” he asked Leliana. The Nightingale shook her head.

“So you let him go?” Cassandra asked, eyes wide and watery.

“I had to,” Kate said.

“Then your young gentleman was a fool,” Vivienne said, looking rather put out. “Any man of standing would have kept you as his mistress regardless. You’d clearly proven your discretion a thousand times over.”

“Oh, Alan did offer to keep me,” Kate said. Beside her, Cullen looked up sharply. “I just…” Kate stopped there. Her insides felt strangely hollow.

Kate could still remember that night perfectly: the way the dancers kept dancing, the way the music kept playing. She’d felt her world was crumbling, and yet, somehow, the party had gone on. Yet she’d smiled and joked and even laughed aloud - and no one knew how numb she felt inside. At long last, Kate had made her escape. She’d slipped out into the hallway, headed for her guest room.

Then Alan had stepped out of the shadows…

“Katerina.”

Alan’s whisper sent a shiver down her spine, and Kate turned at once.

“Alan,” she said. “What do you…”

Alan closed the distance and kissed her. And for one moment, Kate allowed herself to melt into him.
She allowed herself to imagine what had happened back there in the ballroom was some awful dream. But then sense and decency returned to her, and she pushed him away.

“Alan, don’t,” Kate said. “You’re…” She hadn’t been able to say ‘you’re married.’ The words hurt too much.

“Olivia’s a snake,” Alan replied. “You know she is. I wanted to tell you myself, but I couldn’t find a way. Olivia heard something - or she guessed something. It wasn’t me, I swear! I didn’t tell her. You know I never meant for anyone to find out about us.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Kate said.

As soon as she said it, the words took on a different meaning.

“Katerina, I’m so sorry,” Alan said.

Kate nodded. She knew that, just as she knew that it changed nothing.

“It’s forgiven,” she said. It was true.

“It’s forgotten,” she added.

That part was a lie.

“Maker, you’re...” Alan blinked at her. “You’re incredible, Katerina. You know that, right?”

“Of course,” Kate chuckled. But inside, she wasn’t so sure. If she was so incredible, then why did she live in a cell in a tower? If she was so incredible, then why had Alan insisted on secrecy all these years? And if she was so incredible, then why had Alan agreed to a marriage of convenience? Why hadn’t he found a way to be with Kate, instead?

“You know, Katerina,” Alan began, “I’ve been thinking. This doesn’t have to change things. Olivia spends most of her time at her flat in town, and I prefer the estates. If you ever wanted to… You know.”

He didn’t outright say it, but Kate had known exactly what he meant.

“Alan, do you honestly think that Olivia would allow me to visit from the Circle? That your mother-in-law would allow it? They’re rather jealous of their possessions, you know.”

Kate had known that was cruel, but she couldn’t entirely control her temper. At her words, Alan flinched.

“I don’t see why it should be a problem,” he said, though he looked uncertain. “I mean, the other wo... er, times...”

Kate heard the slip that he tried to hide. She felt it in her gut.

“Oh,” she said, softly. She looked up at him - met Alan’s eyes for the first time that evening.

“So this wasn’t your only love affair.”

Kate hadn’t phrased it as a question. She hadn’t said it as an accusation, either. She let it fall between them as fact. Alan’s eyes slid away from her as he muttered:

“Come on, Katerina. Don’t act so innocent with me. We all know what goes on in the Circles.”
Kate blinked at that. Her temper had kicked in, just enough to put an edge to her words:

“So that’s it then? You assumed that mages are promiscuous and so…”

“Maker no!” Alan cried. “Everyone knows your reputation. You’re something of a prude, really.”

Kate went from annoyed to mollified to furious, all in the space of a few statements.

“And what, may I ask, is so wrong with prudence?” she demanded. The air had turned cold around her.

“Don’t… Not with the frost, Katerina,” Alan cringed. “You promised no magic. Not around me.”

So she had, Kate thought. That hadn’t struck her as odd until now.

I don’t know why you’re being so childish about it,” Alan went on. “I know you said I was your first, but surely you didn’t… I mean, I didn’t ask you to stay faithful to me.”

Kate felt her face go hot, but she trusted the dim light would hide her blush. She pretended to examine her fingernails instead.

“You know, some people would consider faithfulness a virtue, not a failing.”

Alan’s expression was one of astonishment - or maybe disbelief. “Good Maker, Katerina. Did you honestly think anything would come of this? You can’t possibly have thought that.”

But Kate had thought that. To her everlasting shame, she had hoped - for seven, long, patient years - she had hoped that something would come of this. She’d fallen in love with her childhood friend, and…

No, Kate realized. She’d fallen in love with a dream. She was one of the cleverest mages in the Ostwick Circle, and yet she’d been fooled by a boy without courage. It disgusted her - both Alan’s deception and her own stupidity.

But she’d be damned if she let him see how much he’d hurt her, Kate thought. So she gathered up the shreds of her pride, and gave Alan a brittle smile.

“Goodbye, Alan,” Kate had said, “I hope your marriage is everything you dreamed it would be.”

Kate turned on her heel then, feeling a small thrill of triumph in spite of everything. For once, she’d not said too much or too little, but just enough. And now she was walking away, her head held high.

Alan ruined that, too.

“How dare you?” he hissed at her back. “How dare you try to shame me? I am a teryn’s son. I have responsibilities. And mages aren’t for marrying, Katerina. You knew that. You must have known that.”

She had known that.

Kate had forgotten it, but never again. And in spite of Alan’s words, Kate hadn’t looked back. Even as tears had filled her eyes, she walked on, turned the corner, and headed for her rooms. She reached the bedchamber door as the first sob escaped her. Kate slipped through the door and shut it behind her. For a moment, she rested her head on the solid oak.

Then a tear had fallen, and another and another. Kate slid to the floor, her silk dress pooling around
her, her bracelets glinting in the moonlight. Kate tore the jewelry from her wrists, but it was no use. These fine clothes were her chains, Kate thought wildly, just as her guest room was a cage, just as her bloodline and her manners and her magic formed the bars of her prison. There was no escape, Kate realized. There was no way out. And even if she did escape the Circle’s walls, where would she go? Who would she keep company with? Who would ever - ever - want a mage?

“How dare you, Kate?” she whispered into the silence. Her tears tasted salty on her lips. “How dare you hope for more?”

In the quiet of a borrowed room, Kate had placed her hands over her face and wept.

“It wasn’t worth the trouble,” Kate said, quietly.

She went to take a sip of wine, only to find that her glass was empty.

“That feckin’ edhis-ava weren’t worth any of it!” Coll said, stoutly. “Sweet Mythal, Kate-lass. Why didn’t you say nothin’ all these years?”

“Habit?” Kate forced a smile. “Anyhow, it happened a long time ago.”

“Three years, lass,” Coll said, watching her closely. “Ain’t that long.”

“Three years is plenty of time to congratulate yourself on making a narrow escape from stupidity,” Kate said, managing a wry smile. This brought a small chuckle from Varric, and a nod from Dorian. Kate lifted her now-empty wine glass, and toasted the crowd.

“Well, there’s your story,” she said.

“That sucks,” Ruvena said, flatly. She then blinked, as if she had not meant to speak aloud. “I mean… Sorry, Inquisitor.”

Kate laughed at the understatement. “No, you’re right, captain. It does, in fact, suck.”

“You bore it well, my dear,” Vivienne said, gently. “And discreetly, too. Ballroom gossip is a pernicious poison. Most people would have melted under such an assault.”

“Another mark in your favor, Inquisitor,” Leliana said, looking pleased.

“Um, thanks?” Kate said, not sure she either deserved or wanted these compliments.

“Ehhh, that’s a battlefield I’ll leave to you, Duchess,” Varric said. “Aristocrats are more vicious than blood mages, darkspawn… shit. Even spiders.”

“Spiders?” Robert asked him. “You have a problem with spiders?”

“I do when they’re bigger than me,” Varric replied.

“Well, in case you were wondering, Katie,” Robert said. “Olivia’s taken to drink and Alan’s in debt to the coterie again. Hope that makes you feel better.”

Kate frowned. “It doesn’t, actually.”

“Ah!” Robert shouted, slapping his cards down on the table before him. “And there’s my win! Take that, you doubters!”
“What?” Barris jerked upright, as if he’d forgotten there was even a game on.

“Bah!” Varric threw down his own cards. “And I was so close to a royal flush.”

“Pay up, pay up,” Robert said, waving his fingers toward himself.

Iron Bull squinted at Robert’s cards, then at his own. “Wait,” Bull said, frowning. “You had the Knight of Roses? I thought it was still in the draw pile.”

“I do believe it was in the draw pile,” Leliana said.

Robert spread his hands wide. “Who can argue with luck?” he asked.

“A loser with a blade, if you’re not careful,” Leliana said. “Work on your slight of hand, Scout Trevelyan.”

“Yes ma’am,” Robert said, snapping off a salute.

“How could you be cheating at cards when your cousin was telling that story?” Cassandra said. She looked at Robert as though she thought him heartless.

“Who said I cheated?” Robert wanted to know. “Ought to call you out for suggesting such a thing. Shall we play another round?”

“No, no, stay,” Dorian said, patting Barris on the shoulder as he came over to the table. “You’ve got teach me how to play.”

Dorian grabbed a chair from a nearby table, turned it around and straddled it. Barris glanced over at Dorian and stayed put.

“How about you, Curly?” Varric asked, shuffling the cards.

“Huh? Me?” Cullen looked up with a start.

“Come join us, ser,” Ruvena said. She looked at Cullen expectantly.

“I, um…”

For some reason, Cullen looked up at Kate. He stared at her for a moment, and Kate managed to meet his eyes. Maker, he was handsome, Kate thought. And she’d just told a very embarrassing story in his presence. This was not how she’d envisioned their evening conversation happening. Not at all. For right now, Cullen had a very strange expression on his face. Disapproving, maybe? Or had the milk made him sick? Truly, he looked a bit ill. His brows were drawn together as if he wanted to ask Kate something. But she didn’t know what the question was, and so she couldn’t answer.
“How about you, Duchess?” Varric called, startling Kate. “Want me to deal you in?”

“Oh, um…”

Kate wanted to say yes. She wanted to want to stay. But quite suddenly, Kate felt hollow and spent. She felt that she didn’t belong here, in spite Varric’s invitation and the fact that all her friends were here. Her own embarrassment seemed to be shooing her away.

“I think I’m going to, um… mingle,” Kate lied.

“Are you sure?” Cullen spoke at last. “Shall I…?”

But Cullen didn’t complete that thought and Kate didn’t wait to hear the offer. She shook her head and waved at the card game.

“No, no,” she said. “Stay and play if you like. I’m just going for a short walk.”

_A short walk to my room_, she added silently. _Where I’ll hide for the rest of the night._

“Ser?” Ruvena prompted. There seemed to be an edge to her voice. Cullen looked like he might say something more to Kate, but then he turned to the card game with an “Er, yes.” He shuffled his chair in Ruvena’s direction. She scooted aside to make room for him. Kate paused at that – then pushed the thought aside.

It wasn’t her business, Kate told herself. None of Cullen’s personal life was her business. Nor his present interests, nor his past exploits…

_Still_, some part of her mind whispered. _Ten years?_

Not her business, Kate told herself. She turned and headed for the door. Kate hadn’t gone two steps before someone called:

“Kate darling!” Kate turned to find Vivienne had followed her.

“Before you go, my dear,” the enchanter said, crossing the distance between them, “I meant to tell you…” Vivienne leaned over and whispered low:

“Are you aware that your shirt is rather transparent?”

Kate’s eyes went wide. She looked up at Vivienne in alarm.

“I thought as much,” Vivienne said, nodding at Kate’s expression. “Didn’t imagine you meant to start a trend of visible bralettes. Though it does look rather Antivan, the way you’ve styled it,” Vivienne cocked her head, as if considering the fashion. “Still, if that wasn’t what you intended, you might want to change before you make the rounds. Have a good night, darling.”

With this, Vivienne turned and strutted away.

“I… Yes, thank you,” Kate sputtered after her.

What the Void, Kate thought? How could Coll and Cullen and Robert and Dorian and _all those people_ have let her sit on a table, telling embarrassing stories about past lovers with her bra showing? Maker’s breath.

Kate whirled around and bolted for the door. As she slipped through the crowds, a pale figure appeared by her side.
“A few of them didn’t notice,” Cole told Kate without preamble. “But most of them did. Cullen did.”

“Oh, Andraste’s tears,” Kate said, pushing past him.

“They call it ‘Herald’s Rest,’” Cole said. “But you still need rest.”

“I need some air,” Kate told him.

“Of course you do,” Cole said. “Your lungs won’t work without it.”

Kate couldn’t argue with that. She dove for the door, yanked it open and threw herself out into the courtyard. The door swung shut behind her.

It was like plunging into dark water from the light of day. The noises of the tavern were muffled now, as if coming from inside a wrapped box. The moon had set, and the enchanted lanterns had dimmed and sunk. They skuffed along the ground with the last of their flickering magic, like glowing paper tumbleweeds. The courtyard was nearly empty. It seemed everyone had gone to bed or packed into the tavern for warmth.

Here she went again, Kate thought - fleeing yet another party where she didn’t belong.

But no, Kate thought. That wasn’t true. She belonged here. That tavern had been named for her, for the Maker’s sake. And yet, Kate thought, as she stopped and looked back at the tavern, she still felt like an outsider. Quite literally, she was standing out here in the dark, with paper lanterns floating about her feet.

It seemed that the role of Inquisitor was the most isolating position of all.

Oh come now, Kate told herself. No one in that pub had pushed her away or rejected her. Her friends had been kind, if a bit tipsy. And maybe she’d bungled her not-really-a-date with Cullen, but it wasn’t entirely her fault. So perhaps, Kate thought, perhaps she ought to try and salvage this evening after all. Maybe she should return to the light and the laughter inside. Surely there was time enough for Varric to deal her in on that next round of Wicked Grace. Then Kate could sit beside Cullen and…

*How dare you?*

Kate stopped short. She recognized that voice in her head. And now she realized whose voice it was. Curse Alan for slipping into her thoughts like that. And yet, Kate thought, his warning wasn’t entirely wrong. He’d been right. That’s why the words hurt so much. Men like Alan did have responsibilities. Men like Cullen had responsibilities, too. They couldn’t be expected to drop their obligations for the sake of some heartsick girl. And mages weren’t for marrying. Kate knew that well enough. The Chantry almost never granted the special license required. And every eligible man that Kate had ever known had passed her by. So how could Kate think - how dare she think - that someone like Cullen would want her company? Alan had dazzled Kate, but Cullen was the better man by far. Cullen was handsome and charming and he opened doors for people. And Kate wasn’t the only woman who had noticed this - not if Captain Ruvena was any indication. It seemed Cullen could have his pick of the Inquisition. So why would he ever choose her?

The only reason he would, Kate realized, was if he felt obligated to. If Kate pressed her advantage as Inquisitor, Cullen might feel that he must return her attentions. And that would be awful. Kate wanted Cullen to like her for herself. Just as she wanted…

Maker, wouldn’t anyone ever like her for herself? A tear tracked down Kate’s cheek, and she swiped it away.
Oh come now, Kate told herself sharply. She was being ridiculous. She was no longer a rejected mistress, but the Herald of the Inquisition. She had people counting on her. She had a job to do. Come to think of it, her job required her to set out for Crestwood at the break of dawn. Set out with Cullen at her side, Maker help her. What she needed now was sleep, Kate decided, not more brooding. Clearly, the drink must have gone to her head. That was why she felt so tender and teary when there was no real reason for it.

Kate turned her back on the lights of the tavern and stalked off into the dark. She wasn’t looking for romance, Kate reminded herself, kicking a paper lantern out of her path. She didn’t need anything but friendship and her freedom. And if she dreamed of love, the kind that bonded two people together in spite of every obstacle, the kind that gave a person a home…

No, Kate told herself. She didn’t believe in a love like that. She’d reached for it years ago, but she wouldn’t make that mistake again.

She didn’t dare.
Barris was unlucky at cards. He had neither the temperament for cheating, nor the patience for counting the deck. But Barris didn’t mind. He had learned long ago that a poor card player was welcome in any game. The key, Barris found, was not to drink too much, not to wager too much, and not to take the teasing too seriously.

“You’d better step up your game, templar,” Robert said, glancing over at Barris. “And I mean it this time. Final round is for high stakes players only.”

“This is my final hand, Trevelyan,” Barris assured Robert.

The Tevinter mage - Dorian, looked up in amusement. “You said that an hour ago.”

True enough, Barris thought. He supposed that he ought to have quit when Ser Cullen had. After one round, the commander had excused himself from the game and gone off to bed. Ruvena had given up one round after Cullen left, a scowl upon her face. Barris might have left then, too. Or he could have quit when Lieutenant Krem returned to his chair beside the bard, or when Cassandra and Leliana headed off, or when Vivienne left to talk to some friend, or when Sera and Morris went looking for more food. Barris probably should have quit playing when the Dalish elf had revealed that she’d known how to play Wicked Grace all along. Coll had merely feigned ignorance long enough to learn everyone’s tells. Right now, she was taking Barris for all of his coin.

“Sure, this’ll be over soon, templar,” Coll said, elbowing Barris in the ribs. “You too, Vint,” she added, looking over at Dorian. “Better have something good or you’re out.”

“Fasta vass,” Dorian replied.

Barris didn’t know what that meant, but it didn’t sound complimentary. Dorian had not been nearly as calm about his losses as Barris. But then, Dorian also had drunk a great deal more wine than Barris had.

Dorian caught Barris looking at him, and Barris quickly looked back to his cards. This entire night had been surreal, Barris thought. Less than a month ago, Barris had been considered a rising star in the Templar Order. He had been a war hero, a respected minor lord of Ferelden, and he’d never once set a foot out of line or offended against propriety. Now Barris sat playing Wicked Grace with a Tevinter mage, a qunari spy, a dwarven novelist, a Dalish elf, and Robert Trevelyan. Barris wasn’t certain who among this crew would have drawn more disapproval from his former associates - or his father.

Probably the mage, Barris mused. As a Tevinter magister… No, not a magister. Dorian had corrected Barris on that assumption about five minutes into the game. Dorian was a - what was the word again? Ah yes, an ‘altus.’ Either way, Dorian wasn’t at all what Barris had expected of Tevinter mages. Dorian wasn’t wearing bloodstained robes, for a start. He hadn’t once tried to enslave any of the present company or raise a demon. Instead, Dorian reminded Barris of a dandified Orlesian...
soldier: well-spoken, well-bred, well-groomed, and entirely too aware of his own good looks.

In fact, Barris thought, looking around the table, none of these people were what he had expected. Coll was clever and funny, Iron Bull was like any other mercenary captain Barris had ever met: equal parts hard-ass and mother hen. Robert Trevelyan had turned out to be a lot less devious than his reputation suggested, meaning that only Varric Tethras lived up to rumor. But then, considering that Varric had written his own rumors, that was to be expected.

But then, what did rumor matter? If Barris had listened to rumors and followed orders back in Therinfal, he’d be a red templar by now. The ‘notorious’ Robert Trevelyan had saved Barris from that fate. Barris felt quite grateful to the rogue. Actually, Barris felt quite grateful toward all these people, every odd one of them. Instead of dying a slow death as a monster, Barris was a proud officer of the Inquisition. He was having a marvelous time of it, too.

It seemed heresy suited him just fine.

“Good hand, Barris?” Dorian asked.

“Uh…” Barris realized he’d been smirking to himself. He wiped the expression off of his face and took a look at his cards. He’d entirely forgotten what he had. Oh, that’s right. Rubbish, that’s what he had.

“Sweet Mythal, templar!” Coll groaned. “Don’t tell him what you’ve got.”

“I didn’t,” Barris said, looking up in confusion.

“It’s written all over your face, boyo,” Coll said, waving her tattooed fingers at her own tattooed face. “Creators help you eejits. But ‘tis your loss. For there’s the Angel of Death.” She threw the card down on the pile in triumph.

“Come on,” Bull said. “That’s the fifth time someone’s called before I got a good hand.”

“You have a shit hand,” Robert observed.

“I know, right?”

Barris set his cards on the pile face-down. There was no point in showing his cards. They’d been even worse than Bull’s. Dorian chucked his cards on the table in disgust. Varric, however, quietly turned his cards around and fanned them out wide. There was a pause, and then…

“Go on!” Coll shouted.

“Never discount the dwarf,” Varric said, smugly. He placed the cards neatly on the table.

Barris supposed not. For Varric had all the high-ranking songs: Mercy, Twilight, Autumn, and Temerity, too.

“I thought you had bollocks!” Coll cried.

“I do have bollocks,” Varris replied, gathering up the deck. “I also have the best cards. Pay up, Elfroot.”

“Elfroot?” Bull frowned.

“Nickname,” Varric said.
“‘Circles’ was better,” Bull said.

“‘Circles’ was shit,” Varric said.

“Better call her ‘Nettles,’” Robert suggested. “Or ‘Rashvine,’ or…”

“‘Elfroot’ is grand,” Coll said, imperiously. “Only I’ll be winnin’ all that coin back from you, I will. Deal again, dwarf.”

“Far be it from me to deny such a gracious request,” Varric said. “Who else is in?”

Barris looked to his markers. He had one wooden chip left. “I’m out,” he said. And he meant it this time.

“I’m out as well,” Dorian said.

Barris looked over, and for a moment, he and Dorian locked eyes. Then, quite suddenly, Dorian fell to the floor.

There was a pause as everyone at the table stared at one another. Then they looked looked over the edge of the table. Dorian sat on the floor beside his chair, apparently stunned. Then he burst out laughing. He had a very loud laugh. Half the tavern looked over in surprise.

“What happened, Vint?” Coll wanted to know.

“Do you know, I’m not sure,” Dorian replied, reaching for the table. “I think the chair moved of it’s own - thank you - of it’s own accord.”

Bull tried to help Dorian back into his chair, but the mage insisted on standing up. He swayed on his feet, his eyes unfocused.

“Whoa there, Sparkler,” Varric said, as Dorian leaned over the table. Without thinking, Barris stood and gripped Dorian by the arm.

Alright, that was strange, Barris thought. He should add ‘well-muscled’ to Dorian’s list of unexpected traits. The mage had rather brawny arms by the feel of them. Dorian must be as fit as a templar. Then again, Barris supposed he should have guessed as much by looking. Dorian’s armor left little to the imagination, after all.

“Ah, thank you,” Dorian said, leaning heavily on Barris.

“Don’t mention it,” Barris replied.

“Think you can make it back to your room, Vint?” Iron Bull wanted to know.

“Of course,” Dorian said, standing tall. He swayed backward this time, and Barris steadied him yet again.

“You’re dead scuttered, lad,” Coll observed.

“I only had the one drink,” Dorian told her.

“One bottle,” Coll corrected.

“And a dram of maraas lok,” Bull added.
“Oh yes,” Dorian said, looking up to the rafters. He seemed to be picturing all those glasses lined up above his head.

Barris sighed. He could see where this was going.

“I’ll get him back to the library,” Barris said.

“You sure?” Varric asked, but he sounded relieved that he would not have to deal with it. Around the table, Coll, Robert, and Iron Bull did not look up from their cards.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Barris said.

After all, Barris thought, both the Templar Code of Chivalry and the etiquette of Ferelden knights were quite clear in such cases. They dictated that Barris ought to help any incapacitated person get safely home. Of course, Barris had never heard of such courtesies being extended to a Tevinter mage. But then, he reasoned, that was all the more reason to help Dorian out. Chivalry should extend across borders, or else it was just another form of prejudice.

“Come on then,” Barris said. He tried to help Dorian navigate the space between the table and the chair.

“I’m fine,” Dorian said, trying to wave Barris off. “I…” Dorian bumped the table and sent his empty wine bottle crashing to the floor.

“Alright, fine,” Dorian muttered. “Help a man out, Barris? There’s a good fellow.”

Barris gripped Dorian by the elbow and helped him stumble away. The crowds had thinned, leaving the room clear, but the tables full. Varric and Coll looked up to call out farewells, but Robert and Iron Bull remained engrossed in their cards.

“Who do you think will prevail?” Dorian asked, looking over his shoulder. He was so busy looking back at the game, he nearly ran into a pole.

“I think Ser Cullen did, by leaving early,” Barris remarked.

“Ha!” Dorian laughed loudly. Barris felt his stomach knot in response. When Dorian laughed like that, Barris could feel the sound in his own belly.

“No question about that,” Dorian agreed. “Cullen’s the most sensible man of the lot. Possibly the handsomest, too.”

Barris tried not hear the speculation in that sentence.

“Then again,” Dorian added, turning to look at Barris, “You’re rather handsome yourself. Is that a templar thing?”

Barris wasn’t quite sure how he ran into a table, but he did. The people gathered around it looked up in surprise.

“Sorry,” Barris said, dragging Dorian away. “Sorry.”

“You’re my escort home?” Dorian giggled as he spoke. “You’re a drunk as I am!”

“No, I’m not,” Barris said. He felt his face heat. He shooed Dorian toward the tavern door.

“You’re not my escort, or not drunk?” Dorian wanted to know. He rammed into the doorframe,
wincing at the impact to his shoulder.

“I’m neither,” Barris said, holding the door open.

“What a gentleman,” Dorian said, looking up with a grin.

Barris shot an apologetic glance back at the table they’d just passed. A few of them gave Barris sympathetic looks, while the others had gone back to their drinking. Across the tavern, it seemed the Wicked Grace game went on in earnest now that the weaker players were gone.

“Goodnight,” Barris muttered to no one in particular.

Barris turned, only to realize that he’d lost Dorian. Barris stood in an empty doorway, which opened onto a deserted courtyard.

“Oh, blast,” Barris said. He hurried out into the night, letting the door swing shut behind him.

Thankfully, Dorian had not gone far. The mage staggered along the cobblestones, stumbling over what looked like a deflated paper lantern. Dorian stomped on the thing, and it sputtered up a little puff of golden dust.

“Ha!” Dorian laughed. Barris shook his head. That sound was far too clear and bright for nighttime. Dorian had a daylight kind of laughter.

“Ah, look at that!” Dorian said. He lifted his chin and waved his arms wide.

Barris looked up. The bright band of stars known as Alindra’s River spanned the heavens overhead. The stars seemed brighter and closer here at Skyhold, Barris noticed. On a night like this, it looked as though the whole castle might be turned over like a bowl, pouring everyone out into the endless sky. Feeling sudden vertigo, Barris looked back down. His eyes landed on Dorian.

“Beautiful night,” Dorian said, dreamily.

“It is, rather.” Barris agreed. He then realized he was looking at Dorian as he said that. Barris looked down at the castle grounds instead. They were strewn with debris and discarded lanterns. That sight was rather less beautiful, Barris thought. He was glad he wasn’t on the cleaning crew.

“That was a lot of fun,” Dorian said, staggering forward. “Didn’t you have a lot of fun? I usually… Damn lanterns,” Dorian stomped another one into golden dust, “I usually stay out a bit later than this. But still, it was a nice evening. Good wine, good food, good company…”

Dorian turned and smiled at Barris. Even by starlight, Barris could see a spark of interest in the mage’s eyes.

Barris quickly looked away. It didn’t mean anything, Barris told himself. Dorian had been flirting with Barris all evening, but then, Dorian had been flirting with everybody. Besides, the man had an entire bottle of wine in his belly. His smiles shouldn’t be taken seriously at this hour.

“Let’s get you to bed,” Barris said.

“Alright,” Dorian said, gamely. Barris did a double take.

“I didn’t mean…”

“I know,” Dorian said. He took a stutter step as his foot hit the stairs up to the great hall. Barris held out a hand to steady Dorian, and Dorian began climbing carefully, concentrating on each step.
“I do worry about little Kate though,” Dorian said, about three steps in and without preamble. “She never came back after that whole prince thing. I hope she’s alright.”

Barris was certain that ‘little Kate’ had been just fine. This was the Inquisitor they were talking about, not a lost child.

“I imagine a great many people wanted to talk to her,” Barris said.

“Yes, but that’s just the… Oops!” Dorian slipped on a step, and Barris caught him by the arm, “That’s just the - Maker, who made these stairs so steep? That’s… Oh, not that direction! Hullo. I’ll break my neck if I go that way. Hmm, what was I saying?”

“No idea,” Barris said. He focused his attention on guiding Dorian up the flight of stairs, rather than off the edge of them.

“Damn Sera and her questions though,” Dorian said, wrinkling his nose. Barris paused. That’s right. Dorian’s history… Was none of his business, Barris told himself.


“You seem not to, um, care for Bull much,” Barris said, studiously keeping his eyes on the great hall ahead.

“Still haven’t made up my mind.” Dorian said.

Barris decided that was none of his business, either. So instead of thinking about Dorian’s past history or future plans, Barris concentrated on getting Dorian into to the great hall without further incident. Just inside, a fire burned low.

“Come on then,” Barris said. He started to lead Dorian toward the library door.

“No, no. That way,” Dorian pointed at the opposite door, the one that led to the gardens.

“But I thought…”

“That I slept among the books? No!” Dorian laughed. “My room is just down from yours.”

“It is?” Barris asked, startled. He wasn’t sure which surprised him more - that a Tevinter mage lived down the hall from him, or that Barris hadn’t noticed it. But then, Barris had kept a busy schedule all week. He’d scarcely been inside of his rooms except to sleep.

“I hope to get better quarters eventually,” Dorian said, yawning. “I have to share with Sera and Varric and Robert at present. They snore. All of them.”

“Then why aren’t they escorting you home?” Barris wanted to know.

“Last call?” Dorian shrugged, and nearly fell to the floor. Barris caught him, then paused. Then - knowing he would probably regret it - Barris looped Dorian’s arm over his shoulder.

Barris regretted it. Dorian smelled of sweet wine and cologne and leather. It was a good smell. Furthermore, Barris could now feel the skin of Dorian’s bare forearm - and why did the man only have one sleeve on his armor, Barris wondered? Barris kicked open the door to the gardens, trying not to notice the way that Dorian’s armor didn’t entirely cover his chest muscles either.

“Ah,” Dorian said, waving out at the moonlit courtyard before them. “Here we are! This is my favorite view in the space. Aside from the mountains. And the lake. And the training grounds. Do
“you know, my favorite part of the day is when all you templars strip down to your undershirts for your sword practice? I can see you perfectly from my window in the library – Ow!”

Barris had stumbled at that last statement, running Dorian into the doorframe.

“She’s,” he mumbled.

“No permanent harm done,” Dorian said, though he clutched his head with his free hand.

They stumbled into the cloistered walkway, then down the hall. Off in the garden, Barris saw a movement. It took shape a moment later as two people trying to fit on one bench - lengthwise, it seemed. Dorian chuckled low.

“‘Tis the night for it,” Dorian murmured.

Barris ignored that as best he could - both the couple, and Dorian’s comment. Instead, he focused on leading Dorian to the stairs. Really, this short walk was taking much too long.

“You didn’t go home with that Ruvena girl,” Dorian said, suddenly. His words came right by Barris’ ear, and Barris made the mistake of looking over at Dorian in surprise. Dorian’s face was right beside Barris’ own. Barris flushed and looked away.

“Uh, no,” he said.

“But you invited her,” Dorian pressed. “To the tavern.”

“Just company,” Barris said, shrugging. That didn’t work so well with Dorian on his shoulders. They’d reached the stairs now, and Barris concentrated on leading Dorian up the flight of them.

“I owed Robert a drink,” Barris went on, filling the awkward silence with muttered words. “For all that business at Therinfal. And I owed Ruvena a drink because she covered a shift for me. Wanted to pay them back.”


“I imagine Ruvena wanted to go home with the commander, though,” Dorian said. “That’s the impression I got, anyhow.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Barris said. As a rule, he didn’t engage in gossip about his fellow officers.

“And I suppose Cullen returned to his rooms alone. Pity.”

Barris said nothing. He got Dorian up to the second level of the courtyard, where a balcony ringed the space and upper rooms lined one side of the wall.

“Which is yours?” Barris asked.

“This one here,” Dorian nodded. Barris helped him stumble over to the door, and Dorian pushed it open. Or at least, Dorian tried to push the door open. He nearly fell over the threshold. Barris, quite uncomfortable now, opened the door and helped Dorian stagger the last few feet to his bed. Dorian sat heavily on the edge of the mattress, then fell back against the quilts and spread his arms wide.

“A beautiful night!” Dorian announced to the ceiling.

“You are completely drunk,” Barris said. It was an unnecessary observation, but it brought a smile to Dorian’s face. The door swung shut behind them, leaving them in darkness.
“Um,” Barris said. “I should probably go.”

“Probably,” Dorian said. In the dark, his voice sounded lower, more intimate. Barris felt his stomach knot yet again. Knots on knots now. Barris turned for the door.

“Do you want a nightcap?” Dorian asked, as Barris’ fingers found the door handle. Barris went very still.

“I assume that’s not a hat you wear to bed.”

“Ha!” Dorian laughed. The sound was bright in the darkness. “No. It’s a drink, my friend. Last drink of the night.”

With this, a light appeared. Dorian held a ball of unburning flame in his hand. He let it roll along his fingers for a moment, then gave it a little flick. The light shot up into the air and hovered among the rafters, lending the room a firelit glow.

“A hat you wear to bed,” Dorian chuckled, seemingly transfixed by his summoned light. “Only Fereldens…”

Barris didn’t know what to say to that - either the insult to his countrymen, or the invitation.

“I think we’ve had enough drinks,” he suggested.

“I have,” Dorian said, glancing over at Barris with a sly smile on his lips. “You haven’t.”

Barris swallowed. What should he make of that? What should he make of Dorian in general? Because the more that Barris thought about it, the more that Dorian reminded Barris of…

Barris took a step back.

“I’ve got to get to bed,” he said, completely flustered now. “I’m leaving for Crestwood at dawn, you see, and…”

“Oh?” Dorian rolled to one side and propped his head on his hand. “So am I!”

Barris blinked. “You’re going to Crestwood, too?”

“I am,” Dorian nodded. “Fairly hush-hush mission from what I can gather. Seems Leliana and the Inquisitor have hand-picked the crew.”

“Captain Cullen asked me to come,” Barris said. “Got the assignment just this afternoon, and I…”

Barris stopped there. What in the Maker’s name was he doing? He’d been so unnerved that he’d completely forgotten himself.

“We really shouldn’t discuss it,” Barris said, stiffly.

“Shouldn’t we?” Dorian asked, raising a brow.

“Um, no,” Barris said. Dorian shrugged and sprawled back on the bed once again.

“Ah, well. If we aren’t going to speak about our mission, how shall we occupy our time until morning?”

“Sleeping?” Barris suggested.
Dorian pursed his lips and slanted a glance at Barris, as if they were actors in some play and Barris had just flubbed his lines.

“What?” Barris said, defensively.

“Such restraint,” Dorian said, closing his eyes. But his lips curled in a smile - his fine mustache curled, too. And for one moment Barris considered…

Well, obviously Barris didn’t consider doing anything right now. The codes of chivalry were clear about this. Dorian was entirely too drunk, and Barris wasn’t about to indulge in a nightcap or anything else with the man. Instead, Barris would leave Dorian alone to sleep this off. But perhaps another night…

No, Barris thought, shaking his head. That would never work. Dorian might be a friendly sort of fellow, but the two of them came from entirely different worlds. This man was a mage from Tevinter. There were several complications in that. For first, Dorian was Tevene. And he was a mage. And he was a man, for the Maker’s sake. Barris could only imagine what his father would say.

Strike that. Barris knew exactly what his father would say. He’d heard it years ago.

Five years ago, to be precise.

“Damn it, boy! Your own training partner? What were you thinking? Your mother was fit to be tied, she was so shocked. And don’t expect me to write to your Knight-Captain, either. I think they’re right, sending your ‘friend’ off to Brynnlaw and you to the ass-end of the Bannorn. Maker’s balls, if you’ll take either, then why not stick to wenches? If I’d have thought it would keep you honest, I would have engaged you to the arl’s girl and found someone else for your brother.”

As if it was that simple, Barris thought with a frown. As if anything was as simple as his father or the Chantry had wanted it to be. But it didn’t matter now, Barris supposed. What mattered now was that it was nearly midnight, and he only had a few hours left until dawn.

Though Dorian’s eyes were still closed, Barris gave the man a formal bow.

“Good evening, Messere Pavus,” Barris said.

“It’s Altus Pavus, actually,” Dorian murmured dreamily. A moment later, a soft snore escaped him.

Dorian’s summoned light shuddered among the rafters, wavering with each snore. Barris gave Dorian one last look. He briefly considered trying to tuck Dorian’s legs up on the bed so that the man didn’t fall off in the middle of the night. But as that seemed to invite all sorts of embarrassing scenarios, Barris decided against it. Barris turned his back on Dorian and left the room, satisfied he’d done his duty for the night.

Barris remained unsatisfied in certain other respects, but oh well. That was chivalry for you.

“Oh sweet Maker!” Hawke screamed.

She threw her head back, mouth open on a gasp, breasts heavy and full and slicked with sweat. Anders licked her nipple, causing Hawke to buck once again. The orgasm crashed on and on…

Anders’s cock pulsing deep inside of her, his thumb at her clit, and that extra punch of magic shuddering down every vein. Arcane energies tangled and teased and shot jolts of pleasure down Hawke’s every nerve, along every fingertip…
Hawke came back to earth with a crash. She felt as if her heart had been blown out of her chest. Hawke pressed a hand to the spot between her breasts, then looked down at Anders. Her breath caught in her throat.

He was stunning. No, more than that. He was beauty itself. Like a sunrise in winter or a Chantry painting or one of those poems Hawke’s mother used to read. With his eyes closed in ecstasy, with his lips parted on a breath, he embodied loveliness. Then his eyelids fluttered open, and Hawke found herself looking at Justice.

Ugh!

Hawke recoiled from those glowing-blue eyes, then quickly tried to cover for it. She ducked her head away, curled up and laid her cheek on Anders’ chest. Anders didn’t seem to notice her reaction. He placed his hand on Hawke’s back and ran his fingers down her spine. Hawke trembled as the last of the aftershocks echoed through her.

“Holy fuck,” Anders gasped.

Hawke figured that was about right. As far as fucks went, this seemed pretty holy - right along with the vague sense of guilt and disappointment following after. Hawke didn’t often go to Chantry, so she figured bedding Anders was as close to the Maker’s bosom as she was ever likely to get.

“I didn’t think you’d actually…” Anders gasped, “That we’d actually…” He trailed off there.

Hawke didn’t answer. She hadn’t thought that they’d start things off with roll in the blankets either. But she couldn’t say she was surprised. After traveling through the rain and the muck all afternoon, the tension between her and Anders had grown too much for Hawke to resist. She hadn’t been able to bear that wrecked look on his face. She’d had to try and reach him in the only way she knew how. So Hawke had kissed Anders the moment he had turned to her and said, “Here’s the – Ooof!”

He hadn’t even been able to show her around the cave, because Hawke had shoved Anders up against the slimy rock wall and mashed her lips to his. Then Anders had turned Hawke around and pushed her up against the wall instead. He’d lifted her legs up, and then there had been a carrying, stumbling sort of race into the darkness. They’d managed to fall on a bunch of blankets on the floor, just as Anders had ripped Hawke’s small clothes free. Their armor was still strewn all down the tunnel.

It probably wasn’t the best strategy for laying low, now that Hawke thought about it. But then, she hadn’t really thought about it. She’d been more interested in seeing if sex with Anders was as good as she remembered. Turned out, it was better. Two powerful mages made for some pretty spectacular orgasms, after all.

And a pretty fucked-up everything else, Hawke supposed. Maker damn her for a fool, why had she done this to herself? Why had she done this to Anders? She knew it was a mess, and yet… Hawke wiped away a tear before it could fall onto Anders’ skin.

Hawke rolled off of Anders and lay on her back, looking up at the ceiling. She felt cold where she’d been hot and sweaty before, but she didn’t bother to reach for a blanket. The air felt invasive, and somehow, Hawke felt she deserved it.

“Hawke… You…”

Anders turned to her, a wondering smile on his face. His eyes were open now, returned to that blessed shade of brown. Hawke sighed in relief. Maker, she hated the color blue. Oh sure, it was
kinky-hot to see Anders throw back his head and glow - actually *glow* - as he came. But that orgasmic light display had also served as a reminder that Anders didn’t belong to Hawke alone. There was a third person in this bed, and Hawke just wanted to kick Justice the Void *out*.

The feeling was mutual, undoubtedly. Justice probably hated Hawke as much as Hawke hated Justice. But Hawke couldn’t do a damn thing about that Fade-spirit squatter. So she contented herself with pretending that Justice didn’t exist.

Justice didn’t return the courtesy. Judging from the way that Anders suddenly frowned, that spirit was probably whispering to Anders even now.

“We shouldn’t have done this,” Anders said at once.

Hawke flinched. Yep, that was Justice talking. Had to be.

“Well, of course not” Hawke said, angrily. Of course they shouldn’t have done this. But that was supposed to be her line, not Anders’. Or Justice’s. Or whatever.

Anders frowned. “What do you mean, ‘of course not?’ You wanted this as much as I did.”

“And now I regret it as much as you do.” Hawke felt rather brutal right now, so surely that’s why she said it like that. Anders sucked in a breath.

“If you were looking for restraint…” Anders began.

“Pfft,” Hawke cut him off with a snort. “The only time I ever wanted restraint in bed was that time I brought home a pair of handcuffs. Hmm, never did return those to the guard barracks. I wonder if Aveline noticed they were missing…”

“That’s not what I meant, Hawke.”

“I know. You never did appreciate my puns.” Or rather, Justice didn’t appreciate Hawke’s puns. Hawke was certain that Anders wouldn’t be such a spoilsport. With that thought, she sighed.

“It doesn’t have to be all serious, Anders,” she told him. “It can just, you know, *be*.”

“I don’t regret the sex,” Anders told Hawke, evidently not picking up on her bit of advice. “It’s just that we did this all out of order.”

“Out of order?” Hawke said, raising a brow. “What? Pants off, bits together is backward or something?”

“No,” Anders said, shaking his head against the blankets. “But Hawke, we should have talked first.”

“Talked,” Hawke snorted.

“Yes, talked,” Anders insisted. “For months I’ve been thinking of you - longing for you. I just wanted to tell you… To make you see…”

Hawke’s heart had started beating faster as Anders spoke, but then he suddenly trailed off. Hawke felt like her heart had been lead to the edge of a cliff and now teetered on the edge.

“Um…yes?” Hawke prompted after a moment. “You were saying?”

But Anders didn’t seem able to formulate words. Either he couldn’t remember what he wanted to say, or Justice was talking to Anders again. Hawke hated those exclusive conversations that Justice
and Anders had inside of Anders’ head. That was a party that Hawke never got invited to. She felt her temper rising.

“Whatever, Anders,” Hawke shrugged. The movement wasn’t all that impressive when she was lying down.

And this was why Hawke always went and raided the pantry after sex. Food was better than pillow talk. Also, more satisfying.

Hawke sat up and reached for her tunic. She pulled her shirt on, wiped between her legs with one of the blankets, then looked around the cave. She’d been so busy trying to get Anders out of his clothes, she hadn’t bothered to take a look at their love-shack.

“How long have you been down here?” Hawke asked, waving a hand at the cave. Anders let out an exasperated sigh and placed his hand over his face.

“A week,” he said. “And before you say anything, I know it’s in shambles. But smugglers aren’t the cleanest lot. I stockpiled food and added lanterns. That’s as far as I got.”

“Hmm,” Hawke said. She stood and started padding around in her bare feet, her tunic only just covering her bare bottom.

“I’m more worried about the defense,” she said. “It isn’t the worst cave we’ve ever camped in, but it’s close. Lanterns are okay, but there’s no second exit. And a boarded up wall as a barricade? Shit sort of door. Anyone could have walked in on us as we were… you know.” Hawke blushed, but turned her head away so that Anders couldn’t see. “Better rig up some traps before next time,” she concluded.

“Next time?” Anders sounded stunned. “You’re planning on repeating that performance?”

“I don’t usually double-orgasm, so maybe not that performance,” Hawke said, strolling around the perimeter. “But how else are we going to pass the time?”

She said it to shock him, and it worked. Anders made a sort of strangled sound his throat. While he was distracted, Hawke wiped the last tears from her eyes, then turned to inspect the one lone table and chair. Beyond a few barrels and Anders’ sleeping roll, that was the only furniture in the place.

“Nug warren in the corner,” Hawke pointed out. “Huh. There’s a draft here, and… Ah! There’s your backdoor. Gotta crawl for it. These smugglers weren’t so stupid after all. Hmmm… Rusted armor, crappy treasure… and a barrel of chasind sack mead. Well then! Definitely not so stupid. That’ll go well with the sandwiches I brought. I have some in my pack if you’re hungry.”

“That’s right,” Anders chuckled. “You and your appetite.”

“Considering how much energy you take out of me…” Hawke returned from her perusal of the cave to find Anders lying on his back, his hands folded behind his head. He was looking at her with a familiar expression - half smug, half amazed. Hawke felt her face flush.

“What?” she asked.

“You,” Anders said.

Just like that, the empty spot in Hawke’s heart filled again. And there was that connection she’d been hoping for, Hawke thought. She brushed her hair out of her face, ready for more compliments. But to
her disappointment, Anders’ smile faded.

“Hawke,” Anders said. Hawke cringed at his tone.

“We need to talk,” she muttered to herself, as Anders said aloud: “We need to talk.”

“Why?” Hawke demanded. She knew she sounded whiny, but she couldn’t help it. Whenever Anders said that, what he really wanted to do was lecture Hawke about all the things that were wrong with him - the things that made him blighted and horrible and dangerous. But that didn’t sound like Anders to Hawke’s ears. That sounded like Justice talking through Anders, and Hawke didn’t want to hear it.

“Hawke, I’m serious,” Anders said, rising to his knees.

“Justice always is,” she muttered.

It occurred to Hawke that Anders was kneeling in a nest of rumpled blankets, and he was still semi-hard. The pose should have made him look ridiculous. But no. Anders looked like an illustration for the cover of the Blooming Rose Weekly. Hawke found herself staring.

“Hawke,” Anders said. “We have to talk.” Hawke shook herself and returned her eyes to Anders’ face.

“What about?” she asked, growing angry now. “About the fact that you blew up most of Kirkwall? About the fact that you never wrote to me?”

“How would I have written to you?” Anders said, looking confused. “I had no idea where you were.”

“Oh, I’ve got it!” Hawke went on. “Maybe you want to talk about the fact that we’re both fugitives now and we just fucked in a cave. Let’s not forget that.”

“It’s the cave part that has me concerned,” Anders said. “Because even after everything that happened, we…” He waved a hand at the blankets with a significant look.

“Are you calling me easy?” Hawke went on the offensive, because that seemed a safer route than any other path. “Okay, first of all, that’s like the nug calling the mabari muddy, Mr. ‘Everyone was Kissing Everyone in the Ferelden Circle.’”

“Everyone was kissing everyone. Except the templars. But that’s not the point.”

“No, the point is, of course I want you after all this time. I mean, we were practically married all those years…”

“Not actually married,” Anders said, softly. Hawke regretted bringing that up at once. The fact that they couldn’t get hitched in a Chantry had always been a sore subject.

