Shards of Antiva

by Philosophizes

Summary

After the events in Kirkwall, Zevran returns to Antiva and must come to terms with his past as he decides what to do with his future. In Ferelden, Theron struggles to deal with Zevran’s absence, his own feelings, and his position as Arl of Amaranthine.

And somewhere, trying to live a life in the isolated corners of Thedas and hide from her past, is a woman neither of them had thought was alive- Zevran’s mother, Nehna Sora Revasina.

Notes

Hello and welcome to the third story in the Wardens of Ferelden series! This story directly follows the events of Flowers of Kirkwall, so if you haven't read that, I'd recommend it.

There are also some blanket content warnings for this fic, because it doesn't deal with a lot of happy things for most of the story. They won't be in every chapter, but they feature pretty prominently in some. Here's your list:
- torture
- discussion of torture (adult and child)
- off-screen sexual exploitation
- off-screen sexual abuse/rape (adult and child)
- slavery
- description of child abuse (mental, emotional, physical)
- discussion of suicide and suicidal thoughts
- alcohol as coping mechanism
Chapter 1

Nehna, daughter of Sora, crafter for Clan Revasina, had had her *vallas’lin* for three years when she saw Adan Escipo kill a human in Antiva’s thin southern woods with a swing of his hatchet, and fallen in love. The city elf was nothing like what she’d been told the flat-ears were— he was beautiful, he was graceful, he had tattoos, he was *deadly*. This was no trembling craven.

When she blurted this out to him, he tucked some of his loose sun-blond hair behind and ear and erupted into pleased laughter, green eyes scrunching up, light skin dappled darker in the shadows of the pine branches.

“And you are very little like the barbarian elves I have been told to expect in the wilderness,” he said, and did a strange thing. He took her hand and bowed over it, like the genuflection you made to the most esteemed Hahren and Keepers, and kissed it. It shouldn’t have been intimate, but she’d burned with heat all the same, and in her distraction, the only thing she could manage to do was ask what he did.

Adan’s eyes had glittered with humor and secrets when he told her he was a woodcutter.

He kept coming back to see her— first under the pretense of hunting for particularly fine pieces of pinewood, but eventually dispensing of the excuse entirely. He couldn’t always come, but eventually, when he did, he brought presents. A bag of tiny glass beads in colors she’d only seen in flowers. Lengths of soft leather cured in a way she wasn’t familiar with. Spools of gold and silver and brightly colored thread. Bronze filigree bracelets. Knives of a metal she’d never seen or heard of before, better than steel, the hilts inlaid with leaping halla. Wooden rings he’d carved and polished himself. A silk shawl with long fringe that shimmered under its own natural iridescence as well as from the tiny fragments of mica and opal strung onto the threads. A cascade of diamonds and pearls and sapphires to wear around her neck, with matching earrings.

Dalish crafters didn’t often work with precious gems, but she still knew that there was no way that Adan would have been able to afford such a thing. When she asked him about it, he smiled like he was scared she’d send him away and admitted that he’d taken it from the bedroom of someone he’d killed. People paid him quite well for that sort of thing, you see.

“So, not a woodcutter,” Nehna said after a moment, and Adan relaxed.

“On the contrary,” he said breezily. “A woodcutter clears out the deadwood and takes only that which will make the forest as a whole stay healthy. I do the same, only my wood is people.”

Nehna didn’t dare wear the necklace and earrings around her clan, but she wrapped them up in some of Adan’s leather that she had left over and hid them with other things, careful to pull them out for admiration only when no one else was around.

So, of course, she was eventually caught with them out. She’d already gotten into trouble once for continuing to see Adan and twice for the careful way she’d been carving beads of halla antler and wood for a necklace for him, and it turned out that the third time was the limit. She refused to get rid of his gifts, she refused to stop seeing him, and she refused to take back her words of love.

Her parents turned their backs on her, her friends pretended not to see or hear her, and the Keeper gave her until the evening meal to gather her things and leave.

Nehna did so with her head held high. She walked out of Revasina’s camp wearing the gloves and
boots and jacket she’d made from Adan’s leather and decorated with his glass beads and thread. The
silk shawl was tied around her hips as a belt, and the fringe swayed in time with the earrings at her
every step.

It was always meant to be a temporary exile, to last only until she came around to her clan’s view of
things, but Nehna had her pride and knew her mind and kept walking, heading for Rialto. Adan
lived in Rialto. She spent the nights on the road finishing the beads she’d been carving him, and the
night waiting outside the city gates stringing them on a long length of doubled-over thread. In the
morning, she tracked him down to his apartment, and still on edge by the presence of so many people
and humans that she simply thrust it at him when he opened the door, saying something about
Revasina kicking her out because she refused to stop seeing him.

Adan had taken the necklace, but it seemed that it had been more out of reflex than anything,
because he blinked at her a few times before coming up with a real response.

“Then you’d better come in,” he told her. “I have room.”

That night was the first night they’d done more than kissed, and Nehna was very pleased that this
was to be the new state of things.

Adjusting to life in Rialto wasn’t easy. Elves could not carry weapons openly unless they were
assassins like Adan- Crows. She learned how to hide the short, flat knives he gave her in her boots
and under her clothes. It was unfashionable- nearly unheard of- for women to wear pants. She
continued to do so anyway, but learned about skirts as well, and could appreciate the way they flared
and twirled to Rialto’s street musicians at the festivals. No one in Rialto knew El’vhen and the
human’s Trade marked her as even more foreign, so she learned Antivan. The humans and city elves
had no use for most of a Dalish crafter’s skills, but wood beads were cheap and city elves were poor,
and little wood-carved toys for children could be any parent’s weakness. She would sit in the
fountain square outside of Adan’s apartment building and bring shapes out wood in the sunlight,
shavings dropping to the backed clay street beneath her feet.

At first the locals stared at her for her pants and the Dalish aesthetics in the embroidery and cut of her
clothes and her clay-dark skin and her vallas’lin, but soon enough the local women would come with
their mending or their washing or their child-minding and watch her, sit with her, talk with her. she
made friends who would invite her for the warm or cold chocolate drinks out of the nearby
rainforests of northern Antiva and Rivain and Tevinter, either over at their houses or out in Rialto’s
cafés. They couldn’t pronounce El’vhen and didn’t understand Dalish names, so she became ‘Nina
Rivasina’ everywhere but in Adan’s apartment.

It was through them that she learned the most about Antiva, Rialto, and humans. She learned how
city elves were treated. She learned what most of the family-less elf women here had to do to
survive. She learned about how much power the Crows had, how large they were- and most
importantly, the way people feared them. She learned sayings and rhymes from listening to the
women with the children.

One a sorrow, two a decoy
Three a lost morrow, four a man destroy
Five in shadow, six will devour
Seven and sold, eight on the threshold
Nine with the secrets
Never to be told.

Nehna learned that the only reason she was living free and healthy and unmolested was because
Adan was a Crow, and even elves in the Crows got some respect. No one crossed them.
She confronted him about it the next time he came back from Antiva City and a contract, demanding to know why he wasn’t helping others the way he was helping her.

“I can dispense charity,” Adan told her. “But I cannot take so many under my protection. Word would get to the other Crows, and I would become a threat, and they would come for me. I am no Master of a House, I am not Grandmaster, I am in no position to insinuate myself up the ranks, and I am nothing but an elf to the humans who run the Crows. A human man with my record could be allowed privileges - control of a neighborhood, a passel of apprentices and junior Crows to manage, a wife.”

At that he stopped as he realized what he’d said, looking mortified. Nehna thought about it for moment, slapped him across the face like she’d been told Antivan women did when their men were making fools of themselves, and then grabbed him by the front of his shirt and dragged him into her face like a proper Dalish.

“Have some pride,” she told him. “Do not let the shem’len own you. You kill them for a living, they are no better than you. They are worse, even.”

“Nehna, carina-”

“Marry me, you fool.”

The next time he came back from a contract, he brought her a gold ring set with a tiny emerald as dark as the pine trees they’d first met in. Nehna gave him a bone carving of Sylaise’s hearthfire with a fine dyed leather strip twined through the whorls of flame to wear around his neck.

They never had a Chantry Sister oversee a ceremony, which was perfectly fine by Nehna and made Adan feel a little more secure. A Chantry wedding would be recorded, he said, and there was no place like Antiva for official recordkeeping. The Crows would have found out within days. Theirs was a common law marriage, which made more sense to her anyway, because what was more declaring someone family than living with them?

Her social status amongst the neighborhood changed again, because they all knew a wedding ring when they saw one. Before she’d a partial outsider, privy to everything and yet strangely apart because of her heritage and uncertain status as a Crow’s favorite- but a Crow’s wife was something much more. As a married woman, she was trusted to watch the neighbors’ children. People came to her for advice. She was asked to assist with the neighborhood charity, since she now had a proper claim on her husband’s money and possessions.

She took up fixing people’s furniture and small house repairs. They were all wood or clay, and the Dalish knew those. It all turned out to be less complicated than upkeep on aravels, anyway.

Three years after leaving her clan Nehna was twenty-one, married, and pregnant. Adan was in an awful flutter the whole time because Crows of his stature did not have children, or at least none they knew of or acknowledged. Nehna was nervous about giving birth without a Keeper around, but hid it. She had things to do and people to help.

Their son was born in the winter. He had Nehna’s darker skin and brown eyes, but his father’s hair. She named him Satheraan and Adan smiled and chuckled a little and said that no one else would ever be able to pronounce it. Nehna held her son a little tighter and proclaimed that Antiva would learn how to pronounce it, because it was his name, and as his dangerous and charmingly-convincing father, he was going to make it happen. He could start by getting it right himself.
The winter passed well, and so did the spring. Adan took less contracts, and quicker ones, so he could stay home. He was absolutely enamored with his son, and would spend entire mornings and afternoons just lying on the floor, Satheraan flopped on his chest, talking about whatever came to mind and pretending they were having full conversations. Nehna got the neighbors she associated the most with to say ‘Satheraan’ correctly, and showed him off proudly in the markets and the squares, the silk shawl Adan had given her when she’d still been with her clan repurposed into her son’s carrying sling.

Together, they talked about what Satheraan could be like as he grew older. Adan finally told her about his own life, about what it was like to grow up with the Crows, about the training and the constant threat of betrayal and the way that you could trust no one because no one was ever really your friend, or else they were but it always meant less than loyalty to the Crows. Nehna held him while he cried and told him that Satheraan would have a better life, a different life, would grow up to a respectable trade- a secretary, a printer, a glazier, a potter. They had money enough to buy him into a good apprenticeship, and a Crow sponsor could push him past a few of the prejudices that kept humans from taking elf children to their trades. Here in their neighborhood, they were king and queen because everyone was scared of what Adan represented; when Satheraan married, he would be king of his own neighborhood because people liked and respected him for his character.

In summer, the Crows came.

Adan had gone to Antiva City to bid on contracts, and three nights later Nehna was dragged out of bed and made to watch as they killed him slowly, because he’d dare to have what was not given. The man who was Master of House Escipo held Satheraan like he knew anything about babies and Nehna promised herself in her towering rage as Adan finally screamed that the Crows would not have her son!

Adan died with his eyes sliced open and Master Escipo soothed Satheraan when he woke up to his father’s screams and started to cry himself. He rocked her son gently back to sleep as he told her that Adan had cost the Crows the entirety of the value of his training and upkeep with the need for his execution. Everything he owned was now the Crows’, with the gracious exception of the clothes she was wearing and what she could take in one bag. Some of the Crows watched her as she packed up her woodcarving knives, a few changes of clothes for herself and Satheraan, and her son’s blanket. They didn’t let her keep any of the courting gifts Adan had given her, or any of the household money.

They didn’t search her, so she didn’t have to find out what they’d say about the flat throwing knives Adan had given her, and taught her how to use. She teetered right on the edge of pulling them out and taking at least Master Escipo with her when, once she was finished packing, the Crows escorted her back into his presence and he smiled and named the size of the debt that was still owed on top of Adan’s death and the seizure of everything they’d owned. Perhaps the King of Antiva could have paid it back, or the richest merchant houses, she would never be able to.

“Of course,” Master Escipo said, and in Adan’s voice she would have called it smooth but with this man it was pure slime. “The price of a life can be paid by another’s life.”

He was still holding her son.

“Mine then,” Nehna told him. “Let me leave my son with the neighbors and you can have me.”

“Not enough,” he said. “But speaking of your son- a Crow is valuable, and one brought up with us even more so. He would pay the rest of the debt in full, and then some. You could keep everything else you have.”
They did not get to torment her husband his whole life just to take his son. No flat-ear, no *shem’len*, would break the sacred line of parent to child. She was Dalish. She knew her history, and she had her pride; and *her son* would have his.

She held her arms out.

“He’s mine.”

Master Escipo handed Satheraan back with a sharp-edged smile, and the Crows turned her out in the street.

The neighborhood wouldn’t have her back. She tried taking odd jobs that she could still do while sitting and watching Satheraan, but they barely paid enough and inevitably turned her out when they learned about the Crows. The Crows were always watching, in Antiva, and it was best to stay beneath their notice. Nehna hadn’t, and now they would make her pay for it.

Eventually there were no more odd jobs. She turned to begging. It didn’t pay enough for consistent food, and every ten days a Crow would come and take whatever money she hadn’t spent yet.

Nehna spent an entire day down at the docks trying to convince herself to ask for work for passage, but knew that no one would take a woman with a baby. Then she tried to convince herself to stow away.

She knew that the Crows would find her again, wherever she went, assuming that she was even allowed to get near a gangplank. Even if they didn’t live up to their reputation, she would still be as good as dead- a young elven woman traveling alone with a baby was slaver bait for Tevinter.

Night fell over the sea, and when the brothel recruiter for the Summer Lily dropped a whole gold piece in her begging bowl and asked if a pretty Dalish woman like herself wouldn’t object to making at least this much every night, she listened to him. She thought of the good it would do Satheraan to have steady food and someplace indoors. She thought about how even the money she’d make whoring wouldn’t ever be enough to pay off the Crows, but it was the most money she *would* make, and how living in the semblance of false hope would be better than the lingering, soul-warping despair she had on the streets.

She accepted and felt every Dalish who’d ever live exile her from The People permanently.
“There’s only so many ships that could have left overnight. The Harbormaster-”

“No.”

“There’s a book, there’s records, I’ll find out the ship and the captain and what city they were going to port in-”

“No,” Theron said again, and adjusted the sit of his armor. It already lay comfortably, but it was something to do. “He told me not to go after him.”

“Then I’ll go after him for you!” Alistair exploded, and Theron wondered, for a second, what everyone else in the Crown and Lion was thinking, overhearing this. “Andraste’s flaming sword, Theron- I’ll go after him for me if that makes you feel better! He’s my friend too, and he’s in no state to be running off by himself!”

He knew that.

“He was dying not that long ago, I can’t believe he’d do this to us! He should still be here where Anders can check his health and the two of you could talk everything out and I could be there for both of you! Does he think we wouldn’t do that! Does he think we’d just- rather have him gone! We’re not mad- well I’m mad now but I wasn’t before! So he tried to kill us! It wasn’t his fault!”

“He knows,” Theron said quietly.

“He was thinking!” Alistair demanded, then took another look at Theron’s expression and sighed, anger draining. He ran a hand through his hair.

“I’m worried about him, and this hurt you,” he said. “I want to get on the next ship to Antiva and find him and, I don’t know, punch him in the stomach, sling him over my shoulder, and march him back here.”

“Don’t,” Theron asked him. “Please. If he wants to go, he has a right to go. I’m not going to-”

-stand by and let someone steal his choices, he’d been going to say, but he’d done that. Ever since the day he’d pieced together the things Zevran told him and the way he reacted to being treated decently and come up with a nightmare of a complete picture, Theron had promised himself that he wouldn’t be that. He’d be the sort of person Zevran had never had but had deserved all this time.

And then he’d been too blighted scared, chained up and faced with a Tevinter Magister, to even think about doing anything. Zevran was the one who was deathly scared of being broken and under someone’s control again, but he’d been the one to resist, and lost everything for it. It had hurt him, so much. Theron had recognized the impulse that had brought him back to the estate in the morning bloody and strained as a coping mechanism Zevran had been so happy to put behind him, to move past the days when the only ways he could handle his emotions were to kill something or have sex.

No wonder he’d left.

“Not going to what, Theron?” Alistair asked, and he remembered that he had finished sentence.

“I already let the Magister steal his free will,” Theron told him. “I won’t do it myself.”
“That’s- agh, Theron. That’s not your fault.”

“I was the one who was there,” he said. “He trusted me and I didn’t protect him.”

Alistair was glaring at him.

“Sit,” he ordered.

“What?”

“Sit,” he said, pointing to the bed, and Theron sat.

“First of all,” Alistair said. “That wasn’t your fault. Second of all, that wasn’t your fault. Third of all, running off to Antiva might have been Zevran’s choice, but people make stupid choices and you shouldn’t always respect them. Fourth of all, even if it wasn’t a stupid choice, you love him, and he’s not in a good place right now, and you should go get him. Fifth of all, that wasn’t your fault.”

Theron stared at his hands. He kept remembering the Magister’s knife, and Zevran’s blood, and that- that ‘it’s all right’ when it hadn’t been, and wasn’t going to be.

“Alistair, when he talked about the Crows, in his not, he said- he said ‘we’.”

“He didn’t. He wouldn’t.”

“He did, he-” he couldn’t do this right now, they had to go back to the Vigil today and he had to officially reinstate Delilah to the nobility and he had to get the proper entourage together for his visit to Denerim and he had to plan a trip to Hallarenis’haminathe to tell the other clans Sabrae had been found and to get halla for them, but it hurt and he’d never been good at not feeling. ‘He said ‘we’ when he talked about the Crows, and he’s gone back to Antiva, and he said he’s sorry and wants to live well but he’s gone back to Antiva and he said ‘we’ and he left his Warden armor and he said he’s sorry and that I can’t help him any longer what am I supposed to think about that-”

Alistair grabbed his shoulders.

“Hey, breathe-”

“He’s gone back to the Crows,” Theron sobbed, finally giving voice to the fear that had rooted in him when’d woken up to find Zevran gone and only a note without an explanation. “I broke his trust and he’s gone back to the Crows-”

“Theron- Theron! Calm down and listen to yourself, you know he’d never- Fen, go get Nathaniel-”

They were two hours later than expected getting on the road to the Vigil, dealing with Theron’s hysterics. Alistair had finally managed to get him to put on a stoic face just until they passed the limits of the city and were out in the farmland. Now they were riding down the Pilgrim’s Path, and Theron sat slumped in the saddle of one of the horses they’d borrowed, tired and heartsick.

It was something Alistair had been prepared for, sort of. Kirkwall had been a very straining experience and he’d been fully expecting Theron to have a bit of breakdown about it once they were home and safe, but he hadn’t thought that it would happen before they’d gotten back to the Vigil, and certainly not that Zevran wouldn’t be around for it.

Whatever you’re doing in Antiva, he thought angrily at his absentee friend. It had better be really important, and you’d better come back soon.
Part of getting Theron calm enough to be out in public without being the cause of awkward questions had been promising that he wouldn’t go after Zevran. Alistair still hated that he’d made that promise, but it had been the only thing that Theron would accept. Most of the time, Alistair quietly thought that it was sweet and romantic how protective Theron was of a man who was eminently capable of defending himself, but dear Andraste there was such a thing as ‘taking it too far’.

A promise was a promise, but it also only meant that he couldn’t be the one to go after Zevran.

After they’d arrived back at the Vigil and Nathaniel had settled in his sister’s family, Alistair quietly got him, Anders, Mhequi, Rhannur, and Fenris in a room together.

“Okay! Strategy time.”

“Normally,” Nathaniel said. “I’m completely in favor of our Commander-management meetings, but this one seems a bit fuller than usual.”

“That’s because Theron’s managed to get himself into more trouble than usual,” Alistair said. “He made me promise not to go after Zevran, but that doesn’t mean that anyone else can’t. So you-”

He pointed to Nathaniel.

“-you-”

Anders.

“-and you.”

Fenris.

“You all know people of dubious and sneaky character, right?”

“I know few people at all,” Fenris told him.

“Well, just Anders and Nathaniel, then. Got anybody you trust enough who could go to Antiva?”

“Not on something this personal,” Nathaniel said. “Hunting traitorous banns in Kirkwall was one thing. That was business.”

“I have contacts in Antiva,” Anders said. “But I don’t know any of them personally. And they’re not really the hunting-people types. Just the opposite, really.”

Okay. Not as useful as he’d hoped.

“Could you ask them to keep their eyes and ears open, though?” Alistair asked.

“Just how curious do you want people to get?” Anders asked in turn. “It’s one thing for me to write and ask about apostates and Templars. If I write and say ‘hey, there’s this Crow, elf, so tall, so old, here’s a picture of his face’, there’ll be plenty of questions. Especially in Antiva. The sort of people I can write to aren’t the sort of people who can ask too hard about Crows.”

Really not as useful as he’d hoped. Zevran was still trying to hide from the Crows, as far as Alistair knew, and asking questions like that wouldn’t keep him hidden for long.

Time for plan number two. It wasn’t as good as the first one, since it risked more attention on this side of things.
“Then we’ll just have to send some of our people.”

“I will go,” Fenris volunteered immediately. “Hadriana-”


“Captain,” Rhannur said. “Voshai will go. Know Tevene. He hides from Crows, we speak Tevene, no one thinks ‘Ferelden’.”

That was- Alistair was kind of impressed. He’d had the thought, earlier, of trying to wheedle the Voshai into going after Zevran for him, since they liked him so much. It was why he’d brought Rhannur and Mhequi along in the first place, but he was happier that they’d volunteered themselves. It felt strange, asking for a favor this big; and he’d also been worried that the Voshai would stick out too badly. But using the fact that they’d definitely stick out to cover for another sort of foreignness was something he hadn’t thought of.

“Really?” Nathaniel asked, obviously not convinced.

“Hey, it’s a good idea,” Alistair defended him as the two Voshai started talking to each other in their own language. “And so long as he’s still hiding, he’ll need the misdirection, right?”

“I suppose,” Nathaniel said doubtfully. “But we have to be careful about it as well. If they go off right now, the Commander will be suspicious. And we can’t send them with anything that says ‘Warden’ or ‘Amaranthine’, or else no one will buy that the Voshai are Tevene.”

“Send Andreas,” Mhequi spoke up, breaking from her conversation. “Has most Tevene name, speaks well.”

“Just Andreas?”

“Yes. Easier with less. Makes less attention.”

True enough.

“So, just Andreas,” Alistair agreed. “He’s going to need money, and different armor and I’m pretty sure he’s got some of those lyrium-work blades the Voshai make, those are distinctive- wait, should he even go like that? I mean, Crows, and Antiva, but if he needs to lay low, he should probably look non-threatening.”

“The Crows are powerful,” Fenris said. “Antiva has no army, and survives because the Crows would take an attack on their territory badly. Enough Crows will make even a Magister hesitate-twenty or thirty were hired by a lesser-ranked Magister to take out a more powerful one a year before I ran. They succeeded, though at great cost to themselves. I have heard that such losses, on both sides, are the reason that the Crows and the Magisters often prefer to be tolerant of each other, as an explanation for the Antivan slave trade to Tevinter.”

“Antiva sells slaves to Tevinter?” Alistair asked. “What, officially? Not just, like, pirates?”

“Your friend would know better than I,” Fenris said. “But the Crows sanction it. I- did I understand correctly, when the Arl-Commander told his story? The Crows bought your friend?”

“They did,” Alistair said uneasily.

“If the Crows had not taken him, he would have passed to the Imperium. The slaves who are not born into it are largely taken from Antiva, and those with money for house slaves prefer elves.
Children, particularly, can be trained to a master’s exact standards.”

Alistair had the sudden thought of how Zevran might have been, sold into Tevinter. As much as he could conceive of it, it didn’t bear dwelling on.

“Where are you going with this, Fenris?”

“Small deceptions are easier than large ones,” Fenris said. “Have Andreas keep his Voshai blades, give him clothes dyed with amaranth, and send him to Antiva speaking of his lord and his captain in Tevene. People will see the lyrium, dressed in the most expensive dye in all Thedas, and the language will do the rest. He will be seen as a trusted armed retainer of some Magister, searching for a valued and prestigious member of his lord’s household. Between the assumption and the description of a Crow, no one will wish to ask many questions.”

“Wow. You came up with all of that just now?”

“There was time,” Fenris told him, tone gone flat. “When such a task would have been my duty.”

“It sounds good,” Nathaniel said. “But does Zevran even know enough Tevene to pretend to have lived there?”

“Yes,” Rhannur answered immediately.

“And, we still have to get it past the Commander.”

“Need advice from sovellirajaa for Fenris,” Mhequi said. “Ask leave for Rhannur and Andreas. Take ship to Cumberland. Rhannur go home. Andreas take new ship, go to Antiva.”

Alistair and Nathaniel looked at each other.

“I think we can make this work.”

As Arl of Amaranthine, Theron had received the accompanying estate in Denerim. Unlike Redcliffe’s, originally built outside the curtain wall and then ignominiously folded into the market as Denerim expanded, Amaranthine’s estate was in the heart of the city, only a few streets away from Fort Drakon and ten minutes’ walk from the palace and Landsmeet.

Usually, Theron just tolerated it. The Vigil was home now, and this was a showpiece house, meant for entertaining guests and otherwise impressing foreign dignitaries and guests of lesser rank during one of the social seasons that he barely attended, being Warden-Commander.

But without Zevran, the Vigil hurt. They shared rooms, they shared a bed, and he wasn’t going to move Zevran’s things out but that just meant that every day he spent at the Vigil, he had to live with the obvious, gaping holes everywhere that he should have been. He’d tried sleeping in his office one night, which hadn’t gone well, and then moved into Fen’s room to curl up with the mabari. He’d been so tired by nights of bad sleep by that point that he’d overslept, and Alistair had come looking for him. Theron had been expecting a comment about living road-rough again when they had their own arling now, but his friend had just summarized what he’d missed of the morning so far before leaving him to get dressed.

So, for once, the Amaranthine estate in Denerim was better. It was still just Orlesian enough to put his teeth on edge, soaring ceilings and columned arches and whitewashed expanses of wall where there should have been frescos and plaster sculpting imitating stone carvings and symbolic colors and lighting, all of it stolen right out of the Dales, observed by the humans but not understood. The estate
It had kept him from ever staying in the Amaranthine estate for long, and so it meant that Zevran wasn’t missing in the same way, here. It was more tolerable.

And being annoyed at the architecture was a good distraction. Maybe, now that he had re-ennobled Delilah and Nathaniel was freed up from running the arling, between the three of them there would actually be time to do things in Denerim. Maybe he could finally justify de-Orlesianing the interiors to himself, despite what it would be sure to cost.

It was just him, Alistair, Fen, Leonie, Kallian, and Captain Alec on this trip. Queen Anora had only asked for Alistair, Zevran, and Leonie or Nell; but Theron had something to bring up to her as well. If it went well, he wanted Kallian and Alec with him for it.

Anora was not amused when he arrived for the wedding meeting without Zevran.

“You’re lying to me, Arl-Commander,” she said when he tried to skim over the topic by saying Zevran had personal business in Antiva to take care of. “Half a decade of experience and his influence has made you better at it, but your emotions still betray you. Why isn’t he here?”

They weren’t the only people in the room, Queen and Wardens. Anora had her favorite advisors with her- Erlina, Alfstanna Eremen, raised to Arlessa of Edgehall after the war, and Teyrn Fergus. The four nobles in the room represented the entirety of Ferelden’s coastline from the Frostbacks east through Highever, Amaranthine, and Denerim, then winding south down the rocky, mostly-uninhabited eastern shores of the Brecilian to Gwaren. Alfstanna, Fergus, Theron, and Anora held, to varying degrees, all of Ferelden’s naval power, almost all of its international trade, and its most profitable and densely-populated cities. They made a very powerful political and economic bloc, even if Theron was still, almost five years later, not really sure what to do when it came to the exercise of such power. This was the faction Anora had put together to secure her own power- the only other ruling woman in the country, who’d been a staunch supporter of anti-Blight measures for the entire near civil war; the only other Teyrn, who’d thrown in with her immediately upon returning home from his Chasind healing; and the Grey Warden who’d secured her throne for her and saved the country. Teyrn Fergus especially had been helping her push back against those remaining nobles from the time of Maric’s rebellion who’d always supported Cailan and the Theirin blood more than her own competency and achievements.

He interacted a lot with Alfstanna and Fergus, at least in comparison to the Ferelden nobility generally. They were friendly with each other. But that didn’t mean that he wanted to talk about Kirkwall in front of them, especially when he already just didn’t want to talk about it, period.

“Arl-Commander?” Anora pressed, and Theron remembered that she very slightly, subtly hated him for killing her father. She was friendly enough around others, and possibly liked him a little in spite of herself, and definitely liked Zevran; but the initial combination of ‘left to torture in Fort Drakon’ and ‘killed my father’ was hard to overcome.

“There was a blood Magister in Kirkwall,” he said. The barest explanation was all she was going to get, especially asking like this. “It didn’t go well.”

Her continued look at him was a silent ‘And?’ and his steady meeting of it was ‘I’m not saying anything more about it.’
Anora held it for a few more moments before speaking again.

“If you need royal backing to lend weight to a request to one of the Circles-”

A sympathetic offer with a political edge, he’d learned to catch those now, at least sometimes. She did care enough about Zevran to help him get a spirit healer from Kinloch Hold or Jainen, but the implication that Theron wouldn’t be able to do it himself was supposed to be an insult, given his contacts.

“The Wardens have our own mages, Your Royal Highness,” Theron told her. “And our own healers. They did what they could. He’s gone to Antiva.”

A silent assessment, and she decided not to push any further.

“And when will he be back?”

It hurt, it hurt-

“We don’t know.”

“Unfortunate,” Anora said. “I would have liked to have his advice.”

“You got it,” Alistair spoke up. Theron was glad he had. He had no idea why Anora had asked for one of her least-politically-fortunate subjects to come to a meeting about her second marriage, but it said a lot about Alistair and how far he’d come from begging not to be made King that he’d step between him and Anora. Theron was proud of him, under the relief of being able to stay silent for a while and focus on ignoring the curious looks he was getting from Fergus, Alfstanna, and Erlina. “He did see your letter. Unless you want to marry Crows, don’t marry into Antiva.”

Fergus looked very uneasy.

“What, all of them?” he asked.

“Or has close ties to them’, that’s what he said,” Alistair confirmed. “He’s said some things about the Crows, and they weren’t nice. Anyway, Your Royal Highness-”

He turned his attention to Anora.

“The last the three of us knew, the Crows still have the contract from the Blight on us open; and the one Bann Esmerelle took out on Theron specifically. It would be really awkward if you invited them to court for a chance to marry you and then they tried to kill us to avenge their reputation.”

“That could be problematic, yes,” Anora said. “Unfortunately, Antiva was also the likeliest place to find a suitable husband.”

Alistair looked a little suspicious.

“Just what makes a ‘suitable husband’?” he asked.

“Young enough to be active and virile,” she said, staring him down. “Sense enough to know to stay out of my way, and realize why doing so would be beneficial to them. Personable. Lacking in real ambition. Likely a younger son, or one who was otherwise passed over for being… unsuitable.”

The silence stretched as they glared at each other.

Leonie coughed discreetly.
“Were you looking to receive advice on Orlais, Your Royal Highness?” she asked.

Anora broke the mutual glaring, but in a way that made it clear that she hadn’t given in. Theron put his hand on Alistair’s knee under the table.

“Orlais has quite the number of unattached men,” she said. “But marrying one could be, let us say, politically distasteful. I will do so if I must, but I would prefer one who was not so…”

She waved a hand.

“Orlesian?” Leonie suggested delicately.

“Quite.”

“I can look the list over and tell you what I’ve heard.”

Between the rumor and gossip Leonie dredged up from her memory and the more official information Erlina and Anora herself had already compiled, the list of Orlesians shrunk considerably. It was discouragingly impressive, given that it had been the longest list.

“Who out of these are the least offensive?” Anora finally asked some hours later, rather tiredly.

“Rosaire Desrochers, legitimized son of the Marquis of Emprise du Lion,” Erlina told her. “His mother is a commoner the Marquis married after the death of his third wife, and his elder sister’s husband is set to inherit the marquisate. The other is Ser Reynaud Yann Fay-Dufort, Arlessa Isolde’s youngest cousin. He has no titles but his rank as a Chevalier.”

“Then they may begin the list. What of Nevarra?”

Nevarra only had two names.

“Hey, we met that guy in Kirkwall,” Alistair said, seeing ‘Enoch Van Markham’. “He’s the Warden-Constable of the Free Marches.”

“Which would explain why we couldn’t find much on him,” Alfstanna said, and his name was discarded. A few minutes later, Duke Tythas of Hunter Fell was as well, after Leonie and Fergus traded stories they’d heard about his five deadly mistresses.

The Anderfels had exactly one name: Prince Baldewin Augustin, only child of the King of the Anderfels.

“His father is a weak king,” Leonie said. “But people are hopeful about the prince.”

“Dual reigning titles could present a problem,” Alfstanna cautioned, but Anora had him added to the final list anyway.

The last area of Thedas to consider were the Free Marches.

“I’ll say it again, Anora— he’s too young,” was Erlina’s comment about Saemus Dumar, the first name on the ‘Free Marches’ page.

“But we’ve just opened profitable dialogue with his father about our expatriate citizens,” Anora countered.

“It’s not worth it,” Alistair told them both. “The blood Magister wasn’t the only thing wrong with that city. There were demons. And other blood mages. Slavers. Rampant crime. Apparently there are
weird cults. We’ve got some people back in Amaranthine who could write you a whole list of reasons never to go to Kirkwall. You don’t want to be involved there for any longer than it takes to get the Fereldans home.”

He seemed to realize, when Anora shot a look at him, that he’d spoken as if he was in a Warden meeting. His expression was torn between ingrained deference to the throne and a pure authority-born stubbornness that he was probably only holding onto because it was Anora.

“He’s right,” Theron spoke for him. “It isn’t a good place. We arrived and immediately had to track down a source of the Taint.”

Kirkwall and Saemus Dumar were quickly relegated to non-candidate status.

“I’m not sure,” Fergus said uncertainly to the mention of Goran Vael. “They just had a coup. That sounds like something we shouldn’t get involved in.”

“Teyrn Fergus, I’d like to remind you that we had a coup,” Anora said. “They even happened in the same year, and furthermore, ours had more factions and came much closer to fracturing the country than theirs did.”

“it’s just that I’ve met him, my Queen,” Fergus protested. “I don’t think he’s the sort of person who could pull off a coup. I think someone else did it, and then put him there as a puppet.”

“He’s got a cousin,” Alfstanna suggested hopefully.

“And everyone knows that the Vaels send at least one child a generation just to keep their hands in the Game,” she argued. “Lay brothers and sisters from noble families have been released before for marriage purposes. He’s very nearly perfect- the middle son, apparently had no ambitions beyond living well, the standard rumors of wild behavior when he was younger before being sent to the Chantry, but nothing of the sort since then. With the coup, he’s out of the line of succession, so you get the benefit of a Princely family without the complication of titles.”

“Only if the other options prove unreasonable,” Anora decided.

There was only one more, now- Maxwell Trevelyen, son of one of the Banns of Ostwick.

“His older sister Evelyn is heir,” Erlina said. “The Trevelyans are a large family on good terms with the Chantry and have historically made good marriages. They have family ties throughout the Marches, as well as in Nevarra, Antiva, and to at least one Magister line.”

Everyone looked at Theron and pretended that they weren’t.

“It could be beneficial for our diplomatic relations. Public opinion generally presents him as easy-going, without any significant outstanding rumors. He’s almost too young, but-”

“How young?” Alfstanna asked.

“Halfway between twenty and twenty-one.”

“Men that young have been considered before,” Anora said, and Alistair scowled at the tabletop. “Well then. Prince Baldewin, Maxwell Trevelyen, Rosaire Desrochers, and Reynauld Yann Fay-Dufort. If they all prove unpalatable, then we shall see about the other Vael. Erlina, I will need formal invitations- immediately. It will take some time for the Prince to arrive from the Anderfels.”
To Theron’s surprise, Alistair perked up.

“We have Wardens who will be leaving for Weisshaupt soon,” he said. “If you’d like, they could take it.”

“We do?” Theron asked, and then realized that it made him look like an idiot.

“Mhequi was going to ask when you got back,” Alistair told him. “She wants to send Rhannur and Andreas home to ask for advice about Fenris. We’d all assumed you’d let them go, so-”

“Of course they can go,” Theron said. “And they can take the letter.”

“Then the letter can travel with one of my retainers from Amaranthine in the company of your Wardens,” Anora said. “It seems appropriate enough for the Anderfels.”

That sounded like the end of the meeting, but she didn’t dismiss them. She folded her hands on the table and looked at each of them.

“There is other business that must be handled,” she said. “We cannot proceed any longer without our bannorns filled. It is important to continue the line of succession, yes, but it is even more important to continue the country. As so much of our farmland is unclaimed, and we have not enough people of suitable status to claim it, I have decided that the only option is to sell the old holdings and taxation rights of the empty bannorns to suitable personages. It will be announced soon, and the next season of court will be the opportunity for our current nobility to ascertain the characters of those who would make a claim to the lands and titles. Everyone will attend court—yes, even you, Arl-Commander, with Alistair as well. I won’t hear of you needing to do Warden business or handle the arling. You just acquired a new Seneschal, and if you can run off to Kirkwall on a moment’s notice you can do everything that absolutely needs doing from Denerim. Others have run their holdings from Denerim for years.”

“Why would you want me?” Alistair asked.

“You are one of our Blight Wardens,” Anora said. “You survived Ostagar. You fought the Archdemon atop Fort Drakon. You are one of the highest-ranked Wardens in Ferelden; and yes, Alistair Mac Maric—”

He blanched at the official bastardry surname.

“...you are the sole surviving son of one of our most beloved and heroic kings. The Arl-Commander be the Hero of Ferelden, but you are one as well. The two of you represent much of what is good about our national character, and beyond that have an international cachet that none of the rest of us can match. You will both be attending court, specifically for our honored guests.”

That sounded, to Theron, like a terrible idea. He was going to need advice. He needed to talk to Nathaniel.

“As such,” Anora continued, back to addressing Alistair specifically. “Out of respect to your service and to the dignity of both our guests and yourself-”

“No,” Alistair said very, very quietly.

“You shall henceforth be officially known and announced as Warden-Captain Alistair Mac Maric, Lord of Ferelden, in command of the Grey at Soldier’s Peak.”

Alistair shot a wild, panicked look at Theron. It was such a... him reaction that Theron had to smile
just a little. His friend had gotten better at authority, but there were clearly things that were still beyond him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t think I can help you with this one.”

“You have some time to put your affairs in order,” Anora told them. “The decisions will be made after Wintersend, and I will see you within the week before.”

“She gave me the bastardry title,” Alistair moaned on the walk back to the estate. He was doing it both because he was honestly upset, and because his moaning was making Theron smile. That second was very important. “I’m going to sound so pretentious. ‘Hello, Your Royal Highness,’ I’m going to have to say to Prince Baldewin. ‘Yes, you are correct, I’m a Grey Warden. The name’s Captain Alistair Mac Maric, Lord of Ferelden. I’ve stood in the presence of the Urn of Sacred Ashes, defeated a Blight, was one of two Wardens left standing after Ostagar, and I helped kill the Archdemon Urthemiel. What have you done lately? Hunting? That’s nice. Let me tell you about the fortress I command. It’s on top of a mountain.’ Anora really hates us, Theron.”

“If you really did all that,” his friend said, tone almost as mild as it usually was when he turned an observation into gentle teasing. “Then it isn’t pretentious. It’s tell the truth. The nobility loves this sort of thing, all the titles. I could give you some more, and then we could have an equal number—”

“No one needs that many titles, Theron. You’ve got almost as many as Anora.”

“Only because I have Dalish ones as well,” Theron said. “And I can add some new ones. Marethari practically declared me a full Hahren. I’ve been acting as one for Velanna’s clan anyway, and now with our third city, we can have truly independent positions again, not tied to a particular clan or those who have forsworn their names to serve the Dalish as a whole. The shems don’t know what my vallas’lin mean, so I could put that in there too.”

“Theron, no.”

“Anora wants us to be impressive,” he said innocently. “The more titles you have, the more impressive you are. Do you think I should send an updated list to the protocol officer before or after we leave?”

It was doing him good to hear Theron exercising his subtle paybacks against the system he’d gotten stuck in again. Alistair knew this game pretty well— he still played it sometimes. Be deliberately obtuse, miss the point on purpose or pretend to not understand, and people would write you off.

“If you send it before,” Alistair said. “He might come by the estate, and then you can see in person just how badly-equipped he is to handle Dalish titles.”

Theron hmmmed like the idea had potential.

“So what did you stay after to talk to Anora about?”

“Oh, I wanted her acknowledgement,” Theron said. “I’m founding an order of knighthood.”

“Uh, okay,” Alistair said, surprised and a bit confused. “Great? But you’re an arl. You can just do that. And why?”

“It’s polite to inform the monarch before you do it officially, and I’m doing it because I can think of a couple of people who deserve it,” Theron told him, and Alistair mentally shrugged. They’d reached the estate and passed through the guards’ doors by the front gates. Without riding horses around the
city or expecting company, there was no reason to raise the large, heavy portcullis.

Theron stopped in the middle of the courtyard. Alistair only noticed once he was at the main door, and backtracked. His friend was looking very pensive.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m going to need-” Theron gestured around at the bulk of the estate. “Guards, right? Since we’re being forced to live here, and host parties, and escort foreign nobility around. And a full household staff. A chamberlain. A steward. A housekeeper. A cook. Footmen. Maids. Hostlers and carriage keepers and probably a bunch of other positions I don’t even know about. And I’m going to have to have a retinue from Amaranthine, to reinforce my noble dignity, and they’re going to need maids and things. And I don’t know how to host a party. Are they going to make me dance? I don’t know how to dance.”

It was true. Alistair could manage through the very simple court dances, and he could remember one single time that Zevran had led Theron through a waltz, but that had been required participation. Usually, at court parties, Theron sat off at the tables and ate, talking to the particularly solemn and serious banns who no one wanted to socialize with, listening politely to what they had to say about the state of their lands and holdings while Zevran did most of the social legwork with the ‘real’ nobility and Alistair chatted up the lords and knights. It worked because they’d all come together at the end of the evening and make a whole picture of the party.

It was going to be difficult to manage this without Zevran. Theron was not going to be able to step up for the social side of things by spring court, and neither was he, unless they found a deportment master. Maybe Nathaniel and Delilah could stand in for Zevran this time on the teaching front. If not, well, Alistair would join Theron in exploiting a Warden’s constant ability to eat and spend what were sure to be full six- or seven-hour night parties steadily working through everything the royal kitchens had to offer. They could do it. You just needed to find the right pace.

“If it’s your party, I don’t think they can make you dance,” Alistair told him. “But yeah, you need to hire a household.”

Theron looked around sadly.

“And I was thinking about redecorating, too.”

“Why? Looks fine to me.”

“But it’s Orlesian,” Theron said. “They stole it all from the Dales and did it wrong. I’d be happier if it looked right.”

“If it makes you happy you should do it,” Alistair told him immediately, seizing on the hint of something like a useful distraction for his friend. A project might be just the thing to keep him from worrying. “And Anora’s inviting Orlesians. You could show them how it’s supposed to be done.”

A fleeting smile crossed his face, but it was wide and genuine, and Alistair congratulated himself for getting it right.

“The plastering needs to come out and everything needs to be repainted,” Theron said firmly, apparently settled now on the idea of redecorating in the name of showing some Orlesians what was what. “That’s the worst, all the white. I want to get someone from the clans who’s used to maintaining the murals in the Dales to come do the proper frescos.”

“Wait, you do-”
“Of course we do that. We preserve them wherever we find them. There aren’t many of them, but if we’re going to keep them someone has to go back every couple of years and repaint them. Maybe to save time most of them could be wall mosaics. If the mural crafter sketched it out, a human put install it. That would be faster than doing the entire estate in frescos, and they last longer. And all of the colors are wrong, generally. Things will need to be reupholstered. Maybe we can exchange furniture.”

“Sounds good to me- I can ask around about who to get for the interiors,” Alistair promised. “You find your Dalish muralist and then things can get started.”

“Then I should go south right after this,” Theron said. “So everyone has as much of the time before Wintersend as possible. Could you find Alec and Kallian and have them come to the office?”

That was easy enough. Leonie had gone out to the city after leaving the palace to get food for the night, so they’d be the only other people in the estate. Theron was impressing his seal on the bottom of some pieces of parchment when Alistair escorted them up, tagging along out of curiosity.

“These are for you,” Theron told Alec and Kallian, handing them each a stamped and embossed leather scroll case. Alistair had to raise his eyebrows at that and give Theron a questioning look. They were official Amaranthine scroll cases, the leather tinted purplish with the arling’s dye and the amaranth flowers picked out in gold. “The ceremony will be later, in the Vigil, once I’ve had the chance to give the other guards who volunteered in the tent city during Caron their letters, and Wade is finished with the armor commission.”

“Arl-Commander?” Captain Alec asked.

Theron turned one of the parchments around.

“A letter patent of accolade,” he said. “For public posting. It establishes the Silver Order of Knighthood with the adoubement of its first two members.”

“Holy flaming shit,” Kallian said, and then clapped her free hand over her mouth in mortification.

Theron just smiled at her.

“For outstanding service to the arling in its time of need, Ser Alec; and for my life in Kirkwall, Ser Tabris. Everyone else involved in both your efforts were Wardens, and I can’t do anything more for them. But you, I can. Thank you for what you’ve done.”

“I-” Alec said. “I- thank you, Your Arlship, Commander, I- I should go write my family-”

Theron nodded, silently dismissing him, and Alec retreated from the room, flustered.

Kallian was still standing there, frozen.

“Ser Ta-”

“Why,” she blurted. “Ser, I don’t mean to- this is a real honor but I really didn’t do anything-”

“You nearly escaped the Tevenes without any backup,” Theron interrupted her. “If the Wardens hadn’t realized we were missing yet, you would have been the one to inform them and lead them to our rescue. I know I wasn’t really- properly present for that, but when we were packing to leave Kirkwall, Zevran told me that you deserved a promotion. I trust him.”

“I’m not sure this is what he meant, Ser.”
“Well, it’s what I mean.”

Kallian swallowed heavily.

“Arl-Commander,” she said, visibly steeling herself, and Alistair’s attention sharpened. “Your Arlship. I feel like- I should tell you, before you post those-”

She glanced down at the letters patent on his desk.

“-I’m the elf who killed Vaughan Kendells and his guards and his friends.”

Theron was clearly trying to remember where he’d heard the name before, so Alistair stepped in a provided it.

“Son of the old Arl of Denerim.”

“Oh,” Theron said. “Did he deserve it?”

“He was a filthy rapist with filthy rapist friends who thought it would be fun to kidnap me and my wedding party because my cousin knocked him out with a wine bottle.”

“I’d say you deserve a knighthood just for that,” Theron told her, and Alistair desperately wanted the rest of this story, it sounded like Kallian had made a very big and very bloody impression. “But I can’t put that in the letters.”

He handed her one of them.

“Ser Tabris, if you’d like to be of immediate help, the Queen has ordered me to attend court for the spring. I need a household staff. I’d like to hire out of the alienage. Do you think you could find someone with enough skills to be chamberlain? I’ll let them hire their own staff.”

Kallian clutched the scroll case and the letter.

“I know somebody,” she said. “Who would really appreciate the ability to boss around drunk nobles.”

She had to take a moment, when she went back to her room to safely stow her copy of the accolade, to cover her face with her hands and scream.

She’d been elevated to the nobility. The lowest rung of the nobility, but she was in the nobility. She was in the part of the nobility whose express purpose was to be very good at fighting and killing things in the name of defending their people.

Ferelden now had two elven nobles, and both of them were fighters. Her and the Arl-Commander. Her and the Arl-Commander.

Oh Andraste.

Kallian sat down hard on the floor and stayed there for a bit.

One piece of parchment and the Arl-Commander’s signature and seal, and she had all the rights and privileges of the nobility. She could sit in the Landsmeet, though as merely a Knight she couldn’t vote. She could go armed anywhere in the country. The only people with the legal authority to try and convict her of a crime were her liege lord and the ruling monarch. In some instances, it was a capital offense, even treason, to attack to otherwise harm her. Her personal reputation and honor
were now as sacred and inviolable as any Freeholder’s- as any human’s- and as an official representative of the arling, and through that Ferelden itself, an insult to her could be an insult to the Arl-Commander and the Crown, and vice versa. Insult to her people was an insult to her-

It started out as a breathless giggle, but soon Kallian was outright laughing, brightly, in something like relief. Let anyone try to touch an elf when she was around now! The Arl-Commander had said he needed a household. Human commoners and Freeholders were protected under their lord’s or employer’s reputation. An estate of this size and dignity, which was going to hold court parties- you could employ a lot of people for that.

She got up from the floor, adjusted her armor, secured her sword across her back, and walked out the estate with the letter patent of accolade in hand and her head high. Let the city guard try to stop her. Let the other nobles take offense. She had Amaranthine’s bear etched into the silverite plate across her chest and her linens and ties were warm wheat yellow and the leather sun-baked brown. She was wearing her lord’s colors and was carrying a paper that made her legally as good as any of them, and better than some of them.

The guards on the alienage got very set expressions as they had to let her pass through the gates with her sword, and Kallian had to resist stopping and shoving the letter in their faces. The Arl-Commander would take care of informing the rest of the country- the letter she had was for the alienage, and the alienage deserved to know first.

People she knew called hello when they saw her pass. Children who had been too young to remember when she left, or had been born since, stared at her with wide eyes, fascinated by the sight of an elven warrior dressed better than the city guard. The few adult faces that she didn’t know- new spouses, from elsewhere- froze instinctively at the glimpse of two-handed sword and armor, then relaxed in confusion when they saw her ears.