“Well, why wouldn’t we have sex?” Hawke wanted to know. “We needed to get it out of the way. Otherwise we’d both be thinking about it obsessively. Or at least I would be.”

“Is that what that was?” Anders gaped at her. “‘Getting it out of the way?’”

“No,” Hawke said, sulkily. “It might have been more than that.”

“Might have been?”
“Ugh, what do you want me to say, Anders? That I haven’t had anyone but you? I haven’t. That I’ve been desperate for it? Yes, I was. Am. Still am, actually…”

“Hawke, this isn’t about that.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No. We need to talk about what’s going on out there.” Anders waved a hand at the tunnel - the one that led back to rainy Crestwood.

Hawke frowned suspiciously. “I assume that’s not an opening gambit about the weather?”

“No,” Anders said, clearly exasperated. “I mean, what are you even doing here? I didn’t send for you. Carver didn’t send for you…”

“So I’m not wanted, is that it?”

“No! You’re very much wanted,” Anders waved a hand at his lap.

“By your dick? Oh, thanks for that.”

“I only meant…”

“For your information,” Hawke said, folding her arms over her chest. “I was invited here.” The movement raised her shirt enough to show off her privates, and Anders’ eyes flicked there before returning to her face.

“By whom?” Anders wanted to know. He looked down at her crotch again.

“By Stroud,” Hawke said, feeling smug when Anders’ eyes shot up to her face in surprise. “And Varric.”

“Varric?” Anders’ brows furrowed.

“And the Inquisition,” Hawke added, sticking her nose in the air.

“The what?” Anders asked, frowning.

“Andraste’s tits, how long have you been in this cave?” Hawke said. She felt she needed to sound incredulous, even though she’d only learned this stuff about a week ago herself. But it made Hawke feel better if she had some information that Anders didn’t.

“You remember the Divine’s peace talks? All those mages and templars who went to try and fix your shitty war? Well the conclave blew up, the Divine got murdered…”

“I heard that part,” Anders said.

“Well some of those people stuck around to ‘inquisit’ what happened there. They’re the Inquisition now.”

“Historically, the original Inquisition became the Chantry,” Anders said, suspicious.

“Well yeah,” Hawke said, as if she’d remembered that. “That, too. Anyhow, the rebel mages joined them.”

“The rebel mages?” Anders looked astonished. “The rebel mages joined the Chantry?”
“Ugh,” Hawke said rolling her eyes. “Look at you, with your hard-on for the rebellion.”

“I’ve got a hard-on for you, damn it all…” Anders searched around among the blankets to find his small clothes. He began stabbing his legs into them.

“The rebels didn’t join the Chantry,” Hawke told him. “They allied with that heretical Inquisition-thingy. Same group that Varric joined. They’ve got a Seeker and some templars or something. But they take orders from a mage.”

Anders sneered. “Probably some arse-licking Loyalist.”

“Probably,” Hawke agreed.

“Let me guess,” Anders said. “That’s who you’re waiting for? You’re meeting Varric here with his Loyalist mage?”

Hawke lifted her chin defiantly. Anders’ eyes flashed blue.

“So that’s it then?” Anders asked, and his voice dropped again to Justice’s register. “You’re leaving me to join the Chantry? Were you planning to sell me out, Hawke? Mete out your revenge? Let the templars take me, and the Champion returns to Kirkwall, a hero?”

“Oh fuck that!” Hawke said, her hands clenching to fists at her sides. “Don’t be such a little bitch, Justice.”

Then Hawke remembered that she was ignoring Justice and shook her head. “Okay, first of all, the Inquisition doesn’t even know about you. Secondly, would I ever sell you out? No. Don’t answer that. But the answer is that I wouldn’t.”

Anders looked at Hawke, his eyes fading to a wary brown. “So if you’re not here to capture me, then why did you come?”

“Because you had your dick in me” Hawke said, smiling sweetly.

Anders frowned. “Hawke…”

“Fine,” Hawke sighed. “Stroud sent me a letter, saying that the Wardens had sent Carver to kill you. Stroud would have come and kicked your ass himself, only he’s got to take a bunch of Wardens into hiding. Something about defying orders for the sake of his men. Good for him, I say.”

“That sounds like Stroud,” Anders said, consideringly. “But why involve you?”

“Uh, because I fix shit?” Hawke said, flipping her hair. “Stroud wanted me to make sure that you and Carver didn’t kill each other. Or… yeah, I think that was supposed to be my job. Making sure there was no killing. Or was I supposed to kill someone? I’d have to double check the letter for the details.”

“You don’t remember what you were supposed to do?”

“I got distracted. See, just as I got to Ferelden, I got a second letter from Varric. I’m supposed to meet with him and his new friends here in Crestwood. Rendezvous in about, oh, four days or so. The Inquisition needs information on Corypheus.”

“Corypheus?” Anders blinked. “Why does that name…?”

to get ourselves out of said prison. You know, if I’d been thinking, I would have kept a list of all the people we killed over the years. It’s sort of embarrassing when someone attacks me to avenge their brother or whatever and I can’t remember a thing.”

“What does the Inquisition want with Corypheus?” Anders asked, ignoring everything else Hawke said.

“They want him dead,” Hawke said. “What else would they want with him? Oh, right. Those kooky Wardens wanted to make Corypheus their pet or something.”

Anders looked at Hawke and frowned. “The Inquisition wants Corypheus dead? But he is dead.”

“Ah… No,” Hawke said. “That’s the problem. Turns out we killed him too quickly. Corypheus showed up very much alive, and bedraggled as well. He killed a lot of the Inquisition’s people, and thus, they wants him dead. Dead again, I should say.”

“But he was dead,” Anders said. “You’re as much a healer as me. You know that his body had no life-force left in it after we got through with him.”

Hawke shrugged. “I guess a beheading isn’t what it used to be? Either that or he wasn’t really dead. Or he wasn’t really alive in the first place. Or maybe he’s become undead? Ooh! Ooh! Or he has an evil twin! Maybe that explains… Anders?”

Hawke stopped there, for Anders had gone very still.

“The Calling,” he murmured.

“The what now?” Hawke said.

“When we fought Corypheus before, he could influence Wardens with something like the Calling…”

“The Calling?” Hawke asked. “You mean that ‘when you’re about to die’ feeling that you Wardens get when the blight is about to take your body?”

Anders looked to her in surprise. “How did you know about that? That’s a highly guarded Warden secret.”

Hawke shrugged. “Carver whined about it once when he was visiting. And drunk. I may have helped him with the drunk part. So what’s this about the Calling now?”

Anders continued to frown, but he answered Hawke all the same: “Do you recall how Corypheus got into my head? As we were searching his prison…”

“He possessed you,” Hawke said, shuddering to remember it.

“He didn’t possess me,” Anders said. “He made me hear the Calling. Or something that sounded like the Calling. I thought I was dying. And Justice thought I was dying.”


“And Justice attacked me,” Hawke said, scowling. “Yeah, I remember that. It was hard to kick your ass without leaving any lasting damage.”

“I still have a scar on my thigh.”
“But I kissed it and made it all better,” Hawke reminded him.

Anders didn’t smile. “That’s the connection,” he said. “Not the real Calling,” his voice dropped as he spoke. “But Corypheus’ song…”

“Anders?” Hawke said.

“Not the Blight-song, not the truth. The servant used them, used them at his behest…“

Anders eyes went fully blue, and fractured blue lines flickered out across his face. He looked like a statue now, all cracked and ready to break.

“The mages lie dead in their own blood. The demons set free by trickery and deceit! He USED them!”

Smoke began to rise from Anders’ body - blue and black and thick.


Nothing happened. Hawke felt panic rise within her as smoke curled around her fingers.

“Corypheus is his master! Defiling duty, slaughtering sacrifice! Turning truth hollow, honor perverted!”

“Fuck, fuck fuck…” Hawke whispered, her fingers clenching Anders’ shoulders. This was where Justice went from an annoying guest to a terrifying conquerer. And Hawke could no longer ignore the spirit’s presence. She placed her hands on either side of Anders’ face, licked her lips, and looked right into those glowing blue eyes.

“I will stop them!” Justice was roaring. “I will end ALL of them!”

“Uh, Justice?” Hawke said. She hated the way her voice broke a little. But at least Anders stopped shouting.

“Yeah, hi Justice? This, um… Hawke?” Oh Maker, she sounded like such a fool. “Right so, I know you don’t like me, and I sure as the Void don’t like you. But I need you to give Anders back to me, okay? I need…”

Anders’ face contorted in rage, and he bared his teeth at her. Even his teeth were glowing now! Hawke tried a different tack.

“Okay Justice,” she said, forcing her voice to remain steady. “I got the message, okay? There’s something unjust out there and you want it fixed. And that’s what I do, right? I fix things. You know that. So I’m here and I’ll do whatever justice-y thing you need. You don’t have to possess Anders to get things done anymore. I’m here. I’ll help with the justifying. You don’t need to take him over. I’ve got it, alright? I can do this duty-and-honor shit for the both of you…”

Hawke hardly knew what she was saying anymore: just babbling anything that might bring Anders back. On the inside, however, Hawke was screaming a very different sort of litany:

I hate you, Justice! Hawke thought angrily, I fucking hate you! But aloud Hawke kept crooning:

“It’s alright, Justice. We don’t have to fight, you and me. Just go back where you came from. Just go to sleep or… or whatever it is you do. Fade away? Okay, bad pun. I’ll stop making them if you’ll
“Hawke?” Anders rasped. His voice sounded thin and hoarse.

“Oh thank the Maker,” Hawke sighed. She rested her head on Anders’ chest as all the blue light faded out of him.

Damn it all, Hawke thought, as tears stung her eyes. Why couldn’t she fix this mess? Why couldn’t she get rid of Justice for good? What was the point of both her and Anders being healers if they couldn’t cure Anders of this *thing* inside of him?

“How long was I gone?” Anders asked, quietly.

No wondering what had happened, Hawke noticed. No wondering what he’d done. Just ‘how long?’ As if he knew there was no point in asking those other questions. *Fucking hate you, Justice!*

“Just a second or two,” Hawke said.

Anders nodded. “It’s been longer and longer each time,” he told her. He paused, then added:

“It’s worse when you’re gone.”

Hawke felt like guilt had balled a fist and punched her in the gut.

“Well, I’m back now,” Hawke said, forcing a smile. “So stick with me, alright?”

Anders drew back a little. “Are you, Hawke?” he asked. “Are you back?”

Hawke didn’t know how to answer that. Was she back? As in, back to stay? Maker, she hadn’t decided that yet. She hadn’t planned that far ahead. She never planned that far ahead. Even when she and Anders had lived together, she’d been taking things day by day. Maybe she should tell him the truth? But a flicker of blue shot through Anders’ eyes, and Hawke found herself lying:

“Of course I’m back.”

Anders swallowed. Then he nodded. And because she couldn’t heal him with magic, Hawke took Anders’ face in her hands and kissed him deeply. His lips were soft, and Hawke kissed him until she had to break away to breathe. When she let Anders go, he wrapped his arms around her and drew her close again. They tumbled back onto the blankets, Hawke laying over him, Anders gazing up at her. Anders’ eyes were brown now, and the expression in them was so intense, so searching, that Hawke found she had to say something:

“So, um… about that Calling thing…”

Anders flinched. Ooh, bad subject, Hawke realized.

“I’ll tell you in a minute or two,” he said. “But for now, love…” Anders reached up and brushed Hawke’s hair from her face. Short as her fringe was, the hair felt right back down over her forehead again.

“It’s okay, Anders,” Hawke whispered. “We can figure this out as we go. We don’t need a plan or–”

Anders pulled her to him, cutting her off with a kiss. It made Hawke’s head spin, made her utterly breathless.

“We’re going to make this right,” Anders told her. Hawke hadn’t even realized he’d stopped kissing
her until she heard his stern voice, felt his breath against her lips.

“Of course we will,” Hawke said, opening her eyes.

She didn’t believe that for a second, but it seemed the right thing to say.

“I didn’t mean you…” Anders shook his head, his nose brushing her nose. “We will make it right. I promise.”

“Oh, Hawke said, because what else could she say when Anders looked at her like that? What else could she say when she found herself naked on the floor of a dirty, nug-infested cave, ready to kiss Anders some more? Really, what could she say?

“It’s okay, Anders,” was what Hawke said. She brushed his cheek with her thumb. “It’s okay,” she said again. Hawke spread her legs to straddle him, her bare crotch against his belly.

“Hawke,” Anders whispered.

But Hawke didn’t give him a chance to protest. She kissed him again, reaching down to slide his penis free from his unbuttoned small clothes. She slid herself back, his crown against her folds. Anders groaned.

“Is this…” Anders nipped at her earlobe, “Is this what you really want?”

Hawke paused. Was this what she wanted? Well... no. But because of Justice, Hawke never got what she really wanted. So why expect that to change now? Besides, what else were she and Anders going to do until Varric got here? Count the nugs in the corner? Go out dragon baiting in bandit-infested hills? Have another three-way conversation with Justice the killjoy? Fuck that. Quite literally, fuck that. There was no way of knowing what would happen to them in a day, much less a week or more. Better to live in the moment, right? Better to enjoy whatever time they had. So if Hawke considered what she wanted now - as in right now...

“Yes, Anders” Hawke said. She slid herself down over him, causing his breath to hitch. “This is what I really want.”
Paths to the Moon

Chapter Summary

In which Cullen considers the road before him

At this un-Makerly hour of the morning, the sky was still dark outside the windows, and the war-table was lit by a small pool of lantern light. But Cullen did not look out into the gloom beyond his work space. Likewise, he did his best to ignore the voices that whispered in his head. He was trying - trying, he told himself - to get some last-minute work done in preparation for the trip to Crestwood. But as Cullen considered the paths before him, it seemed his mind had other plans:

“Cullen. Please, Cullen.”

The dream had haunted him long after waking.

Cullen shrugged his shoulders and squinted at the map. Right then, what was the route he’d been looking at? Ah yes. Over the mountains to Gherlen’s Pass. It would be rough going for the first day - nothing but goat-trails from Skyhold to the gates of Orzammar. But after skirting the dwarven thaig, they’d follow the Imperial Highway into Ferelden. That would make for easier travel, though it took them closer to the Storm Coast than Cullen would have liked. They were sure to encounter freezing rain, but Cullen had requisitioned the best tents. Or wait. Hadn’t he? Cullen paused to check his lists. Yes, he had. The tents were in order - ought to be delivered to the stables this morning, and that would help to make the journey more tolerable. As for Crestwood itself…

“Please.”

The voice echoed in his mind once more. New curves and contours swam across Cullen’s vision, quite different than those of the map before him. Instead of drawn hills and valleys, Cullen now saw the slope of a shoulder, the curve of a breast.

“Cullen.”

Now the war table disappeared entirely, as visions from last night’s dream flashed before Cullen’s eyes. In his dream, a woman had been lying in Cullen’s bed – No, not ‘a woman.’ Cullen could be honest with himself in the privacy of his own mind. Kate had been lying in his bed, wearing nothing but that transparent shirt and her smile. In the dream, Cullen had felt no shame to find that he was naked before her. Far from it: he’d been delighted. In his dream, he’d pushed Kate back against the mattress, kissed his way down her neck and collarbone to her breasts. She had sighed and twined her fingers in his hair, gasping as Cullen tongued her nipples through the fabric. She’d stroked her hands down his back, nails grazing his shoulder blades. Kate had begged for him, cried out as Cullen had lifted his head and lowered himself over her - then into her…

“Cullen. Oh, Maker, yes…”

The map, Cullen thought desperately, his fingers splaying over the north coast of Ferelden. He was looking at the map, damn it. And according to the map, they ought to stick to the Imperial Highway. Cullen pinched the bridge of his nose. If only cartography were as exciting as anatomy.
Alright then. To review: he preferred the Imperial Highway approach to the route through Sulcher’s Pass. Not only did Sulcher’s Pass take them further south than necessary, but it meant sailing over the northern end of Lake Calenhad. Cullen traced the alternate route with his finger. No, this was no good. Getting a boat to carry the horses would be difficult at this time of year. Not to mention, when one considered the landing point…

Cullen froze. Just to the left of those docks was the picture of a tower, set on an island in the great Ferelden lake. It looked like every other tower on the map, drawn as a rectangular box with a triangle hat. Comical, really. Clearly the mapmakers had never visited that particular fortress. Cullen knew Kinloch Hold looked nothing like that. And just like that, the rest of last night’s dream flashed before Cullen’s mind.

The rest of the nightmare, rather.

In his dream, Cullen had just settled into Kate’s warmth. Then bed had pitched violently beneath him, like a ship in a storm. The sheets had twined about Cullen’s legs and the light about him had snuffed into darkness. Long talons had clawed at Cullen’s shoulders and hot, sour breath had fanned his face. And when Cullen had looked down at Kate, he had found that she was gone. A demon had lain beneath him, it’s purple eyes flashing fire in the darkness. Bloodied lips had opened around dripping fangs and a voice like oil had whispered:

“A kiss, templar. It all begins with a kiss.”

Cullen did not remember the next part of the dream. Somehow, he must have broken free. The dream had next seen him running down a narrow corridor. The demon had had been right behind him, its claws inches from his back. The walls had closed in about Cullen, tighter and tighter, until he was certain he would be crushed and caught. Then, just as panic had flooded through him, Cullen had found a door. He’d torn it off it’s hinges as he burst out into a tiny courtyard. Old, crooked buildings had towered over him like disapproving giants. Trash had lain strewn across the cobblestones and rain had poured down from the low-hanging clouds. It was Denerim, Cullen realized. He had fallen to his knees and vomited.

But even as he’d knelt there, retching into the muck, a clawed hand had curled around his throat. Clawed arms had circled his waist and a voice had hissed at his ear:

“Cullen.”

In the dream, Cullen had split in two. His consciousness had spun out of his body, escaping into the air. Cullen had looked back down at himself, back at the man retching in a back alley of Denerim. But to his surprise, it was not a demon who held his abandoned body.

It was Kate. She sat on the filthy cobblestones, cradling that empty, retching shell in her arms. The real Cullen, the spirit Cullen, had tried to cry out to her, tried to swim through the air and return to her. But he hadn’t been able to change directions. Instead, Cullen had drifted away, untethered, into the sky. He had screamed for Kate to see him, begged for her to call him back. She had not heard him. Then, just as the Cullen had been about to float away forever, Kate had looked up.

Her eyes had glowed like twin stars and fangs had curled from her lips.

Cullen had screamed himself awake.

Maker’s breath, Cullen thought, scrubbing a hand over his face. Yes, that had been his dream. Utterly obvious in its symbolism, now that he thought about it in the clear light of day. Or the murky light of pre-dawn, but still. The back alley in Denerim? Exactly as Cullen remembered it - the
retching, too. The desire demon? A regular guest in his nightly terrors. And as for the earlier bit, Cullen knew what had inspired that fantasy. Or rather, *who*. No, the moral of this story was painfully clear:

Cullen feared his desires, because they led to nothing but trouble.

Well, he needed no dreams to tell him so, Cullen thought, snatching up his itinerary and snapping it before his face. He knew how this worked: his desires turned to dreams and his dreams turned to nightmares, and Cullen was left shaking the morning after. Was it any wonder that he’d gone a decade without sex? Not that he could explain this to any of the people back in the tavern, Cullen thought, wryly. Well, he supposed he *could*. He just wouldn’t. He wasn’t like Kate, who could up and tell the story of her past lover without even blushing. Kate’s history was more admirable from start to finish.

Cullen frowned and let his list drop to the table. Still, that story of hers. He didn’t know what to think about it. In fact, Cullen found he didn’t really *want* to think about it. The tale left him feeling… What was the word he was looking for? Jealous? No, surely not. Itchy, maybe. Or stricken, that’s what it was. After Kate had finished talking, Cullen hadn’t been able to think of a word to say to her. He had felt like an accomplice somehow, as if the whole thing had been his fault. Though that didn’t make any sense. Why should Cullen feel guilt over something that had happened years ago, in another city entirely? All the same, Cullen hadn’t been able to meet Kate’s eyes once she’d finished. And when Kate had stood up and walked away, Cullen hadn’t had the courage to follow. He hadn’t felt he deserved to.

An odd feeling, that. So instead, Cullen had stayed behind for a time and played cards. Not a terrible way to end the evening, he supposed. Still, the events of last night weren’t at all what Cullen had hoped for. He had hoped – well, wait. Cullen caught himself there. He hadn’t *hoped* for anything. He hadn’t had imagined that drinks with Kate meant anything or – No. He had just been looking forward to some time alone with Kate. Er, time with Kate. Just time. That was all.

Of course, he hadn’t spent much time with Kate, had he? And after he’d spent such a ridiculous amount of effort getting dressed for the evening, too. Silly really, when Cullen considered how few clothes he owned. But then, full armor had struck him as too formal and a mere tunic had seemed under-dressed. Cullen had spent a full twenty minutes trying to turn his various pieces of armor into a decent outfit. Then he’d washed his face, smoothed back his hair, taken a deep breath, and hiked on over to the tavern - only to be struck dumb the moment he’d seen Kate. The sight of her in that thin tunic had quite literally haunted his dreams. Even now, images from both dream and reality swam before his vision yet again…

“Well, someone’s up early!”

The voice brought Cullen’s head snapping up. Sweet Andraste, he thought. It was a good thing that his thoughts were all hidden away in his head, not lying scattered about the war table like his papers. Otherwise Cullen would have been caught with all his wicked fantasies out on display.

A figure approached from the shadows, and though lantern light had not yet revealed a face, Cullen recognized the person all the same. There was no mistaking that smug, Orlesian accent.

“A figure approached from the shadows, and though lantern light had not yet revealed a face, Cullen recognized the person all the same. There was no mistaking that smug, Orlesian accent.

“Good morning, Leliana,” Cullen said. “What are you doing up by daylight? Hardly any shadows left for you to hide in.”

“Oh pish, I never went to sleep,” Leliana said by way of reply.

“Do you ever sleep?” Cullen asked her. “I thought…”
Leliana stepped into the circle of lantern light, and Cullen drew up short, staring. At first, he thought the spymaster was wearing an oddly-shaped black cloak, but then Cullen realized that she carried two ravens with her, one perched on each shoulder. The ravens cocked their heads and stared at Cullen with beady little eyes.

“New fashion?” he asked.

“Remind me to tell you about the time that feathered coiffures were the rage in Val Royeaux,” she said. “Besides, you’re one to talk.” Leliana eyed his furred collar significantly.

Cullen decided at once that he would not rise to her bait, nor would he be drawn into a discussion about Orlesian fashion. Instead, Cullen studied the ravens, who seemed to study him right back.

“Er, morning,” he greeted them. Leliana smiled and reached up to stroke one raven’s ebony feathers.

“Good move, commander,” Leliana told him. “Baroness Plucky will be going with you to Crestwood. It’s wise to make friends with her, or she sulks. Lady Pickles will be staying behind, of course.”

“Plucky? Pickles?”

“Hawke requested Plucky’s company,” Leliana went on, as if these were perfectly normal raven-names and it was perfectly normal to name ravens in the first place.

“You’re giving one of our ravens to Hawke?”

“But giving,” Leliana frowned. “They aren’t possessions. Plucky liked the Champion as much as the Champion liked her. It’s a friendship. On you go then.”

This last statement was addressed to the birds, who hopped off of her shoulders and right onto the war table. Cullen noticed that their little talons looked like miniature dragon-claws. He opened his mouth to protest, fearful they’d rip the map to shreds. But Cullen stopped himself there. He supposed that part of the map contained nothing important - just the blightlands of the Abyssal Reach. Not like anyone was going out there anyway. He shrugged and turned back to his papers. Leliana did the same.

For a few minutes, Cullen and Leliana stood side by side, each rifling through their papers. They’d spent many hours like this, both at their work, both not speaking. But today, Cullen got the impression that Leliana kept staring at him. Yet every time he looked over, the Nightingale’s eyes were on her work. Cullen supposed he was imagining things. He had just put the notion from his mind when Leliana suddenly asked:

“So, commander. A decade without sex?”

Cullen sputtered. At the edge of the table, one raven fluffed her feathers, while the other fixed him with a curious look.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes,’” Leliana said.

“No!” Cullen cried. “I mean, yes. I mean… Sweet Andraste, where did that come from?”

“From the tavern last night?” Leliana suggested. “Don’t worry, commander. I took the liberty of editing your story on its way out the door.”

“I… What? Editing my story?” Cullen didn’t know what that meant, but he didn’t like it. It sounded
like something Varric might say.

“The story of your celibacy or orgy or… Whatever it was. I fixed it for you.”

Cullen went still. That could be a good thing. Or it could be very bad.

“Fixed it how?” he wanted to know.

“I couldn’t stop the story from spreading.” Leliana told him. “But I directed its trajectory. By the time the tale reaches the barracks - which,” she glanced to the windows, “should be in about an hour or two - the new rumor will be that no one knows for certain how many lovers you’ve had, but you were a perfect gentleman to all of them and everyone parted on amicable terms.”

Cullen blinked at her. He opened his mouth - nothing came out - then blinked again.

“You’re welcome,” Leliana said.

“I’m sorry? What? And how…?”

“How did I manage that? All too easily. I paid off Sera - artists are easy to win over, I find, if you keep them well-supplied with notebooks and pencils. Bull and Krem are already in my employ, as is Robert Trevelyan, so I merely said the word and they saw it done. The rest of the crowd agreed to keep quiet.”

“You paid everyone to spread a false tale about me?” Cullen gaped at her.

“Would you prefer that people learn the real story?” Leliana asked. “I did what I could to control the damage.”

Cullen flinched. “I am not damage that needs controlling.”

“Oh come,” Leliana sniffed. “You know that Morris would have blurted out the truth eventually. So short of murdering your quartermaster, I had to do something to contain the situation.”

“Murder Morris?” Cullen repeated in astonishment.

“Well… No! Maybe. Sometimes I’ve wanted to strangle him a little. But that’s not the point.”

“No, the point is that if I hadn’t stepped in, every soldier in camp would think you were either entirely debauched, or completely inexperienced.”

“I don’t see how inexperience is so bad,” Cullen said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“As it is, I maintained your dignity,” Leliana went on, as if he hadn’t spoken. “Or was there some other rumor that you would have preferred? ‘Cullen is pure as the driven snow,’ perhaps? Or ‘Cullen has a membership to every brothel in Thedas?’”

“No! I don’t… That’s not…” Cullen knew his face must be turning red. “I just don’t deal in rumors, that’s all.”

“No, you don’t, do you? And that’s why you needed my help. Maker’s breath, Cullen. Would it kill you to say ‘thank you’?”

“No, I…” Cullen sighed. “You’re right,” he admitted, though it stung to say it. “Thank you.”
“You’re welcome,” Leliana said, lips twisted in a wry sort of smile.

Cullen just sighed and shook his head. Maker’s breath, what a whirlwind Leliana was. Like any bard, she could pirouette so quickly with her words that no one could possibly keep up. And Cullen was no dancer.

Cullen turned back to his papers, trying to find that list he’d misplaced. He didn’t get any further than that. For of course, Leliana just had to go twirling off again:

“Incidentally, I left Kate’s story exactly as it was. I may even have helped it spread.”

Cullen’s head whipped around. “What?”

“No embellishment needed there,” Leliana said in a sing-song voice as she made a note on a piece of paper. “The noble mage and her princely lover? I couldn’t have crafted a better tale myself.”

“He wasn’t a prince,” Cullen said. Leliana ignored the correction.

“It makes dear Kate seem wronged and loyal and attractive and untouchable all at the same time, don’t you think?”

Cullen did not answer that. He wasn’t about to tell Leliana what he’d thought about Kate’s tale. Not for all the gold in Orlais.

“No opinion?” she prompted.

“None,” Cullen lied. One of the ravens made a noise in its throat. Cullen glanced over at them, but neither one had moved. The birds sat there like little winged bookends, entirely still except for the occasional blink of their beady eyes.

“Really?” Leliana asked, lightly. “Well, I must say that I had a definite opinion on those stories. All of them. Your story in particular.”

Cullen froze with his fingers over his requisitions list. “Leliana, if you please…”

“Ten years, Cullen?” There was steel in the spymaster’s voice now.

“Yes, yes, I know it’s been a long time,” Cullen said, irritably. “Just as I am aware that most people fornicate on a more regular basis than me. But as the discrepancy between myself and the general population is my own business, I’d appreciate if you’d leave me alone.”

“But it’s not just your own business, is it Cullen?” Leliana said, turning to face him with narrowed eyes.

“Just what is that supposed to mean?”

“Ten years is not just a long time, Cullen,” Leliana said, glaring now. “Ten years is a very specific time.” She folded her arms over her chest and asked:

“Have you really been denying yourself all these years because of Aurelia Amell?”

Cullen should have seen the question coming. He ought to have known that Leliana had that missile in her arsenal and might shoot it at him at any moment. But even so, he was struck dumb with surprise. He looked at her in shock, then down at his chest, as if he might see an arrow sticking through him.
“We must speak of it sometime, commander.” Leliana said, raising a brow.

“Must we?” Cullen returned, turning quickly back to his papers. “I think I preferred it when we pretended that we’d never met before.”

But of course, they had met before. And not only in Kirkwall, when Leliana had looked at Cullen and said, “Oh yes. You,” with narrowed eyes. No, it had been before, back when…

Cullen’s gaze shot across the map to the tower marked ‘Kinloch Hold.’ It had been then, he thought. Back in the chaos of the Fifth Blight, Aurelia Amell had left the Ferelden Circle, left the tower that both she and Cullen had lived in - and she’d gone on to become a Grey Warden. But when she returned to the tower…

A memory flashed through Cullen’s mind: claws and blood and cold and quiet - quiet punctuated by the occasional scream. Cullen shuddered.

“We can go back to pretending in a moment,” Leliana said. “But for now…”

“Leliana, this is neither the time nor the place.”

“On the contrary, this exactly the time and the place. “If Auri affects you even now…”

Cullen winced at the familiarity of that nickname. He had known of the connection, of course. But to hear that endearment spoken aloud was another thing entirely. Leliana saw his reaction and scowled.


“No, it’s not… I’m not…”

All other explanations failed him, so Cullen reached for his trusty back-up shield:

“I’m married to my work.”

It was the explanation he’d always given in the past, but somehow, it rang a bit hollow in the cavernous war room.

“So you say.” From her tone, Cullen guessed Leliana did not believe him. “Cullen, do you know why spies and bards keep track of love affairs?”

Cullen blinked at the sudden change of subject. “Because you’re nosy like that?” he suggested, before he could stop himself.

“Because desire is a weakness,” Leliana said. “It’s the chink in the armor where the knife slips in.”

Cullen looked away sharply. Maker’s breath, he already knew that. Hadn’t he dreamed that this morning? Of course, those dreams had featured another lovely mage entirely. Cullen blushed at the thought.

“I’m well aware of the dangers of desire,” he said, stiffly. “And I’m not… I don’t want…”

But of course that was a lie. Cullen desired a lot of things that he couldn’t have. But he wasn’t going to talk about them. Certainly not with the spymaster.

“Leliana, there is no need…”

“I suspected you were carrying a torch for her,” Leliana began, and for a moment, Cullen almost
slipped up and said, “Kate?”

“But if you’ve spent ten years pining for Auri…” Leliana went on.

*Oh, right.*

“I didn’t,” Cullen said. “I mean, I *did*, but…”

“Cullen, I was there. When we found you in the Ferelden tower,” Leliana went on. “I know what happened to you, what you…”

But Cullen did not hear the rest. For in that instant - with those simple words - Leliana had sent him hurtling down the path of memory:

*Cold moonlight, bloodied walls. Claws, screams, bruises, nausea and pain. So much he didn’t remember, so much lost to the shadows of delirium and fear and time. But the blood on the floor was always fresh. That part Cullen remembered perfectly.*

“I don’t want to speak of it,” Cullen said, turning away from that memory as if slamming a door.

“Cullen,” Leliana said, “*We* must. *You* must. Listen to me, I have endured similar things. I know…”

“You do *not* know!”

Cullen found himself towering over Leliana, though he didn’t remember turning around. He heard a voice echoing through the room in rage, though he didn’t remember shouting. At the edge of the table, the ravens let out nervous croaks. They fluffed their feathers as if they were trying to decide if they should intervene. Leliana, however, stood still as carved marble. Cullen held her gaze for a moment, fury filling his entire body, rage coursing down every muscle, down every vein. Leliana stared right back, and in her eyes, Cullen thought he saw a flicker of - fear? Surely not. Sympathy maybe. Either emotion was unwelcome.

Just like that, the fight went out of him. Cullen felt sorrow sweep in in it's place. He turned to the table, placed his hands on the edge.

“You do *not* know,” he whispered. “No one does.”

*Not even me. Not really.*

“I always feared you might bring this up,” he said, his voice thick. I *just didn’t think it would hurt so much*, he added, silently.

“I’m sorry, Cullen. I…”

Leliana’s words came to him from a long distance away. At the edge of the table, the two ravens ruffled their feathers and cooed. Their soft sounds drew Cullen back to the present, where there was no blood, no screaming, and no demons.

This was his world now, Cullen reminded himself, looking out at the map before him. He was safe here, with his work, with these maps, with his life laid out before him on wide, well-marked roads.

“Amell spoke well of you, you know,” Leliana said. She spoke the words haltingly, as if she holding out crumbs to a wounded bird. “She said that of all the templars, you were the most kind.”

Cullen hung his head. That praise did not sound so praiseworthy, somehow.
“I tried to be,” he said.

Yes, he’d tried to be kind, until he’d believed that kindness had backfired on him.

Another memory flashed in Cullen’s mind: the topmost chamber of the Circle tower had blazed with candles on the night of Amell’s Harrowing. Half a dozen templars stood guard for the ritual. They had selected Cullen to strike the killing blow should Amell fail, and Cullen had been nearly sick with fear. But then Amell had entered the room, and all Cullen’s fears had fled. She had looked like a queen: her best robes swirling about her ankles, her dark skin powered and perfumed, her black, curling hair swept up into elaborate braid. But her eyes, Amell’s striking, Starkhaven blue eyes, had flashed fury and fire wherever she looked. She hadn’t said a word, but Cullen had understood her all the same. She hated this. She had hated all of it. And she had hated all of them. She hated the templars for what they were doing to her. And then - at least on that night - Cullen had completely agreed with her.

“She deserved better than that life,” he said, unthinking.

“All mages do,” Leliana replied.

“Not all of them,” Cullen said. “Not Ulric and the blood mages who took over Kinloch Hold and slaughtered everyone. They deserved a harsher death than the one you two gave them.”

Leliana’s brows raised in surprise, and Cullen shook his head.

“I’m sorry,” he told her. “I just… When you met me… When you both saved me…” Cullen sighed. “I was my worst self that day.”

Leliana nodded. “I understand.”

Cullen doubted that she did. When they had rescued Cullen from Kinloch Hold’s tower, he’d been half out of his mind. And Amell had seen him like that. Leliana had seen him like that, too. Little wonder that Cullen had always been so nervous around her.

“Amell and I never…” Cullen began, looking over at Leliana. “You know that we never… That I never…”

“Yes, she told me.”

Cullen stiffened. They’d talked about him? Maker, how embarrassing.

“There you are then,” he said, blushing.

“You admire the admirable, Cullen,” Leliana asked, watching him closely. “As do I.”

Again, the words seemed like an offering - or maybe bait.

“Is that your way of saying that you forgive me for once being infatuated with your lover? Come now, Leliana, clearly I’m no threat to your romantic bliss.”

To his surprise, Leliana drew back as if he’d struck her. At the corner of the table, the Pickles and Plucky snapped their beaks.

“Oh,” Leliana said, softly. “You didn’t know?”

“Know what?,” Cullen said, speaking over the sudden noise of the ravens. “I don’t… Oh, Good Maker, is she dead? I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize.”
“Auri isn’t dead,” Leliana said, rolling her eyes. “Maker, have you been taking lessons from Cassandra when it comes to tact?”

“I… Oh.”

Cullen didn’t know what to say to that. He was quite curious now, but he feared any show of interest might be taken the wrong way. Still, he thought it best to ask:

“So, um, what exactly…?” That was apparently all the invitation that Leliana needed.

“We quarreled,” she said. With a scowl, she snatched up another of the raven-shaped map-markers that stood jumbled among her things. Leliana held it in her hand, stroking the little bronze wings. “We haven’t spoken in, oh, nearly three years now.”

“Oh,” Cullen said. He refrained from commenting on how long a time that was. He wasn’t one to talk.

“Back before I met Auri,” Leliana went on, haltingly, “Back when I worked as a bard…” Leliana shook her head, her eyes going unfocused as she looked down at the raven.

“I was once tortured,” she said, flatly. Cullen felt an answering drop in his stomach.

“I was not lying when I said I know something of what you’ve endured,” Leliana looked up at Cullen, met his eyes. “I know how it changes you. The pain, the fear of the pain. The fear when it begins, for how long it will last - the fear when it ends, for how long you’ll have until it resumes again. To be like that - to be dragged to the edge of yourself and thrown off into the abyss… You never recover from that.”

If Leliana had spoken those words with pity, Cullen wouldn’t have been able to bear them. But as it was, Cullen heard nothing but truth.

“It isn’t the pain itself,” Leliana added, looking back down at the bird. “You can endure that. No, the truly awful part is knowing how small you are, how near your edges lie. You always break much sooner than you think. Most people live their lives believing that they are solid and whole. But people like you and me? We know that is a lie. We know we are only a handful of threads, just waiting to unravel.”

Cullen nodded at her words, for he could not speak past the lump in his throat. He had never thought of himself of having anything in common with Leliana - least of all something like this.

“It takes a long time to gather yourself back together,” Leliana added, softly.

“That’s assuming you can find all the threads,” Cullen said.

“Indeed,” Leliana said, her voice little more than a whisper. “And for a time, I thought I had. Auri bound me together and held me close. But then…”

Leliana’s gaze shifted, her eyes gazing out over the map - to the blight lands near Lothering, if Cullen was not mistaken.

“Dorothea - Divine Justinia, I should say - She once saved my life. She once saved… No,” Leliana chuckled. “She would hate for me to say that. She helped me save myself. That was why I had to answer the call when she became Divine. But my Auri did not understand. She was so angry. How could I, she asked? How could I leave her? After everything we’d been through? How could I leave her for the Chantry? Something she never believed in.”
“She never found the Maker?” Cullen asked, unable to keep the question to himself.

“No,” Leliana said, sadly. “Not in the Chantry, anyhow. You remember how she was.”

“A general in mage’s robes,” Cullen said, before he could think better of it. When Leliana looked to him in surprise, he shrugged. “I know it was wrong of me to question the Order, but I could never understood why they’d locked her up. Amell could have done so much good in the world.”

“She could,” Leliana said. “She did. My Auri changed the world. She changed me.”

Cullen turned away at that. This seemed rather like a confession to him, and he was not a cleric.

“She made me dream,” Leliana went on, her tone soft and wondering. “She made me want to make the world a better place for her - for the both of us. But in the end…”

“In the end?” Cullen asked politely, when Leliana did not go on.

The spymaster shook her head. To his surprise, Cullen saw that Leliana’s eyes had filled with tears. Cullen had never seen Leliana cry before. He hadn’t known that she could cry. He felt alarmed now, as if all the laws of nature were failing, as if Skyhold might crumble down around them any minute.

“Uh, Leliana?” Cullen asked, uncertainly.

“I couldn’t do it,” she said, thickly. “I couldn’t watch her grow blighted and die. We ended the Fifth Blight, and for what? For her to keep fighting? Not three days together and there we were stopping at some cave again. Always the blighted caves! Always that smell of blood and rot and the Broodmother’s breath. You’ve never been down in the Deep Roads, Cullen. You don’t know how they are. You begin to believe that you’ll never see sunlight again.”

Leliana wiped the tears from her eyes. Cullen stood there awkwardly, unsure if he should put a hand on her shoulder or say something or what. He’d never seen this side of Leliana. He hadn’t known it existed. Cullen cleared his throat and raised his hand, but he didn’t say anything and he let his hand fall right back down at his side.

“When the Circles rebelled, she came for me,” Leliana went on after a moment. “She believed the Chantry had fallen. She believed I was free. She wanted me to go with her - for good this time, she said. But I couldn’t. Not when Justinia needed me more than ever. My Auri didn’t understand. She didn’t see…”

“That our work had just begun?” Cullen suggested, when Leliana did not go on.

“Our work is never done,” Leliana said, glaring at the map-marker in her hand.

“True,” Cullen agreed.

Until this moment, he’d thought that was a good thing. Work was a blessing, or so the Chantry said. Work kept idle hands and idle hearts from temptation. But in light of Leliana’s tears, that proverb rang hollow.

“Forgive me,” Leliana said, shaking her head. “Last night at the tavern, I got to thinking about how long it has been for me. And then I thought…”

Leliana continued to stare at the metal map-marker in her hand. She tapped it against her lips, then set it quickly on the table.
“I am going to write to her,” she announced.

“Oh.” Cullen blinked. “Alright.”

He looked at where Leliana had set the raven marker: in the Free Marches, of all places. How odd.

“Because the Inquisition needs it,” Leliana said. “We can’t allow pride to rob us of a potential lead, or… Wait.” She stopped, staring at him.

“You don’t object?”

“Should I?”

“No concerns?” Leliana asked, eyes narrowing. “No problems with bringing Auri on board?”

Cullen thought about it a moment. Strangely enough, no.

“It will probably be awkward as the Void at first,” he said, “but no more so than any other partnership we’ve made. Certainty can’t be worse than playing referee to a meeting between Fiona and Vivienne. By the way, would you deal with them next time? They’re bound to get into another argument while I’m away in Crestwood.”

“You’re serious,” Leliana said, looking at him in disbelief.

“Well,” Cullen said, feeling rather flustered now. “You said it yourself: we can’t allow pride to rob us of any leads. We need information about Corypheus, and the wardens have a connection to him. If we’re stooping to contacting Hawke, we might as well exhaust all our other contacts as well.”

“I am not writing to Auri just to see if I can smooth things over with her,” Leliana said, frowning at him.

Cullen’s brows furrowed. “I didn’t say that you were.”

“Good. Because I’m not. This isn’t about trying to win my love back. That ship has sailed.”

“Riiight.”

Cullen glanced over at the ravens, wondering if they found this behavior as odd as he did. One of them - was that Plucky? - fluffed its wings in an approximation of a shrug.

“And don’t you dare try and make a pass at her, either,” Leliana warned. “I might have to stab you if you do.”

“She doesn’t favor men,” Cullen pointed out. “Not that I realized it back then,” he added, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Well, yes,” Leliana said. “Yes, but… Never mind.”

Cullen let his hand drop and cocked his head. He’d never seen Leliana this flustered before. Somehow, it made him feel better, like he wasn’t the only person that had once fancied the mighty Amell. But it seemed that Cullen’s infatuation had faded at the edges, like a portrait left too long in the sun. Leliana’s memories, it seemed, were colorfast.

“You really don’t mind?” she asked, looking up at Cullen with narrowed eyes.

“Even if it did, it’s hardly relevant. By the way, have you seen these new guard rotations?” Cullen
picked up the list from the table.

“Cullen!” Leliana cried. Cullen turned to her in surprise.

“What?!” he returned, startled by her tone.

“You can’t possibly be that calm about all this!”

Cullen blinked. “It seems I am.”

“But you went a decade without sex,” Leliana said. “Because of her.”

“That wasn’t because of Aurelia,” Cullen said. When Leliana raised a brow at him, he amended: “Alright, not entirely because of her. Look, can we discuss the guard rotation?”

“Cullen we have to talk about this!”

“We just did, for pity’s sake!”

“No, not Auri. Your decade-long celibacy! Cullen, your abstinence worries me.”

“Worries you?” Cullen repeated, turning to Leliana in astonishment. “I’m sorry, what exactly worries you about the fact that I…? That I chose to… That is none of your business.”

Cullen turned back to his papers with a huff. Maker’s breath, he liked it better when Leliana was terrifying him with her tears. He had no desire to discuss his sex life with Leliana, of all people - or lack of sex life, as the case may be.

“Cullen, I’ve read ‘The Tale of the Champion.’ If you were still speaking of Auri years later…”

“I am going to kill Varric over that book,” Cullen said, lifting his face to the ceiling. “So help me, I will.”

“Cullen, you’ve been denying yourself for how long? And all for one woman! Admit it, you wanted Aurelia. You still do.”

“No, you want her,” Cullen said, looking down suddenly. “You still do.”

Judging from Leliana’s sudden jolt of surprise, Cullen knew his words had struck true. He redoubled the assault, if only to keep Leliana from attacking.

“You got her, then you lost her,” he said. “And while I’m sorry for your pain, Leliana, please don’t use it as an excuse to drag me into your… Whatever this is. Either the ship has sailed on, or it hasn’t. Either write your letter or don’t. I don’t care. Just please kindly keep your nose out of my business.”

Leliana went very still. Her face became a perfect mask of calm. Cullen wondered if this was the expression Leliana wore just before she slid a knife across someone’s throat.

“Alright then,” she said, suddenly. Surprisingly, no knife accompanied the words.

“Alright then,” Cullen repeated. They stared at each other for a moment. Then Cullen turned back to his papers.

“Now about these guard rotations…” he began.

“Cullen, you must keep your head in this game we are playing!” Leliana said, scowling at him.
“Affection cannot get in our way. Nor the lack of it.”

“Dear Maker, Leliana,” he groaned. “I am trying to work here!”

“I am serious.” She folded her arms over her chest.

“So am I. Work! See?” he shook his papers in emphasis.

“You say you are married to that work, Cullen,” Leliana said, jerking her chin. “But work is a hard wife. She makes for a cold bed.”

“Very poetic,” Cullen grumbled. Still, hadn’t he felt the truth of that this morning?

“Cullen, I understand,” Leliana said. “I am married to work as well. That is why I know her limits. You and I share the same spouse.”

“You know, I find the idea of polyamory with you and work rather disturbing. Besides, I thought you liked your work.”

“I did! I do.” Leliana waved a hand impatiently. “That is not the point. The point is that when one’s wife is cold, one is tempted to take a mistress.”

“Mistress?” Cullen choked.

A vision flashed over the map again: sheets and skin and a sheer wisp of a tunic. Cullen closed his eyes against it.

“Yes, a mistress, Cullen. That is what I am worried about. A mistress can trick you into abandoning your duty. A lover can make you shed your dignity. If someone tempts you enough, you may reveal all our secrets.”

Cullen fought to shake off the dreams that still danced before his mind: Kate’s arms, Kate’s smile, Kate’s… other parts.

“Cullen, admit it,” Leliana said. “After ten years alone, you are ripe for the plucking.”

“Ripe for the plucking?” His eyes popped back open. “I’m not sure I like being compared to a piece of fruit.”

“You are vulnerable, Cullen. Starved for affection.”

“I am not starved.”

“A decade,” Leliana returned.

Cullen snapped his mouth shut. Alright, he was a little hungry.

“Loneliness is a danger,” Leliana said. “Celibacy is a danger. It could make you reckless. It could even get you killed.”

“I hardly think that K— That anyone,” Cullen caught himself quickly, “Would kill me just because
I… Because…. Maker’s breath, I’m not lonely. Rather too much company at present, if you ask me.”

Cullen hoped that Leliana would take the hint. She did not.

“Desire did that to me one,” Leliana told him. “It tripped me and trapped me and led me to torment. Obsession nearly undid me.”

“I am not obsessed…”

That, too, was something of a lie. In the past, Cullen had been obsessed with Amell. And in the present, his interest in Kate was growing just as strong.

Not thinking about that. Not thinking about that…

Alright, Cullen admitted to himself. When it came to desires, he was just an obsessive sort of man. All the better to keep it to himself and direct his single-mindedness toward his job.

“Desire is a danger,” Leliana was saying, and Cullen realized he’d missed what she’d said a moment earlier. “But it can also be a salvation. It is both the poison and the balm, you see.”

Cullen did not see, nor did he like how this conversation had danced away from him yet again.

“I’m not looking for a balm,” he lied. “I’m not looking for anything, thank you very much.”

“So you say,” Leliana said, eyes narrowing. Her lips twisted in consideration.

“But maybe,” she went on, slowly, “Maybe it would be better to plan for it and deal with it like a sensible adult. It would surely be better than going wild like you did in Denerim.”

“I didn’t ‘go wild,’” Cullen said, feeling stung. But Leliana was entirely in her own head right now, dancing to her own tune.

“Discretely, of course,” she said, tapping a finger to her lips. “And not too much attachment, or it could get sticky should it end…”

“What are you on about?” Cullen asked.

He should not have asked.

“Perhaps you should take a mistress, Cullen. Have you considered it?”

Oh dear God.

Yes, he’d considered it. But he was not going to consider it again with Leliana standing right there before him. Yet even as he thought that, a flood of images swept into his mind:

Tangled sheets. A whisper-thin shirt. Conversations about logic and lyrium and tea from beer mugs and soft lips that Cullen had almost - almost - kissed…

Cullen buried his head in his hands.

“Oh stop it,” Leliana said, slapping his arm. “I’m not trying to act as your pimp, Cullen. I’m just saying that if you were to take a lover, that might be better for you and for the Inquisition’s security.”

Cullen looked up, his hands dropping before his mouth as if folded in prayer.
“This is about security?” He spoke through his fingers.

“Well of course,” Leliana said. “Just make sure that you choose someone clever and loyal to our cause, or I would have to intervene.”

Cullen meant to say something, he really did. He might have said ‘This is absurd’ or ‘Duly noted’ or ‘Leliana, you have lost your Orlesian mind.’ But instead, Cullen said nothing. He’d been rendered incapable of speech. For just then, a helpful, hopeful voice piped up inside of him and said:

*Kate is loyal to our cause. Why not pick her?*

Cullen squeezed his eyes tight and pressed his fingertips to his eyelids.

*No, no, no, and no,* he told himself. That was not a good reason - not a good reason at all. He couldn’t ask Kate to become his… what? His mistress? His lover?

*Why not?* that hopeful voice seemed to ask. *She was faithful to a teryn’s heir for years. Is it too much to hope that she might consider a gruff, broken, lyrium-addicted ex-templar as her second lover?*

Cullen frowned and let his hands drop. *Yes,* he thought, glaring out over the map. *Yes, of course it was. When he compared himself to Kate’s perfect little teyrnling…*

Cullen scowled. Kate could have had the pick of Ostwick. She certainly wouldn’t choose *him.* Besides, Cullen couldn’t ask the Inquisitor to become his mistress. It flew in the face of everything he knew about decency and respect and the chain of command. And then there was the problem of Corypheus to deal with, and his lyrium addiction, and…

Actually, the lyrium addiction hadn’t been as much of a hurdle as Cullen had feared. Kate had been quite accepting of his struggle - supportive, even. But that didn’t mean she was ready to deal with rest of his problems, Cullen reminded himself. And the rest of his problems were myriad.

*But she’s your friend,* that hopeful part of his mind seemed to say. *She invited you to the tavern, she defended you. So maybe, if you play your cards right…*

If he played his cards right, then he’d have to *reveal* his cards, Cullen reminded himself. And that was the trouble, right there. It wouldn’t be gentlemanly to pursue Kate without letting her know exactly the kind of man she was getting in the bargain. And how could he explain all *that?* Right now, Kate thought him a capable commander and a friend. Cullen didn’t want to sully that image. For when he imagined trying to tell Kate about Kinloch Hold, Cullen broke out in a cold sweat.

No, Cullen thought. He couldn’t do that. He had his professional life in order, but his personal life was a mess. He currently slept in a bed of nightmares and woke to screaming. So how could he possibly invite Kate into that chaos? How would that even work? What, Kate and Cullen and all of his demons, tucked cozily under the covers? Some orgy that would be. Good Maker, she’d run away screaming. And if Kate did *that* – if she became Cullen’s lover, only to become his ex-lover…

Cullen felt as if his stomach had dropped through his boots. Sweet Andraste, he couldn’t think of that. He recoiled from that notion as quickly as he recoiled from all thoughts of Kinloch Hold. It would destroy him. And Leliana would intervene *then,* Cullen was absolutely certain. The entire Inquisition would intervene.

Besides, Cullen told himself, he *liked* Kate. She deserved better than to be his mistress or his dirty secret or his mode of letting off steam. He liked her far more than he’d ever been infatuated with Amell. That alone ought to warn him not to mess around with this friendship. Obviously, what he had with Kate was more than fancy and wonder and youthful lust.
So, it’s adult lust? the hopeful part of his mind asked.

No, Cullen thought sharply. This wasn’t about a comparison anyhow. Yes, Amell had been a remarkable woman, there was no denying it. For years, she’d been his ideal... well, everything, really. His ideal woman, his ideal leader, his ideal person. Whereas Kate? Kate wasn’t an ideal. She was just his friend. His best friend. He liked her company, just as he liked her insight and her bravery and yes, he could admit it, also her looks. But Cullen was ten years wiser now: he could separate need from want. That was why he saw the solution clear as day: Cullen wanted Kate in his bed, but he needed her at his side far more.

Looks like we’ll be taking the high road, then. The hopeful voice in his head sounded disappointed.

Yes, Cullen told himself. The high road. He had settled on this route back at Kate’s coronation, and he would stay the course. He would keep to the paths of honor and duty and practicality – all Imperial Highways in a landscape of social and sexual unknowns. And he would not go scouting about in the wild-lands of desire, Cullen told himself, nor plan journeys down roads that did not exist. There was no path from Ferelden to the moon, after all. Likewise, there was no path that could lead Cullen to Kate’s bed.

Actually, the helpful, hopeful part of his mind perked up, She’s just up the stairs. If you go down the hall and hang a left…

Cullen winced. Maker save him. The moon and the Inquisitor’s bed, indeed. The one was as inaccessible to him as the other. He would do well to remember that.

“Cullen, are you even listening to me?”

Cullen blinked. He looked down to find that Leliana was glaring at him.

“Umm…”

Had he been listening to her? Not at all. Leliana had been talking all this while, but Cullen hadn’t registered a word. Something about love and healing and time?

“Uh, loyalty to the cause?” Cullen guessed, going back to the last bit he remembered. “Time heals all wounds. Something, something…”

Leliana’s eyes narrowed. “You needn’t treat me like a meddlesome sister, you know. I’m trying to help.”

“The comparison is fitting,” Cullen said, seizing on the change of topic. “Only your meddling puts my sister’s to shame.”

“Why thank you.” Leliana’s lips twisted in a trying-not-to-smile sort of smile. “And I suppose that makes you the little brother I never had.”

“Little brother?” Cullen stood taller than her by a half a foot at least.

“Little brother,” Leliana repeated. “The pretty, dim, helpless little brother that I might have fussed over and teased and driven to distraction.”

“You certainly drive me to… Wait. Dim?”

“But pretty,” Leliana said, with a cheeky smile. “Speaking of which, that reminds me: your actual sister - Mia? She wrote to you. Wanted to know if you’d survived the fall of Haven. I took the liberty
of assuring your family that you’d survived. Here’s her letter,” Leliana added, handing over a piece of paper. “You might want to write to her yourself. I think she’s rather angry with you.”

“You opened my mail?”

Cullen couldn’t tell which bothered him more: that Leliana had written a letter for him, or that she knew Cullen well enough to realize that he’d put off writing to Mia for as long as possible.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like his sister, Cullen thought. But the more often that Cullen wrote to Mia, the more often she wrote back. And she wanted to know everything. Cullen could scarcely stand to face his private life when he was in private. He certainly did not want to sit down and sort through all his thoughts and feelings for the sake of a virtual stranger.

Maker, Cullen thought with a start. When had his own sister become a stranger? And how had he let that happen?

“For what it’s worth, Cullen,” Leliana said, cocking her head at him. “You’re stronger than I thought.”

“Oh.” Cullen said. He felt taken aback, embarrassed, and yet somehow pleased all at once. “Um… Thank you?”

“Don’t mention it,” she said, turning back to her papers.

“Er, likewise,” Cullen said, for it seemed he ought to attempt a compliment in return.

“Likewise what?”

“Well, just… You’re not nearly as heartless as you pretend to be.”

Leliana frowned and her eyes narrowed. “Yes I am,” she said, scowling. “And if you tell anyone differently, I will have to kill you.”

Cullen snorted and rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes, always the vicious spy… Wait. You are joking, aren’t you?”

“You’d better get going, commander,” Leliana said, looking back to her work. “I believe that’s the six o’clock bell that I hear.”

Cullen froze. Indeed, that was the morning bell, ringing faintly in the distance. He lunged for his papers.

“Maker’s breath, Leliana, you might have said something.”

“I just did.”

Cullen scowled at her as he tried to gather up his things. “Blast, blast… Oh, Crestwood!” he cried, snagging a map-marker and sliding it onto the dot on the map. “Blast! Look, I still don’t have the guard rotation settled.” Cullen dug out a paper from his pile and tossed it at Leliana. “Could you get that to Rylen? And please keep Morris out of trouble, will you? He never listens to anyone, but he’s frightened of you. You might be able to use that. Oh, and if you see Barris… Wait, no. Barris is going with me. Isn’t he?”

“We’ll be fine,” Leliana said, laughing. “I’m sure we can manage without you for one week. Now go on and have fun, commander.”
Cullen had been stacking his papers into a pile, but he nearly dropped them at that.

“Fun?” he repeated. What was she talking about? He was about to try and make contact with Hawke.

“Oh, and don’t forget to take Plucky with you!” Leliana cried, as Cullen could turned to go.

Cullen turned back around as one of the ravens came hopping across the table in a flurry of beak and feathers. Cullen clutched his papers to his chest, shouting “Maker!” Then the flapping stilled, and Cullen had a giant crow clinging to his fur ruff.

“Ohhh, she *likes* you,” Leliana crooned. The bird leaned forward cried *WAAACK!* right by Cullen’s ear.

“This bird isn’t going ride me all the way to Crestwood, is she?”

“I love you, too, Plucky,” Leliana said, ignoring Cullen. She went up on her tip toes to rub her nose to the bird’s beak. Cullen cringed at this display of avian affection.

“You cannot be serious.”

“Go, go!” Leliana said, shooing him away. “Bon voyage, little brother!”

“I’m not your… Unngh.”

But Cullen did not have time to argue with her, so he grabbed his papers and strode toward the door, Plucky clinging to his shoulder the entire way.

“Be good, Plucky!” Leliana called. “And Cullen! Think about everything I said!”

Leliana kept waving until the door had shut behind Cullen. The moment she was alone, however, Leliana dropped her hand, and her eyes narrowed.

“Hmmmm….” she said. At the edge of the table, Lady Pickles cawed once, drawing Leliana’s attention.

“Oh yes,” Leliana said, nodding. “He’ll be kind to Plucky. Probably will try hand her off to the first person who will take her, but you know Plucky won’t let him get away with that.”

“Ack!” the bird crowed.

“Oh yes, he’s always been like that. Thick as Denerim’s outer walls.”

Pickles bobbed her head and croaked again: “Ack!”

“I didn’t say he was stupid,” Leliana said. “I said he was thick. You know, doesn’t pick up on things. Although when he does pick up on things…” Leliana sighed and shook her head. “Hmmmm, some bard I am, misjudging my audience like that. You’re right. He’s cleverer than I gave him credit for. And more vulnerable. So we’ll keep a better eye on him in the future, won’t we, Pickles?”

Pickles bobbed her body close to the table, croaking: “Aack, ack!”

“Oh. *That.* Well, I did try to give him a hint. Find a nice girl, I told him. Enjoy what time you can, I told him. But did he listen to me? Oh no. Wincing and frowning at the table as if I was sticking pins in him.”
“Aaack!” the raven cawed, fluffing her feathers.

“I’m not so sure. I find they’re rather formal with each other. Hard to tell one way or the other. Even if you did see them talking on the ramparts the other day, that could mean anything. What about that Ruvena girl? She might do for him.”

Pickles let out a loud, angry squawk: “Maaaack!”

“Really? She seems nice enough.”

Pickles made a short ‘Haaa!’ and looked away. Leliana turned to the table and started rifling through her papers.

“Do you indeed? Alright then, I’ll take that bet. And I raise you four silver on our bet about Coll and Solas. The end of the month or sooner, see if they don’t.”

Pickles fluffed her feathers snapped her beak. “Ack?”

Leliana flinched ever so slightly.

“What about me?” she asked.

Pickles made a whistling, whippoorwill sort of noise. Leliana’s jaw dropped in indignation.

“I beg your pardon? No, I was not just looking for an excuse to reminisce about Auri!”

The raven cocked her head and blinked her eyes.

“What cheek! Besides, that is over and done with, as you know very well.”

The raven looked up at the ceiling and remained silent.

“I do not dwell on it!” Leliana protested.

The raven bent over, tapping a blank sheet of parchment which lay upon the table. Leliana waved a hand impatiently.

“Yes, yes, of course I’ll write to her. I said I would, didn’t I?”

Pickles hopped along the edge of the table and tapped her beak against the ink pot.

“You’re a pushy thing, aren’t you?”

Pickles let out another “Ack!”

“No, it is over, and I’m not going to delude myself into thinking otherwise.”

Pickles made a cooing sort of sound now, a kind of soft ‘weep-weep’. Leliana sighed.

“I do not share your confidence,” she said.

Pickles cawed once more.

“Yes, yes, I will. Oh, and do keep an eye on things in Crestwood, will you? Plucky is counting on your backup.”

“Ack!” The raven bobbed her head.
“Very good,” Leliana said. “Now follow at a distance and report to Charter if anything goes wrong. Oh, and do be safe, my dear.”

Pickles hopped up on Leliana’s shoulder, and nuzzled her head against Leliana’s cheek. Leliana chuckled.

“Yes, yes,” she said. “I’ll miss you, too. Now off you go. The window is open.”

The raven took off in a rush of wings, and Leliana didn’t even blink. Then she took up a piece of paper, drew a breath, and let it out in a heavy sigh.

“‘Not as cold as everyone thinks’?” Leliana murmured to the empty room. “Oh my dear Auri. I only wish I was.”
“Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn…”

Robert swore with each step, flying through curses as quickly as he flew down the stairs. “Damn, damn, damn, damn…” he paused to round a corner and vault out into the courtyard. “…Damn, damn, damn,” he resumed.

It was what, Robert wondered? Six in the morning? If that? The square of sky above the courtyard shone a pale, thin sort of blue. Robert regarded the weak light as a kind of personal affront. No sensible person should be awake at his hour, he thought. Absolutely awful that the Maker made the early morning in the first place.

“Damn, damn – Good morning!”

Robert paused his glowering and cursing to greet two passing servants. They stared after him in shock as he dashed on into the cloistered walkway. Robert reached the door to the Great Hall, pulled it open and ran on, his backpack bouncing with every step, his socks and boots clutched tightly in one hand.

“How the Void - how the very Void had Cassandra managed to slip by him? Thank the Maker that Cole had thought to warn Robert. The spirit had appeared at the end of Robert’s bed just five minutes ago and said: “Cassandra is awake and getting dressed. I thought you might want to know.”

Yes, Robert thought. Yes, he did want to know. Only it was Leliana's responsibility to mind the Seeker this morning. What was the spymaster thinking? Had she fallen asleep in her rookery or something? Blast it, it would not be Robert's fault if Cassandra found out about Hawke from the crowd down at the stables. Robert reached the door of the Great Hall and tore off down the stairs.

"Damn, damn, damn - ow!"

Robert stubbed his toe on the steps, which changed his rhythmic curse to a limping one:

“Damn, ow, damn ow…”

Robert stumbled on, ignored the stares and giggles that followed him. He wheeled around the corner and began down the longer staircase. From here, he could see the lower courtyard, and noticed that a fair number of people were milling about in the early light. Some folks were saddling horses and some were packing bags. Kate and Cullen and Scout Charter stood at a table by the base of the stairs. A raven had perched upon the edge of the table, studying the maps as intently as the humans and elf. Kate looked up to greet Robert with a surprised “Oh! Rob-” but Robert waved off her greeting and hurried on. He reached the lower courtyard and pushed through the crowds. Robert spotted Dorian by the market stalls, looking extremely hungover. Barris stood nearby, watching Dorian warily. Varric was pointing and gesturing at a dwarf-sized pony while Blackwall nodded mildly. And then
Robert saw her: Cassandra came striding out of the stables, surveying the courtyard as if it were a battlefield. Robert sighed in relief, then shouted:

“Cassie!”

She stopped short. She looked around - and then she spotted him. Her eyes went wide as Robert dashed up. He stopped right in front of her. Cassandra’s mouth dropped open, but she didn’t say a thing.

“Hey,” Robert said. And that was all he could manage. Robert found he was completely out of breath. He placed a hand on his chest. Cassandra’s eyes were drawn to that hand. She stared at his chest.

And hullo, Robert thought. That was right. He still hadn’t put his shirt on, had he?Oops.

“What in the Maker’s name are you doing!” Cassandra gaped at him. “You are half naked! And your pants! They are open!”

“What?” Robert looked down in alarm. “Oh. You mean my laces aren’t tied. I thought you meant my small clothes were… Never mind. You had me worried there.”

Robert dropped his boots and socks to the ground, then began lacing his trousers. Cassandra watched him for a moment, then shook herself and looked up at him in shock.

“You can’t dress yourself here!”

“Why not?” Robert wanted to know.

“Because… You…” Cassandra had looked back down at his hands as Robert tied a knot at his waist. And he might have flexed just then, just to make sure she understood that his archery practice had done him some good. Cassandra drew in a sharp breath, then looked up at his face. Her cheeks were very pink now.

“You should dress yourself in your room, of course!”

“I would have,” Robert said. “Only I heard you were about to leave without me.”

“I wasn’t going to leave without you,” Cassandra said, frowning, “I just…”

Her eyes trailed back down to Robert’s chest and she seemed to forget what she was saying.


“I was not certain I could trust you to make the necessary preparations,” she said, archly. “The way you were drinking last night, I thought you might not wake until tomorrow.”

Robert scowled. “I didn’t drink that much. In fact, I…”

Robert caught himself there. He almost said he’d quit drinking early so that he could run some errands for Leliana. Instead, he said:

“I paced myself.”

Cassandra looked doubtful.

“Anyhow,” Robert went on, “Here I am now, as you can see. Sober and packed and ready to go
whenever you are. You want to leave now?” To emphasize, he hefted his pack on his back.

“You still aren’t wearing a shirt!”

Robert shrugged. “Alright, so I’ll get my shirt on and we’ll go.”

“This!” Cassandra said, waving a hand up and down, as if to indicate his chest. “This is why I hesitate to go with you!”

“What? Because I’m shirtless?”

“Because you do not consider!” she cried, her voice rising. “Because you do not plan! How can I trust you are ready to run a mission when you cannot even dress yourself?”

A few passing servants slowed their steps to stare at Cassandra with wide eyes - then they shot Robert sympathetic looks. They seemed to be silently telling him You’re in for it, before hurrying away.

“I can dress myself,” Robert said, frowning. “I just can’t dress myself and run through Skyhold at the same time. What, you think you could do better? I dare you to strip down right now, then see if you can get your clothes on by the time you reach the Great Hall.”

Cassandra’s mouth dropped open.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Robert asked her. “Go on then.”

“You!” Cassandra cried. “What is wrong with you? Do you think this is all some joke? Some flirtation? Some kind of seduction?”

Robert frowned. “I’m just saying…”

“That’s all this is to you,” Cassandra said, angrily. “All you care about is pleasure and amusing yourself.”

“It is not!” Robert said, growing angry now. “Come now! I’m about to risk my life on this mission - a mission that’s beginning at the break of dawn, I’d like to add - and you think I’m just doing this for my own amusement?”

“I saw the betting book!” Cassandra cried. She pointed over Robert’s shoulder, as if indicating tavern in the upper courtyard.

“Betting book?” Robert blinked at her.

“The new one,” Cassandra nearly growled. “There was a bet on how long it would take you to… to… To find a new lover!”

Robert groaned. “Truly?” he asked, rolling his eyes heavenward. “That’s what this is about?”

“Well,” Cassandra said, now looking a little less certain of herself, “Your name was in there. And I thought…”

“You thought I put myself down in that book? Signed myself up for more gossip and speculation and anger from you? Maker’s breath, Cassandra. Just how stupid do you think I am?”

“But your name was in there!”
“Well, I didn’t put it there,” Robert said. “Was it even in my handwriting?”

“I… That…” This simple piece of logic seemed to stump Cassandra. She scowled at him.

“You were chasing after women just last night! I heard you talking to that server. You were flirting!”

Robert fixed Cassandra with a look. “So you’re jealous?”

“I am not jealous!” Cassandra practically shouted. “I just don’t like the way you toy with my reputation the way you do your own. I know you love playing the rogue…”

“I hate playing the rogue,” Robert said, unthinkingly.

”… But I deserve better than to be dragged all over Thedas by some man who does not think two days into the future, whose idea of ‘planning’ for a mission is to stay up all night, making bets with drunks and card cheats!”

Cassandra’s voice raised once again. Several stable hands turned to stare. And Robert, who had begun to feel a bit chilled without his shirt on, now felt hot with anger and shame. She sounded just like his father.

“And why me, Robert?” Cassandra went on, her voice rising. “Why choose me? Why not pick some woman who would welcome your insincere flatteries? Maker knows there are plenty who would have you.”

Before he could stop himself, before he could consider the wisdom of what he was thinking, Robert leaned down and hissed in her face:

“No one wants me, Cassandra.”

Cassandra blinked. “What?”

Robert caught himself there. He couldn’t explain all that. He wouldn’t explain that. And he was tired of this farce. He didn’t care what he’d promised Leliana. He’d keep the secret about Hawke, but he was done with the rest of it. He refused to spend his days herding Cassandra about. She was no sheep, and he wasn’t a damned dog.

Robert swung his pack around into his arms, opened the top, and began rummaging through it.

“You want plans?” he asked her. “Here you are: plans.”

Robert grabbed a sheaf of papers out of his pack and shoved them at her folded arms. Cassandra grabbed for them so that they would not fall.

“I’ve got maps, scout reports, Cullen’s notes on former templars, Scout Harding’s notes on observed red lyrium trades, and everything Cole and Barris could tell me about red templars. This might be a bit rudimentary compared with a Seeker’s work, but it’s all I’ve got.” Robert swung his pack back onto his back.

“You think you can do better?” he asked Cassandra without looking at her. “Then go to the Graves without me. But I’m done with this interrogation. And I’m done with you.”

Cassandra just stared at him in shock. And unable to meet her eyes, Robert stomped away.

Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn…
Damn her insinuations, Robert thought in fury. And damn her accusations and her doubt and her prying questions that got right at the heart of him. And damn it all, this just wasn’t like him to get hurt like that. He was the casual Trevelyan. He was the fun Trevelyan. And yet somehow, Robert had also become the Trevelyan who lived down to every assumption that anyone ever made about him.

He had also stomped himself right into the barn, Robert realized. It was quiet in here, as most of the horses were out in the courtyard getting saddled for the journey. This space was mostly packed with bales of hay. A quick glance over Robert’s shoulder showed him that Cassandra still stood in the courtyard beyond. She was reading through his notes, brows drawn and lips pressed in a deep frown. She didn’t have to look so upset, Robert thought with a frown. Sure his handwriting was terrible, but the notes were fine - or so Robert thought. And now that Robert stood here, he realized that he should not have lost his temper like that. In giving Cassandra those papers, he’d given away his mission. And he couldn’t do that. Leliana would have his hide. So Robert supposed he ought to go back out there and ask for his things back. But two things made him hesitate: first of all, his pride was still wounded. And second of all, he still wasn’t wearing a shirt. Better get dressed first, Robert thought. Then he could focus on how to deal with Cassandra.

With a sigh, Robert looked around for a dressing room. He could go up into the hayloft, he supposed. Only it looked quite dusty up there. Perhaps – ah! There! The hay bales in the corner had been stacked in neat columns and rows, making a standing fortress of burlap-wrapped blocks. Robert ducked around the side, side-stepping along the narrow space between the barn wall and the bales. He continued around the corner of the barn until he came to a space where the blocks had been stacked unevenly, forming a kind of bale-throne. Robert plunked himself down upon a hay bale and threw his bag and boots to the straw-strewn floor. It was like he was king of the barn, Robert thought. That seemed fitting somehow.

Robert found his tunic and pulled it out of his bag. The shirt was a crumpled mess. Sort of like this morning, Robert thought. He scowled and did his best to shake out the wrinkles. He was so busy fuming, that Robert almost missed it when a voice on the other side of the hay bale said, softly:

“I’m sorry, what’s this about now?”

Out of habit, Robert froze and listened. Years of eavesdropping at the edges of ballrooms had taught him well enough how to stay quiet still. Robert didn’t place the voice at first, but he recognized the second speaker easily enough:

“That was Katie. And now that Robert recognized his cousin, he realized who was with her: that Cullen-commander fellow.

“P-privately?” the man stammered in reply.

Robert frowned at the man’s reaction. The commander didn’t need to sound that nervous about being along with a mage. Varric had said that Cullen was a stuffy ex-templar, but this took stuffy and ex-templar-y to new heights.

“If there’s a problem with the route…” Cullen began.

“Oh no, the routes are fine,” Katie said. “I think you made your case for the Imperial Highway well enough. No, I wanted to talk to you about something else.”

Robert looked over his shoulder, as if he could actually see through the wall of hay bales. It occurred
to him that perhaps he ought not listen in on his own cousin. But Robert couldn’t very well sneak out of this corner without revealing himself. And that would raise all sorts of questions about why he’d been shirtless and hiding in the hay in the first place. As Robert didn’t feel like explaining himself, he stayed quiet.

“So, um, Cullen,” Kate began on the other side of the bales. “About last night…”

Sitting on his throne of straw, Robert froze. Hang on. What about last night? Surely these two hadn’t…? Together? Dear Maker, this was already more information than he’d bargained for.

“Last night?” Cullen said on the other side of the bale. “What happened last night?”

Oh, Robert thought. Never mind. Judging by the man’s confusion, nothing exciting had happened last night - at least not to the templar. Still, a suspicion bloomed in Robert’s mind - the seed of which had been planted the previous evening in the tavern. It had germinated under a winter of distractions: the drinks and the game of Wicked Grace and the tantalizingly close view of Cassandra’s leather-clad bottom. But now, Robert’s suspicions opened in full flower. Had Katie invited this Cullen fellow to the tavern out of a sense of pity? Some sort of outreach-to-uptight-templars-type charity? Or did Katie’s interest run deeper than that?

But that made no sense, Robert mused. Katie hated the Order, even though she would never say so aloud. Besides, by all accounts - well, Varric’s account, anyhow - the commander was dull and rigid. Not to mention, Robert thought, he was also freakishly celibate. Meanwhile, Katie had a romance-novel collection that amounted to a small library. No, Robert thought. Cullen didn’t seem at all a good match for his cousin. Let that over-eager Ruvena have the commander, and let Katie find someone kinder.

“Um, don’t you remember?” Kate was asking Cullen on the other side of the bales. “We went to the tavern last night?”

“Yes, I remember that part,” Cullen said. There was a strange note of in his voice - almost like sarcasm. “Kind of hard to forget it.”

“Right,” Kate said. It sounded like she was grimacing. “So naturally, I must apologize.”

Apologize? Robert wondered.

“Apologize?” Cullen repeated in evident confusion.

“For abandoning you at the tavern like that. Rude of me, really, to invite you out for drinks and then not remain to play hostess. I woke up this morning and just felt awful about it. I rushed down here as quick as I could to say so, only you were busy talking to Charter and, well, here we are. Anyhow, I’m sorry.”

Robert barely kept himself from snorting aloud. Is that what this was all about? Not romantic interest, but unfounded social guilt? How very Trevelyan of her.

“Abandoning me?” Cullen said on the other side of the hay bale. “That’s not how I remember it.”

“But that’s what I did,” Kate said. “And I am sorry for it. I found myself growing tired after all those drinks, and … Well, to be honest, I had a bit of a panic after I finished with my story.”

“A panic?”

“Quite,” Kate said. “I was belatedly mortified.”
Behind the bale, Robert blinked in astonishment. Wait, Katie was admitting to an emotion? Just how close was she with this templar anyhow? Even more curious now, Robert leaned toward the wall of straw. He did his best not to make a sound.

“Ah,” Cullen was saying. “I see.”

“Yes,” Kate said. “And besides that, I thought… Well, I feared that perhaps you might disapprove of a mage carrying on so. For having an affair like that, I mean. You were glowering while I spoke…”

“I was?”

He was, Robert thought. That was part of the reason Robert hadn’t thought the templar cared much for Katie.

“Um, well yes,” Katie said. “And I thought that perhaps, with you being a templar and all…”

“Ex-templar,” Cullen interrupted - rather emphatically, in Robert’s opinion. “And I don’t disapprove of…” Cullen paused, then said:

“Actually, yes. Yes, I do disapprove.”

Behind the bale, Robert rolled his eyes. So the templar was that severe after all.

“But only because it was quite unwise,” Cullen went on. “In Kirkwall you would have gotten the brand for such a thing.”

Robert went quite still. Kate gave a startled ‘Oh!’

“Well, you would have,” Cullen persisted. “Your teyrn’s son, whatever his name was, he would have gotten away with nothing more than a stain to his reputation, whereas you…” There was slightly strangled sound, then a pause, and then:

“This is why I didn’t – I don’t…” Cullen cleared his throat. “I don’t like thinking about it.”

Robert didn’t like thinking about it either. The tranquil’s brand? Really? Just for taking a lover? But surely that wouldn’t have happened in Ostwick, and definitely not to a Trevelyan. Still, Robert thought with a frown, Katie’s tendency toward secrecy and anxiety suddenly made a great deal more sense.

“Your Circle was horrible,” Kate said, angrily.

Robert found himself surprised by that pronouncement - not at the pronouncement itself, but at the fact that Katie would criticize a Chantry institution. She’d never done that before.

“Yes?” Cullen said it as if it were a question - as if he were resigned to that question. There was a strange, tense silence on the other side of the straw.

Robert couldn’t see either person’s face, but he could imagine the scene all the same: Cullen with that stony scowl he’d worn last night, and Katie with her half-angry, half-earnest expression.

“Well,” Kate said after a moment. “Hence the secrecy all these years.”

“Er, yes,” Cullen said. “Yes, I can see that. Still,” he pressed on, hesitantly, as if shuffling one foot in front of the other, “Still, to take a risk like that, you must have loved him very much? Your, um… him?”
Well now. Robert’s brows shot up. So the ex-templar was jealous? Robert scarcely knew Cullen from Mafarath, but Robert knew that tone of voice well enough. Maybe he’d misjudged this Cullen fellow after all.

“Alan?” Kate said, supplying the name when Cullen did not. “I suppose I did.”

Robert wanted to smack his forehead, but he dared not. Really Kate, he thought? Did she have no idea how to play coy? One never spoke openly about one’s former lovers. One kept things obscured by saying ‘That’s in the past’ and making other vague insinuations. Or was Katie even trying to play coy? Was she trying to do anything other than apologize? Robert wasn’t certain.

“Ah. Well.” Cullen said briskly. “I see.”

Did he, Robert wondered? Maybe he could explain Katie to Robert, as Robert didn’t entirely understand her sometimes.

“Leliana certainly liked your tale,” Cullen went on. “Liked it so well that she…”

He stopped himself there. Behind the bale, Robert’s eyes went wide. How had Cullen found out about that?

“What did she do?” Kate asked, clearly alarmed.

“Oh, um,” Cullen said. “She thought it made you sound sympathetic. So she, um…” Cullen hesitated there.

“I’m not quite sure what she’s doing, exactly.”

“She’s going to publish it in a broadside, isn’t she?” Kate said, her tone flat.

Robert bit back a chuckle. Oh yes indeed, he thought. But Robert completely approved of the spymaster’s plans. After all, Leliana was quite right: the story did make Kate seem heroic and all those other things the Inquisitor ought to be. Robert hoped the tale made its way back to Ostwick, and that Alan and Olivia choked on it. How he’d love to see their faces when the gossip began! Robert grinned at the thought.

“I should have realized the story wouldn’t stay in the tavern,” Kate groaned. “I never should have said anything.”

“Why did you say anything?” Cullen asked her. “You needn’t have told them that story. Certainly not in such detail.”

Robert perked up at that. Yes, why had Katie told that tale after so much silence?

“I don’t know.” Kate said, in a way that made Robert think she knew perfectly well what she’d been about. “I suppose I thought it was better that way. Bull always tells me, ‘control the battlefield, boss.’ I decided I ought to tell the story myself, rather than have someone ferret it out.”

“Makes sense,” Cullen said.

Behind the hay bale, Robert nodded to himself. If only he had thought to do something similar with Cassandra, Robert mused. Might have saved himself a great deal of embarrassment this morning.

“A tactic of the Grand Game,” Kate went on. “I’ve learned a few.”

Sort of, Robert thought. Katie had managed well enough among the Trevelyans, but around this
Cullen fellow, her subtlety had failed entirely. Maybe she did fancy him after all.

“Ah,” Cullen said. “Because for a moment there, I thought you told the story because… Er, never mind.”

“What did you think?” Kate asked.

“Well,” Cullen said, trying to sound off-hand and failing miserably. “For a moment I wondered if maybe you were trying to deflect attention from me. You know, some kind of challenge to draw the attention of the enemy. Not that anyone at the tavern was the enemy. It just seemed like a tactic, that’s all.”

“Oh,” Kate said.

“Foolish, I know.”

“No, no,” Kate said. “I was trying to shield you as well. You’re quite right.”

Behind the hay bale, Robert wanted to smack his forehead. Behold the failed subtlety, he thought. She might as well tell the man she planned to slay dragons for him.

“You were?” Cullen sounded startled. He sounded a bit pleased as well, but mostly startled.

“Of course,” Kate said. “That’s what friends do, right? Shield each other?”

This time, Robert really did smack his forehead. He couldn’t help it. But neither Cullen nor Kate seemed to hear the soft ‘thwack’ on the other side of the straw wall.

Katieeeeet, Robert wanted to whine at her. Was she trying to court the man or push him away? What in the Void was she doing?

“Oh.” Cullen sounded rather disappointed, which was only to be expected. “I, um… Yes. I suppose so.”

“I mean,” Kate added quickly. “I wanted to defend you. Or, you know, help. I figured with all the struggles you’ve been facing –”

Struggles? Robert perked up. What struggles?

” – the last thing you needed was a lot of rude questions about your past.”

What about Cullen’s past?

“Yes, well…” Cullen didn’t seem to know what to say there. “Thank you?”

“You’re welcome?” Kate replied, and that also sounded like a question. “Or you would be, if I’d been successful in stopping them. I wasn’t able to entirely fend them off.”

“No need to worry about that,” Cullen said, sourly. “Leliana ‘edited’ my story.”

“Oh.” There was a telling pause. “What does that mean?”

Robert knew, but he listened quietly as Cullen explained: “She spread a different tale around the barracks. Some obscuring story that passes me off as a gentleman. Roped your cousin into it, I understand.”
Robert found himself frowning. *Oh, well don’t thank me or anything*, he thought.

“You speak as though that was a bad thing.” Kate sounded confused. “It sounds like they were trying to do you a favor.”

*Thank you*, Robert thought, glad his cousin was defending him.

“No, you’re right,” Cullen said. He sounded like he did not think she was right. “I just take issue with needing an editor in the first place.”

*Shouldn’t have gone on a bender then, templar*, Robert thought.

“I don’t judge you, you know,” Kate said. “I don’t think anyone did. For your sexual… er, for your history, I mean.”

Robert wasn’t so sure about that. Varric had a decided opinion on the matter, and Coll had looked downright dubious.

“It wasn’t an orgy,” Cullen said at once.

Robert snorted to himself. Well *that* had been rather defensive, hadn’t it? Frankly, he hadn’t cared about Cullen’s history one way or the other, but after listening to this fellow half-flirt with Katie, Robert now found himself quite intrigued. Was the man’s celibacy due to a physical problem? Was it a rule-based thing? Or did Cullen have some weird kink or something? Robert knew it wasn’t really any of his business, but he couldn’t help but wonder.

“Um, yes, you established that,” Kate said. “And ‘I’m sure you had your, er… reasons?’”

Good God Katie, Robert thought! Why not just ask the man for a fully narrated account? With drawings, even! Yet again, her Trevelyan subtlety was nowhere to be found.

“My reasons for Denerim, you mean?” Cullen asked.

“Yes,” Kate said. She said nothing more, as if silently asking Cullen to explain.

“Well, I…” Cullen began, “I, um… I once fancied a girl…”

*Ho, now!* Robert thought to himself. The templar had had a sweetheart! A promising start.

“It, um… Well, it didn’t work out and I tried to forget her. And the forgetting bit didn’t go as I’d planned either. Took me a while to forget the forgetting, as it were. Then the lyrium kicked in. Stronger doses in Kirkwall, so I found it hard… Er, difficult…”

Robert bit back a laugh. Nice save there, templar.

“Anyhow, that was long ago. And after a morning of talking with Lel… er… It was long ago.”

Cullen said that emphatically, quickly, as if tossing all the words away in a rubbish heap. There was a long pause, then Kate said:

“It sounds like she was special to you.”

Robert shook his head at that entirely unhelpful observation.

“She…” Cullen didn’t seem able to confirm or deny that. “It doesn’t matter,” he said instead. “I’m married to my wor…”
Robert assumed that Cullen meant to say ‘Married to his work,’ but the commander seemed to choke on his words. Behind his bales, Robert made a face at the templar’s rudeness. Alright, so maybe Cullen wasn’t interested in Kate after all. But surely the templar could find a gentler way to let her down? As it was, Katie sounded quite crushed when she said:

“Oh.” That was all she said, too. Robert scowled at the hay bales in cousinly indignation.

“No!” Cullen said, rather loudly and much too quickly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t… I don’t… I don’t like to be fussed over. But I appreciate the um… the thought.”

What thought, Robert wondered? Had there been a thought?

“What thought?” Kate asked.

“The thought of asking me to the tavern,” Cullen explained. “I had a nice time. Wicked Grace is a fun game. I enjoyed it. Might like to play it again. And I would have liked to have spent more time with you. That had been my intention. So perhaps another time…?” Cullen trailed off meaningfully and cleared his throat.

Ah ha, Robert thought! That had definitely been a flirt. Well done, templar! Now just go back and fix the last bit.

“Oh,” Kate said, sounding flustered. “Yes, another time… Another time would be fun.” She paused, and Robert pictured her shuffling her feet awkwardly. “I wish I’d planned last night more carefully. As it was, I wish I hadn’t invited you.”

On the other side of the bales, Robert winced. Katie, he thought. That was a terrible way to phrase it.

“You wish you hadn’t invited me?” Cullen sounded confused - and possibly a little hurt.

“No, no!” Kate said, quickly. “I didn’t want not to invite you. Maker, that makes no sense. I mean, I wish I’d invited you to do something else. Take a walk maybe, or have an actual conversation? Or toast marshmallows in the courtyard, perhaps.”

“Toast marshmallows,” Cullen repeated. “You would have asked me to toast marshmallows.”

He sounded like he was trying not to laugh. Robert likewise held in his own exasperated noises. Was this Kate’s idea of flirting? What was this?

“You’re right,” Kate sighed on the other side of the hay bale. “We couldn’t have toasted marshmallows. Josephine won’t be able to get any for months.”

“I’d like marshmallows,” Cullen said.

Sounded like the templar wanted more than marshmallows, Robert thought.

“Anyhow, I’m sorry,” Kate went on.

“You’re sorry about marshmallows?”

“I’m sorry for exposing you to embarrassment.”

Robert rolled his eyes. Why did Katie take the blame for things that were not her fault? Why apologize at all if one could avoid it?

“That was not your doing,” Cullen said.
Well good, Robert thought. He was glad to hear the templar say so.

“Perhaps not directly,” Kate pressed. “But you were embarrassed on my watch. Or at my invitation. Or something. Anyhow, I feel I ought to have prevented it somehow. Maybe if I had written out a list of things to talk about? Or if I’d kept the conversation on safer topics…”

Robert could not help it. He snorted with laughter. As if that would have worked. Thankfully for Robert, Cullen burst out laughing at the same time, and covered for him.

“What?” Kate demanded on the other side of the hay bale. “It’s not that funny. Is it?”

“Kate,” Cullen said - the use of her given name startled Robert into silence - “Do you honestly think your cousin would have followed one of your lists? Or Sera? Or any of them? Maker knows Morris wouldn’t have. And that’s assuming they could read your handwriting.”

Hold on now, Robert thought. Cullen knew about Kate’s lists? And her handwriting? And how did the commander know that Robert wouldn’t have followed Kate’s instructions? Of course Robert wouldn’t have, but how did the commander know Robert so well? Robert had only met the man twice.

“Hey!” Kate said, but it sounded like she was laughing.

“Really now,” Cullen said. “Would they have listened?”

There was a pause, then: “Maybe not.”

“Maybe?”

Another pause.

“Alright!” Kate said, and there was a definite laugh that escaped her this time. “It was a hopeless situation from the start.”

“It was,” Cullen agreed. “And we both got broadsided.”

“Which is why I should have planned for us to do something else.”

“Like marshmallows,” came the deadpan reply.

“Exactly. Like marshmallows.”

On the other side of the hay bale, Robert lowered his face into the palm of his hand. They were terrible. Terrible! Dear Maker, did he sound like that when he flirted with Cassandra? Surely not. Surely he was far more smooth and direct than this… whatever this was.

This entire conversation was confounding, Robert thought. The two of them were definitely flirting, but neither of them seemed to realize that the other person was flirting back. It was like watching two people hesitantly hold out gifts to one another, not realizing the other person’s hands were too full to accept anything in return.

“Incidentally,” Cullen asked, his voice carrying over the hay bales, “What had you hoped for last night?”

Ah, Robert thought. A good question. Remarkably forward, that. Robert was surprised the commander had even asked. Katie took her time answering. At last she said:
“I don’t know. I guess I wanted to have a conversation that didn’t involve troop movements, or Morris’ strange requisition orders, or your lyrium withdrawals…”

Robert’s eyes bulged from his head. What withdrawals?

“Ah,” Cullen said. His tone was tight.

“Not that I have a problem with the withdrawals!” Kate said, her voice rising. She then caught herself and spoke in a near whisper. Robert had to strain to hear. “You know how I feel about that. I mean to help you get through all this, not… Oh Andraste, I’m making this worse, aren’t I? I just thought that it would be good for you - for everyone - to take some rest. Inquisitor and commander included.”

“So, a furlough of sorts,” Cullen said. He said this in an odd tone - searching, maybe. Or perhaps disappointed.

“Of sorts,” Kate agreed.

But Robert scarcely heard this. Instead, his mind was spinning over what had been revealed a moment before. The templar had quit taking lyrium? Good Maker, did the man have a death wish? He might as well take himself to the top of Skyhold’s tower and throw himself off the side. Everyone knew that there was no coming back from a lyrium addiction. Katie had befriended this man just as he reached the end of his life.

So this wasn’t a flirtation, Robert realized. This was a long goodbye.

“Well again,” Kate was saying on the other side of the bale. “I’m sorry the evening didn’t work out as planned.”

“And again,” Cullen replied, “That’s not your fault. I…”

“Ah there you are!”

Compared to Kate and Cullen’s furtive whispers on the other side of the hay bales, this latest greeting boomed through the whole barn. Robert recognized the speaker at once. So also did Kate.

“Morning Coll,” she said. Kate’s voice came out rather breathless. “You seem to be in a fine mood.”

“I am,” Coll said, and the straw crunched as she came to a stop on the other side of the bales. “But only because I got the last word in with Solas just now. Howya, templar. Say, where’d your cousin get off to, Kate-lass? Seeker’s out there lookin’ for him.”

Robert cringed. Oh dear. He’d forgotten about that, engrossed as he had been with Kate and Cullen’s interchange. Was Cassandra still angry, Robert wondered? Or had she cooled off?

Unfortunately, Coll made for yet another person blocking Robert into this self-inflicted straw prison. Maybe he could sneak past them all without being noticed? Robert looked around and frowned. Not likely. If he started shuffling around in the hay, they would probably hear him out there. Straw was notoriously noisy in all the wrong ways.

“How strange,” Kate said. “I saw Robert earlier. Maybe he realized he’d forgotten his shirt and went back to his rooms?”

No, Robert thought to himself. That’s what he should have done, but no.
“I’ve no clue,” Coll said, as if Robert’s whereabouts didn’t concern her in the least. “As for you two, I got mixes for you both.”

“Mixes?” That was Cullen.

“Potions,” Kate clarified without missing a beat.

“Stayed up all night on ‘em,” Coll added. “Done never went to bed, I’ll have you know. Things didn’t work out with Krem, by the by. Just in case you’re wondering.”

Neither Kate nor Cullen commented upon that. Neither of them had asked in the first place. There was a clinking of glass as Coll went on:

“For you lass, healin’ potions and sun ointment.”

“It’s the middle of winter,” Kate protested.

“No excuse,” Coll said. “As for you, templar. I done made you up some elfroot pellets.”

There was a strange rattling sound. It sounded as though Coll was brandishing a jar of pills at the templar.

“Er,” Cullen said. “And what are these for?”

He sounded rather put off by whatever he was looking at, Robert mused. Robert had half a mind to take a peek at the offering, but didn’t dare.

“These here are for your suhlan’nu. Your lyrium pains.” There was another rattle on the other side of the bales.

“Uh… oh,” Cullen said.

On his side of the bale, Robert perked up. Wait. Coll had made Cullen some kind of medicine? Robert felt a flicker of hope rise inside of him.

“Oh, thank you Coll,” Kate said, in obvious relief. “See? This is what I was telling you about, Cullen. A supplement to help your body break down the lyrium.”

Ah ha, Robert thought! Clever, clever mages! Really, Robert mused. Why did they lock mages in towers anyhow? From all he’d ever seen of mages, they were the most useful people to have around. And Robert should have realized that his cousin wasn’t going to let the commander just withdrawal himself to death. Of course Katie had a plan. And of course she’d recruited Coll to help her.