It turned out to be laundry day- good. That meant that there were more people around than usual, even for what was usually a break day for elves in household service. Shianni was directing the procession of tubs set up around the vhenadahl to handle the neighborhood’s collective washing, and her own father was seated up on the gathering platform, the Hahren holding court. She stopped at the edge of the square and held her free hand up to her mouth.

“Surprise!” Kallian yelled across the space, and everyone descended, calling back greetings and questions for news as they dragged her up to the gathering platform to stand next to her father.

“Hey Dad,” she said quietly as the neighborhood gathered, and Cyrion leveraged himself out of his chair to hug her.

“My little girl all in armor,” he said. “I’ll never tire of this.”

“You were supposed to be back from Kirkwall weeks ago!” Shianni yelled up at her from the tubs, where the launderers were quickly finishing up the tasks they’d been working on, in anticipation of a story.

“Yeah, yeah!” Kallian replied. “I got my own life, Shianni!”

“So tell us!” her cousin demanded, and others picked it up. Her father stepped back and held up his hand for quiet. Getting it, he gestured her towards the front of the platform.

“The Arl-Commander went to Kirkwall to find the daughter of Rendon How, and Andraste only knows why, he had me come along with the Wardens,” Kallian said for the benefit of anyone who hadn’t gotten the news, her voice carrying across the square. “And now I finally understand the
stories from the Blight. These people just turn up, and suddenly there’s trouble! I’m pretty sure they just wandered around the country looking for darkspawn, and it rained chamberpots!”

There was a general chuckle at that. ‘Raining chamberpots’ was an old alienage saying- the shit in your life wasn’t your fault, any more than noble estates illegally emptying chamberpots out the windows in the morning was, it just managed to hit you on the way down anyway. Thinking about the distinguished Grey Wardens suffering such an indignity was amusing.

“I got to fight demons,” Kallian continued once everyone was listening again. “I got to fight a blood mage. And there was- now I know there’s no point in asking you all not to laugh at me, but I’m doing it anyway- I met a guy.”

Hooting laughter and mocking whistles greeted that, just as expected.

“This from the girl who swore for three hours straight that she wouldn’t get married!”

“He’s got this voice!” she called back at whoever had made that comment. “And a sword as big as he is, and he could definitely kill me! He’s kicked my ass every time we’ve sparred! He’s blighted fast and strong and he spent six years in Kirkwall trying to lure the Magister he ran from out of Minrathous so he can rip his fucking hear out with his bare hands! And he could do it, too! The Magister’s apprentice turned up while we were there, a blood mage, and he did it to her! The Arl-Commander and his man and I got captured by the slavers she brought and I tore through the shem filth the same way I did Vaughan Kendells, and-”

Kallain flourished the parchment.

“-the Arl-Commander knighted me for it!”

Lots of excited shouting and congratulations later, someone had gotten a cheap bottle of wine her hand, and she and Shianni were sitting together at the base of the vheneadahl, under were they’d posted the letter patent, sharing it. It was some pretty awful wine, but it tasted like home.

“So,” Kallian said. “What are you doing these days? Job-wise?”

“Laundry,” Shianni told her. “Dusting and sweeping. Dishes. I mucked stables for a week. The nobles are moving in or moving out for the winter, so there’s lots of temp work if you’re up for it. The shems have realized I talk, to temp work is all I’ve had for- a long time.”

“Well,” Kallian said, and handed her the wine bottle. “How would you feel about a job kicking rich drunk humans out the door?”

Her cousin smiled.

“Sounds great,” she said. “But if this is another one of your ‘move to Amaranthine’ schemes, I’m still saying no. Even if it is a tavern job-”

“No tavern,” Kallian cut her off. “The Queen has ordered the Arl-Commander to attend spring court. He asked me to help him find a household staff from the alienage. He said that if I found someone good enough to be chamberlain, they could hire their picks for the staff.”

Silence.

“It’s a good position, Shianni,” she told her. “The estate is a mess. Nobody’s lived in it since Rendon Howe got grabby with other people’s land. Whenever the Arl-Commander is forced to come, he and his Wardens just clean a couple rooms to sleep in, cook for themselves, and then leave. It needs to be
even nicer than any of the other estates, to make up for what the shems will think about the Commander. And then it needs to stay that way. You already organize here. I bet you could do it.”

Shianni just handed her the wine bottle back.

“I’ve got this picture in my head,” Kallian pressed. “Since I started walking out to come down here. A whole legion of servants, in gold and white, all elves. Me, and the elves from Amaranthine’s Guard, keeping an eye out, armored, armed. The Arl-Commander presiding. And all those blighted shem nobles trying not to piss themselves in their fancy outfits because we outnumber them, and if they’re not polite to the staff or respectful to the guards or downright friendly to the Arl-Commander, he’ll call them on it. And they’d know that we know that they’ve got not one sodding clue amongst themselves what decent behavior looks like. They’re going to slip eventually, and it’ll only be a matter of time. And then we’ll all be there to see it. Think you could make it happen?”

Her cousin stayed quiet a moment longer.

“I can damn well try,” she finally said.
Zevran returned to Rialto with a dream of Theron quietly dying inside from his absence until there was nothing left of him still fresh in his mind. Dock beggars pressed for coin because everyone in Antiva knew Crow tattoos when they saw them, and he avoided their eyes.

He found one of the week-inns that let rooms without question. They were a favorite with conmen, smugglers, those on the search for more permanent accommodations, and the cheaper sort of Crows, like what he was pretending to be. Simple muscle, the sort of person who was trained in how to kill a mark in a crowd, because that was easy and didn’t need pesky things like actual intelligence or finesse.

The name he’d decided to assume for this trip was meant to sound more Rivaini than Antivan. He was dark enough for Rivaini heritage two or three generations back to not be out of the question for someone who didn’t know his family history. The only constraint was that it had to be easy for him to remember, and react unconsciously to.

In the end, it had been too easy.

“Mahar Desoto,” Zevran told the woman who owned the week-inn her chose. Desoto was Crow House based in Ayesleigh, on the other side of Antiva, and big enough that everyone in the House didn’t know everyone else.

“Loshca Albanesu,” the woman said in return, and gave him an obvious physical appraisal. Zevran tried to smile through it, but it left a sort of crawling feeling inside him that this sort of obvious desire never had before. He’d played this game when he’d last been in Antiva, killing Grandmaster Eoman Arainai and destroying his old House, but now there were words in his head and

Together we’ll find out how he likes having a blood thrall for a lover.

He told himself he had to play to expectations and shifted his weight just enough to best show off his body. A particularly persistent rumor about the Crows held that they were, to a one, promiscuous and up for anything. In reality that was only a requirement for the Crows’ courtesans- but, well, that was what he’d been trained in. Other rumor claimed that said courtesans were pure fiction and just fodder for bad romances; while the other popular school of thought held that they were skilled enough to kill someone simply by having sex with them. It was worth your life to experience, people said confidently in taverns across Antiva.

That sort of assassination was, of course, physically impossible; but Zevran knew all too well that there were other kinds of death. Sex could be a very effective weapon in inflicting a lot of them.

Loshca clearly enjoyed the show, but didn’t press any flirtation, which was a secret relief. She explained the inn rules on the way to show him his room. It was nothing he hadn’t heard before- after one week the room price jumped fivefold, no whoring or other business out of the premises, and if someone was going to die take it out to the street or the rooftop. She didn’t add that she paid protection to the Crows against theft. That was assumed, and anyway, he was a Crow. He could be expected to know these things.

He locked the door once Loshca had gone back downstairs to watch the door, and unpacked. He only had a few of the clothes he’d taken to Kirkwall, the very simplest and plainest things that could have come from anywhere in Thedas. It wouldn’t pay to stand out as a foreigner here, and things could have been awkward if he’d brought the rest, and someone had identified the cut and the style
as Fereldan. The Crows didn’t have business in Ferelden. The only person who’d ever considered hiring them had been Loghain- Ferelden just didn’t have a need for assassins. They preferred things all out in the open.

Three shirts, an extra pair of pants, all of his socks- he put them away in the short chest of drawers. They’d hold him until he could replenish his wardrobe with Antivan garments.

The notebook he’d been using to keep track of his expenses went on top of the chest. Zevran flipped it open and paused at the beginning, like he always did- he’d torn the first page of this journal out to write his farewell note to Theron, and he hadn’t picked the ragged edge out of the spine yet. He wasn’t certain he ever would.

He forced himself past the tiny detail and updated his expense record. The first entry at the top was the sum total of what the Wardens had had on them when he’d slipped away. He’d find some way to pay them back. His money noted, he quickly checked the back cover- he’d stitched Anora’s list of Antivan candidates to the leather his first night aboard the ship to Rialto. It was still there, his reminder of why he’d come.

Well, that was a lie, but why dwell? He was in Antiva because he couldn’t be fixed and Theron cared too much, which meant that Zevran couldn’t do this to him. He couldn’t stay and be the one thing Theron couldn’t make better, the one person he couldn’t help.

The Magister had done more than just steal his mind. She’d driven home the truth of the lie he’d been told so young- or he’d told himself- that he’d always believed it. He’d been a slave to the Crows, and even before that, he’d never been free. He hadn’t been free since the moment his mother had fallen sick; or maybe even since the moment she’d been forced into the brothel to survive. He’d been telling himself his whole life that he’d made his own choices and always had, but they weren’t choices if someone else had all the power. The blood magic had only proved this, written it into his soul with words he could never escape.

Zevran couldn’t do anything about the blood magic, but Maker and Creators he could do something about the Crows, and he had truly chosen to do so. No one had forced him to come back here. This was maybe the first real choice he’d made in his whole life- it was perhaps a matter of semantics, but he didn’t count anything after taking the contract on Theron and Alistair as a true choice. They were real ones, sure enough- choosing to live, to kill Taliesin, to stay with Theron, to fall so absolutely hopelessly and completely in love with him- they had happened, and it had been his own doing, without anyone forcing him. Those just didn’t matter in the same way. He’d still been lying to himself then, and hadn’t realized how precious a thing he’d managed to take for himself.

But the Crows- if enough of them died. If he chose to be what they’d made him to be, if he turned cold-hearted ruthless assassin on his own terms. Then maybe he could gain at least as much control over himself as anyone else did.

The money he’d stolen was in the bottom of his sparse luggage, under two things he really shouldn’t have brought with him, but had anyway.

The first was the silverite and Antivan leather armor Theron had commissioned for him. It was entirely too expensive for the role he was playing, and not at all good for acting as a Crow, but he hadn’t been able to leave it behind like he had his Warden armor. This was a gift from someone special, and- the circumstance of it was important. Zevran had appointed himself Theron’s bodyguard and spymaster once they’d gotten back from Orzammar and re-established themselves, half as a joke while also deadly serious about it. Theron was entirely too trusting for either of their well-being, and needed someone considerably more pragmatic and cynical about the human condition to watch out for him.
At the time, Theron had just smiled a little like he was humoring him, and Zevran had been sure that was the last they’d talk about it until some crisis inevitably came up.

But then a month and a half later he’d surprised Zevran with the armor, all laid out on their bed one evening after dinner. The silverite plates were delicately engraved on the edges with a complicated tangle of amaranth flowers and soaring owls. The leather was a warm golden brown and came with cream linen to go under it- Amaranthine colors- but the little embroidered details around the stitching and some of the edges were Dalish designs in the wine red and pink-purple of good Amaranthine dye. There was a sash to go with it, woven of both colors mixed together to create the richest and most luxurious shade of red-purple he’d ever seen. It had instantly become his new favorite color.

“It’s low-key enough to be field armor,” Theron had told him when he’d brought Zevran into their room to show off his present. “But when you wear it all together it’s nice enough for dress armor, for when I have to hold court, or we’re called to Denerim, and we need to be official about your positions.”

“And you can show me off wearing your colors?” he’d asked slyly, and Theron had smiled a little. The way he wouldn’t quite meet Zevran’s eyes was his obvious tell for when he was having possessive thoughts and trying not to enjoy them too much.

But Zevran was very much in favor of those possessive thoughts, and had made sure that Theron knew it.

He couldn’t wear this armor in Antiva unless he dyed the leather and darkened the silverite, so it looked older and of lesser materials, but he couldn’t do that. This armor was his place at the Keep, by Theron’s side, protecting him, and- he wasn’t there now and likely never would be again, but the memories of it were such precious things.

The majority of the armor went into the lowest drawer. The gloves and boots he kept out, because the silverite was sandwiched between the leather there, and even cheap Crows would have good equipment.

Wrapping the sash around his waist and making sure the subtly-embroidered owl in flight at the end of it was hanging down against his hip, the tight stitches in the same color as the sash itself noticeable only when he brushed his fingers against them, was pure sentiment. He wanted… something, and this was the closest he’d get.

The second thing he shouldn’t have brought was the gold-inlaid iron box. He didn’t open it. The Wardens had been going to keep the red lyrium, but Zevran had thought that was a terrible decision for their health and slipped it into his bag when he’d run away. He’d meant to drop it over the side of the ship somewhere in the Amaranthine Ocean, and it worried him that he hadn’t.

He’d find some way to get rid of it, he promised himself; and balled the bag up around the box and kicked both under his bed after he’d retrieved the money and hidden that, too. Then he went to the market, Alistair’s coin purse tucked into his sash.

It was lunchtime and crowded. Zevran drifted around the stalls, contemplating the various clothes on sale and selecting items. He really needed a few things that were of slightly higher quality than were on display out here under the sun, but he could worry about that after he’d bought lunch, which he took on the fountain- a pocket of bread with lightly-fried fish and diced cucumbers in yoghurt sauce. Only in Antiva, and he savored the taste of it.

Once the market cleared up a bit, he ambled up one of the streets off the square and went into the first likely-looking clothes shop. Observation during lunch had shown him that red in all its varieties
was the order of the season, and the selection here did not disappoint. There was true red and sangria and scarlet and jay and ruby and wine and brick, cherry and blood and mahogany and apple and berry and fire, even the rust brown of dried blood and the lightest of desert pinks. Embroidery was a common staple of Antivan fashion for all classes, and whoever had decided that black and white and yellow were the picks for the reds had had quite good taste. The effect was very striking, but Zevran almost forgot to notice once he realized what the embroideries were.

Antivan fashion had long called for flowers, geometric patterns, and the usual mainstay of Andraste’s sun-in-glory. But now-

Bulls and desert lions. Dragons and griffins. Snakes and scorpions. The elvhen-headed winged lions festooned with jewelry, the *dammaskari*, that you could still find carvings and statues of out in the desert. Many still guarded the ruins of temples and shrines to old Iashtivar Queen of the Heavens, their details worn almost away by the ravages of sand-laced wind and season rains and simple time, but their overall forms stayed strong.

This was the Antiva no one spoke of.

This was Antiva before the Imperium, when the oasis-dwellers who’d built the brick-and-stone cities the desert had long swallowed up or tumbled down, and spent the dry season on the coast or on the edges of the rainforest still spoke their own language; before it had been lost in the alphabet carved into the deep walls of the desert caves that no one could read any longer, with only the faint echoes of those old words in the purely local additions to the almost-Tevene of modern Antivan.

This was Antiva before the Chantry, after the Imperium had fallen and the those who remained gathered their communities together in communes in the floodplains and on the edges of the forests and in the hills and up against the sea, clinging to the forms of the old laws while they encoded what remained of their own heritage right alongside it; before the costal communes had become true cities through trade and remembered the Magisters’ ruthlessness, plastering it over with Orlesian gilt to create something entirely new.

This was Antiva when it had truly been Rivain’s sister-people, something like the Chasind and the Avvar of Ferelden, maybe even something like the Dalish.

Something had changed here, and he didn’t know what, or how.

Zevran bought a dark red shirt with griffins and Iashtivar’s *dammaskari* stitched large around the collar and cuffs in black and yellow, and left the shops behind.

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He was on his way back to the inn when he passed a printer’s stall closing up for the evening. Neither the senior apprentice running the stall or the last customer himself were anything out the ordinary, but a certain furtiveness and the way that they were trying a little too much to seem perfectly normal made him pause in a shadow and watch.

The last customer bought an octavo book with no proper cover to show off its decorative stitch-binding. The apprentice slipped a pamphlet into the book behind the receipt in a deplorable example of slight-of-hand. Zevran followed the customer and brushed by him in the falling dark, fingering the receipt and the pamphlet out of the book.

He stopped the read the receipt by the light of a street lantern.

*I o. Exec. Romão Dommaskari Aut. Rains 0.00.52 Garras.&Zu. sig. Ciri. Ola*

The pamphlet was made of thick, good paper, Zevran looked at it only long enough to note the block
printed design across the top of it- a wide strip of black with Andraste’s gold sun-in-glory shining over Iashtivar’s bull-horn crescent moon the cream white of uninked paper, with two red dammashari flanking the celestial symbols, facing each other and supporting the center with an upraised forepaw each.

Interesting. He’d read it when he was back in his room.

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**NO CROWS, NO KINGS, NO CLERICS!**

*It is known that:*

1. *The House of Crows in Antiva controls every aspect of public life*
2. The descendants of our Honored Queen Asha Subira Badahur Campana care more for their infighting than the care of their birthright and have been shamelessly exploited by the Crows to further their own ends
3. The structures of the Chantry have been co-opted to the agenda of the Crows so that the Chantry of Antiva is even more irredeemably corrupt than its sister-Chantries under both the White and Black Divines
4. The merchant houses succeed only under the auspices of the Crows and this relationship to prevent any others from attaining wealth and status
5. The people of Antiva suffer needlessly and egregiously under these four swords of oppression

*Thus we hold that:*

6. *The Crows’ greatest weapon is not their assassins but their intimate and collective knowledge of people and affairs both within and without Antiva*
7. The descendants of our Honored Queen Asha Subira Badahur Campana have forfeited their birthright and are not fit to rule
8. The Chant of Light has been debased, defiled, and abused on the whims of the Chantry
9. The merchant houses of Antiva impoverish the rest of the country in the name of profit and competition
10. We the people of Antiva had the right and responsibility to revolution, rebellion, and reform

*And so we believe that:*

11. *The Crows and the monarchy must be dispensed with through most any means necessary*
12. The governance of Antiva should be taken over by a Council of the Cities and Communes, as the city and commune councils draw from their own residents to declare matters of law and civic regulation
13. The Chantry of Antiva must be dismissed and Antiva break with the Divine in Val Royeaux, and rather manage our own spiritual health according to the true and literal precepts given to us by Our Lady Andraste in Her most sacred and holy Chant of Light
14. Money must not be a tool of oppression but rather a means of progression, and the merchant houses must therefore be humbled
15. Knowledge is power, and information must therefore be free and easy to obtain
16. Our time has come

*In the words of Our Lady Andraste, Prophet and Bride, to whom we commend ourselves, our honor and pride, and our beloved country of Antiva:*

“You who stand before the gates,
You who have followed me into the heart of evil,
The fear of death is in your eyes;
Its hand is upon your throat.
Raise your voice to the heavens!
Remember:
Not alone do we stand on the field of battle.”

So does Rosso Noche stand with the strength of the Antivan people behind us and cry to the heavens:

NO CROWS, NO KINGS, NO CLERICS!
Chapter 4

No one cared what a prostitute thought, so Satheraan became Zevran before he was a year old.

Her job- Nehna had her pride and she held it fiercely with both hands because it was all she had. She saw others in the brothel lose theirs, and others she was pretty sure had never had any at all; but she used hers as her shield, her wall. The *shem’len* never knew any better, and she could spin outrageous lies about the Dalish, tailored depending on what they wanted. She knew the truth. She knew better. She had her language and her history.

But her son spoke his first stumbling, halting words of El’vhen at age three, long after he’d mastered sentences in Antivan. He answered more readily to ‘Zevran’ than ‘Satheraan’, and sometimes in the gray before dawn Nehna would lie in bed starting at the ceiling and wonder if he even understood that Satheraan was his name, and not just something she called him.

He knew Ghilan’nain’s story because of her *vallas’lin*, and sometimes cried before bed because he was scared that Falon’din would mistake him for dead when he was just sleeping. But he didn’t know who Elgar’nan’s parents were, or why The People thanked Mythal for the world, or that Falon’din had a brother who would do anything for him, and he the same. She would tell him, and he wouldn’t remember. But he could tell the simple version of Andraste’s life that they lay sisters taught the poor for their spiritual benefit by heart in the disjointed, rambling way of small children; and said that the Tevenes were evil because they’d killed the Maker’s Bride and not because Arlathan had fallen.

A few times- a very few times- she considered speaking to him only in El’vhen, so he’d learn it properly. But the one time she almost did the words knotted up in her throat because there were *shem’len* around and they didn’t deserve to have what should be her son’s.

By the time he was four he knew ‘mother’ and the simple forms of ‘I’m sorry’ and ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’ and ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ in El’vhen, and could count to seven and sometimes remembered how to say ‘silver’ and ‘blue’ and ‘bird’. But he couldn’t form a sentence, and when she called him ‘Satheraan’ a few weeks before his fifth birthday, he was old enough to understand that she meant it as a name but pulled a face and told her that she didn’t need to make his name sound Dalish, he liked Zevran.

Nehna cried into her pillows once she got off work that day. Her son heard her and climbed in with her, hugging her tight because he’d learned to be scared when women cried. Crying women meant that someone had hurt them and no one was going to do anything about it, and the only thing he could do to make anyone feel better was offer hugs.

She held him close against her chest and sobbed out El’vhen apologies that he couldn’t understand for everything he deserved, everything she’d hoped for him and meant to give him, that he’d never have because he was growing up in the filthy, *awful shem’len city*.

The Crows collected on her debt straight from the brothel master. She knew it made the man nervous- Crows as clients were fine, but Crows getting involved in the business end of things was terrifying and could go bad quickly. He would have thrown her out, but she made good money for him; and if she was gone then he’d have to explain to the Crows why they weren’t going to be getting gold any longer.

The Crows didn’t take everything now that she had a place in the brothel- just most of it. The other
prostitutes could afford things like perfumes and nicer clothes and addictive habits and favorite foods, but between the Crows and caring for her son, the two of them mostly just managed to stay fed. Nehna had the protection of the brothel, but otherwise her circumstances were little better than the street whores that the others in the Summer Lily held themselves above, mostly because there were so very few people lower than any of them. Some of the others treated her like a street whore- not slaps and kicks, because none of them could go around bruised; but they could steal from her or act condescending or call her names or a hundred other things.

It was really the older ones who did that- the ones her age and a bit over, who’d come to prostitution young or even grown up in the Summer Lily, and had lost so much of themselves because of the way they were treated. Nehna never wanted Satheraan- she would always call him that in her head, it was a precious thing, ‘many pleasant dreams’ and it was both all she had to give him and everything he deserved- to grow up like them, but she worried about how to make sure it didn’t happen. There were three jobs for children who grew up in brothels- join a brothel themselves, join one of the Crow-overseen gangs that ran the neighborhoods, or join a crew and run off to sea.

Satheraan would break her heart if he ran off to sea, but it would be the best for him. He could live somewhere else, somewhere far away- Nevarra, maybe. It was far away from Antiva, and she’d heard that they were nicer to elves than Orlais.

There were other prostitutes in the brothel who were perfectly nice to her, of course; it was just that there were only two of them her age who were, and the rest of them were children.

The youngest was fifteen, a human girl named Jacqina, who’d come to the Summer Lily because it was less humiliating working out of an establishment than having her own mother whore her out, and promising her to the local gang to do with as they wished. She’d been pregnant and miscarried a few days before arriving, and absolutely adored Satheraan to a point that was almost sisterly. Nehna would bring him to her rooms and Jacqina would play with him while Nehna cooked for all of them, and then after dinner she’d sit on the floor behind the girl while Satheraan dozed, and braid her long black hair.

“Who was his father?” Jacqina eventually asked, one day.

‘A woodcutter’ was the answer she’d always given, the little joke he’d told her when they met, but this time it died on her lips. Her hands still in Jacqina’s hair.

“A Crow,” Nehna told her. “He married me without permission.”

Jacqina reached up and took her hands out of her hair, holding them. The whole brothel knew that most of Nehna’s pay went to the Crows, but no one had ever known why.

“I’m so sorry,” Jacqina said. “Was it quick?”

“No,” Nehna whispered, and started crying. She’d never cried for Adan before, not in company. Jacqina leaned back into her and sang quiet songs until she’d finished.

“That wasn’t Antivan.”

Jacqina turned around to look at her.

“Jacqina isn’t my name,” she said, back straight and defensive and oh, did Nehna know this, this was pride. “My mother married a desert-man and ran away with me when I was ten. She said that she couldn’t stand the way that they still worship in fashtivar’s shrines don’t even pray to the Maker, only Andraste. She said that it was living in sin-”
Her voice broke instead of turning into bitter laughter, which was probably what she would have preferred to happen.

“No one could pronounce my real name,” Nehna offered in return. “Only my husband ever tried. I am Nehna Sora Revasina of the Dalish.”

The woman who was not Jacqina smiled tremulously at her.

“Tanis nin Zagin-miri,” she said. “Of the Khagti.”

“And my son,” Nehna said, suddenly feeling that this was urgent, important information; and that if she didn’t say it now the knowledge would just be lost, buried forever under Antiva and uncaring cruelty. “My son is Satheraan Adan Revasina.”

“Satheraan,” Tanis repeated, with a soft smile for Nehna’s son, where was sleeping on top of her covers, and Nehna began to cry again. Creators, the El’ven sat right in Tanis’s mouth, she’d never thought anyone here would even try, much less say it properly the first time-

“Nehna?” she asked in concern, and the vowels slid low and open off her tongue the way they never did in Antiva.

“Please,” she begged. “Please, say it again.”


There was just something about it, the little way that it was her clan’s name properly, ‘Revas-ina’ and not ‘Reva-sina’ the way that the shem’len and the city elves had always butchered it even though it was such a simple thing, and she just couldn’t bear it.

“Tanis,” Nehna said, fumbling for her friend’s hands, doing her best to return the favor of proper words; and must have gotten it right because Tanis smiled brilliantly at her and gripped back tightly, hanging onto this newfound thing they had between them. “Tanis nin Zagin-miri.”

Satheraan turned six and Tanis sang him bright whirling desert songs in Khagti because she was always in their place or they in hers, now. Nehna cooked the strips of beef Tanis had brought the appropriate Aliashtivar celebration of life, and a shelf by the window had wood carvings Nehna had made of the Creators and Andraste and Iashtivar with her dammaskari all mixed together. A metal plate Tanis had scavenged from somewhere lay in front, dusty with the remains of burned incense.

Three months later Tanis quietly told Nehna, in the dead of morning when the brothel was closed and the rest of the house was sleep, that she’d loved to be able to move in with them. They both knew it would never happen, because it would mean the brothel master knew for certain that they considered themselves family, and ‘love between whores’ was an old selling-point in this business. He’d advertise them together, and it would do nothing but destroy them.

Tanis knew that well, and never brought it up again; but Nehna held the knowledge that she wanted to close in her heart, right next to Adan choosing to marry her and Satheraan’s entire existence.

Still, people knew. Nehna never called Tanis ‘lethal’lan’ where anyone but the three of them could hear, but there were more ways than words to show you cared for someone, and it turned into another thing for the older prostitutes to use against her, more fodder for nasty and cutting comments or looks. But the younger ones were protective of Tanis as the youngest, still; and many of them liked Nehna and were charmed and comforted by Satheraan’s presence. The brothel master was forced to come down on the older ones instead, to keep peace in the Summer Lily.
Except that he watched them, now, and six months later Nehna took a careful look back over her record of pay and realized that the reason that their food didn’t seem to be lasting so long was because he’d started holding more of her money back for the Crows. Often, now, their meals were more leftovers from what the Summer Lily made for their clients than anything she’d bought and prepared herself.

Tanis would have helped out, but they realized that she was getting paid less, too. The prices reported to the clients and what she’d been told she was worth were quite different amounts. They were being punished for making the brothel master’s life difficult, and Nehna started guarding Satheraan closely. None of the others were allowed children- they’d been forced to leave the ones they already had behind with friends or family, lose any they became pregnant with, or give the babies up to the Chantry orphanage when they were born- and it would be so, so easy for the brothel master to arrange for her son to just disappear one day, and claim he’d run off because he was a stupid little knife-ear brat who’d probably deserved whatever he’d gotten.

Satheraan never disappeared, not even at the most dangerous part of the day when he went to the local Chantry to learn the basics of his letters along with all of the other children in the area, legitimate or bastards or human or elf or street trash or the next best thing. Nehna would stay up long enough to escort him there and back, or Tanis would, or one of the other younger prostitutes. Nehna almost preferred letting Tanis or one of the others do it, both for their sakes and Satheraan’s- when she came around to the Chantry, her son had to listen to the not-at-all whispers about the Dalish; but when one of the others went, the sixteen-seventeen-eighteen-year-old children, they got a little extra care from the faithful and a reminder that they world wasn’t limited to other prostitutes, thugs, and clients.

She could live without that reminder. Her life had been happy until Master Escipo, and she had her son and Tanis and her gods and her memories of love in the clan and with Adan. Most of the others had never even had a fraction of that.

When her son turned seven, she fell sick.

The work rules at the Summer Lily were as simple as they were cruel. The client gets what they want. Always do what the brothel master says. If you don’t work for a week, you get thrown out. If someone covers for you after that week, it’s accepted, but they have to make enough to cover both jobs as though nothing was amiss.

On the fifth day of Nehna being too sick to work, wracked with sweats and diffuse pain and no appetite to speak of, Tanis got up from the chair she’d been sitting in to nurse her and said she was going to go talk to the others about covering for her, just in case.

On the sixth day, they did the accounting together- the younger ones who they were friends with could cover her for five more days, until they all ran out of money for food or the addictions that kept them functional. This was the hazard of Nehna being the highest-priced prostitute in the house, and the Crows’ every-ten-days collection.

On the eleventh day, Nehna was no better, and had barely gotten out of bed in a week and a half. She kept seeing Satheraan trying to hide outside the doorway, watching her anxiously. Tanis was looking worn down and strained and already halfway to accepting that Nehna and Satheraan were going to be thrown out into the streets, and she would be alone.

It was enough for Nehna to force herself to get up and work that night, to reset the week-count. She paid for it for the next three days, when she was barely lucid and felt like her body was tearing itself apart.
On the sixteenth day of being sick, she woke up to find that Tanis had begged the other prostitutes, the Sisters at the local Chantry who taught the children’s lessons, the other children’s parents, and random passers-by on the street for coin enough to get her an apothecary and some medicine. The apothecary had been very confused about why she was sick in the first place, but had been able, at least, to prescribe some painkilling herbs and suggest a chance in diet. They couldn’t afford the diet but the herbs were cheap enough and helped some. It wasn’t enough to make her functional for work, and the herbs made her sleep so much, but when she was awake she was awake, and in little enough pain that she could walk around for a few minutes with assistance from Tanis.

Day twenty marked one day below three weeks of not earning any real pay, and the brothel master came around to her rooms to yell about Crows and gold and how someone had to start paying before the Crows decided to take it out of him. Tanis tried to volunteer her own pay, but Nehna stopped her. It wasn’t nearly enough to cover what the Crows usually got, and Tanis’s money was the only thing keeping the three of them in food.

Nehna slept through most of day twenty-one, absolutely exhausted by the yelling the day before. Tanis shook her awake at the Chantry bells sounding an hour after nightfall.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, tears streaming down her face. She’d have to fix her makeup and hair before showing herself off for the clients on the ground floor again. “Nehna, Nehna, I’m so sorry I swear I didn’t know no one knew we would have stopped him I don’t even know where he got the idea-”

“What?” Nehna asked, roused fully awake by the ‘he’. “What, Tanis? What did that lout of a shem who runs this place-”

“It’s not him, Nehna,” Tanis cut her off, despair heavy in her voice. “It’s Satheraan.”
Chapter 5

The rain was pitter-pattering against the leaves of the willow tree around them and the surface of the stream that flowed through the low hills around Vigil’s Keep. The air was spring-cool and the view of midlands Amaranthine was being slowly obscured by sunset-lit mist. Theron’s head was in his lap, eyes closed in quiet, comfortable contentment as Zevran stroked his fingers through his hair. They’d been going to go back to the Vigil before the rain had started, but this was a convenient excuse to stay outside for just a little longer, in this private stillness, and it took Zevran too long to notice that the grass was wrong.

His dreams always had a problem with grass. It was a lot of detail for the Fade, and hadn’t grown up with it. The first time he’d seen a full ground cover of green had been in Ferelden, outside of Denerim.

*Please don’t be a demon, please don’t be a demon,* Zevran thought, and it was that much more than the stutter of his fingers in dream-Theron’s hair that gave his newfound awareness away. Thoughts could be louder than words here.

A desire demon’s eyes glittered out of Theron’s face, and Zevran shoved it away as the horns started to grow. It got halfway to its true form before settling on a different face from his memory, and the draping, swaying willow branches behind Theron became the walls of a familiar room in Antiva City behind Rinna; and awareness slipped away again.

“Zevran,” she said urgently, grabbing his hands. “Zevran, please just *listen* to me. I did it. I found a way to get out. There are these people, they want to make me the next Queen, and that wouldn’t get me away from the Crows but if I *pretend*- they said that they have a safe place the Crows can’t track them to, I could escape from there and no one would ever find me- *come with me, Zevran.*”

His heart was in his throat because they were in Antiva City, just come from the House of Crows, and anyone could have followed them.

“That is entirely too god to be true,” he told Rinna. “They will kill you for trying to run away.”

“No they won’t,” she said. “You and me and Taliesin- we’re the best and they *know* it. You ran away to the Dalish and they barely punished you when you came back, you could take contracts again after two weeks and they didn’t do any permanent damage! Even if they catch me, I’ll be fine.”

“And Taliesin?” Zevran asked, because Taliesin was his oldest friend, and he didn’t want to leave him to the Crows.

“They’ll take him too, Zev, promise. Rosso Noche-”

And then the illusion fell apart again, because the desire demon had just pulled surface connections when the much better fabrication of Amaranthine had started to fall apart, and Zevran was *never* going to mistake *this*.

He pushed the desire demon away again, and woke himself up. He was getting better at it, but he still wasn’t good enough.

There was no real need for candles at night this far into Rialto. Light from the street lamps got everywhere, and he used it to write down his dreams in the journal, the way Anders had told him to. The grass discrepancy was noted, as well as the way that the demon had tried to switch the story, and the face that Rinna and Rosso Noche was something that could snap him into lucid dreaming.
Under the description of the dream, he noted ‘desire’; and then proceeded to ignore the rest of Anders’s advice and refused to go back to sleep.

Maker and Creators, how he hated desire demons.

Demons had never been something he’d hated, before this. They were alternately a nuisance and a challenge, but he’d never held any particular ill will against them. They were like highwaymen, or mercenaries. He’d been attacked by many over the years. They were just something that happened, and you lived with it.

He could live with the fear demons, the terror demons, the despair demons. They came so often in his dreams that he hoped, maybe, that he could become used to seeing Theron dead, Theron enslaved, Theron broken, Theron alone on his Calling; the Vigil destroyed, Ferelden turning on the Gray Wardens once more, treacherous Amaranthine banns getting a coup attempt right for once; himself with blood on his hands he didn’t want to think about, himself with a letter in his hands that he couldn’t bear to read but did anyway as it tore his soul apart, himself with words words words in his head he couldn’t fight.

Zevran was sure that he wouldn’t, but all of that was better than desire demons.

If only they tried to trap him with seduction, but most demons knew better. They knew that all he really wanted was to have things back the way they’d been before Kirkwall. They would keep stealing his memories and corrupting the one simple pleasure of pretending that he had left until one night he just gave into it, to avoid having to wake up and face it again the next time he fell asleep.

Zevran hated desire demons. He’d been good at not wanting things, once.

And that thought brought a whole new round of revulsion about Crows and slavery and no choices that drove him into getting dressed and blast, he’d forgotten to get fitting armor yesterday at the market!

He couldn’t wear anything too brightly colored, not for a gray morning roof run, but some of the reds he’d found yesterday were dark enough. Boots, gloves, the Amaranthine sash firmly secured, money pouch and the receipt and the Rosso Noche pamphlet from yesterday tucked safely away, sword and off-hand knife sheathed were they wouldn’t get in the way, and out the window and off.

Roof-running was an essential Crow skill, and Zevran leapt and rolled and crept and clambered and balanced his way through it, faster and faster, choosing roofs with more obstacles and walls with the narrowest under-window ledges and road crossings that got wider and wider until it was past dawn enough that the city was awake and he was crouched out of sight near the edge of a roof, overlooking the Queen’s Highway market from the day before and catching his breath. He was keyed up, adrenaline replacing sleep, and every trained instinct was screaming at him to finish the job find your mark! because the sun was up and this was Antiva and no one was dead.

Zevran placed his palms flat on the roof and leaned into them, bending over until his forehead was almost to the baked adobe. The risen sun warmed his hair and it occurred to him, that if he extended his arms and his hands palms up, he’d be in the proper Dalish obeisance to a Creator.

Theron had done this once on the road during the Blight. He’d done it since then, as well, but the first time was the one Zevran remembered the best.

No one had been expecting it. It had been the first day of summer, and they’d been on the road somewhere in central Ferelden. The night before Leliana had held an All Soul’s Day service-thought it had really been the day before the holiday proper- as best as could be done while still
being in camp. Alistair had helped her build the fire up while the rest of the camp watched.

Morrigan had held to her own, separate fire, huffing about fools’ comforts and the stupidity of celebrating one woman’s death almost a thousand years ago, until Theron asked her to hunt with him for dinner, and they’d disappeared. Zevran had dithered silently over whether he wanted to be included or not, and finally compromised by sitting and petting Fen’harel while he listened to Leliana, joining in on the congregation parts so quietly that even he wasn’t sure if he’d said anything out loud.

Theron and Morrigan had come back with dinner, and Theron had volunteered to take the morning watch, and Zevran had woken to the smell of Antivan incense. He’d been so startled and disoriented that he’d burst out of his tent with sword and knife out, ready to kill whoever had tracked him down.

But it had just been Theron, with a little fire lit on top of a large flat rock he must have pulled up from the small river that ran by their campsite. Resin crystals were scattered around the edges of the flames, not close enough to burn, but close enough to melt slowly and release scent. Theron had been bowing to it, and the rising sun behind it, knees and forehead and arms to the ground, palms up. The first thought that Zevran had been able to come up with was that it was possibly the best position to find someone in, if your goal was to slit their wrists open without them being able to easily fight back.

And then he’d heard the El’vhen, and couldn’t resist. He could pick out only a few words he recognized- Sylaise, ‘glory’, ‘gold’, ‘song’- but it was enough to keep him transfixed, blades sheathed and sitting silently off to the side to watch.

Theron had finished his singing prayer and sat up, carefully removing the resin crystals from the stone before dousing the fire with their water bucket.

When he’d moved to clean up, he’d noticed Zevran where he sat, and given him a smile.

“Today is Sylaise’s holy day,” he explained as he wrapped the incense crystals back up in their cloth scrap so they could be replaced in their pouch. It was a Dalish pouch, the leather almost entirely hidden by colorful embroidery. “We thank her for her gifts of the arts- our song, our language, and our magic- and our families and children.”

That was a subject he’d known not to linger on. Zevran had gotten up to help him move away the remains of the fire and the river stone.

“I did not know the Dalish bowed,” he’d remarked, and Theron had picked up on the unasked question because he was terrifying like that, able to tell exactly when he wanted more information about his mother’s people but couldn’t make himself ask. “It seems rather against the spirit of bitter independence.”

“We have many bows,” Theron had said, and stood before him so he could see. “For greeting a friend, equal, or superior-”

It was more of an extended nod than anything, though he did angle his shoulders forward.

“-to a particularly respected Keeper or Hahren-”

Zevran had been surprised to find that it was an Antivan bow, a bit out of fashion in favor of the court manners of Orlais, but popular enough in most of Antivan money and society. He’d had to learn it in the Crows- you bowed from the waist, but not the whole way down, with your arms swept out to the sides and a little bit of bend in the legs.
“-to the remembered and honored dead-”

Theron had gone on his knees then, and it had been another surprise because it looked almost like the Chantry prayer position. His arms were bent up and his head down, the insides of his wrists bared again.

“-to beg forgiveness, or to begin the most personal or sacred conversations-”

He’d leaned forward so he was bent perpendicular to the ground. The backs of his fingers just touched the dirt and if he kept baring his wrists like that Zevran was going to scream and make him put his gauntlets on.

“-and to the Creators.”

Theron had repeated the bow to the sun and fire he’d been doing earlier, and when Zevran had helped him up he didn’t let go once he was standing. It had felt silly and hadn’t made any sense to him at all at the time, because they hadn’t been in danger, but he’d felt distinctly, intensely better with the pulse of Theron’s wrists strong and protected beneath his fingers.

“Those are not defensible positions,” Zevran had informed him. “You are simply asking for someone to take a knife to you. You cannot get to your feet easily from such a kneel, and you are too well braced against the ground to fall properly and roll out of the way of an attack.”

Theron had smiled at him and said that that was the point. You were always vulnerable to the people you loved, and the people who protected you.

Five years later on the rooftop in Rialto, Zevran looked at the insides of his own wrists, properly protected within his discreetly-armored, elbow-length leather gloves. He thought that that truth was still as terrifying to him now, after he’d accepted that trust and love into his life, as it had been then, when he’d still been too scared and confused and blind to his own emotions to try.

He bought breakfast in the market and went around to an armorer’s. The owner of the establishment he finally chose looked deeply shocked to see him. Zevran made an emergency memory check and came up with nothing. He was almost certain he’d never seen this woman before.

“And you would be Mistress di Treviso?” he asked. That was the name on the sign out front, and she nodded jerkily before recovering her composure.

“And what can I do for you, Master Crow?”

Ah, well, he wasn’t officially a Master, but he wouldn’t say anything. All Mistress di Treviso knew was that a Crow in no armor but gloves and boots, not even hidden armor, had come into her shop. Only Crows who were very, very secure in their positions could afford to do that- someone like the Masters of the Talon Houses, or the Grandmaster.

He smiled, trying to disarm her with charm, and told her what he wanted. She produced a set of leather armor with a minimum of panic, pulling on different parts of different standard sets to get him what he wanted. There could have been an awful mis-match of pieces, except for the fact that everything was dyed either black or a middling-dark grey. Crows bought the majority of good leather armor in Antiva, after all, and there was an aesthetic to satisfy.

Zevran changed into the armor on her roof, pleased with the way that it allowed so many places for hidden surprises, and so much movements. He missed his silverite, but there were veridium plates hidden inside this leather, and that would serve well enough. He made sure his sash was visible
before trotting along the rooftops in search of the ‘Garras.&Zu.’ from the receipt he’d stolen the night before.

He found it eventually, after some pleasantly-directionless wandering. ‘Garrastazu and Zuñiga, Printers’ was the sign above the door, and Zevran hopped back to street level in an alley and went in the front door.

The apprentices working this shop were even more surprised to see him than the armorer had been. There were three of them- the human senior apprentice from the stall the night before, a dark girl with her hair cut short, and a blond elf-blooded boy who was semi-successfully keeping his long hair back in a braid. Of the three, he seemed the calmest. The senior apprentice looked like he might faint, and Zevran pretended to be distracted by one of the shelves nearest to the door to give him a chance to flee in the back room.

When he looked again at the counter, the girl had positioned herself firmly behind it, watching him. Her hands were shaking just a bit, and the way her fingers twitched- it wasn’t a familiarity of knives, but he knew it anyway. Ah well, he’d remember eventually; and if she tried to attack him, he’d find out.

The elf-blooded boy had actually come out from behind the safety of the long, broad counter and was standing at his elbow.

“Can I help you, Master Crow?” he asked.

He didn’t speak Antivan like a native, which explained quite a bit. He hadn’t learned yet to properly fear the Cows. Zevran debated with himself for a moment, and then decided that he wasn’t going to be the one to give him that lesson.

“And you are?”

“Fainire Vincenti,” the boy answered. “You?”

Oh, that was entirely too direct, and Zevran was tempted to decide otherwise about that lesson simply by virtue of this sheer cockiness. Someday soon he was going to encounter a real Crow, and he might not walk away from it.

“Mahar Desoto,” he said, and made a sharp, dismissive gesture so the girl behind the counter would simply be relieved that the Crow had decided not to take offense, rather than confused about his lack of reaction. Confusion made people remember you, and wonder. “If I require help, Vincenti, I shall inform you.”

Zevran wandered off into the books, browsing, and eventually one of the master printers turned up in the front to track his progress. The senior apprentice must have summoned him.

In the back corner, he found what he was looking for- a bound version of the octavo he’d seen bought the night before, with a cover of red leather. Stamped onto the spine in thin, darkened letters was Ezecil Romão, and the printing on the first page proclaimed it to be Dammashari of the Autumn Rains: Reclaiming Antiva’s Ancient History.

As a point of interest, Zevran noted that all of the books on this shelf were bound in red leather, or wrapped in red-dyed canvas, or had their red decorative binding stitches bared. Almost all of the titles were on old Antivan history, or Queen Asha Campana, or modern accounts of the cities. Only a few seemed to be fiction. Down near the floor, he found a surprisingly-thin copy of the Chant of Light that turned out, on further inspection, to contain only the Canticle of Transfigurations for some
He took Romão’s book with him to the counter.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” the master printer asked. He was much better at hiding his nervousness than his apprentices, but not good enough.

“Without any trouble,” Zevran assured him. “Messere Garrastazu, or Messere Zuñiga?”

“Zuñiga,” the printer said. He’d stared too long at the title of the book while he’d been writing down the information for the receipts- one to stay with the shop and one for Zevran.

He handed one over and Zevran signed ‘Mahar Desoto’ at the bottom. Zuñiga tried to exchange it for the other, and Zevran left him holding it three beats to long before taking it.

“Vincenti,” the told the man. “Is going to get himself killed one of these days. Soon. Foreign ignorance is no excuse to the Crows.”

Zevran picked up his book and exited the shop before any of them could notice that he’d snuck the receipt from the night before and the Rosso Noche pamphlet under the book, and left them behind on the counter.

He’d written ‘be more careful’ on the back of the receipt. Hopefully, they’d listen to him. It would be a shame to lose anyone who wanted the Crows gone enough to commit the words to print. That took a certain, rare courage.

He holed up in a residential fountain courtyard on the inside of an apartment building, hiding in the tree branches to look through the book he’d bought. He had expected it to be a very scholarly sort of book, and was pleasantly surprised when it turned out to be nothing of the sort. It was easy to follow, and read almost more like a travelogue or a novel than a work of history. There was lots of lavish prose about the desert ruins and the imagined emotional state of Antivans at important points down through their history. It was fun, and oddly moving. He got halfway through it before it was almost too late to go buy some dinner, and felt strangely invested in Antiva as a nation of independent, enterprising spirit, complemented by a deep appreciation of beauty and pleasure, back up by excellent administrative skills.

Zevran went to bed that night because demons would be a faster, cleaner death than running into Crows while sleep-deprived. His last stray thought before sleep took him was about how strange it was that he hadn’t seen any other Crows in two days of frequenting Rialto’s public spaces.

He dreamed of dammashari in the desert, surrounded by the quick-blooming summer flowers, and couldn’t tell where the trick was. He was distantly pleased that he was lucid dreaming from the beginning of the night this time around, but the more important things were ‘where was the demon?’ and ‘why would one think this would trick me?’ This was just what he’d been reading before bed, not anything personal to him.

Zevran wandered around the dammashari, checking the flowers every so often to make sure that he still knew they weren’t supposed to be vague like that around the edges. It was night here, and too bright under the full moons. The stars stood out intensely against the pure dark of the sky, and if he really concentrated, he was pretty sure that he could find the outline of the Black City against it.

Eventually, a statue of Iashtivar turned up, a woman wearing a crown of diamond stars with a long-bladed spear in one hand and the other open, palm up and fingers tipped down. The stone was gilded with gold and silver and inlaid with gems, dressed in real cloth, and looked much newer than the
flanking her. The pedestal of her statue was covered in bouquets of desert flowers and copper and bronze bowls of water, all placed atop the dusty tan of desert lion skins or the obsidian black of jungle panther.

An owl flapped up to land on the goddess’s wrist. It hooted at him. Zevran eyed it suspiciously. They stared at each other for a long time before Zevran imagined the weight of a throwing knife in his hand and flung it at the out-of-place bird.

The owl resettled onto the other stone wrist and hooted at him again. This time it sounded reproving.

“I have known demons to possess animals,” Zevran told the animal. “But pretending to be one is a new trick.”

“You know so much about demons?”

Zevran turned towards the voice and became even more confused and vaguely annoyed, because instead of anyone he actually knew, it was the elf-blooded printers’ apprentice, dressed like a Dalish.

“This is extremely sub-par work,” Zevran said loudly to the surrounding desert. “Are you even trying?”

He could use a night off, but this was just insulting. How was he supposed to sleep properly if he was always going to be bothered by the way the dream made no sense? Changing the surroundings to fit some kind of narrative sounded like work as well. How were mages ever rested? Did their magic make up for it somehow?

“Do you usually insult demons?” the apprentice asked. He sounded honestly interested.

“I do if they are sufficiently inept,” Zevran retorted. “Leave.”

The apprentice smiled at him.

“No.”

Fine then. If there was going to be a test of wills, a child was not going to beat a fully-trained adult Crow.

Zevran willed him gone very hard, but the apprentice’s image didn’t even flicker. He just smiled wider, looking amused and much too pleased with himself.

“It won’t work, Crow,” he said conversationally. “I’m the one in control here. You wear Rosso Noche colors, you come into a Rosso Noche printers’, you buy a Rosso Noche book and leave a stolen Rosso Noche pamphlet behind, and you think that we would just ignore you? There are no more of your kind in Rialto for a reason. Whatever your Masters wanted from this little trip of yours, they’re not getting it. You’re not waking up until I let you.”

Zevran had him on his back in the hard-packed desert dust with a knife drawing shallow blood against his throat before he could take another breath.

“There are two ways here, you see?” he said conversationally. “One is that you are lying because you are a demon, and a very poor one at that, in which case I kill you and you are dead and I get to wake up. The other is that you are telling the truth, in which case I kill you and you wake up Tranquil and I get to wake up just as whole and healthy as when I fell asleep. Or-”

He dug the knife in a little further.
“You leave on your own, and I get to wake up, and you get to wake up or go off to exercise your demonic whiles elsewhere, and everyone leaves happy. What option do you like better?”

The boy’s eyes were very wide as he disappeared out from under him, leaving behind the tiniest change in the desert air. Zevran woke himself up.

“-eatened to make me *Tranquil*!”

And was promptly knocked back into unconsciousness.

At least he didn’t dream, this time.
Chapter 6

Nehna had been able to hold onto the throwing knives that Adan had given her through these seven years. She couldn’t really wear them anymore, but they were tucked up safely in the bottom of her clothes trunk, wrapped in her old leather jacket.

If she had been any more mobile, any less sick, she would have gotten up and unwrapped them and put one right through the brothel master’s head before grabbing Satheraan and Tanis and running for the docks, Dread Wolf take the Crows!

Her son, her son her child had gone to the brothel master and-

“I don’t want to know,” Nehna told Tanis. “I don’t want to hear about it, I don’t—”

Tanis left her alone, to go back to work so they could eat, and Nehna tried not to think about it but she was alone in the room and it was the dark of the night and Satheraan—

He came back to the rooms once the Summer Lily had closed for the morning, with a double handful of silver. He put it down on the bedside table—twelve or fifteen pieces. Before the brothel master had started targeting her and Tanis, that had been what Nehna had gotten in two weeks, once the price for the Crows was taken out.

Satheraan climbed into bed with her.

“Some people like children,” he said, like that was supposed to make things better. “And everyone says that elves are pretty, and that’s why we have clients, because they want something easy and pretty.”

“This is wrong.”

“You need money for the herbs and so we can stay here. And the master agreed.”

It took her one shocked, horrible second to realize that he really didn’t see what the problem was—this was just what the people he knew did and he’d never lived anywhere else to know that right wasn’t the same thing as allowed and oh Creators what had she done to him. He’d fallen asleep atop her while she thought and Nehna had lived seven years as a prostitute and a full decade away from Revasina among the shem’len but this, listening to Satheraan’s quiet, even breathing, this was the first time that she had honestly felt worthless.

They didn’t talk about it once they’d both woken up again, that afternoon. Nehna didn’t want to think about it.

But then the city bells tolled evening and her son slipped off the bed and darted out of her grasp when she tried to grab him, pull him back—

“Don’t, Satheraan—”

“You need the money,” he said, and that didn’t matter he was far too young and her son and— “And If I do it enough I’ll get used to it. That’s what they tell all the new prostitutes, but I know it already.”

“No, da’len—”

“I’ll be back in the morning, mamae.”
“Satheraan!”

But he was out the door, headed for the stairs to the ground floor and the clients, and she was too weak to get up, to stop him, to protect him.

The days began to pass in an indistinct haze, helped along by Antivan brandy, broken only by the sound and scent of Tanis cooking food or the way that Satheraan clung to her tighter and tighter in his sleep and smiled unconvincingly when he was awake. The pain was too much, and knowing what her son was doing was too much, and the silver that was accumulating in the wood box in the kitchen was far too much. Brandy took care of all three of those problems.

At some point, Tanis brought the apothecary back. The only thing Nehna remembered of that visit was the apothecary saying something about the fact that steeping the painkilling herbs in the brandy would actually make them more potent. This was great news, but also meant that she got less of the brandy overall, since there were specific ratios of alcohol to herbs.

Tanis might have paid the apothecary to say that, actually. She was always worried about them these days, and Nehna’s one comfort was that Tanis watched Satheraan through the nights, and had enlisted others to do so as well. They knew better than to try to tell her about it, but if Satheraan ever needed someone to defend him, or be there for him after something happened, someone would.

Months passed slow and fast all at once- days of being confined to bed made the hours drag, but it was always a surprise to be told how many had gone by without her really noticing.

A few weeks before Satheraan turned eight- Mythal, eight, she’d been sick over half a year- Tanis bought only enough brandy to steep the herbs in and refused to get any more.

“You haven’t seen what it’s doing to him,” Tanis told her. “Or you have and you’ve ignored it, in which case don’t tell me, because I thought better of you. Satheraan’s so happy when he’s awake and you’re awake. You sleep so much, and then when you’re awake you’re drunk, but the few times he’s caught you sober- Nehna, it would break your heart to see the difference. It’s been breaking mine. Please. Stop for him, and me. We both want you back.”

Nehna reached for her hand and said she was sorry. Still, the only thing that kept her sober was that it hurt so much to get up and move, and Tanis had put the brandy up high enough that she had to drag a chair over to reach it. By the time Nehna would have been able to get the chair arranged, she knew, she’d be too weak to do anything but collapse into it. That would be humiliating, so she never tried.

She watched Satheraan carefully, when she could, through re-adjusting to life without so much of the brandy, and saw after a few days that Tanis had been telling the truth. He lit up from the inside out whenever he saw her awake, and his smile was a true, happy thing, never forced. He’d clamber into bed with her and listen raptly to the Dalish stories she told, fighting to stay awake for ‘one more, please’.

And she learned that he’d stopped going to the Chantry Sisters’ lessons. Nehna asked Tanis to bring back some of the public broadsheets from the market, sailors’ and city news, and pulled herself to the kitchen table to assess how well Satheraan remembered. His grasp of written Trade and Common Antivan was shakier than her own imperfect ability with either, but she wasn’t going to worry about it. He had years yet, and even in literacy-happy Antiva, there were people older than him who were worse.

Nehna couldn’t do much with him for the common script besides make him practice, the same way
Adan and her old neighbors had had her practice with the free broadsheets, but she could help with an area the Chantry Sisters would never cover, not for the poor.

“You should learn the Justinian script,” she told her son.

Satheraan’s face scrunched up.

“But that’s for the Chantry.”

“And official documents, and scholarship, and literature,” Nehna said. “They made common script out of dwarf signs because so many people could recognize a few already, but it also means that they can keep their secrets. Knowledge is power, Satheraan, and if you don’t know Justinian they can keep it from you. What few books we have from the Dales are written in Justinian, applied to El’vhen the same way it’s applied to other languages. We had our own alphabet, once, but it’s yet another thing we’ve lost. A few times, our clan found shem’len merchants with old artifacts from the jungle where lost Arlathan lies, in the north on the coast. It is too close to Tevinter for any of The People to safely travel to, but when we took those artifacts back, there were some with writing. One or two letters looked like Justinian, but the rest were a mystery. Writing is just another thing they stole from us, da’len, and it’s part of our duty to steal it back.”

“How am I supposed to practice it if there’s nothing for me to read?”

“I will write out the old stories for you,” she told him. “That is how it is taught to the children in the clans. We may learn to speak Trade, but we learn to write in Justinian, not common. Now pay attention. The letters go in a different order in Justinian, and you write them a different way- right to left or top to bottom-“

The leftover fruits and cold meats from the Summer Lily’s provided food for the clients disappeared from their table the week after Satheraan turned eight.

“The others could use them more,” Tanis told her, and when Nehna asked about it. “And you should have seen the brothel master’s face when I didn’t take any this morning. He already owns everything else in this place- we should be able to control our own food.”

The silver that had used to go to the brandy went for red meat and fruit from the market to add to the usual bread and vegetables and fish; and a month later Nehna woke up and realized she was weak and exhausted but not in pain. Her usual cup of herb-infused brandy was sitting by the bed but she ignored it and got up and went to the kitchen, forcing herself to take as much food to the table as she could before true exhaustion hit. She only let herself sit down when she was on the very edge of her energy, and started gorging. I had been so long since she’d been hungry.

Tanis wandered in sleepily to being making the evening meal half an hour later and froze in the doorway, staring. Nehna had devoured almost their entire stock of food, and what was left wasn’t enough to cook with. She’d have to go shopping.

“I don’t hurt!” Nehna told her. “I woke up and I didn’t hurt and I was hungry!”

Tanis stood there in shock a moment longer before lunging towards the table and kissing her. Nehna laughed into it and kissed her back, and that was how Satheraan found them.

“Mamae?”
“I’m going to be all right, da’len. Everything is going to be fine.”

It took another month and a half to build up her stamina properly, and Nehna hated every second of the recovery. Every night she didn’t go to work, Satheraan kept going in her place. One day halfway into the month, she left the Summer Lily for the first time in over a year and bought a large wooden cutting board in the market. She put it on a shelf across the room from her bed and dug out her throwing knives. When she was too tired to walk, or couldn’t come up with the energy or willpower to get out of bed, she practiced her aim.

It made her feel a lot better. She thought that she’d kept it up even once she started working again. The day she turned up at the brothel master’s office and told him to put her on the work roster and take Satheraan off for good was strange, uncomfortable pleasure. The man looked… angry that she was coming back, and so Nehna held herself straight and tall and resisted the urge to pull out one of the knives she hadn’t taken off and stick him with it for whoring out her son. There was nothing truly illegal in Antiva save crossing the Crows, but there were still things that would cause a neighborhood to rise and extract their own justice.

Some of the younger men and women surprised her in the hallway and took her off to Tanis’s rooms, which were full of others foregoing some hours of sleep to celebrate her renewed health. It was touching, and Nehna gave in and accepted hugs and cheek kisses and basked in the happy atmosphere and the smell of Tanis’s cooking.

She was helping take the food off the stove when someone screeched. Nehna tensed and almost burned her hand.

Tanis leaned in and whispered: “Crow!”

Nehna put the pan with the cooked fish down and turned. The Crow had climbed in the window and was seated on his haunches on top of Tanis’s table. Master Escipo.

He smiled blandly at the cold rage she wasn’t even trying to hide.

“So we heard right,” he said. “You’re well enough to go back to work. A shame you took your son off. Courtesans are better the younger they start- he could be a noble’s lover one day, if only you let him. He’s already learned so much, and there was a definite improvement with practice.”

Nehna went hot and cold all over. The room was dead silent.

“Oh, come now,” Master Escipo said. “What did you think he was going to end up doing with his life, living on the street? You should have let me take him and settled your debt, and then neither of you would be here. It’s still an open offer. He’s young enough to train and he’s certainly got the right dedication. And seduction is a practical-”

“I told you no eight years ago!” Nehna snarled.

“And five, six years from now?” Master Escipo shrugged. “He’ll just be back downstairs for the nights again. He’ll be old enough not to cause a stir and he’ll be pretty. He’ll have plenty of people paying for him, with your skin and his father’s hair. Adan was pretty, t-”

The throwing knife Nehna had strapped to the inside of her right wrist sank into his throat, and he fell forward with a wet choking noise. It was a fatal wound, and he wasn’t dead yet, and Nehna
grabbed his arm and twisted when he tried to slash at her, forcing him onto his stomach. She knelt on top of him, trapping the arm she’d grabbed under her leg, and pulled his head back by his hair.

“Tanis,” she said. “I need a bowl.”

One was silently brought, and placed on the floor below Master Escipo’s head.

Nehna reached around and grabbed the hilt of her throwing knife.

“No’one ‘scapes t’Crows,” Master Escipo gasped, and Nehna pulled her knife out so she could slit his throat with it. It was just like draining game in the clan, so they could be neatly skinned. She’d done it often as the first step in making leather.

It didn’t take long for the Crow to die.

“Andraste preserve us,” someone said very quietly, when Nehna let his head drop and Tanis took the bowl to the sink to wash out.

“He killed my husband, Ashera,” Nehna told her, feeling very calm and distantly pleased. “Adan was a Crow, too; and these-

She touched her vallas’lin.

“-aren’t for decoration. I know a lot about killing. This wasn’t the first time.”

No one else seemed to know how to react to that. Nehna cleaned her knife, stripped the dead Crow of his armor and weapons, and let those brave enough to pick through the rest of his things. She and Tanis dumped the body in the trash pile behind the Summer Lily, buried under the week’s refuse, and then Nehna went back upstairs. Her knives and the Crow’s armor and knives back into the bottom of her chest.

She scrubbed herself clean of blood and the stink of the trash, got into nice clothes, locked the door to Satheraan’s room so no one could get in while she was gone, and went downstairs for the night’s work.

The last memory she could find, when she woke up in a strange wooden room that was swaying nauseatingly, was the brothel master handing her a drink with her night’s pay, ‘in celebration of her health’.

“We’re on a ship,” she heard Tanis, and searched the room for her. The woman was huddled in a corner, and looked like she’d been crying. “The brothel master, he- Nehna he sold us. There, there’s this Orlesian chevalier who’s been coming around the past couple of weeks-”

Nehna remembered him. He’d been one of her clients last night, and paid quite a lot to spend most of it with her.

“-and he, he really likes me and I guess he liked you too and that, that shem’len-”

“Satheraan,” Nehna realized, shooting up in bed. “Tanis, where’s-”

“He kept him,” Tanis told her. “He said what the chevalier paid for you and me, it was enough to get the Crows to leave him alone, and he kept Satheraan, I didn’t even see him he just had the bouncer grab me when I tried to go back upstairs-”

She was a slave on a ship heading to Orlais and her son was at the mercy of the brothel. Nehna
refused to cry.

No one could be vigilant all the time. If a Crow couldn’t do it, some jumped-up Orlesian thug would be easy. There would be an opportunity, and she would strike, and then she would come back for Sathraan. They would leave the shem’len for good, and he could grow up in The People.

*We are Dalish, and never again shall we submit.*
Zevran woke up blindfolded and tied up in a cool, large space with a hard cold floor beneath him and-

*I will not panic,* he told himself even as his heart raced and his breathing stuttered and flowed unevenly in and out of his tightening ribs. *This is Rialto, not Kirkwall. The mage brought a threat from Rosso Noche, not Tevinter Magisters. It will simple torture for information, followed by death. No slavery. No magic.*

The thought of torture followed by death was strangely calming. Zevran examined it for a moment and came up with ‘*better than living with demons’*. Still, this is what he got for running off to Antiva with no plan, no reconnaissance, and a goal that could be better described as a panic- and despair-induced attempt to keep from hurting anyone importa-

*You are important,* his imaginary Theron told him.

Oh.

He began another round of self-examination. It wasn’t like there was much else to occupy him here. A harder look at ‘*better than living with demons’* prompted ‘*why*’ which got ‘*I have demons because blood magic*’ which revised the first thought to ‘*better than living with this*’.

That thought, Zevran had had before, and it made him squirm inside with guilt and discomfort. He’d thought that he’d moved past it, but- grief faded, and sins could be atoned for. Blood magic couldn’t be removed.

*I want you back and you want to come home,* imaginary Theron said. *Come home.*

*I never meant to hurt you like this,* Zevran apologized, and started to focus on the differences in this situation from the one in Kirkwall to distract himself from his own thoughts. *But I am making my own choices, and that means consequences.*

At his back was a metal post. He’d been bound to it with rope, from wrist to elbow, which locked him into a kneeling position. His ankles were tied with different lengths of rope to other metal poles close by, so that he couldn’t get his feet under him and kick out, or reach the ends of the ropes with his fingers and tease the knots open. Whoever had put him here knew about tying people up, and avoided the amateur and overconfidence-born mistakes that had let him escape as much as he had in Kirkwall, like merely being chained up and dumped on the floor.

His captors left him alone for hours, another sign that they knew what they were doing. Gloating was often petty rather than understandable, and prolonged lack of personal contact- even just the knowledge that someone was nearby- did strange things to people.

Eventually he became accustomed enough to the silence to hear the ceiling above him creak with footsteps, and then the start of a faint, dull *thmp-thmp* directly over his head. Prior knowledge and context from his recent experiences told him that it was a printing press. The steady rhythm of it indicated an experience team familiar with the particular machine, and working from a group of preset type boxes that were switched in and out with speed- broadsheet and pamphlet work, easy and routine.

Zevran timed his breathing to the *thmp-thmp* of the press and dropped himself into an unthinking
disconnect with his body and surroundings to wait out his captors.

At some point, the disconnect turned into a doze.

*You never have to hurt again,* a sloth demon told him, not speaking so much as oozing intent. *You know they will kill you. Stay here, sleeping and safe. Comfort until death takes you, and give me the pain.*

*Theron,* Zevran thought sadly. *Would not want to know I died like this.*

He was about to answer the demon when he jerked awake and back to awareness.

The side of his face stung and ached where bones had been badly rattled and his jaw had been forced a little too far out of alignment. He’d been hurt worse before, but someone had put a lot of force behind this one.

“You didn’t say he was a *mage!*” a female voice exclaimed in distress.

“He’s *not!*” It was the elf-blooded printers’ apprentice again. He sounded frustrated. “At least I don’t *think* he is! He didn’t fight like a mage!”

“The Crows don’t take mages;” a different male voice said. “He *can’t* be.”

Three voices, one familiar, all sounding somewhat young- the three printers’ apprentices? It would fit.

“But he’s got *demons,*” the woman said. “Feynriel *please,* make it leave-”

“It doesn’t want *us,* Ella.”

“Can we *not* infest the shop with demons?” the eldest apprentice asked. “We have to *live* here.”

“He’s awake now,” Feynriel said. Zevran tried to work it out- Feynriel to Fainire, what sort of a name was Feynriel? Feynriel, Feynriel… wait. He’d been dressed Dalish in the dream, *Feynriel* and *Mahariel.* El’vhen mangled into something those who didn’t speak it could say, and then changed again to fit into Antivan. “He shouldn’t be hearing them any longer. I *hope.*”

“Maybe we should just kill him now.”

“We can’t kill somebody while there are customers around, Cirico.”

“I’m just saying. Lauro’s not supposed to get here until tomorrow morning, and-”

“And you want to cross *Lauro?* Master Garrastazu will kill you *herself.*”

“But Fai, *demons.*”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Zevran refused to let himself sleep once the apprentices had left. He didn’t want more demons, and he didn’t want Feynriel in his dreams again. He focused on ignoring the pain of being tied up in the same position for so long, the hunger gnawing at him, and the fact that he hadn’t been offered a chamberpot.

He heard the shop close up for the night. No one came to check on him, and he eventually got back
into the unthinking haze he’d existed in for so much of the day.

This time, he was shocked out of it by being shoved face-first onto the floor. It took him fifteen, twenty seconds too long to notice that he’d been untied, and by the time he was ready to react he’d already had the ropes and his shirt pulled off him and been trapped against the stone, cold on his back, pinned by hands on his spread wrists and the heavy, solid weight of someone sitting on his hips.

It was familiar, unexpected, and entirely unwelcome. He could survive it- he knew how to breathe through it, ignore it, act like it didn’t bother him. Some of it had been official Crow teaching about torture, or courtesan training; but plenty of it had just been graduated Crows or older apprentices amusing themselves. He had entire set of survival skills and coping mechanism, and he would never be above resorting to any of them, including pretending to willing participation until he’d almost convinced himself. It had been a while since he’d used that one, but it might be time to utilize it again.

“There is usually an etiquette to these things, my friend, and I cannot help but feel that we have gotten off with—”

“Compradi trash,” an unfamiliar voice said- male, high-class accent, and a very particular, intimately familiar attitude.

Zevran went perfectly still.

Of course Rosso Noche would be known to the Crows still. Of course they would be tracking the people who printed such inflammatory material. Of course they would be three steps ahead while Rosso Noche thought they were far, far behind. So all the Crows in Rialto were dead, the Crows had more and every death was just more justification to come down on their enemies even harder.

He could feel the man above him reading his tattoos. He knew exactly which ones were visible from this position. The simple lines on his face that all elves in the Crows got, to keep them distinct from the city elves, protection from most of the restrictions against ‘their kind’. The small symmetrical twists just above his collarbones for his first contract kill. The wide complex of tangled ink wrapped around his shoulders like a shawl that marked him as a graduated apprentice. The twisting, looping design that began under his breastbone and continued down the center line of his torso for compradi. The delicate artistry of curls and swoops symmetrical down a center line on the insides of both upper arms, personal marks he’d chosen and designed based on the vague memory of his mother’s vallas’lin, that had been logged in the vast Archive of the Crows in Antiva City. The thin, sharp lines that closed in rings around his upper forearms, spiked for every other apprentice who had died in his House during his own years training. The highest curves of the tattoos that draped around his hips, courtesan’s marks, visible over the top of his pants.

“Crow whore, but a successful one at least.”

The Crows had him the Crows had him the Crows had him.

“What is your House?”

He didn’t respond. He would have liked to claim that it was so he could find out what the reaction would be- important information, and you could determine how things might go from that initial reaction- but really it was out of choking panic.

The other Crow dug his fingernails into the sensitive veins and tendons on the undersides of Zevran’s wrists.
Desoto,” Zevran gasped. It was lie and it was the one he was clinging to now, a shield until he could keep himself together. He was trying to push emotion away but five years in Ferelden with friends and love had ruined him, he knew he was going to break. He knew he’d been proud of this before, valued his skill at not breaking, at withstanding the pain and the punishment, because it the mark of a real Crow. He’d been not proud but quietly satisfied with the excess of violence as an apprentice, the abuse that was tolerated with compradi and elves, because he was nothing compared to the Crows as a whole and the people who hurt him were worth more so what did it matter? He’d been serving them then, it had only been right that they use him and he thank them afterwards, for showing him the true depths of the mortal condition.

But he couldn’t accept this any longer. He’d been told he deserved better and had started to believe it.

“And what does Fifth Talon care about in Rialto?”

“Nothing. They have no knowledge that I am here.” Time for some truth, it was amazing the places that truth could get you. It had saved him once before. “The Crows assume I am dead, you see.”

His blindfold was ripped off. The man straddling him was human, with black hair and skin the color of old copper. His armor was high-quality for a Crow, with tooling that marked his rank. Between the face and the designs stamped into the leather and the name the apprentices had dropped earlier, Zevran could identify him from the information he’d gathered when he’d come to kill the last Grandmaster.

“I don’t see,” said Lauro Escipo, Master of House Escipo and Eighth Talon of the Crows. “Explain it to me.”

Even without a properly-stocked room, Crows were supposed to be at least minimally competent at torture. There was a lot that could be done with only one’s body and even the dullest knife.

Lauro Escipo had a sharp knife, and the sort of heavy things that a print shop had to keep around for repairs and replacements to a functioning press. He had the upright, anchored metal bars and a stone floor. He had the pile of waste paper, meant for recycling into pulp paper or sold off for any number of reasons.

Once you broke someone’s legs, after all, it was easy enough to leave them unattended to set such a thing on fire. There was so much you could do with fire.

Lauro Escipo had the training and resources and time. Zevran had a beaten-in tolerance for pain that hadn’t been properly exercised in too long and a biting, tearing panic that let him shut away everything he could not, could not, absolutely could not ever tell the Crows.

In the minutes when Lauro left him alone, to gather his supplies, Zevran picked up his memories of Ferelden and shut them away. Vigil’s Keep. The Blight. The Dalish. The trip to Kirkwall. The staff of the Vigil and Amaranthine, Kallian, Fenris, Queen Anora, Wynne, Leliana, Morrigan, Velanna, Viktory, the Voshai, Sigrun, Anders, Nathaniel, Oghren, Alistair, Theron. The Crows could not find out where he’d been, who had helped him, who he’d been helping. None of them were prepared to counter such an assault. Some of them might survive but at least one of them would die, and he couldn’t be the cause of that. He couldn’t do that to the people who had taught him how to live, how to feel, how to care without destroying himself.
He couldn’t care.

He cared too much and Lauro was the one torturing him and another Crow knew exactly the sort of standards he’d been trained to have, his probable limits and the ways to get around them, push past them.

He was going to die here and no one he’d left behind would ever know what had happened to him. When he never came back they’d suspect, but they’d never know for certain that he was dead and they’d always wonder, Theron would always wonder and live with the guilt of not being there because he wasn’t supposed to be the one who outlived the other.

But Zevran knew he was going to die, and that no one was going to come save him. No one in Antiva cared about a whoreson compradi Crow courtesan traitor.

There was pain, and pain, and pain.

*What does Eighth Talon want here, what is your name, what is your mission, where have you been if the Crows think you’re dead*

*Nothing, Mahar Desoto, kill Crows, south*

*Where have you been*

*South*

*You know what I want*

*South*

*One more chance*

*South*

*Where*

*Kirkwall Cumberland Hunter Fell Val Chevin Denerim Ostwick Halamshiral Perivantium Wildervale Orzammar Val Royeaux Llomerryne Salle Nevarra Montfort Starkhaven Amaranthine Caimen Brea Haven Andoral’s Reach Estwatch Sulfur Point Ostagar Montsim bard Ansburg Hasmal Jader Bastion Solas Trevis Wycome Nessum Tantervale Emprise du Lion Kal-Sharok Mont-de-glace Perendale*

*No one escapes the Crows*

*I did*

He didn’t know this place.

It was a city, overgrown. The buildings were opaque rock crystal and colored marbles, in some places looking like the work of hands and architectural planning, and in some places… not. Gold ran through the seams and up the walls, twisting around spires and windows and doorframes in a way that seemed vaguely familiar to him, and matched the creeping vines and tree roots. The streets were clogged with them, and he had to step from root to root, balancing on the thick moss. The trees and riot of color in the massive blooming flowers were tropical, matching pictures he’d seen of the northern jungles, but the air was merely warm and heavy with the smell of the greenery, not hot and
choked with humidity. He could hear the rush and faint roar of water that told of a great waterfall somewhere nearby, and over all that birds singing. Light flashed off the polished-smooth surfaces of the buildings as he walked, where they were still uncovered.

Something shifted on his back. It was a very peculiar sensation, like part of him was peeling off and away-

Black in the corner of his eyes, both of them; and he had an inky black bird on either shoulder.

The graduation tattoos that wrapped around his shoulders were focused on two crows, depicted in flight on the broad triangular planes of his shoulder blades.

Zevran stopped.

“I’m dreaming,” he realized. “I am dying and hallucinating something more pleasant than pain.”

Dying, one of the birds said. How funny.

“Go on, away with you, shoo,” Zevran told them both, flapping at them with his hands. They held on obstinately for a moment before gliding away to perch on nearby tree roots.

He thinks he hallucinates us, a bird said. He couldn’t tell if it was the same one as before or not.

“I am in no mood to listen to demons,” Zevran said. “You should have tried earlier. Perhaps then I would have been interested.”

Demons! a bird laughed uproariously. Demons!

“I am dying and have nothing left to lose. There is nothing you can offer me.”

We can offer you everything.

You can have anything.

“Goodbye,” Zevran said firmly, and picked a new direction to walk in. The birds followed him, flapping ahead short distances to stay within his field of vision.

We know things.

You can learn anything.

There is so much to know in the world, so many secrets.

They could be yours. Knowledge is power, information is better than gold, more vital than blood, worth anything, absolutely anything.

Wouldn’t be nice to know where your enemies are, how to avoid them, all their weaknesses, the best time to strike?

“I am dying,” Zevran reminded them loudly. The noise of the waterfall was getting clearer with every step. He thought he’d be close to it, soon- the breeze down the mostly-unblocked streets was cool with the feel and scent of water.

Silly child, thinks he’s allowed to die.

You’ll come here, you’ll come to us, you can’t escape us.
“I escaped the Crows. I did.”

He remembered that. He wasn’t sure what he’d said otherwise, exactly, but he remembered that, because it had been the moment of change.

He’d told Lauro Escipo ‘I did’ and realized that he believed it. He was being killed in a basement in Rialto by a Talon of the Crows, but he had escaped them. He’d lived five years away from them, with love and care. He’d learned he was worth something, and that he could be something other than the Crows made him. He’d remembered what Isabela had told him up on Sundermount—

“No matter what the Crows do, they’ll never get you back. I’m so proud of you, Zev.”

—and realized that this was what she’d meant. The Crows had captured him, but they didn’t own him. They never would, not again. He was dying free, despite all appearances.

Zevran thought that maybe he’d laughed with the sheer relief of the release that knowledge had brought, that he was free and that that was strength enough not to break. It would explain why everything had hurt so much worse after that, why he remembered Lauro Escipo’s expression going absolutely livid, and how he’d managed to slip into the total disconnect of mind and body that he’d only seen before, never experienced. Many of the new apprentices slipped into it the first time the Crows tried to break them. The ones who couldn’t be brought back to themselves by the administration of a special, quite nasty herbal concoction were simply killed. There was no point in keeping anyone so weak as to run from their very selves and stupid enough not to be able to find their way back.

One of the birds hopped closer.

We could tell you of old Arlathan, it said. We saw it, we know all its secrets. Wouldn’t that be a nice gift, a kind gift, to go back to your lover with? Wouldn’t he be so grateful, wouldn’t he take you back-

“I am dying,” Zevran said again. There was a sort of power in those words. “And if I could go back, Theron would be grateful simply to see me. I do not have to— to buy his care, or prove that I am worth it, that I am of use enough.”

He would love to be gifted with that sort of knowledge, though.

“You,” he realized, a flash of protective anger going through him. “Both of you, you will stay away from him.”

Scared he’s weak? the bird taunted. Scared he’ll listen to the demons he fights, the ones that can find his dreams through the blood, once he learns you’re dead?

We could tell him.

He isn’t ours to take but it would be easy, so easy, make things easier for whose he is, he would know you were dead and how you died; the whole world would learn what he’d give to have you back, to see you again-

Zevran tried to kick the nearest one, but it flapped away.

His sister! it called from where it circled above him with its twin. His sister would listen, she wants to know! He would lose both of you! He would accept anything, anyone, to have his family back, to save them-
“Theron would not!” Zevran yelled up at them. “He knows better! He is too good a person to inflict demons on others! He is- he is kind, and caring, and I love him, and you will not have him!”

Everyone has a price! Everyone has a breaking point!

“And he has people who will help him, who will catch him if he starts to fall and support him when he wants to break! You will never have him!”

We don’t want him, one of the birds called down. Zevran had kept walking towards the sound of the waterfall, trying to get away from them, and they were finally falling behind. But we know who does!

“I will stop you,” he promised, more to himself than to the birds. He didn’t think they could hear him if he didn’t yell, but he could be wrong. This was the Fade, after all. “There must be something more useful to do in death than sitting about by the Maker’s side for eternity. It sounds quite dull anyhow, no? And certainly he and Andraste would approve of killing demons.”

The birds didn’t answer. He came to the waterfall.

It was on the edge of the city, falling into a deep ravine that marked the border of the buildings. There was a grand stone bridge on this side out towards land, a little broken and weathered, but still usable. Zevran sat down on a tumbled stone and watched the water.

Presently, an owl flapped out of the sky and perched on his knee. Zevran didn’t spare it much attention for a few moments- he’d come to realize that the frequency of this owl in his dreams was another one of his markers. He remembered it from his time under the worst of the blood magic, so he was counting it as one of his strongest ones.

He offered it his arm. It hopped on.

“What do you think?” he asked it. “My final choice while alive, hm? To continue guarding Theron in death? Very romantic, if I do say so, in the way of the best tragedies. It is not a bad choice, I think. And certainly it will be easier to ignore demons when I have no body for them to lust after. It was a very exhausting thing, to not to listen when they were offering me-”

The owl hooted softly at him, after a moment of his silence.

Zevran cracked a smile, and gently scratched its head. The owl’s feathers were surprisingly light, and so soft. It blinked big golden eyes at him, and he started to chuckle to himself- then outright laugh.

“Oh, I am an idiot,” he told the owl. “A complete fool, I should be ashamed of myself. ’Making my own choices’- well, it was an awful thing to live with, but oh, the irony of it. The same thing that reminded me that once I had had no choices, giving me nights of full of opportunities to determine my own autonomy. I must say that I think another would appreciate the hilarity of it more, it is hard to do from the inside, but here I am and it is my own stupid fault.”

He paused, and smiled ruefully.

“I really should apologize for getting myself killed,” he said.

The owl stretched up into his fingers, and he scratched it a bit harder.

“I wonder,” Zevran murmured. “Could I send you to find a kindly spirit? You are of my dreams, after all, so I should. Perhaps you could find Justice, he knows me, and Theron would trust the news if it came from him. I could ask him to pass the message along. I’m sure he would agree.”
The owl blinked at him again, and nipped his fingers. Zevran was surprised to find that it hurt; and then even more surprised when it kept hurting, getting worse and spreading down his fingers, up his arm-

He woke with the awful taste of the Crows’ wake-up concoction coating the inside of his mouth, the smell of it equally pungent in his nose, and the feel of magic sinking into his bones.
Chapter 8

Sometimes he could go weeks without thinking of Oriana and Oren, his mother, his father, Cathasach. He’d stopped seeing them in every room in the castle in Highever, and enough had needed changing in the Denerim estate, once he’d gotten it back from Rendon Howe, that even back when the betrayal had still been fresh and the Blight newly over, it had been as easy a place to live as any.

Fergus had never been particularly attached to the Denerim Highever estate- before. He’d loved Highever, still did, but not quite in the right way for him to be the best Teyrn. He still had his days where he thought that Cathasach was the one who’d deserved to live, to have led the teyrnir’s forces south to Ostagar and been saved by the Chasind, because Cathasach was the one who’d loved Highever with all his heart and soul. He’d loved the land of it, the rolling sea coasts and the high cliffs, the hills and the farmlands, the mountains in the east. He’d loved the people, all of them, fiercely. He’d felt a sense of duty to the teyrin that had been deeply profound, a calling, a vocation all its own, as strong as any that called the Chantry Sisters to service.

The strongest feelings Fergus had ever had had been for Oriana and Oren. He would have happily stepped aside and let the succession fall to his younger brother. He could have been Cathasach’s Commander of the Teyrn. He would have liked that.

Instead, he was Teyrn, and widowed, and orphaned, all on the same day. He’d barely been twenty-seven, and sometimes it felt like he’d aged three decades upon hearing the news. Today, at thirty-two, still yet to remarry despite the saturation of noble daughters in Ferelden, it wasn’t much better. Every so often something would pop up and the loss would feel fresh again, even if only for a few moments.

Fergus had not expected it to happen today. Not in the Queen’s company, and certainly not with the Arl-Commander.

He didn’t know the man as well as he probably should. He’d been happy enough to give away the arling and his liege lord status with it, to the Wardens who had saved the country and killed Rendon Howe, but that was no excuse for not getting to know them afterwards. Well, he knew Nathaniel, who had stopped by Highever after joining the Wardens and given him an excruciating apology, but that was different. The Commander- Fergus had no idea if it was even polite to use the man’s name, he’d heard exactly two people ever call him something that wasn’t a variant on his titles- didn’t come to court, despite his status as Hero and his vital position in Anora’s political bloc. Fergus wasn’t sure how he’d managed it, except for Anora’s annoyed comment earlier about the Commander pleading Warden duties.

He should be honest with himself. It was something more than an absence of court opportunity that had kept him from getting to know the Hero of Ferelden.

The man was Dalish. It was hard to get past the full facial tattoos, and even if you managed that, then you were confronted with his sheer solemnity. His resting expression made him seem twice his age and gave him the air of an aging country Bann, one of the ones with little more than a patch of forest and a field or two somewhere who took everything very seriously, but didn’t have the charisma to make anyone think well of them for it- the sort of Banns no one wanted to invite to their parties.

Fergus would have said that that was all the Warden-Commander was too, except that he’d noticed bits and pieces of something different. Very dry and unobtrusive, gentle teasing of Captain Alistair, at the five-year anniversary of Anora’s crowning some months ago. Automatic politeness to
everyone; and thoughtless kindness, not seen firsthand but clear in the stories out of Amaranthine of how his people were treated, and in the loyalty they seemed to give him in return.

And the quiet, deeply content smiles of a man utterly in love, when his Crow was around. Fergus had heard some things about the Crows from Oriana, and he was still not exactly clear on how the Commander could have possibly met him, much less hit off so well, but Zevran had helped saved the country and had the Wardens’ trust and Anora used him for advice, so he’d let it be. It helped that the rare times that the Wardens came to court Zevran came along and charmed everyone, making it hard to hold on to the memory of the wariness Oriana had always had when speaking of the Crows. Fergus was also not above admitting that hearing an Antivan accent, and the way that Zevran had been perfectly willing to speak with him in Oriana’s language- as much as Fergus could manage of it, he knew full well that he was dismal at Antivan- didn’t ease an ache deep inside.

So when Anora had pressed the Commander about Zevran’s whereabouts, Fergus had felt the other man’s pain at having to elaborate. He’d felt the same, having to be properly polite and accept the condolences of the rest of the nobility in the weeks after the Blight, when all he’d wanted was for everyone to stop talking about it. ‘Tevinter blood Magister’ and ‘didn’t go well’ sounded like a wagon’s-load of understatement, and Fergus would have bet good money that there had been a lot more pain for everyone involved than the Commander and Captain Alistair had been willing to admit- especially since it had driven the Wardens’ tame Crow back to Antiva. He’d seen how the Commander smiled at him, but he’d also seen the way that Zevran had looked back.

The Amaranthine estate, when he arrived, was dead-quiet. It was wrong. The portcullis should have been open, there should have been servants out on the grounds, there should have been noise. They couldn’t possibly have left already, but it was clear that here was no one here.

Fergus was still idling awkwardly in front of the estate, confused, when the Orlesian Warden from the meeting arrived with two large baskets of food.

“Warden Caron,” he greeted her, and an oddly pained expression crossed her face.

“‘Warden Leonie’, if it pleases you, Your Grace,” she said. “Warden Caron was my brother.”

Yes, he had heard about that. It felt like such a long time ago.

“As you wish, Warden,” he said. “I’m sorry to have missed the Arl-Commander. Did he leave you behind to oversee arrangements for the spring?”

Leonie blinked at him a moment, slightly startled, and then sighed long-sufferingly.

“No, Your Grace,” she said. “The Commander and Captain Alistair are still in residence. If you would follow me, please.”

It wasn’t really following, what with Leonie’s baskets. Fergus held the guard doors open for her, and then the back door into the kitchen to put the food down, before she actually started leading him anywhere.

Most of the doors in the estate were closed. The few large rooms without doors, gathering halls and reception areas and the like, were dusty and unkempt, furniture covered with cloths. By the time Leonie had brought him to the stairs that led to the family apartments, Fergus was forced to concede the obvious. There was no household here, which was why the building looked dead even while it was occupied.

“Why?” he asked Leonie on the way up, who sighed heavily again.
“The Commander may hold his title, but he has yet to think of himself as a lord, Your Grace,” she told him. “Both of them act as though leaving their command posts means that they must camp.”

That was an… odd view of things to take, but Fergus held his peace about it while Leonie knocked on the door to the Arl-Commander’s office and announced him. The man was sitting at his desk- or rather it had likely been Rendon Howe’s desk, with the way that it was so obviously out of proportion to him. Had he changed nothing?

“Is there something else we needed to talk about?” the Arl-Commander asked as Leonie left.

“Not ‘needed’,” Fergus told him. “I just thought I’d-”

He hoped this didn’t sound like interfering.

“My wife was Antivan,” he said. “I still write to her family. If you want, or need, to get news. Or ask questions.”

The Arl-Commander stared at him silently, expression blank.

“It’s just an offer,” Fergus told him hastily. “You clearly didn’t want to talk about Kirkwall or Zevran. You don’t have to. I won’t ask. It’s just- there. It sounds like a bad situation.”

“It is,” the Arl-Commander said shortly, and they were left in an uncomfortable silence. Fergus cast around for a new topic of conversation.

“It will be interesting to have you at court for a full season,” he said. “What sort of entertainment are you thinking of hosting? With two Orlesian prospects we’ll probably have at least one or two masked balls. I’m not sure what’s traditional for the Anderfels or the Free Marches, but the Queen might hold a small tourney if there’s a stretch of weather nice enough. I’m sure your Wardens could come away well from that. There are plenty of opportunities for celebratory parties at the noble estates, and it will be nice to see again. We haven’t had anything like a rota of parties in Denerim since before the Blight. We’re not quite as well-off as we were before, but I’m sure we can make it grand enough…”

The Arl-Commander wasn’t saying anything, just looking more and more woefull in small increments, even as Fergus trailed off.

“I don’t know how to host parties,” he admitted, sounding lost and defeated. “I don’t know how to be social like this.

Fergus wasn’t exactly sure why he was surprised. The man was Dalish, why would he know anything about this? It must have been because he ran the arling without any apparent difficulty, though Fergus had seen plenty of examples in the nobility of how being good at social season and good at administration and ruling were two very different things.

“Well,” Fergus told him. “That’s fine. Technically, you wouldn’t host anyway. As Arl, that’s supposed to be your Arlessa’s job.”

“Zevran could probably have done it,” the Arl-Commander said thoughtfully- and rather sadly, to Fergus’s mind.

“That’s, ah, not really- well yes,” Fergus conceded. “In the absence of a wi- spouse, the job of hostess and party management is traditionally handed off to an unmarried female relative of known talent.”
“My sister is very adept at destroying her enemies with lightning while encased in rock armor,” the Arl-Commander said, and was he- was this a joke? Was he being teased? Had that bit a minute ago with talking about Zevran like he was the Arlessa of Amaranthine also been a joke? Was he reading this right? Or was the Arl-Commander being serious? “And hasn’t officially gotten married yet.”

“I don’t think that would translate well to party hosting,” Fergus said, the best he could do for tact and diplomacy in the face of confusion.

“Probably not,” the Arl-Commander agreed. “Are there people I can- hire? For this?”

“There are plenty of noble young women you could politely ask to be your hostess,” he said. “Paying them would be an insult, and ah, complicate the situation. Whoever you pick will be seen as a sign of favoritism and, er, personal interest, and mixing that with money-”

“You mean sex,” the Arl-Commander said, and then looked deeply offended when Fergus clarified that yes, that would be one aspect, but it would be taken more like an unofficial announcement of courtship.

“There have to be married women who are free to do this.”

“I’m afraid that wouldn’t solve your problem,” Fergus told him. “They’ll just think she’s your mistress either way.”

“But why.”

“You’re unmarried-”

He spread his hands a little in a gesture of reconciliation at the Arl-Commander’s look.

“I’m not saying you’re not committed! I respect what I’ve seen between you and Zevran. But you’re the Hero of Ferelden, you killed the Archdemon, you defeated Loghain Mac Tir in single combat, you put Anora on her throne. You’re Champion of Redcliffe. You’re the Warden-Commander of Ferelden and the Arl of Amaranthine. You’ve got money and power and influence and a storied reputation and you’re in good physical shape, plus the, uh-”

No good way to put this.

“You’re an elf and plenty of humans like that,” Fergus pointed out, feeling nebulously rude and ashamed about it. “Humans and elves can’t get married. An alienage elf be a huge step down, socially, for you; and for all that you visit the Dalish you’ve never brought anyone has heard of. As far as rumor is concerned, you’re completely uninvolved-”

“I have-” the Arl-Commander started to say, eyes flashing with anger.

“I know! I know,” Fergus said soothingly. “But- you’ve kept it mostly to yourselves, right? In the privacy of Vigil’s Keep, maybe? The only times Zevran has come to court he’s flirted with everyone. He’s got good court manners, very sophisticated-”

“And I’m not sophisticated,” the Arl-Commander said flatly, crossing his arms. “I’m a heathen barbarian ‘knife-ear’ who managed to be in the right places at the right times. I probably still steal children and hunt humans for the fun of it, right? Secretly host evil magical rituals in the dungeons of the Vigil with human blood? Defile Chantries when no one is looking? Perhaps I violated burial urns and carried off helpless Sisters during the Blight and then left them staked out for the darkspawn once I’d had my way with them. Maybe I Tainted the southern farm fields on purpose. Maybe me and my worship of ‘demon gods’ is the reason Ferelden had a Blight in the first place. Creators know
I can’t figure out something so simple as having servants, so why not go for the entire slander?”

“No one would say that about you,” Fergus said.

“And they wouldn’t think it?”

…He’d got him there.

“I was going to say that it means that everyone assumed that you and Zevran are close in the same way that you and Captain Alistair are- as people who fought the Blight together,” Fergus said. “And having an actual household here would help with… some of what you said.”

“I sent someone looking for servants.”

“Well, that’s a good start. But the point I’m trying to make is that a lot people don’t know or won’t care about you and Zevran, and with elves and humans not being allowed to marry and all, it certainly isn’t going to hurt any of our young women to take up with you when there aren’t any local young men to marry, anyway. It could even be considered a good move for the wider marriage market in some cases. Any woman you pick for your hostess, married or unmarried, is going to be assumed to be your mistress, or a potential mistress. And people might- fling themselves at you during spring season. Both of us, really- no all three of us. Captain Alistair isn’t married, right?”

“He isn’t even seeing anyone.”

“So the three most eligible bachelors in Ferelden, escorting the excitingly-foreign noblemen who just might become King or Prince-Consort around,” Fergus said, dreading the idea even more as he articulated it. “Yes, we’ll be the perfect opportunity for all the unmarried women of Ferelden to catch a good thing. And maybe some men, too, if people stop and think about Zevran.”

The Arl-Commander did not look pleased.

“Maybe I could get stuck in the Deep Roads for five months again.”

“Five months?”

Theron spent the journey back to the Vigil frowning over what Fergus had told him. After they’d gotten to talk about the Deep Roads and darkspawn and Warden business, Theron had felt comfortable broaching the topic of redecorating assistance. Fergus had been useful and accommodating there as well. He got the feeling that the Teyrn was trying to make friends, and wasn’t particularly opposed to that. He seemed decent, and they’d have to spend a lot of time together soon, after all.

Still. A- a mistress.

He was still dithering about really trying to come to a decision when they arrived back at the Vigil. The courtyard was bustling, as usual, with the gates open to the town below, also as usual, and so neither he nor Alistair noticed their guest until Fen sniffed the air, barked excitedly, and dashed off for an out-of-the-way, shaded area behind the public shrine to Andraste.

“Maker’s breath, she’s learned what shirts are for,” Alistair muttered to him as they stood and stared at Fen jumping excitedly around Morrigan’s feet. “Where has she been, she looks like she killed a couple of Chasind and stole their clothes.”

Theron had to admit, even in his surprise, that she did look much more Chasind than he was used to
seeing her. There was a lot more fur and layers of cloth going on than before, though her strappy skirt and gold jewelry were exactly the same. If anything, she’d found more gold somewhere, and a new staff to go with it—still rough-looking in comparison to Circle-made staves, but elegant in its simplicity—a long length of dark cedar, the forking branches at the end lopped partway off and used as a setting for a finely-polished perfect sphere of flawless amber. Theron wondered distractedly where she’d found it.

“I thought she said— and you said— that she wasn’t coming back!”

Theron shrugged and moved to say hello. Personally, he was glad to see her again. She’d gone through an Eluvian, and in his experience, that wasn’t something people came back from. Who knew where she’d been or what sort of danger she’d found—

He wasn’t quite within speaking distance yet when Morrigan’s straps wriggled.

“BABAЕ!”

Sabrae had had children once, and everyone had helped take care of them. As Hahren Paivel’s apprentice and then understudy, Theron had gotten some of the most exposure to the children, when they’d clustered around the Hahren’s fire to learn the histories and the ways of survival and all the things that made the Dalish Dalish. It was still automatic to him—kneel down, open arms, hug small body against chest and shoulder, hook one arm around and under for a place to sit and support weight, other hand on back of small head to provide balance as he stood back up, holding the child.

“Babae look we came!” his son told him happily in El’vhen, hugging him around the neck and swinging his feet against Theron’s plate. “Mother brought us!”

Morrigan was tense around the eyes and she wasn’t frowning, but she definitely wasn’t smiling either. She was gripping her staff like she was thinking of using it.

“And did your mother teach you this language?” Theron asked. He could hear Alistair coming up behind him.

His son shook his head, and said in a pleased, confiding whisper: “I know things.”

“Knowing things is good,” Theron told him, simply accepting the implications of that statement for now. “I— want to see your face, da’len.”

The boy leaned back and Theron moved his steadying hand down between his shoulder blades. His son looked so much like his mother, with her dark hair and gold eyes, but he wasn’t nearly as pale, and there was a certain cast to his features that marked his elf blood.

His son.

The tight, bright feeling in his chest made one corner of his mouth twitch up, and he felt fluttery when he leaned in and kissed the boy’s forehead before pulling him close again, hugging him tight.

“You look like you’re about to burst from happiness,” Alistair said dryly. “If you’re going to start bouncing in excitement like a mabari promised a shank of meat, maybe put the kid down first.”

His son wriggled in his grasp and Theron gave him some slack. He perked up and smiled brightly at Alistair, pointing to the man.

“Dragon!”
“Uh… no,” Alistair said, and pointed at himself. “Human.”

The boy’s scoff sounded exactly like Morrigan’s.

“Alistair,” Alistair continued. “Who’re you, huh?”

“But you know me,” he said with a little whine. “You could hear me!”

Theron stiffened a little, and just caught a strangled hissing from Alistair that might have been a half-formed Voshai curse before Morrigan cut across everything with a sharp: “Enough, Kieran!”

“But Mother-”

“I said enough,” Morrigan repeated, thumping the butt of her staff on the grass and dirt. Kieran subsided, squirming in Theron’s hold.

“M’ sorry,” he mumbled, and Theron kissed him again.

“You are a surprising child, Kieran,” he said gently. “Do you remember me?”

He wasn’t sure if he wanted the answer to that question, but if Kieran remembered Alistair- it was better to know.

“You heard me too,” Kieran said, and then his voice went soft with awe. “You saved me.”

Of all the things to hear- Theron looked at Morrigan, silently pleading for an explanation, and she looked pointedly at the bulk of the Vigil. Theron turned on his heel and headed for the stairs inside. A few of the staff and guards greeted him, but most gave him a look of silent confusion, at a compete loss when faced with their Arl striding purposefully down the Vigil’s hallways carrying a young boy and followed by what looked like a Chasind shaman.

Nathaniel was waiting in Theron’s office.