“Sure, but you’ll need to keep an eye on him, Kate-lass,” Coll warned on the other side of the bale. “This geshathena is all experimentin’ at this point. Gonna need to check in on him regular-like with the protocols. Perhaps twice a night.” Coll chuckled to herself. Then there was a muffled ‘Oof!’ then “Ow, lass!”

Cullen must not have heard that last interchange. Either that, or he was preoccupied with the bottle of pellets. “I’m sure this isn’t really necessary is it?” he asked.

Robert frowned at that. Why was Cullen complaining? The two mages were trying to save him.

“Will you listen to the boyo?” Coll cried. “Elfroot ain’t good enough for him, is that it?”

“Keep it down, Coll,” Kate hissed. “Cullen,” she went on, speaking more quietly, “We talked about
“Now you listen to me, templar,” Coll said, talking right over Kate and speaking just as loudly as before: “Kate here told me you’re in a right state. I can tell you’re in a right state just by standin’ here. An’ there’s a heap o’ difference between elfroot healin’ and your Chantry’s feckin’ drug.”

“I, well, yes,” Cullen said, hesitantly. “But they look awfully, um… grassy.”

“Sure,” Coll said, “You take ‘em rectally. Shove one in every morning after your daily crap.”

Robert doubled over. He didn’t know how he managed not to laugh, but somehow he managed not to laugh. As it was, tears came to his eyes and he wrapped his arms around his bare stomach. Good Maker, no wonder the templar didn’t want them!

“What?” Cullen sputtered. “I…er… Well, I suppose…”

“Oh Coll, stop!” Kate cried. “Don’t tease him like that.”

“Is she teasing me?” Cullen asked. He sounded desperate for it to be so.

“No,” Coll deadpanned.

“Yes!” Kate insisted. “Coll,” she chided.

“Fine, fine,” Coll said, “I’m just messin’ with you, templar. Serves you right though! I stayed up all night on those!”

“So these are not rectally inserted.” Cullen sounded like he wanted to be very clear on this.

“Maythal no,” Coll said. “You jess swallow ‘em. Or mash ‘em up in your food if you prefer. Oh, Creators love you lad! Look at how red you’ve gone after goin’ so pale!”

“Coll,” Kate said. “That wasn’t very nice.”

“No, but ‘twas worth it,” Coll said. “Come on now, templar. I want to hear some gratitude.”

“I, er… thanks?”

“Ta!” Coll said. “And lemme be clear, boyo,” she added, “You don’t want to put those things up your arse. Might sprout in there, for sure, elfroot grows in any crack in all of Thedas. And then you’d end up with…”

“Yes, thank you Coll,” Kate said. “I think we get the idea.”

“Might have to try that sometime though,” Coll said, thoughtfully. “Not on meself, but on someone else. You got any prisoners down in the dungeons who…?”

“Coll!”

“I believe the Chantry has laws about torture,” Cullen said.

“Nah they don’t,” Coll said. “They’ve got Circles, don’t they? Ah now, don’ you two worry. I was just jokin’. Me days of tormentin’ are over. Mostly. Almost entirely. Exceptin’ for Solas.”

“Coll, you’re a force of nature, truly,” Kate said.
“Ah, you’re too kind, lass.”

“How do you keep up with her?” Cullen asked.

“I don’t,” Kate admitted. “I really don’t.”

“No one can,” Coll said, proudly. “By the by, templar, your stable master wants to speak to you. Cute lass she is, too. Somethin’ about not knowin’ what kind of horse you want?”

“One suitable for a beginner, I suppose,” Cullen said. There was another rattle of the elfroot pellets, perhaps as Cullen transferred them from one hand to another.

“ Beginner,” Kate said. A doubtful note crept into her voice now. “Cullen, I hesitate to ask. Did you ever get a chance to practice riding?”

“ Maker no,” the templar replied. “Didn’t have time. I’ll learn in the saddle, I suppose.”

“What?” Kate groaned. “ Cullen.”

“Oh come now,” the man said. “How hard can it be?”

Behind the bale, Robert bit back a snort. Coll did not, however. Her laugh echoed through the barn.

“I admire your confidence boyo,” the elf said. “Still, you might want to take two pellets a day now. Not up yer arse, but for it.”

“What?” Cullen sounded like he was frowning. “Why? Surely I don’t… Ah, yes Sienna! I’ll… Of course! If you’ll excuse me, Kate. Coll.”

There was a crunching as Cullen walked away through the straw.

“One pellet a day, templar!” Coll shouted after him. “No wait. Two!” There was a pause, then:

“He’s gonna be dyin’ by tomorrow.”

“By tonight,” Kate replied. “His ass will be sore in ways he didn’t know were possible.”

Robert burst out laughing. Katie was commenting upon a templars ass? Since when had she grown so bold? But before Robert could consider the answer to that question, he heard an ‘Eep!’ on the other side of the straw. That was Kate, Robert realized, and there was also a shout of ‘Who in feck’s back there?!’ which came from Coll.

Oh. Oops, Robert thought. That’s right. He was supposed to be hiding back here. Ah well. The game was up now. At least the templar had gone. Robert stood on his bale-seat and peeked over the hay wall.

“Good morning,” he said, waving a hand.

On the other side of the straw, Kate’s eyes went huge. Coll just looked delighted, as if Robert’s appearance was the latest joke in a comedic play.

“Mornin’ lad!” Coll said, waving back. “Sure but you have the best timin’.”

“Robert Alexander Lindsay Trevelyan!” Kate cried, eyes wide and furious. “Have you been back there all along?”
“Lindsay?” Coll laughed.

“We have a Great-Aunt who demanded a namesake,” Robert explained, as Coll started poking around the bales.

“How’d you get back there, boyo?” Coll asked. She walked to the end of the hay-wall, found the small walkway, and came around to Robert’s side.

“What a grand hidin’ space!” she laughed.

“Coll!” Kate hissed. Then, with a glare at Robert, Kate followed her friend. A moment or two later both Kate and Coll had shuffled through the narrow walkway and into Robert’s rustic court of hay-thrones.

“Welcome!” he told them, spreading his arms wide.

“Robert Trevelyan…” Kate began. “What in the Maker’s name…” Kate broke off when she finally got a good look at him.

“You still don’t have on a shirt?” she asked. “Robert, why?”

“Boffin’ lasses in the barn, were you?” Coll nodded approvingly. “Classic, that. Personally, I find that straw is dead scratchy. Also there’s mice.”

“I wasn’t back here with a woman,” Robert said in exasperation. “I came back here just to… Um…”

“Oh,” Coll said, glancing down at his trousers. “Pullin’ the dread wolf’s tail, were you? Well then. We’ll leave you to it.” She elbowed Kate and made to leave.

“I wasn’t masturbat—” Robert said.

“Oh my Maker,” Kate said, looking from one of them to the either. “You two. It’s like having a conversation with a couple of apprentices.”

“Don’t be knockin’ it, Kate-lass,” Coll snorted. “Sure but you must rub the little fennec from time to time.”

Kate said nothing to that, but went slightly pink. She turned to Robert and deliberately ignored Coll.

“So,” she said. “Just how much of that conversation did you overhear?”

“Oh,” Robert shrugged. “Just about all of it.”

“Robert,” Kate groaned.

“What?” he said, holding his arms out innocently. “You and your commander trapped me back here.”

“Trapped you?” Kate repeated. “What. You weren’t spying for Leliana then?”

“Maker no!” Robert said, affronted now. “I don’t sell out friends.”

“Then why were you back here?”

“Because I was hiding from Cassandra, if you must know.”
“Hiding from the Seeker?” Coll laughed, as Kate frowned.

“Why are you hiding from Cassandra?” Kate asked.


“I…” Kate shook her head, then evidently decided not to ask about that story. “Fair enough,” she said. “So if you were back here, did you hear me and Cullen talking about his lyrium… Um…?”

“Did I hear about how your commander quit lyrium? Yes.”

“Robert!”

“What?” he waved his arms wide. “Stupid thing to keep secret if you ask me. If he goes balls up on the battlefield, it’ll come as a shock to everyone.”

“That’s what I said!” Coll agreed.

Judging by the look on Kate’s face, his cousin had had a similar worry. She sighed.

“I’m doing what I can to help him,” she said. “But he can be a bit stubborn, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“Oh, we all noticed,” Coll said. She raised her eyebrows in a sort of ‘And how’ expression.

“It comes of being a commander, I suppose,” Kate said. “I only wish that I…”

But what Kate wished, Robert didn’t find out. For at that moment, a voice called out on the other side of the hay bales:

“Hello? Inquisitor? Katerina, are you in here?”

Robert froze in panic. He heard a ‘stomp’ as a boot hit the bottom step of the hayloft stairs.

“Katerina? Cullen said you were still in the barn?”

“Don’t answer!” Robert hissed, but Kate had raised her voice and shouted:

“Under here, Cassandra!”

“No!” Robert hissed.

“‘Round the edge of the hay bales!” Coll added.

“Coll!” he turned to glare at the elf.

“What?” Coll shrugged. “Rude to leave a body hollerin’ out there.”

“What in the Maker’s name…” Cassandra’s voice trailed off. There were more steps and sounds of crunching hay. Then shuffling as the Seeker made her way through the barn. Robert looked down at himself, then dove for his bag. Where was his shirt, he wondered? He dug through his pack frantically. Where was his shirt? Robert spotted it on a hay bale where he’d left it. He snagged it just as Cassandra came into view. Then he whirled around, holding it before himself like a shield. Cassandra stood at the edge of the tiny space, her eyes wide.

“Oh,” she said.

Once again, she was staring at Robert’s chest.
“Hullo,” Robert said.

“You still have no shirt on,” Cassandra noted.

Coll sniggered into her tattooed hand. Kate pressed her lips together and looked down at the floor.

“Er, no,” Robert said. “Not yet. I came back here to get dressed.” He shook out his shirt, but couldn’t seem to find the opening.

“You are dressing while your cousin and Coll are watching you?”

“No,” Robert said, turning the fabric around and around. “They came…”

“We came to wish him a happy journey,” Kate said, jumping in to explain. Robert would have hugged her for it, if he hadn’t been so busy with the tunic. “We realized we’ll miss him while he’s out in the Emerald Graves with you. Do keep him company, will you?”

Well that was laying it on a bit thick, Robert thought. He would have been grateful for Kate’s words, only Cassandra wasn’t coming with him anymore, was she?

“Oh, I’m sure Cassandra wouldn’t want my company,” Robert grumbled. “She’s got better things to do. Doesn’t she?”

There was a silence at that. Robert realized that he’d said that aloud. He hadn’t meant to do that. Coll pressed her lips together and gave Kate an ‘Oh shite!’ sort of look. Kate just looked up innocently at the beams above. Cassandra flushed, but she didn’t not look away from Robert’s face. Their eyes locked, and Robert felt a sudden warmth spread through him.

“Well now!” Coll cried. She clapped her tattooed hand together. “Look at the time, Kate-lass! Best we be gettin’ on, don’t you think?”

“Oh yes, definitely,” Kate agreed. She and the elf turned to go.

“No, wait–” Robert called. Now that he was about to be left alone with Cassandra again, he felt a sudden sense of panic. Kate must have guessed at his worry, for she turned back to him and said:

“It’s alright, Robert. You’ll do well.” She nodded once. “I know you will.”

Whether she meant the mission to the Graves or speaking with Cassandra, Robert didn’t know. She might have meant both. And some advice that was, Robert thought. All the same, he felt he ought to offer some advice of his own:

“You, too, Katie,” he told her. “You and the temp…” He caught himself there. “Just remember,” he said, trying a different tack. “You don’t have to settle for an Alan anymore. You can do much better than that.”

Kate’s eyes went wide, but all she did was nod. To one side, Cassandra made a kind of sighing sound. Coll just snorted.

“Sure, but I coulda told you that. Come on, Kate.”

The two of them left, shuffling past Cassandra in a tight exchange between the bales. Then Robert stood alone with the Seeker once more.

And he was still shirtless.
“Blast.” Robert dove into his tunic, got tangled, then tried to get himself sorted out. On the other side of the fabric, he heard Cassandra say:

“So.”

“So,” he replied, all muffled. Damn it, where was the - ah! - the neck. Robert popped his head through, the threaded his arms through the sleeves.

“You’re backward,” Cassandra told him.

Robert looked down. So he was. He pulled his arms back into his shirt and turned the tunic around. As he threaded his arms in the right way, he heard Cassandra say:

“Regarding the Emerald Graves…”

“I’ll handle it,” Robert said, tugging his shirt into place. “You needn’t…”

“I would like to go with you,” Cassandra told him.

“You would?” Robert froze, blinking at her.

“I would,” Cassandra nodded. “And I must apologize. I lost my temper back there.”

“You’re admitting it?” Now Robert was even more astonished. And it seemed that made Cassandra angry.

“Of course I am admitting it,” she said, frowning. “I can do that, you know.”


“You have made very good plans for the journey,” Cassandra continued on. She held out her hands, and Robert saw now that she was holding all of his papers in a neat stack. “They are much better than I would have expected.”

Robert snorted. “High praise, indeed,” he said. He tugged down each shirt cuff in turn.

“I also now realize,” Cassandra went on. “That it was not your handwriting that I saw in the betting book.”

“Is this the part where I get to say ‘I told you so?’” Robert began to tuck his shirt into his trousers. “Because I’d like to. Very much.”

“I must ask you though,” Cassandra went on. “Where did you get this?”

Robert froze mid-tuck. He stood there, staring at Cassandra while he had his hand down his pants. For in her hand, Cassandra held a book. It was a very old, very worn-looking book.

Damn, Robert thought.

“Carmen de Amatus is banned,” Cassandra told him. She said ‘banned’ as if this was a very serious thing.

Damn, damn, damn…

“Does your cousin often put her books into your bags?” Cassandra asked, raising a brow.

“Oh, you know scholars,” Robert said. “Always leaving their things about.”

“Katerina is fastidious to a fault. Especially with books.”

Robert cringed. He often forgot how observant Cassandra could be when she was actually being observant.

“Must be a mistake,” he shrugged.

“I’ll make sure to give it back to her, then,” Cassandra said. She turned as if to go.

“No, no, it’s fine,” Robert said hastily - probably too hastily. “I’ll take the book with me. Reading material for the trail and all that.”

Cassandra’s eyes narrowed. “Well,” she said. “This is not your cousin’s.”

Oh damn, Robert thought. Damn, damn, damn, damn, dammit.

For now Cassandra held up another book. This one was a small notebook - the kind of leather-bound journal one could pick up at any binder’s shop in Thedas.

Robert swallowed. “Oh,” he said. “That’s…”

Without waiting for him to finish speaking, Cassandra flipped the book open.

“Did you write these poems?” she asked him. “All of them?”

“Don’t read them!” Robert cried, taking a step toward her.

“Why not?” Cassandra asked, looking up at him.

“Oh no,” Robert groaned. “You already did, didn’t you?”

“You handed them to me!”

“Not on purpose,” Robert groaned. “Andraste’s tits! I should have wondered why it had taken you so long to read through my maps.”

“So you did not intend for me to see these poems.” Cassandra pointed the notebook at him, as if it were evidence in a court of law.

“You’re damn well right I didn’t.” Robert reached for the book, but Cassandra spun away, out of reach.

“Well that’s too bad,” she told him. There seemed to be a kind of triumph in her tone. “Because I read them. And I liked them.”

Robert stopped short. He blinked at this unexpected praise. “Really?”

“Yes!” Cassandra cried. “I mean… yes. That is why I wondered if you planned for me to see them.”

“Of course I didn’t plan for you to see them!” Robert scowled. “I don’t let anyone see my writing.”

“Why is that?” Cassandra asked.
“Well I…” Robert floundered there. How did one explain that being a poet wasn’t acceptable among the Trevelyan family? That writing was a terrible practice for anyone trying to project an image of perfection and polish?

“They’re not finished,” Robert said instead.

“This one is finished. It is also quite good.”

And before he could stop her, Cassandra flipped the book open - he realized that she’d had her finger in that page the whole time. “This one right here,” she said. “‘The Dance.’”

_Oh no_, Robert thought. That one was one of his favorites, too. And yet, it was far too revealing. Robert felt himself shrink with shame.

“I was drunk when I wrote that,” Robert said. He tried reaching for the book again.

“Oh really?” Cassandra asked. “Were you also drunk when you edited it all those times?” There was a playfulness to her tone as she darted past him and out of reach.


Cassandra spun away, giggling. And in spite of himself, Robert found he was smiling. But surely that was ridiculous. He shouldn’t find this amusing. He should find this horrifying. Cassandra had read his poetry. But he found he didn’t mind. He found he almost… wanted her to?

But then - _then_ - Cassandra did something alarming. She stepped back out of reach, held up the book - and she read it.

In that moment, Robert probably could have reached out and yanked the book out of her hands, but he was too shocked to do so. He’d never experienced anything so strange as hearing _his_ words fall from _Cassandra_ lips. Robert stood there, frozen, picturing the lines as she read:

_"The waltz has become so familiar I could dance it in my sleep. So also the maggot, the reel, the quadrille. I see the ruts in the ballroom floor from a thousand feet that shuffled here before shuffling off into the orangery for the second set: a jig of sweat and grunts and a groan -- Then we return to silken pretense. We fill dance cards. Swap partners. We say stupid things to sound clever. But then, as I look out of the windows, I see two servants have sneaked out into the gardens. As they walk, they hold hands. They merely hold hands. It occurs to me -- That's the one dance I've never tried."_

Cassandra finished the poem and looked up. Robert felt himself trembling, as if the poem were a stone dropped into a pond. Ripples of awareness trembled through him. Perhaps those ripples trembled through Cassandra as well. Her hands shook. The notebook shook. Cassandra looked at
Robert, her eyes searching his face.

“You’re a poet,” she said.

“I didn’t want to be,” Robert replied. His voice came out breathless - as if he’d been the one reading, as if he’d just run for miles.

“Why?” Cassandra asked.

Robert couldn’t answer that. Not just now. He shrugged and shook his head. Cassandra didn’t press him. She looked at him a long moment, then held out the notebook and *De Amatus*. Robert took them gingerly, as if they might burst into flames.

“I will go saddle the horses,” Cassandra told him. She turned to go.

“Cassandra!” Robert called.

She turned at the desperate note in his voice. But Robert didn’t know what to say. What was he supposed to say, anyway? Robert stood there, feeling far too big for the space, feeling as though he were a poem that hadn’t yet taken form on a waiting page.

Cassandra took a step forward. She reached out her gloved hand - reached it out towards Robert’s bare hand - and then she caught herself. Her fingers curled into a fist and she drew back. She hesitated there.

“I need some time,” she said. “We need some time. But I should like to see…”

“You should like to see?” Robert prompted, when she did not go on. To his surprise, Cassandra looked up at him with a smile. It was a sly smile, almost seductive.

“I should like to see more of your poetry, Robert Trevelyan,” she said. “Perhaps on the trail, you could read some to me?”

Robert’s mouth dropped open. He stared at Cassandra and did not speak.

*Say something, damn it,* his mind prompted him. *Say ‘I’ll show you more than poetry.’ Or say, ‘Of course,’ in a deep, throaty voice and gaze meaningfully into her eyes. Just say something! Anything, damn it!*

“Kuh-huh-uh… Kay?”

*Say something coherent,* his mind groaned.

Cassandra gave Robert a smoldering look. Her eyes roamed his body from his head to his bare feet. Then she smirked - actually smirked - and strutted away.

Robert just stood there. Then he gulped. Then he let out a breath and fell back against the hay bales.

“Maker save me,” he sighed.

Or maybe the Maker already had, he realized. That might have been his salvation just then. And to think, all it took was some of his shameful poetry.

“Thank you, Maker,” he said, speaking in the direction of the hay loft. “I won’t waste it.”

Robert kissed his notebook, then tucked it into his bag. Better be careful with *that*, he thought. Then
Robert quickly finished dressing. He was off for the Emerald Graves, he thought, his excitement rising once again. And he'd better not keep his lady waiting.
Erratic Diaries

Chapter Summary

In which Kate writes wrongs, and Cullen briefly debriefs

20th of Firstfall, 9:41 Dragon

Inquisitor’s Log (no, too pretentious)

Kate’s Diary (Or journal, I suppose. Never understood the difference between a diary and a journal, actually.)

Truth be told, I’m a very erratic diarist.

Every time Wintermarch rolls around, I resolve to Keep a Journal This Year! - capitals and emphasis and everything. And so I do – for about a week. Then I forget to reach for my diary one night and a single day slips out of the record. I comfort myself, saying ‘That’s alright. I’ll catch up on things tomorrow.’ But then another day is forgotten, and another and another. By the time I reach my birthday on Wintersend, my ‘diary’ consists of nothing more than pages upon pages of to-do lists. It continues in this vein throughout the year.

The only exception is when I find myself in low spirits. On those miserable occasions, I crack open my diary to scribble down a novel’s worth of worries and woes. The exposition becomes drearily self-depreciating. My writing becomes illegible from all the tears and ink running together. But I never bother to write about my return to good humor. By the time I’m feeling better, I’m back to list-making. Most unhelpful for future moments of despair, I can tell you that. It’s like I leave myself an account of how I fell into the sea, but no account of how I swam back to shore. If someone were to read those scribblings, they would think me some moody creature who hibernated from one despairing rage to the next.

Of course, no one would ever actually read my journals. First of all, I don’t think anyone cares enough to, and secondly, I’ve been told that my handwriting is quite illegible. But in the off-chance that someone is prone to snooping, I shall bespell this notebook with a shielding charm. A useful trick, that. Coll and I used to sneak banned books past the templars in this way. Any tome thus enchanted will appear as blank ledger to anyone but the person who knows the counterspell and the password.

There now. The spell is cast. I can journal in peace. And look at that! A page filled with a rambling introduction and I haven’t even begun to record the day’s events! No wonder I give up on diaries so easily. I begin with too much and taper off to nothing.

Right then, to begin properly: Today marks the first day of our journey to Crestwood, and I am terrified. No, that’s putting it too strongly. Or not strongly enough? Rather, I find I am uneasy. Just this morning, I was in Skyhold.

It was easy to be Inquisitor in Skyhold.

There, I acted as lady of the manor. There, I planned for a tavern opening, oversaw building projects,
approved the meal schedule, signed my name to letters. My days consisted of walls, lists, and aesthetic questions. Very familiar, all of it. I’d been groomed for such tasks since childhood. Even after I was went to the Circle, Lydia’s not-so-secret hope was that I would one day usurp the First Enchanter and bring a more Libertarian rule to Ostwick. (Maker rest her ambitious soul. I had neither the allies nor the inclination for such a coup.)

But now I am out in the field again. And as we walked away from Skyhold, I could not help but remember our walk to Skyhold, and what necessitated it. I recalled the attack on Haven, all the people lost there. I remembered the Conclave and and that horrible business at Redcliffe. Most upsetting memories.

And now that I’m out in the wilds again, I remember how very wild it can get out here. I find myself fearful of the challenges to come. And if Hawke does not have information that can help us…

No, I can’t second-guess our mission already. We’ve scarcely begun! And I need to stop rambling, or I’ll never record the events of the day. (This is a diary, after all, not a Chantry confessional booth.)

Let me see. Where did we begin? Oh yes! I began the day bleary-eyed and downcast. The tavern debacle had me feeling very out of sorts, but after speaking with Cullen in the barns, I felt much better. I still can’t seem to set aside my attraction to him, but that is another problem. It seems so long ago that Cullen and I spoke, but that was just this morning. Funny how travel can stretch a day out so long.

I then took my leave of Robert and Coll in the Skyhold courtyard - or rather, I got crushed in a three-person embrace between Robert and Coll as all of Skyhold looked on. Cullen, in particular, seemed rather taken aback by the emotional nature of the goodbye. I started crying, I’m sorry to say. Robert and Coll are such dear friends, and I miss them already. But then I dried my tears and joined Cullen at the head of the company. Together, we led everyone out into the snowy mountains. It was a grand scene: banners flying, people cheering, trumpets blaring. I think Josephine had something to do with the fanfare. Cullen shook his head and snorted as we crossed the drawbridge.

From there, our path turned east. We could not ride the horses today, on account of the deep snow. (So Cullen got out of that for one day, at least.) The horses wore funny little snow-shoes, and all the bipeds wore tall boots. Varric had a time of it, poor fellow. ‘Too many long legs,’ he said. He’s been sullen all day.

As for the weather, it was both brilliant and forbidding. There is a fierce beauty in the mountains. It’s somewhat like the Fade. It’s a world of wonders and dangers that people were not quite made for. Even the air felt different up here: it seemed to scour my lungs rather than fill them. And the wind! We’d be walking along, and then whoosh! - a gust would come ripping up the mountainside. Our company managed to stay grounded, but the snow did not. Whole drifts went scuffing off the into the sky, trailing out over the peaks in glimmering white-and-rainbow banners. A most majestic heraldry! I wish I could have captured the scene somehow - put it in a painting and carried it with me always. Of course, walking through said landscape was rather a challenge. I kept losing my footing in the snow, and the sky was so bright a blue that I spent the whole time squinting. I’m sure my face has gotten scrunched up into an expression of perpetual confusion.

I didn’t look particularly Inquisitor-like, I fear. If anyone were to see our company trudging along, they would not have guessed that Cullen was the leader of the Inquisition, not I. And little wonder! Cullen looked the part, with the sun glinting on his armor and his hair all golden and curling in the wind. He looked so handsome that I just wanted to pounce on him and tackle him into the snows.

We reached our camp as the sun began to set. Cullen elected for us all to stay in a Tevinter
watchtower, the better to seek shelter from the alpine winds. It is quite –

Or no, I just heard Dorian say that this was not a watchtower, but an astronomical observatory. ‘Or perhaps a ritual temple’ he added. Goodness, I hope no one was sacrificed here. How beastly that would be!

Whatever the ruin’s past purpose, it certainly looks imposing. The top of this peak is flat - as if sheered off with an axe - and a cobble-stone courtyard has been laid out upon the ground. This courtyard is ringed by a waist-high wall, and the watchtower was plunked down in the center of it all. Everyone has packed their sleeping rolls into the lower room, carpeting the space with bedrolls. A drafty tower shambles up from the lower bit. The whole structure is made in the Tevene style: grey stone capped with rusted iron crenellation. It looks like an open jaw: as if a bloody-toothed wolf was howling at the moon.

But ignoring the dreariness of our temporary shelter, the views up here are amazing! We seem to be standing on the top of the world. It’s as if we’ve entered a land of pure ether. As I’ve been journaling here in the courtyard (for so long! My hand is cramping), the sky has darkened to a lovely coral-pink. The clouds have turned lilac-gray. To the north and west stretch the endless mountains: a sea of choppy, snow-peaked waves. But off to the east, there lies a darkness that Cullen tells me is the Ferelden forests. You can’t see trees from up here, just a general softness, like moss. It makes me think –

Wait! Cullen! Lyrium protocols! I almost forgot!

Commander’s Log

20th of Firstfall, 1900 hours

Reached Grimmfall Watchtower at around 1700 hours.

No major injuries or difficulties along the trail. Minor injuries include wind-chapped faces and a few blistered feet. Elfroot poultices have been rationed to those affected.

Note to self: Issue warnings prior to missions regarding the proper breaking in of boots. Mages, in particular, prove unfamiliar with the basics of travel-appropriate apparel. Bad ASS Captain Rion was complaining about everything about the quality of his company’s gear in comparison with that of ‘the templars’ (Capt. Barris, Capt. Lysette, myself). When I did not offer ‘proper’ sympathy, he directed his complaints to the Inquisitor. She dealt with it more kindly than I would have. She has handled it.

Camp settled for the night. I must address the question of the lyrium protocols soon. Kate The Inquisitor approached me regarding them and I fear I did not respond. I have a plan.

Took elfroot pellets as directed. (Orally.)

21th of Firstfall

The hilltop lies shrouded in eerie fog. Dawn must be rising somewhere in the east, but I can’t see the sun. Everything is mist and cloud from here. Quite a different scene than yesterday.
Everyone else is still sleeping, but I woke with a start. I didn’t want to dwell on the nightmares, so I came out here to the edge of the courtyard, to sit alone and think. Right now, I’m standing by Flame. My mare seems pleased by the company. Plucky is here as well, perched on the wall beside me.

…Well that was odd. Plucky just glared at me accusingly and flapped away. What was that about, I wonder? It almost looked as if she’d tried to read my writing, then got offended when she couldn’t. Does that shielding spell work on ravens? More to the point, why am I ascribing motivation to a bird?

But back to my purpose: I did not finish my diary entry yesterday. Not one day in and already I’m falling behind! But now I hesitate to commit last night’s memory to a journal. But who else do I have to talk to? I suppose I might as well write it out and think on it. You see, I completed the lyrium protocols on Cullen.

They did not quite go as I’d planned.

It wasn’t so bad. It was fine. Professional, even. Certainly better than the last time we did this, where it was awkward and I was awkward and the whole thing felt like a sensual mess. But this time –

Let me back up. When I last set down my journal, I went to go find Cullen. I pulled him aside, and he became apprehensive. Perhaps he’d already anticipated my purpose? I reminded him about the lyrium protocols, and then he said, “Ah.”

Just “ah.” He has this way of saying it - blank as an empty canvas and yet full of meaning all at once.

I had no idea what to say in return, so of course I said something very stupid. I said: “Lucky you!” (trying to make a joke of it) “Coll gave me some pointers and so now I can give you a proper lyrium protocol without the full-body groping!”

In retrospect, I should not have used the work ‘groping.’ Cullen went quite pale. “What I mean to say,” I clarified, “Is that all I need to do is hold your hand. Your bare hand, of course. For about a minute. Or maybe five minutes. We’ll just hold hands for about five minutes. Because of the protocols. Coll told me to!”

Yes, ‘Coll told me to.’ That’s what I said. That’s what came out of my mouth. The truth is, Coll told me to do something quite different, but of course I did not tell Cullen this. My thoughts might have been evident in my face however, for my cheeks felt quite hot.

Cullen, for his part, said nothing. He turned and walked away. Without even looking back at me! Or saying anything! I felt – A lot of things, really. Angry, for one. And quite embarrassed. I had half a mind to chase after Cullen, grab the man by the hand and do a full-body lyrium protocol on him right then and there in the courtyard! It would have served him right, too. It isn’t my idea to keep this whole thing a secret!

But of course I didn’t do anything like that. I just stood there, staring. Then I caught myself. I decided to brush the whole thing off. (The fact that several scouts were looking at me with curiosity helped with that decision.)

So I went and made myself useful. I joined the scouts in their preparation of dinner. (Jacket potatoes! Maker bless the horse that they rode in on!)

Talking with the scouts was a little awkward at first. It’s one thing to nod to people in passing while wandering the halls at Skyhold. It’s another to sit around a campfire while everyone keeps glancing nervously at my left hand. But I did what I could. I pretended that it was the first day of class and I
was the instructor. I began by asking everyone what their name was and where they were from and then asked follow-up questions from there. It worked reasonably well. Most people are desperate to have someone show an interest in them, from apprentices on up to marchionesses. Before long, we were talking more comfortably (All except Rion. He may be a very talented mage, but I remember him from back before he escaped the Ostwick Circle. He was insufferably boastful back then and he’s still boastful now.)

While we talked, the sky got darker and darker around us. Soon dinner was ready, and the courtyard flooded with people (only thirty-one of us, but it’s a small courtyard). I took my cooling potato over to the courtyard wall for a bit of quiet. Varric was over there as well, but I left him alone. He seemed to be in a pensive mood.

But then, just as I went to stuff a bite of potato into my mouth, Cullen suddenly appeared right beside me! As if he’d never left! I nearly choked. I probably looked like a squirrel for a moment there, my cheeks all puffed up with food and my eyes wide in surprise. Or maybe I looked annoyed, because Cullen leaned over and whispered in my ear: “I’m sorry about earlier. I had to do… things.”

He didn’t elaborate, and I didn’t pry. For a few minutes, it was rather tense. We just stood there, eating. But then Dorian came and joined us for a time, and then Bull wandered over as well. Fairly soon we were all joking about something or other - I can’t recall what. Then the mood began to shift again. Dorian went indoors, following Ser Barris. Iron Bull grunted and followed after them both. The scouts began to trail indoors, one by one, and then Varric left.

Then it was just Cullen and I, out there under a full sky of stars. It was a remarkable view. No, more than remarkable.

It was stunning. The silent world lay below; a glistening velvet darkness spanned above us. It was sacred somehow: like looking into the face of a goddess. That must be why the Avaar worship the Lady of the Skies. They are closest to her, the people of the mountains. They know her likeness better than everyone. And as I stood there, staring up at this incredible display, Cullen turned to me and said: “So, um… protocols?”

It was rather disorienting, really. Beautiful skies above me, thrumming male voice in my ear. I flushed hot, in spite the rapidly dropping temperature. When I said, “Oh, yes, quite” I’m sure my voice rose an octave. Then Cullen said, somewhat loudly:

“Will you join me at the requisitions table, Inquisitor?”

Coll has told me that I am very bad at ‘acting casual.’ I never understood what she meant. Now I do. Cullen was clearly ‘acting casual,’ and failing miserably. Still, I followed him over to the requisitions table. Cullen dismissed the scout who was standing there on duty, and then we were alone.

Well, mostly alone. There were still a few scouts over by the campfire in the courtyard, but otherwise, it was just us, the requisition table, a few candles, and the stars. Cullen handed me a warm blanket - which I thought quite kind - and said:

“Here’s my thinking.” (Again with his voice all deep and low). “I’ve set myself for first watch. Each night, we can stand side-by-side. If we act as though we’re doing work over here, and if we keep our arms hidden in the folds of our cloaks…”

Cullen held his hand out to his side - just slightly, you understand. But his hand was bare, and a shiver went through me. I realized what he was on about. And it made me think…

Well, that doesn’t matter. I stepped around to the other side of him (for I couldn’t use my left hand),
tugged my glove off, and took his left hand in my right.

I swear all the stars in the sky lit up inside of me. I was overcome by the sensation of it. His hand was so soft! But so calloused and rough! So warm! But it was so cold outside, that my face was freezing off! Maker how I want to hold all of him! And through it all, I felt an internal muffled squealing, as if all my nerves were crying ‘Aaaaaaaah’!

I felt as if I were nineteen again, startled by the revelation of my very first kiss. And yet I was only holding his hand! Several minutes passed and I have no recollection of them. The next thing I knew, Cullen began to pull his hand away, saying, ‘So that’s it then?’ To my mortification, I had to say, ‘Oh my Maker, no! Sorry! I hadn’t yet begun.’

I didn’t explain why I hadn’t begun. I could think of no excuse. So I just started in on the protocols - too roughly, perhaps, for Cullen gasped and then seemed not to draw breath again until I was done.

It took about three minutes, and no one noticed that the commander and the Inquisitor were holding hands beneath their cloaks in all that while. (Or blanket, in my case.) Of course, we were in near darkness with only a few candles for light, and it probably looked like we were hunched over the table to check the papers. But still, it was laughably easy to maintain the ruse.

Frustratingly easy, really.

When I’d finished, I gave Cullen’s hand a light squeeze, and said, “You seem unchanged since yesterday.” Cullen snatched his hand away, as if I’d caught fire. Feeling a bit foolish now, I added, “It worked rather well, hiding in plain sight like that.” Cullen nodded and said, “I’m good at running operations.”

I came crashing back down to earth and splattered all over the hillside. Well, not really, but you know what I mean. I just felt… I don’t know. I know the purpose was to get this done, and I know that we agreed to keep this secret, but for Cullen to treat it like some mere assignment? It made me so angry

No, that is unfair. Cullen is struggling. He is trying to do what is right, and things are complicated for him. But complications for Cullen have become complications for me. Because in spite of my resolutions to the contrary, in spite of what I promised myself that night at the tavern, in spite of the fact that love and romance are nonsense so far as mages are concerned, I wanted…

Bah! It’s silly to want anything. Embarrassing, too. A handsome man held my hand for the sake of a medical procedure, and I fell all to pieces! (Though to be fair, Cullen is not just handsome. He is devastatingly handsome. I am rather surprised I can speak to him without stammering. I often feel I’m about to.) I only wish –

Ack! And there’s Bull, poking his horns around the corner to say I’m late for training. I can’t believe it’s past sunrise already. Didn’t even notice. Alright, recording one last thought before I rush off to train with Bull and the ASS:

I left Cullen there at the requisition table - rather abruptly, I fear. But when I reached the door to the tower, I looked back. Cullen stood there against the stars, his face glowing in a sliver of candlelight. The glittering sky stretching over him like a halo, and I thought:

He’s a star. And then: I want make a constellation with him.

I’m not quite sure what I meant by that. To burn with him in his bedroll in the heavens? To float forever in that deep, holy sky? The stars were so perfect last night - a perfect scene to charm lovers or
sweethearts. But there were no lovers or sweethearts. There were only lyrium protocols.

Such a waste. And I –

Bother, Bull isn’t going to let me finish that thought. Probably for the best. This infatuation of mine is already getting–

Yes, yes, Bull. On my way.

21th of Firstfall, 1900 hours

Reached Orzammar Gate. Thaig in lockdown due to the mage-templar war. Cannot secure supplies, nor are the dwarves willing to trade. Josephine’s textiles are thus useless. Now we shall have to carry these goods with us all the way to Ferelden. (Don’t know why I let her talk me into taking this lot of silks and velvets in the first place.)

I now realize that in comparison with other dwarves, Varric is a joy.

Roads abysmal. Muddy switchbacks. Lots of slipping and falling all the way down to the border. Did not ride the horses - hard enough to keep them on the path. Attacked by bandits by way of Ferelden welcome. Dispatched the brigands in minutes, but it was still annoying. One scout injured. He’s being seen to by the healers in the Sexy ASS unit, (much to his delight.)

Kate confused that anyone would attack a company so well armed. She doesn’t seem to understand how desperate some criminals can be. Maker pray she never does

Realized that we’re taking Kate into great danger in Crestwood. Always unnerving to stand by as she risks herself

Rotten weather. Campsite is soaking wet and the rain is growing worse. No proper shelter available. You’d think the merchants would build a better campsite to encourage trade, but no. I suppose they thought the lyrium would bring people here regardless of lodgings.

Speaking of lyrium, I’m finding it difficult to ignore the lyrium vials that the mages and templars brought with them. In Skyhold, I stayed away from the stores, but here it’s stashed in the next pack over. I struggle to

Speaking of lyrium, I have scheduled the protocols for first watch. Hoping to get some work done tonight, rather than standing there like a fool while Kate

The lyrium protocols were shorter last time, but just as stimulating

I’m not sure how to describe

I’m not sure if I should describe

Will take two elfroot pellets tonight. I feel a headache coming on.

I did it! HA- HA! Take that Enchanter Timothy! You said no one could set a ward in the air, but…

Alright, you can’t set a ward in the air, but if you place wards on trees and standing stones, one can create a web of wards over a space that effectively works as a repellant shield and I managed to do it!
I cast an Umbrella Spell!

That’s what I’m going to call it anyhow. I’ll have to work out a patent for it. I tried to explain it to Cullen, but got a little too technical, I fear. All he cared about was that I managed to cast a spell that kept the rain off of a patch of ground. The mages were impressed, at least. We can now pitch our tents –

... 

Ran out of ink there! Can’t believe I used a whole bottle already. Good thing I brought four. And then Charter needed to speak to me. And Dorian and I got into a discussion about how best to reinforce the umbrella spell so that it lasts through the night. I’ll start teaching it to the other mages, too. It’s already helped make the camp more livable. Good thing, too! Everyone was feeling low and sour today. Bandit attack and bad roads and then we ended up camping in a puddle. The puddles aren’t gone, actually. Ella and her crew are working on draining the water from our tents. I’d help them, but I’ve got lyrium protocols in a minute. (!!!)

... 

Lyrium protocols completed for the night. Everyone tucked in early, so it was easy for Cullen and me to slip away. We wandered down the road a ways, under the auspices of ‘scouting the trail.’ I thought the rain and gloom might make the protocols less cozy. No such luck. Cullen and I ended up looking out over a ravine with a rather lovely (if drizzly) view of the Ferelden forests ahead.

Cullen spent the whole time reading some report and ignoring me entirely. Efficient of him, I suppose, to multitask like that. Me, I found it maddening. For there we were, with our fingers intertwined, and Cullen with droplets of rain in his curling hair and rain streaming down his lips and I think I’m losing my mind. Or my objectivity. Or both. It’s probably the rain. I should go to bed.

Oh, and the date is still 21th Firstfall. - in the evening, this time. Maker, I’m all over the place tonight.

---

22nd Firstfall. Early. (Too early.)

Nightmares again. Bother.

I might as well write it down, as I swear I’ve had this dream before. I dreamt I was trapped in a winding tower, and floodwaters swiftly filled the building. I kept running up spiral staircases, closing doors to try and slow the tide. In the end, I was trapped in a room, with icy waters up to my chin. Then the water rose over my head and I was drowning. (What a memory!) I groped at the wall, at the ceiling, certain I was done for. Then I found a window. With a sudden push and burst I was falling - tumbling out into nothing.

Actually, it wasn’t nothing. I fell into this green glowing mass that seemed to have no end. (Little wonder what inspired that.) Then there was ground below me, rushing toward me. I died when I landed, and woke shaking. My handwriting shows it. This is more illegible than usual.

I suppose it comes of worrying myself to sleep. Last night, I lay in bed thinking about Cullen about things. I thought about Corypheus, and Keran’s death - how sudden it was, how cruel. I thought about Haven and all those village huts on fire. I thought again about what happened at Redcliffe Castle: that Voidish future, and all the many ways things could go wrong if I fail.

It’s surprising my nightmare was so mild, come to think of it. In comparison to what I’ve lived, a flood and a tower is nothing.
So here I am, journaling in the early morning. It’s cold comfort, sitting alone against a tree trunk with only a mage light for company. At least it stopped raining. From what little I can see of the forest, we’re blanketed in fog. Ferelden mornings announce themselves ominously, I find.

But while the nightmares have fled, the worries have not. Neither have the expectations. I can’t stop thinking about all that I must do. And spending time with the troops reminds me of all the people counting on me to do it. I feel quite alone, high on the mountain peak of Inquisition leadership. I’m up at the top with no one to guide me. Oh, I have advisors. (Quite a handsome one along for the journey)

I have advisors, but no mentor. I have no one to tell me what I ought to do. The Divine is gone, Lydia died, and I’ve long lacked a parental influence. I feel like an orphan - an orphan playing at Inquisitor. If only –

Maker’s sake! Bull snuck up on me and gave me a scare. Training time already? Bull said he’d give me a moment to ‘clean up’ (I guess I look awful? Thanks a lot, Bull.)

Better go wash my face, not that my sparring partners care.

...

My sparring partner was Cullen.

Thank the Maker that Bull suggested I clean up first. Bull surprised me with a demonstration – one in which I was expected to demonstrate. Wish I’d had more warning. But I think I faked my way through that encounter. Bull and Cullen wanted to train the company in some kind of shielding technique that they’ll be using during the siege. They had me throw some fire and ice around, then showed the ASSes how to guard against that.

I wonder if they chose me to demonstrate because my magic is too weak to do much damage?

And that is another thing that has me worried: I still cannot cast properly. Not like I used to, I mean. And what kind of mage am I if I can’t draw energy from the Fade? No mage at all, that’s what. It’s bad enough to be marked by magic, but far worse when said magic has no power! I’ve tried everything I can think of, but this mark on my hand seems to push all ambient energies away. I can cast runes and barriers, I find - I’m getting very good at the barriers. But while those are useful, the whole point of all my training was to be more flexible than this. I suppose I could try…

No, better not. That would be unwise. I wish Solas was here to advise.

But really, the weakness of my magic is just a symptom of the further disease. The truth is, I’m completely out of my element here, and I fear everyone knows it. I ought to be like ice, but instead I’m all water. I ought to be resolved and strong, but instead I’m weak and fluid and doubtful. I ought to be one thing, but I fear I’m always something else.

That doesn’t even make sense. It’s a warring sort of feeling inside of me. I can’t seem to describe it. But it’s like I want to be one way, yet I’m always the other way - whatever the ‘other’ happens to be. A part of me takes pride in my uniqueness and my magic. But then the next moment, my eyes fill with tears and I feel cut off from everyone. And why did the Maker make me like this, I have to ask? Such conflicting impulses make it very hard to get anything done. And I very much need to get things done. Incredible things. Impossible things…

Oh for the Maker’s sake. This is no good. Look at this: I’m getting all maudlin and mournful, just like I swore I wouldn’t. I’m stopping now, before this gets out of hand.
At least we get to ride today. Ought to be a nice change of pace. Better go saddle up.

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22nd of Firstfall, 1900 hours

It is remarkable how quickly we travelled by horseback. Much faster than on foot. Unfortunately, my ass is numb in ways I did not think were possible. And I do mean my bottom, not the ASS units.

Though the ASS units were a pain in the rear, too. Or rather, Rion is a pain in the rear. I should have noticed his snide attitude earlier, but it did not reveal itself in training. The man seems incapable of showing respect to anyone who is not a mage. Understandable, I suppose, but also unacceptable. He has three non-mages in his team, and he must learn to work with them. One more infraction and I’m putting him on probation.

On the other hand, Sexy ASS Captain Ella has proved a most competent leader. It is an odd thing to consider, but Ella was once interred at Kirkwall. I was her jailer. Now she is one of my captains, as trusted as Rylen or Ruvena. Such strange alliances the Inquisition has brought. Like Kate, who is now so close so respected

Like the Inquisitor, who taught me how to ride today. A horse, I mean, not

This morning, Kate came up to me and said it was time for me to learn how to ride. I confess that my first reaction was a quickened pulse

We rode from the Orzammar Gates to the northeast corner of Lake Calenhad. Didn’t make it all the way to West Hill, as I don’t want to camp within sight of Kinloch Hold. I wanted to take advantage of the protected campsite at Feller’s Hill.

I set up the requisition table on the banks of the lake, so what when that when Kate and I do the lyrium protocols tonight, she’ll have a pretty view

Not that I intend

Not that a view matters

Elfroot pellet, etc.

---

23rd Firstfall, early morning

I completely forgot to finish my journal yesterday. So long as I’m up early (nightmares again) I might as well get caught up:

Lyrium protocols are – progressing? They are getting done. That’s what I can say about them. Last night, Cullen and I were standing on the banks of Lake Calenhad, and it was a very lovely view. Not as pretty as the stars, but still very nice. (And on a side note, I find it strange that this is the same lake that I keep travelling over and around. It seems completely different on this shore - sort of lonely and melancholy out here. Though that may have been Cullen. He seemed pensive yesterday. He kept looking out at the rain on the waters and didn’t seem to notice me at all.)

Anyhow, there we were, finishing up the protocols, and I went and stuck my foot in my mouth. Cullen said something like, ‘Well that’s done’ or he sighed in relief. It was something like that. He seemed quite glad to be done with the thing.
I felt stung. I told him that if he’d just tell everyone he’d quit lyrium, there’d be no reason for us to sneak around all nefarious-like. (I hate all this secrecy. It reminds me of Alan, and I hate things that remind me of Alan).