“Commander, we may be on the brink of a- what is this.”

“Such inviting people, you Wardens are;” Morrigan said. “Perhaps this one will also accuse me of theft? And ‘swooping’.”

“That was five years ago,” Alistair complained.

“And perhaps, in those five years, I have finally learned how to turn men into toads.”

“Nathaniel, this is Morrigan,” Theron told him. “The Witch of the Wilds. And this is our son Kieran.”

Nathaniel got a distinctly pained look on his face.

“You have a problem with that, Howe?” Alistair demanded.

“No, no problem,” Nathaniel said. “I’m just trying to figure out if there’s any good way to break this news. He’s not a mage at least, right?”

“Well,” Theron said. “Between my father’s lineage and Morrigan and her mother-”

Kieran looked at the brace of candles on Theron’s desk. They lit up.
“-he’ll probably grow to be a powerful one,” Theron concluded with a thrill of excitement. A mage child! His son had magic! And so young! The clan had been right in planning to pair him and Merrill to keep the power of Arlathan going, even if it had never managed to happen. “We’ve been blessed, Nathaniel.”

“The Chantry is going to have our heads,” Nathaniel said faintly.

“The Chantry can fight me.”

“Theron, no,” Alistair groaned. “Do not fight the Chantry! We won’t win that one! Leave them alone.”

“So long as they remember that Kieran and Dalish and Chasind and that they can mind their own business.”

“This is the Chantry’s business,” Nathaniel said.

“Tis not,” Morrigan told him icily. “We care little for their Maker or his prophet.”

“Well, whatever else, Andraste was a friend of the El’vhen,” Theron said, trying to keep the situation defused. “And we don’t need to be rude about it.”

“When there cease to be Templars, perhaps I shall cease in my so-called ‘rudeness’.”

“I’d almost forgotten what a joy to have around you are,” Alistair told her.

“Whereas I had not forgotten the same of you.”

“Can whatever you were here about wait for a bit, Nathaniel?” Theron asked. His Constable sighed, muttered something about holding off Anders, and said he’d come back in an hour.

“Outside, Kieran,” Morrigan ordered.

“Noooo,” he whined, and tightened his grip on Theron’s neck. “I want Babae!”

“You may have him once we are finished speaking.”

Well, what if Theron didn’t want to let go of him?

“Going to talk about me,” Kieran grumbled.

“You are eminently discussable,” Morrigan told him, tone fond. “Theron.”

He squeezed his son briefly and knelt down. Kieran clamped his legs around Theron’s ribs and refused to let go.

“Kieran,” Theron said. “Da’len. Go out in the hallway with Fen for a bit and then I promise we can have the day together.”

“Promise,” Kieran said sullenly.

“Promise,” Theron said. “I will carry you around on all my business and introduce you to everyone.”

“Soon,” his son insisted, but put his feet on the floor and went with Fen when the mabari nudged him towards the door.
'Oh, uh, okay,” Alistair said a moment after the door closed behind them, startled. “I wasn’t expecting you to actually start bouncing in excitement- Theron, what was that noise? Was that an explosion? You sounded like a teakettle.”

Theron threw his arms around Morrigan and hugged her tightly.

“Thank you for bringing him,” he told her. “Thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you-”

“Twas nothing much,” she said, a little stiff in the hug but not pushing him away. “He was asking for you, and I- I have run out of options.”

Theron pulled back, keeping a hold on her upper arms.

“If you’re in trouble-”

“I am in no more trouble than I was the last time we met,” Morrigan said. “But Kieran-”

She stopped, apparently to consider her words.

“-he is not so safe as I thought he was.”

“We’ll help-”

“I’d like to hear what she wants, first,” Alistair overruled him.

“I had thought,” Morrigan said. “That taking Kieran into the world of the Eluvians would keep him safe- safer- from my mother-”

“I thought that we killed her,” Alistair interrupted again.

“She has thwarted her own death I know now how,” Morrigan told him, clearly frustrated. “She is inhuman.”

“Well we knew that.”

“Morrigan,” Theron said. “Before you left, last time- you said that you’d learned that the ritual Flemeth gave you was ‘just a means to an end’ and the beginning of the future. What does that mean?”

“Later,” she told him. “I shall- first I must- Kieran, Theron. My son, your son- I thought we would be safe in the Eluvians. ‘Twas foolish of me to hope. There is something- there are shadows, whispers, in that place, never properly seen nor heard. They make him scream. He has awful nightmares there, and now when we are outside the Eluvians as well. He says that he cannot remember what the whispers say when he awakes, but that they scratch at his mind.”

Morrigan’s voice went quiet, suddenly, and tinged with dread.

“He says there is singing.”

“I’m not sure you can stop that,” Alistair said after a moment.

“He has been asking for you since he could speak,” Morrigan told Theron. “I did not wish to return. This seems too obvious a place for Flemeth to not search. But staying out in the wilds is-”

She made a little gesture with her hand.
“Hard on your own, especially with a young child?” Theron suggested. “That’s why we live in clans.”

“When he wakes in the night screaming, we cannot hide,” Morrigan said. “Should I choose an inn or some such, we are inevitably beset by the local Templars, come to save him from the demons that I have obviously summoned through the Fade to torment my own sleeping son! Here, at least, no one would dare attempt such foolishness.”

“They won’t,” Theron agreed. “No Templars here-”

Morrigan looked pointedly at Alistair.

“I’ll say it again- I never actually got to taking my vows,” he said. “And you might be a witch and Kieran might be kind of creepy-”

“Alistair!”

“Well he is, Theron, sorry. He remembered us from the Blight. But we all know what Flemeth was like, and I know you wouldn’t do that to your child.”

“Your sudden faith in me is touching,” Morrigan drawled. “Shall we take a picnic in the fields next, and commiserate about our favorite posies?”

“Both of you stop,” Theron said. “Morrigan, most of the Vigil is being used, but I don’t think the Arlessa’s suite has been opened up since Zevran just moved in with me-”

“And where is your Antivan? Shall I fear the shadows and blind corners, awaiting-”

“He went back to Antiva,” Theron cut her off. He wasn’t prepared to have this conversation.

Morrigan raised her eyebrows.

“Are you going to tell me why he would walk back into the stronghold of those who wish him dead, or shall I begin guessing?”

“Not now,” Alistair told her.

“I should think-”

“Not now, Morrigan!” he said sharply, and looked at Theron. “You want to give her the Arlessa’s rooms, really? You know what that will look like.”

“No one else is using them,” Theron said, glad to change topics. “There are rooms enough for her and Kieran to have their own spaces.”

“I do not recall saying anything about remaining here,” Morrigan cut in.

“Oh, didn’t you?” Alistair asked acidly. “Because it sounded an awful lot like you were planning on having Kieran live here with us, and you’re his mother.”

“My mother-”

“Is a bad person and should be ashamed of her parenting,” Theron said. “If she comes, she comes. We’ve fought her before and run her off, and now we’ve got the entire Vigil to help. Ush ma’leth, Morrigan.”
She stepped away from him, towards the door.

“I am not of your clan, Theron Mahariel Sabrae. I am no Dalish.”

“Neither is Alistair,” Theron said. “Or Zevran, who actually has a claim to it. My clan made me leave, Morrigan, and I’ll never be a part of the People the way I was, or the way everyone else is. I haven’t been exiled and I haven’t forswn my name in service to the People and our gods, so my clan is who I say it is, no matter if any of the others recognize it or not. I’ve chosen all of you, Morrigan. You’re family. You have been since you traveled with us during the Blight.”

“‘Tis no jest, this?” Morrigan said after a moment. “I shall never understand you.”

“You said that before, at the Eluvian, and I don’t believe it,” Theron told her. “I also remember you saying that you want is unimportant, and that’s not true either.”

“‘Tis not!” Morrigan said. “Individual wants must be put aside for the greater good!”

“And when have you cared about the ‘greater good’?” Alistair asked.

“The true and only definition of such a thing is survival, Alistair. And I have always cared for that.”

“Survival and vitality of clan and people,” Theron agreed.

“Of self and those deserving,” Morrigan countered.

“And how, exactly, do you decide who’s ‘deserving’?” Alistair demanded.

“Morrigan, stay,” Theron said quickly, before a real argument could develop. “Please.”

“You do not understand the danger,” she told him.

“Then explain.”

She looked at the still-burning candles on his desk, weak and wane in the sunlight coming through the window.

“‘Twas not supposed to be you, Theron,” Morrigan finally said, still staring at the candles. “Flemeth said as much when she gave me the knowledge of the ritual. ‘Twas to be Alistair.”

“What!”

“Morrigan, stay,” Theron said quickly, before a real argument could develop. “Please.”

“You do not understand the danger,” she told him.

“Then explain.”

She looked at the still-burning candles on his desk, weak and wane in the sunlight coming through the window.

“‘Twas not supposed to be you, Theron,” Morrigan finally said, still staring at the candles. “Flemeth said as much when she gave me the knowledge of the ritual. ‘Twas to be Alistair.”

“What!”

“She knew whose son you are, Alistair Theirin-”

“Not my name! And how!”

“If I knew, doubtless this entire situation would begin to make a whit of sense!” Morrigan cried. “She wanted Theirin blood for this child, for the- the physical shell of an Old God, and this is the one thing in all my life I have been able to deny her!”

“Morrigan,” Theron said. “Why me?”

“Why you what?” she asked. “Why did my mother bother to save you? Perhaps to keep Alistair happy. Perhaps to fight the Blight. The only thing she ever said about you was an implication that she has a way to control you, a thing to hold against your obedience to her plans.”

Dread curled low in his stomach. Something to hold against him-
“But,” Morrigan said, just a bit hesitant. “Why you for the ritual? You were- you are kind. To me. I thought it would be more… tolerable.”

That was nice to hear, but he was still rather distracted by that ‘a thing to hold against your obedience’.

“But we attacked her,” he said, trying to reassure himself as much as convince Morrigan. “If she did have something, then that would have been the time-”

“And so it must have been part of the plan!” Morrigan snapped. “Do you see now, Theron? She sent me out into the world to have my son, she sent me out in the world were her false grimoire lay, where I would find the maddening bits of information that I can make nothing of besides that I am a made thing, Flemeth’s ideal replacement and the culmination of what may well be centuries of plotting, where I would learn about this particular thing and send you to kill her! Everything was a plan! The fact that Kieran exists, that I am running from her, and that she has not caught us yet-surely the only reason that she has not overcome us is because it is not yet time! Our simple presence here, with both of you again-”

She stopped and glared furiously at nothing, biting her lip. Theron didn’t think she realized how clear her fight for composure was, and reached out for her again.

“It must be some plan if it could account for all that,” he said gently.

“No one is that good at manipulation,” Alistair disagreed.

“You have never lived with my mother!”

“Alistair,” Theron said. “Morrigan. Whatever Flemeth is up to, we’ll find out eventually, won’t we? If and until Morrigan knows more, all we can do is live. Once she tries something, we’ll just fight it, and her.”

“‘Twill not be that simple,” Morrigan said, and Theron and Alistair both politely ignored the edge of frustrated tears roughing her words. “It never is.”

“Well,” Theorn said. “I think that three of us and an entire arling would find it easier to thwart her than just you alone in the wilderness somewhere, don’t-”

The office door banged open.

“Commander-”

“Commander!”

“We’re busy,” Alistair told Nathaniel and Anders testily.

“I was trying to keep him-” Nathaniel tried to say, but Anders ran right over him.

“You have to let them stay, Commander!” Anders demanded. “The things they went through getting here- the things they lived through in the Circle! You can’t make them go back! It’ll kill them!”

“Anders,” Theron said. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, and I’m in the middle of a different conversation.”

“You can’t let the Templars have them!”

“Since when have I let Templars have anyone?” he asked. “If they’re more escapees, we’ll take them
so long as they’re willing to try being Wardens.”

“Neria is pregnant!”

“Good for her.”

“They’ll take her baby!”

“Anders!” Theron said forcefully. “I already agreed with you. Stop a moment and listen to me listening to you.”

Alistair looked at Nathaniel.

“This is what you were talking about when you said the Chantry would have our heads, weren’t you?”

Nathaniel sighed.

“They arrived yesterday from Kinloch,” he said. “Came in with a merchant’s cart. They had the good sense to dump their robes and staves at least, but who knew where they got their clothes or money. I decided I’d rather not ask. They slipped into the Vigil and started asking for Anders. Maverlies nearly threw them out—”

“They’ have names,” Anders said. “Neria Surana and Leontius Amell.”

“Oh Maker,” Alistair groaned. “That’s not—”


“Leontius can’t go back, Commander,” Anders told him urgently. “He can’t. I’ve seen people where he is before, I’ve been there before, if you make him go back he’ll kill himself! Make him a Warden or let me send him on but don’t turn him in! And Neria—”

“Is going to have a baby. I remember.”

“Leontius is a theorist,” Anders pressed. “Spirit and Arcane. He’ll have to be taught how to fight but put him in support for anyone and he could be invaluable. Neria specialized with earth and ice and can do a couple other things, a bit like Viktory- let her go up to the Peak, she and Eadric have been friends for—”

“Anders, I already agreed with you,” Theron told him again. “Ask them if they’ll take the Joining. Tell them it might kill them. If they agree we’ll Join Leontius, and Neria can have hers once her baby can survive without her.”

Anders took a deep, steadying breath.

“Sorry, Commander,” he said. “Really. I’m not- I’m not used to anyone doing that. Listening to me. About mages.”

“Just don’t interrupt me next time.”

“Right,” he said, and took a proper look at Morrigan. “So who are you?”

“Anders,” Theron introduced them. “This is Morrigan, the Witch of the Wilds. She fought the Blight with us. Morrigan, this is Anders. I think you’ll like him, he ran away from the Circle seven times and might despise Templars just as much as you.”
“Please don’t encourage them,” he heard Alistair mutter. “Please.”

Anders faltered a moment when he held out his hand to shake, and Morrigan just looked at it.

“Witch of the Wilds, huh?” he asked instead, letting it drop. “Like Flemeth? Can you turn into a dragon too?”

For a second, everything was dead silence.

“Theron, did you tell—” Alistair started to ask.

“No, I didn’t,” Theron said. “Where did you meet Flemeth, Anders?”

“There was a whole thing,” he said. “With Hawke. Flemeth saved her and Bethany and Leandra on the road from Lothering. In return she gave Hawke with amulet and said she was supposed to give it to the Dalish on Sundermount. I was with her when she went up there and that’s when we met Merrill and your clan, when Merrill performed some sort of burial rite on the amulet. It went all swirly and glow and Justice went sort of- he didn’t like it. And then there was Flemeth, except Merrill called her ‘Asha’bellanar’.”

Oh no.

“Flemeth is Asha’bellanar,” Theron said faintly as Alistair clapped his hands over his face.

“Fuuuuuuuuuu--”

“You see?” Morrigan said bitterly “For everything a plan, for every pawn three hidden strings!”

“Please explain ‘Asha’bellanar’;,” Alistair begged Theron. “Please tell me she’s not like, another Dalish big bad person like, Fen’harel or something—”

“No, no,” Theron said. “She’s a- story. A powerful, ancient sorceress living in the Wilds. She’s supposed to be an elf. If you’re really desperate, if you’re in really big trouble, you go to her for help. There are a lot of cautionary tales about it, but some helpful ones too."

He paused, the dread returning.

“My father,” he said. “Mahariel Soleanaathe Sabrae, our Keeper before Marethari. Just a little bit before I was born, Sabrae was leaving the Dales. We got into some sort of trouble, trouble that my parents couldn’t get us out of, and. And my father went to Asha’bellanar to ask for help. Sabrae owes her.”

“I’m going to go destroy something,” Alistair said.

“They’re not all bad!” Theron told them, the reassurance sounding weak even to himself. “She’s supposed to be the one who arranged for the truce between the Dalish, the Chasind, and the Avvar! That was good!”

“Wait, the Dalish have a what?” Nathaniel asked.

“Well, the Chantry and the settled shem hate all of us,” Theron said. “Chasind and Avvar are decent, for humans. They don’t try to convert us or kill us, they respect our Keepers, they’ll leave our artifacts and ruins alone, and tell us when they find any. The clans who don’t travel in Fereldan territory may hate it or dislike it a lot, but—”

He shrugged.
“-it means that we could always run to the Wilds or the Frostbacks if Ferelden got after us, and they
could do the same to the Brecilian. Most of the clans in Ferelden are in the Frostbacks, actually.
Sometimes their shamans visit our Keepers, and sometimes our mages are sent to talk to them, when
we need another opinion on something. They’re a safe trade outlet, where we can get metal and
woven cloth and supplies to preserve our books and other things that are hard to make when you
have to live nomadically without talking to Andrasteans. And there’s a lot of El’vhen blood in the
Chasind and Avvar now because of it so they’re like… really distant cousins. It’s been that way
since forever. The story with Ash’a’bellanar is that there was a great Avvar shaman, who led her tribe
like a Keeper and held counsel with powerful spirits. One of them was Ash’a’bellanar, who had
possessed one of the I’tel’melin-”

“The who now?” Anders asked.

“Those who give up their names and their clans in service to the People and our gods,” Theron
explained. “They take an attribute as their name, usually something that drove them to make the
sacrifice in the first place- duty or faith or vengeance or learning or protection. They are perpetual
wanderers, loners, offering their service and skills and knowledge wherever it’s needed, and are very
honored. It’s not really- right, I guess, that whichever I’tel’melin accepted the spirit did that, but if it
wasn’t for her and the shaman Tyrdda-”

“Tyrdda Bright-Axe,” Morrigan said. “Is in her grimoire. The true and the false. I have yet to
discover the significance of it, but I dislike this.”

“Commander, what have you gotten into now?” Nathaniel asked.

“Nothing we can do anything about,” Theron told him. “I’m giving Morrigan and Kieran the
Arlessa’s rooms, Nathaniel. Could you tell Delilah, and get it arranged?”

It was strange being at Vigil’s Keep without Kallian, even just for the few days that she was
accompanying the Arl-Commander to Denerim. She was the one Fenris knew best of all these
people he’d fallen in with, and without her he just… didn’t know what to do with himself.

Vigil’s Keep was strange to him. It was the seat of government for the area, the equivalent of the
local Magister’s residence, but there was little enough comfort here. There were servants, and the
water and food stayed tolerably warm on a journey from the kitchens to the tiny house in the mostly-
empty fenced-in servants’ courtyard he’d been given, and there was firewood and rugs of wool and
fur aplenty provided out of the Vigil’s stores.

But he missed plumbing. He would always miss plumbing. It was one of the very few good things
about Tevinter.

The first day of Kallian being gone, he stayed in his room, spending hours in the meditations Mhequi
had taught him. They weren’t doing anything for his memory that he could tell, but the restful quiet
and the long, easy stretches did help some with the pain of the lyrium, and properly, finally adjusting
to his magic sensitivity. He could content himself with that much progress for now, even with the
way that Mhequi had broken off their lessons for now, muttering about needing more help and the
travesty of burning decaying blood into living flesh.

Remembering that particular turn of phrase she’d used about the lyrium had thrown him out of a
practicing mood. He’d spent the rest of the day going over his room, caring for his sword and armor,
and poking around the Vigil. It was very much a defensive construction, and he approved, even as
he found the aggressively square lines and stark stone of it all artless and inelegant. It was functional,
and the Fereldans at least acknowledged that their architecture left a lot to be desired. He wasn’t sure
if he wanted to do much with the little house he’d been given- a bedroom, a main room with a kitchen, and an attached outhouse with a properly-filtered shared cesspit so that it didn’t stink. The whole think was built around the double-sided brick fireplace that warmed the bedroom and served as an open cook fire in the kitchen, though some former resident had inexpertly put in a cast iron stove as well. It was not particularly furnished, and he could take utensils and plates with him from the kitchen with his provided food so long as he returned them promptly- but he had an itch, seeing the painted and carved wood, wrought iron, and bright wool weavings that the Fereldans used to alleviated their architecture, to own the simple things for himself. Forks, knives, spoons, plates, cups. He didn’t know how to cook, so no pans, but a pot for boiling water or heating wine and some herbs for tisanes wouldn’t be amiss, nor the ability to buy and store his own fruits or vegetables.

His problem was the same as in Kirkwall. He had no money.

The second day with Kallian gone, he went down into the Vigil’s town, which seemed to serve mostly as a web of workshops, markets, and caravansaries that served the Vigil and spread their extras around the local farms or the nearest proper cities. There was a small, rough Chantry here, complete with Chanter and board. Fenris thought to pick up some work, but loitering and waiting for people to comment on the posted jobs proved unfruitful. Most of them involved places he’d never heard of.

Wandering about the town that afternoon brought him to the attention of a caravan leader who was looking for an armed escort to Highever. That was too far for a first journey, Fenris decided, but the man was willing to point him in the direction of a women leading a small group weighted down with silverite ore to Kal’Hirol. That was a journey of only three days at most, and Fenris signed on for leaving the next afternoon.

And there he ran into a dilemma. He had been provided a living space, but would it still be there if he left? He hadn’t had to think about this sort of thing before. Hesitantly, upon his return to the Vigil, he knocked on the door of one of the other occupied houses in the servants’ courtyard. A slight man with messy hair answered, looking like he’d just been in bed.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hello,” Fenris said, and then couldn’t figure out how to proceed.


“Yep,” Kelso agreed. “I saw the Constable Howe move you in. You need something?”

Fenris explained about his job and the house.

“Nah, it’ll still be there,” Kelso told him. “It’s got your name on it and all. It’s yours until you take off for good or you die.”

“Die?” Fenris asked.

“Well, you know,” Kelso said, and waved at his sword. “Weapons are dangerous business. Like my dogs more, personally.”

“Dogs?”

“Yeah!” the man said brightly. “Mabari! The war hounds. My pa was an Ash Warrior, and his pa too. I didn’t take to the sword life, but nothing can take me from the hounds. I’m kennel master here.
“I’ll show you.”

Fenris hadn’t expected any of this, and was left awkwardly standing on Kelso’s doorstep as the other man disappeared back into his house for a couple of minutes. He came back with his hair a little neater, and with boots on.

The Vigil’s kennel was around the back of the main building, in the vicinity of the training grounds but not next to it. The long wooden building backed up against the stone wall of the Vigil. Fenris had seen it when exploring before, but had ignored it, assuming they were stables.

The set up Kelso opened the door on could never have been mistaken for a stable. The floor was a mix of stone and packed dirt, with rugs and pillows and blankets strewn around everywhere, some of them even new, but for the far end of the building, which was clear and floored with thoroughly-scrubbed stone. A large metal bucket of bones marked it as the eating area, and the lower portion of the door there was hinged and unlatched, unlike the main body of the thick wood. For the dogs?

“This is nice,” Fenris said.

“‘For dogs’, ” Kelso said. “Yeah, I hear that even though you didn’t say it. Foreigners are always like that. But mabari are special, eh? The old Magisters made them out of some big hunting dogs off Seheron, added some magic, and here we are! They’re people, mabari are, and smart enough to choose us over the Tevenes.”

“Smart indeed,” Fenris said as the mabari started to crowd around, sniffing and wagging stumpy tails. Hunting dogs from Seheron… “Shan-vihara.”

“Eh?”

“Hunting dogs from Seheron,” Fenris said, squatting down to scratch behind ears. “Shan-vihara guarded the old temples from leopards. No the Seherain hunt Magisters and Qunari with them, in addition to the leopards.”

“Sounds like mabari,” Kelso said, obviously proud. “What’s a leopard?”

“A very large cat that lives in the jungle,” Fenris told him. “In the trees. They have spots, and will attack anything.”

“Sounds like fun hunting.”

“Hm,” Fenris said, cupping his hands around the stunted muzzle of the nearest hound and tipping it back and forth, examining its profile. These mabari were more squashed than the shan-vihara the Fog Warriors kept, but they still looked very similar. “With these jaws, they could break a leopard’s spine.”

“Do that all the time to men,” Kelso said happily, patted nearest mabari on the head, and started cooing at it. “Don’t you, you big glorious lugs? Nothing better than ripping a man’s arms off, hm? Oh no there isn’t!”

Fereldans were strange.

The small caravan to Kal’Hirol passed mostly through farmland and low hills. It was eminently boring, and the season had just begun to bite. Fenris realized that he was going to need to buy warm clothes. He’d had little use for them in Kirkwall, where warm winds often came blowing out of the deserts of Nevarra and southern Tevinter, making the winters rainy and merely chilled. A little talk confirmed that it snowed here, and his questions got the caravan reminiscing about a massive storm a
couple of years previously, which had snowed in the Vigil and Amaranthine for a week. Snow up to the rafters, they said, happy in the glow of memory, and Fenris grimaced.

Kal’Hirol was even stranger than Amaranthine and the Vigil. He’d been to the Dwarven Ambassadoria in Minrathous, but this was something altogether different—a sprawling, artfully angular city of stone, carved out of the living rock and built up with Amaranthine granite in contrast to the multi-toned grays of the local stone, half above and half below ground. Fenris wasn’t sure that he approved of its location at the bottom of a chasm, but there were guards posted around the rim of it, so at least they weren’t ignorant of their strategic disadvantage.

The caravan went into the underground section of the city to deliver the ore, and Fenris’s tongue curled up behind his teeth. It didn’t taste exactly like magic, but there was a hint of something—

“Fenris!”

It was the bouncy dwarf Warden.

“Warden Kondrat.”

“Hey, Fenris!” Sigrun said happily, falling into step with him. “Didn’t expect to see you here! How’s things?”

“You last saw me four days ago.”

“Yeah, and now you’re here, with a caravan! Do you not like the Vigil?”

Fenris assured her that he did like the Vigil, but that he also needed money. The Warden was leading him somewhere, and as the caravan didn’t need him at the moment, he was content to see where they were going.

“You should talk to Nathaniel,” she told him. Their destination seemed to be a very solid construction of steel and stone, heavy-looking and standing across the mouth of what might have, at one point, been a cave or tunnel. “If you need a job so badly. I’m sure he could find something at the Vigil for you.”

The heavy construction turned out to be the Warden’s headquarters in Kal’Hirol. They shared it with the Legion of the Dead, who had provided the mason and architects to block off the Deep Roads. He found this out from the Warden-Captain in charge, another dwarf who Sigrun introduced him to, red-haired and brash, who showed him around a bit and then dragged him home for dinner with his family.

His wife was not exactly pleased.

“You couldn’t have sent Sigrun on ahead?” she demanded.

“Awe, Felsi, sweetheart—”

“Don’t ‘sweetheart’ me, Oghren Kondrat. I cook enough extra for one person since Sigrun is always coming around, but not two people!”

There was some mumbling on Oghren’s part and more yelling on Felsi’s, and the argument continued in Dwarven. Sigrun unconcernedly handed him the bread basket as she munched on her own roll, and Fenris picked one apart, carefully avoiding crumbs.

“Sigrun!”
“Thrune!” the Warden happily greeted the small dwarven girl who’d scampered into the room, and ruffled her hair. “Thrune, say hi to Fenris.”

“Hi,” the girl said solemnly, and Fenris greeted her back before running out of things to say. Small children were far outside of his experience.

The dinner situation was eventually resolved by Felsi taking half of Oghren’s food and giving it to Fenris. Oghren grumbled about it in good humor.

“Skinny twig of a thing,” was what he called Fenris when he slapped him heartily across the back as everyone was sitting down for dinner. “Ain’t ever seen an elf that isn’t, excepting the Commander. He had muscle on him even running around on barely anything during the Blight! But the rest of you could use a few good solid meals and some decent ale. It’ll thicken you right up.”

Dinner was surface potatoes and underground mushroom with nug, and later on roasted and sweetened apple slices for dessert. Fenris had to restrain himself from eating all of them.

The caravan returned to the Vigil on the same day that the Arl-Commander and Kallian and the others returned from Denerim. The caravan was a few hours behind, and Fenris stayed in the high-traffic public spaces just long enough to overhear that the current ruckus was about mages before slipping around behind the Vigil for the training grounds. He would do sword exercises until everything had blown over, and then talk to Warden-Constable Howe about a job.

Happily, Kallian was already on the training grounds, talking excitedly with some of the Vigil’s guard.

“Fenris!” she called when she saw him approaching, and waved enthusiastically. “Fenris! Guess what!”

“You have returned?” he guessed dryly once he was close enough to hold conversation.

“Well, obviously,” she said, and elbowed him. “The Arl-Commander made me a Knight of Amaranthine while we were in Denerim. Me! There’s papers and everything!”

“In that case- congratulations, Ser Tabris.”

“Maker, I will never get tired of hearing that,” she said. “Spar with me?”

“Gladly.”

They squared off against each other in the large fenced-in area for practice bouts, watched by the guards and the odd loitering servant who’d come to see the elf knight. As during their couple of spars in Kirkwall, Fenris bested her handily.

“I’ve really got to not let you do that,” she said, accepted his hand to help her back to her feet. “I’m a knight now! I’m supposed to be one of the best!”

“You are letting me win?” Fenris asked. “So that explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“Why you are always distracted when we fight.”

“What?” Kallian protested, and started turning red. “No! It’s you! It’s, uh, you’re so good at this, I can’t help noticing! I’m trying to fight you and watch you, and that’s hard!”
“Then perhaps I should properly teach you.”

“That would be great,” Kallian said. “That would be really great. I learned a lot from the guard but most of them are sword-and-shield fighters, and you’ve got moves I’ve never even seen- I’ll buy you dinner.”

So that’s how this was. Well.

“Then stand like this,” Fenris told her, demonstrating. “You’re heavy on your feet. Human warriors can afford to be. We cannot.”

Elven warriors had to be as fast and light on their feet as a rogue to avoid being caught by the often-superior height and weight of their human counterparts, or so Fenris had been taught. He’d been shown enough blood sport in the Tevene arenas to have internalized that lesson, and the trainers he’d had had then reinforced the importance of a longsword to an elf over sword and shield to him again and again. It gave an elf reach and kept them out of the area where a human with a shield could be particularly dangerous. Kallian was right about the moves being different- the south obviously trained elves and humans in the same style, despite the tactical troubles. Somehow she and the Arl-Commander had made it work, though, so perhaps this was another thing Tevinter was wrong about.

Or perhaps it had been nothing more than his trainers making excuses for Danarius’s whims. Fenris didn’t remember the man’s previous bodyguards, but overheard talk had informed him that they had all used two-handed swords as well. Regardless, his training had served him well, the style catching many opponents off-guard.

He asked for a delayed dinner once they’d decided that they’d had enough for the day, and Kallian seemed happy to agree. She headed off to her place in the barracks to change and wash, and Fenris went looking for Warden-Constable Howe.

His expectation had been that he’d have to go through a layer of secretaries, or junior Wardens, but the Warden-Constable’s door was partially open and the man himself welcomed him in immediately.

“Trouble with our newest residents?” he asked.

“I have yet to meet them,” Fenris said. “Why would there be trouble?”

The Constable sighed.

“Mages,” he said. “Two escapees from a Circle and an old friend of the Commander’s. The… mother of his son, apparently.”

“A son?”

“A surprise to everyone but him and Alistair, it looked like. If you’re not comfortable with them-”

“Will they be Wardens?”

“The escapees will be,” Nathaniel said. “The man by tonight, or dead; and the woman once her baby has been born and can live without her. I don’t know about the witch.”

“The Wardens are a regulating force on their mages,” Fenris said. “This- witch is a friend of the Arl-Commander’s?”

A nod.
“Then I presume that he will deal with her should it be necessary, as he was prepared for the- your healer. I am a guest here. I will not tell you how to run your home.”

“Thanks,” Nathaniel old him. “But if it turns into a problem, tell me. The Commander wouldn’t want it to go unresolved. So what did you come up here for?”

“I require employment.”

“If you’re asking about the Wardens-”

“I have no interest in darkspawn,” Fenris said. “Nor in testing my markings against the Taint.”

The man winced.

“Good idea,” he said. “Well, what are you good at?”

“Killing people.”

“We’ve a lot of people who are good at that,” Nathaniel said, looking thoughtful. “I’d tell you to go to Captain Maverlies or Ser Alec, but… am I right to assume that you’ve had specialized training?”

“Yes.”

“Then it would be a waste of your skills, and likely no challenge. Anything else you can do?”

There was very little else, or at least little else that was willing or eager to go back to doing.

“Should you engage in guerrilla warfare, I am capable of leading units,” Fenris told him. “And I am a trained and competent bodyguard.”

“We’re hoping to stay out of any more wars. It’s sort of a shame that you probably shouldn’t try to join the Wardens. We just don’t have a real need for your level of skill anywhere else. But you could join the Guard if you’d like. I can recommend you to Maverlies.”

Fenris thought about it a moment. He had coin enough from the escort job to Kal’Hirol that he wouldn’t need to worry for a bit. Perhaps he could get Kallian to read the Chanter’s board for him when they went out tonight, and show him where the places the jobs mentioned were on a map.

“I shall consider it.”

Alistair took a deep breath of mid-autumn air. The hills of central Fereldan were beautiful at this time of year, everything clear and cool and bright with the trees in their fiery glory.

“This is nice,” he said to no one in particularly, stopping at the crest of a particularly large hill to take a look at the landscape spreading out below them. The city of South Reach and the River Drakon were a morning’s ride behind them, and ahead was the long, wide valley that cut through the Southron Hills and gave the arling and the city their names- South Reach, an almost dead straight expanse of green and fertile ground that emptied out in the western end of the Brecilian Passage.

Morrigan was next to arrive at the crest, scowling at her horse’s ears. Even after days of travel she was uneasy in the saddle. It was just as well that Alistair had found her a particularly tractable old stallion, far past stud years, in the Vigil’s stables, or else she likely would have been ridden off the road before they’d even left Amaranthine. She looked over the landscape with a marked distaste.

“‘Tis more grass and trees and hillside,” she said. “The same as anywhere else we have ridden...
“through, or been ambushed in by darkspawn.”

“Not this time though!” he said cheerfully.

“Not yet, I believe you mean. Or am I really to believe that there are not still foul stragglers of the horde lurking in the forgotten places?”

“People have found some since the Blight ended.” Theron said, finally catching up. He took hills slowly, holding onto his reins tightly with one hand and Kieran in front of him in the saddle with the other. The boy had refused to ride with Morrigan in favor of chattering away at Theron in El’vhen for hours, much to her disgruntlement. Alistair had tried to quietly reassure her that it was natural for Kieran to want to spend most of his time with his father, now that they’d finally met, and that the novelty would eventually wear off, but he wasn’t sure that she’d believed it. “But fewer every year.”

“Oh?” Morrigan asked archly. “So which is it, then? ‘Some’, or ‘fewer’? Shall we tread carefully, our senses sharp for threat?”

“There shouldn’t be any here,” Theron said, and pointed out over the valley. “Too many people live here for darkspawn to go unnoticed. When I do have to send Wardens to sweep down here, it’s in the low mountains and at the edges of the Brecilian. And if we do run into any, we’ll kill them.”

“Should we see darkspawn, I expect you to run,” Morrigan told him, with a pointed look at Kieran. Theron shifted uncomfortably in his saddle.

“Babae will protect me,” Kieran said, supremely and simply confident in his father’s protective prowess. Alistair was quickly becoming acclimatized to his pronouncements but at this one sounded normal and no-

“And there aren’t any darkspawn, Mother,” he continued. “Nothing is screaming.”

Never mind.

“Serannas, Hathen,” Theron told his son, which what he’d taken to calling Kieran when he did something like this. Alistair was still deciding whether or not to take him to task for the meaning of the boy’s official Dalish name- ‘old awakening’, really. There was absolutely nothing funny about it, no matter what his friend seemed to think.

“Anyway,” Alistair continued. “This is what I mean. Nothing but us and the road and maybe worried about being ambushed. It’s just like old times, but better. We’ve got horses! And authority! And no one is trying to kill us.”

“I recall staying on the Imperial Highway during the Blight,” Morrigan said. “Not that we did not do our share of cross-country traipsing-”

“If we’d stuck to the Highway we’d have to go through Lothering,” Theron said. “I’m not going through Lothering. They put up a statue of me.”

“It’s a nice statue,” Alistair told him, remembering the wooden thing from his last time through the town, on the journey to find out where Theron had disappeared to. “Very heartfelt.”

“No Lothering.”

“You’re no fun.”

“We shall be beset by bandits,” Morrigan declared. “For the sake of your embarrassment.”
“We can fight bandits,” Theron said. “Can’t fight freeholders. It’s illegal, and then I’d have to have a
duel with the local lord. I don’t want to fight Arl Bryland. He likes me. And it’s a shorter distance to
Hallarenis ’haminate taking the Reach than the Highway.”

“’Tis not faster, though.”

“The longer I’m away from Amaranthine, the less people can bother me about spring court.”

“Delilah still after you about the household?” Alistair asked sympathetically, and nudged his horse
into a slow walk down the hill towards the valley road.

“I don’t see what’s wrong with my choice of chamberlain,” Theron said. “I asked Kallain to find
someone and she did. I remember Shianni. I like her. She’s going to be my chamberlain, and I’m
going to ask Kallian to be Captain of the Guard there, and nothing Delilah or Nathaniel can say
about the difficulties of finding humans who could respectfully work under an elvhen staff will
change my mind.”

“Nathaniel?”

“She’s recruited him,” Theron said glumly. “He ambushed me with a lecture at the end of the status
report he gave before we left.”

“So that’s what your mood was about. What did he say?”

“That if Morrigan is going to be staying, her position demands some legitimization.”

“And just what, pray tell,” Morrigan said. “Does the Lord Howe think is my ‘position’? No, do not
say- I can guess. I am the wicked temptress who lured you from your post once before, returned to
complete my nefarious magics and ensnare you properly.”

“Oh no, you wouldn’t need magic for that,” Alistair said. “You’ve got his son. That’s more than
enough.”

“Apparently,” Theron said sourly. “The Banns are convinced that Zevran is gone because I left him
in favor of Morrigan. Apparently, that’s reasonable, and logical, because how could I possibly
want an elvhen man over a human woman!”

“Do you want to challenge one of them to a duel for your good name, or his?” Alistair asked after a
moment. “I mean, it won’t stop me from volunteering as your second either way, but I’d still like to
know. And both is good too, I’ll go for a fight for both of you.”

“If someone should spout such crass nonsense at me,” Morrigan said. “I shall inform them that
Zevran is off murdering your enemies. Perhaps you should as well.”

“Delilah and Nathaniel will be upset if I fight my own Banns,” Theron sighed. “And we don’t know
that’s what Zevran’s doing. I asked to be told about any news from Antiva, and there’s just- I wish
there was something.”

Alistair, who’d sent Andreas off on his secret mission the day before they’d set off south, thought a
quick prayer for his swift and happy return.

“Hey, no news is good news with assassins, right?” he said, trying to cheer his friend up. “The
Crows wouldn’t want to put it around that people are getting killed off. It would ruin their reputation.
But they’d shout it from the rooftops if they found Zevran. So he’s okay.”
“Maybe,” Theron mumbled.

Time for a subject change.

“Nathaniel say what he thought would be proper for Morrigan’s position?” Alistair asked.

“A lady’s maid-”

Morrigan scoffed.

“-and a Chantry governess for Kieran, so he can start to learn to read-”

“Bleah,” said Kieran.

“Reading is an important skill,” Theron chided.

“Chantry,” Kieran said, looking absolutely disgusted. Morrigan laughed and reached over to ruffle his hair.

“Oh, yes, this definitely won’t cause trouble for us,” Alistair said.

“Do not listen to him,” Morrigan told Kieran. “He has been fully indoctrinated and his opinions on the matter are suspect.”

“Some people have faith.”

“We’re not going to argue about religion,” Theron said. “Pick something else if you want to spend the trip bickering.”


“Surely you also tire of the Chantry, Theron,” Morrigan said. “Have you no wish to, say, counter-proselytize in the alienages? I recall you implying that a trained Dalish Hahren is something of a priest.”

“We don’t proselytize,” Theron said. “But I was thinking.”

“Thinking what?” Alistair prompted, when he didn’t complete his thought.

“Well,” Theron said. “With the Denerim estate. There are gardens. No reason I can’t place and consecrate devotional statuary. The front reception hall is clearly a temple sanctuary, but as much as I’d like to make it one in actuality, it would be disrespectful. I think I’ll put up blessing cloths instead.”

“Those big embroidery banners?” Alistair asked. He remembered seeing one being made in Hallarenis’haminathe for the new temple over the winter he and Zevran had been forced to spend with the Dalish, and it had been very impressive—long enough to be floor-to-ceiling in any major Chantry. “I like the one you have in your room, maybe you should order more like that.”

Theron had worked on that one over the winter after he’d returned from his ill-advised absence, dragging the length of cloth and small basket of colored threads out into the great hall by the fire every evening for three and a half months while the Wardens and officials of the Vigil drank and talked.

“They’re supposed to be something you make yourself,” Theron said. “But I don’t think I’ll have the time. If I get some Crafters to agree I’ll help out when I’m able—maybe that will be enough.”
“Why do I have the feeling that this is going to be an expensive trip?” Alistair asked, mentally recounting the gold they’d brought along.

“Because it will be,” Theron said. “Mostly in favors.”

He always had to take a moment whenever he saw Hallarenis’haminathe again. Five years on from the Blight it was well-restored with warm-hued Redcliff sandstone, dark quartzite that sparked iridescent green in the presence of magic, and the odd bit of Amaranthine granite that he’d been able to pass along. The natural colors of the stones had been worked into the great fresco murals that covered the old gray and white stone of old Ostagar in most places, and made Hallarenis’haminathe bright with color even in the dull damp of southern Ferelden and the edge of the Wilds. The founding of the Dales done thirty feet high on the temple exterior and the flapping snap of the blessing and marker cloths hanging from the bridge across the valley always forced Theron to pause and compose both himself and a prayer. There was so much feeling in this place, even contained as it was. This was a place of hopes and dreams made real, a struggle with a sort of ending, and a day would not go by when he didn’t thank the Creators for the chance for this to happen. A city of the People, with stone walls and temple, spread out along the slopes of the old fortress and below into the valley and magically-cleared areas of the Wilds in clan compounds, long halls of their own with accompanying clusters of aravels and permanent constructions and roads to connect them.

Zevran was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen, but Hallarenis’haminathe was the most awesome and moving. Theron was never going to be able to explain to anyone else the sheer, soul-consuming wonder and joy of his first steps on their new ground, even when Ostagar had still born the gaping wounds of the Blight five months after the Archdemon, arriving with Ashalle and the clans in Ferelden he’d been able to contact - Vhadan’ena and Erdua and Tillahnen and Vhen’haurasha from the Brecilian, Ebalavhen and Lenlanun from the dangerous lowland fringes of the shem’len farmland and the Wilds, Lanasten and Lathlea and Nu’nin and Rajnala and Himalen and Rashatal and Rosahar out of the Frostbacks and its foothills on either side of the Fereldan-Orlesian border. Only the Keepers and Firsts and Hahren of these first clans to arrive could understand the deeply spiritual experience of dedicating the temple, pouring warmed water and scented oil over the stones, performing the ritual sacrifices, making the air heavy with incense and burning wood chips, giving force to prayers and ritual forms that had not been said in full in centuries, not since the Chantry had taken the temples of the Dales and gutted them with fire to the words of the Chant-

They had tried to explain to the others, after the reverent funeral for the eldest Hahren of the present clans, a woman of over ninety years from Clan Rosahar who had felt so called by the situation to unexpectedly sanctify the high alter with her suicide in the middle of the proceedings, but even the other Dalish had been missing something fundamental to true understanding by not having been present in the temple.

He hadn’t even tried to explain it to Alistair and Zevran upon seeing them again, opting instead for the wild ecstatic revelry of that first night of celebration, but the cultural distance had been too much to cross, especially with how he’d had to carefully edit out the ritual sacrifices and suicide to conform to their sensibilities. They’d tried. But.

Theron had wanted family to share this feeling with. He still did, but now that he’d found Sabrae again, things were complicated. He was trying to take comfort in the fact that with Sabrae found the clans who had not yet come was very short, a mere five names, and then the city could be properly founded and dedicated. They would speak the history of the People from Arlathan to now in one unending story, and it would all be official.

“‘Tis much improved since last I saw it,” Morrigan said as they came upon the city.
“Thank you,” Theron said. “I’m glad you like it. We’ll probably see a lot of it figuring out where Clan Athanae is.”

“You would not,” she said, with faint horror.

“I would,” Theron told her. “I am. Maybe it doesn’t seem like a lot to you, Morrigan; but you stole one of our books. You gave it back, which is better than most would, but we still only have so many and you still betrayed their trust and hospitality. They very least of what you owe is an apology.”

“I shall not beg and prostrate myself for forgiveness in your manner!”

“I didn’t expect that. You’re not a person who would. But you’re going to make up for it by telling the council of Keepers and Hahren everything you know and remember about the insides of an Eluvian.”

Morrigan kept up a low, angry muttering to herself all through the first portion of the city, and Theron pointedly ignored her, using the temple to orient their path and take them to Vhadan’ena’s compound.

Ashalle ran to meet him once she’d been alerted that he’d arrived, as she always did, but as they hugged Theron choked up on everything, on the sheer enormity of the different points of news he had to impart.

“Theron?” Ashalle asked worriedly when he just kept clinging to her and wouldn’t let go. “Da’len? What is it?”

“Everything,” he managed to tell her. “Ashalle, I- we need to speak privately.”

“All right,” she said, stroking his hair. “Theron, you came here first, didn’t you? You didn’t get any trouble?”

“This is Hallarenis’haminathe, why would I get trouble?”

“Politics,” Ashalle told him tiredly. “I was going to write you a letter, but here you are, and with fortunate timing. Where’s Satheraan?”

“His—” Theron tried to tell her, and then couldn’t continue. He squeezed his eyes shut and held onto her tighter.

“Oh, da’len, please- he isn’t dead?”

“I don’t know,” he whispered.

“Sylaise—” Ashalle entreated. “Come along, Theron, and talk with me.”

“Just, just a minute,” he said, and forced himself to let go of her. “Alistair, could you make sure Morrigan goes to Athenae? You might as well get it done now.”

“Right,” Alistair said. “I’ll drag her if I have to, magic or no.”

“You will keep your hands to yourself!” Morrigan exclaimed indignantly.

“And take Kieran?” Theron asked. His son whined wordlessly in protest. “This really does need to be private.”

“I’ve got this,” his friend promised. “You go.”
Ashalle led him to her place in the compound, a three-room cottage sort of construction, and sat him down on the floor of the sleeping room, pulling out floor cushions for seating and taking his boots and replacing his thick winter riding cloak with a blanket before pulling him down to curl up in her arms. Theron rested his head on her shoulder and closed his eyes.

“Why did you come, Theron?”

“I found Sabrae,” he told her, and it should have been a happy thing to say but it wasn’t, because that was about the only good news of the situation. “They’ve been stuck on Sundermount, next to Kirkwall.”

He told her about the loss of their halla. He told her about the dead or stolen children. He told her about the Tainted Eluvian and the demon and blood magic and Merrill.

“She said she had to, because we weren’t there,” Theron said. “That she had to be stronger than she was because Tamlen wasn’t there and searching for our history because I wasn’t, and I know that all this was what the Creators decreed for me but if I’d just made us leave when I had a bad feeling about the ruins instead of just warning Tamlen to be careful, if I hadn’t been so willing to let it go because it turned out to be a temple of Falon’din’s—”

Ashalle stroked his face comfortingly, tracing the lines of his vallas’lin.

“You were right where you were meant to be.”

“But it almost destroyed Sabrae,” Theron said miserably.

“And you were in a place to find them when they needed help. They will come here and become strong again.”

“Tamlen’s gone and Merrill left.”

“Things change, and things are lost,” Ashalle told him. “Tamlen is with our elders now and Merrill is away from the pressure that led her to her ill-advised decisions. Tell me how she is, Theron, besides the blood magic. I worry about my children forced to live in the human cities.”

“She seemed happy with Kirkwall. She has friends—humans and a dwarf, but she didn’t say anything about them treating her badly. She’s in love with one of them, a woman named Marian Hawke. She lives in her house.”

“My cruel, cruel children!” Ashalle lamented, over-dramatic, and Theron found himself smiling at it. “Taking up with people and not informing me of the weddings!”

“Neither of us are married, Ashalle,” Theron said. “But Merrill made me promise to attend her and I made her promise to come to mine.”

“Da’len, the only reason that you are not married is because you haven’t declared it so yet. Satheraan is your husband and I won’t hear a word otherwise.”

Guilt and shame spiked within him, and Theron pulled back, smile dropping, unable to look at her.

“He’s gone,” he said. “I didn’t protect him and he’s gone, he’s gone back to Antiva and I don’t know where or if he’s coming back or if he’s still alive, let alone well. There was a blood Magister in Kirkwall and I—”

He bent over into the bow to beg forgiveness.
“I broke the Oath of the Dales, Mamae. I was too scared to resist and she put compulsions on me and she thralled Satheraan and we only got away because he wasn’t too scared to try anything and my Wardens came for us and Merrill knows blood magic now so she could fix it mostly and I’m sorry, I’m so sorry I’ve disgraced you and me and Sabrae-”

“I don’t care,” Ashalle said, reaching out and pulling him back. “I don’t care. You’re here, you came back. Just- look at me, da’len, and tell me that you haven’t tried to kill yourself over this.”

“It would be the honorable thing to do,” Theron muttered into her shoulder, not looking at her.

“Don’t you dare,” she ordered. “I have thought you lost too many times already-”

“I haven’t tried, Mamae,” he interrupted her. “And I couldn’t- I have the arling, and my Wardens, and my family. But it feels like I should.”

“Don’t,” Ashalle said. “Don’t you dare. I already live in fear of the day when one of your people comes to tell me that some darkspawn finally killed you, or that the humans did.”

“I won’t,” Theron promised. “I won’t, Mamae. If I choose to die it will be in sacrifice, not in shame.”

“Good,” Ashalle said. “Good. Now tell me something happy. I don’t care how small.”

“Well,” Theron said, casting around for something. There hadn’t been much that was simply happy in his life lately. “I have a son?”

“Since when!”

“Four years ago or a couple of weeks, depending on how you count it.”

She shoved him back enough to glare.

“Theron!”

“His mother didn’t want me involved so I stayed out of it! But now she’s changed her mind.”

“That boy,” Ashalle said, catching on. “Who you came in with. Your son is half-human.”

“He’s a mage,” Theron countered. “Morrigan is Chasind if she’s anything. It’s not like I took up with a settled human, and even if I had, I wouldn’t be ashamed of it because they’d be a decent person. My son is just as good as anyone else’s.”

Ashalle sighed.

“I’m not saying he isn’t, da’len. It’s just that you picked quite the time to turn up.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s the politics,” she said with a shrug. “Mostly the usual, a few things news. It’s been building ever since your Velanna started her clan.”

“Oh- this is the ‘city elves and half-humans’ argument again.”

“It was easier to have when the only time we could have it was at Arlathvhen,” Ashalle told him. “It was going... civilly. No one could agree but we were all focused on building up Hallarenis’haminathe and gather the clans, but we’re mostly finished with the first now- we’ve even got a handle on the farming- and we’re only missing three clans now.”
“Three?” Theron asked, excitement flaring.

“You’ve found Sabrae, and they’ll come once they have halla,” Ashalle said. “Dadhase’lin is finishing up with a particular Tevene slaving band in the Hundred Pillars, and we finally found out what happened to Alas’nidar’mis. They’ve been in Rivain for the last fifteen years.”

“Rivain?”

Ashalle shrugged helplessly.

“They’re going to have some explaining to do, yes, but we’ve finally accounted for everyone. It won’t be long now.”

Wait.

“If those are the only three,” Theron said. “Then Revasina is here.”

“They arrived two or three weeks ago,” Ashall told him. “And that’s what started all this. Everythign was fine, and then Talanulea’s Keeper said something to Revasina’s First. Now Revasina, Ralaferin, and Vemari aren’t speaking to Talanulea, Athanae, or Virnehn; and everyone is arguing about the city elves and half-humans and about whether or not those who have left their clans should be allowed back, and if we can afford to accept exiles who wish to return now that we have a real city. It’s a mess. Broadly: the clans out of Orlais don’t want any of it, the clans out of Antiva refuse to agree with anything they say and Revasina in particular is talking loudly about how Dadhase’lin will definitely take their side—”

Theron winced. That could turn bad very quickly. Dadhase’lin was a major part of the reason that Antiva thought that the Dalish were uniformly violent and ‘easily provoked’; and they had few qualms turning that belligerence on other Dalish whom they disagreed with. Usually not with their swords, given that they were all Dalish, but there were other ways to have a war.

“The clans out of the Free Marches are divided within their own clans on the issues, the ones out of Nevarra generally agree with those out of Orlais but are willing to compromise, and the clans out of the Anderfels think we’re all wasting our time and should be focusing on building more defense.”

Oh dear.

“And Ferelden?”

“We’ve always had half-humans and taken city elves,” Ashalle said. “Though not nearly to the same degree as your Velanna did, that’s pushing it a bit. As for the rest- it’s complicated, and no one is sure.”

“I left Sabrae,” Theron said. “If I go out there—”

“No one will say a thing about you,” she told him. “You’re the reason we’re here in the first place. As well, the only opinion the clans out of the Anderfels have deigned to contribute to the arguing is a very emphatic insistence that Grey Wardens are a special type of I’tel’melin, and that anyone who wants to disagree is more than welcome to challenge a trial of settlement. They have Wardens from their clans in the Anderfels still, trying to get permission to move here.”

“It could work,” Theron said, thinking it over as he talked and silently pondering over the network of favors he could gain access to by offering to help. “Hallarenis’haminathe is its own state, and the Wardens divide their areas of authority along human political lines. If I write Weisshaupt and point that out, it should do something. And if they want to be shem about it I can decide that here is under
my authority and ask for the Dalish Wardens. Or they could just come anyway. Weisshaupt isn’t going to send anyone with real authority across all of Thedas to Ferelden or the Wilds to get them back. They probably don’t even like having Dalish Wardens, given the way they’ve treated my people.”

“You should tell them.”

“I will,” Theron said. “And I should go speak to Revasina.”

Alistair had to go hunting for Theron after dinner with Vhadan’ena. Morrigan had sulked through the whole thing, still being prickly about her visit and apology to Athenae, and Theron had stuck himself between Lanaya and Ashalle and had seemed to be involved in some particularly in-depth business conversation, so Alistair had ended up being Kieran’s choice of company for the meal. After the food had been finished he’d pestered Alistair for a story- something Theron had started, telling El’vhen history after dinner to begin teaching his son- and Alistair had had to rack his memory to find a traditional Fereldan story that wasn’t horrifically racist about elves or Chasind.

Kieran had seemed to enjoy his long and sort of rambling retelling of “Iron Aedan,” the story of an Alamarri warrior who fought with nothing but the superhuman strength of his arms, the imperviousness of his own skin, and a little bit of magical luck. He won against increasingly-improbably opponents, starting with Hinterlands bears and working his way up through werewolves, demons, a High Dragon, an entire army’s worth of his enemies, Korth the Mountain-Father, the Waking Sea, and the personification of his own flaws before being defeated by his own young daughter, a favorite of the vaguely-present gods of the Alamarri, revealing her destiny to be a great warrior Queen of the local tribes and ancestress of heroes- most importantly, Calenhad.

“All right, off you go,” Alistair said once he’d finished relating the daughter’s speech of fate, shooing Kieran off his lap. “Your mother probably wants to spend time with you, and I should go find your father.”

“Babae is at the Tower,” Kieran said.

“Told you where he was going, didn’t he?”

The boy shook his head.

“I always know where Babae is.”

Theron could say that Kieran wasn’t creepy all he liked, Alistair had ears.

The hike up to the top of the Tower of Ishal felt like it took a lot longer than Alistair remembered it being, even as he was able to occupy himself with the changes the Dalish had made. The large area on the first level had been made into some kind of gathering chamber, completely with guards posted on the doors into the Tower and on the stairs to the second floor, even though no one was meeting. The successive floors looked like they’d been made into the Dalish’s collective library, artifact storage, and research center, and reminded him of the Circles of Magi. If all these books had been brought and preserved from the Dales, he was very impressed.

The scent of lyrium storage took him off-guard halfway up the Tower, and then later on, a floor or two below the top, the sight of a scriptorium with mage lights and secured cupboards of inks and pens and parchments and binding tools that could put a decently-sized Chantry cloister to shame. He snuck a quick looking into the cupboards as he walked through and was surprised to find, besides the usual colored inks, small pots labeled with swipes of the metallic paints they contained, as well as
scrap gold leaf destined for grinded down to stretch the supply. Apparently, the Dalish did not mess around when it came to their books.

The top floor of the Tower was the only one where the Dalish made any structural changes. The ceiling between the top floor and the beacon platform had been taken out and a wrap-around walkway installed in its place, turning the great arches of the old beacon’s windows into a panorama view of the city and surrounding Wilds. The mid-air-suspended Lights of Arlathan clustered in the center of the old beacon area turned the Tower into a new sort of light, ever-burning and intensely magical.

Theron was seated on the sill of one of the windows. Alistair walked up to lean on the stone next to him, caught a glimpse of the ground below, and immediately regretted everything.

“Are you not worried about falling off?” he asked Theron, staring fixedly at the tree tops of the southernmost reach of the Brecilian, not so far from the city.

“It’s a thick wall,” Theron said, patting the stone below him. “Solid.”

“Just don’t lose your balance. I’m not sure I could catch you. What are you doing up here?”

“This is a thinking place,” Theron told him. “I was going to go to the temple, but this isn’t personal.”

“Oh?”

“Dalish politics. My problem, not yours.”

“And would these mysterious Dalish politics have anything to do with the many, many evil looks I got today while tracking down Clan Athanae? Because I remember this city being distinctly more welcoming when there was less of it.”

“Yes, they do,” Theron said. “There’s a big argument going on right now about who counts as Dalish, or who should be able to become Dalish, now that we have land again. There’s not a lot of tolerance to spare on humans at the moment. They’re using it all up trying to live with each other.”

“The joys of urban life,” Alistair said, feeling secure enough now to move his eyes from the trees to the glimmering fires of the clan compounds. “The next thing you know they’ll be trying to decide on a monarch and you’ll have to keep your people from breaking out in civil war because- I don’t know, actually. What would the Dalish fight over?”

“We’ve had a week-long meeting every decade for over four hundred years, and at every single one of them there’s a fight about the proper and correct designs for Falon’din and Dirthamen. There are clans who don’t marry into each other because they insist that Falon’din’s vallas’lin are for Dirthamen and the other way around. It can be kind of unclear depending on what set of descriptions and carvings you go by, and I think there is something to be said for the argument that there isn’t and wasn’t as much hard distinction between service to those two Evanuris because of their relationship to each other, and that in Arlathan they probably traded or shared devotees and priests; but there’s a very clear section in the histories that states—”

“Whoa, okay, Hahren,” Alistair cut him off, holding his hands up in mock surrender. “Tell it to Kieran.”

“We’ll fight about a lot, is my point,” Theron said. “And we’ll never let it go. ‘To forget is to die’. We lost everything when Arlathan fell, and we won’t let that happen again. Whatever it takes, we’ll learn and we’ll remember. Everything is important.”
“Sounds intense.”

“It couldn’t be any other way,” Theron told him, leaning sides to rest up against the side of the arch window he was sitting in. “That’s who we are, and we wouldn’t change it. It keeps us alive.”

“Uh, speaking of staying alive,” Alistair said. “That’s kind of why I’m up here. I have a question that I didn’t want to ask where other people could hear. Or in front of Kieran. Or Morrigan. Especially them. Why did you take her up on her offer, with the ritual? Not that I’m complaining! But you never said.”

“I did think about not doing it,” Theron said. “Not for very long though, even though it would have been a good death.”

“Heroic?”

“Honorable,” he said. “Eminently honorable, something to praise and celebrate even in mourning. It could have been the fulfillment of my sacred duty.”

“Sacred?” Alistair asked, arching an eyebrow. “That’s new.”

“No, I just haven’t talked about it with you before,” Theron corrected. “Everyone, every Dalish, has one. Mir vanur’esem’dru. What the Evanuris have decided you will sacrifice for your dedication to them. Some people have a larger sacrifice to make than others. Usually the biggest one is your name and your clan, to become I’tel’melin, but sometimes it’s your life. That’s what I’m paying. It’s just on delay until I’m called.”

“That’s nice and… mystic,” Alistair said, unable to come up with anything politer to say. “You almost sound like Leliana. The only thing missing is a vague, prophetic vision. Unless you’re trying to tell me that your gods are going to turn up one day to say: ‘Hey, guess what! You’re about to get your Calling, thanks for stopping the Fifth Blight and getting the Dalish a homeland, good job!’”

“The Evanuris haven’t spoken to anyone since Fen’harel locked them away somewhere,” Theron said. “I wasn’t talking about the Warden Calling. It’s- you know what it is when you’re faced with it, even if it takes a while to set in. I dedicated myself to Falon’din and it was in Falon’din’s temple that I contracted the Taint. I didn’t want to see it at the time, and had to be forced to leave Sabrae, but that’s what was decided for me. I’m supposed to serve the People as a Warden. None of this-”

He swept a hand out, indicating the fires of Hallarenis’haminathe.

“-would be here if I wasn’t a Warden. I’ve lost my natural lifespan, Tamlen, Merrill, Sabrae, the ability to live with my people, to be properly buried, and I may end up giving even more before I finally die- but you have to lose the things you were made to lose, even if it’s hard, because your vanur’esem’dru is for the good of the El’vhen and the People, and there is nothing you shouldn’t sacrifice for that.”

Alistair almost wanted to ask if Theron had been having a hard time accepting his sacred duty. It kind of sounded like it, from what he was saying; but he didn’t know if it was something that Theron wanted to or could discuss openly with him. The fact that it hadn’t come up in six whole years of friendship sort of implied that this was one of those Dalish things that weren’t really supposed to be talked about around outsiders.

“If dying to kill the Archdemon would have fulfilled your sacred duty,” he asked instead. “Why didn’t you turn her down?”

Theron shrugged the shoulder he wasn’t leaning on.
“I didn’t feel called to it,” he said. “What I was thinking was that if the ritual didn’t happen, if I didn’t
do it, then I might have ended up being responsible for you dying. And Zevran- less than a week
before he’d admitted to loving me without being able to say the words, and had begged for the
chance of a future together. I’d promised him the possibility of the remaining years of my life, and I
wasn’t going to take that from him. The progress he’d made with the unlearning what the Crows had
taught him, with accepting love and friendship and trust and care- it was so new and so fragile. I
don’t know if the person he was becoming could have survived my death. And with Rinna, and
Taliesin… I would have made the third person he loved dead in less than a year and a half. I couldn’t
do that to him. The highest honor is fulfilling your vanur’esem’dru, but caring for your family and
keeping your promises and living to keep fighting and protecting and supporting are all honorable,
too.”

“And so you’ve ended up with an Old God for a son, sort of,” Alistair said. “Just how much of…
Urthemiel is he, anyway?”

“Morrigan says we’d have to ask Kieran. Probably when he’s older.”

“That’s part of your becoming a Warden, too,” Alistair pointed out. “What possible use could the
Creators have for an Old God stuck in a mortal body?”

“I don’t know,” Theron said, looking out over the city at the night sky. “But Fen’harel was the one
who locked them away. Maybe it will take another god to let them go.”

Theron woke up early the next morning, a little too early for comfort given the length of time he’d
spent awake and thinking on top of the Tower the night before, and went straight to the temple. He
needed composure before going to speak to Clan Revasina.

Alistair and Ashalle had both offered to come along, but he’d declined them both. He wasn’t sure
how Revasina would react to Alistair, and he was fairly sure that Ashalle would have talked it
around into something like the first stages of a marriage negotiation, especially since she’d made a
couple of completely unnecessary comments about his choice of dress. His Warden-Commander
armor and his regular riding cloak were more than nice enough for a formal visit to an unmet clan.

Revasina was still camped in their aravels, sails posted around the edge of the area that would
become their clan compound, but a couple of weeks had been long enough for them to break ground
on their long hall. By the time he arrived at their camp- across the city from Sabrae, out in the low
land cleared of the Wilds’ swap- there were Crafters from clans who had already been at
Hallarenis’haminathe for some seasons directing the work and passing on their newly-acquired
construction knowledge.

Theron lingered politely by one of the posted sails until news of a visitor reached Revasina’s Keeper,
and she came to greet him. She was very old, and he could see why it might have taken Revasina so
long to come south. She didn’t look like she traveled well any longer, and walked with a lean on her
staff and stiffness that probably meant she had to spend much of her time seated.

“Creators guard your clan, Keeper,” Theron told her when she stopped in front of him and looked
him over. She was much shorter than him, and he had to look down.


“Theron Mahariel Sabrae.”

The Keeper straightened fractionally, adjusting her grip on her staff.
“Arla’lanelan, you are a welcome surprise,” she told him. “The greatest of blessings upon you and your clan. I am Nythashiral Hulle Revasina, and I offer our hospitality.”

“Thank you, Keeper Nythashiral,” Theron said. “I come with a question. Did Revasina lose a woman to the cities of Antiva, about thirty years ago, likely of the name ‘Nehna’?”

The Keeper’s eyes darkened.

“We remember Nehna,” she said, tone short and guarded. “What business of it is yours?”

“I have news of her son,” Theron told her, starting to wonder if he would be better off leaving the topic be. Keeper Nythashiral didn’t seem to want to speak of her.

“Which one?”

‘Which one’?

“The one she had with the man she went to the cities to be with,” he said carefully, very confused. “My apologies. I didn’t know that she’d had any other children.”

Keeper Nythashiral gave him a long look.

“You have not spoken to Talanulea,” she declared after a few moments.

“No?”

“Come,” she ordered, and Theron followed her to her aravel. He offered her his hand for support up the stairs, but she shook her head and rapped the top of her staff on the doorframe instead.

“Rajrad!”

The man who pushed the door curtain open with a forearm, hands wet with bits of mint and elfroot, hard braided his hair back to keep it out of his honey-brown eyes, almost the exact shade as Zevran’s.

“Arla’lanelan, this is my First, Rajrad Myathis Revasina. Rajrad, this is Theron Mahariel Sabrae. He has come about your sister.”
The chevalier had a country manor at the foot of the Hunterhorns, and shut them up there. The only other people in the manor were one teenaged lady’s maid who took double-duty as the cook, a master huntsman to keep the boundaries of the property safe from poachers and other peasants, and a small contingent of guards. There was a village a few miles down the road, but Nehna and Tanis weren’t allowed to go outside, and knew of it only through the grocery deliveries.

The lady’s maid who brought them their food and forced them through grooming rituals every day, even during the long spans of time when the chevalier wasn’t in residence, couldn’t or didn’t speak. Nehna wasn’t able to tell which, and eventually even Tanis stopped trying to interact with her. The presence of the lady’s maid was the best and worst part of the day simultaneously— they were both so desperate to see another person, and yet were treated with as much regard as expensive porcelain dolls.

Nehna took to stripping off the dresses and scrubbing off the cosmetics as soon as the lady’s maid left. Tanis kept hers on in defiance, and always spent time in the mirror finding something about her appearance to enjoy; but Nehna wanted Antivan cotton shirts and Dalish leather hip-wraps and left the Orlesian silks in a pile by the door each day as she redressed herself in her own clothes. The maid didn’t seem to care, and eventually Tanis and Nehna wondered if that wasn’t the woman’s own sort of defiance.

The maid brought their food and provided towels and linens and washing accessories and cosmetics, but nothing else. Days passed and they lost count; the rest of the world seemed to stop existing. Out the windows they could occasionally see some of the guards or the huntsman, but it felt like watching a silent street play.

Finally, one morning, the door unlocked— Nehna had found her knives and Master Escipo’s things still hidden in her trunk, and Adan had taught her a lot but never how to pick a lock, otherwise she would have been out ages ago— and someone who wasn’t the maid stepped in with breakfast.

She’d never seen an elf dressed like this before. He looked like a secretary, complete with the small glasses perched on his nose.

“My name is Lucien,” he told them, in Antivan, and Nehna had never thought that she’d miss this language. “I’m to teach you Orlesian.”

They learned that it had been four months since they’d been bought from Antiva. Lucien didn’t seem to have any orders about what he could and could not tell them, and it was welcome change from the silent maid.

“Why teach us Orlesian?” Nehna challenged him, a few days into the lessons.

“Ser du Vergagne-L’oest holds summer receptions in this manor,” Lucien said. “He wishes you to be presentable.”

Nehna refused to speak in his presence for a whole week. He calmly ignored her and focused on Tanis.

“How can you do this!” Nehna finally exploded at her when the Chantry day came— they didn’t have lessons then, because Lucien had to attend chapel in the town down the road. “Do what that man
wants! The parade us around like- like-"

“It’s not about him, Nehna,” Tanis said. “None of it is. The jewelry the maid brings us is gold, and so long as it’s something small she doesn’t notice if I keep it. You can sell that for money. Same for the silks- I’ve been taking the seams out of a shift every few weeks and sticking the pieces in the bottom of my armoire. People will pay a lot for that amount of silk, and they’re big enough to be cut up and sold off in smaller swatches. Learning Orlesian means I can talk to other people, and know what they’re saying, and not mark myself so badly as foreign.”

It grated against every part of her soul and every scrap of Dalish pride she had left, but Tanis’s plan made sense, even if she didn’t have the ‘how to escape’ part figured out yet. Well, Nehna could do that- she was the one with the knives, and the leather Crow armor that she could take in as soon as she got her hands on suitable tools.

By the time the summer receptions came around she knew enough Orlesian to smile at the right parts of a conversation. It was awful, she hated it, and the chevalier’s wife came to their rooms on the nights when her husband was out hunting or doing something else noble and pointless.

The receptions ended and the chevalier left again, and Nehna promised herself that she wouldn’t put up with another season of this. She and Tanis would be gone before the next summer.

She realized that she was pregnant again at the end of Kingsway. She shouted and raged and threw things at the lady’s maid, but nothing could make it never have happened.

Lucien was the one who brought her her food cravings and Tanis was the one who sat with her when it hurt and when all she could do was cry and ask the Creators how they could allow this, and then feel guilty because it wasn’t them allowing it, it was her.

She had the baby in Bloomingtide, just before the summer season. The midwife the chevalier had paid off handed her the child and Nehna looked at it and viciously thought ‘I already have a son’.

Tanis kindly took it from her once the midwife had left and let her cry quietly for Satheraan as she tried and failed to believe that he wasn’t already dead, in body or soul.

*I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry,* she prayed, and begged Falon’din to take him even though he wasn’t really Dalish. It wasn’t her son’s fault, everything that had happened, and he deserved to have the company of his ancestors and his gods so he could properly learn who he was.

The next morning she named the baby Damien, because it was a name the shem’len couldn’t butcher, and Tanis and Lucien took their Orlesian lesson off to a different room. It was supposed to be for her privacy, and a concession to the fact that she was going to be kept locked up in these rooms through the summer’s receptions to take care of Damien, but it felt like she was being abandoned.

Nehna fed Damien so he wouldn’t scream, and otherwise left him alone on the bed. She could ignore people, too.

Damien turned one and the summer came again. Nehna spent the receptions looking for a way out, seeing the exits and the hallways of the rest of the manor. The receptions ended and she waited and waited and waited, and after the ground froze with the third frost of the new winter, she tried to break out.

She didn’t make it to the front door, and when she was dragged back in with the guards Tanis looked
at her with hurt betrayal, Damien in her arms. A week and a half later the chevalier stormed in furiously and beat Nehna half to death before storming out again to fulfill the season’s social obligations in the Winter Palace in Halamshiral. The beating kept her abed for weeks and Tanis weaned Damien off milk earlier than was good for him since she couldn’t breastfeed him like this.

His first word was ‘sun!’ in response to the clouds breaking after the winter’s first real snowstorm, and Nehna tried to care about it. But it was hard. Damien turned two and kept babbling away. Tanis was teaching him Khagti but Nehna couldn’t bring herself to teach him El’vhen.

The chevalier didn’t care, this second summer just as the first, to see his bastard son. A little something in Nehna snarled at that, the knowledge that all of it meant nothing to him. He trotted Nehna out for the receptions but stayed away from her when there weren’t other people around, which was apparently supposed to be a punishment.

On the last day before he left, he tried to rape her again. Nehna hit him, and he broke her face and left her bleeding on the floor. This summer it was Tanis who’d gotten pregnant. It wasn’t going well for her, so it was Lucien who was her nursemaid through it.

Tanis lost her baby in the last days of Guardian and nearly died from it. The midwife was called again, and disinterestedly told her not to try to have any more babies. Nehna could have killed the shem woman right there because she thought they wanted this? Thought that they wanted to be here, that she’d wanted another child?

They’d been here two years and it was two years too long and Nehna had been living a life she despised for nine years and she was not- she needed-

The next morning she got Lucien to have sex with her instead of spending two hours teaching her Orlesian. It was her own choice for once and she thought that it would make her feel better, but it didn’t.

By the end of Drakonis a month later, she knew she was pregnant again. The summer season would start in two months and the chevalier would be back, and by the time he left again it would be obvious that she was pregnant from someone else. She told Tanis the news, and her friend quietly offered a portion of the herbs that the midwife had left with her, just in case she did get pregnant again.

“Children are precious,” Nehna said on reflex. “Children are the future of our people.”

Tanis looked at her, and then pointedly over to where Damien was napping.

Nehna knew she didn’t treat him as well as she should, but it was hard not to hold the situation of his conception against him, or the fact that he wasn’t Satheraan, or the simple knowledge that she didn’t love him, not even one bit. She cared about him in a vague, general way, because he was her responsibility; but she was glad that Tanis was here. The other woman treated him like her own son.

“We’re just going to have to escape before the summer,” Nehna told her.

The chevalier appeared at the country manor three weeks later, nearly a month and a half before he’d been due, and it wasn’t for them.

He came for Lucien. He had him dragged out into the gravel courtyard where the carriages and the horses lined up for the receptions and cut his hands off, then his head. Nehna and Tanis watched from one of their windows.
“It’s not about you,” someone said, and they both jumped. The lady’s maid was standing there, looking small and hopeless. “He doesn’t know about that. Lucien was being held here against the silence of his family, and I guess they said something that Ser du Vergagne-L’oest didn’t like.”

“You can actually talk,” Nehna said. “It’s been two years!”

The maid looked at her, eyes heavy and perfectly blank.

“My mother was the last woman he locked up here,” she said. “Lucien was her brother.”

“What’s your name?” Tanis asked.

“Charlotte,” she answered. “If you leave right now, it will be a while before they notice. Ser du Vergagne-L’oest will be mad until after dinner. Too mad to come up here and check on you.”

She looked wistful, suddenly.


Home—what did that even mean, any longer.

She made a snap decision.

“You’re coming with us,” she told Charlotte. “Tanis—”

Her friend was already waking Damien and gathering the hoarded jewelry and silks.

“Me?” Charlotte asked.

“Unless you’d rather stay and tell that man where we went,” Nehna said. “Or won’t he blame you?”

Charlotte paled, and then went even whiter when Nehna opened her trunk and pulled out the things she’d kept hidden from Antiva—the last of her Dalish-style leathers, the Crow armor she’d modified to fit, her throwing knives, and Master Escipo’s dueling ones. She kept glancing warily at Nehna as she led the three of them downstairs and helped them steal food for the kitchen, and then got them all out the back door.

“Aren’t Dalish supposed to be masters of the wood?” Charlotte ventured a few days later. They were being chased, and the only reason they couldn’t say that they were lost was because it implied that they’d ever had an idea of where they’d started from.

“The woods here aren’t like the ones in Antiva!” Nehna said, deeply frustrated. Pine forests were clear of all these—bushes and other mysterious tangling plant things.

But they had to keep walking. The chevalier and his men were chasing them. At least the tangling bits made it harder for them to be tracked effectively.

A few days later, mostly out of food and tired from the traveling, they came to the edge of the woods. There was a walled town set a ways back from the trees, and by the tracks leading past their position further into the woods, it served as a base camp for loggers and trappers.

To Nehna’s deep surprise, the guards at the gate saw her ears and her vallas’lin and just nodded.

“Found more lost noble servants, eh?” one of them asked. “You’d think them fancy titles would
make a man learn a bit of sense, but nothing seems to do it. Our thanks to Keeper Felaran.”

“And you’d better pass your thanks on too,” the other guard told Tanis and Charlotte.

They agreed that they would, and the guards let them all through. Charlotte seemed to half an idea of what she was doing and went to sell some of the jewelry and silks, and Nehna went to ask questions.

The forest they’d been in was the Tirashan. This town was called Fort Tolaissouen and had begun as an outpost for the loggers and trappers, but now served as a clearing house for trade as well. It was a couple of weeks in either direction to reach a real city, and the closest one was north across the plains- Andoral’s Reach, at the end of the Road Ghislain. There were a few Dalish clans who passed by regularly, and the locals of Fort Tolaissouen had a long-standing informal arrangement of keep to the Dalish standards of forestry in exchange for the rescue of any wayward travelers or workers. The clan nearby at this time of year was Talanulea, but they would be moving south soon, and replaced by Clan Enasaghil.

“You should go if you want to, Nehna,” Tanis told her that night in the inn. “I love you and you’ve been good to me, and we’ve been good for each other, but I can’t be Dalish for you any more than you can be Khagti for me. I can’t go back to my father’s people, not after everything that’s happened, but you could go back to yours.”

“I’d be abandoning you,” Nehna protested, but the feel of curing leather under her hands and the smell of halla in summer estrus and the sound of rain against the aravel roofs was haunting her anyway. “And none of them are my clan.”

“Nehna, we both you know you don’t want to go back to Revasina anyway. But this could be a new start for you. Go find them before they leave.”

“They’re not my clan,” Nehna repeated, and in the other room Damien started crying. He was tired, but in the way of small children, didn’t want to go to sleep. They could hear Charlotte trying to get him to calm.

“Nehna,” Tanis said. “I don’t want to force you to go, please don’t take it like that, but- I’m human. Charlotte looks human. You’ll never look human, and you wouldn’t want to try, and that would make traveling a lot harder. I also know that you want to go back to Antiva for Satheraan, and- I never want to go back. There’s nothing for me there and I’m happy to leave the memories be. But you…”

She trailed off.

“And that child,” she said after a moment, pointing to Nehna’s midsection. It wasn’t obvious through her clothes just yet, but she was showing her pregnancy. “Is going to be a full-blooded elf. I know you wanted to give Satheraan a life with the Dalish, and if you find him, he might still get it. But that child could have it from the day they’re born, Nehna, and I don’t think you could forgive yourself for not taking that opportunity.”

That was- yes, that was true.

“Where will you and Charlotte go?” Nehna asked, thinking about what she’d need to get in the morning to hold over supply-wise until she could track down one of the clans.

“Charlotte said she’s heard good things about Lydes. A quiet place, a city on the Imperial Highway on the other side of the Waking Sea. Big enough to get lost in, but the nobility thinks it’s boring and stay away from it.”
Nehna snorted, and then explained at Tanis’s questioning look.

“Boring,” she scoffed. “Enough humans remember that Halam’shiral was a Dalish city once, but that was only our capital. Leadys and Vareshe’el were ours too. Lydes and Verchiel. Halam’shiral was the jewel in our crown, our highest blessing; but Leadys was our shining city. Our histories were there, our great library. The Emerald Knights trained there. Halam’shiral was the center of our hearts, but Leadys was the center of our heads just as Vareshe’el was of our souls, with the memorials to our dead and the Great Temples of the Evanuris. But that’s all forgotten now, just as much as the Knight-Commanders and the General-Clerics of Muntsemur, the only Andrasteans to stand with us in recognition of the promise made to Shartan and our people.”

“I didn’t know,” Tanis said.

“No one but the Dalish care to remember,” Nehna said. “The Chantry doesn’t speak of Esba Couer or Shesha Marsaloc or Maryu Dalli. They held Muntsemur for years against Orlais and the Chantry, and so when they finally fell the _shem’len_ forbade calling it by its real name and pretended that ‘Muntsemur’ was just an archaic spelling. Maferath at least had the dignity of being left his name, but the Worthy of Muntsemur were so thoroughly erased that people actually believe that General Vaharel was the one who sacked the city and killed everyone in it, and that it was always an Orlesian city; rather than an independent fortress held a faction of the Chantry not in concord with the Divine in Val Royeaux and nearly razed by the ‘Exalted March’. Because that’s what the Chantry wrote about it, and the Chantry doesn’t lie.”

“I’m sorry,” Tanis said.

“It’s not your fault,” Nehna told her.

Damien stopped crying, and the night was quiet again.

“Take him.”

“What?” Tanis asked.

“Take Damien,” Nehna said. “You’re a better mother to him than I am- I don’t even want to be his mother. He looks human. He’ll fit with you and Charlotte in Lydes. My people might take him, but I don’t want- I can’t do it, Tanis. I can’t go back to the Dalish with physical proof of what’s been done to me.”

Unspoken between them was that Tanis would never carry a child to term on her own, and between her treatment of Satheraan and Damien, it was clear that she _did_ want a child. This was a parting gift of sorts, and an acknowledgement of trust and the relationship they had. They’d been family to each other, but now it was formal.

“Thank you,” Tanis told her, quiet and heartfelt. “And I hope your gods lead you back to Satheraan, Nehna; and bless your life with your new child. Go well and in happiness.”

“I’ll come see you in Lydes if I’m ever nearby,” Nehna promised, and got up and left. It was easier to go now than have to answer Charlotte’s questions later, or finding out if Damien cared or not if she was leaving.

The next morning she bought a bow and a quiver of arrows to take with her into the Tirashan. It had been a long time since she’d hunted, but she did know how, and it would look better to return to her people with a ranged weapon more multi-purpose than throwing knives. The Dalish had no need for assassins.
The logging camp furthest from Fort Tolaissouen had Dalish trail sign on its western edge, and she followed it south. Three days later she shared a campfire with an elvhen Orlesian trapper who might as well have been Dalish, with the ease of which he handled himself in El’vhen and the stains of camouflage dye across his face. He was able to point her on a new course, and swore that she’d reach Clan Talanulea before nightfall if she started traveling right after breakfast.

She made it in time to hear the sounds of dinner being prepared, and stopped on a hillock near the camp and just looked- there were the aravel sails posted around the perimeter, there was the Hahren’s fire with a few children clustered around it, there was the Master Crafter’s sawhorse table being packed away for the night and tools being wrapped away.

A few short steps down the hillock and out of the thick trees into the sentries’ watch area got their attention. A man with *vallas’lin* to Mythal lowered his bow a few inches once he realized what he was seeing.

“I am Nehna Sora Revasina,” she said. “And I would ask the hospitality of Clan Talanulea.”

“An’daran atish’an, sister,” the sentry said, and moved aside.

Nehna stepped into a Dalish camp for the first time in twelve years.
Lauro had a knife to his throat as soon as Zevran opened his eyes. It was one of the ones he’d been using before- a junk knife, cheap with an edge that hurt because it couldn’t be sharpened properly. The Crows only bought such knives because they took heat well. If you stuck one next to a fire for long enough, you could cut and burn.

The blade was still warm enough to be uncomfortable pressed against his skin.

“I don’t see what good it does for me to heal him when you’re still hurting him,” someone new said. Zevran couldn’t move his head but he could just see someone kneeling down by his legs.

“No one asked for your opinion, Belo.”

“And you’re fucking with my patient, Crow.”

“What yourself, apostate.”

“You watch yourself,” the healer retorted. “I’ve got twenty years on you and I can kill you with my mind. You don’t own Rosso Noche just because you waltzed in here with contacts and protection offers and a merchant house and got Romão to listen to you.”

“Don’t I?” Lauro asked snidely.

“Rosso Noche existed before you came along, and it will stay long after someone finally offs you for being a smug little smartass. There’s no place for Crows here.”

“And yet you came to me to ask for him,” Lauro said, and turned the blade so more of the flat lay against the tender skin of Zevran’s neck and ah, hot! “If you were planning on using him to get rid of me, Belo, the old guard really has fallen into its twilight. This one’s a courtesan. You get one competent one maybe every couple of generations, and that sheep-fucking shit-for-brains Arainai cost us the last one.”

Zevran gave him a sharp, tight smile.

“I am quite competent at what I do, I assure you.”

“And I’m not interested,” Lauro said. “Listen very carefully, Mahar. You’re working for Rosso Noche now. You step out of line and I’ll be back to finish what I started. Amajuan won’t be able to save you this time. Andraste only knows what he wants you for, but if we humor the old man he leaves us alone. So you- you’re going to keep him happy, and stay out of everyone else’s way.”

“Don’t you have somewhere to be that isn’t threatening people?” Belo demanded.

“Ah, but he is a Talon of the Crows!” Zevran said. “It is surely his greatest talent, being threatening.”

“If you make me come back, I’m taking your tongue first,” Lauro promised. The knife was removed from his throat, but a second later it slashed across his cheek, and then the Crow Master was gone.

Belo reached up once they were certain that he was gone and healed the cut with a touch.

“You’ve had a spirit healer before,” he said.

“Hm?” Zevran asked, trying not to worry about how he knew.
“You’re leaning into it. Most people aren’t this comfortable.”

“It is warm and making me feel better—why would I be uncomfortable with it? And the Crows use healers.”

“Don’t I know it,” Belo muttered to himself, and then spoke at a normal volume again: “Got hurt that much, then?”

“Killing people is a dangerous business to be in,” Zevran said.

“It is,” he agreed. “That should be it. Sit up, and then we’ll see if you’re fit to walk.”

Zevran sat up. He ached, but it was nothing he couldn’t work through.

He was still in the printshop basement. He’d been moved away from the bars, but Lauro hadn’t cleaned up after himself. Zevran’s blood was still pooled on the stone some feet away, and the paper fire hadn’t burned out completely yet.

“Hey,” Belo said, and got between him and the sight of the place where he’d been tortured. Nice, but not necessary. The experience it suggested was intriguing. “How are you feeling?”

“Sore.”

“Can’t do much about that, sorry,” he said, and shrugged; then held his hand out. “Oscar Belo, Organized Apostates of Antiva. We share interests with Rosso Noche.”

Zevran took his hand.

“Mahar Desoto, no longer of the Crows. I would have said that I, quite to my own shock and surprise, share interests with Rosso Noche; but I believe I have been proven wrong.”

“Killing Crows, right?” Oscar asked. “Feynriel and Ella told me. You’re lucky Rafaila and Herman were so willing to hide mage kids as their new apprentices, or you’d be dead right now.”

“My thanks, then.”

Oscar stood, and Zevran got to use his body weight as leverage to get off the floor. The bones of his legs ached, but he knew his body well enough to know that he could walk.

“Rosso Noche isn’t a Crow puppet,” Oscar told him, leading him up to the printshop proper. “If that’s what you’re worried about. But I won’t say that since Escipo weaseled his way in here he hasn’t been a conniving little snake who uses our efforts to further his own agenda, especially when it comes to the Crows. We’ve fallen a lot since we got founded, but you’ve just fallen in with the faction that actually gives a shit about holding to all the words they put in those pamphlets.”

They emerged in the back room with the press. The apprentices were cutting reams of said pamphlets. The oldest apprentice, the non-mage, eyed him warily.

“You’re letting him go with you? Alone?”

“I know better than any of you how to handle myself,” Oscar told him. “Go get one of your extra coats, Cirico. You dragged this man here in his bed clothes, and I’m not making him walk outside in them at this time of day.”

Cirico didn’t seem very happy about that, but provided him a light coat to go over his sleeping shirt. Oscar took him out the back door so no one would see them, and told him they were going to get his
things. Wherever he’d been living, he was moving in with Azieri Amajuan now.

“And who is this Signor Amajuan?” Zevran asked.

“Old Rosso Noche- true Rosso Noche,” Oscar said, and opened the door to the week-inn. “Hey, Loshca.”

The owner of the inn looked up.

“Signor Belo,” she said, and: “Messere Desoto, I hadn’t thought I’d be seeing you again.”

Zevran looked at Oscar.

“Her too?”

“If you wanted to avoid Rosso Noche, Mahar, you picked the wrong city. This is our stronghold.”

Well that was just wonderful. He climbed the stairs to his room and considered simply taking his things and leaving out the window, but- supposing Lauro Escipo tried to find him, and tracked him back to Amaranthine, and told the Crows about Theron and the others? And if Rialto really was so full of Rosso Noche, how far could he even get without being seen, since he knew he wouldn’t be able to make it to the city limits without descending to ground level at least once? And even if he did manage to avoid detection, could they send Feynriel after his drams again?

No, it wasn’t worth it, not yet. He’d been discovered, and that meant he had to put in the time and effort to win their trust so they would leave him alone when he left; or stick around long enough for them to try to kill him again and have an escape plan ready that would let him get lost in the Free Marches, or perhaps Nevarra or Orlais.

He couldn’t bring Antiva back to Ferelden. Not if it wasn’t on his own terms.

Azieri Amajuan turned out to be an elf of fifty-five or so, just starting to grey in the hair. He had a deep scar across the right side of his face which, to Zevran, looked like someone had tried to slice his eye out in a fight and failed. Maybe in the same encounter, maybe in a different one, someone had broken his arm on the same side and his leg on the other one, and neither had healed well. The bones was straight but his fingers didn’t move properly and his good hand had to be occupied with a cane when he stood or walked, and the limbs themselves were held stiffy.

He eyed Zevran suspiciously as he was led in.

“Warn a man before you bring a sacrifice to the pyre, Oscar,” he said. “I can’t be prepared for blood in my floorboards on short notice.”

“He’s the one Loshca and Argiñe reported, and who stopped by Rafaila and Herman’s,” Oscar told him. “I thought you might want him. Said he came back to Antiva to kill Crows.”

Zevran tried a disarming smile in the face of Azieri’s clear dislike. It didn’t work.

“You’d kill your own people, but expect us to trust you?”

“I expect very little from Rosso Noche,” Zevran said. “And they are not my people- I am formerly of the Crows.”

“No one escapes the Crows’,” Azieri quoted at him.
“They certainly do not when they have *that* mindset.”

“And you don’t?”

“There is a difference, I have learned,” Zevran told him. “Between *escaping* the Crows, and living free of them. So long as you have achieved the second, the first can never be taken from you, even in death. But having only the first does nothing but have you live constantly looking over your shoulder for retaliation and waiting for a knife in the back, and that is hardly being free of anything.”

“Hn,” Azieri grunted, but seemed at least mildly approving of this answer. “He know about Escipo?”

“Escipo was torturing him to death in Rafaila’s basement,” Oscar said. “He’d have done it, too, except Feynriel and Ella mentioned him to me. I told Escipo you wanted him. Figured even if he’s as useless as thrice-ridden dog talked like he was, it’d be enough to spite him. I know how much you *love* spiting the Crows.”

“Oh, so he’s a bribe to shut up and fuck off,” Azieri spat. “Embers and ashes, Oscar, when did we come to this!”

“We recruited in the new generation.”

“He’s not going to win!” Azieri swore, and pounded his good fist on the kitchen table. “I won’t let him! Antiva deserves better!”

“What’s my brother gone and done *now*?” someone called from the upper floor, and there were footsteps on the stairs. A human man appeared— surprising to Zevran despite the facts, this was an elven neighborhood after all— who, yes, did look a lot like Lauro Escipo.

“Tried to torture this one to death,” Oscar explained again. “I lied and said that Azieri wanted him so he wouldn’t end up as one big bloodstain in Rafaila’s basement. He lives here now.”

“He’s *what*?” Azieri demanded, incensed, and they started arguing. Lauro’s brother just watched them for a moment, sighed, and beckoned Zevran towards the stairs.

“I’m Antonu,” he introduced himself. “You?”

“Mahar Desoto.”

“I’d apologize for my brother, but it doesn’t seem sufficient.”

“So long as you do not intend to drug me and hand me off to him again,” Zevran said. “I will not hold him against you. He is a Talon of the Crows. Who knows his family?”

“He never really-” Antonu sounded uncomfortable. “I mean, he always knew. He’s- there’s a word-”

“Congradi,” Zevran supplied. ‘*With favor*’- Crows whose parents had willing offered them up. They were usually from merchant houses, or the old bureaucracy families, or from one of the many, many minor Antivan royal branches, like Rinna. The status rift in the Crows between *congradi* and *compradi*— free and slave, he knew to admit *now*— was a vast one. There were less *congradi*, for one, but they were often the Crows who rose to the high positions of power, just as their families had hoped they would. It was another sort of business investment, having an insider with the Crows, and was considered worth losing a child for by most who in the position to afford it.

“Yeah. I always mix it up with the other one. Father sent him to the last Master Escipo once my younger sister was born and he could be sure that he’d have enough heirs to give the eldest up.”
Zevran had been hoping for the family name, to get a better sense of the politics of this strange rift within Rosso Noche, but Antonu seemed very reticent about it. He was shown to the Antivan equivalent of an attic room, high up in the house and prone to getting much too warm; but Zevran noted the immediate roof access and wondered if Antonu was giving him this room for more reasons than because no one else wanted it. He’d have to know how easy it would be to him to come and go as he wished, and with a brother like Lauro he was sure to know about roof-running.

If this was Antonu’s compensation for his brother’s behavior, he liked it.

“There’s a washroom off the kitchen,” Antonu told him. “We share the cess tank with the rest of the courtyard. Everybody in the house eats the meals together, and we take turns cooking as we feel like it. Tonight it’s Zelda.”

“Zelda?”

“Signor Amajuan is his father,” Antonu said, and his chin rose just a bit in defiance. “And he and I are together.”

Ah, more drama! And perhaps some clues about the nature and severity of the political rift.

“And you live here instead of moving him to your house,” Zevran observed, nice and neutral.

“If I moved him into my father’s house,” Antonu said, and just about spat the word ‘father’. “He’d just be my- you know. It would completely discredit him, with the humans and the elves. He’s doing his father’s work, and that’s much more important than my family’s honor and dignity. It’s for the good of Antiva. What’s one person against that?”

“One person can be worth quite a lot,” Zevran said, and let Antonu believe he meant it in terms of the monetary value of Crow contracts.

Life in the Amajuan household was, well, extremely boring. Zevran was staying on his best behavior and hadn’t tried to sneak out once, but he couldn’t help comparing this instance of being saved from certain death to his experience with Theron and the others, who’d put him to use immediately with a bewildering level of trust.

Well, really, that had been Theron’s trust, and of course Rosso Noche likely had plenty of operatives to call on and were not in any way reduced to picking up every lost and lonely soul with nowhere else to go, but still. He would have liked to go out days with Antonu and Zelda- who had turned out to be a firebrand reformer, especially on the subject of the legal rights of elves- but no one asked and Zevran didn’t want to push, just in case it was taken the wrong way.

But Azieri’s house was only so big. Antonu was generally pleasant and easy-going, but Azieri didn’t seem to want him around. It seemed oddly personal, while also not being about him at all.

For a lack of anything better to do, Zevran had cleaned the entire house during his first week. Azieri hadn’t tried to stop him, but he’d shot annoyed looks whenever they happened to be in the same room together.

So they didn’t trust him. Fine. He didn’t trust them very much either. A plot to put Rinna on the throne didn’t seem like something an organization openly advocating for the execution of the monarchy would do, but that didn’t mean they hadn’t done it. Somewhere in the depths of Rosso Noche’s contacts could be the person who had let word slip to the Crows. If he only did one thing while stuck with these people, it was going to be finding out who was responsible for that. He’d killed Eoman Arainai, and might be able to get Claudio Valisti while he was here, and if he could
take out the operative in Rosso Noche without having the entire revolutionary apparatus come crashing down on his head, he’d make a third murder.

On Chantry day, he was eating breakfast with the other three and idly considering wrecking the Amajuan house so he’d have an excuse to clean it again when Azieri looked at his son and said: “Take the Crow with you today.”

Zelda blinked at him in surprise, his mouth full of food.

“All’s he’s doing here is hanging around like a two-bit kicked cur and watching me,” Azieri said. “Take him out and give him some exercise.”

Zevran did not appreciate being talked about like a street dog, but outside was good. There was uninterrupted sunlight, some breeze, and new people.

“So!” he said brightly, once they’d walked a few blocks away from the house and were crossing out of the elven neighborhood. “Where are we going?”

“Docks,” Zelda said. “You get to meet the Ships’ Union.”

He explained as they walked. The way shipping traditionally worked in Antiva was that the merchant houses or the monarchy owned the ships, the crews were free-floating, and the captains were freelancers. The merchants and the monarchy were the ones who paid out to the Felicissima Armada, but the captains were still held responsible for any damage to cargo or ship, whether from nature or negligence or the Armada deciding their payout wasn’t high enough.

“The Ships’ Union holds that all it does is drive experienced captains and sailors to piracy,” Zelda said. “The merchant houses have the exact same standards as the Armada, but at least the pirates can own their own ships and the crews aren’t dissolved every few voyages. They want to own their own ships, and have free rein with their hiring of crews, and be freelance contractors for the merchants’ cargos.”

Captain Daganin, the head of the Ships’ Union, was a tall human woman with an impressive hat. She didn’t seem to care that Zevran was loitering in her cabin and listening in on the meeting without contributing.

“They just keep taunting us lately,” she eventually ended up complaining, about the Armada. “They show up very pointedly where our captains put into port, because they know we don’t have any traction with the merchant houses yet and can’t do anything about it! Castillon has been in Rialto for two days and it’s all I can do not to punch him in his smug fucking face when he keeps turning up wherever I’m drinking!”

“Castillon?” Zevran asked, the first thing he’d said this entire time, and they all looked at him in surprise. “I can take care of him for you.”

“What?” Antonu asked, taken aback.

“We don’t need an assassin-” Zelda started to say.

“Now, wait a minute,” Captain Daganin said, holding up a hand to stop him. “A Crow volunteers to kill the biggest man in the Armada, I’m going to hear him out.”

Zelda looked pained.
“Heliz-”

“I’m not your father, Zelda, and I’d be honestly surprised if you got him to say he was against assassination. And then I’d call him a damn hypocrite. It’s not killing for money he hates, it’s the Crows.”

“Do you want him to simply disappear or should there be an example?” Zevran asked her.

“Example is good,” Captain Daganin said. “How much is this going to cost?”

“No money,” he promised. “I simply need to know what you know about how he spends his time—where, when, with whom, those kinds of things.”

“Armand Castillon? Hello, yes, it is good to see you awake. No, you are not dreaming this, despite the no doubt outstanding view you have from your current position. Someone really has broken into your bedroom. We have a mutual friend I am doing a favor for, but first—tell me why you are so upset with Captain Isabela of the Siren’s Call.”

The dock’s alarms tolled two nights after the conversation with Captain Daganin. The barque Pride of Dairsmuid was burning, unmoored in the middle of the harbor, all the way up through her sails. The fire brigade was called out, though there wasn’t much to do besides note where the wreckage was going to sink so it could be dredged up later to keep the harbor clear.

They tripped over Castillon’s corpse on the wooden planking of the water-walk.

Zevran watched from a rooftop the next morning as Zelda, Antonu, and Captain Daganin surveyed the harbor and watched as rowboats and fishing trawlers were conscripted into hauling what was left floating of the great warship— and the burnt remains of its crew— out of the water. Everyone on land was giving them a respectful distance. There was no doubt in any of the locals’ minds that this had been the work of Rosso Noche.

Or in some of the visiting sailors, it seemed. Zevran noticed the change in crowd, the people walking against and in spite of the natural flow of movement, and slipped down to the street level. He got up behind the nicest-dressed one and gave him a fatal stab.

“Oh, Captain!” he called, and pointed to the other approaching sailors. She looked around sharply and drew her sword, and their would-be assailants changed their minds.

“That’s Keyon Fallisut,” Captain Daganin told him, coming to look at the man he’d killed. “An Armada captain, of the Seajewel, worked a lot with Castillon. Good job.”