Cullen then launched into a long explanation of his reasons for keeping quiet: ‘Leaders must show strength’ and all that. He concluded with: ‘Besides, we’ve managed to keep it quiet easily enough. No one has said anything.’ And I (rather sarcastically) retorted: ‘Yes, because couples have been slipping off in pairs since the beginning of time.’

I should not have said that. It ended the day on a sour note.

But other than those protocols, the day was rather pleasant. I got to ride beside Cullen and gave him some pointers about horse-handling. (I hope I didn’t annoy him. He seemed to be listening, but he also did not talk much. Concentrating on the task at hand, I suppose.) Bull rode with us as well (oh my goodness! The horse they have for him - it’s huge!) and I spent lunchtime talking with Dorian and Ella and Charter. Then I spent dinner with the scouts. I’ve had a lot of lovely conversations on this trip, actually. I haven’t recorded them all, but the company seems to be getting on very well.

Yet even as I write that, I again grow nervous. You see, I know how to get along with people, but I’m not certain that I know how to lead them. I’ve had no trouble in building relationships with the crew. Right now, I could tell you about anyone in the company. For example, Scout Belette is from Denerim, she wanted to be a knight, but was born to a washerwoman. This is a dream come true for her. Phillip is from the Montsimmard Circle. He loves flame spells, and keeps toying around with the campfire (much to the alarm of the others).

You see? I could go on about everyone. But I’m not certain that mere observation and friendliness help me with the task of being a leader. I notice that Cullen has a certain reserve in his dealings with others. He has this untouchable quality that I very much want to touch. I am trying to strike a balance between being approachable, but being in charge. I am trying to be competent, noble, respectable - and yet not put on airs. I fear that I come off as stilted - or a snob.

Take, for example, the way I handled that incident with Rion yesterday. I think I could have done better there. At lunch, I overhead Rion joking that Cullen sleeps alone in order to ‘take care of himself.’ As in… you know.

Well, masturbating. There, I said it wrote it.

It was a highly inappropriate thing to say about one’s commanding officer. So I did as I would have done if some apprentice had said such a thing about a senior enchanter: I cleared my throat right behind Rion, and then glared at him. He looked up with a start, stammered out an apology, and that ended that conversation quickly enough. I didn’t have to say anything more. Everyone who’d been listening to Rion scurried off. But I’m not certain if that was the best way to deal with it. Should I have reprimanded him more strongly? Given him latrine duty? I tend to approach the troops as I would a classroom, but I’m not certain that’s the right way to handle things.

Also, it didn’t help that the entire incident made me wonder about Cullen’s sleeping habits. I mean, surely Cullen doesn’t sleep alone so that he can masturbate nightly? On the trail? Surely not. But then again, how do soldiers take care of themselves? I mean, I’ve been going crazy, but I haven’t dared to do anything about it. Not when I’ve got no privacy.

I shouldn’t be thinking about this. It’s not like I can ask Cullen about it, anyway.

...
I asked Cullen about it.

I did not mean to ask, but I did! Just now, Cullen and I were saddling up our horses and suddenly I blurted out: ‘Why do you sleep alone?’

Cullen gave me a look of complete surprise (a ‘did you just ask that?’ kind of look). I suddenly realized how that might sound. So I tried (Maker, I tried!) to smooth it over by saying, ‘It’s just that your single tent looks so cold and cramped. Surely we could find room for you in one of the larger shelters.’ (I don’t think that helped.)


And that’s it. That’s the mystery. Nothing lewd. No ‘pulling the Dread Wolf’s tail’ or anything like that. Just that Cullen talks in his sleep (adorable, really) and he doesn’t want to bother people with it.

Maker, when will I learn not to let my curiosity get the better of me? Forget leadership behavior, I need a brush-up in simple manners.

There are days I behave so awkwardly, I’m amazed that I ever let myself out of the tower in the first place.

23 Firstfall, Crestwood, 1900 hours

Reached Crestwood outskirts. Aside from undead and the rift in the lake, this place hasn’t changed a bit. Said a prayer of thanks to the Maker for reaching our destination safely. No major incidents, and the company is working together well (Rion aside).

Plucky has gone missing this evening. Probably off hunting or scouting or whatever it is that she does when not dogging me. Several times now, I swear I’ve seen that bird poking through people’s packs, or even leafing through Charter’s papers. Must be my imagination.

It has been a strange journey. Though I’m comfortable with commanding a crew, I’ve never been comfortable with befriending a crew. That has happened in the Inquisition with far greater frequency than I expected. Not certain what to make of it. Not certain it’s entirely professional, either. I also fear my friendship with Kate is not entirely professional, but I still enjoy...

It is for this reason that I remain concerned about bringing Hawke on board. While I hesitate bring it up with Kate the Inquisitor, I fear Hawke will disrupt the delicate balance of mage/non-mage comraderie in the ranks. We have not told the rank and file about the Champion. Yet, we will have to eventually. I fear what that revelation might bring. As Hawke is such a reckless wildwoman...

Kate is a capable leader, but Hawke is utterly without control.

It’s not that Kate can’t handle herself, but it seems a pity to introduce...

If we had any other options, I would recommend another course of action. Clearly, we do not have options. Hence Hawke, hence Crestwood, and hence my presence here to guard Kate to advise...

Lyrium protocols planned for 2000 hours. Still feeling drawn to lyrium like anything. One would think that the hunger for it would lessen, not get worse intermittently.

At least I’m getting used to the protocols. That’s something.
24 Firstfall (Probably. Must be after midnight by now.)

Siege tomorrow and I’ll be meeting Hawke soon. ALL THE THOUGHTS are in my head, demanding to be dealt with now. I’ve been trying to avoid worrying all week. But I can’t outrun these ruminations any more. So here I am by the now-dead campfire, writing by summoned magelight. Ser Lysette is on watch, looking out over that ominous green light in the lake. (There’s a rift in the lake! How on earth am I to deal with that? Cullen said there is a dam or something? And there have been reports of a dragon sighting?)

We got to the end of this road and there’s nothing but more road ahead. I’ve got a million things to do, I don’t even know where to begin, and Cullen…

I know I shouldn’t write about Cullen (again!), but I just feel so confused on that score. He seems to enjoy my company. I cerntainly enjoy his! I haven’t recorded all the little moments, but they’ve come to mean so much to me. Just small things: sitting by the fire together. His dry jokes that half the company misses entirely. His sly grin when someone does catch his jokes, and laughs at them. The way he falls out of his saddle every evening (Poor man! But it is rather funny.) Or even the way he goes walking about the forest, as if he’d been born and bred to spend his days in the wild. He is so himself out of doors. Today I said to him (or was it yesterday?) – I said, ‘You seem completely in your element out here.’ ‘I do like the fresh air,’ he replied (said this with that lopsided smile of his, the one that never fails to make me smile as well.) And then I said, ‘It’s strange you’d choose to be a templar then, and live your life behind walls.’

I should not have said that. It wiped the smile right off his face. And that was not what I intended.

Maker, I don’t know what to do with him. Or rather, I don’t know what to do with my feelings toward him. I feel we are becoming closer, but closer how? As friends, certainly. As co-leaders… yes? But there’s something hiding there, something that makes me uneasy and I don’t know what it is.

Well no, I think I know what it is. It’s the lyrium protocols. It’s his history as a templar and his current battle with this addiction. It makes things so uncertain, both for him and me. I never quite know what I ought to say or do. Am I helping, or simply being selfish in my desire to help? These two things seem intertwined, and that’s never happened before.

For while I know I should not consider my needs or wants while doing the protocols, I’ve come to crave holding Cullen’s hand. I know that’s wrong of me. The lyrium protocols aren’t for me or even about me. It ought to be enough for me that Cullen is holding up well and he’s healthy. And so it is! But I also enjoy the lyrium protocols for my own, selfish reasons. I spend most of my days feeling lost and unmoored. Then for just a few minutes, someone takes me by the hand (or I take him by the hand, I suppose. Details.) Suddenly I feel connected. I feel grounded. The rift in the lake doesn’t seem so far off. The tasks ahead of me are just tasks. It all seems quite managable when I’m not alone, and Maker knows how much I need that.

But I’m afraid to rely on it.

There it is! That’s the problem. I fear the other boot will drop. I fear that no matter how kind someone is - no matter how generous or lovely, the friendship will end. That person will realize that I am a mage, and that there is no getting over that condition (though Maker knows I’ve tried!). Then they will back away. I fear this will happen with Cullen. I fear that one day, he will look into my eyes and see how much I like him and then he’ll stammer out some excuse and back away…

Actually, he’s done as much several times now. That ought to warn me to keep my guard up. Thankfully, Cullen keeps coming back - as a friend, of course. But if I ever tried for more –
No, that’s not a good idea. Though maybe if he –

No. Never mind.

The thing is, I feel completely caught up in my own head these days. It comes of having no one to talk to. It’s not like I can unburden myself to Cullen - about Cullen. How would that work? I share far too many of my worries with him as it is. And who else could I talk to? Coll and Robert are away, and even if they were here, I know what they would say. Coll would say, ‘Feck it, Kate. Don’t worry so much!’ And Robert would shrug and say, ‘Sounds like a pain in the arse. Let it go.’ Good advice, if only I could take it! I’ve never been able to will away my worry.

Perhaps I can help myself. I could make a list (I know! A list! But it seems I need one) and then work my way through my problems one by one. So then:

**Things Kate is Worried About**

Liking Cullen.

To clarify: I like Cullen and that brings a lot of complications with it.

Am Inquisitor.

To clarify: I am the leader of the Inquisition and feel completely unequal to the task.

To clarify further: everyone is looking to me to save the world (groan if you must, Coll, but it’s true).

My magic isn’t working. (!!!!)

Jealous of Hawke.

…

Alright, I did not mean to write that last one. But I did write it. So now I must think that through. Am I jealous of Hawke?

I suppose I am.

Maybe not jealous. Rather, I’m haunted by the ghost of comparison. I overhead a rumor that Cassandra originally wanted Hawke to become the Inquisitor. Hawke was the first choice.

Well, why not? Hawke is an ideal to all mages. Hawke roamed free when the rest of us were chained; she spoke confidently when the rest of us kept our secrets. Hawke never brooded, nor succumbed to despair and self-harm. It comes of being an apostate, I suppose. In fact, Hawke is so popular that we’ve had to keep this meeting a secret. Only Cullen does not get giddy when Hawke’s name is mentioned. He just purses his lips and says nothing. As for Varric, he’s been no help. When I tried to ask him what to expect from his friend, he scowled and drew away. Strange behavior from the only two people who knew Hawke personally.

But there it is: Hawke was the one the Inquisition wanted. I am the contingency plan. Hawke is the Champion. I’m just Kate.

I mean, when one considers the reason they made me Inquisitor, it’s not a very flattering one. They chose me because I’m Andraste’s Herald - or believed to be so. I was chosen because I have a magical mark on my hand – as if that were a proper recommendation! I am certain that before long, everyone will realize what a coincidental mistake all this is.
(I am also concerned that these clothes do not suit me and I should have brought another set of armor. I suppose that’s ridiculous, worrying about my wardrobe when it’s perfectly serviceable. Vivienne would be appalled at my second-guessing her choices. But the Champion always had such a keen sense of style, and I’m sure I shall feel quite grubby by comparison.)

But consider! Cullen would make a far better Inquisitor than I, what with his commanderliness. Or take Cassandra, with all her honor and flashing armor. Or Leliana, or Josephine. Or anyone, really.

Well, almost anyone. Rion would be pretty bad at it. Coll and Robert wouldn’t want to. Sera would simply use the role to prank all of Thedas, and Morris…

Okay, so maybe half of the Inquisition would be better than me. Or a quarter. Still, that’s a lot of candidates. And when one considers what an Inquisitor is supposed to do…

What is an Inquisitor supposed to do?

It suddenly occurs to me that no one ever briefed me on my job description. It was assumed that I would ‘lead’ (whatever that means). But when I consider the etymology of the word ‘inquisitor’ (linguistic roots are always a good place to start), then I find myself somewhat comforted. For an Inquisitor is one who inquisits. As in, asks questions. So there we are:

I am the Questions-Asker-in-Chief. Why did I never think of that before?

Well that’s comforting. I can ask questions. In fact, I’m rather good at that. Under other circumstances, that would be an ideal line of work for me. Though if I recall my history right, the first inquisitor, Ameridan, asked straightforward questions like ‘Are you a blood mage?’ and ‘Are you an abomination?’ He summarily dispatched anyone who answered in the affirmative. Rather a grisly line of inquiry.

So what are my questions?

‘Who killed the Divine?’ We’ve answered that question. Or rather, Corypheus answered that question at Haven. We are still reeling from that answer. But his answer just raises even more questions: What is Corypheus? What does he want? How did he survive if Hawke and Varric say they killed him? Most importantly: how do we stop him?

These are the questions I plan to put to the Champion. (Perhaps I should start a list? On the back page, maybe.) But even if we find answers to those questions, there are many more to follow: What of the mages and the templars and their war? What of the Circles and the Chantry? Who should be Divine? Does the Inquisition try to solve those problems? Do we dare?

Here is the real question then: What questions shall I ask? What questions will help us move forward? For contrary to that old proverb, there are stupid questions. The Chantry asked many stupid questions, I believe. ‘How shall we best imprison mages?’ for example. That question was biased from the start. It assumed that mages were the problem, that mages needed containment. The Chantry should have asked ‘How shall we keep people safe when magic has destructive as well as healing power?’ If we’d formulated the question like that, we might have found a better solution than the Circles. We need questions that clarify and lead us to lasting answers.

But there’s the real trouble: it isn’t enough to ask questions. I am expected to find answers, too. Inquisitor and Oracle – that’s what they hired me for.

Answers are harder to come by than questions, I fear. And when I do find satisfactory answers - satisfactory to me, at any rate - they are rarely Orthodox ones. I tend to favor heretical explanations.
Then again, if Orthodox answers worked, the Chantry would not have failed in the first place. The whole problem with the world is that people clung to stupid answers and stupid questions for far too long. Sometimes you need to break a bone again in order to…

Where did that thought come from? Just now I had a image of a woman, telling me something about… bones breaking? The memory is gone now. How curious. But I feel better all of a sudden. That’s curious, too.

For a gentle voice seems to whisper inside of me. It says that I cannot let fear of failure keep me from my work. I cannot allow Hawke’s brilliance to cause me to give up hope. Otherwise, Corypheus will win due to my own self-doubt, and that is unacceptable. There is more here at stake than my own ego.

I may not be the best leader - or even a very good leader. But I am - by whatever twist of fate - a leader. I am the Inquisitor. I am here, and…

I am here. I am here now. And I will do what I can. That’s really all there is to say.

Well now! I think I managed to talk myself around to a better mood. There’s something to this journaling thing after all! This diary might be a mess of rambling and nonsense, but if I managed to make myself feel better, then it wasn’t waste of parchment, now was it?

… Hm. I need sleep.

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24 Firstfall, 200 hours

I am not getting used to the lyrium protocols. I am not getting used to anything.

It’s the middle of the night, and I can’t sleep. Feeling hungry, but not for food. Fighting so many conflicting desires

I saw Kate out there, writing by the campfire. I had half a mind to go sit with her, but

She’s always scribbling in that journal of hers. What is she writing anyway? Is it lists? It must be lists. Surely it’s not anything about me— is it?

I am trying to determine the best way to proceed. I know I’m not in any sort of state to seek out a relationship. But perhaps after we’ve dealt with Corypheus

Perhaps if I had any reason to believe that Kate was interested

Perhaps if I had a clear indication of interest on Kate’s part

a very clear indication

Perhaps when we get Crestwood secured, I might take her on a walk? There is that spot down by the lake, the one I used to visit as a child. If the dock is still standing, that might be the perfect place to

Damn it all, what am I doing? This isn’t a diary. Can’t use the log to

Siege plan is in place. Everything else can wait.
Fair Play

Chapter Summary

In which Hawke gets no answer

Hawke woke to dim, bluish light. She lay still, listening to the sound of her own breathing, to the sound of water dripping from a stalactite in the corner. Must be raining outside, Hawke thought. Stupid leaky cave. Hawke rubbed her eyes with the heel of her palm, rolled over…

Justice stared down at her, watching her as she slept.

“HolyshitfuckmeAndrastewhattheeverlastingfuck!??”

Hawke gasped all this out on one breath. She windmilled out of the bedroll, but her arms and legs caught in the blankets. Hawke landed on her ass on the cave floor, scrambled back like a crab until – “Ooof!” – she hit a stalagmite. The rock pillar was covered in slime; Hawke pressed herself into the ooze. A blanket remained wrapped around her leg, a shackel trailing back toward the bed.

Glowing eyes tracked her every movement. The glowing mouth frowned, and glowing smoke curled from the corners of the lips. In the darkness, the glowing body was naked. Fissures of light ran down the skin in veins, like cracks in badly-repaired pottery.

And then there was Hawke, butt-naked and clinging to a slimy piece of rock.

“Enjoy the view?” Hawke snapped, for anger seemed a more welcome emotion than fear. Her fingers trembled as she reached out and grabbed the blanket from her ankle. Hawke pulled the blanket to her chest, the better to cover her breasts.

“Sweet Andraste, what’s wrong with you?” Hawke added with a scowl.

As soon as she said it, she realized it was a silly question. There were a whole lot of things wrong with this particular spirit.

“So… what?” Hawke asked. “What’s with the creeping and the glowing and the staring? I assume you’ve got some reason for waking me up in the middle of the night.”

Justice did not even blink. The only sound was the steady plop of droplets in the corner. Hawke licked her lips, then swallowed.

“You came here to smite me, didn’t you?” she asked. It was the only thing that made sense, really. “Well, try it. Try it and fry asshole. I don’t care if you’re in Anders’ body or not. You make one move, and I’ll blast you without thinking. I swear to the Maker I will.”

Justice remained silent. Either the spirit didn’t remember that incident back in Corypheus’ prison, or it didn’t believe Hawke would fight Anders a second time. Hawke wasn’t certain of that herself. She reached up and shoved her hair out of her face, but the fringe fell right back into her eyes.

“So no smiting, huh?” Hawke asked. She gave Justice plenty of time to answer.
“Justice didn’t answer.

“And no talking either?” she probed. “No rants about vengeance and mages and bullshit like that?”

 Apparently not. The spirit remained as still if it had been carved from Fade-stone.

“Or maybe you’re here to ask for a favor?” Hawke suggested. “Want me to do something justice-y? Like take out some templars or bandits or something? Well, usually that’d be right up my alley, only I don’t want to leave Anders alone just now. I’m not sure if you’d noticed, but he’s not doing so well. Always staring at the wall and humming to himself. Only time he’s really present is when he and I… Well, you know.”

Hawke cringed. Yeah, Justice probably did know. She did not want to think about what this spirit experienced from inside Anders’ body.

“Or maybe you’re bored?” Hawke suggested. “Feeling left out of the conversation? Not that Anders and I are talking all that much these days,” she added in a mutter. “But maybe you’re looking for some small-talk? A little chat? Okay, so what do you want to talk about? The weather, maybe? Been raining like a bitch out there, huh?”

Hawke tucked the blanket under her armpits and wrapped the fabric behind her butt in an approximation of a lumpy dress. Justice took no notice of her fumbling. The spirit’s eyes remained fixed on Hawke’s face. Somehow, that made Hawke feel even more exposed than her previous nudity.

“Not interested in the weather? Okay then. How about that Grand Tourney? Lots of people beating each other with sticks and stuff. Good times.”

Smoke curled from Anders’ parted lips, but Justice made no sound.

“Look, what do you want?” Hawke snapped, losing her patience. “Either say something, or fuck off or go back to sleep. Or, you know, whatever it is that you do when you’re quiet. ‘Cause I can’t have you ruining things. I have some delicate negotiations coming up, you see. Varric’s bringing these people: Inquisit-somethings. Rebel mages and former templars…”

Was that a blink? For the briefest moment, it looked like Justice flinched.

“Hey, don’t look at me,” Hawke said, holding her hands up. “They aren’t my friends. They’re Varric’s friends. That means even if they’re total shitheds, we aren’t allowed to kill them. Besides, this whole meet-and-greet is my chance to set things right. I plan to clean up that Corypheus mess and help the mage rebellion, too.”

The glowing eyes burned a brighter blue. Hawke figured that was the spirit version of acting intrigued.


Hawke attempted a sarcastic clap, but that caused her blanket to slip. Hawke caught at the fabric and covered herself up. Justice sat perfectly still now, eyes quietly blazing.

”’Justice,’” Hawke sneered, as if it were the dirtiest word she’d ever uttered. “Yeah right. You
wouldn’t know what justice was if it crawled out of the Fade and bit you on the ass. Maker’s balls, I’d love give you a taste of justice. I’d beat it into you if I could. Only I can’t. Not without hurting Anders, and he’s been hurt enough.”

Justice’s eyes seemed to narrow ever so slightly. Hawke shot the spirit a look of pure loathing.

“See, that’s the part I can’t get over,” she said, her voice low and angry. “That’s the part I can’t forgive. You hurt Anders, and I can’t forgive that. You can tell me that the Chantry deserved it or that Kirkwall deserved it. You can tell me that the whole world deserved it. But Anders? Anders didn’t deserve this. But you used him all the same. Used him for your dirty work, used him to lie to me. Used him to prove some Fade-shit point. And you know what the kicker is? Even now,” - Hawke leaned forward, as if to impart a secret - “Even now, after everything you did to him? He still trusts you.”

Hawke fell back against the slimy stone. She felt entirely sapped of strength. But Justice didn’t seem to be shocked by this revelation. The spirit remained immovable.

“He trusted you!” Hawke said, throwing an arm wide on a hysterical laugh. “He still trusts you! He fucking defends you! To my face!” She pointed at herself. “And do you have any idea how much that pisses me off? He trusted you more than me! He chose your ‘justice’ over a life with me! I’m the one who loved him. And you? You just turned him into a…”

Hawke couldn’t bring herself to finish that sentence. She couldn’t say what Anders had become. She didn’t want to say it.

“You’re the monster,” she said, pointing right at Justice. “You’re the liar and the killer. You took Anders’ faith and you used it. You twisted it. You took a believer and you put a sword in his hand. It’s the same thing the Chantry does with the templars. Same. Fucking. Thing.”

Was that a sneer? Justice’s face suddenly looked brighter and more dangerous.

“Oh ho!” Hawke laughed. “Don’t like that, huh? Truth hurts the widdle Fade-baby? Well, fuck you! You’re not superior or pure or any of that shit. You’re as bad as the fucking templars! Trying help mages, and only hurting them. Your grand plan backfired! And what the fuck did you expect, anyway? This isn’t the Fade. You pursue some ‘greater good’ out here and you’re gonna end up screwing over everyone you cared about. Welcome to the real world, fucker!” Hawke waved her arms wide. “No pure ideals ‘round these parts! Not for you, not for me, and certainly not for And–”

But even as she tried to speak Anders’ name, Hawke choked. Her felt like she might sneeze, and her vision went blurry with… Tears? Oh fuck. Not tears. Hawke couldn’t cry in front of this asshole. Far better to get angry. Far better to get furious.

“Say something, you dick!” Hawke shouted at the spirit. “You wanna fight? Let’s fight! You want to threaten me? Then threaten me! But this? This sitting and staring? This hiding in a cave while people out there are getting hurt? This isn’t justice! This isn’t vengeance either! This isn’t shit! Fuck, do you even know what justice means? It means people getting what they deserve! It means that good people don’t suffer and the bad guys don’t get away with it. If you really cared about justice, you’d see that. You’d do something about it all.”

Another sob caught in Hawke’s throat. She swallowed it down, nearly choked on it.

“But you don’t care, do you? Like, where were you when my mom died, huh? Or when Kirkwall was on fire, when the whole world was on fire? When Anders is hurting, when I’ve been hurting, where was all your raging and shit? Nowhere! Because you don’t give a shit! All you care about is
yourself! You think you’re so special and righteous, but you’re just a selfish asshole like everyone else. Like a human."

Hawke sneered the last word, and Justice seemed to wink. Or maybe it was about to attack. Or maybe it just had Fade dust in its eyes. Hawke didn’t care anymore.

“Nah, you’re not human,” she said, shaking her head. “If you were, maybe you’d understand. You’d understand that Anders was mine. He was the one thing in my life that I chose for myself. I got the coin for my family, got the house back for my mom. But Anders? He was for me. And I tried - Maker knows I tried - to make him happy. Because that’s what you do when you love someone, right? You make them happy, no matter what.”

Hawke choked back a sob, shook her head and charged on:

“He’s the person I chose. Out of all of Kirkwall, I chose him. But you didn’t care. You and the Blight crawled up inside of him and fucked him up. He could have healed himself if you’d let him! He could have been so much more. But now he’s slipping away, and it’s all your fault! And don’t think I can’t see what you’re doing! You’re whispering to him on the inside. You’re telling him that I’m a worthless - just like you did before. And how am I supposed to fight that, huh? You’re inside him, so he can’t ever leave you. He can’t…”

Hawke gritted her teeth, and spoke the next words as a sob:

“He can’t choose me. And he would! If you were just some person, I’d seduce him away from you so fast your glowing head would spin. But you didn’t play fair. You’re Justice itself, and you didn’t play fair.”

Hawke slumped against the stalagmite behind her. She wiped at her mouth, but found her lips were dry. Water dripped steadily in the corner; slime oozed down her back. Hawke sighed and ran her hand through her hair.

“You never played fair,” she said, softly.

Justice lifted its glowing head. The smoking lips parted. The mouth was glowed on the inside, too, as if Anders’ had swallowed a wisp. Hawke froze, uncertain if Justice meant to speak or scream or accuse or attack. Every one of her muscles tensed, ready to drop the blanket and fight.

The glowing faded instantly, and Hawke was plunged into darkness. Hawke gasped, summoning a ball of light into her hands. She saw Anders’ body pitch sideways into the bed.

“Shit!”

Hawke left the light hovering at her shoulder, and lunged for Anders in the darkness. Anders’ body hit the bedroll, his face wedged between a couple pillows. Hawke clambered onto the bed, carefully rolled Anders onto his back. Anders’ head lolled to one side, his hair like spun gold against the pillow, his long lashed fanned out against his cheeks. He looked like a fairy prince, Hawke thought, just waiting to be wakened by a kiss.

Only Hawke knew better: this was no fairy tale. And Justice wasn’t really gone. That spirit was hiding inside of Anders even now. Could the spirit see her, Hawke wondered? Hear her? Was it plotting in there, or had this encounter been some sort of weird, spiritual sleep-walking? Had the spirit been threatening her? Warning her? And most importantly, was the spirit gone for good, or could she expect more one-sided conversations in the weeks to come?

“You stay gone, Justice,” Hawke whispered to Anders’ sleeping face. “And don’t you dare mess
things up for us with the Inquisition. Don’t you dare mess it up.”

Anders let out a drowsy snore. It was such a normal sound, such a human sound, that Hawke let out a hysterical laugh. She then slapped a hand over her mouth.

It was no good. Panic had begun rising inside of her - panic and fury both. Pressure grew in Hawke’s chest. She felt a tingling in her fingertips, and her hair began to stand on end. She felt ready to blast a hole right through the wall. Hawke bit her lip to keep the scream inside.

_What the fuck do you want, Justice?_

With shaking hands, Hawke took blanket from her body and tucked it around Anders’ bare shoulders. Fingers still trembling, she picked up her clothes. It took Hawke a few tries to get her legs into the pants, to get the tunic over her head. She slipped away from the bed, and padded barefoot out of the deep-cave room. She marched down the torch-lit tunnel that led back to the cave entrance.

_I just need fresh air_, Hawke told herself. _I just need sun. I just need company. I just need something to do with myself, some battle to fight, some problem to solve…_

Light shivered down her arms, arcing out from her bare toes. She began to walk faster now, skipping every other step. Her belly seemed to burn, like she had a campfire inside. Hawke she broke into a jog – a run – then she _bolted_ for the cave entrance. Her feet slapped the stones, her arms pumped the air. Hawke rounded a corner, and there was the mouth of the cave. The tunnel entrance looked like a rocky shore surrounding a pool of stormy sky.

Hawke dove right in. She flung herself out of the cave and into the rain. Her face was blasted by the downpour, heavy drops weighing her down until she skidded to her knees in the muddy grass. Lightning cracked, and Hawke couldn’t tell if the bolt had come from her or from the sky. It didn’t matter. Thunder rolled all around her, an echo to her rage.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHAAAAH!”

Hawke began pounding the earth like a punching bag.

_Damn Justice!_ she thought. _The fucker! Asshole! Creep! Horrible, nasty little… butt!_ Hawke pummeled the ground now. Arcs of electricity went crackling off in every direction.

_Fucking Justice and its… Fucking… Freaky-ass… Stalking… Judging… Unjust dickery!_

Watching her while she was sleeping? Taking possession of Anders while he was weak? Maker damn Justice! Damn it to the Void - no! Deeper than the Void. Maker send that spirit straight to the Abyss!

_It wasn’t fair! It just wasn’t FAIR._

Hawke didn’t care if that sounded like a child’s rant. It _wasn’t_ fair! None of this was fair! And Justice was supposed to be fair! That was its _job_, damn it! And Justice was cheating! Stealing all the cards from the deck! Tears ran from Hawke’s eyes and snot ran from her nose and rain poured down her face and she felt like the entire world was melting around her.

_None of this was right_, Hawke thought on a sob. _None_ of this. All she wanted was for Anders to be okay. And for Corypheus to be dead. And for the mage rebellion to be over. And for Varric to show up and take her the Void away from here.

Hawke’s fists stuttered. She paused mid-swing. Rain dripped from her muddy fingers as she knelt
there, breathing hard.

Fucking Varric, Hawke thought, her heart constricting with fondness and frustration. Maker damn that dwarf, where the Void was he? She was waiting on him, desperate for his company and his stories. She didn’t know how much longer she would last without him. Anders and Justice were slowly driving her mad.

Hawke sighed, gave the ground one last half-hearted thwack, then sat back on her butt. It seemed Varric had predicted this years ago, Hawke thought. When Varric had expressed concern over her romance with a possessed apostate, Hawke had laughed Varric off.

“Come on, Varric,” she’d slurred between shots. “Since when have I ever been turned off by crazy?”

Ah fuck, Hawke thought, running her hands through her soaked hair. Leave it to Varric to point out the obvious: People didn’t screw around with possessions for a reason. Justice wasn’t some kind of indoor pet that Anders could keep on a leash. In fact, it seemed like Anders was the one in a collar here. So maybe Varric was right. Maybe there was no way to fix this. Maybe Anders had been a lost cause from the beginning.

Hawke stared out into the storm. A scorched patch of mud how stretched before her. It was a weird sight. Mud and fire didn’t usually go together.

Suddenly, Hawke suddenly sat up taller.

Wait a minute. What the Void was she doing? She was the Champion of Kirkwall, not some sad-sap damsel in distress. She was a mage. She was a healer. She could fucking burn mud. But most of all, Hawke was Ferelden. She was a survivor born and bred, and she was not about to give up just because some stupid Fade spirit had freaked her out.

Anders was hers, Hawke thought fiercely. And yeah, she might be a little frustrated with her man right now, but that didn’t matter. If only out of spite, Hawke would not lose this battle to Justice. And it was a battle, make no mistake. Anders was under siege here. And Hawke needed to liberate him.

Alright then, Hawke thought, pounding the ground one last time. That was that. She’d had her little freak-out, and she was done with it. No more crying. It was time for fighting. And now that her eyes were empty of tears, Hawke saw the solution clear as day:

All she needed to do was free Anders from Justice and the Blight, and then everything would be fine.

Oh, is that all?

Hm, yeah, Hawke thought, tapping a muddy finger to her lips. Easier said than done. She’d considered this battleplan before. The problem was, there weren’t any cures for possessions or for the taint - at least none that Hawke knew of. In fact, Hawke had bought every tome she could find on those subjects, and hadn’t found jack. The smugglers in Lowtown knew all about her weird book obsession. So it seemed that she didn’t have much hope of…

Hang on! An idea flashed through Hawke’s mind like lightning, as all her best ideas did. A smile rolled across her lips in answering thunder:

What if I asked the rebel mages for help?

That’s was it! That was the game-changer! Hawke had never been able to speak freely with Circle
mages before. Her past visits to the Gallows had been as short as she could make them. But if she could join the mage rebellion, she’d have access to every single freaking mage in all of Thedas! Yes!

Hawke’s belly felt like it was tying itself into knots with excitement. This was it! This had to be the solution! Everyone knew that Circle mages were like walking libraries, every last one of them! And hadn’t Carver once said that there was some mage who used to be a Grey Warden? As in, used to have the taint – and now didn’t? Carver had been drunk at the time, and complaining as usual (‘You mages have all the luck,’ he’d whined). But right there, that was one half of Anders’ problem solved! As for undoing spirit possessions, some senior enchant-whatever ought to know something about that, right? Those Circle nerds had to know more than Hawke did, anyhow.

“Ewww…yeah.”

Hawke bit her lip. Yeah, the Circle mages would know more than her. They’d know *lot* more than her. Suddenly, the knots in Hawke’s stomach pulled tight. Because if there was one thing that Hawke was self-conscious about, it was how little formal education she’d had. Oh, she’d done her best. She’d learned everything she could from her parents and she’d read a shit-ton of books on her own. Her library back in Kirkwall had been as big as the rest of the house. But erratic homeschooling-while-on-the-run plus adventuring-for-coin did not a robust education make. Hawke just hoped the Circle mages wouldn’t be too snobby toward a self-taught apostate. Otherwise, asking for their help was going to be a real bitch.

But she would ask for help, Hawke vowed. Because if there was anyone who knew how to get rid of the Blight and possessions and shit, it would be the Circle mages. True, the idea might be a little bit crazy…

*But when have I ever been turned off by crazy?*

Hawke grinned. Alright then, she thought. She had her battleplan. She knew where to get ammunition. And once she was loaded up with enough missiles, she was ready to win this fight. Now all she had to do was find herself a rebellion.
Complete Overkill

Chapter Summary

In which Cullen's best laid plans go to the dogs

Varric wasn’t a poet, and he wasn’t one of those so-called ‘literary’ writers that you could find lounging around in some nobleman’s salon. You could smell those posers a mile away, what with their sneering attitudes and their faux despair, their continual complaints about ‘the state of the medium these days,’ and their horror at ‘the regrettable popularity of genre hacks.’ Whenever Varric met those clowns, they always managed to find some way to name-drop the Chantry-sanctioned publication their work had once appeared in. Maker forbid you have the gall to say you preferred serial mysteries or broadside adventures or – horror of horrors – romance. Make a mistake like that, and those writers would be all over you, pointing out the superiority of their ‘intriguing metaphysical juxtapositions’ and advocating ‘a robust disavowal of the ordinary trappings of plot and character.’ They’d tell you that their greatest ambition in life was ‘to write beautiful sentences.’

Write beautiful sentences? Without a plot to put them in? What did that even mean? That was like saying you wanted to sing beautiful notes without bothering with a song. More to the point, who wanted to read that kind of shit? Two hundred pages of self-important prose all cobbled together into some plotless mess? In Varric’s opinion, it was the literary equivalent of jacking off in public.

So yeah, Varric wasn’t a Writer with a capital ‘Wruh’. But he was a storyteller. And if that made him a pariah in the Val Royeaux set, fine by him. So he was going to ignore that nagging letter he’d gotten from his publisher - the one saying that The Tale of the Champion needed a ‘more literary’ sequel - and he’d keep doing as he did. Because first of all, The Tale of the Champion wasn’t literary on purpose. Varric tried to think of a ‘literary’ way to relate Isabela’s dick jokes, and came up with nothing. Secondly, a sequel? To that? Come on. The whole world was living the sequel. Besides, Varric thought, if there was one thing he knew about storytelling, it was that a good author left out all the boring bits.

And everything since Hawke had left? Pretty boring bits.

Take this Inquisition, for example. Sure, there had been that business with the Conclave and Haven and Corypheus and all that. Those events weren’t exactly a snore, but they weren’t the kind of thing you could set down in a story. No one would believe Varric if he said what had really happened, and furthermore, a good story needed an exciting central character. The Inquisition folks were nice and all, but none of them were starring-role material. Take Inquisitor Duchess for example, all serene and diplomatic. She’d do fine in some Orlesian romance, but she didn’t exactly fit in an adventure plot. Then there was Commander Curly, who managed to make every conversation as dull as dirt. Cole was a kick in the pants, but Varric couldn’t even begin to guess how to write a story from a spirit’s point of view.

Nah, Varric mused. No one here had that ‘it’ factor: that relatable, hard-bitten something-or-other that made for a true folk hero.

Because none of them were Hawke.

When Hawke was around, Varric thought, life itself read like the very best of stories. When Hawke
was around, everything had been adventures and laughs and drinks at the pub and jokes penciled in on the margins. Well, at least things had been that way until Hawke had started shacking up with Anders. Once the apostate had moved in, Hawke hadn’t had much time for her dwarven friend. But that lapse aside, Varric had been with Hawke through dragon fights and belching contests, through battles and heists and simple, quiet moments that he still played over in his mind.

Maker, Varric missed her. Biggest mistake he’d ever made, letting Hawke leave Kirkwall all by herself. Well, maybe it wasn’t Varric’s biggest mistake. That would probably be that business with Bartrand and the red lyrium. Or maybe Varric’s biggest mistake was failing to kill Corypheus the first time around. It made Varric sick to his stomach to think that all this Breach shit could be traced back to a cocked-up mission of his and Hawke’s.

But if there was an upside to all this craziness, it was that Varric would soon be reunited with Hawke, and the two of them could set things right. Did that outweigh all those deaths in Haven? Shit no. But Varric would take his silver linings where he could. The past five days on the road had been driving him crazy. This entire trip had read like the minutes from a Merchant Guild’s meeting: all schedule and formality and a lot of blowing wind. Commander Curly, in particular, was in a fine mood. He was surrounded by maps and soldiers and the Inquisitor and Ferelden mud. The mages were all showing off for each other, the scouts were gossiping like mad, and normally, this would have been Varric’s favorite sort of vacation. Perfect story-fodder.

As it was, Varric didn’t much care. He’d grown sulky and withdrawn, spent most of his time watching the road ahead or staring into the campfire. He didn’t feel like making small talk or making friends. The only thing he wanted was to see Hawke again.

But today - today - Varric was in the home stretch. Last night, they’d reached the outskirts of Crestwood. The weather had been terrible, and the lakeshore smelled like a compost pile. Varric had been tempted to set off for Hawke at once, only Commander Curly had ordered everyone to stay close to the camp - something about undead and bandits and a dragon up in the hills. Only a few scouts had been allowed out into the storm.

So rather than sneaking off to find Hawke, Varric had sent Plucky with a message. It was probably against Inquisition rules to borrow the camp bird without permission. But Varric had wanted to warn Hawke that the Inquisition was on her doorstep. Or cavestep. Whatever. Besides, Varric figured that Hawke could use the company. She was probably feeling pretty lonely, hanging out in a cave all by herself.

As for Varric, he’d tucked himself into his tent last night, but he’d scarcely slept a wink. The pounding rain hadn’t exactly been a lullaby, and he kept worrying about Hawke, alone out there in some chilly, Maker-forsaken hole.

And now it was morning. Soon Varric could set off to find his friend. Only two things stood in his way: a bunch of bandits in a keep – and this endless siege-planning meeting:

“Are you all getting this?” Cullen asked.

Varric rolled his eyes. Of course they were getting this. At present, all the scouts and mages and soldiers - all thirty-something of them - stood packed around the requisitions table. A mess of maps and notes lay on the surface, pinned down with wet stones. Overhead, a canvas awning did little to keep out the wind or the rain. Commander Curly’s hair was going wild: he had little droplets all through his frizz.

“Now, to review,” Cullen said, leaning forward over the table and pointing at the map. “Rion’s team will maintain the supply lines. Ella’s forward team will take out the doors, then the first wave of
soldiers will sweep in and secure the outer courtyard. Lysette? You and your soldiers will claim the forward ramparts. Barris, you'll march in then and secure the lower inner bailey. Charter’s team will take the upper inner bailey, and Iron Bull?” Cullen looked up. “You and I and the Inquisitor will finish with a sweep of the rear ramparts.”

“Got it,” Bull said. The qunari stood so tall that his horns stuck up into the awning. The twin points shaped the canvas into a private pavilion around his head.

“Alright then,” Cullen said. “Any further questions?”

Andraste’s ass, Varric thought. They had been going over this plan since breakfast. Surely no one had any questions.

“Ah, Inquisitor?”

Damn it. There was always that guy with questions.

“Permission to change my assignment, ma’am. My team’s assignment, that is.”

And of course that was Rion. The pale, pockmarked guy with angry eyes was a real pain in the ass. Varric almost felt bad for Curly, having to deal with that ego all week.

“What?” Kate frowned, as Cullen demanded: “Why?”

“I just don’t think that sitting with the packs is the best use of my team’s talents.”

“Oh, Maker,” Varric heard Lysette grumble.

Varric agreed. What was with this guy? Rion was acting like they’d asked him to clean the fortress garderobe or something.

“Your company is not ‘sitting with the packs,’” Kate told Rion. “You’re making sure our supplies and horses stay safe.”

“And you’re the rear guard against corpses shambling up the road,” Cullen added. “But if you can’t handle that…” He trailed off meaningfully.

“We can handle it,” Philip, Rion’s second-in-command, assured both Commander and Inquisitor. “We can handle it,” he added, speaking to Rion through gritted teeth.

“Of course we can handle it,” Rion said. “We’re the Bad ASS. We’re front line guys. And that’s why we should be on the front lines. Not like…” He trailed off there, then tried a different tack:

“We could assist Ella’s team,” Rion said. “Take down the gates. Help neutralize traps and hostiles and such.”

Captain Ella gave Rion a look that could have frozen the lake. Varric remembered Ella from back in Kirkwall, when the dark-skinned, black-haired woman had been a frightened, chubby-cheeked apprentice. Hawke had saved this chick from the Gallows - and then from Anders. As per usual, Justice had freaked out and gone on a killing spree. It seemed that a brush with death and subsequent freedom had left an impression on Ella. She didn’t look like she’d back down from anything now - not a bunch of bandits, and certainly not a blowhard like Rion.

“I think my Sexy ASS can handle it,” she said, placing a hand on her hip.

Several of the soldiers laughed, and Cullen visibly bit back a smile. Normally, Varric would have
been cracking up over a delivery like that. But he was too distracted by Rion’s stupidity. This idiot was eating up their time.

“Okay then,” Varric said. “So if we’ve all got our assignments…”

“I need you on the supply lines, Rion,” Cullen said, speaking right over Varric. “Once we’ve got a dry roof over our heads, we’ll be able to set up a proper base of operations. And everyone will want some supper.” Several people in the company nodded at that.

“So Rion,” Cullen continued, “Can you guard the horses?”

Philip looked at Rion pleadingly. Rion looked to Kate, but she just raised a brow as if to say, ‘Well?’

Rion deflated. “Yes, ma’am,” he said. “Ser,” he added, glancing at Cullen.

Varric rolled his eyes. Had Rion thought that Duchess would take his side over Curly’s? Just because Rion and Kate were both from Ostwick? Yeah, good luck with that. Inquisition Mom and Inquisition Dad had been a unified front since day one on the trail.

Of course, Varric mused, Duchess and Curly probably didn’t realize that the scouts were calling them ‘mom’ and ‘dad’ behind their backs. They also didn’t seem to realize that they were the subject of some pretty juicy gossip. One scout swore she’d seen Mom and Dad holding hands down by the lake. Varric found that doubtful, given how standoffish Curly was. But he supposed anything was possible. Either way, he didn’t much care. There was only one human that Varric was interested in at present.

Hold on a little longer, Hawke.

“Right,” Varric said. “So we’ve got our plans and…”

“Now remember,” Cullen cut over Varric. “These brigands have refused to surrender peacefully. They must be neutralized with force.”

Aaugh! Varric thought, ready to throw his hands up in the air. Would Curly never stop? Besides, these bandits had been terrorizing the area for months. Bastards deserved everything coming to them.

“One final thing,” Cullen added. “One of the hostiles is a mage. Be cautious.”

“So what?” Varric blurted out. “We have eight mages. And if we had Haw…”

Varric realized that Cullen was glaring at him. He stopped himself there.

“Never mind,” he muttered.

“Mages make a battlefield unpredictable,” Cullen said, his eyes narrowing on Varric.

“You mean enemy mages,” Kate corrected in an undertone. “Enemy mages make battles unpredictable.”

“Right,” Cullen said, glancing over at her, apologetically. “Right, enemy mages. The point is, be cautious.”

Everyone in the company nodded at that. Even the mages nodded at that. Rion made a wry face of agreement. Varric sighed.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “I’ve got it. We’ve all got it. Now can we go?”
“Are you in a hurry to fight bandits?” Dorian asked, looking down at him.

“Sure,” Varric said, casually as he could. “Aren’t you?”

“Not particularly,” Dorian said, looking around. “Can’t we wait until it stops raining?”


“I was afraid you’d say that,” Dorian sniffed. That sniff was not one of distain, but the result of a runny nose. Nearly everyone had caught cold, even the healers. Hawke probably had a cold, too, Varric thought. He glanced out into the storm and frowned.

“Alright,” Cullen said. “Anything else?”

Varric held his breath and crossed his fingers, hoping no one would say anything.

“I don’t want to kill the dogs.”

This came from Cole, who materialized suddenly at Varric’s side. At his words, several people looked over and blinked. The rest of the company remained oblivious to Cole’s presence.

“I… Ah.” Cullen frowned. “Yes, scouts saw mabari in the keep. I’d rather not hurt them, either,” he admitted.

“Hey, those are Ferelden war dogs,” Bull said. “Even qunari know you don’t fuck around with Ferelden war dogs.”

“They’re good dogs, Bull,” Cole said.

“Good at killing, maybe,” Charter put in. “They have armor and fangs and… everything.”

“Mabari will follow their masters’ orders or die trying,” Cullen told Cole. “The only mercy is to put them down.”

“Their masters are already dead,” Cole said. “The bandits took the dogs. Made them hurt, made them hungry, made them hate. The dogs sleep alone in the stables and have nothing to eat but garbage.”

“Oh, how awful,” Kate frowned. “Do we really have to kill them?” she asked Cullen.

Under the awning, the scouts and soldiers either looked similarly sympathetic, or vaguely confused. Evidently, some of them were missing the Cole-half of this conversation.

“We could sleep them,” Captain Ella suggested, before Cullen could answer. “Spell them and muzzle them.”

“Yes. Do that,” Cullen said. He rapped his knuckles on the table, then pointed into the crowd. “Rion, change of assignment. You’re with Ella on dog-duty. Philip, you’re in charge of guarding the supplies.”

“Yes, ser!” Philip said, eagerly snapping off a salute.

“Dogs?” Rion asked.

“Everyone else, your assignments are unchanged.”

“Dogs?” Rion asked again.
“Dogs,” Cullen repeated.

“Sure,” Rion said. “Muzzle war dogs. Why not?”

“Good,” Cullen said. “Any other questions? Once we hit the road, we’re in it.”

Varric willed everyone to stay silent.

“Varric wants to get going,” Cole informed Cullen. “Charter thinks this plan is complete overkill. Iron Bull wanted to storm the keep last night all by himself, but he held back out of respect for you.”

Cullen raised a brow. “Noted, Scout Charter. And thank you for your forbearance, Bull.”

“Hey, no problem.” Bull shrugged.

“Alright then,” Cullen said. “Move out!” He clapped his hands together. With the thick gloves on, they made little more than a ‘thwap.’

The company broke as one, bumping into one another as they headed out into the rain. Iron Bull turned, then swore - “Kadanshok defransdim vashedan!” - when the awning caught on his horns. Bull extracted himself from the canvas, then replanted the tentposts that he’d torn free. He bent double, shuffled out from under the awning, then straightened with a sigh. Bull shook his massive head, and wandered off toward the road. Dorian followed after, looking highly entertained. Barris followed as well, looking sulky.

“Iron Bull doesn’t fit here,” Cole observed.


“I made myself medium-sized,” Cole said.

“Wise choice. I’d do the same if I could.” Varric paused, then thought better of it:

“Nah,” he said. “Shorter is stronger. People tend to underestimate you.”

“Like Hawke,” Cole said.

“Yeah,” Varric said. “Like…”

But Cole was already gone. Varric found himself alone under the awning.

Wait, Varric thought. What had Cole meant by that? ‘Like Hawke?’ Either Cole meant that Varric was underestimated, just like Hawke was underestimated. Or maybe Cole meant that most people underestimated Varric - and Hawke was one of them.

Well, it was sort of true, Varric thought. After all, Hawke had never realized…

“Ah, shit,” Varric muttered to himself. It didn’t matter. None of that mattered. The point was, he would see his friend again soon. That was worth any amount of boredom or battle.

Varric checked the sights on his crossbow, then turned to join the scouts marching up the muddy road.

At least Cullen could plan a siege.
He couldn’t have planned for a number of other things, starting with this dreadful weather. Naturally, Cullen had anticipated storms. It was Ferelden, after all. But he hadn’t expected a total deluge, complete with roads so flooded that they more resembled shallow rivers than proper walkways. Further, Cullen hadn’t expected it would be so dark. Thick clouds rolled overhead, making the noonday hour look like twilight, and the perpetual rainfall registered as a constant crackle to his ears.

Cullen also hadn’t planned on this headache that now assailed him. He was doing his best to ignore the pain, but his temples were throbbing. Though that may have been caused by the other thing he hadn’t planned on: Cullen had woken this morning, checked his log book, and found that he’d scribbled a load of nonsense in there last night. He’d promptly scratched out the entire entry. Cullen had been tempted to throw the offending pages into the morning campfire but he’d worried that someone might ask him what he was up to. Anyhow, he certainly hadn’t planned for his personal feelings to get so out of hand again.

Worst of all, Cullen knew that he could not plan for Hawke’s arrival. He didn’t know when or where a meeting would take place, nor could he anticipate what information the Champion might bring with her. In fact, Cullen rather feared that when Hawke appeared, the whole of Crestwood would spontaneously explode.

But if Cullen could not plan for Hawke - or the weather or his physical pains or even his own feelings - he could at least plan a siege. Thank the Maker for that. Because as it was, these bandits were dug in deep, and they weren’t as stupid as Cullen had hoped. They’d reinforced the ramparts, and right now, their archers were hailing down arrows with remarkable speed.

Still, the Inquisition troops held firm. For while Philip, Barris, Iron Bull and the Bad ASS team remained around the bend with the horses, everyone else had marched right up in view of the keep. Captain Lysette had all the soldiers in tortoise-shell formation, and Charter and her scouts crouched under their canopy of shields. Cullen stood with Kate at the front of the crowd, Cullen with his shield and sword drawn, Kate with her arms held high over her head. Waves of blue light shimmered from Kate’s fingertips, and a massive shield spell flickered over the whole of the company. Rion had taken up the left flank of the spell, and two of Ella’s Sexy ASS mages helped Kate maintain the right and rear of the barrier. All around them, arrows zipped down from the ramparts, pinging off of magic and iron shield alike.

Not bad, Cullen thought, looking up at the shield above. Not bad at all. Especially impressive, considering that Kate and Dorian had worked out this spell just last night. From the inside, the barrier looked like a giant, shimmering bubble. Then again, it wasn’t entirely perfect. Kate winced with every arrow that made impact.

“You alright?” Cullen asked her.

“Fine,” Kate huffed. She sounded as if she was hiking or jogging, not standing there with her hands upraised. “Just feels prickly. Experimental modifications… and all that. You know how… these conjurations go.”

Cullen didn’t, actually. But he didn’t ask for clarification. Instead, Cullen turned his attention to the fortress gates, where the true siege was going on:

Dorian and Ella stood before the castle doors, summoning up a roiling ball of fire between them. Cole stood with them, shrouding the two mages in a strange, greenish mist. The bandits remained oblivious to the sappers at their gates. Instead, the defending archers focused all their attention on the road.

Exactly according to plan, Cullen thought, as arrows clattered ineffectually to the ground. Now all
they had to do was to patiently wait for the doors to explode.

“Think this'll work?” Cullen heard one of the huddled scouts ask.

“Pssh,” came the reply. “Curly planned for everything. Guy makes ‘careful’ into an art form.”

Cullen looked over his shoulder. That was Varric, of course. The dwarf stood under Ser Lysette’s armpit.

“We’ll be fine,” Varric went on. “It’ll take forever, but we’ll be fine. If my Kirkwall friends were here, though,” he added. “We’d be done already.”

“If your Kirkwall friends were here,” Cullen said, dryly. “They would have burned this place to the ground.”

“But we’d be done,” Varric pointed out. “Eh, I wish we were done. This place is creepy.”

Cullen felt slightly offended at that. “It’s home,” he muttered.

“Reminds me… of the Fallow Mire,” Kate breathed at his side.

“Crestwood’s not at all like…” Cullen stopped himself there. Storms? Undead? A crumbling keep full of hostiles?

“I suppose that’s an apt comparison,” he admitted. “Only there are no Avaar here,” he hastened to point out.

“And also…” Kate panted, “Siege plan’s not based… On a romance novel.”

Kate slanted a smile at Cullen. Cullen chuckled at the private joke.

“Actually,” he told her, “I got the idea for this raid from a book by Eleanor Feather.”

Kate did a double-take. “Really?”

Cullen managed to keep a straight face for about two seconds. Then his lips twitched, betraying him.

“You’re teasing me,” Kate’s eyes narrowed.

“Maybe,” Cullen said. Kate huffed in reply.

“Well,” she said. “I guess you won’t need… the flares I stuffed down my corset.”

Cullen started, glancing over and down at Kate’s armored chest. “What? You didn’t…”

“Maybe,” Kate said, mimicking his earlier tone. Cullen matched her sly look with one of his own, but then –

“Pffft.”

Cullen heard a snort. It was a very loud snort, and it came from Varric. Cullen’s smile faltered. It seemed he had an audience. He’d had an audience all week, blast it.

“Ah, um, no, actually,” Cullen said, clearing his throat and trying for seriousness. “This plan is not based on a novel. It’s based on Brother Genitivi’s *Decisive Battles of the Towers Age*.”

“Ah,” Kate nodded. “Military romance, then.”
“M-military romance?” Cullen repeated. “That’s not a thing… is it?”

“Sure is,” Varric said, because of course, the dwarf just had to butt in. “Popular genre, too. Sunnan Brockman writes that stuff. Also Lorna Lee, Tyler Stephanie…”

“Ready, ser!”

A shout from Ella had them all looking forward to the gates. The summoned fireball was now half as large as the doors of the keep. Ella swept her hands out to form a barrier over herself and Dorian and Cole.

Maker’s breath, Cullen thought. What was he doing getting distracted by talk of novels? This wasn’t the time or place for… whatever this was. He had work to do.

Military romance, indeed.

“Ready!” Cullen shouted back. To the company around him, he shouted: “Shields up!”

Kate grunted as she straightened her arms over her head. The shimmering above them grew brighter, and the air took on a faint, rainbow sheen. The soldiers huddled together, the shield-wall tightened. Cullen held his own shield at the ready, and then…

“Fire in the hole,” Varric muttered.

BOOM.

The front doors of the castle burst open in a blast. Great chunks of stone wall and oaken door went flying into the air. The debris came crashing down over them, landing harmlessly on Kate’s barrier. From inside the shield, the muffled clatter reminded Cullen of hail on a Chantry roof.

“It worked,” Cullen said, looking up at the scattered mess.

“Don’t sound… so surprised,” Kate breathed. Her hands shook as if she’d felt the impact of that blast through her fingers.

“Hey Curly,” Varric called from behind them. “Hope you guys brought along some spare doors. We ruined that pair.”

It was true. Smoke curled from a great hole in the wall, and three figures stood in the breach. One of them was laughing.

“Ha-ha-ha!” Dorian cried. “How’s that for Tevinter siege work?”

Cullen had to admit, it was pretty good. He himself preferred weaponry to spellcraft. But Dorian’s magisterial training had allowed Dorian and Ella to act as portable blasting cannons.

Mages make a battlefield unpredictable, Cullen thought. The old templar proverb was true. Only this time, that unpredictability was a boon for the Inquisition, and a nasty shock for the other side.

“First wave, forward!” Cullen shouted.

The company moved as one, debris hovering over them as they marched up to the breach in the wall. As soon as the company had cleared the floating wreckage, Kate let out a long breath. Stones and splinters of wood dropped heavily to the ground behind them. Kate then threw her arms wide, and another wave of shimmering magic passed over their heads. Kate stumbled in that moment, staggering as if she’d just picked up a sizable stone.
“Can you handle this?” Cullen asked her.

Kate blew a hank of rain-slicked hair out of her eyes as she stumbled along. “Just don’t ask… For combat spells after,” she puffed.

Cullen didn’t plan to. And it seemed he wouldn’t need to. For as the company marched into the forward courtyard, Cullen saw that the battlefield was exactly as he’d expected it to be:

Dark, rain-slicked stone walls ringed them in on four sides. There was a structure in the corner - stables, probably. The wood was too rotted to be of any use. The courtyard was flanked by four bastion towers, each with doorways set into them, allowing passage around walkway that ringed the space. There was no way up to that walkway from down here on the ground. Evidently, those bandits had gotten onto the ramparts through the tower doors. On the opposite end of the paved space, there was a tall, wide archway. The doors were thrown open - (Careless, Cullen thought) - showing just a glimpse of a rainy courtyard beyond. That was the only way forward.

Exactly as I expected, Cullen thought. One had to appreciate the predictability of Ferelden design.

And as Cullen expected, the archers up on the ramparts had not thought to flee. Instead, the three of them - no, five of them - had fanned out along the walkway, the better to aim down at the courtyard below. But though arrows zipped down from above, nothing got through Kate’s barrier.

Right then, Cullen thought. Our turn.

“Inquisition archers!” Cullen cried. He heard a rustling sound, as all of Charter’s embedded scouts reached for their arrows. At the same time, Cullen spied a movement in the archway opposite. Two bandits came running into the bailey, then stopped in surprise when they saw two dozen archers, soldiers, and mages standing in a giant hole in their wall. One wisely turned to run. The other raised his maul and charged.

“Fire!”

At Cullen’s order, Charter and her scouts burst from under Lysette’s shielding. Varric was among them, his crossbow primed and ready. There was a shout of: “They’ve broken through! Send for the–!” but that warning was silenced. Cullen heard the zip!-whip! of Inquisition arrows, the tat-tat-tat-tat-tat of Varric’s crossbow, and over it all, the wild whooosh of mage-fire. There were screams and wails and a horn blew and Cullen heard a loud “Ha-ha-ha!” that came from Dorian. One of the bandits got away through the bastion tower doors, running to warn the rest of the castle. And through all this, Kate stood stock still in the courtyard. She held the entirety of the barrier spell upon her shoulders, as Rion and the other mages engaged the enemy.

Then, there was silence. The bandits were all dead: either lying in lumps at the base of the wall, or with limbs dangling down from the walkway overhead.

Hmmm, Cullen thought, taking a look around. Maybe this plan was a bit of an overkill.

“To the ramparts!” he cried all the same. “Move, move! Ladders up!”

Two soldiers came running forward, slid out a telescoping ladder - modified Qunari design - and set the ladder up in the corner of the courtyard. And now they had access to the ramparts, Cullen thought in satisfaction. Always good to bring your own key to a locked door.

“Up to the walkways!” Cullen ordered. “Secure this courtyard! Someone check those storerooms there!”
While Charter’s scouts strode through the courtyard, Lysette and her soldiers climbed up onto the ramparts above. As they fanned out, another brave, stupid bandit came charging through the archway into the courtyard. The fellow screamed an impressive battlecry, but he didn’t get far. Varric shot him, Charter shot him, half the company shot him, and Dorian hit him with twelve bolts of flame. The bandit fell to the ground as a burnt pincushion.

*Definitely overkill,* Cullen thought. Ah well, better safe than sorry.

“Ramparts clear, ser!” Cullen heard Lysette call.

“Storerooms are empty, ser!” a scout shouted, as she came back out into the courtyard.

“Courtyard clear!” Charter added in.

“Well done, everyone!” Cullen shouted back.

*Very well done,* Cullen thought to himself. He gazed around at the small army with pride. Maker’s breath, that had been flawless. Even Varric had taken this seriously.

At Cullen’ side, Kate let her hands drop. The barrier burst, and Kate visibly wilted. She bent double and placed her hands on her knees.

“Good work,” Cullen told her.

“Mmmuuhhhnnn,” Kate replied. She didn’t sound like she had breath for anything more.

Then, above the driving rain, Cullen heard a new sound: barks echoed from the stairway ahead. The sound grew louder and louder.

*Right,* Cullen thought. *The dogs…*

“Rion!” Cullen cried, striding forward to meet the new threat. “Ella!”

“Here, ser!”

“Everyone else, get back!” Cullen called.

The two mages strode forward to join Cullen, Rion in his impractical robes, and Ella in her combat gear. Cullen placed himself in the middle of the courtyard, and not a moment too soon. Two enormous shapes came flashing through the archway. They didn’t look like dogs at all, Cullen thought - more like short, self-propelled suits of armor.

“Sleep them!” Cullen cried.

Both Rion and Ella flung their hands out wide. One of the dogs stumbled, as if its foot had gone suddenly numb. The other one didn’t even flinch. It just kept coming, all metal and muscle and a mouth full of teeth.

“It didn’t work!” Cullen heard Rion cry.

“You need more power!” Kate shouted behind them. “The armor… And mabari willpower…”

The dogs leaped – “Ahhh!” Rion screamed – and then…

*Smack. Whack.*
The dogs bounced back as if they’d hit something, then fell to the ground with a whimper. Cullen glanced over and saw that Kate had her hands out before her. Once again, she’d summoned a barrier shield. Only this time, she looked like she was about to faint from the effort. Cullen whirled back to the dogs.

“Cast again,” he ordered.

“Damn things are impervious,” Rion snapped. “Only managed to sleep its foot.”

“Add your power to mine,” Ella said, but Rion wasn’t listening. He flung his arms out wide again, and another wave of light passed through Kate’s shield and settled on the dogs. The limping dog shook its head and sneezed. The other one snarled in fury, its mouth dripping with foam.

“I said add your power to mine!” Ella cried. “Damn it, Rion…”

“Want me to shoot ‘em?” Varric called from somewhere to Cullen’s right.

“No, just…”

“More hostiles! Commander! There are– Ah!”

Cullen looked up, and saw a flurry of movement on the ramparts. It seemed that a trio of bandits were trying to come through the upper doorways of the bastion towers. Cullen heard another round of zips and tat-tats and more of Dorian’s gleeful laughter.

“Dorian!” Ella snapped. “Get your sparkly ass over here and help me!”

“Bit busy at the moment!” Dorian shouted back. A flaming bandit fell from the ramparts, landing with a sickening crunch. The dogs skidded sideways, yapping frantically at the burning corpse.

“They’ll come back with reinforcements if we don’t press on!” Charter shouted. “Permission to kill the dogs and move forward!”

“Give us a moment!” Cullen cried back.

“I can’t hold this… for much longer…” Kate bit out. Her arms were shaking, and the dogs were now pacing on the other side of her rippling barrier.

“Ella! Rion!” Cullen shouted. “Last chance! Sleep those…”

“Ahhh!” Kate cried. At the same moment, her shield flickered away. She fell to her knees, and the mark on her hand started sparking wildly. The dogs shrank back for a moment - the limping one with wide, fearful eyes, the foam-mouthed one yapping madly - and then both mabari seemed to realize they were free. The foam-mouthed dog charged - Cullen saw Rion go down in a screaming flurry of robes and fireworks and flashing armor - and the limping dog lunged for the kneeling Kate.

Kate screamed and covered her head with her hands, but Cullen got there before the dog did. The dog slammed into his shield with enough force to send Cullen stumbling to his knees. Cullen tried to get his feet under him, but the dog whirled around in place, and then slammed into him again.

The dog took him to the ground. Cullen fell flat on his back, his head cracking on the cobblestones. He found himself pinned under his own shield, his vision blurred and doubled, his head ringing as though he’d landed inside of a Chantry bell. For a moment, Cullen couldn’t breathe - the dog’s weight crushed his chest, a mouth full of teeth snarled over him. The smell of rancid dog-breath fanned his face, sour as turned milk and garbage. The dog’s claws scrabbled on his shield, the dog’s
teeth yapped at his neck, and then…

“Back! Get back!”

There was a flash of lightning - not blue-white lightning, but a bunch of weird, greenish bolts - then a ‘Yip!’ and more scrabbling, and the dog-weight was gone. Cullen sat up with a sudden “Uff! He shook his head, got his shield in front of him again, and then took a look at where the dog had gone.

Oh Maker.

“Kate!”

“Easy, boy.”

For a moment, Cullen thought Kate was talking to him. But then he realized that she was talking to the dog. She had placed herself between Cullen and the mabari - and she didn’t even have a weapon. Cullen now recalled that she’d left her staff with the pack horses.

“Kate, back away.” Cullen scrambled to his feet, nearly blacked out for the sudden dizziness that fell over him.

But Kate did not move.

“Good dog,” she crooned. “Nice dog. Mother had a dog once. Just a spoiled Orlesian terrier. Not nearly so clever as you, you sweet killer mabari.”

The sweet killer mabari began pacing before her in an uneven cadence. It limped back and forth, its broad head low to the ground. And then Cullen realized that Kate wasn’t entirely unarmed after all. She held her left hand out before her, and green light flickered in her palm. The dog limped away from her, growling as it retreated. It seemed that the mabari did not care for Fade-magics.

Smart dog.

“Nice puppy,” Kate went on, still in that soothing voice. “Good dog…”

Was she trying to scare or calm the dog? Cullen wondered. But then he saw that Kate had her right hand hidden behind her back. Her fingers were curled in a loose fist, and a ball of light had begun to form within the cage of her fingers. Cullen guessed at once what she was doing, but he didn’t want to take any chances.

“Kate, get behind me,” Cullen ordered. The dog hunkered down low. It was either ready to surrender – or ready to leap again.

“Good…” Kate murmured.

“Kate…” Cullen warned.

“Dog!” Kate cried, as the mabari jumped.

Cullen lunged for Kate, but she flung her right hand forward at the same time. Her spell shot under Cullen’s guard, sending a ripple of light into the air. The light hit the mabari mid-flight, and the dog dropped as suddenly as if it had been hit with an invisible hammer. Its armored body landed upon the stones with a heavy thud. The dog looked as if it had crash landed in a nap.

Kate collapsed as well. She sat down in a puddle and didn’t even care. She just hunched there, hands on her knees, breathing hard.
Cullen stumbled to her side. “You alright?”

“That,” she panted. “Was a lot of effort… For a dog.”

“Indeed,” Cullen agreed. He absently laid a hand on her shoulder. Kate just as absently patted his hand.

“Wait!” Kate cried, suddenly twisting around. “Rion! Ella! Did they…?”

“They’re…” Cullen turned at once, looking to see what had become of the other dog-battle.

Then he let out a laugh. He really couldn’t help it.

“I know,” Ella groaned from a few paces away. “Believe me, I know. But I was going for power, not precision. Then Sparkler got caught in the middle, and well…”

Ella waved her hands helplessly at the heap of bodies before her. Rion, Dorian, and the foam-mouthed dog were all lying in a tangled pile of limbs and armor. All of them were asleep, and all of them were snoring. The sound echoed the thunder overhead.

“I sleepeed them all,” Ella sighed.

“So you did,” Cullen agreed.

But where Dorian and Rion looked quite peaceful, that foam-mouthed mabari still looked vicious. Its eyes had rolled back into its head in sleep, so that only the whites showed. Cullen grimaced at the sight of it.

“That one needs a muzzle,” a voice said softly at Cullen’s side.

Cullen turned his head to see that Cole had materialized at last. And just where had the spirit been all this time, Cullen wanted to know? Cole might have helped them with that skirmish just now.

“You didn’t need my help,” Cole replied to Cullen’s unasked question.

Cullen wasn’t so sure about that. The dog rescue had nearly gotten Kate injured, had given Cullen a bad bump on the head, and two of their best mages were now out of commission. More than that, the Inquisition now had two angry dogs to train.

Though from the looks of it, Cullen thought, that foam-mouthed dog might have to be put down. Some creatures were just too far gone to save.

“This one isn’t,” Cole told Cullen.

Cullen rolled his eyes. He didn’t have time for this.

“Just get the dogs muzzled,” he told Cole. “Are they alright?” he asked Ella, waving at the pile of slumbering mages.

“Oh, they’re fine,” Ella said. “I’m the one who tweaked my shoulder, trying to lift that dog. Thing’s as big as a pony, and Rion’s as skinny as a beanpole. Can’t get ‘em sorted out myself.”

“Scout Brooke!” Cullen called for the big soldier in Charter’s company. “Move this dog, will you?”

The man came lumbering over, and Cullen turned his attention to the archway ahead. He couldn’t make out much more than blurry shapes through the rain, but it seemed there was a barricade in the
courtyard beyond. That hadn’t been there a few minutes ago. Apparently, the Inquisition was enjoying a brief reprieve as the bandits planned an ambush.

*Fair enough.* Cullen had anticipated ambushes.

“Is everyone else alright?” Cullen shouted, turning to make a quick visual sweep of the battlefield. “Any casualties?”

As he spun, Cullen’s vision went double again. He squeezed his eyes shut in a long blink and wiped the rain from his eyes.

“All troops, prepare to press on!” he called, pointing at the archway ahead. “Reform position and await further orders! Someone send for Barris! And mages…” Cullen’s gaze dropped to Dorian and Rion and he frowned. He sighed, then turned and looked at Kate, who was still sitting in her puddle of rainwater.

“Can you cast another barrier?” he asked her.


“Is that a yes?” Cullen asked, reaching out a hand. Kate let him help her to her feet, then she leaned heavily on his arm.

“Sure,” Kate said, still in that dazed, almost drunk sort of way. Cullen frowned at her. Maybe he’d better leave her here in the bailey.

“That sounds like a ‘no,’ Duchess,” another voice put in. That was Varric, wandering over to give his commentary. Cullen decided to ignore the dwarf.

Just then, Barris and Iron Bull came marching up, along with half of the Bad ASS team. But as they approached, both Barris and Iron Bull turned to look at the sleeping mages. Or rather, both of them turned to look at the sleeping Dorian. Both Barris and Bull cocked their heads, but where Barris shook himself and immediately turned his attention back to Cullen, Iron Bull continued to gaze at Dorian. Bull’s craggy face broke into a fond sort of smile.

“Orders, ser?” Barris asked. He gave a crisp salute to match his crisp tone.

“Get ready to press on,” Cullen replied. “Has anyone seen Kate’s…”

“Staff?” Iron Bull supplied, still looking at Dorian. “Yep. Here y’are, boss.”

The qunari held the weapon out, and Kate accepted it with a mumbled ‘Thanks.’ She planted the pommel end on the ground like a standard and leaned upon it for support.

“So,” Varric said. “One courtyard down, two to go?”

“Three to go,” Cullen corrected.

“Two, isn’t it?” Bull said, finally tearing his gaze away from Dorian. “The next courtyard is a bi-level, so technically…” He raised his hand from waist-height to shoulder height, then shrugged. “Yeah, it doesn’t matter. Point is, we’d better go. ‘Cause if we don’t…”
“Hostiles on the ramparts!” Cullen heard Lysette shout. He looked up to see that the doors to the bastion towers had opened, and a group of bandits were trying to fight their way onto the space above.

“If we don’t, that sort of shit will keep happening,” Iron Bull said, pointing up at the walkway above.

“Persistent for bandits, aren’t they?” Varric said thoughtfully. He held up his crossbow, and looked through the sights. “Eh, Lysette’s fighting too close. Hey Lysette! Put your shield up and back off!”

Varric’s order was lost in the shouting. And now Cullen heard another cry:

“Ser, we’re taking fire!” It was Charter, yelling from the doorway. Cullen whipped his head around to see that the barricade in the next courtyard was crawling with bandits.

Blast it all, he thought. They’d taken too long with the dogs. Foolish last-minute changes to the plan. Still, the Inquisition had the advantage by far, and the bandits were clearly desperate. He could easily salvage this.

“Barris, go help Charter ward off that attack!” Cullen snapped. “Varric, have you got a clear – ?”

There was a Whipppp and a Thunk and then:

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!”

Cullen never finished his question. A bloodcurdling scream echoed off the stone walls, and Cullen spun around in shock. That scream was so loud, it sounded like it had come from right behind him.

Actually, Cullen realized, it had come from right behind him.

It had come from Cole.

“NO!” Cole’s cry now turned to snarl, and he looked up at the ramparts with fury in his eyes. “NO!”

“Cole, what’s wrong?” Kate asked.

“That’s wrong,” Varric said, pointing at the ground.

Cullen looked down, then felt his stomach lurch. The limp-pawed dog lay dead at Cole’s feet. A single arrow stuck out of its soft, unarmored belly. Rain matted its fur, and blood ran out onto the cobblestones.

“They shouldn’t have done that,” Cole said, his voice somehow both mild and mad. “They shouldn’t have done that.”

Then he was gone. Rain fell on the space where Cole had been standing a moment ago, pattering down on the cobblestones and the dead dog alike.

“Shields up!” Cullen said, stepping in front of Kate. “They’re aiming at the Inquisitor.”

“Oh, I’m gonna assume they were aiming at the dog,” Varric said. “Don’t think the kid would’ve been so pissed if that’d been an accident.”

“Why would they shoot the dog?” Kate wanted to know.

“Vindictive dipshits don’t like to share their toys?” Bull suggested.
“That’s awful,” Kate said.

“Hell of a shot though,” Varric said, sounding impressed. “I mean, they’re assholes, but that was a hell of a shot.”

Cullen had scarcely been paying attention to this conversation. On the ramparts above, those dipshit, asshole archers were still battling with Lysette’s soldiers.

“We need to take those bandits down,” he said. “Iron Bull! I need you to you…”

But before Cullen could complete that order there was a flash on the ramparts. A sound rang out across the courtyard - a kind of whhhipppp or a whisshh, like the sound of scissors slicing. There was a shout from Lysette: “Holy Maker!” - and then a scream that cut off on a strangled gurgle:

“AAAaaaaH-ggggrurh!”

Then a bandit went flying into the air, pinwheeling off of the ramparts with limbs splayed. The body went up - up - then changed direction and began to fall. The bandit landed on the paving stones before them with a gruesome crunch.

“Gahh!” Kate cried. The corpse was staring up at the sky with glassy eyes. Its throat was nothing but a mangled mess of bloody tendons and loose flaps of skin.

“Holy shit!” Varric gasped. “Did Cole do that?”

“Yep,” Iron Bull said. The qunari stood smiling up at the ramparts, his eyes shielded against the rain. His expression was that of a proud father. “Aw, hey look. He shanked the other guy, too.”

Cullen peered up at the ramparts, but all he could see was Lysette, a scout, and one last bandit. He heard a scream, then…

“Good Maker!”

The last bandit on the ramparts went flying. This one spun sideways, like a skipped stone. It hit the roof of the rotting stables, and crashed through the timbers with a nasty splat.

“Sweet Andraste,” Kate said. “Cole’s going on a rampage, isn’t he?”

“Looks like it,” Varric agreed.

And now the screams were coming from that barricade in the courtyard ahead. Cullen couldn’t see much through the rain, but he heard Charter shouting:

“No! Hold your position! I don’t know what’s going on but… Maker’s breath!”

This time, a body went through the archway. Or toward the archway, anyhow. The body hit the top of the doorway with a smack, then fell straight down like a stone.

“Maker’s balls!” Cullen heard Charter shout. “What the Void is going on?”

“Cole is going on,” Varric shouted back. He sounded like he wanted to laugh. And sure enough, when he turned to Cullen, the dwarf’s expression was smug.

“There goes your siege plan, Curly,” he said.

Cullen shot Varric an angry look. Iron Bull whirled around, his good eye wide and excited.
“So hey, um, Cullen? Boss?” Bull asked. “If Cole is off the rails and this siege plan is going to shit, do you think that maybe I could… uh…?”

The giant hiked a thumb over his shoulder. He looked like a child on Feast Day. Only instead of asking for presents, Iron Bull was asking to storm the castle. Kate looked to Cullen, and Cullen shook his head.

“This was supposed to be a group training exercise,” he told Bull. “It was supposed to be…”

“Aaaaahhhhh!” Another scream came from inside the next courtyard, and another body went flying from behind that barricade. Cullen sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Just… Watch out for the mage,” he said. “There’s a mage in there, if you recall.”

“We recall, Curly,” Varric said.

“Really?” Bull grinned.

“Yes, yes, go on,” Cullen sighed.

“Yas!” Bull cried. He punched his gray fist in the air. “You coming, Varric?”

“Obviously,” Varric replied, as they both took off running for the archway. “But we’d better be keeping score.”

“’Course we’re keeping score,” Cullen heard Bull shout back. “Not fair though, seeing as how Cole got a head start…”

Cullen shook his head, then looked over at Kate. She wrinkled her nose as she looked around the body-strewn courtyard.

“It will be faster this way,” she pointed out.

“Yes, but we won’t always be able to do things this way,” Cullen replied. “Not if the enemy knows how to reinforce a keep, not if they’ve had any degree of training. Most sieges are the result of careful planning and precision and Yes Scout Charter, what is it?”

Cullen spun around angrily as the elven scout came running up to him. Charter looked angry as well. Her hair was plastered to her forehead with rain, and she pointed at the archway behind her.

“Ser, what happened?” she demanded. “Why are those two breaking ranks? And who’s in there throwing bodies around?”

“It’s Cole,” Cullen explained. “Cole took off and Iron Bull and Varric wanted to go and basically this strategized siege plan has turned into a free-for-all. And yes,” he added, “I know what you’re going to say. The plan was complete overkill from the start.”


“But I don’t want to hear ‘I told you so,’” Cullen warned her. He held up a finger to stall her.

“ Wouldn’t dream of it, ser.” Charter turned to Kate.

“I told him so.”

“You did,” Kate agreed.
“Excuse me? What did I just say?”

“I was talking to mom, not you.”

“Mom?” Kate repeated. She glanced at Cullen in confusion. Cullen had no idea, so he just shrugged.

“New orders, ser?” Charter asked, not bothering to explain.

“The rest of the plan is unchanged,” Cullen replied, determined to salvage some semblance of a siege from this mess. “Sweep through the fortress, secure the structure. Make sure we don’t miss any storage rooms or secret passages. We need to account for every hostile in the place.”

“Need to clean the bodies off the floor, more like,” Charter said.

Cullen didn’t disagree. “No broom closet left unchecked,” he told her. “Go on then.”

“Yes, ser!” Charter turned and walked briskly back to the archway, hollering as she went: “Listen up, you lot! That boy Cole and the qunari and the dwarf went off to do our work for us! But don’t get sloppy now! Look alive. Scouts on the ramparts, soldiers on the ground. Follow me…”

With that, the troops pressed on into the fortress and the fog.

“Looks like we’re ahead of schedule,” Kate observed.

“So we are,” Cullen agreed. He took a look at the remaining wreckage of the courtyard. There were bodies everywhere, but they were all bandit corpses. The only fallen Inquisition soldiers were Rion and Dorian. At present, Ella crouched over them, her hands glowing as she tried to conjure a spell to wake them up.

“We might as well send for Philip,” Cullen said. “You there!” he called to a scout. “Call for the supplies, will you?” The scout nodded, then went running off through the breach in the wall.

“We’ll need a pyre soon, too,” Kate said. She looked at the dead dog with a frown.

“Good point,” Cullen told her. “I think there’s dry kindling in the…”

“Cullen!” Kate hissed. She was looking at something over Cullen’s shoulder, and he spun around at once.

Something - no, some one was trying to sneak out of the storerooms. The someone was a skinny, dirty-looking man in soaking wet robes. Either he had been hiding in the storeroom all that while, or there was a secret passage in there.

“Ah,” Cullen said, drawing his sword.

Kate threw her hands wide, but the barrier she conjured was a feeble, rippling little thing.

“Ella!” Cullen cried, striding forward. “Lysette! Hostile!”

The robed man stood frozen, as if he was a startled deer. He took in Cullen, Kate, and Ella, who had come running to cut him off. Then suddenly, wildly, he went running for the gates.

Cullen chased after him. The man threw his hands out behind him, and a shower of ice went flying from his fingers. Ella countered with a whip-like flash of fire, and the icicles fell to the ground. With a second, whip-like flame, Ella caught the man around the legs. He tripped, and went down face-first.
“Well then,” Ella said, strutting up to him with a flicker of fire in her palm. “Guess we found that missing mage.”

The mage groaned as he rolled himself onto his back. He looked up at Ella, his eyes going wide as he took in the fire. He then looked to Cullen, and at Kate, too. The mage snarled. He looked more like a mabari than the mabari, Cullen thought. Then, so suddenly Cullen didn’t have time to react, the mage cast a sweeping wave of light over them all.

Cullen tensed, expecting fire or lightning or ice. Instead, Cullen felt a gentle, breezy sort of sensation blow into him. It was like getting a face full of fluff, or goose down. Cullen shook his head, and looked down at the now-trembling mage. The fellow looked startled, as if he’d expected something else.

Cullen snorted to himself. So much for the bandit apostate. He went to step forward –

Cullen went down like a landslide.

Limp, and boneless, he crashed to the ground, his head cracking on the stones a second time.

But he didn’t feel it.

He didn’t hear it either. In fact, Cullen now heard nothing: not the sound of rain, nor the sound of thunder, nor the tramp of the Inquisition soldiers’ feet as they ran toward him. Cullen could see the mage was laughing at him, but he couldn’t hear the sound. Then an arrow hit the mage in the chest, and the mage’s mouth opened on a scream. Cullen didn’t hear that, either.

And now someone was rolling Cullen onto his back. Kate leaned over him, her face low to his, her mouth moving. Cullen thought he recognized the shape of his name on her lips. But he couldn’t hear it, couldn’t hear anything, couldn’t feel anything - not Kate’s fingers as they brushed across his face, not his arms as they lay limp at his side - not the rain falling into his unblinking eyes, nor the cold nor the wet, nor anything at all. In a panic born of peace, Cullen looked at the world outside of his body and found he felt…

Nothing. Nothing at all.
Too loud, Kate thought. The courtyard was too loud. As she knelt at Cullen’s side, she listened for his voice, listened for his breath. But she couldn’t hear him over all the other sounds. Thunder rolled overhead and the supply horses came clop-clopping into the courtyard, and all the remaining soldiers - all five of them - were murmuring and rustling and trying to get a look at Cullen:

“What happened?”

“What was that?”

“Is he dead?”

“Is he dying?”

“No,” Kate said, firmly. “No, he is not dying.”

*Oh Maker, please don’t let him die,* Kate silently prayed.

Because it certainly looked as if he might. Cullen lay there, unmoving, except for the quivering of his fingers and his lips. His veins were turning dark purple and his face was turning blue. Was he even breathing?

*Maker help!*

Kate tried to summon up some healing magic, but found she had no mana left within her. She tried to draw energy from the Fade, but the mark started sputtering. Kate felt she was scattering energy rather than pulling it toward her. *Blast it!*

“I need a healer!” Kate shouted, her voice going shrill with panic. “Ella! And Dorian! No, Dorian’s asleep. Someone wake Dorian! Wake Rion, too. Just… any mage! Philip! Give the supplies to Lysette. And Lysette, I need you to… Oh my Maker, there’s still a siege on…”

That last sentence was uttered as a whimper of frustration. Kate’s head was spinning, and her thoughts were scattering. Cullen stared into the sky, unblinking, as raindrops splashed down upon his face. Kate leaned over him, doing her best to block the rain.

“What did that spell do to you?” Kate murmured, her brows drawing together.

Cullen did not answer.

“Too bad we can’t ask the mage who cast it,” Ella snarled, dropping down on Cullen’s opposite side.

“Why?” Kate asked, looking up. “Did he…”

“Dead,” Ella said, nodding past Kate’s shoulder. Kate turned and saw for herself. The mage lay dead upon the cobblestones. His hood had fallen back, and his long, grey hair was slicked with rainwater.
and mud. Two arrows stuck from his chest and blood dripped from his lips.

“Fool scouts,” Ella said, clapping her hands together so that blue sparks flew from them. “Should have asked questions first and maimed later. Now we don’t know what spell that was.”

Kate opened her mouth, but then stopped herself. She had a suspicion about that spell, and she didn’t like that suspicion at all.

“Just get him breathing,” she said. “Please,” she added, as an afterthought. Kate tugged off her gloves and put her hands on either side of Cullen’s neck. She tried to listen for the lyrium in his veins, but could summon up no energy for the protocols. Ella placed her now-glowing hands upon Cullen’s chest. And Philip, who had come trotting over, looked down at this operation with a frown.

“I, um… I’m here,” he said. “But I don’t know how to heal. My Circle rebelled before I could learn.”

“Then wake up Dorian,” Ella told him, curtly.

“No,” Kate said, glancing around. “No, let Brooke handle that.” The big fellow was already crouched over Dorian, shaking the sleeping mage as best he could. “Go get the other mages. They went with Charter. Be careful!” she added, as Philip went running off. Kate turned back to Cullen to find that Ella had a steady stream of healing magic pouring into him. Ella’s face was lit by the glow, as was all the area around Cullen. Together, they looked like a pocket of hearthfire against the driving backdrop of the rain.

Kate felt a sudden wave of envy. She wished she could be the one to help Cullen right now, but Kate had never been good at healing spells. Convincing the body to speed up its natural regeneration took tremendous amounts of bold, direct energy. Kate’s magics had always been subtler, more shifting. She’d never had the aptitude for healing. If only she could help in some other way.

“Elfroot!” Kate cried, reaching for her potion belt. “Do you think…?”

“He’s not even breathing,” Ella pointed out, before she could finish. “Pouring a potion down his throat isn’t going to help.”

“Right,” Kate said, wincing. She supposed that meant that the elfroot pellets wouldn’t help, either. If Cullen couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t chew up a pill. Besides, those pellets were preventative, not a cure.

Healing magic it is, then.

Kate turned back to Cullen. He was so blue now that Kate’s heart lurched in her chest. She reached for the Fade, grabbing what little energy she could. It felt like trying to grab a fish in a pond. Kate got hold of a tiny stream of mana, sent the energy flowing into Cullen. She tried to send it to his lungs, tried to envision his chest filling with air. Compared with the magic coming out of Ella, Kate’s power was a feeble trickle. Still, she did what she could.

“Breathe,” Kate said. “Come on, Cullen. Breathe.”

Cullen continued to stare up at the sky. His skin was now going grey.

“Come on, Cullen,” Kate said, her eyes growing clouded with tears. The mark on her hand started sparking wildly.

“Like pouring water down a dry well,” Ella grunted. “He’s not…”
“Huhh!” Cullen lips opened on a wheezing gasp. Kate gasped as well, nearly laughing with relief. “Cullen!” she cried, placing her hand on the side of his face. “Cullen, are you alright?”

But Cullen still did not answer. His breaths came in ragged pants. His face flushed red from an influx of air. His eyes remained unblinking, and his arms still hung limp at his side. “Cullen,” Kate said, looking down into his eyes. “Cullen, can you hear us?”

Cullen continued to stare. *It’s like he isn’t even in there*, Kate thought in a panic.

“What the Void is wrong with him?” Ella wanted to know. “He’s soaking up magic like anything, but there’s no wound. No wound that I can find, anyhow. It’s not a Paralysis spell, though. Maybe it’s some Horror variant?”

Kate shook her head. By now, her previous suspicion had blossomed into conviction. “It was Clash,” she said.


“That’s what it looked like,” Kate said. “That’s what it felt like,” she added in a mutter. “But no one uses that spell anymore!” Ella protested. “Besides, it doesn’t work on templars.”

“It shouldn’t have,” Kate agreed. “Clashing exploits weaknesses in Fade-resonant, mana-based casting. Attacks bio-nodes with a burst of opposing energy. Like one tide crashing into another. Flatlines stored energies, causes burn damage to the nerves, kills spirits outright. It’s an endgame move in mage duels - or it was. But when barriers were perfected in 9:32, mages became resistant to Mana Clash and other draining techniques. Everyone made a shift to grounded casting frequencies, and…”

Kate broke off when she realized that she was nervously lapsing into lecture. Ella was looking at Kate with a dubious expression.

“Never mind,” Kate said. “The point is, I doubt that mage was thinking clearly when he cast it. Likely an old reflex.”

“But it worked,” Ella pointed out.

“It worked,” Kate agreed. She reached for the buckles to Cullen’s breastplate. So long as she couldn’t gather any mana, she might as well get this extra armor out of the way.

“And it *shouldn’t* have,” Ella said, light still streaming from her fingers. “So what happened?”

“I don’t know,” Kate said. Her fingers fumbled on the straps of Cullen’s armor. “I’m guessing his nodes flipped polarity just enough that the Clash found a Fade-resonant foothold in him? At least I think so. But I don’t know. I really don’t know.” Kate tugged Cullen’s breastplate loose and threw the armor aside with a clank.

“So, what if you’ve got some idea as to how to heal him, Inquisitor, you’d better do it fast. I can’t keep pouring magic into him forever. I’m already half out.”

“Right,” Kate said, nodding. “Right.”

She looked around the courtyard, trying to think of some way to fix this disaster. Lysette was over by
the horses, rummaging around in the packs. Brooke still hadn’t woken Dorian or Rion, and Philip had long since left the courtyard. The remaining scout stood at her post, keeping watch for bandits - or pretending to. In truth, she was nervously glancing over at Cullen, as if she didn’t expect him to last another minute. Kate felt her stomach drop.

_Maker help me_, she thought, desperately. _I don’t know what to do!_

“**I got it!**” Kate heard someone shout. It was Lysette. The captain came running over with a pouch in her hands.

“**Took me a moment,**” she said, “**but I found it.**” She dropped to Cullen’s side and held something out to Kate. It was a small bottle, filled with blue, glowing liquid.

“Lyrium,” Ella breathed. “Good idea. Might be hard to get him to swallow, but…”

“**NO!**” Kate shouted.

Ella and Lysette looked up in surprise.

“Don’t give him lyrium,” Kate said, shaking her head. “Try something else.”

“**What else?**” Ella cried, sounding both exhausted and panicked. “I’ve been healing all this while! There’s been no change!”

“With all due respect, ma’am,” Lysette put in, “When a templar is down…”

“Cullen’s _not_ a templar…” Kate began.

“But he _was_,” Ella interrupted. “And even if Philip gets back here and every mage pours magic into him, it won’t help. His wound isn’t physical, Inquisitor.”

“I know,” Kate agreed. “It’s magical.”

“So give him the lyrium already!” Ella cried. “Pour it into him and hope something takes!”

Lysette held the vial out. As the bottle passed over Cullen’s face, Kate thought she saw his eyes widen in panic. Or maybe she was imagining it.

Kate snatched the vial away. Lysette looked up at her in shock. Ella cried, “Hey!” but Kate just took a breath and said:

“Cullen quit lyrium.”

A pause met this announcement. Then:

“**What??**”

“Wait. **What?**”

_Sorry Cullen_, Kate thought with a wince. _But now’s not the time for secrets._

“He quit lyrium,” she said again. “But we can still use this draught,” she added. “Once Ella runs out of mana…”

“Wait,” Lysette interrupted, holding up a hand. “He quit lyrium? The commander _quit_ lyrium?”
“Stupid risk!” Ella said at the same time. “Why would you let him take such a stupid risk?”

“There was no ‘letting’ about it,” Kate said, looking from one woman to the other. “He made the choice himself, eight months ago. He told me about it just last week.”

“Eight months!” Lysette was gaping now. “But templars can’t… They don’t… Not for eight months!”

“Well that’s what’s wrong with him, isn’t it?” Ella asked, cutting right over Lysette. “Going without lyrium for that long? Maker’s breath, just give him a draught already!”

“No!” Kate cried, clutching the vial to her chest. “At this point, the lyrium is more likely to poison him than heal him! I mean, yes, most of his nodes are still Fade-dissonant, but many are in an advanced state of decay, and some have reversed polarity. So either the Clash shifted his resonant wave pattern or flattened it, or set him vibrating in some non-standard way! And I’d try to fix it if I could, but right now I can’t even get enough energy gathered to complete a basic scan of his nodic system!”

“Uh… I didn’t understand any of that. Did you understand any of that?” Lysette looked to Ella, and Ella shook her head.

“I understood it,” a voice drawled. Dorian stumbled over to them, leaning heavily on Brooke.

“Dorian!” Kate cried.

“What she was saying,” Dorian yawned, “is that our dear commander… is… zzzzzz….”

Dorian’s head nodded forward. His body followed, and he nearly pitched face first onto the stones. Brooke caught Dorian with a ‘Oops!’; and gently set Dorian down on the ground. Dorian rolled onto his back and resumed snoring.

“He’s still slept?” Lysette frowned.

“I said I was sorry,” Ella grumbled.

But Kate was looking elsewhere. “Watch out!” she cried. “Cullen’s turning blue again!”

“Ah, dammit!” Ella cried. She flicked her fingers out, sending more healing magic into Cullen.

“Huuhhhhh!” Cullen gasped out at once. He resumed his raspy wheezing.

“Be careful with him!” Kate shouted at Ella.

“Hey!” Ella snapped back. “You try making someone else’s body function for them!”

“You’re right,” Kate said, shaking her head. “You’re right. Sorry. I’m just…”

Kate trailed off there. She had to do something - something that wasn’t more healing. Ella’s magic wasn’t working, they couldn’t give Cullen lyrium, so that left… what? Kate was certain something was wrong with Cullen’s nodes, but she couldn’t think what it was.

Better find out, and quickly, too.

“May I have this for myself?” Kate asked, holding up the bottle of lyrium.

“Sure,” Lysette replied. “But don’t you think…?”

“Get one for Ella, too,” Kate told her. Then Kate pulled the cork out of the bottle and tipped the
contents into her mouth.