Zevran dropped a bow.

“I live to please, dear captain. The example was not too dramatic for your liking?”

“No, this is good,” she said, looking with no little satisfaction at the empty space at the docks where the Pride of Dairsmuid had been docked the evening before. “Bit of a shame though. She was a beautiful ship, and a floating fortress. Rumor had it that he kept all his documents with them, to keep them from thieves, and as insurance against the other captains coming after his ship. It would have been interesting to see what he was involved in.”

“Oh,” Zevran said, and crooked a finger at the three of them to follow him back to the shady dockside inn he’d rented a room in the night before.
He opened the door to the room with a flourish to reveal the boxes of papers he’d taken from Castillon.

“This is not all of it, I am afraid,” he said. “There is only so much one man can come and go with boxes without becoming suspicious, even here.”

“You thought to take paperwork?” Zelda asked. He sounded somewhat awed, and Zevran mentally tallied at least one or two points in his favor from Rosso Noche for this.

“‘Knowledge is power,’” he quoted at him. “I will remind you that I read your pamphlet, and that I have an idea of what you want.”

“I know you said this job was free,” Captain Daganin told him. “But this is worth favors. At least three. Find me if you ever need something, and we’ll negotiate terms.”

The Ships’ Union loved him and Rosso Noche unbent a little, because with the papers he’d taken from Castillon, they could go after at least small parts of the Armada in Antiva. Zevran was allowed free rein of the city again, and other movement on conditions; but he spent his first day of returned semi-autonomy up in his room, looking at the Tome of Koslun lying unimpressively on top of his chest of drawers, thinking.

“I am going to Salle,” he told Zelda and Antonu two days later. “If I am not back by the morning of the day after tomorrow, something has gone horribly wrong. Probably Crows.”

Rialto to Salle was one day on land. He left very early in the morning so he could arrive in Salle before the evening got too late, conduct his business, and leave immediately. Like all major cities, Salle had a Talon House- here, it was Ibarra, Fourth Talon- and he wanted to keep the risk of being seen to a minimum.

It was about dinner when he found the courier ships down at the docks. To one he gave a package; another received a thick packet of paper. Both needed to get to Kirkwall, and he stayed only long enough to receive assurances about the speed of which they would get there.

My dear Isabela,

Let me be the bearer of good news! I had the opportunity recently to come across Castillon, and let us merely say that the Pride of Dairsmuid made a lovely beacon in the winter night.

I confess that I pried into your business somewhat during the course of the meeting and I hope that you will forgive me. I was concerned about you. And now I am shocked! The Qunari, Isabela, and you are still in Kirkwall? I do not know how I feel about this, my dear- I do not like the thought of you in such danger. I have taken the liberty of returning your cargo for you. Hopefully this will help your situation. Expect news from the Viscount’s Keep soon.

May I suggest, in the future, that you simply kill your creditors rather than drive yourself to desperation trying to appease them? To that end I have enclosed the information for Castillon’s accounts in Kirkwall. Buy yourself a new ship, my Isabela, with a strapping crew of deadly beauties, and show the Armada the quality of your steel.

If you should happen to be in Antiva, please be careful attempting to speak with me. I am sorry to tell you that I have fallen in with revolutionaries- entirely on accident- but I am certain that it will make a good story once I manage to extract myself.
With well-wishes,

Mahar Desoto
Chapter 11

She told Clan Talanulea that she’d been stolen from Antiva and sold to an Orlesian, and escaped after two years. It was true in its generalities, and let her not say anything about leaving Revasina for Adan, or the years in the Summer Lily, or Damien. No one questioned her story, and when the clan packed up to head south, she was installed in the Master Crafter’s aravel.

The clan was traveling to the Sulfur Lakes in the far south of Thedas. Nehna had never been, but knew the stories of them from the time of the Dales. They were said to have amazing healing powers, and she couldn’t think of a better place to have a baby.

It was strange, adjusting to living with a clan again. She kept looking around for Tanis, or being caught off-guard by the lack of a proper kitchen or walls, but it was still so familiar at the same time. She picked up crafting again easily enough, starting with the curing of furs and leathers as a refresher, and was back to carving wood by the time they reached the southern edge of the Tirashan and she was obviously pregnant.

Keeper Felaran took her aside before they were to brave the mountain pass of Arl Dumat.

“That child,” he asked. “Will it be half-blooded?”

“No,” Nehna told him, and wondered what the reaction would have been if she’d been carrying Damien. Just because a Dalish clan lived near humans didn’t make them necessarily more amenable to elf-blooded children—usually, if they didn’t like such people, they were even more intolerant of them than even the clans who refused any human contact completely. It was all about differentiation from the neighbors.

Keeper Felaran just nodded. The next day, the clan headed over the mountains. Nehna had never traveled in such territory before, and as much as the Orlesian woods unsettled her in their differences from the Antivan ones, she hated the mountains more. They were cold, and full of rocks, and there was too much up-and-down without enough secure footholds. The halla could handle it fine, but the aravels were not necessarily made for this, and kept requiring repairs. They got stuck in the highest part of the pass for two days because an axle broke, and Nehna almost fell off the mountain helping to deal with it.

After that, the Keeper made her stay in the First’s aravel for her own safety. She worked on bits of halla horn, carving tiny delicate statues as the clan started to descend into the warm, wet air of the Sulphur Lakes.

Talanulea set up on a strip of land between two of the larger lakes, taking full advantage of the heat and the minerals that could be gathered by filling buckets and letting the water evaporate. Nehna spent the last months of her pregnancy warm and rested, bathing in the lakes as ordered and grinding up the mineral salts into powders for easier transport, supported in her seat by rolled rugs and pillows.

Her daughter was born in late Firstfall. Keeper Felaran took her out by one of the lakes so that there was warm water nearby and the baby came out easy, fast, little fuss. She was tired, afterwards, and the First took her back to the aravels to lie down while Felaran checked the baby over with his magic for any health concerns that needed addressing.

When he came back, her daughter wrapped in a blanket and hair damp from being cleaned, and handed her over-
Nehna cradled her daughter and waited and- nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“Salladin,” she said to the baby and Felaran. It meant ‘soul of new life’ and she’d picked it out months ago, and it was what she’d hoped for, the start of a new life with her people, but there was nothing.

*I’m tired*, she told herself. *Tomorrow, after I’ve slept, it will be fine.*

It wasn’t. A whole month went by and Nehna was still waiting to love her daughter. She didn’t resent Salladin the way she had Damien, but she didn’t love her and what if she just couldn’t any longer, what if the humans had taken that from her when she hadn’t been looking? What if she’d used up all she had, loving Adan and Satheraan and Tanis?

She cared for Salladin because she was her baby and her responsibility, and she wanted to do better than she had for Damien. Nehna held her when she cried and carried her around the camp when she did the day’s duties and fed her when she was hungry and sang her to sleep, but it didn’t feel any different from the times when she’d been younger with Revasina and helped take care of the newborn halla or the hunters’ infants while they were out. Salladin meant about as much to her, emotionally, as a stranger’s baby.

She remembered loving Satheraan before he was even born. She remembered him learning to crawl in the sunlight in the apartment, she remembered Adan playing with him and smiling and chuckling, she remembered talking about him proudly with the other mothers in the neighborhood. She remembered Satheraan learning to speak and walk in their rooms in the Summer Lily, and playing with the other children in the Chantry’s courtyard, and every second of the awful, horrifying first night when he’d had himself put on the brothel’s listing.

When Nehna thought about Satheraan it still *hurt*, in a way that nothing else but Adan did. She loved her first son and knew she would until she died. But not Damien, and now not Salladin either.

Her daughter was two and a half months old on the night that Nehna couldn’t take it any longer and went crying to Keeper Felaran because she didn’t love her baby, mothers were supposed to love their children and care for them and protect them and this was the *third time* she’d failed-

Felaran nodded solemnly through her entire story as it spilled out, finally, Adan and brothel and Satheraan and the chevalier and Damien. He gave her tea with a little bit of alcohol and told her to go back to bed.

She woke up the next morning and Salladin wasn’t there. She was tired still from crying and didn’t want to show her face but her baby was gone, and that was the sort of thing she should care about.

Felaran had Salladin. He was sitting with the clan’s Hahren, idly amusing her with little sparks of colored magic as the adults talked. Felaran saw her come out of the aravel and nodded- Nehna took that mean that everything was fine, and they would talk later. She got breakfast and went to help with the minerals.

The clan had lunch together, as usual. Felaran had kept Salladin all morning and Nehna was grateful for the break from having to pretend.

Halfway through the meal, the Keeper stood up, still holding her daughter, and started telling Talanulea everything she’d told him in her despair the night before. No details were spared, at no point did he stop to ask if she wanted anyone else to know these things, and Nehna just sat there
“By your own choice, you left The People,” Felaran said, and that shook her out of the shock because she knew this formula, she’d heard a variation of it with Revasina. “By your own actions, you broke the oath you gave in exchange for your vallas’lin. You spent seven years in willing servitude, never trying to escape. You allowed one son to be violated, then abandoned him—”

Rage choked her. ‘Allowed’, ‘allowed’- she’d been stolen away she hadn’t just walked off and left-

“-seeking us out rather than returning for him. You gave another to a shem’len woman to be raised as one of them, instead of with the clans. You yourself said that you bear no love for him, and now feel the same for your new child. You are not fit to be a mother, and you do not deserve to be of the Dalish.”

Deserve-

“You are Nehna Talines, Nehna of no family, and you are an exile,” Felaran declared to the whole clan. “Salladin will be raised in Talanulea free of your name and ignominy of your blood. Take your things and go, before the Dread Wolf is attracted here by the presence of such a traitor.”

He wasn’t Keeper for Revasina, he had no right to strip her of her name, and she clung to that in the face of everything as the First took her to pack her belongings, gave her winter clothes and supplies, and walked her far out past the boundaries of the camp, away from the lakes, where the ground was no longer heated from within and could freeze to hold snow.

She made her fire there on the edge of the lake-ground and the snow that night, and stared at the flames for a long time.

Felaran had no right to strip her of her name, but any Keeper could declare one of their clan unfit to parent, for the child’s safety. They had the right to challenge fitness in another clan, to that clan’s Keeper, and while Nehna wasn’t exactly a part of any clan at this point, staying with Talanulea had put her under Felaran’s authority. He could say she didn’t deserve Salladin, and he could declare her an exile.

And exiles weren’t allowed to take their children. Children were precious to the Dalish and exiles lived dangerous lives- and she’d been cast out in far southern Orlais in winter. Should she venture into the snow, as Talanulea was clearly expecting her to do, she had bad odds of survival. It was hard to care for a child alone, let alone alone in the wilderness; and she’d wanted the Dalish life for her daughter that her sons couldn’t have, and-

Felaran and Talanulea had just stolen Salladin. Antiva had stolen Satheraan and she wasn’t going to let anyone do this to her again. If she left Salladin eventually the way she’d left Damien to someone who could love him- fine. But no one was going to force her, not ever again.

She pulled the coat the clan had sent her away in off and put on the old Crow armor, rearranging the knives so that she could get to them when the coat was on. She put enough wood on the fire that it should be coals, at least, by the time she’d returned, and walked back to Talanulea’s camp, bow strung and ready with an arrow in case of interfering sentries.

Nehna got past them without complication and slipped silently into the Keeper’s aravel. Salladin was there, sleeping, and she gently picked her daughter up and slipped her into the front of her coat, retying it securely to hold her in place. She stole a little more food and firewood, and then went back to her own camp.
There, she put her pack back on, tied the firewood bundles together, unstrung her bow and left it with her arrows in her quiver, and started walking in the dark, putting the glowing coals of the fire behind her. Talanulea might come after her for taking back her daughter, and she wanted as much of a head start as possible.

The mineral deposits of the Sulfur Lakes made it easier to travel without being detected, because they were packed so hard that it was like walking across rock. Where the mineral salts hadn’t caked, the clear dirt was firm and warm, which meant that she only had to build a fire when there was something to cook. The water was a little too hot and didn’t taste nice on the tongue, but the minerals- when they weren’t so caustic that she had to spit her mouthful out immediately and wipe her hands off to keep from getting burned- were good for both of them.

Nehna went back and forth across the river between the Sulfur Lakes and the Malcellin Geyers that winter, hunting for the game that huddled around the geothermal warmth and scavenging the plants that grew on it. Salladin stayed huddled in the front of her coat and outgrew her clothes too quickly, and Nehna had to improvise to keep her covered. They traveled slowly south, avoiding the few signs of human or elfen life she came across until months after Firstfall, when she ventured out towards the eastern snows in search of water that wasn’t so mineral-heavy and cold, found tiny spring flowers blooming.

It was spring, probably late spring. Talanulea would be gone, north in the Tirashan again.

The next time she was at the river, she camped on the bank, in plain sight. She spent the time helping Salladin take her first steps. It wasn’t love and it wasn’t pride, but there was a certain satisfaction in holding her tiny hands and helping her stay upright as she managed to stumble along on her legs.

On the fifth or sixth day a barge came poling up the river and Nehna hailed it. It was a group of humans, going to pick up some seasonal miners who spent their winters on the Sulfur Lakes, doing what Clan Talanulea had been- evaporating tubs of water for the salts they left behind, and chipping at the salt cakes.

Nehna traded fresh game and help with loading the minerals for a spot on the barge. At the beginning of the next month, the arrived at the city of Sulfur Point, which got the title of ‘city’ simply because it was a decent-sized collection of buildings in a place where no one lived. It was grey and low, built of stone and brick and wood floated down the river from the Tirashan, and existed solely to handle the products of the mineral miners in the hot springs of the Lakes and Geysers in the sifters in the Sea of Ash in the far northeast. The docks of Sulfur Point were right where the river dumped into the ice-floe-filled Sundered Sea, and Nehna took odd jobs with the fishing boats and the icers and loading and unloading barges until someone picked up that she knew her way around woodworking tools, and took her into the docks’ carpentry shop. She learned elven months learning the basics of ship repair, especially of the ice-breaking koch boats that were essential in these waters, and was loaned out with the carpentry apprentices to do structural repairs on the buildings in town.

She got a room in town and learned the local language on the docks. It wasn’t Orlesian, not here- Sulfur Point and its sister trading city, Mont-de-glace, barely thought of themselves as such. They called themselves and their language Sheletk, and spoke it with the sailors who came in small wood or hide boats over the Sundered Sea in summer, or walked or rode across the ice pack in winter, bringing animal skins and fat and dried meat and trade goods from people she’d never heard of- Chasind, Dlanikik, Feana.

The spring after Salladin turned two, Nehna got passage on a koch boat break the winter’s ice for the traders to Mont-de-glace. They stayed in the city a whole year, and she continued to do carpentry, and picked up a mercenary’s work of bouncer in the local taverns or hunting wolves or searching for
lost locals when there weren’t enough unskilled repairs to go around. When Salladin was three, they went back to Sulfur Point; when she was four they came again to Mont-de-glace and then returned to Sulfur Point early because there was good pay to be had on the koch boat fleet going to clear the Sundered Sea for the arrival of an Orlesian ship.

Nehna was sitting in the bow of the ship, one eye on Salladin clambering on the lower parts of the rigging and laughing with the rest of the crew about the Vicomtess Mont-de-glace’s northern snobbery that was going to get a perfectly fine Waking Sea cutter sunk against the ice and rocks of the Sundered Sea, when she realized that Salladin was going to be five in seven months and that her old self-reassurance that she wanted her daughter to be a little older and a little stronger before she went searching for another clan to take them in was a lie. She liked this life, the travel between the two cities, the ice on the Sundered Sea, the little bits of news and fascinating oddities on the docks that made her want to jump in one of the little wood and hide boats and find out just how and why the Sunless Lands had gotten their name-

And Keeper Felaran’s pronouncement of ‘exile’ had stuck in her chest, a sharp shard of the obsidian glass that the sifters brought out of the Seas of Ashes in wicker baskets, and it had stuck and festered right next to Adan and Satheraan and the pine forests of southern Antiva. She wanted roots and she wanted family, and while she didn’t quite have either of those, Salladin could at least end up with them. She was growing up here, learning Sheletk right alongside El’vhen, and if there weren’t very many other elves here and no other Dalish, at least the humans really didn’t care. The only reason anyone who wasn’t a local came here was because they were running from trouble or a trader or both, and it was just how things were done here not to pry into anyone’s personal business so long as nobody was being hurt. She wasn’t sure if she could call the Sundered Sea and its cities home, but she wasn’t sure she’d ever be able to call anywhere home again.

Nehna looked out over the ice, breaking and cracking with loud snaps as the iron-plated hull of the koch boat smashed into it, and decided that it would be time, soon, to go see Tanis in Lydes. Salladin wasn’t growing up in the clans, but she deserved to see old cities of the El’vhen, and meet the woman Nehna had claimed for family.
Chapter 12

Halfway through Harvestmere, about two weeks after he’d arrived in Antiva and been conscripted into Rosso Noche, news reached Rialto that Kirkwall had gone down in flames. Feynriel brought the news— the printers had sent their apprentices running around the city to gather everyone to discuss what it would mean for the work they were trying to do.

Zelda and Antonu acted like it was a given that Zevran was coming along, and Azieri clearly just agreed to let him come along because he didn’t trust him enough to leave him alone in the house unsupervised.

The meeting was held in the print shop’s basement. Someone had taken harsh lye to the stone to get his blood out. Zevran sat on the stairs, his back to the open door, and no one tried to make him come further down.

From that position, he could see everyone who had gathered. Rosso Noche’s ringleaders in Rialto were an improbable mix— Zelda and Antonu and Azieri. The printers. Loshca who ran the week-inn. The armorer who had sold him his leathers. Oscar was here, and Captain Daganin, and— the Reverend Mother of Rialto’s Chantry? She and Oscar nodded at each other like old friends, and wasn’t that interesting.

Zevran squished himself against the wall to let Feynriel and Ella and Cirico go up and down the stairs, fetching drinks and snacks. It seemed like everyone was settling in for a long talk.

“Sorry, sorry!” someone called from behind him, and he looked over his shoulder to see a human man in a large cloak coming through the basement door. He had a sword at his hip— a bit odd for Antiva. One thing his homeland shared with Ferelden was a propensity for carrying weapons as part of everyday wear, but here they were mostly things that were easy to hide, or simple knives, or rapiers for the merchant and bureaucrat class.

The man’s cloak got tangled in his sword hilt as he tried to get down the stairs past Zevran, and he swore, simply pulling the entire length of cloth off. It was only at that point that cloak made sense— the man had been trying to hide a Templar breastplate.

“Knight-Captain Loyola,” the Reverend Mother greeted him.

“Mother Melcarati,” he said in return, and tried to salute, and almost fell off the stairs. “Am I late? They’re having or they had this same meeting in Antiva City and the Grand Cleric sent me as soon as she heard about Kirkwall a day or two ago—”

The Grand Cleric of Antiva was part of Rosso Noche?

“You’re not late, Marcel,” Mother Melcarati told him. “Sit down, and let’s see if you know anything we don’t.”

Knight-Captain Loyola finally got to the bottom of the stairs and then stopped short again halfway to the small folding tables that had been set up for the snacks and drinks. He saluted again.

“Signor Amajuan, Signor Belo,” he said respectfully. “The Grand Cleric said to send her regards.”

“You tell Itzar we miss her too,” Oscar said.

They knew the Grand Cleric?
“Signor Amajuan, Signor Belo, and Grand Cleric Jaso founded Rosso Noche together,” Feynriel told him. He’d come down the stairs and sat a few above Zevran. “A while ago. When they were all young. I don’t know the whole story. No one likes telling it—something about Lauro Escipo.”

Zevran looked back at him and Feynriel scowled.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said. “I didn’t read your mind or whatever you’re thinking. Everyone always asks when it comes up.”

The meeting started. There were three different versions of the story of what had happened to Kirkwall: what Oscar and the Organized Apostates had heard, the news Captain Daganin had gotten on the docks, and what Knight-Captain Loyola had from the semi-official letter sent to the Grand Cleric.

“There was some big fight at the Circle in Kirkwall is what I heard,” Captain Daganin said. “The Qunari got involved. And a lot of Kirkwall caught on fire. It was reaching the docks when the ships cast off with whatever crew they had the natives trying to run. The biggest rumor going around is that one of the Orlesian galleys cast off with a Chantry brother who’d taken charge of a bunch of mages.”

“That’s true,” the Knight-Captain spoke up. “Brother Sebastian Vael arrived at the Circle in Jainen with a group of mages from the Circle in Kirkwall.”

“I’ve heard some shit about the Gallows,” Oscar said. “I’m surprised there were any Loyalists who wanted to move to another Circle.”

The Knight-Captain opened his mouth, looked very uncomfortable, and then shut it again.

“Marcel,” Mother Melcarati pressed.

“We don’t know if they were Loyalists,” he said. “We don’t even know who all of them were. The Knight-Commander in Jainen had the mages executed on the spot rather than take them into the Circle. It was right in front of the main Chantry. There were… apprentices. Children. It almost caused a riot. The city lord drew his sword on the Reverend Mother for not ordering the children spared, at least; and Vael attacked the Templars. The Knight-Commander had them both arrested. The Queen of Ferelden had to step in to get them both out of Chantry custody.”

“All the really interesting things happen in Ferelden lately,” Azieri said dryly, to a general round of amused noises and chuckles while Zevran focused on the basement floor and controlled his breathing and tried not to betray that he cared very much about news of Ferelden. That sounded like exactly the sort of thing Theron would get himself involved in; and if he was here in Antiva, then who was going to stop Theron, to watch out for him? He was the Hero of the Ferelden and the Fifth Blight, but he was Dalish as well. The Chantry would come down on him with cries of ‘heretic’ and dredge up every nasty story and rumor about his people that they had—Dalish and Warden—if he stood against them. Would Alistair and Nathaniel even think to look for such an attack? Would Leonie or Nelle? Oghren?

He so badly had the urge to send a letter to Theron warning him away from any rash action, but he couldn’t. It was one thing for it to be discovered that a nobody Crow like Mahar Desoto was supposed to be had sent a letter to a pirate. It was conceivable that they could, on occasion, run in the same circles and meet. There was no such excuse for a nobody Crow and the Hero of Ferelden.

Don’t you dare do anything stupid and dangerous while I’m not there to watch your back, he told his imaginary Theron, who smiled back blandly. That was his ‘I am listening to you and disagreeing
strongly, but being too polite to say so’ expression.

“And it was allowed?” Mother Melcarati asked. “Everyone knows how much Ferelden enjoys spiting Orlais, but they don’t have the sort of weight it takes to overrule Chantry custody like that. The Knight-Commander of Jainen was within their rights—any mages outside a Circle unaccompanied by a Templar can be executed rather than taken back, and to be running from an annulment—”

“It wasn’t,” Knight-Captain Loyola interrupted her. “Apparently the Knight-Commander of Kirkwall claimed it was. But she didn’t send for permission from Val Royeaux, or seemed to have any intention to. She just left the Grand Cleric’s office calling for an annulment of her Circle.”

“She’s not allowed to do that!”

“She never cared!” Ella shouted, and Zevran jumped along with most of the room. She’d been in a corner of the basement, folding pamphlets so she could be in position to keep an eye out for snacks and drinks that needing refreshing, and everyone had forgotten her presence. “She never cared none of them ever cared she just got to do whatever she wanted—!”

Oscar suddenly looked guilty.

“Ella— Ella escaped the Circle in Kirkwall,” he said. “Girl, you don’t have to—”

“No,” she said. “No, no. Tell me. What did she finally do? What was her excuse?”

“The First Enchanter was accused of knowing, and aiding and abetting others in, the practice of blood magic,” Knight-Captain Loyola said.

Ella stared at him.

“No,” she said. “Orsino— he was one of the only people in there who cared—”

“‘Accused’ might be too weak word,” Oscar said. “The way I heard it, from people who swore they’d gotten it from people who were there, the First Enchanter used blood magic to turn into some kind of monster and killed most of the Templars.”

The Knight-Captain looked deeply uneasy.

“The official report mentioned stories of a monster rampaging in the lower city,” he said. “It said that they were inflated rumors about the Qunari.”

“Well, I trust my people,” Oscar said. “So maybe get yours to take another look.”

“We need this in some kind of order,” Rafaila Garrastazu said. “What actually happened?”

Knight-Captain Loyola had the most complete story, though it was still light on details with the Qunari.

Grand Cleric Elthina of the Free Marches received evidence that First Enchanter Orsino was a blood mage. She called Knight-Commander Meredith Stannard to the main Kirkwall Chantry to give it to her. Witnesses in the Chantry saw the Knight-Commander rush out in a storm of righteousness and wrath. Soon after, Reverend Mother Petrice of Kirkwall came to the sanctuary and exhorted the faithful within to truly cleanse the city of heresy and sin. Some joined her; others she gathered on the march down to the docks.
Things became confused beginning at the docks. Mother Petrice’s crowd seemed to think that they were there to act against the blood mages who were supposedly plaguing the city. On Mother Petrice’s orders some of them were instead convinced to strike out against the Qunari, who may or may not have already been out of their compound and on the docks, perhaps or perhaps not to get on ships back to Par Vollen in accordance with the Arishok’s promise to Viscount Dumar to leave, given when he had returned the Tome of Koslun. Regardless, the Qunari and the Kirkwallers collided and the violence spread up the city until it reached the Viscount’s Keep. Viscount Dumar was dead, and the only reason the city nobility, guard, and those who had fled to the fortification in hopes of safety hadn’t also been killed had been the actions of a local notable with a very large sword.

In the Gallows, the mages and Templars tore each other apart. Some mages escaped to a ship under the lead of Brother Sebastian Vael, and undoubtedly others, unescorted, had slipped out as well and were now living as apostates. First Enchanter Orsino led the mages who stood and fought, until-

“We don’t know after that,” Knight-Commander Loyola admitted. “The only Templars who survived were ones who lost their nerve and ran once Orsino cut himself, or before. Something- our report came from one of the cloistered Sisters in Kirkwall. Someone killed Grand Cleric Elthina in her office, and the Qunari killed Mother Petrice. But even before the First Enchanter, something had happened to the Knight-Commander. They said she…”

He trailed off, looking disturbed.

“She what?” Mother Melcarati asked.

“At first they thought she was turning into an abomination,” he said. “Templars can get possessed by demons, they said, there was some mage in Kirkwall doing it and- Maker I don’t want to think about it, that’s not supposed to happen to us-”

He shook his head to clear it.

“But it was just her. She started cracking, cracking open, her skin, and she was glowing red- we don’t. No one has any idea what happened with her. She’s just- in the courtyard of the Circle. The report said she’s a solid statue of red and the Templars there swear that it’s lyrium.”

I feel like a Crow again and I hate it, Zevran wrote in journal some nights later, under his notes on his near-death experience with Lauro, looked at it a moment, and then put the book aside.

After the demon birds and what they’d said about Theron, he’d stopped trying to rely on lucid dreaming and forced himself into the automatic waking cycle Anders had told him about. He was a little worried that the birds would come back, if he dreamed; and even if they didn’t, there was still the possibility of Feynriel to worry about. For all that he was scared of the Crows learning his secrets, he didn’t want to give them to Rosso Noche, either.

Living in a state of constant low-level distrust was surprisingly exhausting. It had been fine for a while, living with Azieri watching him suspiciously. Helping Captain Daganin had been a good boost, and it meant that Antonu and Zelda and the Captain were fine with him, but the rest of Rosso Noche had either written him off or was clearly wary about the way he’d gotten rid of Castillon. A few times, Zevran had wondered how exactly these people got anything done.

They trusted people who weren’t him was the answer, of course, but he was having less and less success, as the days went on, at not comparing this situation to how he’d been treated in Ferelden. He kept telling himself that it was probably unfair: Theron and the others really had needed all the
help they could get with the Blight and couldn’t afford distrust, and Fereldans didn’t live their lives in fear of the Crows the way Antivans did, but it didn’t help. He was used to being trusted and respected, now, and he didn’t have that here. Maybe he couldn’t have it.

Except that they tolerated Lauro Escipo- maybe even actively welcomed him. What did he have that made him worthy of that?

Power. He was a Talon of the Crows, and he had connections to whatever respectable merchant house he’d been born into. He wasn’t *compradi*, and he was human. He was exactly the sort of face the Crows put on for the outside world, and in a backwards and unfair way, that made him trustworthy even to people who hated Crows. He was exactly what they were expecting to find, even right down to betraying his own organization.

People just didn’t know what to do when confronted with a Crow who’d run, escaped, and then *come back* to hunt their former colleagues. Zevran knew very well that a common reaction to not knowing what to do with someone because they didn’t fit a familiar mold was suspicion and mistrust. He’d done it with Theron at first, because there hadn’t been cruelty that followed his kindness.

Because Rosso Noche didn’t trust him, he couldn’t trust *them*, and it was a cycle that needed to be broken but Zevran was wary of trying anything in case it backfired. If he was prepared, or even just gien a fighting chance, he was sure that he could dispose of Lauro Escipo- but if Rosso Noche asked the Talon to get rid of him then he wouldn’t know until Lauro was *there*.

Zevran picked the journal back up. He wasn’t going to be able to fall asleep for a bit anyway, so he might as well plan.

Captain Daganin owed him favors, but he wasn’t certain what sort of pull she had with the rest of the leaders in Rialto. Zelda and Antonu likely trusted him enough to trust him a little more if he asked, but they were held back by their association with Azieri. He wasn’t particularly interested in approaching the printers whose reaction to his appearance and distinctly *non-threatening actions* had been to call a Talon, and he didn’t really know any of the others.

That left him with Oscar and Azieri. Winning Azieri’s trust would definitely get him trusted by everyone else, but doing so could be actually impossible. It depended on why he hated Crows so much. If it was just Lauro coming in and stealing the organization from him, Zevran could work with that. If it was something else- well, there were few good possibilities when it came to Crows.

In the morning, he told Zelda and Antonu that he was going out, avoided Azieri as best he could, and hunted down Oscar. He was in a neighborhood Chantry garden, weeding, his staff leaning against a wall far out of his reach.

“Who needs something?” Oscar asked.

“No one,” Zevran asked. “I wished to speak with you about something, but perhaps first I should ask if this is safe or not.”

“Would I be here if I wasn’t?”

Zevran shrugged and spread his arms a little.

“You are an apostate in a Chantry. It seems unlikely.”

Oscar snorted.

“Chantry in Antiva doesn’t care so much about apostates,” he said. “The Crows strongarmed them
into it ages ago so they’d have an easy source of desperate and disposable magic, and now it’s just how things work here. You’re a Crow—"

“Was a Crow.”

“If you can believe in Andraste and the Maker without holding with the Divine, then you can be a Crow without taking orders from the Grandmaster or Talons,” Oscar told him. “You were trained a Crow, you know the Crows, and that’s not ever something you’ll be able to leave behind. I bet you could tell me right now why the Crows don’t take mages.”

That was an easy one. It was a common story, passed around quietly amongst the compradi, especially in their early years. The Crows taught it as part of the official history, of course, but the nighttime softly-spoken version was slanted a bit differently.

“The last mage Crow was Grandmaster Calien d’Evaliste, a blood mage who fought with the Grey Warden Garahel against the Fourth Blight,” Zevran said. “D’Evaliste was a minor cuchillos House before Calien took a contract that brought him into contact with the Grey Wardens. After the Archdemon was killed, he returned to the Crows and took over. He was Grandmaster for fifty years, the longest run in history, and he died of old age. Four hundred years later d’Evaliste has yet to fall from First Talon, and the Crows only recently dared to break his unofficial ban on any contracts on Grey Wardens. Calien had learned things about taking initiative for himself, you see, with the Wardens; and it scared everyone else so badly that they agreed to never take mage children ever again. It was just as well. Crow training tended to drive mages to demons, so really, everyone was safer for that decision.”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Oscar said. “The Organized Apostates have been going on for so long that nobody even knows exactly how or when we started any more. We know it’s the Crows, but we could never figure out why they didn’t just take mage kids from the Chantry and train them up instead of dealing with us. But I ask you and you yank it right out of your memory as easily as I could set you on fire. Crows don’t tell anyone who’s not a Crow that sort of thing.”

“Well, then by your own admission, I cannot be a Crow!” Zevran said with false cheer “Since you are not a Crow and I just told you.”

“Smartass,” Oscar grumbled, and Zevran flashed a wide smile. “What did you come here for?”

“Why does Azieri hate the Crows?”

Oscar leaned back from his gardening and scowled suspiciously.

“You could ask him yourself.”

“I doubt he would be interested in answering me.”

“Hn,” Oscar said. “I’ll tell you, so you don’t get it wrong from someone else. But if you use it against Azieri I’ll find you and only freeze your insides.”

“I really do mean it when I say I am only interested in killing Crows,” Zevran said sharply.

That admission of emotion had the mage eyeing him for a few moments before he spoke.

“You ever heard of the Friends of Red Jenny?” he asked.

“Vaguely.”
“Well, that was us- me and Azieri and Itzar- when we were younger. The Jennies used to have a big presence in Antiva. Plenty of people here who can’t afford Crows but still revenge on somebody, yeah? And lots of the downtrodden and the abused who need help, people nobody else cares about. That’s what we did. We cared. We thought that would be enough to help, but we got big enough and the cell leaders got bold enough that the Crows took exception. It was a big operation. The hit us all in one night. The three of us were the only ones who got away because we were young and stupid and damned lucky blighters, but we saw everybody else go down. We ran to Jennies in other countries, the Crows chased us, and finally we found a cell who made us stand and fight. We killed those Crows, and that’s how we realized that they could be killed. That we didn’t have to buy into their ‘no one escapes the Crows’ line of bullshit. We came back here and founded Rosso Noche instead of rebuilding the Jennies. Maybe their tactics work in Orlais and the Free Marches and all those places, but Antiva needs something different.”

Perfect. He wanted revenge.

“So he hates the Crows because they killed his friends.”

“No,” Oscar said. “He hates the Crows because they cost him everything else. Zelda was born while we were on the run, and his parents were killed in their own house by the Crows, and the only reason that they didn’t get his wife and son was because she died in childbirth and one of his cousin smuggled Zelda here to Rialto to live with her in-laws. By the time we got back and Azieri figured out where his son had gotten to, Zelda was seven and treated these two old elves none of us had ever even seen before like his parents. Me and Itzar, we didn’t have anybody but each other and Azieri. We never had anything like that to lose.”

Zevran mentally discarded the option of trying to get Azieri to trust him.

“Now I am curious,” he said, hoping that he could push his luck. “How did Lauro Escipo come to be a part of this, given that sort of start?”

Oscar glared at him.

“Not interested in asking nice questions, are you?”

“When a topic is nice, people speak freely of it and I do not have to ask.”

“We had an incident,” Oscar said, and it was clear he was running short on patience. Once this story was done, it would be time for a strategic retreat. “About six years ago now. We knew there was a leak to House Valisti. We exploited it to plant false information. We wanted to start Crow in-fighting so they’d be distracted for a while, but Valisti made some sort of deal and it didn’t happen. We only caught the leak, but it got Lauro Escipo sniffing around. He wasn’t Talon yet, or House Master, but Escipo used to rule Rialto so he knew that us supporting a royal claimant was bullshit. He tracked us down and gave us an offer.’”

Even without knowing the man’s personal opinions on Crows, the sheer vitriol he managed to pack into that one word said a lot.

“He could turn us over to the Crows, or he could turn Rialto over to us in exchange for being cut in. We argued against it but Rosso Noche was bigger than just us by then, and the leaders in Antiva City were on the rise and wanted more protection from the Crows. Ezecil Romão and his people accepted Escipo without telling us. Lauro killed his House Master, let us take the credit for it, and ceded Rialto to the old Eighth Talon- Arainai. They’d just lost their old House Master and Grandmaster and were real interested in securing their position by getting Antiva City and Rialto under their control, so the new House Master snapped up Rialto without questioning why a House that’s been Talon before
would dare give up a trading port to move to some middling river city practically in the Telleri Swamps. There was some sort of plan he had to take the new House Master out, but someone else got there first. The new Master Arainai got herself killed, and four of her staunchest supporters. Lauro didn’t even have to do anything. House Arainai fell the fuck apart, Escipo grabbed their Talon spot and said some claptrap to the Crows about ‘the revenge of Rosso Noche’ when he refused to move his House back to Rialto, and then got to waltz right into our command structure and sideline us because we never wanted anything to do with him.”

Zevran did his best to thank Oscar without sounding suspiciously abrupt and retreated to a rooftop three streets away, where he lay down and scowled at the clear sky for a while.

“I try to do a good thing,” he told the spread of blue above him. “I try to protect myself from the Crows who know me on sight and would kill me for desertion. I kill Eoman and leave the Crows without a Grandmaster who can properly claim the title and Arainai without a House Master, and then I kill the new House Master and her lackeys so that the House is barely functional, and what does it do? Kick me when I am already down!”

The Maker was laughing at him, and possibly Andraste as well. His personal revenge and safety had spoiled the best chance for outside interference against the Crows. All he’d done was give Lauro an opening and leave a mess behind him.

The logical part of him chose to sound like his imaginary Theron.

‘You had no way of knowing.’

“I could have looked a bit harder,” Zevran grumbled to himself, knowing that it was pointless. For Lauro to have pulled off getting into the position where he was now, it would have taken much more digging than Zevran would have been willing to risk to discover what he’d been doing with Rosso Noche.

‘It’s not your fault.’

“It is at least partially my fault, and so I suppose that I must come up with a way to fix it.”

Rosso Noche took advantage of the pageantry and bustle of Satinalia to have a full meeting in Antiva City. The world came to the City for Satinalia, the saying went, so the idea was that Rosso Noche could pass unnoticed, but Azieri complained bitterly about meeting in the Crow’s headquarter city until Oscar got fed up and reminded him that the Grand Cleric was in Antiva City too, so they’d finally get a visit in.

For a few days, Zevran was certain that he’d get left behind in Rialto, but Azieri’s continued distrust of him won out over his suspicions that Zevran would go running right back to the Crows and sell out Rosso Noche once he was in their seat of power, so they all went to Antiva City together. When the time came for the big meeting, Azieri locked him in his room of the short-lease apartment suite Rosso Noche had arranged for them.

A few minutes later, Antonu snuck back up the stairs and unlocked the door.

“Zelda’s distracting him if you want to go out the window at the end of the hall,” he said. “It’s Satinalia. Go have fun. Someone should.”

Zevran slipped past him into the hallway.

“You won’t be?”
Antonu sighed.

“I’ve got these Rosso Noche meetings, and Lauro will be there,” he said. “And after all that’s over, I have to spend more time with him- with my father. We have to go home for the feast night and I’m going to get to hear all about how I should come home more often, how moving in with Zelda is an embarrassment to the family name, how I should be going into business instead of consorting with the plebeians- it’s going to be awful.”

“If sickness will excuse you, there’s a particular recipe that uses mustard and a pit of zinc sulfate—”

“I tried that when I was fifteen,” Antonu interrupted him. “It was a couple months after Lauro had graduated and ‘come home’, and I didn’t like being around him. Once I started throwing up he checked my wine for poison and then told Father what I’d dosed myself with. Now the only reason I’m allowed not to be at the feast night is if I’m actually dying. But thanks for the suggestion.”

“You could get disgracefully drunk,” Zevran suggested, and Antonu actually laughed a little.

“All right, maybe I will,” he said. “Maybe I’ll challenge all the guests to duels over my sisters’ honor and Father will kick me out for disrupting his marriage negotiations for Iveta.”

“A sound plan,” Zevran told him, heading for the window. “And thank you for the door.”

“Have fun!” Antonu wished him again as he slipped out.

He did have fun. He bought a cheap mask from a street vendor and wandered with the crowds. The City was a mess of color and movement during Satinalia, with paper and silk flowers bunching from windows, ribbon banners fluttering and tangling in the sea breezes, the bright imported Orlesian masquerade costumes the merchants and bureaucrats wore and everyone else’s vibrant, embroidered customary Antivan fashions for both the everyday and the holiday week specifically.

Zevran lingered around the dancing platforms out of nostalgia. The duos and trios and singles of Antivan and Rivaini dancers switched on and off between songs from the bands, and somewhere where the bands were large enough or the platforms close enough, the dance wars were between Antivans and the Rivaini, rather than individuals. The two different musics played in that instance complimented each other even as the similarly-cut tight skirts and tight pants and tight shirts of the dancers, with their vibrant colors and intricate embroideries; the fans and fringed shawls and feather-light scarves; the compatible rhythms of Rivaini clapping and the sharp loud clicking of the steel plates riveted to the bottoms of hard-soled and high-heeled Antivan dancing shoes; and the precise and practiced movements of hands, arms, heads, feet, and hips; all of it betraying a once-shared cultural heritage.

The crowd called encouragement and congratulations and the drifts of it tugged Zevran away from the show dancers and through the food and craft stalls. He spotted wine being sold by the bottle and haggled for his favorite, a sweet, strong Drylands Rosado that wasn’t popular for export. To ground his stomach he got soft bread with shaved, slow-cooked meat and roasted vegetables.

Rejoining the crowd swept him down to the large square cleared for public dancing, and here, he hung back. The last time he had danced it had been with Rinna and Taliesin and it had been an experience of awesome beauty, immersed in the music and the feel of having dance partners who knew him so well and whom he trusted completely. There were things that couldn’t be said in the Crows, not with words; but with sex, with dance- he’d gotten away with a hundred little things that said ‘I love you’, so well that he hadn’t even realized that he’d been saying it.

It was a good memory- a very, very good memory- and he basked in the warmth of it while he
hummed along to the music for the dancers and had his wine and dinner.

Zevran woke up the next morning naked in a nest of pillows on the floor of the front room of the apartment. Zelda dropped a blanket over his head when he tried to sit up.

“You came back drunk and half-asleep with an eight-bottle hand crate of Viejez Dulche Alegria Rosado and stole half the pillows in the apartment while stripping,” Zelda informed him. “There were a surprising amount of things that could kill people hidden in your clothes, but it was hard to find that threatening when you were mumbling and sighing about hard it is to live hedonistically anywhere south of the Minanter.”

“Orlais only thinks they know decadent,” Zevran said. “I, ah, don’t suppose that I will be getting any of those surprising amounts of ways to kill people back?”

“You’re lucky my father decided to visit with the Grand Cleric overnight, or else you wouldn’t be. Antonu’s got them in the kitchen.”

“And my clothes?”

Zelda pointed. They were piled at the edge of the pillow nest. Zevran did his best to get dressed without offending the other man’s apparent sensibilities.

“Is it weird that I trust you more now that I know what you’ve been carrying around?”

“Excuse me?”

“You were hiding an armory in those,” Zelda said. “And you’ve been living with us for over a month now, but we had no idea. You haven’t used any of it. You could have killed us all weeks ago. Plus, like I said- you don’t seem very threatening when you’re drunk.”

“It would be nice,” Zevran said. “If for once, someone listened when I said the only people I am interested in killing here are Crows.”

Antonu had his weapons laid out on the table. The mentioned hand crate of wine was there as well, and an extra, open bottle of the Dolche Alegria. It had perhaps a mouthful left at the bottom, and was standing next to two full, small glass cups.

“Drinking so early?” he teased Antonu.

“No,” he said. “You pored them last night when you came in to put the wine down and threatened to throw me off the roof if I touched them, because they were for ‘Rinna and Tali’.”

Shit!

“Important people, huh?” Antonu asked after a moment. His voice was gentle and Zevran realized that he’d given himself away by freezing up.

He took a breath and forced his muscles to loosen so he could continue stowing his knives- quicker, now.

“They’re dead,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” Antonu told him, and Zevran put his last knife away and grabbed the glasses. He’d go find somewhere with true ground, maybe a garden, and pour libations there. That was part of Satinalia, after all- you celebrated life and the year to come, but also what you’d lost and the year
gone by.

“Hey, Mahar.”

He stopped a few steps away from the door.

“Lauro gets quiet and meaner when he’s drunk,” Antonu said. “He sits defensively in a corner and glares and teases people apart if they try to talk to him. You remember I mentioned his first Satinalia back with us after the Crows graduated him? He got so drunk he nearly died from the alcohol, and tried to murder Father. Father still claims that wasn’t what happened, but there’s not a lot else that goes with incoherent rage and coming after someone with a wine bottle you broke one a windowsill. That was when Mother divorced Father and went back to her parents in Orlais. I still remember Lauro a little before Father sent him to the Crows- he wasn’t like that. I know people change, as they grow up; but he wasn’t so angry and he wasn’t so mean.”

“The Crows will do that to you,” Zevran said, keeping his voice flat.

“But they didn’t do it to you,” Antonu said. “You got blackout drunk and poured wine for dead friends and tried to cuddle with us, then hugged pillows instead when we said no. I know alcohol isn’t necessarily the best judge of character, but there’s still a lot to be said for ‘there’s truth at the bottom of every bottle’.”

The last, seventh day of Satinalia in Antiva was mostly a lead-up for the feast night and parties that traditionally began in the mid-afternoon. The Rosso Noche meetings had finished the day before, and everyone who hadn’t gotten an invitation to some event or other had headed home. Azieri was going to the Chantry for the Grand Cleric’s service and had left after breakfast to meet her for lunch. Zelda was still considering an invitation to the party Ezecil Romão was hosting to introduce more people to Rosso Noche’s conspiracies, and Antonu was bugging his lover to distract him from the looming specter of his family dinner.

Zevran was relaxing on the floor in the sun, dozing. He’d been busy the last couple of days and nights, once he’d decided not to let himself get drunk again. Satinalia afforded unparalleled opportunities in Antiva City, and it would have been irresponsible of him not to take advantage.

Lauro barged in somewhere between one and two hours past noon, wound up and three seconds from taking it out on someone.

“Tell Father I can’t come to dinner tonight,” he ordered Antonu. “The Talons have to meet.”

“I thought you were done with your Crow meetings.”

“We were!” Lauro exploded. “That’s why we had the Rosso Noche meetings here and now, so I could come to both and so the Crows would be too busy to notice but two nights ago someone killed Grandmaster Runn and then last night Grandmaster Availa was found dead in plain sight in the Crow Quarter! In the middle of the street! Two nights! Two Grandmasters! It’s Satinalia! Mysterious deaths during Satinalia are gauche and cliché and the sort of thing foreigners write bad adventure novels about us with and worst of all it’s predictable! There would be no better time to do it which is why Crows don’t actually plot against each other during Satinalia! The rest of the year fine! But we need to be able to meet at least once a fucking year without worrying that someone’s going to stab us in the back!”

“Were either of them actually stabbed in the back?” Zelda asked. Lauro ignored him.

“We have to have a meeting to pick a new one and if I’m not there it’ll probably go to Caldera Lanos
and do you really want a Nuncio Grandmaster when the Crows still want Rialto back!"

“Father will miss you terribly,” Antonu told his brother, and Zevran suppressed a smile at his completely unsympathetic tone that Lauro was too angry to register.

“He can go fuck a vulture! He’d just better appreciate the effort I’m putting in for him! One of the other Talons has been fucking with the Crows ever since they killed Arainai, playing some sort of game, and I’m going to find out which one of them it is! Whoever’s been hiding the Abbot’s Collar is going to step forward and start doing the dam job, or I’m just going to kill them and be Grandmaster myself! Two days! Two Grandmasters! And since their Houses have lost their Talon status over this- this fucking embarrassment!- we need two new Talons too!”

He stormed back out, presumably to go to his meeting. Zevran wriggled on the floor to get more into the sun.

“Mahar?” Antonu asked a moment or so later. “What, exactly, was that about?”

“A long time ago,” Zevran said. ‘Before Antiva was properly Antiva- sometime during the upheavals after the Imperium contracted to its current borders- there was an order of Andrastean monks in Treviso. A local warlord began committing atrocities, including killing the monks’ abbot. They prayed for guidance, and finally the abbey’s herbalist gathered together what plants he had, invited the warlord to dinner, and poisoned the him and his entire household and retinue. The other monks appointed him the next abbot, and that is how the Crows got their start. The Abbot’s Collar was the only thing that distinguished the abbot from the other monks, and it was passed down through the change of structure and purpose. They say that it is even older than Andraste, but if it is, whatever purpose it had before is lost. It is a gorget necklace, gold, the size of a hand. It sits here-”

He laid a hand just below his collarbones, in the center of his chest.

“-and, predictably, it has birds on it. Crows or ravens- no one is entirely certain which, the details have been worn away with age- but ‘the Antivan Crows’ simply sounds better. The customary way to become Grandmaster is to kill the current one and take the Collar for yourself. The same goes for Talons, when they have not lost their positions because of embarrassments to their House, though they have rings instead.”

“So some Crow is hiding their- crown, sort of,” Zelda said. “And since no one has turned up with it, there’s a war over the succession?”

“Close enough,” Zevran said. “The need to decide on a Grandmaster from amongst the current ranks of the Talons, and to promote two cuchillos Houses to fill the empty places the Grandmasters’ demises have left, is almost entirely unprecedented in the history of the Crows. Simple negotiations are not their strongest area. Such talks require trust, and Talons are sadly lacking in that attribute. This meeting could stretch through weeks as they all stall to gain time to outmaneuver each other- and there will be a little assassinating once Satinalia is over, I am sure. Attempts, at the very least.”

Zelda sighed.

“Well, I guess I have to go to Romão’s party now,” he said. “Someone needs to tell Rosso Noche that we’ve finally got the windows of opportunity while the Crows in-fight that we’ve been trying to arrange for years. If it causes the Crows this much trouble, I hope they never find this collar.”

Zevran smiled into the sunlight, quite sure that they never would. The Crows were unlikely to go rooting around in the bottom of the chest Theron stored his extra armor in.
Chapter 13

Nathaniel was already prepared when Anders came storming into his office.

"Yes, I heard," he said, not looking up from his paperwork. He was making triplicate copies of everything needed to register Leontius Amell as a new Warden- one copy to keep, one for the arling since it was Amaranthine's income that paid them, and one for Weissaupt, who also wanted extra forms.

"Kirkwall!"

"I heard."

"We told him not to tell anyone!"

Nathaniel lay his pen aside.

"Who told who what?" he asked.

"That blood mage who stole Leandra," Anders said bitterly. "That's where the evidence against the First Enchanter came from. Viktory and I told Alistair not to take it to the Chantry- but he must have, and now-!"

"We can't go running off to the Waking Sea Bannorn to do something about it," Nathaniel told him. "We can't even do something about it. Kirkwall has gone down in flames. It's over and done."

"The mages in the Gallows deserved better. Darktown deserved better. And Lowtown. And those Fereldan refugees you and the Commander were arranging help for."

"They did, but it's not something-"

"I know those people, Nathaniel!" Anders screamed at him, and then subsided suddenly, staring at his clenched hands. He flexed them, open and shut, a few times, like he almost didn't believe it was happening.

"I knew those people," he muttered, to Nathaniel's ears more to himself than anything. "I was their healer."

"It's not your fault," Nathaniel told him. "Anders-"

"I should have been there," he said. "I should have-"

"The Chantry is going to be swarming that city in a week or two," Nathaniel pointed out. "As soon as the Divine can get people moving from Val Royeaux. You never would have escaped their attention. You would have gotten caught, and then been dead or Tranquil. We'd rather have you here, safe at home."

"Yes, safe sitting on top of a Deep Roads entrance and two tons of lyrium, with easy living off the arling now that there are no stragglers of the Blight."

"That's unfair," Nathaniel told him sharply. "We patrol the Roads still, and go on raids against the darkspawn with the Legion to keep them away from Kal'Hirol and Orzammar, and we cycle patrols through the southern farmlands to be certain the Taint is burned out. We've rebuilt Amaranthine and Soldiers' Peak. We help keep the peace in the arling, and the Commander tries to care about too
many people at once. You want to be a healer for the poor and unfortunate, you go set up in Amaranthine or in the town outside, just like you did under Caron, but don't you say we aren't doing enough. We've earned some quiet years, and I'm not dragging Amaranthine into the next big mess with the Commander gone."

"The Commander would already be on his way to Waking Sea," Anders said sourly.

"Then it's just as well he's on his way to Hallarenis'haminathe instead, and I pray to the Maker that the news of Kirkwall doesn't catch up to him on the road," Nathaniel said. "We'll take anyone who comes running here from Kirkwall, Anders. If you want me to assign you to Amaranthine for a week or two to oversee that, I'll do it."

"I'm taking care of Leontius."

"He had his Joining days ago, he's not going to fall over and die now," Nathaniel said. "You could take Leontius. He's new, he could do with a simple assignment that will test what he knows. You can tell him everything he needs to know about the Wardens and evaluate his skills more precisely."

Actually, now that he was thinking about it, having someone in Amaranthine to watch for Kirkwall refugees was a good idea.

"I'll write you a letter for Cap- Ser Alec," he told Anders. "For jurisdiction in the harbor over passengers of ships from Kirkwall. Take Leontius and have a duty rest for a week. Get used to wearing the uniform again, and I'll ask Delilah to see about a clinic in town that isn't a disinfected trash heap."

That should have been the end of it, except for that three days later an Amaranthine guard came cantering into the Vigil with a letter signed by Anders, telling him that as unofficial Acting Arl-Commander he needed to get his ass down to the harbor right now, and bring Velanna. Clan Sabrae was on the docks.

Nathaniel asked Kallian to go tell Velanna to meet him in Amaranthine, and rode back with the guard. Anders, looking particularly pissed, met him at the gates and gave him a quick summary of what had happened as they proceeded quickly to the Crown and Lion, because of course this couldn't be a simple problem.

"I know it would cause a lot of trouble," Bethany Amell told him, sincere and sad-eyed in her too-big shirt and trousers. They had a particularly regulation look about them, with a subtle Chantry sun pattern woven into the hems, slightly yellow-white on off-white. Nathaniel didn't wonder what had happened to the Templar who'd used to own them. "I can go. I've run my whole life."

"You're not going anywhere without me!" her sister insisted hotly. "I am not losing another part of this family, Bethany, not when we just had to run from our home in the wake of disaster again!"

The sisters looked at each other for a moment before Bethany dropped her eyes down to the floor. Something unspoken had passed between them, Nathaniel could tell that much, but he had no idea what.

"At least we're back in Ferelden," their mother said tiredly. "We can have another go at it."

"Another go at what?" Hawke demanded. "Farming potatoes in fields that freeze at the end summer half the time and constantly watching our backs for Templars?"

"I've never farmed before," Merrill said. "Is it like gardening? I like gardens. And you don't have to
worry about the Templars, Marian, we've killed so many already. They won't take us. I won't let them."

Because that was *exactly* what they all needed right now, dead Templars in Amaranthine.

"There's always mercenary work," Anders pointed out, with an odd current of hostility beneath it. Hawke glared back at him.

"You *weren't* there," she said. "You *left*. You don't get to judge my choice of who to save."

"Oh, leave off, both of you," Isabela told them from where she was slumped in her chair. She'd acquired an impressively-feathered sea hat since the last time Nathaniel had seen her- only a couple weeks ago, Maker, how could things change so fast?- and had dropped it over her face to give herself some darkness. He wondered if she had a headache, too. "Kiss and make up, you're better friends than this."

"I won't go back to a Circle," Bethany said, gently insistent. "But I won't be any trouble-"

"Come up to Soldiers' Peak-" Anders started to offer her, and that was not the sort of trouble they needed right now!

"You were already told 'no', Anders!"

"You're not the one who decides who goes where."

"Neither are you," Nathaniel reminded him. "That's the Arl-Commander. And Captain Mac Maric is in charge at the Peak, and I *know* that he already said no to taking in apostates there."


"Shut. Up."

"Funny how I only hear that when I'm not joking about myself."

Hawke almost looked like she wanted to agree, but Nathaniel caught her shoving it down away under the angry frustration she'd had ever since Nathaniel had walked into the private suite.

"Once Warden-Keeper Velanna arrives, Sabrae can be accommodated with her clan until they decide to continue south," Nathaniel said, doing his best not to clench his jaw when he wasn't speaking. It was hard, but if he started doing that the headache would get worse.

This was awful. How did the Commander do it?

Well, he knew how. By being casually permissible and holding contrarian politics and being the *Hero of Ferelden*.

"Oh," Merrill said softly. "Do they have extra aravels? We had to leave ours. And can we get wagons from somewhere, or carts, because we have a lot of crates."

Crates?

"The Dalish make crates?" Anders asked dubiously.

"Oh, no, we don't, they take up a terrible amount of space in aravels," Merrill told him. "But they were what the Gallows had, and ships are very good with crates, and Isabela has a *very* good ship."
"Why," Nathaniel asked, even knowing that he didn't want to know, because this wasn't something he could just let go without question. "Were you in the Gallows?"

"The Chantry steals from the Dalish," Merrill said. "So we went to get our things back."

"And how important were these things?"

She gave him a look.

"To the Chantry, not to your people."

"Well the basement was locked up. And Anders always complained about not being able to find any books. And I know that lyr-"

"Merrill, kitten," Isabela interrupted, sitting up quickly, but there was only one word that could have been.

"How much of the lyrium did you take?" Nathaniel asked.

Merrill's chin lifted.

"All of it," she said.

He looked helplessly at Anders. How much was 'all of it'? 

"Less than what I've been told we've got in our basement," Anders said, catching the unspoken question. "But."

He shrugged.

"Refined lyrium goes for twice its weight in gold on the black market. I don't know how much the Chantry buys it for from Orzammar, but I'm sure it's expensive."

"And we took the contents of the storerooms," Merrill said. "And the Tranquils' stores. And the basement archives. And the library."

They were going to die. The Chantry was going to call an Exalted March on Amaranthine and they were going to die.

"The library?" Anders demanded, eyes lighting up.

"They're ours," Merrill told him. "But you can have copies if you ask."

"But those are Circle books!"

"Taken from the Tevenes," Merrill said sharply. "Who took it from us. This is knowledge my people need, and deserve, with all the Chantry has done to us. This is the least of what they owe for stealing our homes and hunting our people."

"How are you even going to make copies?"

"We can write, Anders."

"I know but you're sending them out into the middle of nowhere in a swamp, they're going to get ruined!"
She crossed her arms and glared at him.

"Just because you don't know how to take care of your books without locking them away in a tower
doesn't mean we don't. Do you ever even try to fix them, or do you just let them crumble away to
dust?"

"Where are all these things now?" Nathaniel asked, cutting across the argument. Hopefully they'd
drop it.

"In Isabela's ship," Merrill said.

All right. All right. He needed to keep this from getting to the Chantry, he needed to keep the Dalish
out of sight and safe, if the Commander came back and found out his clan had been attacked by the
Chantry on Nathaniel's watch, well, he might as well follow Anders's example and fake his own
tragic death before that happened. Maybe he could go to Nevarra.

"Then there's no point in unloading," he said. "Captain, do you know Hafterport?"

"Little town?" Isabela asked. "At the mouth of the river? Lots of smugglers?"

"Yes, I thought you might," Nathaniel refrained from sighing. "I'll write you a letter for the docks.
You can unload there, and we'll meet you with Velanna to move Clan Sabrae and their. Things."

It would be safer than doing it in Amaranthine, and it was closer to the Wood, anyway. Smugglers
wouldn't talk. Or if they did, Isabela could stop them. Right? Was there a hierarchy of water-based
miscreants? Surely pirates outclassed smugglers.

He was cooperating with a pirate to unload stolen Chantry goods to assist apostate Dalish mages.

His father would have killed him. Delilah might actually kill him. If she found out.

She could not find about this.

He had to stay overnight in Amaranthine at the Crown and Lion because it was too late in the day to
go back to the Vigil. His sole comfort, when he lay in bed unable to sleep, was that at least he
wouldn't miss Velanna. It was a straight ride south and west down the Hafter from the Vigil to
Hafterport, and if she'd come all the way to Amaranthine just for Nathaniel to decide to turn them all
back she'd get cranky. And that was on top of whatever she'd have to say to Anders about
pretending to be dead. Maker, he did not want to know what she'd have to say about that. She and
the Commander started from the same standpoint in a lot of things, but Velanna was much less
inclined to be pleasant about her conclusions. Or forgiving.

That thought was enough to resign him to getting out of bed and throwing on something appropriate
for public display. If he wasn't going to sleep, he might as well go down to the tavern room and get
himself sleepy on fire-warmed wine.

He passed everyone else's rooms on the way to the stairs- Anders and Leontius first, with light still
shining around the edges and some muffled conversation. Nathaniel considered telling them to stop it
and sleep, but Anders had been in his own state all day and he wasn't in the mood to get his head
bitten off again. Anyway, odds were that Anders was telling Leontius about his cousins.

Marian and Merril's room was next, dark and quiet. Thank the Maker. No trouble from that quarter.

The room Leandra and Bethany were sharing was dark and quiet also, but not because they were
asleep. Nathaniel spotted them from the top of the stairs, sitting together with heavily-watered wine by the low fire, highlighted in the red glow, talking quietly. Leandra had a hand on her daughter's arm.

Nathaniel straightened his appearance as best he could before making a quiet noise to get their attention.

"Lady Amell," he greeted them. "Lady Bethany."

"Lord Howe," Leandra said, standing quickly. Her daughter did as well, curtsying where she did not- Nathaniel realized he'd been expecting them to hold to Marcher court manners, not Ferelden ones. He wondered where they'd learned. As far as he knew, the Amells hadn't been involved in the nobility in Ferelden.

"Constable Howe, my lady," Nathaniel corrected her, bowing back. "Or Warden Howe, as it pleases you. We Wardens give up our titles when we join."

"And what of the Arl-Commander?" she asked.

"A title given afterwards," he explained. "Formally, he is Warden-Commander first and Arl of Amaranthine second."

"And in practice?"

"Such divisions of duty can never be entirely separated when they must be embodied in one person."

"Will he be coming?" Bethany asked as Nathaniel offered her her chair back. "The Arl? Merrill talks about him sometimes. He sounds like a nice man."

"She's not wrong," he told her. "But he and Captain Mac Maric and a- friend of theirs left for the Dalish city only a few days ago. If the news doesn't catch up to them and they don't turn back, it's nearly a month to Hallarenis'haminathe, and likely more than that back, fighting the winter snows."

"Oh," she said. "So, until then- who is in charge?"

"Of the Wardens?" Nathaniel asked. "I am, in a limited capacity. Of the arling? Delilah is Seneschal now, but we're in a transition period. She has the official power, but the people know me."

It wasn't a really ideal situation, but the Vigil would come to defer to her before him eventually. They just needed time to break the habit and for Delilah to finish winning them over.

"Constable Howe," Leandra said, and she sounded so much like the late Eleanor Cousland at their families' old dinner parties that he was sitting up straight with his hands tucked in his lap before he'd properly thought about it.

"We are in need of some forthright answers," she told him. "Firstly- can we prevail upon Amaranthine for hospitality?"

"And violate every bond of peerage you share with my liege lord?" Nathaniel asked. "My father may have been a traitor and an oath breaker, but I-"

"I intended no slight on your father, Constable," Leandra said. "My apologies. But we have so few ties here now."

"The Commander would have my skin for turning you away just as surely as he would if I didn't
assist his clan," Nathaniel told her. "Your daughter is seriously involved with his sister. I know his standards, and to him, that makes you family. I would not disrespect and dishonor his household thus."

"Even at the cost of sheltering an apostate?"

"Lady Amell," he said. "He took Anders. His own son and the boy's mother are mages. Your kinsman and his friend were runaways from the Circle whom he would have taken without any references. He's defied every tradition and unwritten rule of the Wardens and recruited more than once from the same Circle and actively welcomed apostates. Hallarenis'haminathe exists because he asked for it, and it's a haven of pagan mages and I'm sure elven Circle escapees. Taking your family in, your daughter included, is one of the least worrying things he could do in comparison."

"Merrill never said she had a nephew," Bethany said.

"It's a new development," Nathaniel told them. "Very new. None of us knew until a couple of days after leaving Kirkwall. He's already made his feelings on the matter clear- he's Dalish and the boy's mother is Chasind, and therefore the Chantry has no claim to him."

"But that would be easier if I wasn't here," Bethany said.

"It would be easier if he hadn't chosen some Chasind sorceress to share his bed. It would be easier if he didn't agree with Anders on quite so much. It would be easier if he stopped trying quite so hard to save people."

"Still," she said. "My point stands."

"In the Commander's absence I am supposed to care for his people as though I am him," Nathaniel said. "And he would want to find you a place in Amaranthine."

"It's very admirable of you," Leandra said. "A sense of loyalty and duty so strong is something I've come to value in the young nobility. He must be very lucky to have you. But if it was your decision, Constable Howe- if Amaranthine was your arling. Would you welcome my daughter?"

It wasn't even a hard question.

He wouldn't have. Not Bethany, not Morrigan, not Kieran, not Merrill. All of them would have been told to leave. There were some problems you just didn't need to bring down on yourself.

But that wasn't the sort of thing you told people to their face.

"It doesn't matter," he told Leandra. "My job isn't to have an opinion. My job is to make what the Commander wants to happen happen, and then take care of anything that happens because of it. Which I will do."

It was clear that they didn't trust him far on this. Fine. That was what actually keeping his word was for.

"I can find somewhere here in Amaranthine for you," he continued. "Or we could give you guest rooms at Vigil's Keep, though I would warn you that the Vigil is more of a military posting than a petty court."

"Marian would like that," Bethany said. "And Merrill would want to be with her brother."

"I have never lived at a court, Constable Howe," Leandra told him. "I cannot miss what I have never
had. We will gladly accept the hospitality of Vigil's Keep."

The Maker had made the world and knew all that passed within it. No sin went unpunished and no justice unserved, at His hand at the foot of His throne if not in this life.

And so a sister came on behalf of the Grand Cleric of Amaranthine and Reverend Mother of Our Lady Redeemer to fetch him from breakfast the next morning. Nathaniel had to dash back upstairs and get his uniform on without finishing his food. You did not keep a Grand Cleric waiting. He was facing her in front of the Chantry altar before a quarter hour had passed.

"It is an honor to be summoned, Your Grace."

He got a very slight nod in return; acknowledgement that it was, indeed, an honor to be graced with her attention and presence, and that he should be properly grateful for it.

Nathaniel wondered if they were going to go sit down in her office at any point. Grand Cleric Machara had always received his father in her office, but this was his first time meeting Grand Cleric Candide, who'd been sent by Divine Beatrice upon the rededication of Our Lady Redeemer. So far, all the religious needs of Vigil's Keep had been seen to by Mother Eileen. Nathaniel liked her. These days she split her time between the Vigil's tiny detached chapel and the ramshackle one in the unofficial merchant town still growing outside the gates, but she'd come to the Vigil much early, during Caron's time. Then-Sister Eileen had been one of the few Chantry members who'd come to help in the tent city- and the only one who'd stayed, as months had worn on with no sign of Our Lady Redeemer or Amaranthine being rebuilt and the Wardens' start of teaching the elves about reading and weaponry and ignoring apostates.

Nathaniel was almost regretting ignoring Anders's apostate friends now. He'd given an inch, and now it seemed Anders and the Commander and even Alistair were willing to turn it into a mile.

"I have heard a scurrilous rumor about your Wardens, Constable Howe," Grand Cleric Candide said. In Orlesian- but fair enough, that's where she was from and Nathaniel did know the language. You could hate the Orlesians all you liked, but even Ferelden nobility learned their language. "I am certain it is untrue, but I must have the words from your own mouth to satisfy those of a more susceptible nature."

"And what did Your Grace hear?" Nathaniel asked, dreading the answer. There were so many possibilities and he didn't have any explanation beyond 'because Arl-Commander Mahariel said so'.

"It is being said-"

By who? he wondered.

"-that the Wardens are accepting Maleficar into their ranks."

Oh thank Andraste.

"We would never do such a thing, Your Grace."

"You would never?" she asked. "Then how are you to explain the two mages you sent to this blessed city, unsupervised and without definite orders?"

"Their orders were to-"

"I have been informed about what your orders to them were, Constable Howe," Grand Cleric
Candide said. "They were worryingly broad, especially given who received them."

"Your Grace," Nathaniel said. He could feel the hole cracking open under his feet. He couldn't say anything real enough to be twisted against him but he couldn't just say nothing and be seen as rude, either.

"We are concerned, Constable Howe, by the sudden presence of one mage Anders," she said. "A mage who was declared dead to his Circle a number of years ago, only to reappear suddenly within your ranks. After a trip of your order's to Kirkwall- where, incidentally, there was a mage Anders who could find no better use of his life than harassing and defaming the Chantry and our Templars."

"The only work of his we were aware of was his charity healing for the poor," Nathaniel lied.

"He is a renegade," Grand Cleric Candide said.

"Then isn't it a good thing that the Arl-Commander acceded to Anders's own request to return to the Wardens?"

"There were rumors of possession," the Grand Cleric stressed, and began to pace back and forth across the altar space. Nathaniel stood and clasped his hands behind his back and stared fixedly ahead at the stained glass windows. The focal point was the placing of Andraste's ashes in a safe and remote temple- a common enough story to choose for the massive window traditional behind the altar, but Lord Eddelbrek had meant to flatter the Commander by commissioning this particular scene. Alistair had said that he actually recognized the line of mountains in the background as the ones around Haven.

"We are absolutely certain that the Warden Anders is not possessed, Your Grace."

"And you know so much about this?"

"I think you would be surprised at how many demons and apostates and Abominations we've fought, Your Grace. We know one when we see one; and Captain Alistair Mac McFaric has Templar training."

"But he is no Templar himself," she said. "This is troubling as well. What sort of a man voluntarily leaves the service of the Maker to wallow in the filth of the world?"

"I've always heard that the Wardens were His favored children for the sacrifice we make of our lives," Nathaniel said. "And the sort of man who would rather fight that filth than die of slow poisoning and addled wits from lyrium. Your Grace."

She stopped at that, dead still for a moment, faltering in her turn to cross back in front of the altar. Nathaniel could see it happen out of the corner of his eye.

"Our Templars have a holy and necessary purpose."

"If their purpose is to protect people from Abominations and demons, Your Grace, then Captain Mac McFaric is most assuredly still fulfilling his earlier role, and Your Grace would not be remiss in considering the Wardens of Ferelden as officially assisting the Chantry in this endeavor."

"You overstep your bounds!"

"We kill demons and Abominations where we find them, Your Grace," Nathaniel said. The window of Havard being shown the location he was to build the Temple on had some very nice blues in it. Had Delilah been here yet? He didn't think she had. He should bring her. Satinalia was next week, after all. He'd be coming back for that. "I can't recall ever seeing Templars handling the issue, which
is why we have, and why we will continue to."

Grand Cleric Candide stopped in front of the altar, directly in Nathaniel's line-of-sight.

"It is an admirable service you perform, Constable Howe," she said. "And we thank you for your assistance. We have clearly been negligent in our duties. Allow us to rectify them."

Oh shi-

"Ser Darmond Sayer was recently transferred out of Nevarra's Circle by the Grand Cleric there," she continued, beckoning a Templar Nathaniel had completely ignored upon walking in forward. Templars were like part of the furniture in Chantries important enough to have their Reverend Mothers also be Grand Clerics, and this one in particular was of completely average Fereldan stock, no one to look twice at.

"I'm certain the Circles at Kinloch Hold or-

Grand Cleric Candide smiled thinly at him and Nathaniel tried not to panic. Of course this would happen while the Commander was away. Of course the Orlesian Grand Cleric wouldn't want to kick up a fuss while the Hero of Ferelden was in residence. Of course this would be sprung on him while there were a lot of mages who needed to be very far away from Chantry notice waiting for him to come back.

"The Templars in Jainen are half under siege after the outburst on behalf of Bann Elfstanna's lover," she interrupted him. "Commander Greagor recently entered his honorable retirement, well-deserved after the events of the Blight, and a new Knight-Commander is being appointed. In the interim, First Enchanter Irving happily recommended, when he heard of the miraculous reappearance of the mage Anders, and upon the disappearance of two fantastically talented junior mages of his acquaintance from Kinloch Hold, that the Wardens be provided with Templar assistance. Given where the mages Surana and Amell have turned up, Ser Sayer's sudden arrival was a happy convenience."

"They wanted to join the Wardens, and we haven't recruited from the Circles in a couple of years now. They-

"Could have asked, Constable Howe," Grand Cleric Candide interrupted again, a little smile on her face. "They could have asked. As you said, the Wardens do the Maker's work by eradicating the darkspawn. It is the least we can do to assist in that, and there is no reason why Ser Sayer cannot continue his sacred duties by providing his assistance in protecting your mages, as well. He may not be a hero of the Blight as Lord Mac Maric is, but I am confident that a full Templar can do at least as much as what you have said your Captain has in this regard."

At least it was only one Templar, he tried to reassure himself.

"And I am certain that you will find the rest of his squad to be, if not as experienced as him, as strong in their faith. After all, new recruits must begin somewhere. It will be a gift for them, staying so close to home rather than starting immediately in the Circles or at a tiny village Chantry somewhere in the south."

If he repented of everything he'd ever done, right now, would the Maker allow some emergency that meant these Templars had to go take care of something very important very far away immediately.

"We only encounter demons in the field," Nathaniel said quickly, trying to think on his feet. "And we only go into the field these days to take care of darkspawn or potentially-related problems. The risk of them catching the Blight."
"Did not the common soldiers of this arling defend the Vigil against the remnants of the horde?" Grand Cleric Candide asked.

"Experienced soldiery," Nathaniel countered desperately. "Veterans of the Battle of Denerim-

"Surely not all of them," she said dismissively. "And some few of them became Wardens, I know."

They had later, after Caron- after the Commander had returned. No one had joined directly after the battle for the Vigil. There had been some arling soldiers who'd contracted the Taint but lived long enough to see the end of the fighting; but the Commander had ordered mercy kills, for them.

Nathaniel had argued- and Anders, and Sigrun. They already had the Taint in them, why not put them through the Joining? There had been every reason to.

The Commander had told them that a choice when already Tainted was no choice at all, and went off to kill the soldiers himself, before they turned. Oghren had stopped them from running after him to continue the argument, and told them the story of how the Commander had come to the Wardens.

Nathaniel still didn't agree, but the Commander wasn't entirely wrong. It wasn't much of a choice to be killed for contracting the Taint or become a Warden, and he wouldn't want to be in the position of having led non-Wardens into a situation where they did- but his decision would never be the Commander's. He'd offer the Joining. Twenty, twenty-five, thirty years more of natural life could be a long time.

But how was he supposed to explain that to the Grand Cleric, when no one but Wardens and a select few others were supposed to know?

"Go collect your recruits, Ser Sayer," she ordered her Templar, a bit of satisfaction shining through in her tone. She thought she'd won. Well, she hadn't-

Every bit of amicability dropped away from her demeanor as soon as Ser Sayer had exited the sanctuary.

"Doubtless you will attempt to truly argue with me now, Constable Howe," Grand Cleric Candide said, not allowing him an opening to try anything. "Allow me to tell you this before you say something rash: the mage Anders is a renegade and a threat. You will allow Ser Sayer and his mentees access to the Vigil and the Warden's mages. At least one will accompany any expedition of Wardens with a mage included. Ser Sayer and his mentees will also retain all the rights and powers granted to them by the Divine-"

"The Divine?" Nathaniel asked, seizing upon the one glimmer of hope he could find.

"The Templars' charter under the Nevarran Accord derives from an ancient agreement between the Divine and the old Inquisition, that became the Templar Order and the Seekers of Truth," the Grand Cleric said, lips pursing slightly. She was annoyed at being interrupted. "And Divine Beatrice herself agreed to this."


"Did she really?" he asked weakly, remembering halfway through that: "Wait- Divine Beatrice is dea-"

"Your Commander will agree to this too, when he returns," Grand Cleric Candide said. "Or I will call for Templars from Jainen and Kinloch Hold, and every mage in Vigil's Keep and of the Wardens who was not properly arranged for from the Circles will be taken into the custody of the
Chantry _where they belong_- Dalish or no, Chasind or no, lifelong apostate and Circle runaway alike. The recalcitrant will be Tranquilized, for we show those who would stand against us mercy."

For a moment, Nathaniel was back at the Vigil in the frozen early spring, staring at a dead apostate left in the Vigil's road as the Templars rode away.

_That could have been Anders_, he'd thought then, and now, it wouldn't be. It would be a hollowing out, a waking, walking dreamless death; not fast and not something able to be grieved.

It _would_ be Anders. They'd brand him first. Then it would be Velanna. Then most of the mages up at the Peak and the lyricists in Kal'Hirol. And Bethany, and Merrill, and Morrigan and Kieran- and the Commander would be dead too, long before that, for trying to drive off the Templars, or for buying time to get his family to run.

The Wardens wouldn't be able to live with that. They wouldn't survive that. Alistair would go down with the Commander, and so would Oghren, and Nathaniel-

If it came down to the Chantry, or the Commander and Anders and the Wardens, he would ask his forgiveness of the Maker and His Bride when he saw them. Faith and obedience were virtues, but so was loyalty.

But he didn't want it to get that far. He _couldn't_ let it get that far.

But taking Templars in voluntarily wouldn't solve anything, either. All they'd need was one misplaced comment about Merrill or Anders, or to find out that Neria was pregnant, or even just the Commander being Dalish, for there to be an incident.

Templars would be like the apostates, he thought gloomily. Let one in, and more would follow, and you'd never get rid of them.

And Anders- Anders had just come back from Kirkwall, just gotten away from living in fear of Templars-

He needed to go find Anders and warn him about what the Grand Cleric had said- he needed to call in _all of_ the Warden mages and warn them about what the Grand Cleric had said, and he needed support, why not call in _all of_ the Wardens and make it a general announcement, it would be a good idea to move all the mages around anyway, to get them safe, but did that mean keeping them all close to home or putting them all at the fortress at Soldier's Peak, and what about healers, they needed to be on hand-

"Constable Howe."

"No, Your Grace," he told her- in Trade, not Orlesian. "If you have Templars who truly wish to leave your order and join the Wardens, we will take them. But not like this."

He turned sharply and trotted away before she could respond to that. He needed to get to Anders. And the others. And they needed to leave. Immediately.

Ser Sayer and his recruits caught up to him just outside the Crown and Lion.

"Warden-Constable-"

"No," Nathaniel said. "No, no, no. I've already told the Grand Cleric no. You're not coming with us. Goodbye."
He opened the inn's door just enough to slip through and tried to close it, but Ser Sayer caught it. They struggled together with the door, catching the attention of the inn's patrons, getting breakfast— not just Anders and the others, but merchants, captains in port for a spell, pilgrims, and a handful of locals come to get bread for the day or for on the way to work. No few of them were looking nervously at the Wardens' table, where Anders was rising from his seat, staff held loose and ready, and Marian's hand was edging towards her greatsword.

Nathaniel lost the contest with the door and backed up, keeping himself between the approaching Ser Sayer and the table.

"I already told the Grand Cleric: the Wardens will not accept a Templar watch on our mages. Go back to the Chantry."

His words were for the benefit of the people behind him at the table as much as for Ser Sayer's information. He hadn't had any opportunity to deliver a warning, so hopefully everyone would calm down and let him handle it.

"Why not?" Ser Sayer asked. "You have a number of mages. They need supervision."

"They are adequately supervised—"

"All seven?" he asked. "By who? I know you can't answer that. I had my briefing— you let the Dalish one gallivant around in the woods. Do you even know what she's doing?"

"Guarding the Wending Wood and the mines there," Nathaniel told him sharply, trying to muster his best brattish noble entitlement from the days before the Blight. It had been so long. "As arranged with the Arl-Commander and to the benefit of both arling and Chantry. Her and her clan's guard on the Wood keeps away bandits and roving criminals, keeping the road safe for merchants and pilgrims both."

Had the 'stop questioning my authority' come through clear enough? He couldn't tell. He was too worried.

"The others—"

"We will not make Amaranthine into another Kirkwall!"

Oh Maker Anders why.

The Templar actually looked a bit taken aback by being spoken to so directly by a mage.

"And you are?"

Perhaps the Maker really did smile upon Grey Wardens more than any others, or perhaps Andraste approved of his devotion to his duty, because in a split second Nathaniel looked at Anders and saw him, standing there, proud and commanding and strong and ready to fight, all in Warden silver and blue, and the thought was just there, fully formed and perfect.

"This is Warden-Captain Anders," he told Ser Sayer, as Anders stood frozen in blank shock at the spontaneous field promotion. "As our senior and most experienced mage in the Grey Wardens of Ferelden, he commands all of our other Warden mages."

The Templar's brow furrowed in confusion, and his tone was slightly suspicious as he started to protest with: "Warden-Captain Alistair—"
"Lord-Captain Mac Maric of Ferelden," Nathaniel interrupted smoothly, on firm ground with court etiquette and the trappings of royalty. "Is tasked with the day-to-day command of Soldier's Peak. Many of our mages may be stationed there as well, but their direct commander is Captain Anders, who better understands their needs."

"Captain Mac Maric was a Templar!"

"He never quite made it to his ordination," Anders told Ser Sayer. "And Templars aren't mages, no matter how much lyrium you ingest."

Now it was Ser Sayer's turn to stand in shock- and there was a quiet murmuring around the inn. It wasn't meant to be common knowledge that Templars were given lyrium. Everyone knew the Chantry bought it, but general wisdom held that of course they did, they kept mages, and mages needed it for- well, something important, right? Nathaniel distinctly remembered when he'd been told, quite authoritatively, by one of his tutors that the reason it was a kindness for the Chantry to take mage children was because they would all sicken and die without a supply of lyrium.

"We know what happened at Kirkwall," Anders continued. "And we won't let that happen here. That was Templars. Templars with Tainted lyrium."

"You can't-"

"You're really going to stand here and tell Wardens about the Taint?" Anders asked. "That red lyrium in all the stories and rumors I've heard on the docks is infected with the darkspawn Taint, and if you're exposed to it- well, look at what happened to Kirkwall."

"This is a matter of public safety and our own oaths," Nathaniel said, catching on to where Anders was going with this- he took his earlier thought back. This was exactly what they needed, he was so glad Anders had spoken up, this could have gone so badly otherwise. "We aren't going to take Templars and expose them to the Taint. Watching mages isn't worth losing your sanity over, Ser Sayer. Go back to the Chantry, and find your recruits something safer for their first assignment."

Ser Sayer left, looking profoundly disturbed, and Nathaniel resisted the urge to heave a sigh of relief and collapse in a chair.

"What the fuck was that, Nate?" Anders asked ten minutes later, up in their rented rooms. Isabela had gone off to the harbor to get moving to Hafterport, and Marian and Bethany sent to hire a cart to carry Merrill and the Amells' things. Leontius was seeing to their horses, and Merrill and Leandra were packing up in their own rooms. Wardens traveled light, so Anders and Nathaniel were just waiting for everything to pull together.

"The Grand Cleric tried to blackmail us into taking a Templar contingent for the mages."

"Blackmail the Wardens?" Anders scoffed. "In Ferelden? There's no way-"

"She was going to have you Tranquilized."

Anders jerked back, startled.

He hadn’t meant to say that. He really hadn’t. Anders didn’t need to know that- he didn’t need to worry about that, not after everything he’d lived through. He didn’t need to hear that, not from him, not when he’d fled to Kirkwall because he hadn’t been listened to about Templars last time.

"She said if we didn't take these Templars she'd call for a whole force!" Nathaniel told him- and
really did have to sit down this time. He did, on the bed, and put his head in his hands as everything started catching up to him. He’d really- Maker and Andraste, he really had defied the Grand Cleric, he was going to-

"And they'd come for every mage we didn't arrange to recruit from the Circles- they'd take everyone but Eadric and Viktory, and Viktory would get herself killed fighting it and so would the Commander and Alistair and Oghren and we all would, Anders, we'd fight them and it would ruin us and it would ruin the arling and all we'd get at the end is you and all the others Tranquilized because the Grand Cleric specifically said she wouldn't kill you- she wants you and the others to suffer and you just came back, I thought you were dead, I can't-"


Nathaniel tried, and it didn’t work, because-

"I thought you were dead. I thought you were dead and I thought it was Caron's fault so I killed him but you're alive-"

"What."

"I killed my commanding officer for you and I'll kill any Templars who come for you and I would kill the Grand Cleric oh Maker what sort of a person am I-"

"Melodramatic and prone to painful emotional intensity," Anders supplied, sitting down next to him on the bed and gently pushing him forward until Nathaniel was bent double over his knees. That helped him breath better, who knew why. "But really, Nate- you killed Caron, what the fuck?"

"Here," Nathaniel said, staring at the wool rug on the floor. "In Amaranthine. Where they attacked you. He turned up and he wasn't paying attention to me and we were alone and I had a knife and I just- Oghren helped me dump his corpse in the harbor. It's probably still there. I put him down in the books as officially missing, presumed dead, probably bandits."

"Well, if you listen to farmers, you weren't wrong," Anders said.

"What-"

"'A-taexin' the sheips, a-taexin' the whet, a-taexin' the whud!!'," Anders said, putting on an accent in imitation of someone. "This es heighway rebb'ry, this es, pur' raever paercy!"

"You sound sort of like someone from Riverreach," Nathaniel said, recognizing the pattern of changes where Alamarri was becoming Trade as he traced the patterns woven in to the rug with his eyes. "When were you in Riverreach for long enough to pick that up?"

"Never," Anders said. "My parents stopped in Riverreach when they moved from the Anderfels, and that's where they really learned their Trade, but they'd saved up enough to lease the farm outside Langcaid and moved in by the time I was born. They did a lot of complaining about your father up there when I was younger. I remember Serah Lellys would open the back door of the butchery and everyone would go for beer after Chantry and curse 'the caehedded Aerl Rendon atoup his howe'. It took the Enchanters years to knock that sort of thing out of my Trade. 'You sound like an Alamarri barbarian, you Anders brat! At least speak your own language if you're going to be contrary!' 'Ae im asprechin' mae ain kaen-'

Andraste, that was terrible. I hope I didn't sound like that, I sound like a Kirkwaller making fun of some farmer refugee, nobody actually sounds like that."

"They called my father 'cowheaded'," Nathaniel said, stuck on that for some reason, and sat back up. Anders kept his hand on his back. It was comforting, steadying, even though he couldn’t feel it
through the armor. "What does that even mean?"

"That everybody in town and in the fields was too smart for his shit," Anders told him. "Only people from Redcliffe are plodding enough to understand cows."

"People in Redcliffe fish."

"Well people in the Hinterlands have cows."

"No they don't, they have druffalo. The Bannorn has cows."

"Same difference," Anders said. "Big animal with horns and you eat it once you can't make good cheese from it any longer."

"You don't eat druffalo cheese," Nathaniel said, just so that the point was made, and then dropped it in favor of: "Langcaid is only a couple of miles from Vigil's Keep."

"Yeah," Anders agreed.

"Is that why you were around the Vigil to get caught?" Nathaniel asked. "I know what you said about the Templars, but if they'd caught you in Amaranthine, bringing you to the Vigil would actually be a waste of their time. They could have stayed at the Crossroads and joined up with any of the Templars on the Pilgrims' Path for more support."

Anders didn't say anything for a minute.

"I was trying to go to Langcaid," he eventually admitted. "I haven't seen it since I was almost too young to really remember it. It was- when the Templars found me and took me to the Circle. It was droving season. Everyone in Langcaid and Karselaw and Maydown and all up there had driven their goats down to Arlstoll for the festival fair. My parents had given me to my older brother to watch, but my sister kept trying to pull him aside to tell him that I had magic. She'd seen me accidentally catch some of the karse on fire when we'd gone looking for some stray goats a couple of days before the drive, but she hadn't told anyone yet. I snuck off when she finally got him away. I thought magic was fun. I wanted to go to Elruid and see if I could find the nixies. I thought they'd talk to me and teach me and then I wouldn't have to go away to the Circles- I'd planned for it, I'd taken my father's oldest cloak and this embroidered pillow my mother had just finished because I thought I might have to camp out on the shore of the pond. The Templars found me trying different things at the water's edge to attract nixies, and they took me right off. I don't think my family knows what happened to me. I was going to go tell them before I continued on, but then the Templars caught up, and then there were darkspawn all over the arling, and- I didn't really want to know."

"I could find out," Nathaniel offered.

"You don't need to do that," Anders told him, which wasn't exactly a 'no'.

"You know, I'd always thought that you were actually from the Anderfels."

"Everyone does," Anders complained. "I'm not! I'm Ferelden! I'm from Amaranthine, the only reason I know any Ander is because you had to know at least one language besides Alamarri, or whatever your local equivalent was, and Trade, and Ander was the only one I cared about enough to pay attention to!"

He patted Nathaniel between the shoulder blades.

"Feeling better?" he asked, changing the subject abruptly. He didn't like talking his family, maybe?
Had he only told the story to make him calm down?

"Yes," Nathaniel said, but then: "No. No I'm not, the Grand Cleric is going to call for Templars on us oh Maker."

"Then we'll face them when they turn up," Anders said. "Worst comes to worst, we lure them out somewhere and make them chase us into the Deep Roads. Let them and the darkspawn kill each other while we watch."

"Anders."

"What, you have a better idea?"

It was a much longer journey on the way back from Amaranthine than the way there, because the cart slowed them down. But they made it, in the end, after a long day where they'd even had lunch on the road, despite riding in the dark. They'd passed Astkill on the Vigil's road as the sun was getting low, and it was actively setting by the time they stopped in Arlstoll, across the Hafter from the Vigil, to water the horses. Nathaniel looked around, trying to imagine a young Anders in these streets, and couldn't do it. There was just something about him that defied having a childhood, having any history beyond the Wardens and Kinloch Hold and Kirkwall.

It was only three miles, more or less, from Arlstoll to Vigil's Keep, and the torches on the walls and the candles in the windows of the merchant town were lit and burning by the time they arrived. Nathaniel went immediately to get Delilah, but it still took a full hour to get the Amells and Merrill settled. Only once that was done did Nathaniel feel able to lock himself in his office.

He had a lot of letters to write. He did the official ones first- one to the enclave of apostates studying lyrium in Kal'Hirol warning them about the Grand Cleric, and two for the Wardens stationed at the dwarven city and at Soldier's Peak to report to Amaranthine immediately, omitting detail. Then a slightly longer, more personal one to Bann Alfstanna to ask about how Waking Sea was handling their Templar problem. He kept specifics about the situation in Amaranthine vague, just in case.

And then he had to give himself a couple of minutes, because if he tried writing the Commander after penning a handful of warnings, all he'd be able to manage would be a hysterical declaration about how something bad always happened when he left and he had to come back right now and also the Dalish! His sister! Templars!

He did manage to get it written, though, with as much detail about what Grand Cleric Candide had said as he could. He'd send it-

But who would he send it with? Clan Sabrae needed to go south, he would have given it to them, but who knew how fast a whole clan could travel and they'd be taking everything they'd looted from Kirkwall with them, and if some Templars noticed the lyrium or there were bandits or- they'd need an escort, he had to provide an escort, the reasonable thing to do would be to send Wardens and usually he would have sent mages but if he sent mages would that attract even more attention and they really couldn't afford attention directed anywhere near the Dalish and what if the Grand Cleric was also sitting at her desk right now writing letters to call for Templars and they came and if he sent Wardens with Sabrae those were Wardens who wouldn't be here to fight those Templars-

He'd written the letter, and he just had to leave that be. There was nothing else to be done. Not tonight. He was too wound up to sleep just yet, but he couldn't work on or worry about this particular subject any longer.
So Nathaniel went looking through the arling's records. They were in the process of being transferred out of his office and to the room Delilah had claimed for hers, and it turned out that Langcaid's books had already made the trip. He went through the dark, quiet halls of the Vigil without a light and let himself into his sister's office.

Anders had said his parents had leased their farm. As close as Langcaid was to the Vigil, that meant the only possible person they could have been leasing from was Nathaniel's own father.

It took some looking. He didn't know exactly when Anders's family had moved, and the only solid indication he'd be able to find from a simple lease and tax and rent payment record would be an Anders name, given or familial...

He finally found it in the midst of a list of harvest appraisals from 9:19- far too late for the original lease, so he hadn't really been looking, but whoever had taken the record had made a mistake with the name and crossed it out, rewriting it just to the side and throwing the unity of the columns off.


Nathaniel had no idea if one of those sons was Anders, but he got the latest book for Langcaid and looked back through the entries for 'Eistander'. He found it again in the harvest records for the year previous.


They'd prospered enough to buy the farm outright, and improve it besides. That was a strangely comforting thought, relaxing- because it meant that somewhere, someone's life had gone well, Nathaniel decided. It was a good enough thought to make him close the books, lock up the office, and try going to sleep.

It took three days for a dispatch rider with an urgent message to get from Vigil's Keep to Kal'Hirol, and about five and half days to Soldier's Peak. The Wardens were too large a force to all ride, and a number of them couldn't, besides, so that doubled the travel times back.

Velanna arrived long before that, of course, and she, Anders, and Nathaniel had a hasty meeting as soon as she did. It reminded Nathaniel unpleasantly of their days under Caron, except for the way that Velanna swung her staff around and rammed the head of it into Anders’ stomach upon seeing him again, sending him sprawling down onto the stone flags. When he tried to get back up, she stuck the butt of it on her breastbone and leaned just enough to keep him still while she tore him apart for not coming back.

When Nathaniel finally got them all down to business, they ran right into their first problem.

No, Clan Velanna had no aravels or halla for Clan Sabrae to borrow.

Clan Velanna didn't have any themselves.

"The darkspawn burned the aravels and killed or drove away the halla when they killed Clan Tarasyl," Velanna said. "We've been making do. There were some things we could scavenge, and a few of our clan know enough about structure building that we have weatherproof huts. We can't move easily any more than Sabrae can."
"The Templars-

"Did I say we weren't going to move?" Velanna interrupted Nathaniel. "We just need transportation. Besides, it's past time we moved to Hallarenis'haminathe."

After a long talk, they decided that the best thing to do would be to have Isabela take the Dalish's new possessions and a small group to Gwaren, unload, get everything into the Brecilian Forest as quickly as possible, and then have Isabela come back for the rest of Clans Sabrae and Velanna. The important thing was to get everyone away from the Chantry- actually getting them to Hallarenis'haminathe came second.

"I will have to speak to Keeper Marethari," Velanna said just before the meeting broke. "But I think it would be best for her and I and a few others to be the guard. She knows the Brecilian, and I can go ahead to Hallarenis'haminathe and tell the Commander about what the Grand Cleric said."

"I wrote a letter already," Nathaniel said. "But if you'd take it, it would get there a lot faster. And you should take a guard."

"I will be fine."

"There's a lot of traffic in the Brecilian Passage, and if you go through the Forest, that's full of- stuff. You've heard the Commander's stories. It would make me feel better. Take Kallian-"

He paused, a thought coming to him.

"Fenris said he needed a job," he recalled. "If I pay him, he would probably agree to go as well. That's two elven warriors with experience against magic. Please, Velanna."

She grudgingly agreed. Nathaniel gave her his letter to the Commander and sent a servant to Delilah to give Kallian her orders and offer the job to Fenris. The three of them left for Hafterport before lunch, and then, it was just waiting.

Nathaniel was bad at waiting. At least while he was anxious. There were the usual things to do around the Vigil but he felt watched, constantly, and heightened the Vigil's wall guard- and his anxiety spread. He wanted to keep things quiet, so he didn't tell Captain Maverlies what he was ordering the wall guard heightened for, so she couldn't tell her soldiers, so they started speculating, and so the entire seven days of Satinalia were full of wild rumor and gossip- only heightened by the fact that Delilah cancelled their trip to Amaranthine for the Chantry service when he told her what the Grand Cleric had threatened. The two of them attend the outdoor bonfire service Mother Eileen held in the Vigil's main courtyard for the soldiery and the population of the merchant town outside the gates, Nathaniel in his dress armor and Delilah in her best cloak and furs.

Oghren, Sigrun, and the other Wardens from Kal'Hirol arrived the day after Satinalia was over, and Oghren made his displeasure with the way Nathaniel had handled the situation very clear.

"Jumpy soldiers don't make attentive soldiers!" Oghren lectured him, stomping snow off his boots in the great hall. "They don't even know what they're meant to be guardin' against!"

"If everyone knows the Grand Cleric had the sanction of the Divine-"

Oghren grabbed him by the elbow and actually dragged him out of the great hall doors and to the main stair.

"Do I look like I give a nug's Blighted ass about the Divine, boy?" he demanded, shoving him forward. "Get up there and tell Maverlies and the militia they ain't on the lookout for a darkspawn
Oh. Of course. Worried Wardens meant darkspawn, especially in Ferelden and especially at the Vigil, both full of veterans of the Fifth Blight.

Nathaniel owed everyone a little more bonus than they were already getting, as an apology.

Still, even with the news officially spread, the rumors didn't stop. The Commander was gone, and so was Captain Mac Maric, and the strange Chasind sorceress they'd fought the Blight with had only been around a day or so before leaving with them. Oh sure, they said the Commander was off to the Dalish city, but that had been the news once before, hadn't it been? And you remember where they found him then, don't you, out in the Deep Roads all by himself fighting off a third army of darkspawn-

And the Arl's man, the charming Antivan one, he was gone, too. Off on some secret business in the dead of night, right after Kirkwall, and look what happened there! And Captain Kondrat came with all the Wardens in Kal'Hirol, and Anders is back, and I saw Keeper Velanna, really, I swear, she was here for just an hour or so!

The Wardens are moving. The guard on the Vigil is heightened. They say it isn't darkspawn, but the Wardens, our Blight Wardens, our Senior Wardens- they're not saying something.

It has to be darkspawn.

Nathaniel just about tore his hair out trying to counter the rumors without saying anything about the Grand Cleric, to no avail. Delilah actually came to check on him, in his office, with freshly-brewed tea, the day the Wardens from Soldiers' Peak arrived. The Vigil had just about exploded in a mess of emotions and tension, and Nathaniel had felt a lot like letting himself succumb to it.

The next day, he called the entire order into the great hall, shut and locked the doors, and told them what the Grand Cleric had threatened.

Forty-three Wardens could make a lot of noise.

They could make enough noise, ranging from Lockhard's outraged yelling about treaties dating from the very beginning of the Chantry and the Circles themselves about the freedom of Wardens to recruit, to Eadric's terrified wailing about impending Templars, to Oghren roaring over everyone to shut up and sit their asses down, we ain't submitting to a bunch of human Shapers with fancy robes for Captain Maverlies to use the kennel roof to break into the great hall through the great long wide window along the back wall, up near the ceiling, installed in the repairs to the Vigil from some of Dworkin Gavronak's lyrium explosives back during the first darkspawn attack on the fortress.

"Sorry, Ser," she apologized as Sigrun and Nathaniel chipped her out of the ice Neria and Viktory had hit her with in a moment of stark panic. Neria had already retreated, mortified; and Anders had taken Viktory off to the side and talked her through whatever panicky semi-hallucination she was having about the Kirkwall Templars. "It sounded like you might be in trouble."

"We locked the doors behind us, Maverlies, what sort of trouble could we be in?" Sigrun asked, and Nathaniel noted the way she bit back her first answer, replacing it with: "Strange things happen around Wardens."

"I think you mean strange things happen around the Commander," Sigrun said as Nathaniel lifted Maverlies out of the ice enough for her to step out of the casts it had made of her legs. "When he's not around, we're fine. Usually."
Nathaniel could feel Oghren glowering pointedly at his back.

"We need to have a talk, Captain Maverlies, about-"

He groped for words.

"-the recent situation?" he settled for. "I apologize for my reticence but- just come to my office with me and Lady Stockard and we'll talk about it. Please."

Nathaniel hoped the news wouldn't go over badly. He hoped that nothing major would happen before the Commander got back.