The lyrium hit her tongue like a storm: all coiled energy and sparking shocks of song. Kate let the worst of the draught rumble through her, then seized hold of the power roaring through her veins. With trembling fingers, Kate tugged off Cullen’s glove, and took his bare hand in hers. Then she placed her other hand on the side of Cullen’s neck. She could feel Cullen’s pulse hammering away. It was like he was running a race, rather than lying still.

“Just like the protocols, okay?” Then Kate closed her eyes and reached into the Fade.

Or rather, Kate dove into the Fade. It was like plunging herself into cold, dark waves. Cullen’s body jerked in response, and Ella said, “Whoa! What are you doing?” but all this came as if from a long way off. Kate was now somewhere else entirely, searching along Cullen’s nerve endings. It was rather like running her fingers along the strings of a harp, Kate thought. Only where she’d strummed before, she now poked and plucked rather hastily. She looked for magic, looked for a still-vibrating node, but she found…

Nothing.

It was entirely quiet in here. Kate felt another wave of panic - waves upon waves now - but she forced her hysteria back. Surely Cullen had some song in here, she told herself. It wasn’t as if a single mana clash could blow out his entire nodic system. At least, Kate hoped it couldn’t. And his bio-nodes should be able to regenerate energy, at least a little. So where was the hum, Kate wondered? Where had the energy gone?

Another frequency, maybe.

Kate dove deeper. She sank into a churning sort of place, where the energies of the Fade tumbled and crashed like an undertow. Only instead of pulling Kate down, the energies tried to send her up, back to the real world. Kate fought to remain in that place, fought to listen for Cullen’s lyrium song and …

There!

It was more like a gurgle, like water swirling down a drain. Kate tried to listen more closely, tried to make sense of what she was hearing, but now the churning of the Fade caught hold of Kate at last. The magics flung her away. She came up from the Fade-waters breathing hard, nearly all her energy spent.

“Pah,” she gasped. Kate opened her eyes to find Ella and Lysette staring at her. Ella held an empty vial, and renewed light flowed from her fingers. Even Dorian was awake, though Brooke was holding him upright in a seated position.

“What did you do?” Dorian asked. He sounded dazed as he squinted at Kate. His hair was all rumpled and sticking every which way. “What did you dooo…”

Dorian dropped off again, his head slumping onto Brooke’s shoulder.

“Wake up, Sparkles,” Ella groaned. “You need to take your turn.”

“What did you do?” Lysette asked Kate.

“Lyrium protocols,” Kate wheezed. Maker, it felt like she had swallowed a lung full of water.

“Didn’t look like any protocol I’ve ever seen,” Lysette said. “Not even when Coll was working the
infirmary."

“I’ve had… To modify them,” Kate panted.

“You were glowing there for a minute,” Ella told her.

“I was?” Kate blinked. “Cullen never mentioned that. And I’ve been checking his lyrium levels every night.”

“Ohhhhhhh?” Dorian perked up and blinked at Kate sleepily. “So that’s why the two of you…” Scout Brooke elbowed Dorian in the ribs, and Dorian fell promptly back to sleep.

“Never mind him,” Ella said. “What’s wrong with the commander?”

“Still not sure,” Kate said. “I found the hum though. It’s low. Low tide. All drainy.” She shook her head, feeling as if she had water in her ears as well as her lungs.

“Drainy?” Ella repeated.

“Shifted all wrong. And churning under. Pulling. Maybe if we infuse him with healing magic, the nodes will…”

“What do you think I’ve been doing?” Ella cried. “I mean… Look, Inquisitor, I don’t mean to be rude, but we need to change tactics. I’m pouring magic into him, and nothing’s stitching itself back up. It’s like…”

“All that magic is bleeding away into the Fade,” Kate finished for her.

“Right,” Ella agreed, sounding irritated. “So how do we heal for it?”

“I don’t know,” Kate said. To her own ears, it sounded like a whine. “His node system was messy before, but now he’s all knotted in on himself. The polarity is all twisted up in a kind of nodic vortex and…” Kate broke off when Ella began to frown.

“He’s funneling magic into the Fade,” Kate said, deciding to simplify it. “Like the Clash blew a hole inside of him.”

“So I should stop casting,” Ella said.

“No!” Kate cried. “No, if it wasn’t taking your magic, it would be taking Cullen’s life force instead.”

“Oh shit,” Ella hissed. “So I’m keeping the commander from being sucked dry by the Fade? No pressure, right?”

“Maybe I should get some more lyrium for the both of you,” Lysette said. The captain had been listening to all of this with wide eyes, but now she stood and ran for the pack horses.

“Okay,” Ella said, taking a breath. “This is… Great. This is great. So now what? How do we plug a Fade-hole?”

“I… don’t know?” Kate winced. “I’m not really a healer, and I…”

Kate stopped there. True, she wasn’t a healer. But healing magic wasn’t helping. Even if they’d had Coll here (Maker, Kate thought. What I wouldn’t give to have Coll here!), it might not have been enough. Coll was just very precise in the application of her healing energies - it allowed her to bring people back from the brink of death. But Cullen’s injury was lyrium-node and Fade-based. No
physically-based healing could solve this.

*Maybe a spirit healer?* Kate wondered.

Only they didn’t *have* a spirit-healer on their team. Such healers were rare, and most died in the mage rebellion. But then, spirit healers weren’t, properly speaking, ‘healers.’ They didn’t use magic to knit bone and vein back together. Rather, they drew spirits across the Veil, and commanded those spirits to do complex spells for them. They were summoners, really, though the Chantry had never condemned them as such. Spirit healers were too valuable for censure, which just went to show that…

*Wait.*

A thought occurred to Kate, so wild and improbable that for a moment, she just stared dazedly into the rain. *Why had it never occurred to her…?*

But no, Kate stopped herself at once. It was madness. Absolute madness. The tests weren’t complete. The research was nowhere near as conclusive as it ought to be. Her mark was ruining her connection to the Fade, she hadn’t been able to cast properly in months, and if Coll was here, she would say…

Actually, Coll would say to go for it. Ella was quickly losing power, and Cullen hadn’t blinked in what? Five minutes?

*Kate-lass, if there was ever a time to try…*

“Right,” Kate breathed.

“Right what?” Ella wanted to know. “What are you thinking?”

“Something insane,” Kate replied. “Can you hold him steady for a while?”

“What do you think I’ve been doing?” Ella asked. “But yeah,” she sighed. “I can give you… Two minutes? Unless the sleepy-headed Sparkler there wakes up and give me a break.”

“Two minutes is all I need,” Kate said.

Kate reached out, brushed her marked hand along the side of Cullen’s face. She took his hand with her right hand, gave Cullen one last look – she hoped it wasn’t her *last* look at him – then closed her eyes.

And she sank.

It was like the first time she’d done this, on that cold, lonely night. The fall was just as terrifying, the landing just as shocking. Kate plunged deep into the Fade. It felt like ice water down here, along with all those horrible memories of ‘It’s done!’ and ‘Oh Maker, this was so stupid! Why did I…?’

Kate searched around in the Fade, like swirling her arms through dark water. It had to be here - they had to be here. They were always nearby, right on the other side of the Veil. They’d brought her power for years, had kept energy always within her reach. Kate could sense the mark frightening them away - it had been scaring them off ever since she’d first gotten it. But she just had to convince them, Kate realized now. She just had to let them know that she was still the same person. She was still Kate, and some part of her would always be that lost, laughing girl she’d been back when she’d gained their trust, back before she even knew what they were.

*I know you’re near…* Kate thought. *It’s still me. Still me.*
And as she cast about in this deep, strange part of her consciousness – or of the Fade, or of her magic, or whatever this place was – Kate could sense her mark as a bright green storm. It cut and flickered and shocked everything around it. She imagined they were still out there, but afraid to come close. If only she could see them…

There! A whisper. A movement. They were here.

*It’s me*, Kate thought. In the real world, she might have moved her lips around the words. She might have even said it. She didn’t really know. But she was certain she saw them. Only the mark… *Damn mark!* The mark on her hand shivered in a different vibration. It was too bright, too loud, too like a scream of pain. It was the wrong sort of sound entirely.

*Have to shift it*, Kate thought. She didn’t know how to shift it, but surely willpower had to be the key. Will was the key to everything in the Fade. She just had to visualize it.

Kate floated there, fighting with the mark. And as she did so, Kate became dimly aware that people were crowding around her in the real world. There were soldiers out there - she heard Iron Bull’s voice and Barris as well. She heard the ‘caw’ of a raven, heard a rumble in the crowd and heard Varric say, “Well shit. You have good timing.” Kate sensed that another mage knelt at Cullen’s side and took Ella’s place. Then there was a sudden *surge* in healing magic. This new blast was bright and bold as a trumpet. Kate saw at once where the lyrium was seeping through. She could see it like a golden wave, churning and swirling away. And the drain it was swirling out of…

It wasn’t a single hole, but a long, many-branched crevasse. It reminded Kate of the drawings she’d once seen of the Deep Roads. But where fissures in the rock opened onto long lakes of lava, this ravine was spirit in nature, and it bottomed out into the Fade. The broken bit of lyrium near Cullen’s spine formed a long oubliette, and the rest of the spirit-ravine likewise drew in all of the newcomer’s healing magic.

*Now I know what needs healing*, Kate thought. She just needed *them* to see it, too.

Kate turned her attention to the mark upon her hand. She imagined uncurling it, imagined it as a fist that she was opening up finger by finger. The mark fought her every step of the way. It tried to remain all knotted in the Fade, but Kate gently, carefully pushed at it. It needed to be less hard, Kate thought. It needed to be more accepting. It needed to be less like a scream and more… More like laughter. They liked laughter best, Kate knew.

Slowly, finally, Kate felt the mark unbend. It lay still, lay waiting.

Kate waited as well, both hopeful and desperate.

*It’s me*, she thought again.

And they drew near.

They came crowding around Kate in the Fade. To her consciousness they were like dust motes in a sunbeam - the moment you looked at one, it was gone. But if she let her mind go unfocused, she could see the cloud of them.

*Please help*, Kate called to them. She might have been speaking aloud, but she didn’t care. *I never asked anything of you before. I just wanted to understand you. But please… Please help.*

And they did. As always, Fade energy swirled around them, thick and easy to gather. Kate drew some of that energy into her, used it fill her depleted reserves. (*Thank you, she thought.*) And then she pointed at the chasm within Cullen. Well, she didn’t *point* at it, but she directed her
consciousness to it.

*Here*, she thought. And then, *Please?*

They floated for a moment around her, seemed to hover over her shoulder. The whole world went bright around Kate. She felt heat blast her face, heard a gasp from somewhere outside of herself. Then, one little dust-mote went floating down into that long chasm, then another, then another, and soon all of them were filling that deep space inside of Cullen. There was a moment where Kate sensed the far end of that ravine was still open to the Fade, and then, swiftly as shutting a book, the other end closed tight. The branchy chasm had a bedrock floor once again.

Now that his body wasn’t leeching power, Cullen swiftly filled with healing. Like a rising tide, healing magic flooded him, golden-bright and hot to the touch. The dust-like motes scattered before it; Cullen’s body began to heave. Kate heard a shout and gasps and a yell. She began to rise out of this deep Fade-space at once. And as she ascended, Kate sent a thought back into the Fade:

*Thank you! Thank you so much!*

Then Kate was up again, gasping out a breath in the real world. She turned her attention to Cullen. He was breathing. His eyes were rapidly blinking, his gaze darting this way and that, as if he couldn’t figure out where he was or what was happening to him. Kate thought she’d heard him before, but right now, he was not speaking. He looked too shocked to speak. And little wonder. His body was aglow from within, as if he had sunbeams underneath his skin. The entire crowd around them had backed away, all except Dorian, who sat looking on in amazement. Lysette was on her knees, her hands clasped in prayer. Ella was gaping. Iron Bull’s expression was… fearful? Varric looked as though you could have pushed him over with a feather. And the mage kneeling opposite Cullen - the one who’d taken over for Ella and poured all the healing magic into Cullen - she was grinning as if this was the most entertaining show she’d ever seen.

“Wow,” she said. “That was neat.” She elbowed Varric in the side, then pointed to Kate. “You said this was your leadery-person?”


“Yeah,” the mage continued to grin. “I see the fire.”

It was then that Kate noticed the fire. She was on fire, or rather, a glowing light had encompassed her, as well. The Fade-magics flickered over her skin, like a thousand candle flames.

“It’s a miracle,” Lysette breathed.


“It’s a form of summoning.” Dorian blinked sleepily. “How are you doing that if you’re not…” He yawned. “A blood mage?”

“No,” the healer-mage said. “I was watching it from the other side of the Veil. It wasn’t summoning. Not even spirit healing. More like… Some kind of Fade-based energy transference? Only you started off with a flicker of spirit-shit inside of you. It’s like you’re some kind of abomination, only… you’re not. What *are* you?”

Kate froze at the question. She now took in the woman’s appearance – dark hair cut bluntly across her forehead, elaborate, spiky armor, and at her side, what looked to be a massive poleaxe. Most curious of all, Plucky sat perched upon the woman’s shoulder, as if the bird had become part of the
woman’s massive fur ruff. But while Plucky seemed quite familiar with this healer, Kate did not recognize the woman at all.

“Who are y…?” Kate began, but she didn’t get further than that. For in that moment, Cullen lurched to his feet with a roar.

“Get them off of me!” he cried. “Get them out of me!”

Cullen stood there, chest heaving, and his eyes settled on Kate. He stared down at her as she knelt there, and his expression was one of horror and accusation.

“What have you done?”

“I…” Kate opened her mouth to explain, but Cullen was already turning away. He took two steps toward the blasted-open wall, then fell to his knees and vomited on the cobblestones.

“Cullen!” Kate cried, even as one of the scouts reached for him - “Commander!” - but Cullen was back on his feet. He looked to the exit - blocked by a crowd of concerned soldiers and scouts and the pack horses as well. Then he turned around - his boot slipped in the puddle of puke and he nearly fell - and he ran the other way.

“Cullen!” Kate cried again. She rose and ran for him, but Cullen wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and dashed for the storage room. He got to the door a moment before Kate did, stumbled into the doorframe with a groan, then staggered inside and slammed the door in Kate’s face.

Kate jerked her head back. She’d nearly gotten her nose squashed. She stood there, staring at the door, absolutely stunned.

_Did I do something wrong?_ was her first thought.

_At least he’s alive, was the next._

_For now, was the third. But he was vomiting. That’s not good. And then…_  

_Everyone’s staring!_ Kate realized with a start.

And so they were. Kate turned to find that everyone in the keep was gaping at her. Even Plucky appeared shocked.

“Secure the keep,” Kate said, in a clear, ringing voice. Even if she felt like her world had exploded around her just now, she might as well act like everything was normal. “Please secure the keep,” she added, automatically. “We need to barricade the wall, get the supplies situated, and… And the corpses. Please burn the corpses.”

“Inquisitor?” Varric called. “Are you…?”

“Please excuse me,” Kate said, not even really hearing him. “I need to, um…”

She didn’t finish that thought. Instead, Kate turned to the storeroom and shoved the door open. It was a mess inside: all broken barrels and garbage. Cullen was nowhere in sight. But the wall opposite stuck out at a strange angle - or no, it was a door made up with a false front, so that it blended in with the stones. This was their hidden passage, Kate realized. Within, a stairway wound up into darkness. Kate went running for the passage, and so she missed it when the strange new healing mage said:

“Wow. Look at that. Curly hasn’t changed one bit. Oh, by the way, Leadery-Person, I never got to
introduce myself. I’m Haw…”

But Kate was gone, dashing up the passage in search of Cullen.
Perseverance and Whimsy

Chapter Summary

In which a locked room proves no place to hide

Chapter Notes

That hiatus lasted a lot longer than I wanted it to, but a chapter done is a chapter done.
Yay! Thank you all for your patience!

Kate raced up the steps, growing more and more dizzy by the moment. The staircase wound steeply upward: it was the sort made from large slabs of stone that had been cut in wedges, stacked together, then fanned out to make a spiral. A century’s worth of passing feet had grooved the steps in the center, and so Kate clung to the outer edge of the stair. Her toes would have found no purchase on the inner side. If she missed even a step, Kate feared she’d tumble headlong down the center spiral. What a horrible deathtrap, she thought as she climbed. She hoped Cullen hadn’t fallen. She kept expecting to stumble over him in the dark, collapsed halfway up the stairs.

But as she climbed, she did not see him. She did not see anyone, dark as it was. The few slit windows let in scarcely enough light to see by, and Kate didn’t bother summoning a magelight. Even if she had any energy left, she would have saved it for Cullen, in case he needed it. Where was he anyway? Surely this stair could not wind itself up into the storm clouds. Kate was beginning to grow sick from running around and around in circles.

Then, just as she thought that, Kate heard a loud bang overhead. She looked up with a start, but saw only the underside of yet more spiral stairs. It was getting lighter, however. Perhaps she’d reached the top. Or perhaps it was just another slit window.

“Cullen?” Kate called.

More banging answered her. Kate took that as encouragement enough. She redoubled her pace, stumbling up the steps until she came to an open door. Kate pushed past it. She took in the room at a glance: stone walls, a pile of rubbish in one corner, two narrow arched windows to her left, an oak door to her right. It looked like any other store room in any other castle. Only there before the opposite door was Cullen.

Cullen, Kate thought, breathing a sigh of relief. He was alive and awake and upright - well, mostly. He was bent double as if his back ached him, and he was cursing at… The door? Yes, he was cursing at the door opposite Kate. As she watched he rattled the handle and gave the thing a kick.

“Locked, locked!” Kate heard him growl. “Strong enough to break down a crumbling wall, but I can’t kick down a door? Blast it!”

“Cullen!”
At his name, the commander whirled around. He looked wild, Kate thought. His hair stood on end, it seemed as though half his armor had sloughed off. His breastplate had been left down in the courtyard, Kate knew, but now his fur mantle seemed to be going the same way as the rest. The cloak hung from his shoulders and his leather jacket was open at the neck. His bracers hung loose, as if he’d unbuckled them, but not shrugged them off. One of his boots was untied.

“No,” Cullen breathed, his eyes widening at the sight of Kate. “No, no, no.” He thrust his hands into his air.

“Are you alright?” Kate demanded at once, rushing toward him, “Are you hurt? Is the lyrium…?”

“No, no!” he cried, raising up his hands to ward her off. He spun away from her, stalking back to the door again.

“Cullen, I…” Kate froze, arms out, not at all sure what to do. She’d assumed the posture she would have taken with a skittish horse, but that seemed disrespectful somehow. She curled her fingers, drawing them back to her chest.

“I’m just trying to help,” she said, and instantly hated how her voice sounded. But Cullen did not seem to hear her. He was pacing now, from the door to the window and back.

“Not like this… Get a hold of yourself! Never run away from a battle! Never run from a battle!” Kate couldn’t tell if that was an admonition or a statement of fact. Either way, she stepped forward and tried to catch his attention.

“The battle’s over,” she said. “We’re all fine. We were just worried about you. Are you alright? Do you feel…”

Kate reached for Cullen as he paced by, but he held up his hands and took a step closer to the wall.

“Cullen…” Kate said. She knew that repeating his name over and over was not likely to be helpful, but she didn’t know what else to say. The man wasn’t listening to her. Instead, Cullen stalked over to the window again. His boots crunched some broken glass that had been knocked loose from the frame.

“Damn it all,” he growled. “I didn’t want you to see me like this. I didn’t want anyone to see me like this!”

“So long as we’re seeing you alive, we don’t care,” Kate returned. But Cullen only turned his face to the wall.

“Cullen, I mean it,” she said. “We thought…” Her voice broke there, but she recovered: “I thought I’d lost you.”

Kate scarcely got those words out. Her throat tried to close over them, and she felt her eyes well with tears. And that was no good, she thought. Cullen didn’t need her weeping over him. He needed… Well, Kate didn’t know what he needed. She’d felt so frightened in the courtyard, but she hadn’t had the luxury of panicking. Now, she didn’t have the luxury of relief. How could she feel relieved when Cullen was so obviously in distress? His skin was ashen. The smudges under his eyes were dark purple, like a bruise. When he’d looked at her, there had been something wrong with his eyes. But as he was now looking away, Kate couldn’t tell what it was.

“Cullen, please,” she said. “Are you alright? We thought…”
“You thought I’d gone mad?” Cullen asked, whirling around. “Well I had. I did! I panicked. I ran up the stairs, looking for a place to hide. To hide, Kate!”

His voice roared through the room, and Kate blinked in surprise.

“But that’s enough, isn’t it?” he said, stalking to the window. “Enough to lose their trust. Enough to undermine the whole operation. Damn it all, I should be taking it. I should be taking it!” He punched the door again in fury.

“Taking what?”

“Lyrium,” Cullen said, pulling his hand back and flexing his fingers. “I shouldn’t have given it up. Too much at stake.”

“You did well to give it up,” Kate said. “I’m glad you did!”

But even as she said that, it occurred to her that if Cullen hadn’t given up lyrium, that spell wouldn’t have knocked him down. She wasn’t about to say it aloud, however.

“And what am I in the end?” Cullen asked, stalking angrily to the window. “Just one soldier in a greater army. Or I ought to be. Ought to be the commander. Ought to be capable to holding myself together through a battle. Through one battle.” He held up his index finger, bare and streaked with mud. “But instead, I… I…”

Cullen reached to the window, and braced his hands on either side of the broken frame. He began gulping, as if he were struggling for breath.

“How can you breathe?” Kate asked at once. “Maker save you, just take deep breaths. Calm yourself…” She reached out to him, touched his shoulder at last. Cullen whirled away.

“No!” he exploded. “It’s not the breath! It’s the memories!” He sliced a hand toward the door they’d just come through. He gestured as though said memories were lurking in the stairwell.

Kate blinked. “The memories?”

Of what? was her first thought.

Oh dear, was her second.

For now she understood - or rather, she thought she did. Something about that mage’s spell must have reminded Cullen of the battles in Kirkwall. And memories were something for which she had no cure.

“I thought I was stronger than this!” Cullen went on, stalking back into the empty room. “I’ve beat the visions back so times before. Too many times. I had to learn how. It was either face the fears, or live the rest of my life in that abbey.” Cullen sneered the word, as if it were disgusting to him.

“So fighting?” Cullen whirled around and held up his thumb. “I had to do it. Had to force myself back into the training ring. Had to learn to take a blow. And blood?” Now he raised his index finger. “The smell, the sight - can’t let it make me sick. Can’t stop to stare at it when it drips.” Cullen shuddered, and jerked his head to one side, as if to shake off that thought.

“And storms?” Now he had three fingers raised. “If you live in Thedas, you’ll see storms. So I’ve learned to endure the sound of thunder, no longer shudder at the sight of lightning. Can never forget how it feels, though. Arcing through a body, lighting every nerve with pain. It doesn’t leave a scar,
you see. That’s why they favor it. And puddles?” This Cullen ticked off on his fourth finger, even as Kate gaped at him. “For the Maker’s sake, I’m a grown man, and I’m frightened of puddles. But they look like blood if it’s dark enough. And I woke up in pools of blood… so many times…” Cullen trailed off mid-count, and his eyes went glassy.

“Pools of blood?” Kate repeated. “Lightning?”

Good Maker, the way he described it, it sounded like Kirkwall had been nothing but butchery.

“But the nothing,” Cullen said, holding up his pinky finger all by itself. “That nothing? I couldn’t handle that. Couldn’t have trained against that. Blind. Suffocating. Couldn’t even feel the ground beneath me. A prison without walls - without locks or a door. Like being swaddled in death. Like being suspended in the Void. That’s what damnation is like. It’s not fire. It’s not torment or demons. It’s just you, trapped in your own head, and… nothing:"

“Is that what happened when the spell hit you. You felt trapped?” Kate didn’t understand, didn’t know what questions to ask.

“Trapped,” Cullen nodded. He dropped his pinky finger, his expression bleak. “Maker’s breath, how long was I trapped like that? How long did they keep me there?”

“Five minutes?” Kate suggested, taking a tentative step toward him. “Ten? But I’m sure it felt like…”

“Weeks?” Cullen interrupted. “Months? In and out of that nothingness. Butchery and silence and bouts of temptation all running together. And how are you the same after that? How can you be the same?”

Cullen ran his hands through his hair, over his ears. His fingers locked at the back of his neck. His elbows stuck out before him, shielding his face.

“And then, when those lights came for me?” he murmured. “When they flooded me…?”

“You mean the wisps?”

Cullen didn’t answer. Instead, he suddenly dropped to the floor. He sat down so heavily, it looked like he’d gone down like a stone. Kate dashed forward, skidded to her knees in front of him.

“Cullen!” she cried, grabbing him by the elbows, for that was the first thing she could get hold of. “Maker’s breath, was it the wisps that frightened you? Did they remind you of something in Kirkwall? I’m sorry, I don’t understand, but please. Please help me understand. I want to help. I want to understand.”

And now she was babbling, Kate realized. She was babbling and hanging onto his elbows, and she didn’t know at all how to help.

“Cullen please,” she whispered. “I… Oh!” For in that moment, Cullen let his arms drop, and Kate looked right into his eyes.

His eyes looked wilder than the rest of him. He’d broken a blood vessel in one eye, and his pupils were so dilated that irises were mere rings of brown. Kate found herself looking into mismatched while and red, with twin black mirrors reflecting the room.

“Cullen…” Kate murmured.
“Your eyes glowed,” he said, softly. “That’s why I ran.”

Kate blinked. “You ran because of me?”

“They glowed damn it!” Cullen shouted right in her face.

Kate fell back from her knees to her bottom, looked up and blinked at him stupidly.

“No, no,” he said, hands over his face again. “No, you saved me. I told myself you saved me. Even as I ran, I told myself I was alive, that you didn’t… that you wouldn’t… But would you?” he asked, dropping his hands. “Did you? What was the cost they asked of you? What did you have to give them in order to save me?”

“Give them?”

“And did they possess you?” Cullen asked, his bloody expression bleak. “Or did they possess me? Which one of us is the abomination now?”

Kate’s jaw dropped.

“Or both?” Cullen added, his throat catching as he swallowed. “It might be both of us, after all.”

“I– You– That– No!” It took Kate a few tries to get to the refusal she was looking for. “Maker’s breath, Cullen! I should think you know me better than that!”

“I don’t know what to think!” he shouted. He threw a hand wide. “I was lying there, unable to breathe or hear and then I couldn’t see! They always came for me then, Kate! When I was weakest. When I was so isolated and insane that I might have agreed to anything - anyone - rather than be alone! It was just like… It was just like…” A sudden flash of lightning lit the window. Cullen flinched and curled up on himself. “Ah, Andraste…” The thunder rolled out over his cry.

Kate didn’t hold back this time. She didn’t care if he tried to shake her off. Propriety and protocol be damned, this was too much for one person to take on all by himself. Kate plunked herself down right beside Cullen, legs folded up by his side. She threw her arms around him. Her face got all mushed up into his shoulder. She felt Cullen tense, then shudder, as if he was sitting in icy water. But thank the Maker, he didn’t push her away.

“You’re not alone,” Kate said, fierce and low. The words came out all muffled, so Kate lifted her head. “You’re not possessed, either. And I’m not possessed. And I didn’t do blood magic or…” She shook her head, trying to find words when all explanation eluded her.

“They’re just wisps,” she said, grabbing hold of the simplest description. “Not even wisps. Part of a wisp, maybe? I don’t know. But they follow me around - in the Fade, that is,” she added, when Cullen began to tremble. “They trailed me through the Veil. I’ve never tried using them before. I didn’t dare. But when that mage clashed you, he blew every bit of lyrium out of your body. And with your nodes bleeding your life energy into the Fade, I had no choice but to try–.”

“He did what?” Cullen cut her off. A faint thudding now came from the stairwell, but neither Kate nor Cullen turned to heed it. “The mage did what to me?”

“He clashed you,” Kate replied. “Cast Mana Clash on you,” she amended. “Ella couldn’t heal for it. She was struggling just to keep your lungs going. I did a lyrium protocol, and there wasn’t any lyrium left in you, not that I could see. Your body was bleeding energy out of you, and we couldn’t find any other healers because Dorian was still asleep and we were running out of options…” Kate gulped for breath, for she’d said all of this at one go.
“So I summoned up the spirits to help.” She took another breath. “I would have tried something else or asked your permission at the very least. I didn’t have the time and so…” Her breath failed her again.

“But templars can’t…” Cullen murmured. “All the lyrium, you say?” He addressed this out into the room, as if he was having an argument with the shattered glass on the floor. “Maker’s breath, I never should have stopped taking it.”

“Yes, you should have,” Kate said, giving him a little shake. “I don’t know what this means now, and I should probably do a lyrium protocol on you if you’ll allow me. But you made the right choice about the lyrium.”

“Did I?” He didn’t sound convinced. “But at least I’m not possessed. I’m not possessed, right?” Cullen glanced over at Kate, his one bloodshot eye fixing on hers.

“No, you’re not,” Kate said.


Kate drew back, completely bewildered. “Why is that bad?”

“I can’t just believe you,” Cullen said, shaking even harder now. “I put Keran on probation for years - years, Kate. And all because he might have been exposed to possession. He was supposed to be cast out entirely.”

“Cast out of what?”

“The templars! We ought to have had him executed, if we were being consistent about it. Mages certainly wouldn’t have gotten the benefit of a doubt. ‘Never trust a mage’s word on the subject of demons’ - that’s what Meredith always said.”

“What? That’s rubbish. What did she imagine that we studied all day? Turnips?”

“And yet, you say I’m not possessed,” Cullen said, ignoring her remark. “You say you’re not possessed. You say you’re not a blood mage, and I believe you, just like that!” He snapped his fingers, or tried to. Shaking as they were, they only made a soft, rubbing sound.

“Maker’s breath, I’m losing my objectivity,” he moaned.

“It seems to me as if you’re finding it,” Kate returned, unable to keep her annoyance out of her voice. “And I should hope you’d take my word for it, Cullen. I should hope I’ve earned your trust after all this. Besides, you don’t feel them inside do you?”

“Well, no, but –”

“There you are,” Kate said, as if concluding an argument in rhetoric class. Only this was not rhetoric, and Cullen did not appear convinced. Maker’s breath, Kate thought. What did she have to do to convince him?

“I feel like my head is going to explode,” Cullen said, grinding his forehead into his knee. “Those demons - wisps. Whatever they were. They filled me. They ran all through me. They laughed at me, Kate!”

“Oh,” Kate said. “Yes, they would have laughed, wouldn’t they?”
Cullen’s head shot up, and he fixed his bloody eyes on her. “They laughed at me!”

Kate drew back at the anger in his voice.

“And then your eyes glowed,” Cullen said, looking away and covering his face in his hands once more. “They glowed Kate. Just like they do in my nightmares.”

Kate blinked. Surely she hadn’t heard that right. “You have nightmares about me?”

“Yesss,” Cullen groaned from behind his hands.

Well then. Kate had felt stung before. Now she felt like a little trickle of venom had slipped in. She tried to tell herself that Cullen was wounded and reeling and angry. She told herself that he was lashing out at her because she was the person closest by. She tried to remind herself that she’d summoned wisps that thus triggered memories of the worst of his time in Kirkwall. But still, to have nightmares about her? That seemed more than mere unease.

“Do you have nightmares about every mage you know, or just me?” she asked, her tone sharp.

“Just you lately,” Cullen’s voice was strained. “It was Amell before…”

“Who?”

“Could be anyone. That’s what I learned. Their faces haunt me. Ripped to shreds by abominations or they became the abominations. That’s why I can’t… That’s why…”

He ducked his head, and his fingers clawed through his hair. His nails dug deep into his scalp. Kate felt the tension thrumming through him, felt the shaking rattle through her. And she also felt sorry that she’d gotten angry at him just a moment ago. Maker’s breath, the man was reeling. She had to do something. Kate placed her hand on his back and began rubbing his shaking shoulders in wide circles.

“It’s alright,” she said, though she wasn’t certain if that were true or not. “It’s going to be alright.” Come to think of it, she couldn’t promise that, either.

“Sweet Andraste, I’m never going to get over it, am I?” Cullen whispered to the room. “I can train myself against the memories. I can weather what’s left. But it will never really be gone. Can’t burn it out. Not with a spell, not with lyrium. How could I?”

“After what happened to you at Kirkwall,” Kate said gently, “I don’t know if a person ever could get over…”

“Kirkwall?” Cullen snorted, lifting his head. “Maker’s tears, that was mere pinpricks. Reminders everywhere, certainly. But nothing like…” His eyes went unfocused again as he stared out at the storm.

“The way the gore coated the windows,” he whispered. “Every day I woke to darkness. Or to red. Daybreak through bloodstains is the worst sort of sunrise.”

Daybreak through bloodstains? Kate wanted to squeak. And what did he mean, pinpricks and reminders? Was he talking about Kirkwall or not?

But before Kate could say anything, she heard a thumping from the stairwell. It came as an odd echo, all round, stony shapes, and with it came muffled voices. Kate turned her face toward the passageway just in time to see a mustached face appeared in the doorway. It was followed quickly
after by a horned one.

“And there’s the top!” Dorian exclaimed. “Finally! And… Ah! Here they are.”

Dorian staggered into the room, with Iron Bull right on his heels. Both of them were soaking wet. The leather of their boots was so dark with rain as to look nearly black. But where Bull was dripping water all along his grey skin, Dorian had attempted to cover himself with a long cloak. Neither of them seemed particularly surprised to find both Kate and Cullen cuddled up on the floor.

“Good work, boss. Glad you caught up with him. How’s he doing?” Bull stalked over and crouched down at Cullen’s eye level.

“He’s able to speak for himself,” Cullen returned, raising his bloodshot eyes to Bull.

“Good, good,” Bull nodded. “Figured you might be. But sometimes you can’t right after a battle. That’s okay, too.”

“I’m fine,” Cullen said, tightly.

“Of course he’s fine,” Dorian said, sitting down in a heap on the floor. “He was in good hands. And we’re fine, too. Thanks for asking. We just… ah,” Dorian yawned loudly, then smacked his lips. “Maker’s breath, that Ella knows how to cast a sleep spell.”

“We wanted to make sure you were both alright,” Bull finished for Dorian.

“Let it be known that it was my idea to check in on you,” Dorian said. “And I didn’t ask for company.”

“You wouldn’t have made it up the stairs without my help,” Bull countered. “You nodded off halfway up.”

“And you had to walk with your head turned sideways just to make it up the stairs.”

Bull’s lips thinned, and he turned from Dorian to address Cullen. “Castle’s secure, commander,” he said.

“Good,” Cullen said. Then he blinked. That one bit of information seemed to have brought Cullen back to himself.

“Maker’s breath,” he muttered. “I should be down there. I shouldn’t be here…” He started to rise, shaking off Kate’s arms.

“Cullen–!” Kate began, but Bull beat her to it.

“Hey, hey,” the qunari said, placing a heavy hand on Cullen’s shoulder. “I didn’t say it was your shift. Just that the shifts are still goin’. We got it, commander. You need to rest.”

“Rest?” Cullen snorted. “I shouldn’t be resting, I should be…”

“Resting,” Dorian said, emphatically. “Sweet Andraste, you nearly died down there! It’s a good thing our Kate knows a thing or two about spirit healing. Um, that was a spirit healing, yes?”

“Er…” Kate hesitated. Iron Bull and Dorian were looking at her warily. Cullen had swiveled his face toward her as well.

“A form of it,” she hedged. “But don’t expect me to be able to do something like that again.”
“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Bull said. “I know how folks can get a rush of strength in battle. I just didn’t realize it worked on spirit shit as well.” He shuddered.

“It wasn’t…” Kate began, but then she decided that she didn’t want to try and explain. She shrugged instead.

“How are you feeling?” Dorian asked Cullen. “Not well, I imagine. You look like death.”

“Nice, Vint. And you call me rude?” Bull elbowed Dorian in the shoulder, and Dorian pitched sideways.

“I’m just saying,” Dorian sniffed. He yawned again. “So, how are you, commander?”

“Not wanting to be fussed over,” Cullen replied tightly.

“No worries,” Bull said. “We won’t stay long. Just wanted to make sure you weren’t dead.”

“As you can see, I’m alive. How are the troops?”

“Oh fine, fine,” Bull said. “Great, actually. This was a training exercise, and they all learned something.”

“Be ready in case the commander falls?” Cullen said, wryly.

“Yup,” Bull nodded. “Hard lesson, but they learned it. Good thing is, you didn’t actually die.”

Kate shuddered. She didn’t like this turn in the conversation, or the reminder that they’d almost lost Cullen. But she was glad that Bull and Dorian had come to check in. Cullen was already looking more himself in their company.

“Anyhow,” Bull went on, “They’re all back to work. Charter’s got everyone setting up camp. Lysette and Barris are securing the inner courtyard doors. We would have shored up the outer doors, only someone can’t fix the gates.” He leveled a look at Dorian.

“I’m an altus, not a tradesmage,” Dorian sniffed. “Even if I had the supplies, I wouldn’t know how to build a door.”

“Yeah, but you could blow one up just fine.”

“So glad you noticed.” Dorian buffed his nails on his sopping-wet cloak. “That was some of my best work, I’ll have you know.”

“Everyone’s alright then?” Cullen asked, his voice tight. “Everyone’s…” He winced, then doubled over.

“Cullen!” Kate said, gripping his shoulders. “Hey!” Bull said, placing his hand on Cullen’s chest.

“I’ll ask it again, commander,” Dorian said. “How are you? Not ‘Are you capable of marching about and giving orders?’ Clearly you are. But how are you feeling?”

“Aawful,” Cullen ground out. “Like I’ve got a fever. Or just survived one. Muscles… like wet paper. And I’m shaking, like I’m cold.”

Bull put a hand to Cullen’s head. “You’re not cold. Not hot, either.”

“Probably the after-effects of that spell,” Kate murmured.

“Yeah, she did,” Bull said. “Good on you, commander. Givin’ up lyrium? That’s hard core.” He held his fist out in front of Cullen’s face. Cullen stared at it.

“You’re supposed to pound it,” Bull said, nodding at the fist. Cullen ignored that.

“Does everyone know?” he asked. “Does everyone know about the lyrium?” He sounded horrified at the possibility.

“Yes,” Kate said. “I told them. I didn’t want to betray your trust, but I didn’t know how to keep them from giving it to you.”

“Oh Maker,” Cullen groaned, and hung his head.

“What are you ‘Oh Maker’ing for?” Dorian wanted to know. “No one thinks less of you for it. Quite the opposite, really. Everyone’s mightily impressed. In fact, Ser Barris and Lysette are engaged in a debate right now about whether they’re going to do the same.”

Cullen’s head shot up. “No,” he said, scowling. “No, that’s… Blast it! This is exactly why I didn’t want anyone to know! If they die because of me–”

“Hey, calm yourself,” Bull said, holding up a massive hand. “That’s their decision to make, not yours.”

“We’re just saying that we understand,” Dorian said, gently.

“You understand?” Cullen sounded as if he doubted that very much.

“Hey, I understand,” Bull said. “I’ve taken hits that landed too hard and sent me to another place entirely. And after the shit you’ve seen?” Bull whistled low. “I’ve been there, too, commander. Asala-taar is what we call it. Soul-sickness. Can’t count the number of times I’ve staggered off one battlefield, just to fight on in here.” He tapped his temple.

“But no one’s judging you, commander,” Bull went on. “There’s no shame in fighting wars that no one else can see.”

Cullen let out a sigh. His shoulders relaxed just a inch - no, not even an inch. If Kate hadn’t had her hand on his back, she never would have felt the tension going out of him. But he relaxed all the same. As he did, Kate felt her chest go tight and tears pricked her eyes. She wished she could have been the one to find words that reached him, but she was just grateful that such words had been said. Kate looked up at Bull and mouthed, ‘Thank you.’ Bull briefly met her eyes, nodded, and turned his attention back to Cullen.

“So hey,” Bull said, thumping Cullen on the shoulder. “Take some rest. And since we can’t give you any lyrium –”

“Well, we could,” Dorian put in. “It would just kill you. Probably. What’s the verdict on that, by the by?” He asked his of Kate.

“Not a good idea,” she said.

“Well then,” Dorian said. “We’d better give you this instead.”

With that, he pulled a large jar out from under his damp cloak. The glass had been stained green, and
it looked as if it contained lumpy lawn clippings.

“My elfroot,” Cullen said, reaching for it.

“Uhhhh… You’re gonna give him that?” Bull shot Dorian a questioning look.

“It’s his medicine, isn’t it?” Dorian replied. “He sneaks the stuff daily.”

“Also sneaks off with boss daily,” Bull muttered.

“What?” Kate blinked at them both. At her side, Cullen’s head had just shot up. “Excuse me?”

“I’m just saying, you sure that’s medicine?”

“What else would it be?” Cullen said, uncorking the lid.

“Elfroot pellets, yeah? Amrita vein base?”

Cullen looked into the jar, frowning. “I don’t know about the base, but…” He broke off as Bull snagged three pills and popped them into his mouth.

“Hm…” Bull said, chewing. “Drier than I’m used to. But it’s got the same – Mmmmmmm… Oh yeah. There’s the kick. Yeah. Hoo,” he cocked his head to one side. “Gives you a buzz, huh?” He swallowed, then pointed a meaty finger at the jar.

“That there’s an aphrodisiac.”

Cullen nearly dropped the jar. At his side, Kate gave a squeak.

“What?”

“Aphrodisiac. Helps boost the sex drive.” Bull reached for another one.

“I know what an aphrodisiac is!” Kate slapped Bull’s hand away from the jar. “Don’t just eat them!”

“Yes, we wouldn’t want you even hornier than usual,” Dorian murmured. He gave Bull a considering look.

“Did you know about this?” Cullen asked, rounding on Kate.

“Of course I didn’t know about that!” she cried back. “I—” She broke off, then closed her eyes.

“I am going to strangle Coll,” she announced.

“Nah, don’t do that,” Bull said. “I like Circles. ‘Sides. It’s an ingenious use of ‘em.”

“I’ll maim her then.”

“Cool,” Bull nodded. “I’ll watch. As I have some of these as a snack.” He reached for the jar, then paused and looked up at Cullen.

“May I?”

Cullen held the jar out dumbly. Kate scowled at them both.

“It’s not candy!” she cried. “Look, whatever Coll put in them, they are helping. I think. Are they helping?” she asked this of Cullen, whose ears were now red.
“I thought so,” Cullen said. His voice seemed caught in his throat. “Now I’m not so sure.”

“So are they a placebo or a joke?” Dorian wanted to know. “Or an excuse? You two have been sneaking off together so often…” He trailed off meaningfully.

Cullen had been holding up a pill and studying it. Now he dropped it into the jar as if it had caught fire.

“What?” Cullen asked, staring at Dorian.


“No!” Kate said, her eyes going wide. “It’s-because-of-the-lyrium-protocols!” She practically shouted it - all as one word, too.

“Because of the what-whats?” Dorian repeated.

“Lyrium protocols,” Kate said, more slowly, more emphatically. “In the south, templars take lyrium. So mages regularly check their lyrium levels. Take a templar by the hand and just…” Without thinking, Kate wrapped her hand around Cullen’s wrist. He managed not to drop the jar, but he froze quite suddenly.

“How quaint,” Dorian said. His moustache twitched.

“With Cullen no longer on lyrium, I had to check more often, that’s all.”

“Much more often,” Dorian agreed. He now wore a cat-in-the-cream smile.

“It was entirely professional,” Cullen put in.

For you, maybe, Kate thought. She couldn’t help but notice the feel of Cullen’s skin under her fingers. His skin was soft, and his pulse was right under her thumb. Kate drew her hand away at once.

“It’s just for medical purposes,” she said, placing her hands in her lap.

“Yes, I can see that,” Dorian said.

He and Bull exchanged a look.

“Whelp, we’d better be going,” Bull said abruptly. He stood, and motioned for Dorian to do the same. “Come on, Vint.”

“I have a name, you know,” Dorian said. He stood and brushed off his rear. Bull took interest in that, watchin Dorian’s hands as they smoothed over his leather breeches.

“Does everyone else…?” Kate began. “That is to say…”

“Do they share our assumptions?” Dorian asked, pausing mid-swipe. “You know, I’m not sure. Not everyone was in on the betting pool.”

“Betting pool?” Cullen gaped.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Dorian said breezily. “They have all sorts of improbable pairings in there. Varric put down a bet on the two of us, if you can believe that.”
He hiked a thumb from himself to Bull. It might have been Kate’s imagination, but Bull’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

“There’s also a bet on you and Barris.” Bull said to Dorian.

“Yes, true,” Dorian said, flushing.

“And Cullen and Barris,” Bull went on, ticking the pairings off on his large fingers. “And Kate and Barris, and Cullen and me,” – by now, Cullen was sputtering – “And Kate and me…”

“That’s… enough,” Cullen coughed the words out, rather than speaking them.

“Indeed,” Kate agreed. “Maker, I think we need to send out a memo regarding the subject of sex-based gambling. And here I thought Robert was just exaggerating.”

“That’s one memo that I’m not writing,” Cullen said.

“Eh, don’t bother,” Bull told them. “Soldiers need something to worry about besides the possibility of their own death. Anyhow, since you narrowly missed dying today…” he pointed a finger at Cullen.

“Rest,” Bull said.

“I’m the commander here, not you,” Cullen said, glaring up at that finger.

“No, but she’s the boss,” Bull said, nodding at Kate. “It’s her order that matters.”

Everyone turned to look at Kate.

“Um, rest?” she said. It came out as a question. Cullen frowned.

“At least let me do a lyrium protocol,” she said.

Cullen made a face - a rather disapproving one. But he said, “Fine,” all the same.

“Lovely things, protocols,” Dorian said with a wink. “They let a man know exactly what rules are worth breaking.”

Before Kate could say anything, Bull and Dorian headed to the door – the locked door. Kate turned in place, calling out:

“Oh, no. That door’s…”

“Locked,” Bull finished for her. “Fine. We’ll go the way we came.”

“We could blast that door down,” Dorian suggested. “Or you could ram it with your head.”

“Nah,” Bull said. “Let a rogue deal with it.” He headed back to the passageway.

“See you later, commander. Bye boss.”

“Good bye!” Dorian said cheerfully. To Bull, he said, “Where are we in the castle anyway? I can’t understand the layout of this place at all.”

“I think we’re up near the high ramparts,” Bull said, his voice now echoing through the tubular tower. “We’ll need to close up this passage if we can’t get that outer gate shut.”
“I told you,” Dorian’s voice floated from far below now. “Just send for someone in the village. I’m certain that those farmers would be thrilled at the prospect of coin in exchange for carpentry…”

And then they were gone, their voices nothing more than murmured from the stairwell. Kate realized she’d been staring after them. Now that she turned her head, she saw Cullen had been staring at her. As soon as their eyes met, Cullen dropped his head and glanced away.

“Well,” Kate said.

That was as far as she got. Bull and Dorian seemed to have taken all the light and conversation with them, and Kate now felt cold and desperately self-conscious. But at least Dorian and Bull had checked in, Kate thought. Cullen seemed more settled now. At least he had some color in his cheeks. True, it had been brought on by blushing, but Kate wasn’t about to be picky.

“How are you?” she asked him, gently as she could.

“Fine,” Cullen said, tersely. With no Bull to hold him down, Cullen tried to stand.

“You really ought to rest,” Kate said, scrambling to her feet. “You– Oh!”

Cullen pitched over to one side. Kate half caught him, and he half caught himself. He stumbled to the wall, braced a hand against it, and double over.

“Maker,” he gasped. “I feel awful.”


Cullen didn’t argue this time. He slumped down at the base of the wall, back to the stones, legs out before him. Kate knelt at his side. Before she even asked, Cullen held out his hand to her. Their hands were already bare from the protocols in the courtyard, and Kate took his hand in hers. His fingers were freezing, and muddy besides. When they touched, Cullen winced, squeezed his eyes shut.

“It hurts that much?” she asked, softly.

“Just awkward as the Void,” Cullen murmured.

“Bull and Dorian, you mean?” Kate hazarded a guess.

“That too,” Cullen snorted. He turned his face toward the ceiling, eyes still closed, face drawn. Kate hesitated, then asked:

“Is it the memories?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Cullen said, tightly. “Just do the protocols.”

Kate felt as if he’d shoved her away with his hands. Even so, she found she couldn’t blame him. She ought not have pried.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll try and be quick about it.”

Kate closed her eyes, then dropped into that in-between space in her mind. It wasn’t quite like sleeping, nor like a trance, either. Instead, it was similar to the place she found herself when she was studying all day, or lost in a good novel. It felt rather like dreaming, and Kate often lost track of time and space here. But while she floated here, Kate could control her thoughts and focus. She thus directed her attention to Cullen’s body - and tried not to get distracted.
The feel of his hand in hers, the rough callouses of his fingers - she had to move past that. Kate also set aside the awareness of muscle and sinew twisting through his hands. She pressed on through lifeblood, past bone as well. And hidden deep, along the pulses of nerve, Kate found the strange, branching thorns that were his lyrium nodes.

They were quiet.

They were there, which meant she hadn’t simply misplaced them. In a normal person - well, a person who had never drunk lyrium - would never have such formations. A mage would have such nodes, but they would have been thinner and finer, more organic in structure. Cullen’s nodes reminded Kate of a poorly built highway. It was like someone had hauled out a bunch of stone, built part of the road, and then left the rest of the materials in heaps upon the ground. There were no workers, no traffic, and no buzz of liquid song. There were just paths to nothing, nodes half-formed, half built. And all was still.

Kate wandered in that place, up one road and down the next. She was scarcely aware that in waking life, her fingers trailed up Cullen’s arm right up to the inner side of his elbow. She didn’t notice how she pushed aside his sleeve to do it. Then her fingers grazed his neck, his ear, the back of his head. If she’d been more conscious of it, she would have realized she was discomfiting him. But her awareness was here, in this Fade-space. And everywhere she looked, from the base of his skull to the bottom of his spine, she sensed only remnants, and heard only silence. The lyrium was gone.

Well, that’s good, she thought.

Or was it, she wondered? What did abandoned nodes mean for a body? Would Cullen still have the inclination to drink lyrium, or would he find himself cured of that? She suspected that he’d still desire the draught. It wasn’t as if a half-built lyrium highway didn’t want finishing. And what toll would this take on him, she wondered?

Maker’s breath, I’m right back where I began.

She really was no use without Coll, Kate thought. The best thing to do was to get Cullen back to Skyhold, and let Coll take a good, long look at him. And I can ask Coll about that elfroot stunt while we’re at it, Kate thought. She came floating back to full consciousness on a wave of frustration, only to open her eyes and find that her position was rather precarious, indeed.

Kate opened her eyes to find that her right hand rested over Cullen’s heart. He was no longer looking at the ceiling, but right at her. And for some reason, Kate was now straddling Cullen’s outstretched legs. She had no memory of doing that.

Kate made an inelegant noise and dove off of Cullen. It sounded something like: “Gnack!”

“Maker, I’m so sorry,” she gasped, once she’d plunked herself at his side again. “I was probably pinching your knees, wasn’t I?”

“Not the knees,” Cullen grunted. With stiff movements, he pushed himself back into the wall.

“I’m so sorry,” Kate said again, feeling like a fool. “I wasn’t even thinking… I’m sorry.”

”’S’all right,” Cullen said, still with that tight voice. He grabbed his left leg under the thigh and pulled it up so that he had his left knee propped up, and the right leg outstretched. He settled his mantle over his lap, then let out a sigh.

“Better,” Kate asked.
“Somewhat,” he replied. “What’s the verdict?”

“The ver…? Oh, well,” Kate shook her head, scooted herself to a seated position beside him. “The lyrium is gone.”

“Gone,” Cullen repeated, looking to her abruptly. “As in, I’m cured?”

“Not exactly,” Kate said, her mouth pulling to one side. “The nodes remain.”

“And what does that mean?” Cullen asked. “No, don’t tell me,” he said, as she opened her mouth. “You don’t know.”

“I don’t,” Kate said. “I’m so sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Cullen said, scowling at his hands. “I never should have gone off the stuff in the first place.”

“Don’t say that! What you’re doing is still the right thing to do. It doesn’t change in value every time we hit a slight snag.”

“A slight snag, do you call it?” Cullen said, disbelieving. “Kate, I nearly died because of a spell that ought not have affected me. I ran out on my soldiers down there,” he added, more quietly.

“No you didn’t” Kate said. “They were already gone on ahead. You merely…” She searched about for a way to explain it. “You were looking for a good place to sit down.”

Cullen gave her a look to say that he didn’t buy that.

“Cullen, you heard Bull. No one’s angry at you. You have room to rest.”

“And how many people might fall as I do?” Cullen said.

“One,” Kate said, turning to him fiercely. “One person fell today, Cullen. That person was you, and…”

She found she couldn’t speak. The whole of it was catching up with her now - the battle, the fear, and the way she’d struggled to reach Cullen when he’d been turning blue back in the courtyard. Now it seemed she still couldn’t quit reach him, and she very much wanted to.

“And I reacted very badly, I know,” Cullen sighed.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Kate said.

“Well, I did,” Cullen said. “Don’t deny it. It’s just…” Cullen waved a hand, helplessly. “I don’t understand. And I like to understand.”

“To understand what?”

“Everything,” Cullen said, and Kate couldn’t help but smile slightly. She wanted to understand everything as well.

“I don’t do well with surprises,” Cullen went on. “And I prefer to know the rules of engagement whenever possible. When it comes to magic and demons…” He broke off and shuddered.

“They weren’t demons,” Kate said, rather defensively.
“No?” Cullen said, turning his head to look at her. “So you said, but there was something strange about them. You might have convinced everyone else, Kate, but I felt them inside of me. Those were not healing wisps.”

Kate swallowed. And now they were back to this. Kate supposed she wasn’t getting out of it, either. Oh Maker, how much to tell him?

“They aren’t demons…” she began.

Cullen’s bloodshot eyes searched her face, and his expression was questioning and guarded. Kate found her throat go tight.

“They aren’t healing wisps either,” she admitted. “But you don’t need to be worried. There’s nothing nefarious about them.”

And of course, that made it sound quite nefarious, indeed. Andraste help her, what to say?

“It’s complicated,” she ventured.

“How complicated?” Cullen asked, tightly.

“Just complicated?” Kate gave a helpless shrug. “But wisps are like that. They’re small, leftover bits of…”

“Demon,” Cullen supplied. “They’re demons who never found a host body in this world.”

“That’s Chantry semantics. It’s more accurate to say that they’re fragments of thought. They get lost in this world, lost in the Fade. They’re fairly harmless.”

“They lure humans into peril, into places where demons dwell.”

“Maybe some do. In fairy stories, perhaps.”

“Kate, I do know something about demons,” Cullen said, eyes narrowing.

“And I know something about these wisps,” she replied, growing angry. “I’ve been living with them my whole life.”

Cullen’s eyes widened.

Oops.

“What?” he gaped at her.

“That sounded worse than I meant it to. What I mean is…”

“Those things haunt you? Or are you…? I thought you said you weren’t…”

“I’m not,” Kate said, quickly, firmly. “I’m not an abomination. Not exactly.”

“How is one not exactly an abomination?” Cullen wanted to know.

“Carefully?” Kate suggested, trying to make a joke of it. Cullen did not smile. “Alright, alright! Maker’s tears, it’s hard to find words when you’re looking at me like that! I never talk about this! And for good reason, too.”
“Then explain it to me,” Cullen said, imperiously. “Explain this to me and let me understand.”

“Will you understand?” Kate couldn’t help but ask.

“Try me.”

Kate hesitated. ‘Try me,’ was not ‘yes.’ And even ‘yes,’ could not be guaranteed in such a case. But at least Cullen was listening to her. And more than that, he wasn’t shaking and the bleak look at left his eyes. His one eye was still an angry red, but his pupils were growing smaller. Maybe if she told him this, he would no longer fear her? Perhaps he’d stop having nightmares about her, too.

Or maybe this would give him new fodder for his fears, Kate thought. But she supposed she owed Cullen an explanation. He was, after all, intimately acquainted with those wisps now. She’d sent them into him, and she ought to tell him what they were. At the very least, she ought to give him a bit of the story.

“I got sick.” The words came out breathless - and queasy. “I got sick and I had a fever and…”

No, no good. Her breath could not support the weight of these half-truths.

“It was my Harrowing,” she tried again. “During my Harrowing, I…”

Again, she lost her breath. She couldn’t seem to speak the simpler version of the tale. But to start at the beginning? At the very beginning?

Kate opened her eyes again, and there was Cullen. He was looking at her so intently that she felt her chest ache. Kate closed her eyes and let out a breath. Breathe, she thought to herself. That’s what she’d told Cullen to do, down in the courtyard when his lungs wouldn’t work. Now Kate told herself to do the same:

Breathe. And then… Speak.

“I tried to kill myself.”

Silence met her words. Kate cracked an eye open to see that Cullen’s face had gone grey as stone. All his muscles seemed to solidify as well. Kate glanced away and looked to the floor. The floor seemed a safer thing to look at than Cullen’s face.

“I know, I know,” she said. “It sounds awful. Anyhow, it obviously didn’t work…”

“When was this?” Now Cullen’s voice was like stone, too - like stone with cracks in it.

“Just before my Harrowing,” Kate said. She spoke to the floor, to her hands, to the locked door. She looked in every direction except at Cullen.

“I knew I would fail the test, you see. I hadn’t applied myself to my studies at all. I’d just moped ever since I’d arrived at the Circle. I suppose I’d thought that if I didn’t get too far along in magic, someone would come and take me home? It was a foolish notion. All I did was make myself ignorant. I knew only the most basic of spells, nothing that would help me survive in the Fade. So I was frantic, and seeing as how I was so young…”

“How young?” Cullen interrupted.

“Thirteen?” Kate raised her gaze at last. Cullen’s lips parted and his eyes went wide.

“You can’t be serious,” he said, and his throat tightened as he spoke. “How dare they send a thirteen
year old girl into a Harrowing chamber!”

Kate dropped her eyes and gave a one-shouldered shrug. His anger was touching, she supposed. Still, it rang a bit hollow. Harrowing a thirteen year old was the least of the Chantry’s abuses. Still, Cullen seemed to find it unconscionable.

“That’s outrageous! Chantry law clearly states…”

“Chantry law says that any mage may be Harrowed at any time. The only requirement is that the Circle leadership deems the ritual necessary.”

“Yes, but… thirteen?”

“I was a problem pupil,” Kate said, again speaking again to the floor. “I put on airs that first year and a half. It’s embarrassing to admit now, but I did. I tried acting like my father, thinking it would get me out of that place. Instead, it made me insufferable and gained me few allies. And that templar I told you about - the one who struck me and got sacked? He had friends - friends who held grudges. Also, he had a lover. The First Enchanter, in fact. It didn’t help that the only person who liked me was an ambitious young mage named Lydia. She made no secret of her hopes to groom me to become a high ranking enchanter within the Aequitarian fraternity and replace the loyalist stranglehold with backing from the Ostwick aristocracy and… Well. Politics. You know how it goes.”

“So they plotted to be rid of you.” Cullen seemed to choke on the words.

“Exactly so. Harrowing was the easier solution. The rules about Tranquility are more rigid by far. And if I’d been made Tranquil, my parents would have been furious. It would have embarrassed the whole family. But if I died in a Harrowing - or in an ‘accident’ in the hallway outside? Then my parents would have continued their guilt-assuaging monthly donations and the Circle would have been rid of one snobby, troublesome apprentice.”

“Maker’s breath,” Cullen softly swore.

“I’m sorry. That sounds rather bitter.”

“Not at all.”

Kate shook her head. “It does, but I was bitter at the time. More than bitter, I’d completely succumbed to despair. Ever since I’d arrived at the Circle, I’d grown more and more melancholy. I’d hidden it from everyone, but most of the time, I just felt dead inside.”

Kate paused there, feeling a pang of sorrow just to remember that time. “Most people think that melancholy is mere sorrow,” she murmured. “But it’s not. It’d not being sad. It’s moving past the point of tears to where you’re just… numb.”

“Numb,” Cullen repeated. “Yes, I’ve been there.”

“I suppose you have,” Kate said, softly. “Though my struggles weren’t nearly as difficult as yours…”

Kate offered the words as a doorway, of sorts, a chance for Cullen to speak about himself if he liked. He waved the door closed.

“I wasn’t making a comparison.”
“I didn’t say you were,” Kate said. “I just mean…”

But what use was there in prying, she thought to herself? On impulse, Kate reached out and took Cullen’s hand instead. He sucked in a short breath, but he didn’t pull away.

“Go on,” he said, squeezing her fingers.

“Well,” Kate said, feeling flustered now. “That’s when I decided to kill myself. Maker, that still sounds awful. But I couldn’t very well face a demon, now could I? I’d either get turned into an abomination or cut down by a templar—” At those words, Kate felt Cullen’s fingers tighten around hers.

“Or I don’t know,” Kate finished hastily. “However it happened, I knew I’d die. I’d just become part of that dark stain on the Harrowing Chamber floor. The blood never comes out, you know.”

“I know,” Cullen said, darkly.

“So, I decided I’d jump into the sea,” Kate said, airily as she could. “Leave my blood in my body, I thought, where no one could use it for ill magic. It seemed very poetic at the time. It wasn’t though,” she added, frowning to herself.

“You jumped into the sea?”

“I tried to. There had been a suicide the first week I arrived at the tower. Hard to get that sight out of my head, when they dragged the body onto shore. People actually seemed sorry for that mage. They were never sorry about failed Harrowings. I guess I thought… I didn’t think really. I just copied another person’s pain. But I’d entirely miscalculated the tides. Poor scholar that I was, I didn’t even think to look it up in an almanac.”

She gave Cullen a slight smile, but he did not return it. Kate ducked her head once more.

“I thought more about the look of the thing than getting it done. I planned it so that I’d be all alone on the cliff, with the wind whipping about my face. I looked out to sea as the sun set - very artistic, if anyone had bothered to paint the scene. And then, just as the sun went down, I jumped.”

Cullen swallowed. His hand pulsed around hers.

“I guess I believed I’d just jump into Death. Dive in and there I’d be, swimming around in the Fade. Only that didn’t happen, not by a long shot. I hit a wave halfway down - or it hit me. It caught me up and smashed me up against the rocks. Broke my arm. Bone came clean through the skin. The pain of it made me go cross-eyed. And then I was blinded entirely, because I was underwater and being dragged out to sea. But the undertow sucked me up and out and then, wham! Smashed into the cliff again. I got dragged out and smashed back… Oh, Maker, I forget how many times. But I’ll never forget that feeling, just churning under the waves. My arm was screaming with pain, as if it were shouting obscenities at my brain. I still dream of it sometimes. And all the while, some stupid, stupid part of me kept wondering, ‘What was I thinking? What was I thinking? This was the worst plan ever.’

Cullen made a noise in his throat - sort of a strangled hum, and his fingers were now squeezing Kate’s so hard that it hurt. But Kate did not pull her hand away. She continued on:

“Then one wave set me higher than the rest. Suddenly, I was up above the surf, wedged between the rocks. I couldn’t climb for higher ground with my arm all smashed up. I was shivering and disoriented and losing blood, too. Really, the plan was so stupid. I probably would have died like that, clinging to the rocks. Only…”
“Only the spirit arrived,” Cullen finished for her, tightly. “When you were at your weakest.”

“Not at my weakest, no. It came when I was laughing.”

“Laughing?” Cullen’s hand went slightly slack with surprise.

Kate nodded. “It sounds absurd. It was absurd. There I was, stuck in the cliffs, water spraying up to my chin, my legs trapped in my robes, my arm completely mangled. And then… I laughed. I mean, I was rather delirious, but suddenly the whole thing struck me as ridiculous. Here I’d been running away from a Harrowing, and then I put myself to the test in a way that no templar could ever have devised. No demon could have done the damage to me that I’d just done to myself. No spirit of the Fade could harm me more than my own shame and fear had done. I was my own worst enemy. I saw that then. I saw it in an instant. Me against myself. That was the fight I’d failed. And I… Oh, I’m not explaining this very well. It came to me all in an instant, and it made perfect sense in my head. Just this crystal ball of truth, appearing quite suddenly, and going away just as quickly.”

Kate glanced over at Cullen. He was looking at the room, his brows furrowed, his mouth tensed. Kate didn’t know what else to do but forge on.

“And then,” she said, “as soon as I saw the lesson clearly, I realized that I didn’t want to die. I thought… No, I found. I found this thing inside of me, this desire to keep going. My parents might not care if my life story ended suddenly. They’d rather given up on me the day that I was sent to the Circle. And everyone else might forget about me and move on. But I would not forget about me. Well, I would if I was dead, but you know what I mean. I mean that it was my life. I wanted to live it out. I wanted to find out what else could be gotten from it. I wanted to find another lesson, to put it into practice. I wanted to try those spells they’d attempted to teach me. And now I was wildly curious. Could I have survived my Harrowing? Could I, a young, completely unprepared child, have fought off a demon? Suddenly I wanted to try. I wanted to see what came next. I mean, the story hadn’t finished, had it? I had been about to throw the book away, just as things got interesting.”

Kate glanced up. Cullen’s expression was pinched, his face grave.

“I’m sorry, she said, “I’m getting long-winded.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “No, please. Don’t stop.”

“I forgot where I was… Oh, yes. The spirit. That’s when it arrived. I was laughing, and it just floated in off of the sea. It looked like a star at first, and then it became a light - a wisp.”

“And what was it a demon of? Er, spirit, I mean.” The correction sounded heavy on Cullen’s tongue, but Kate smiled gratefully at his attempt. “It sounds like Perseverance,” he went on. “Such spirits are rare.”

“Whimsy,” Kate replied. “I always thought of it as Whimsy.”

“Whimsy?” Cullen repeated. There was a pause. “The Order’s records say nothing of such spirits.”

“That doesn’t mean they don’t exist,” Kate reasoned. “Chantry classifications are rather arbitrary, I find. The Fade reflects thought, but human thought is so nuanced. Anyhow, ‘Whimsy’ was what I settled on years later. It was as good a name for it as any other. ‘Humor,’ I suppose I could have called it. Or the spirit of a joke. Maybe it was Perseverance after all. Only it had a melancholy side to it - a clear-eyed perception that wavered halfway between laughter and a sigh. It’s seeing things as they are, and then finding a way to laugh about it. It’s that sense of ‘well, why not?’ when all hope seems gone.”

“You don’t quite believe me, do you?”

“No, I…” he huffed as he adjusted his shoulders against the wall. “I was just thinking. Down in the courtyard, when I was caught in that spell, the demons looked like lights. I heard laughing. And then I began to remember things. I remembered a joke I’d told at the campfire last night. No one else got it, except for you. You hid your laughter behind your hand. It made me feel… Well, whimsical, I suppose. And there was another memory,” Cullen went on, “Varric and I were on the boat, watching Kirkwall slip away. I said… I don’t recall what I said. Some poor joke. A kind of gallows humor. The Gallows humor, I think that was the punchline. And just now, in the courtyard, I wanted to laugh. Even as I was being possessed - or thought I was. I wanted to laugh. Here I’d warned everyone about that bandit mage at least ten times over. And then I was the one who fell to the spell.” Cullen gave a low chuckle, then caught himself.

“That is rather ironic,” Kate said, lips twitching.

“Varric will be ribbing me about it for weeks,” Cullen said, shaking his head. “But in that moment, I started to laugh along with those demons. Wisps, rather. That was why I feared I’d been possessed. I couldn’t tell if the laughter came from me, or from them. I thought perhaps they were invading me, infecting me with their thoughts.”

“Oh, Cullen. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright. They’re gone, as you say. And now I understand why I laughed along with them. It’s just that I haven’t always been able to find the humor in life, that’s all. Sometimes I do, but much of the time, I’ve been trained for seriousness. I could have done with more whimsy in my life, I suppose.”

Kate felt her throat go tight. She squeezed Cullen’s hand, but that didn’t do anything to convey the squeezing sensation at her heart. She wished she knew how to express the tenderness she felt, without completely making a fool of herself.

“I’m sorry,” Cullen said, shaking himself. “I didn’t mean to interrupt you. You were saying…”

“I was listening to what happened to you.”

“But you were telling your own tale. About Whimsy. That’s what you called it.”

Kate frowned at the way his shoulders remained hunched. “Are you alright?” she asked him. Cullen shook his head.

“I dislike spirits of any kind. I wish they’d stay on their side of the Fade where they belong. But please, finish your tale.”

“I hesitate to,” Kate said, wrinkling her nose. “Because, well… You’re not going to like this part. The spirit… That is to say, I let it, um…”

“Ah,” Cullen said. His hand seemed to go limp. At once, Kate slipped her fingers from his. She folded her hands and placed them primly in her lap. She didn’t have to look up at Cullen to see the disapproval in his eyes. She could feel it in the air around her.

“I see,” was all he said.

“It’s not like that,” Kate said. “Or maybe it was,” she admitted. “Maker, I don’t know how to explain
“This part. Because then the spirit said… Mind you, I don’t know that it could speak. I just sensed that it wanted to help me. And I said… Or thought, rather… Well, I thought, ‘yes.’ Yes, I wanted to go back to the tower and yes, I wanted to continue the story. I wanted to live.”

Cullen said nothing. The air around him seemed to have stopped still.

“I don’t think it possessed me,” Kate said, hurriedly. “I mean, maybe…? Oh, Maker, I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“Well, I’m not possessed now, am I?”

“Aren’t you?”

“No!” Kate frowned. “Surely you’d have seen a flash of it if I was. Glowing eyes, or unexpected moments of power…?”

Cullen gave her a speaking look. Kate wrinkled her nose.

“Fair enough,” she said. “But that was just today.”

“You’re also quite, um, whimsical,” Cullen said, uncomfortably.

Kate wasn’t certain if that was a compliment or an insult or a question.

“Even if I was,” she said, “It’s not because I was possessed by a whimsy spirit. I was good humored as a child - at least I was until they took me to the Circle. Maybe the spirit came to me because we suited each other - like calling to like? But no, I’m not possessed. It’s just me in here. Though for a while, I must confess, I wondered about it. What the wisp did to me - it was rather strange.”

“Strange how?” Cullen asked.

“It floated toward me. And then… Well, this is where it all gets fuzzy. I was losing consciousness, but I think it sort of melted into me.”

“Melted?”

“Sort of. It floated off of the ocean, landed right over my heart. I felt a pain, and then…” Kate found she’d placed her hand over her heart as she spoke, and let her hand drop.

“Then I blacked out. I have strange memories, but they’re all hazy. I recall lying on the ground and Lydia was screaming into the darkness. She later told me she’d been sitting down to read, only she felt this odd prickling at her neck. She came tearing through the tower, raising the alarm. She had the Void of a time explaining to the templars that she didn’t know how she knew to find me out at the cliffs. But she found me - in the dark, too. Then I have memories of her sitting by my bedside, and memories of a furious argument about whether they were going to throw me into the Harrowing chamber with a fever or not.”

Kate stared at her fingers, trying to recall more. But as usual, those patchy visions were all she could dredge up from her mind. At her side, Cullen was still as a statue.

“And then, one day, I woke up. The room was empty. I was empty. The spirit was gone, and I was healed. And I felt peaceful. I felt calmer than I had in years. I felt older, too. And I laughed. Of course I laughed.”

Kate smiled to think of it, but Cullen remained frowning.
“That’s why I was convinced it wasn’t a possession,” Kate went on. “I’d felt the spirit inside for a moment, but that was all. And I’ve never heard of anyone becoming un-possessed, have you?”

Cullen did not reply, so Kate answered her own question. “No, of course not. So it must not have been a possession. It must have been some kind of healing. Wisps have different abilities than spirits, or at least, they seem to. I’ve been studying them ever since.”

“Studying what? Wisps?”

“Naturally. I was fascinated by them, and not a little invested in making sure that I was not possessed. Because it was gone, you see. The wisp was gone. And yet,” she added, “In a way, it was not gone. I could sense that it was near, but it faded. Fractured, I suppose is a better word for it. It had become like crumbs left after a meal. Or maybe healing me used up its power? Or perhaps I changed it’s nature? I’m not sure. I’ve long suspected the original wisp died, and those laughing specks of light were born from its memory. I don’t know. But when I woke, I sensed I was alone, whole - and I sensed the little wisps, gathering on the other side of the Veil. When they sent me to my Harrowing, those wisp-crumbas were waiting for me. It was quite the reunion.”

“They still sent you to be harrowed after all that?”

“Oh of course. My Harrowing was a complete joke, however. The wisps made it into a joke. They followed me like a cloud, turned the whole Fade into a kind of child’s dream. They seemed to think this was some sort of lark, and not a mage-testing. Andraste’s tears, the way they… Well, that doesn’t matter. I’ll tell about you it some other time. The point is, I passed my Harrowing - at thirteen, no less. And things got rather better after that. Lydia was vindicated most spectacularly; the enchanters took a liking to me. I took a liking to them, and though no one ever knew quite what to do with me, I managed to make a place for myself. I spent my time learning everything I could. And when I had a quiet moment and no one was around, I went out to some lonely corner of the island and studied those wisps.”

“That was rather dangerous,” Cullen said, looking troubled at the thought.

“No more so than learning to heal with spirits,” Kate returned. “That’s what I thought they were, at first. Only I soon learned that they weren’t. They just hover near the Veil - almost a part of it, really. They bring a great deal of energy with them. That was useful, I can tell you. I never had a great deal of energy on my own, but I learned to dip into the Fade as easy as breathing. It got to the point where I could cast without ceasing. At least, I could have done before this mark appeared on my hand and messed up all my technique. It scatters the Fade’s energy like anything. But maybe Coll and I can come up with a solution yet. Dear Coll,” Kate sighed. “When she arrived at the tower, she sensed something was odd about me right off. We teamed up to be study partners and it’s been an alliance ever since.”

Kate smiled. Getting to the part where she made friends was definitely a nice way to end this tale.

“Coll knows about your attempted suicide then?”

“Oh,” Kate’s smile faded. “No. I never told her. You see, Lydia - Maker rest her soul - she warned me not to speak of this to anyone. She wouldn’t even let me tell her the tale. The moment I mentioned suicide, she told me to stop. We were never to speak of such things in a mage tower. And Coll was never one for talking about the past. She doesn’t like me to pry into her history. We speak about my wisps, but never talk about how they got there. We talk about her healing, but never inquire about how she became so intimately acquainted with wounds in the first place. I often wish… Well, it doesn’t matter. I haven’t been outside of a Circle long enough to quite get used to confessions. So as you see, I’ve never told anyone about this. Only now…” Kate shrugged, and lifted her eyes to Cullen’s.
“Now I’ve told you.”

She stopped there, her throat once again going tight, and breath once again leaving her lungs.

*And now what are you going to say?* Kate wondered.

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What do I say to that? Cullen wondered.

What could he say to any of this? His thoughts had been scattered ever since that spell had hit him. For the past half hour, his mind had been spinning off in a million directions. Some of his fractured thoughts had been attempting to drag him back to the present. Some of his thoughts had attempted to comfort and calm.

Many more, however, had been lost to memory. When that prison of nothingness closed over him, it had transported Cullen right back to his past. In Kinloch Hold, the demons had used similar prisons to keep their prey alive - and desperate. Cullen had spent hours - days even - trapped in Fade-labyrinths, only to wake to fresh horrors and new temptations. The blood mages loved their carnage, and the desire demons loved to try on new skins and faces. Cullen would open his eyes to find at least one fellow templar dead – and one stunning beauty standing naked before him.

Cullen winced at the thought. Maker’s breath, was it any wonder that the spell had sent him reeling? For that matter, was it any wonder that he’d panicked when found Kate kneeling there before him? True, he’d been frightened by the Fade-fire in her eyes. Yes, it had reminded him of his nightmate. But more than that, he’d been shamed by a terrible realization:

He desired Kate even then, even when he wasn’t sure of her. Surely that was the worst sort of temptation.

So Cullen had run. He didn’t quite remember that part. He seemed to have forgotten a lot of the conversation after, as well. It was all fragments, and the scattered pieces of his thoughts were not putting it back together in any coherent order. He knew he’d made a fool of himself, that much was clear. He knew he shouldn’t be prideful in a moment like this, but he couldn’t help it. And it wasn’t just a matter of vanity, either. He had a duty to be strong and stable for his soldiers. Instead, he’d deserted them on the field of battle. That could not happen again.

Though according to Iron Bull, none of the soldiers had blamed him for his lapse. That was some comfort. And Bull’s words of understanding had been more comforting still. The giant had acknowledged Cullen’s trauma, but not sought to take it from him. That had meant more to Cullen than he’d been able to say. But for all that, Cullen still didn’t feel settled. How could he? His thoughts were still scattered, and memories still flitted in and out of his head. The damp on the wall was just damp - for a moment or two. But with every third breath, it seemed to him that the walls oozed with blood. The lightning no longer looked like mage bolts - for now. But it might turn back into sparks at any moment.

And when Kate had done that protocol - Maker, that had been the worst. Oh, *she* hadn’t seemed to mind it. Kate had been all magic and business throughout. But somehow she’d shifted her body - a hand here, fingers there. The next thing Cullen had known, she’d been hovering over him. The vee between her legs had settled right over his thighs. If she’d been mere inches closer to his chest, she would have opened her eyes to find that Cullen had risen to meet her.

So to speak.

Cullen swallowed. Good maker, of all the times to get so aroused. When she’d opened her eyes, he’d
been unable to decide what to do with her. All this time, he hadn’t known what to do with her. Part of him had wanted to push her away and the other part of him had wanted to lay his head on her shoulder and weep.

And yet another part of him had wanted to haul her onto his lap and kiss her.

But instead of giving in to impulse, Cullen had asked Kate to explain about the nature of those healing wisps. It seemed a reasonable change of subject. He felt certain it would dampen his arousal. And so it had, but it had kindled something else: tenderness, and sympathy, too. A new memory haunted Cullen, and the memory was not his own. He now pictured a girl with fire-red hair, staring out over the sea. She was waiting for that sun to go down, so that she might finally throw herself into the waves. Cullen’s throat went dry as he tried to think of what he might have said to keep that girl from jumping.

But that girl was long gone, he supposed. And in her place, a grown-up Kate was staring at him intently. Cullen supposed he ought to say something to her, instead. He cleared his throat.

“I…”

That was as far as he got. Cullen choked off just one word in.

“…You…”

No good. That wasn’t going to work either. Cullen settled for reaching out and took Kate’s hand in his own. There, he thought, the moment his fingers closed over hers. This was better. This was familiar. This reminded him of the lyrium protocols - the simple ones, that is. The ones that didn’t involve lap-sitting.

“We…”

Still stuck at pronouns, Cullen thought wryly. At least ‘we’ was more promising. He liked the sound of ‘we.’ Now he just needed more words to follow after.

“You disapprove,” Kate said, her fingers curling around his. “You disapprove and I hardly blame you, because it was careless of me. Only I what else was I to do, I’d like to know? I was a child at the time! And anyhow, it worked out alright, didn’t it? If that hadn’t happened, I might not have been able to heal you today. I certainly wouldn’t have studied the Veil, and so I wouldn’t have known enough to do lyrium protocols on you. And surely you must know that I wouldn’t have let you die, not if there was even the slightest chance I could help. So even if you do disapprove, I don’t regret it. At least you’re still alive to be angry at me, that’s all I have to say.”

Cullen blinked at her in confusion. How in the Maker’s name did you get all that from my silence, he wondered? He supposed that was what came of taking to long to respond.

But then, before he could think of anything to say, someone spoke for him:

“Well, I think it’s awesome. Like, best backstory ever.”

Oh no, Cullen thought, freezing at the sound of that voice. No, no, no, no, no… Whatever scraps of thought he had gathered together, Cullen now felt them blown away. It was as if a strong wind had blown through the door.

And that wind was named ‘Hawke.’ She now stood in the doorway - in the previously-locked doorway. Varric knelt beside her, a set of lockpicks in his hand. As Cullen glared at them, Varric
gave both Kate and Cullen a sheepish wave.

“Hi there,” he said. “Oh, hey. Look at that. The door’s open.”

Varric said that as if the door had opened itself. Cullen found his voice at last.

“You might have knocked,” he growled.

“Yeah, but listening at keyholes is way more enlightening,” Hawke said, unrepentantly.

“Listening at keyholes?” Kate tensed. “You don’t mean to say that you overheard everything I just said?”

“Oh, of course!” Hawke said, smiling. “Everything from the enchanter’s plotting to get rid of you, right up to the part where Curly was being a prude about spirits.”

“A prude?” Cullen found himself bristling. It was one thing for Hawke to sling mild insults at him. That was nothing new. But for her to eavesdrop on Kate? That was something else entirely.

“You’d better not spread that story around,” he warned. “No, I mean it. That tale is not to leave this room. Or this castle,” he amended, in case she was planning to claim that the doorway did not count as the room.

Hawke made a face. “Andraste’s bits, Cullen, what do you take me for? I’m a rebel, not a narc.”

“Wait,” Kate holding up a hand. To Cullen’s disappointment, this meant that she withdrew her hand from his grasp. “You know this woman?”

That, Cullen supposed, was his cue to make introductions.

“Kate, that’s Hawke.” Cullen settled for a wave in Hawke’s general direction. He didn’t bother to stand. “Former Champion of Kirkwall, etcetera and so forth…”

“Ouch,” Hawke winced. “‘Former?’ Thanks for that, Curly. No really, way to rub it in.”

“And this,” Cullen went on, waving a hand at Kate, “is Her Worship, Inquisitor Katerina Rosella Trevelyan, formerly of the Ostwick Circle of Magi.”

Kate had been scrambling to her feet, but she paused at the top to look down at Cullen in surprise. “You know my middle name?”

Cullen felt his face heat. “It was in your file.”

He didn’t bother to add that he’d read through said file with great interest, hoping to gain some insight into the woman he was working with. Sadly, Josephine’s compiled notes were nothing more than boring, public details. The story he’d just heard from Kate gave him far more of a glimpse into her character.

That was why he was so irritated at Hawke’s intrusion, Cullen realized. What had begun as an intimate, shared secret was now known by the least discrete person of Cullen’s acquaintance. Cullen kept wanting to get to know Kate better, but everyone else kept beating him to it.

With a sigh, Cullen stood. He did so rather unsteadily, and held onto the wall for support. The room seemed to be bobbing about him, like a ship on the waves.

“Well, aren’t we all formal in the Inquisition?” Hawke said “Nice to meet you, Inquisitor, er,
Worship… I didn’t get most of that. Kay? Is it?”

“Kate.” She offered Hawke her hand, and Hawke shook it heartily.

“Kate,” Hawke said, pumping Kate’s arm like it was a bellows. “That’s much easier. You don’t look like a Kate though. More like a baby Aveline. Can I call you Avvy?”

“Hawke…” Cullen warned.

“Kate works, too,” Hawke said, letting Kate’s hand drop. “Or Duchess, maybe? I’m still angry that Varric gave you a nickname and not me…”

“Get to the point, Hawke,” Cullen said.

“The point? Oh right, the point. I mean, the point beyond getting out of the cave I’ve been holed up in all last week?”

“Yes, that point. If you please,” Kate added.

“If I please? Wow. You guys are formal. I’ll have to brush up on my manners. Or you’ll have to get used the fact that I don’t have any. Okay, so here’s the situation.” Hawke paused for dramatic effect.

“Yes?” Cullen prompted, when she did not go on.

He should not have prompted.

“That. Was. Awesome!” Hawke’s voice rose an octave at least. “All that summoning-spirits-to-fix-up-Cullen shit? That was a trip! I’ve never seen anything like that outside of… Well, other people. And then you were once possessed or maybe but not? Brilliant!” Hawke’s voice rose even higher. “And then that boy out there? The one with the big hat? Did you know that he’s a spirit - that made himself his own body?” Hawke’s voice rose higher still.

“Cole?” Kate said, looking as though she had half a mind to stick her fingers into her ears.

“Ahhhhh!” Hawke said, pumping her fists into the air. “Yes! This is fucking amazing! Oh my Maker, it’s like the fucking Maker actually does answer prayers. And the same day after I started praying again too. Thank you, Andraste! Hallelujah!” Hawke clasped her hands in prayer, then looked down at Kate. When she spoke again, her voice had returned to it’s normal register.


“Nope, no good. You’ve got templars all over the damn place. I mean…” She gave Cullen the once-over.

“I’m not a templar any longer,” Cullen said. “Nor are the others.”

“Uh, huh,” Hawke said, in a disbelieving voice. “Sure. Look, I’d rather deal with mages, or old friends,” she added, placing a hand on Varric’s shoulder. Cullen noticed that Varric stood straighter at that.

“Here’s the thing, Miss All-the-Titles,” Hawke said, speaking to Kate. “We’re gonna have to move real quick. Plucky tells me that Carver heads out tomorrow morning, but you’ve got to fix a dam or a rift or the lake or something? So normally I’d suggest an exchange: we go fix your dam shit - see what I did there? And then we’d go fix my damn shit. Also, see what I did there?”
“Uh….” Kate blinked.

“Nothing like alliances forged over battles with demons,” Varric said dryly.

“I know, right?” Hawke agreed. “That’s how we met Curly. It’ll be all… What’s the word for it?”

“Narrative symmetry?” Varric suggested.

“Sure. That.”

“Demons?” Kate blinked. “The dam? I’m sorry. I don’t…”

“Long story. Here’s a shorter one: come with me if you want answers,” Hawke affected a deep, spooky voice. “No, seriously,” she said, dropping the affectation. “Come with me and let’s kill some shit. We’ll talk along the way. Without all the templars around.”

Cullen scowled at her. “I won’t have you dragging Kate out into the rain just because you don’t like my company.”

“Since when was this all about you?” Hawke said, giving him a patronizing look. “It’s about all of you,” she waved her finger in a circle. “The whole Inquisition. I mean, I can’t have you following us if I don’t trust you, see?”

“If you don’t trust us, then why are you here?” Cullen wanted to know.

“To find out if I can trust you. Duh.”

“Your caution is understandable,” Kate said, kindly. “You only just met me, after all.”

“Yes, and you only just met her,” Cullen pointed out.

Hawke ignored him. “Here’s my thinking, Baby Worship. You and me fight together. If I decide I can trust you - as the leadery person - then we’re good.”

“What happens if you don’t trust me?” Kate wanted to know.

“Then we’re screwed, I guess,” Hawke shrugged.

“Oh,” Kate murmured.

“Come now,” Cullen scoffed. “We’re not going to hinge the success of our mission on whether or not you happen to take a liking to Kate.”

“Well that’s no way to get into my good graces,” Hawke said, folding her arms over her chest.

“It’s fine,” Kate said, giving a little laugh. By Cullen’s reckoning, it sounded a bit forced. “I’m sure we’ll all be great friends - or at least allies,” she added, “by the day’s end.”

“Nice,” Hawke said. “That’s real nice. Can’t tell if you’re sincere, Miss Mage, or if you’re just really, really prissy. At least you’re not treating me like Ferelden trash to my face. That’s a change. Alright, I’ll be waiting for you downstairs. Varric if you’re coming, don’t be a dick about it. And bring the spirit-boy! He’s the shit. Ah, this is great! I’ve been all cooped up and haven’t killed anything for at least a week…”

With that, Hawke was gone, out the door, and off into the rain. There was a long pause, as if the air itself had to catch its breath after being used by Hawke for all that chatter.
“That’s Hawke?” Kate pointed out the door. “That,” she said again. “is Hawke?”

“I know, I know,” Varric sighed, running a hand over his hair. “She’s…”

“She’s exactly like your books, Varric. Oh my Maker. You couldn’t have captured her more perfectly if you had shrunk her down and tucked her inside the pages.”

“You think so?” Varric brightened and let his hand drop.

“Yes,” Kate nodded. “Oh yes. Except she’s shorter than I thought.”

Varric pulled a face. “Don’t let her hear you say that. She wanted me to make her tall as Anders in the stories.”

“Just how tall is Anders?” Kate wondered aloud.

“Forget books,” Cullen said, irritably. “Do we have any idea what Hawke’s up to next?”

Varric’s expression instantly dimmed. “I’ve got an idea,” he said. “But I don’t wanna be right.”

With that, he turned away.

“That’s not—” Kate called after him. “Very helpful,” she finished with a sigh.

Cullen shook his head. “Hawke,” he grumbled. “She’s a whirlwind wherever she goes.”

“And it seems that whirlwind is my afternoon assignment,” Kate said, staring out into the rain. “So much for luncheon by the campfire.”

Cullen didn’t like the weariness in her voice. “Let me deal with Hawke,” he told her. “You get some rest.”

“Cullen…” Kate gave him a pointed look.

“What?”

“What do you mean, ‘what?’ Maker’s breath. Not an hour ago you almost died.”

“All the more reason to get back to the work of the living,” he reasoned.

“No,” Kate said, frowning at him. “You need to rest. I’d stay with you if I could, but maybe Ella can sit with you…”

“I don’t need a nursemaid,” Cullen said. “I need to get back to the soldiers.”

He took a step toward the door, but just that one step made the room pitch. Cullen tripped into the doorframe, and Kate caught him before he went crashing down.

“Sit,” she said.

“No, I can stand,” Cullen insisted. He managed to stay upright, but he had to cling to the doorframe to do it. “I’ll go with you,” he added.

Now that was a bit ambitious. Cullen realized his knuckles were white against the doorjam.

“You need to rest,” Kate countered. “I’ve got strength enough to tromp around in the rain with Hawke. But you…”
“I’m fine,” Cullen assured her. “Alright, maybe I can’t keep up with you today. But at least take some protection with you. Bull for one. And Dorian. They had energy to spare. In fact, take half the company, while you’re at it.”

“It’s Hawke, Cullen. She’s half a company all by herself.”

“Yes. She is. That’s why you need your own troops.”

“Come now,” Kate laughed.

“I’m serious,” Cullen said, wishing he could make her understand. “You’ve never seen the sort of messes that Hawke leaves behind. I don’t like sending you off with her.”

“Sending me off with Hawke was the plan all along. Actually, this is better than the plan. I was supposed to find Hawke in a cave, but now she’s come to us.”

“Yes, and that’s not worrisome in the slightest. How did she find us, anyway?”

“I’ve no idea.” Kate said.

Cullen was about to say that he suspected the raven had something to do with it. But before he could say anything more, a sudden throb of pain went spiking through his temples. Cullen winced and grunted.

“What is it?” Kate asked, reaching for him. “More memories? The storm? The puddles?”

Cullen gave a thin laugh. “Nothing so dire. It’s a headache.”

“Oh,” Kate said, drawing back. “Yes, of course. Well, that would be unpleasant, too.”

“Indeed,” Cullen rumbled, pinching his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

“Take some of Coll’s pellets, will you?” Kate suggested. “That might help.”

“It might,” Cullen hedged. “But I’ll definitely wait until after…”

_Until after you’ve left_, he thought. He didn’t say it aloud, though. He wasn’t about to tell Kate that he wouldn’t risk taking an aphrodisiac when she was nearby. At least that revelation explained why Cullen had felt so restless every time Kate had taken his hand for a lyrium protocol.

Then again, Cullen thought, the elfroot was just one provocation among many. After all, the medicine hadn’t stoked his inclination for anyone else but Kate.

“Do take them,” Kate urged. “And get some rest. Get something to eat as well, and please don’t lift anything heavy. Sleep, if you can, and stay away from the requisition table. The way you get caught up in those reports—”

“Kate, I am the commander,” Cullen interrupted. He knew she meant well, but he wasn’t an invalid. “And I’ll feel better if I check in with the soldiers. They’ll feel better, too,” he added, lest she officially order him to stay put. “It will be good to give them assurances that I’m not going to run out on them again.”

“I’m sure they understand what an accident that was.”

Cullen’s stomach sank. If only he could be certain that it was an accident. Oh, the spell had been unexpected, to be sure. But his reaction to it? That was not so unexpected.
At least this time no one had to chain me, he thought, darkly.

“I’ll feel better once I’ve got a handle on things,” Cullen said, pushing that thought aside. “And we’ll all feel better once Hawke is settled as our ally. Maker’s breath, she must be causing a stir down there.”

“I’ll take her someplace where there are no crowds,” Kate assured him.

“Yes, do,” Cullen said. “Take her away before she burns the castle down.”

“Is that an order?” Kate asked, raising a brow.

“More a suggestion,” Cullen replied.

“Very well. Off I go, then.”

Kate sighed and looked out at the ramparts beyond. The storm raged on behind her, and she suddenly looked quite weary against the gathering gloom of the clouds. Cullen found that didn’t want to send her out into that storm, but what else was he to do? It wasn’t like he could keep Kate all to himself for the rest of the day.

Though I’d very much like to.

The thought came to him unbidden, and Cullen let out a sharp cough.

“Oh, and now you’re catching cold,” Kate said, frowning. “See, all the more reason you should stay in this room and rest. I’ll have someone bring the requisition table up to you. Just wait here.”

And then she was gone, off into the rain. Cullen watched her go, noting the way the rain began to darken her hair the moment it hit it, noting the way her armor fit her far too well for his comfort…

And then he remembered something. Of all the things he’d said and done, he’d completely forgotten to tell Kate one very important thing –

Well, he’d forgotten to tell her a few important things. But only one was relevant right now.

“Thank you!”

The wind picked up the words, seemed to blow them away. For a moment, Cullen feared that Kate hadn’t heard him. But then she stopped, and turned around. She took a step toward him.

“What?”

“Thank you!” Cullen said. He took a step out of the door, got a drip to the face, and jerked back again. “For saving my life, I mean.”

“Ah,” Kate said, nodding. “You’re quite welcome. I…” She said something else, but a roll of thunder drowned it out.

“Hawke’s shouting for me,” Kate continued, pointing off to her left. “I need to go. But I’ll be back…”

Cullen didn’t catch the rest. But he didn’t want Kate to shout herself hoarse, so he held up a hand as if to say, Yes, yes, that’s fine.

“Just be careful,” Cullen called back to her. “And don’t let Hawke get away with anything.
“Anything, do you hear?”

Kate gave him one last bemused look before turning away. When she spoke, Cullen heard her perfectly, though the words did not comfort him in the least:

“Don’t worry, Cullen,” Kate cried before she walked away. “It’s just Hawke. How bad could she be?”

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