He hoped that Velanna, Kallian, and Fenris found the Commander right away, and that he came back soon.
Chapter 14

Nehna and Salladin slipped into the mass of people returning north with the Vicomtess Mont-de-glace rather than try to make the journey north to Lydes by themselves. Nehna thought that they could have done it, but there was a bit of coin to be had traveling with the train of Orlesians proper, and a sort of protection on the road.

The problem was the company. On the shores of the Sundered Sea there had been few comments, but in this miles-long, spread-out train of Heartland-cities-bred Orlesians heading north for ‘civilization’, the only way to avoid slurs and disdain and dismissal was to avoid the humans. Nehna stuck as much as she could to the servant city elves’ areas, staying out of sight, but she could only stand it until they’d passed by the Gamordan Peaks and were partway to Val Fermin. Some prissy lady-in-waiting of the Vicomtess’s came flouncing down to berate the servants and slapped Salladin for not addressing her by her name or title, neither of which her daughter had any reason to know. Nehna swooped in, scooped up her crying daughter, and kicked the lady-in-waiting into a patch of mud. The shem woman shrieked delightfully and Nehna paused a moment to spit on her before going to gather their things.

They split off an hour later, headed east towards the Dales. It would have been faster to cut north at a different angle than the caravan and take the Imperial Highway, but Nehna was in no mood for more Orlesians. They would go northeast cross-country and come into Lydes from the south. Despite the temptation and her own quiet longing, she kept them on the borderlands of the Dales rather than detouring into the heartlands, where a few dedicated clans and loners fiercely guarded what could still be protected of their homeland. If she went looking, Nehna knew she wouldn’t want to leave for Lydes again; and ‘exile’ was a heavy name to be labeled with. She didn’t know if the clans in the Dales had had any contact with Talanulea, or if Talanulea would have even bothered mentioning her- but even if they hadn’t, being with a clan would mean lying about her past again.

Nehna wanted to be done with that. She didn’t want to talk about it, but she didn’t want to have to pretend that the last twelve years hadn’t happened, or that they’d been particularly kind to her.

Well, she amended, looking across the fire to where Salladin slept. The last four years had been all right.

They arrived in Lydes on the last day of Firstfall and had to sneak into the city, because Nehna would not give up her bow or her knives and the city guard wouldn’t let her through with them. Careful social maneuvering of others lurking about the base of the city walls found them a smuggler’s entrance, the information paid for with Nehna’s help in moving through boxes of lyrium potions.

She and Salladin were in the alienage before dawn. It was awful. Nehna absolutely refused to stay here. She was going to find out where Tanis lived and stay there.

Two days of asking and wandering about the city, Salladin and visible weapons safe in the care of an alienage woman, got her the information she needed. After nightfall she took Salladin and their things and went over the alienage wall, slipping through the city until she came to one of the nicer areas, filled with rows of townhouses affordable by the local servants of the most wealthy. Nehna brought them around the back of one, dropped over the garden wall, and knocked on the kitchen door. The curtain over the back window twitched just a bit, and then Tanis yanked the door open.

“In in in!” she urged, and shut it quickly behind them. “Nehna!”
“I know, it’s been a while-”

Tanis threw herself into a crushing hug, cutting off the rest of what Nehna had been going to say.

“I was so worried,” she said. “I was so scared. There were never any letters and the way people here talk about elves, and about the Dalish- I’m the personal maid to Duchess Maylis and the things she says about your people-”

“I would have written, but I didn’t know how to get a letter to you,” Nehna apologized.

“The Dalish aren’t good at the post?”

“No,” she told her friend, feeling the bitter history rise up and choke her. “No, they can- Talanulea exiled me, Tanis.”

“Oh,” Tanis said, pulling back to look at her. “Oh Nehna I’m sorry.”

“I told the Keeper about- about Antiva,” Nehna said, hot tears stinging the backs of her eyes. “And then he told everyone and said I wasn’t a good mother-”

“He’s wrong, Nehna, he’s wrong. Satheraan-”

“Salladin,” Nehna said, before Tanis could continue. “Go into the other room.”

“Mamae-”

Tanis looked searchingly at Nehna for a moment, and then broke the hug.

“Salladin?” she asked, going over to the girl. “That’s a lovely name. Your Mamae is tired and people said mean things to her, and we’re going to talk about it because we’re friends.”

“I don’t like mean people,” Salladin said. “There was a mean lady on the road she hit me-”

“And that was very wrong of her,” Tanis said. “I think that you and your Mamae are going to be staying here for a little while, Salladin. I have a son only a couple years older than you. He’s asleep right now, so tonight you can have the sitting room, but tomorrow you and he can share a room until your Mamae decides it’s time to leave. Would you like that?”

“Is he mean?”

“He had better not be.”

Nehna listened as Tanis got Salladin settled in for the night, heart sore. She was so good with children, and this was just like Satheraan and Damien. She’d always loved Nehna’s children. An old stab of guilt went through her- she knew she’d been doing right by Salladin, been caring for her and providing for her, but surely with someone like Tanis to love her-

Tanis returned from the sitting room and drew her up the stairs. The room she brought them to was clearly her own bedroom, completely with a curtained four-poster with two different layers of curtains. Tanis was living well, in Lydes.

Nehna was sat down on the bed. Tanis sat on the rug next to it, and started undoing Nehna’s boots.

“You don’t want to talk about Satheraan in front of Salladin?” she asked.

“No, I-” Nehna said. “I would, Tanis, I would- but how do I explain that to her? How do I tell her
“Nehna, no,” Tanis said, dropping the laces of her boots. “You didn’t leave him. They stole you from him.”

“But it’s been four years since we got away,” Nehna said. “I could have- I could have with you and Charlotte here to Lydes, and had Salladin, and then gone to Antiva- when Talanulea kicked me out, I could have come here instead, I-”

“Nehna-”

“I’ve been working on ships on the Sundered Sea, I have the money, I could have come here after a year or two and left her with you and paid my way working on ships to Antiva, I-”

Tanis levered herself up and kissed her. Nehna had succumbed to tears by the time she tipped her lips away to breathe.

“Is it so wrong of me,” Nehna whispered. “To not want to go back?”

“No,” Tanis told her. “I wouldn’t go back. Antiva is an awful place.”

“He’d be thirteen tomorrow,” Nehna said. “Thirteen- if he was in a clan, tomorrow would be the day he’d have to pick or be taken into an apprenticeship, if he hadn’t already; I went into mine at eight by the time I was fifteen I was finished-”

Tanis petted her hair, and used her feet to help Nehna get her boots off. They got into the bed together fully clothed.

“I don’t want to know what Antiva did to him, Tanis. You know what happens to people who get into whoring too young and that man, he’d have put Satheraan right back out for clients once we were gone- I just- I just want to remember him like he was, like he was before I got sick, still a child and happy and I wish that they’d never come for Adan I wish that he’d been more ruthless I wish he’d killed them before they killed him I wish we’d run away I wish I hadn’t listened to everything Antiva says about the Crows and gone back to my clan anyway after they killed him but he’d told me what they’d done to him to turn him into a killer and they made me watch as they tortured him to death and I was too scared and too much a coward-”

Tanis kissed her again.

“I hope he’s dead,” Nehna sobbed. “Creators I hope he’s dead, I hope he died years ago, I hope he died before Antiva could hurt him like it hurt us and Adan- and I don’t want to know what happened to my son-”

Nehna had come in the middle of week, so Tanis had to get up early in the morning to leave for work. Her getting up woke Nehna, and she listened silently and pretended to still be sleeping as Tanis roused Damien and Salladin and got them breakfast.

Come noon, Nehna had barely managed to drag herself out of bed and sit downstairs to watch Salladin play. Even then, she wasn’t particularly attentive.

What sort of a mother would wish her own child dead?

Tanis and Damien returned after dinner, and brought leftovers from the meal at the Duchess’s palace with them. It was Nehna’s first look at the boy since she’d given him to Tanis, and the strongest
emotion she could muster was a sort of vague satisfaction that his half-elven features fell far enough on the human side of things that they were hard to find even when looking for them. He was darker than most Orlesians, courtesy of Nehna, but so was Tanis. It lent credence to the fiction that Tanis had been the one to give birth to him. No one was likely to question the story, whatever it was.

Tanis put the children to bed in Damien’s room, as promised the night before, and came back downstairs to share a bit of wine with Nehna.

“Where’s Charlotte?” she asked.

“She got sick and died,” Tanis told her. “Six months or after we separated from you. She was the one who had the job with Duchess Maylis, originally. There was a bit of fever in the city, nothing you or I haven’t seen before in Rialto, but Charlotte got I bad. The apothecary said it was because she’d lived out in the country her whole life. It was worse in the other cities, and Duchess Maylis’s nephews both died of it, and the elder’s wife and one of his daughers, in the early spring at Halamshiral. Duchess Maylis had bene going to step down that year, and give Lydes to her nephew Remache- they weren’t even still supposed to be in Halamshiral. But Charlotte was so sick, and she told them to stay away for the girls’ sake, to put off the transfer for a few weeks longer. By the time Charlotte died they were sick, except for one daughter. Her father sent her to the Duchess, and she was a young thing. The Duchess wanted a replacement for Charlotte who knew about taking care of children, and she already knew me because of Charlotte, so.”

“So you’re mothering this girl, too?”

Tanis nodded.

“The Duchess doesn’t trust anyone in Orlais, doesn’t trust ‘the Great Game’ everyone plays. I’m a foreigner. She thinks I’m a safe governess for Her Ladyship Sévérine Ophélie de Lydes.”

“She sounds like a spoiled brat.”

“That’s just the Orlesian name, Nehna. I wouldn’t let her be. The Duchess is an old woman, and the older she gets and the less she trusts anyone else, the more she trusts me. The more responsibility she gives me.”

Nehna narrowed her eyes at her.

“You’re not ‘safe’, are you?” she asked.

“But he had friends,” Nehna said. “All those parties-”

“And if it’s not in their interest, they’ll all swear it never happened, that they’ve never even been near the Tirashan, and that they’ve never met a man by that name,” Tanis told her. “People can say anything, Nehna, and once they say it enough, people will believe it.”

A smile flitted across her face.

“Anyway, I have the better story.”
“A tragic and romantic history. Tanis nin Zagin-miri, Princess of the wild Khagti of the Antivan deserts, who rescued an Antivan man who’d lost his trade caravan to bandits, a sole survivor. We fell in love as I nursed him back to health, and were married. He was cruelly killed by my mother when she learned that he had brought me to Andraste, and I was exiled. Bereft and in mourning, with my infant son, I sold most of my worldly possessions to finance a pilgrimage to Val Royeaux to ask the blessing of the Maker’s Bride in my time of misfortune. In such a way I found succor in the kindness of the Duchess.”

“Dogshit,” Nehna said.

“Yes,” Tanis agreed. “But it’s the sort of dogshit that the Orlesians would tell themselves, so they believe it. That’s the point.”

“But it means you have to live a lie.”

“And that, Nehna,” Tanis said, leaning over to kiss her fondly. “Is why you were happy living on the Sundered Sea. The Great Game is no game for you.”

A week and a half into the visit, Tanis was given a couple of unexpected days off.

“Shevérine is sick,” she explained, when she came back only an hour after leaving with Damien. “The Duchess is very careful about that now. She doesn’t want to lose me like she lost Charlotte, and Damien is Shevérine’s only friend.”

“It will be nice to have you around for the whole day,” Nehna told her.

And it was. Almost.

Over lunch on the second day, Damien stopped halfway through his food, firmly put his fork down, and asked her: “How do you know Maman?”

Nehna froze, and Tanis— as always—stepped up.

“Well,” she said to her son. “Where would it make sense for me to know her from?”

Damien frowned, thinking. He looked sort of cute, Nehna noticed, with his face scrunched up like that.

“The Khagti?” he asked. “Mistress Revasina’s Dalish.”

“No the Khagti, Damien.”

“So—” he started to say, sounding confident, and then faltered. “Um, which story, Maman?”

“No the one we tell the Orlesians.”

“Rialto,” Damien said promptly. “After Father.”

“Father?” Salladin asked.

“Maman says her mother and my father were wicked people who just wanted to use her and that’s why we had to come to Orlais except we can’t tell anyone because of the Game so we have a public story that’s nicer,” Damien told her.
Salladin pouted, and turned beseechingly to her mother.

“Mamae, I want a father!” she said. “A nice one!”

Nehna shot a panicked glance at Tanis, who nudged her reassuringly under the table.


The look Salladin gave her was distinctly unimpressed.

“He was-” Nehna tried to continue. What was she supposed to say, how was she supposed to dress this up, and fit it into the smaller lie that Tanis had told Damien?

She swallowed the knot in her throat.

“He was a good man, Salladin,” she said, thinking of Adan. “But bad people killed him. Things were very hard after that, because I’d left my clan to be with him, and the bad people wanted to hurt me, and-”

Why had she had to say that, why did she have to deal with this with no preparation time?

“They did,” Nehna said. “You had a brother, Salladin, an older brother named Satheraan; but very bad humans took him and we had to go to Sulfur Point and Mont-de-glace to get away from them.”

Salladin’s eyes were very, very wide.

“Are we okay now?” she asked, voice tiny, and Nehna went over and picked her up out of her seat.

“I think so,” she said.

Another week and a half, the second-to-last Chantry day in Haring, and-

“It’s Haring and there’s no snow!” Salladin half-whined, sounding like she was on the edge of a temper tantrum. She was sitting on the rug in front of the main fireplace, Damien with her. They’d been playing with toy horses and little human figures, except that Salladin insisted that some of them were halla and elves and also that they had boats because no boats was unacceptable. “There hasn’t been any snow since we left and there has to be snow I wanted snow!”

“Nehna, it’s freezing. If they’ve opened a window, just clo-“

Tanis stopped next to her in the doorway and joined Nehna in staring at the small, gentle snowstorm in the sitting room.

“I-” she said after a moment. “I’ll just- go get a, a broom? And a bucket?”

“Salladin,” Nehna said firmly. “You need to stop this.”

“There’s supposed to be snow!”

“Inside?” Nehna asked, in a tone that clearly stated that the correct answer was ‘no’.

“No,” Salladin sulked.

“Then make it stop.”

“I don’t know how!”
“You wanted it to snow,” Nehna said, drawing on old, old memories of Revasina’s Keeper telling expecting parents what to watch for, should their child be born a mage. “You have to want it to not snow.”

“But I don’t!”

“You have to.”

It took a bit of arguing and a bit of distraction, but Salladin did eventually let the snowstorm go. Nehna helped Tanis hide the snow in the back garden to melt, and then started packing their things.

“You don’t have to run right now,” Tanis told her, only just managing not to plead. ‘You and Salladin don’t even leave the house, you don’t have to worry about Templars. I know there are apostates in the city, there are apostates everywhere, let me-’

“I won’t have Salladin taught by Andrasteans,” Nehna told her. “Chantry or apostate or whatever else. I won’t have her be told that her magic is something bad. It’s a gift, it’s a blessing for our family, for our-”

Her brain caught up her to mouth and she put down the shirt she’d just picked up and sat back on her heels.

“You don’t have to, Nehna,” Tanis said softly. “They haven’t been kind to you.”

“They’ll be kind to Salladin,” Nehna told her, and picked the shirt back up, stuffing it angrily into her bag. “The Dalish cherish mage children. But I won’t let them take her from me, Tanis, I won’t. They’ll take both of us or they can’t have her. There has to be a clan somewhere who needs a mage child enough to take me.”

“In the summer,” Tanis said a moment later, coming up behind her to place her hands on her shoulders. “The Duchess takes Sévrén and Damien and I to her country house. It’s in the Dales, on the Exalted Plains. If you’re around, I’d like to see you again.”

“You will,” Nehna promised, tilting her head back to give Tanis an opening for a kiss. “I don’t know if it will be next summer, or when, or if it will be there or here. But I’ll come back to you.”

Leaving Lydes for the Dales at the end of Haring reminded her unpleasantly of the winter she’d been forced to leave Talanulea. The weather was milder, but it did still snow, and it was actually harder to find food or water here. Once they got into the Dales proper they had to hide from the humans completely for fear of being attacked for Nehna’s vallas’lin- all the Orlesians would see was a Dalish woman with a young child, an easy kill.

Nehna worked with Salladin as best she could while they traveled, searching for trail sign.

“You just have to want the wood to catch on fire.”

“It won’t work!”

“Want it harder.”

A woosh of flame and all their wood was gone. Distantly, someone yelled. Nehna picked up Salladin and ran.

“It was a good try,” Nehna told her hours later, once she was sure the humans had lost them. “But
next time I think you should only want the end of one stick to catch on fire.”

It was sometime in Wintermarch when Nehna finally found reasonably recent and clear trail sign. They cut east for some days, and found Clan Virnehn. Nehna asked for hospitality, just like she had with Talanulea, and then went straight to the Keeper and laid her life’s story out.

Keeper Thelhen was not pleased. Nehna took Salladin and left, heading south again. A combination of human villages and bandit camps and her own over-correcting for heading west to find Virnehn almost landed them in the Exalted Plains by the time the snows had lessened. Nehna took them east again, still to the south, to avoid the most human-populated area of the Dales. The sheer size and unfamiliarity of her people’s homeland was making her disoriented, and for all that she knew that there were clans in the Dales they were so hard to find…

She had no idea what month of the year it was when she finally stumbled across trail sign again. This took her to Clan Athanae, and a slightly-politer repeat of her discussion with Keeper Thelhen.

“You abandoned the People,” Keeper Hamarion said. “And yet you come back to the Dalish, in the Dales themselves, to beg for a place? Your daughter can still be salaged but you are a disgrace, a lover of flat-ears and shem’len and a violater of your Oath. Begon from this place, and if the Dread Wolf ever bore any care for us, may he strike you from this world and spare us your shame and dishonor. I do not know what it is like to be Dalish in Antiva, but here in Orlais it is struggle itself, and we cannot afford weakness or traitors.”

West again. No more bothering with the clans, as much as that cut at her still. Apostates came through Mont-de-glace, and if none could be persuaded to stay, then she could take Salladin across the sea to the Sunless Lands when their traders came and beg the help of the shamans of the humans there. At least they wouldn’t be Andrasteans.

She skirted the Arbor Wilds, an easy and relatively safe way to find the eastern end of the Gamordan Peaks and slip past back to the lands of the Sundered Sea. Nehna did her best to stay within a half-day’s walk of the edge of the Wilds, trying to use the cover of the dense forest to keep away from the humans using the clear and unforested route, but searching for shelter during a thunderstorm ran her and Salladin into bandits who’d had the same idea and had decided to base their camp in the ‘spirit-haunted’ woods to stay with easy reach but difficult pursuit of the caravans to and from Mont-de-glace.

They’d had to run, and now she had no idea where they were, or which way was which. Nehna sat down on a rock, put Salladin on the ground at her feet, and tried not to cry.

It was hard, but she managed. They camped there that night, somewhat cold, and somewhat hungry. They fumbled around in the woods for five days before finding the road again, and Nehna risked it now, unwilling to repeat the experience of getting lost.

Approaching Mont-de-glace from the landward side was surreal. She knew it very well from the koch boats, but coming from the road she could see over the snow-covered roofs to the frozen sea, the bright reds and blues and greens and yellows of the buildings almost blindingly bright in the mercilessly reflected sunlight bouncing off ice.

But when they got to the town proper- people knew her. People collecting snow for melting greeted her by name. When she walked into the inn, the barkeep greeted her loudly and exuberantly in Sheletk, and the town blacksmiths asked after Salladin’s health. The carpenters were in for drinks, after a day’s work, and bought her drink and her food, and for Salladin as well, without even the promise of stories of what the north had been like.
Nehna told them anyway, of course; and then told them again as the town slowly cycled in and out. Dinner passed and one of the koch boat captains brought her mandolin. Some of the carpenters were flutists, and there were some traders from the Sunless Lands in, waiting for the spring trade to open, who joined in with theirs. The rest of the inn banged on the tables and stomped their feet and roared along to the songs, and it was good, better than Lydes and better even than the Dales.

Nehna was home.
Chapter 15

Two days after returning to Rialto, Zevran learned about an entirely new sort of ‘bad day’.

He’d had plenty of bad days before. It was entirely possible that entire years of his life had been nothing but strings of bad days. He never felt quite right trying to figure out if they had been or not, because his standard for ‘good day’ after not getting himself killed was significantly nicer than ‘good day’ before that point, so surely it must be inaccurate to compare it to the second set.

He’d had bad days that were bad because they’d been full of rounds of torture, or other training. He had some vague and distant memories of his first days with the Crows, just after his mother had died, those had been bad days. Rinna had been one of the very worst days, and had been followed by weeks of bad days until the Warden contract had come- a good day, even when compared to the with-Theron-good-days, not that he was going to tell anyone that. He’d had hope that day, and profound relief, and a sort of quiet, floating peace.

The Deep Roads had had some bad days. Taliesin and Fort Drakon and the Archdemon were an anxiously uncomfortable mix of truly awful and very good, depending on what part of the day he focused on.

This day was bad like that, but not. Something- nights of little sleep in Antiva City, going after the Grandmasters, likely- had unexpectedly made him tired enough to sleep the whole night through. He didn’t wake from demon dreams in the dark, but at a reasonable hour just before sunrise, jaw clamped shut because the Crows did not let you scream, huddled under the thin sheet, curled around the pillow and clutching it because softness was nice even when it couldn’t be comforting enough.

Zevran awoke feeling desperately unsafe.

This was stupid, this was ridiculous. This was the sort of thing that separated compradi children stuffed in warehouses from apprentices who had barracks in a House and were being properly trained in their discipline rather than pushed to see who was too weak to live, too weak to see that the only good in the world was survival and everything was lies and too weak to learn that kindness-

Stop, he snarled silently at himself. Stop, stop, stop, you better than this-

He had words in his head and he had them because he loved he cared if he didn’t he wouldn’t have-

Shut up shut up shut up shut up!

Zevran forced himself off the bed and hit the floor silently, putting all his weight on his hands, knees, calves. The wood planking of the floor was hard and uncomfortable. It made him feel very slightly better. He reached up and grabbed the pillow off the bed and curled around it again, smashing his face into it and half-suffocating himself. The lightheadedness made the impending panic recede just a little.

This was Crow conditioning talking. He’d thought he was finally over it but here it was again, popping back up.

He let the pillow go and stood. His mind screamed at him- this room had an unsecured roof door and windows one looking into the alley next to the house one looking over the flat adobe covering of the roof and roofs beyond had dozens of hiding places he hadn’t couldn’t check, anyone could be watching.
He’d meant to grab some of his knives and distract himself with sharpening them. It was usually a good way to calm down when he felt exposed, but the windows and-

Zevran snatched up his sash from the armor and crammed himself into the space between bed and dresser, tangling his hands in the purple cloth so tightly that it made his fingers go numb. It felt like being tied up.

A new memory, then, as he pressed his tangled fists and sash to his mouth in an effort to keep silent. Not one of the Crow ones his mind had dredged up while he slept, but one from Ferelden, Denerim, about two weeks after the Blight. All the others had left, and the three of them had moved into the Warden compound in the capital to get out of Arl Eamon’s house, avoid the Queen, and get some privacy in the face of the continued public attention. The compound had had nice thick walls that had made everyone feel a little better, even in the interior- to prevent one Warden with darkspawn nightmares from waking everyone else, Alistair had told them.

It had felt like a safe place; and Theron wore his earring and was alive and everything had been good. Things had been feeling settled, healed, gained closure for.

And then came the first time Theron had tried to make love to him- long and slow, warm, sweet, soft, and ten minutes in Zevran had broken down in tears and shaking and quiet screaming because sex was only safe when it was a passionate thing, a drive, lust for closeness or orgasm or forgetting. Gentleness, with any sort of contact, with holding hands or hugs or kisses or just little touches on bare skin and especially sex, that was a lie, a lure, a trick into compliance so it would hurt more when it stopped and it turned uncaring and cruel-

He’d managed to squash down the reaction before, but that had been the night it had finally won.

Zevran locked his jaw in sympathy with the memory, remembering how he’d done the same in the face of Theron asking what was wrong and trying to help him calm down with more gentleness because he would not answer- not then, and if happened ever again, not now. Theron was an affectionate person and Zevran was not going to tell him ways you could use the things he had for comforting to harm, he was going to give Theron cause for hesitation or worry about his affection when he was starting from a place of love and care.

He’d thought it before, but that had been the night he’d truly decided. He’d share Rinna, he’d share his mother, but there were things that had hurt him that Theron did not need to hear about.

Instead of explaining, he’d begged to be hit. Theron wouldn’t do it, and so Zevran had bitten down on the fingers of his left hand so hard that they’d bled and bruised and ached in the bone, so that he could stop waiting for the hurt, and had thoroughly ruined the evening.

Almost five years later the shame he’d felt at Theron’s fearful expression of incomprehension was still strong. He focused on carefully unwinding the sash from his numb hands, reminding himself with every turn that he was not weak for being hurt, that being warped did make him bad, that he was not worthless, that he was not useless, that he was a better person than he thought he was, that he deserved the life he’d found for himself outside the Crows, that he was not and never had been and was never going to be nothing.

It was more convincing when it was someone else telling him these things.

Moving out of the space between the bed and the dresser still made him feel like he was in mortal danger, but soon enough it would be real morning and Azieri and Zelda and Antonu would wake up. One of them would come to ask him to breakfast, and he couldn’t face them like this. He wouldn’t be able to answer the questions. He had to hide. He had to leave.
But there was marginal safety here in this room. Outside-

He resolutely didn’t think about it long enough to get dressed and arm himself. The armor was good, even if he couldn’t look at himself wearing it because it was *Crow* armor, and so were his knives and his sword and the garrote wire and a few other small deadly things he had on him.

He found his coin purse in the drawer- well, it was Alistair’s, topped off with the monetary contents of Nathaniel’s bags- and had to stop and sit under the window and fight with himself for a few minutes.

Rialto was a big enough city. There were plenty of brothels here, and he knew what to look for. He could strip off his armor and leave most of his weapons and go *pay* someone to beat him, to make the fear go away. He’d never done it in Ferelden because there would have been no way to hide it from Theron. Here in Antiva it might be a bit riskier, handing himself with his Crow tattoos over to the mercy of the civilian populace, especially here in Rialto, but he was highly-trained. He could escape being tied up, he could disable anyone who tried to keep him from leaving, and he could run- and he wouldn’t have to hide welts and bruises and minor burns from anyone. Theron wouldn’t know.

But it would hurt him if he did, and that was what got Zevran to only take a few coins out and leave the rest of the purse He went out onto the roof and started checking it for hidden Crows, clamping down tight on the part of him that was still twenty-seven and believed the Crows’ reputation and was yelling at him to hide better, they’re watching, they know you’re here, Escipo got you once already Talons aren’t idiots Runn and Availa are dead and the difference is that you were in Antiva City he’ll figure it out he’ll come back and they’ll take you to Velabanchel and you won’t be allowed to die until everything you are has been ground to dust under their torture run!

This was Rosso Noche’s city and he was the only Crow here. He’d killed three Grandmasters. Lauro Escipo was a racist money-blind son of a plagued sow who would sooner believe that Andraste herself had asked her husband to strike Runn and Availa down before the thought so much as crossed his mind that some no-reputation *compradi* trash elf whore could have just walked right into the Crow Quarter in Antiva City and shamelessly exploited the combination of Satinalia, hundreds of unfamiliar faces, and his clear belonging to execute what most Crows would have thought of as impossible kills.

He shouldn’t have gone to the Crow Quarter, if this was what it did to him once he was away from the other assassins. But he was *not* going to run. If he ran, then Escipo *would* come for him. He had to stay, even if it meant feeling like this.

Zevran checked every roof that had a line of sight to Azieri’s house. There were no Crows, but it didn’t make him feel much safer. There were plenty of places in the city, plenty of other times and opportunities to set up an ambush, he should go back to his room and lock himself in.

He took off across the roofs instead, heading for the center of the city. He came down just long enough to spend money on morning bread before racing the rest of the way, coming to rest on the peak of the roof of the towering main Rialto Chantry with fading sunrise colors painting the waters of the harbor.

Zevran put his back to the bell steeple and took a few deep, controlled breaths. This was the highest point in the city. He could see anyone coming from here, and he had the best place on the roof to hide.

He ate some of his bread, but gave most of it to the city birds who hopped suspiciously around this intruder into their territory. He sat and he breathed, trying to live in the moment, watching and listening and not thinking.
Rialto woke up. Far below him he heard the local Chanter set up in front of the Chantry steps and begin declaiming Transfigurations to the people passing by on their way to work or market. A bit later, the Sisters gathered in the sanctuary directly below him and began their morning devotions, their gathered voices loud enough to be heard through the roof tiles.

A few hours after dawn proper, the bells started up. The Chantries in the south didn’t have bells, and it was still strange to him. It seemed such a waste. They were a pleasant surprise every day, and sometimes that was what you forced yourself through the hours for, to hear an entire city ring with the music of a hundred bells at midmorning, noon, the end of the workday, and late at night, the signal for anyone still awake to leave off their work or leisure and finally rest.

Zevran pressed his back more firmly against the steeple when the first bell rang, and closed his eyes as the rest joined in and the neighborhood Chantries starting ringing in response, letting the music crowd out his thoughts with sheer volume and proximity as it vibrated through his bones.

The next day he woke up in his room feeling mostly like himself, despite coming back to bed late. He’d slowly found security again sitting against the steeple, but had been loathe to give it up once he’d regained it, and stayed there until the night bells. He hadn’t moved all day, hadn’t eaten or drunk anything besides the bit of bread in the morning, so he woke up very ready for breakfast, if still tired.

None of that was enough to not feel a sting of hurt when not one of the other three men in the house made a mention of him being gone the entire day before. In the normal way of things, Zevran would have been pleased to find that he’d won this level of trust, finally, but given the circumstances…

*It doesn’t not matter if they care or not,* he told himself sternly. *There are people who would if they knew.*

“You’re going out later,” Azieri told him as breakfast was being cleared away. “They’re going to the bad part of town today, and neither of them are fighters.”

He gave Zevran a long, hard look.

“Don’t fuck it up,” he said. “They *have* to come home safe.”

Oh, so he was to play bodyguard? Easy enough, and in Rialto, with no Crows and with Zelda and Antonu on Rosso Noche business, he wasn’t the least bit worried. Azieri was being protective about his son going somewhere with danger, and Zevran could sympathize. That was how it was when you loved someone.

But it was still funny to shadow Zelda and Antonu after lunch and see them get so nervous while they weren’t in any real danger at all. They kept trying to not-look at the usual round of ‘neighborhood toughs’ who were really just young men without steady employment, socializing and hoping for news of an opportunity for a few hours’ pay. Zevran was tempted to give them some coin just for being there, but it was places like this where the Crows ran gangs. One look at his face and it was eyes to the ground, look submissive, maybe he’ll ignore us-

It was disheartening. Zevran found himself mildly annoyed, and was happy to focus on their destination- a large building, wood, recently repainted, white with pale blue and green shutters and front door. It was very fetching. Out in front of the door, on either side, were large pots stuffed with ajo lilies. They weren’t in bloom, given the season, but the window planters had some different flowers and herbs, a few of them flowering, indicating a careful schedule of care.
This was almost too good a building for this neighborhood. It was obviously residential, with the window planters, but who was paying for this? Perhaps it was one of the Chantry’s sponsored houses, a charity mission.

Zevran was proven very wrong once they stepped inside. Most of the first floor was a large seating lobby, with couches and tables, nice chairs, a front counter that served as both bar and pay area. There were a few doors, two on either side of the counter, one behind it, three more on the sides of the room. In the back corner was a flight of wooden stairs up to the second floor, fronted on this side not by walls but by a balcony overlooking the lobby. There were a couple of women up there, seated on benches, mending clothes and talking quietly.

He had a sudden strong, disorienting memory of this lobby from those stairs, from that balcony. The way the sunlight came through the front windows in the late afternoon and cast the long shadow of the balcony railing across the wall and doors of the second floor. The way the lobby looked lit by oil lamps and candlelight. The door between the counter and the stairs led to the kitchen. The door behind the counter was to the brothel master’s office. The door to the other side of the counter was to the back- the cheap and regular rooms for clients. The nice ones, or the ones for trusted customers, were up on the balcony, where there were two doors on either end of the landing that led to the living quarters, where outsiders were not allowed.

There were ajo lilies in the planters out front. Early summer flowers. He didn’t remember those from before.

Zevran sat down quietly in the corner of one of the couches and watched as Zelda and Antonu continued to the counter, speaking to the people behind it. Older. A human woman and an elf man. They all shook hands, and then, just as they all started heading for the office behind the counter, Antonu realized that Zevran wasn’t there.

“Mahar?” he asked, finding him on the couch. “You coming?”

“I am quite comfortable right here,” Zevran told him. His smile only felt a little strained. “Azieri wished me to protect you- and you have gotten here safely, yes? I doubt you will be in danger now that you have arrived.”

Antonu frowned a little, as did Zelda, but let him be. The woman representing the brothel stared at him. The office door closed on all of them a few moments later and Zevran leaned back against the wall and sighed out his nose. He hadn’t come back here the last time he’d been in Rialto- he’d gone to the town hall and looked at the registry records to find his mother’s name.

But this wasn’t- bad. Just new. He hadn’t remembered this lobby, and he hadn’t remembered the exterior, but a view of the Summer Lily from a lower angle floated up from the depths of his memory, looking distinctly less cared-for. There definitely had not been flowers. Someone had started caring for this place in the Andraste. The twenty-five years since he’d seen it last.

Zevran wasn’t sure how long he sat there before the older woman who’d gone into the meeting slipped out and came over. She stood in front of him and held out a small fired-clay cup. Tea- no, chocolate. It had been a long time since he’d had chocolate.

“Been a long time since we had a Crow in here,” the woman said neutrally as Zevran took the cup.”

“Four years or so since Rosso Noche took over Rialto, yes?”

“Before that,” she said, and her expression was… guarded? “Used to be a woman here. Real fierce, had a big grudge against the Crows and a bigger debt to them. She killed one of the old Master
Escipo’s in her best friend’s rooms when he dropped by to taunt her about her little boy. First time anybody here had thought you could do something about Crows. Died the next day, real suspicious-like, same time that her friend got sold off to Orlais. Couple weeks later the Crows came by and the man who owned this place before me traded the boy off in exchange for ending his mama’s debt, plus a few coins for his trouble. That was the last time we had a Crow in here.”

She was watching him. Zevran held his cup and ran his tongue along the back of his teeth, tasting the chocolate still, wondering if this was worth it.

For talking to someone who’d known his mother, he decided after a few moments, it was.

“Nina Rivasina,” he told the woman quietly. “She was Dalish. The brothel master got three sovereigns for the boy, and that was twenty-five years ago.”

She smiled at him, and the guardedness fled completely.

“Little Zevran,” she said, and pulled a small table and chair in front of him, so he could put his chocolate down and she could sit. “You look so much like your mama, and she would hate to see you like this.”

“I had very little choice in the matter.”

“Don’t we all.”

“Apologies,” Zevran said. “But I don’t remember you.”

She shrugged.

“You were a kid, and I didn’t watch you as often as the others. I’m Ashera.”

He reached over the table and took her hand, lifting it to kiss.

“It is a pleasure to remake your acquaintance.”

“Oh look at you,” Ashera guffawed as Zevran replaced her hand. “All grown up and handsome, charmer with a ladykiller’s smile. How many hearts have you broken, boy?”

His smile shrank.

“I- try to stay away from that, except in the literal,” he told her. “Hearts are important.”

“Ahh,” Ashera said, understanding softening her eyes. “How many people have broken your heart?”

Zevran shrugged, just a bit uncomfortable.

“Enough,” he said. “But I have been lucky to find people willing to put it back together again.”

“Good,” she said, and then: “I wouldn’t think Crows would be in that sort of business. And they called you ‘Mahar’.”

“I may have,” Zevran told her. “Convinced the Crows that I got myself killed on a contract, and been free of them for the last five years.”

“In that case,” Ashera said, smile gone sly. “Very nice to see you again, ‘Mahar’. Sounds like an exciting life.”
“On occasion, more exciting than I can stand.”

“Isn’t that the way of things,” Ashera sighed. “But you’ve been all right, away from them? I’ve seen plenty of people fall, trying to break out of a life.”

“It was very good,” Zevran told her honestly. “Returning to Antiva may have been a miscalculation.”

“Well you picked quite the city for it.”

“I had noticed. Rosso Noche was very… forceful in their recruitment.”

She snorted.

“Not surprised to hear that,” she said. “Act before they think, that’s them, even with all their fancy point-by-point pamphlets. I was wondering how you managed to walk in with Amajuan’s boy.”

“I had very little choice in this matter, as well.”

“Why not just run?” Ashera asked. “You ran from the Crows. Rosso Noche is nothing compared to them.”

“They have someone,” Zevran said, unsure of how wise it was to be specific. He wasn’t sure why Antonu and Zelda had come here, after all.

“Someone you care about?” Ashera asked, and then when he didn’t answer: “Someone who could get to someone you care about?”

It should have made him anxious, that she was figuring things out so well, but instead it was a touch comforting. The fact that she was asking these questions meant that she cared to know about him, and he’d always felt secure with prostitutes. People this low down on the social ladder knew all about the things people could do to you to hurt you, how valuable keeping secrets was for survival. Ashera was old enough to have learned some lessons hard, and he trusted her not to say anything. Not when she’d come over here on the small chance that a just-familiar-enough Crow had been a boy she’d known twenty-five years ago.

“The people who helped me after I ran,” he told her. “The man Rosso Noche has, if I tried to leave now, he would find me, and then tell the Crows who they are to hurt me. They are quite good at defending themselves, but…”

Ashera looked back at the office door.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” she said. “The trouble they got us into with their little war. Only the type who’d throw anyone under a stampeding horse would do this sort of shit.”

Zevran was about to ask what ‘this sort of shit’ was when the office door opened and the others came out. Ashera looked at them for a second, and then glanced back him, and read the question on his face.

“You want to know, you come back in a couple hours, around opening,” she told him quickly, quietly. “And I can tell you about your mama, too.”

He could not pass up information about his mother, and dealt with Azieri’s thinly-veiled scorn and Antonu’s discomfort and Zelda’s mild disapproval when Zevran declined dinner and said that he was
going back to the Summer Lily with a real smile.

The evening lights were starting to come on when he walked back in the door, the lobby filling with women and men getting set up and positioned for a night’s work. Suddenly-familiar small plates of sliced fruit were being arranged in an aesthetically pleasing manner on the tables, overseen by Ashera, and he slid up beside her.

She startled when she turned slightly and spotted him, grabbing the edge of the table for balance.


“I can be loud, if that would please you more. It is certainly no difficulty, though I am sure that most people are in general agreement that ‘noisy’ is easier to accomplish when things become hard.”

She pursed her lips, unamused, and he smiled back, completely unashamed.

“Did you come looking for a job or to talk?” she asked. “Though with that mouth, they could be one and the same.”

“To talk only, Signora Ashera, I assure you,” Zevran said, and offered his arm. Ashera muttered ‘flatterer’ but took it anyway. The house prostitutes were staring to stare. “I have had my fill of work as pleasure.”

“I’m beginning to think that you’re incorrigible, Signor Mahar.”

“And utterly shameless. It is a useful talent.”

“I bet,” Ashera said, and directed him to sit at a table in the front of the room, against the wall but near the counter. She snagged a fruit plate off one of her employees and put it down between them.

“So. What do you want to hear about first?”

“My mother,” Zevran said immediately. “I had no idea that her debt was owed to the Crows.”

“Nina made it real clear that she didn’t want you to know about it,” Ashera told him. “Nobody blamed her. If we’d had our own kids, we would have wanted them far away from the Crows, too. She didn’t talk a lot about her shit, did Nina. That afternoon with Master Escipo- that’s the only reason I know most of the stuff I know about her.”

“Tell me,” he said, leaning forward across the table. “Ashera, please.”

She glanced down at the fruit and ate a piece before speaking.

“You ever been so scared by something that you remember everything about it afterwards?”

“A few times.”

“Well, that’s how that afternoon was,” Ashera said. “He just popped up in the window and started saying- I don’t know a good way to talk about this.”

“Simply the bare facts? I believe that I will be able to deduce the emotions of the situation easily enough.”

“That’s not it. I don’t know if you’ll feel better for hearing it or not.”

“Ashera,” Zevran said. “The Crows violently discouraged remembering our lives before being bought, or the happy bits at least. I only just remember her face, and this place. I have done- a lot of
things, and seen many more. I will be able to live with whatever it is you have to tell me.”

“You sure?”

“Ashera.”

“All right,” she said. “I guess- to start. Her husband, your papa, he was a Crow. They said his name was Adan, and Nina was local and Master Escipo knew him, so I guess he was one of his. He said you had your mama’s skin, but your papa’s hair and his looks. Nina said it was Master Escipo who killed him. He offered to take you to settle the debt, way back when before Nina came here, and she said no and that’s why the two of you ended up here. Sounded like Master Escipo was still seriously angling for you, had some talk about training you up as a courtesan. Said he’d- there’s one bit, that he said, that’s really stuck with me, because it was just so- ‘Courtesans are better the younger they start- he could be a noble’s lover one day, if only you let him. He’s already learned so much, and there was a definite improvement with practice’. I’m pretty sure that was when your mama decided to kill him.”

“I don’t remember him,” Zevran told her after a moment. “I remember working. I remember having clients. I don’t remember who they were.”

Ashera looked at him.

“You want some time to yourself?” she asked.

“I am fine.”

“You don’t look-”

He had a heavy, slimy, bitter feeling in his gut, a feeling that said that he’d never had a chance to be anything what the Crows wanted him to be, that he’d been born for the life they’d given him, but he wasn’t about to try addressing that in public.

“I am fine,” he said. “It is simply- I never expected to know my father’s name.”

It was a truth, and for the moments while Ashera decided to accept that answer, Zevran harbored a quiet urge to go digging for information- but Escipo would have taken their House records with them when they’d left Rialto, and breaking into the Archive of the Crows in Antiva City was sure to get him caught. But still.

Nehna Revasina. Adan Escipo.

He must have been a decent sort of Crow, for his mother to fall in love with him, and to have been in love enough to have ignored the rules about relationships, and children. An elf, definitely. Almost certainly compradi, like he was. Apparently Zevran shared his looks- he tried to imagine it, another Crow elf, with the facial tattoos, the same hair, lighter skin, maybe like the Fereldans. Good-looking. Maybe they’d made Adan Escipo a Crow courtesan, too.

“Doesn’t mean you still can’t use a minute,” Ashera told him. “I’ll wait.”

“No,” Zevran said. “This afternoon you dropped an enticingly intriguing hint about your current situation, and surely a woman so distinguished and accomplished would not be so cruel as to deny me satisfaction?”

“Do you ever stop?”
“I can if you wish me to.”

Ashera gave him a look that said she didn’t believe that, and Zevran decided to leave the comments be for the rest of the night.

“Fine,” she said. “You know why I called Rosso Noche in here?”

“Sadly, no.”

“Because their little war with the Crows is destroying us, is why!” she said. “They can talk all they like about trying to make Antiva better, it don’t mean shit when the Crows run the gangs! Rosso Noche got the Crows run out of Rialto, and what happened? All the street gangs they ran, the little ones, the big ones, collapsed and then pulled themselves together worse! It’s been four years of turf wars because the ones who picked up the most muscle, they keep fighting over who’s in control of everything, because the Crows are gone so they figure there’s a top spot open! When the Crows were here we could all breathe easy. We knew how to live, and people got hurt but if you stayed out of the way then it was only bad luck if you got noticed. The mean ones, the rough ones, the Crows picked them up for disposable muscle. They got paid decent and got to go make trouble for other people, got themselves killed somewhere and the world was a little better for it. Now they’re all here and trying to act high and mighty and throw their weight around, because everybody knows they don’t have Crows behind them so they have to go threatening and intimidating all the time. At least the Crows didn’t do that. They kept their people in line. This is Rosso Noche’s fault and I wanted to know what they’re going to do to fix it and the answer was ‘nothing’.”

She settled back in her chair and crossed her arms.

“Don’t even know why I thought different,” she said bitterly. “Bunch of artisans and intellectuals. Don’t have to live like this. ‘No real fighting capacity’ my ass. The Crows are gone, they just don’t want to share.”

Was it going to make things better or worse if he told her about Escipo? She deserved to be told something, and for safety’s sake, Zevran decided to tell the version that left Rosso Noche out of it.

“Rialto has no Crows because of internal politics,” he told her. “House Escipo wanted to cause trouble, and handed this city over to another House, trying to make them fall. I- may have helped, accidentally. My timing for my first return to Antiva to resolve some personal matters has turned out to be unfortunate. Rosso Noche was simply in the position to capitalize.”

He waited for Ashera to get mad and kick him out, but it didn’t happen. She pursed her lips again and raised her eyebrows and said: “I was wondering why you were back in Antiva, if you’d gotten out. More ‘personal matters’?”

The only answer he gave her was a shrug.

“I am at your disposal,” Zevran told her quietly. “So far as Rosso Noche’s trust of me extends, for any ideas you may have about how to make Rialto safer.”

“Bastards killed my last bouncer,” Ashera told him after a few moments. “Right out in front, by the door, when I tried to tell them I wouldn’t pay their flaming extortion. Farrar was a good kid. His sister works here. I don’t want another Crow gang boss around here, but Crow security would give us space to think. Up for it?”

It was… good. To settle into the Summer Lily every evening as the bouncer. It was something simple, and honest, and purely good; and it gave him the strength to go back to dreaming, so he
could sleep properly and avoid having another day when he needed to climb the Chantry, even though it meant facing the demons. But it was harder for them to come up with real tricks when his last thoughts before falling asleep were of a number of hours of pleasant company and easy laughter rather than wishing for Amaranthine.

His first night he turned up in his nicest, drapiest shirt and tightest pants to achieve the proper casually bed-rumpled look. The volume of fabric in his shirt provided adequate hiding space for smaller knives, and his gloves and boots and a discreet visible knife on his hip passed as just part of the look, turning his ensemble from ‘public debauchery accusations’ to merely ‘attention-grabbing’. He arrived at the Summer Lily pleased to see that he blended in with the prostitutes, as planned. He was there to provide protection for them, not scare them with Crow armor or any weapons more intimidating than the knife on his left hip.

With Ashera’s guidance he picked up the youngest, newest, or most skittish prostitutes and grabbed them all a table, doing his best to charm them into relaxing. It worked well, and by the time the Summer Lily began to fill with clients, they were smiling and laughing a little and involved in a silly game of cards with no stakes that could be ducked in and out of easily, so as not to disturb the night’s work. Zevran sat with the tattooed side of his face towards the wall, and when some artisan man finally tried to proposition him and tried getting handsy when he got a ‘no’, Zevran turned his face to show them and smiled with his teeth.

It cleared a six-foot-radius from the table, and the man was so caught up in his own worries about having crossed a Crow that he fled the building on his own. Zevran didn’t even have to get up to escort him out.

Ashera brought him more chocolate for that.

One week, two weeks, and the news spread. The Summer Lily had gone up in the hierarchy of brothels since Zevran had lived here, and his presence bumped it up a slight bit more- because even if this was Rosso Noche’s city, this was still Antiva. The clients got extremely respectful, first of him and then of the prostitutes, though Zevran didn’t miss the way that some of them stopped coming completely. He asked around and was unsurprised to find that they were the rougher, meaner ones.

Three weeks and one of the gangs tried to extort the Summer Lily again. They’d heard about Zevran, and barged in in force, scattering the clients to the edges of the room and the prostitutes up the stairs, but all that did was give Zevran room to work. He let the two weakest cut and run, but took out most of the rest in the lobby before chasing down the others who’d tried fleeing. By the time he got back the clients were all gone and the residents of the Summer Lily were trying to pull themselves together. Zevran offered soft words and his expertise in getting rid of bodies and bloodstains.

The next day he was walking to work and stopped in the usual small market to buy something for dinner. He’d been doing this for days without any particular acknowledgement beyond the slightly quicker service that familiarity with a customer could get, but today he was handed his food with a little extra he hadn’t asked for, and his coin with turned down with a: “No, I wouldn’t dream of asking from you, Maestra Mahar.”

Zevran arrived at the Summer Lily in a mood, unimproved by the way that the stall keeper wasn’t the only person who’d greeted him with ‘Maestra Mahar’, or pressed him with small gifts of food, in only a few cases ostensibly in thanks for his destruction of the gang the night before.

“No, I wouldn’t dream of asking from you, Maestra Mahar.”

“Ashera,” he complained once he’d parceled out his extra food to people who would either appreciate it or looked like they needed cheering up. “They have decided that I am in charge of this quarter.”
“You’re the only one around now, it’s not like they’ve got options,” she said, completely unsympathetic to his plight.

“I do not want this,” Zevran said. “I did not come to Rialto to become a don arrion.”

“Too bad,” Ashera told him. “What else are we supposed to do? The city guard is a joke and we’re sick of the flaming gangs. They talk in the market you know, and at Chantry. My people. The quarter has been asking questions, and they’re all so taken with you. It was inevitable even without what you did last night.”

“I distinctly remember you telling me that you did not want another Crow gang boss, Signora Ashera.”

“Oooh, pissed you off, didn’t I?” she said. You might be a Crow-”

“I have left the Crows!”

“-but you’re no gang boss. You’re too kind for that.”

It had been years since a compliment to his character had made him want to scoff and deny and retreat in a huff to nurse his wounded self-concept. He was better than this impulse and he was not going to give in to it.

‘Kind’!

“You have been encouraging this,” Zevran accused instead.

Ashera shrugged, completely unrepentant.

“You offered to help,” she said. “I’ve talked this over with some of the other names down here. The gangs are only going to be gone if they’re all dead, and you’re the only one who can do that. If that makes you our don arrion, well, tough. We’ll all just have to live with it. You already help my people out enough, charity and protection for a whole quarter isn’t that much different.”

This was ridiculous and he was not going to stand for it- except that he was. He was being trusted not turn into a crime lord by an entire city quarter, and while it might have been a very low bar for trust it was something.

And helping people made him feel like he was back home, anyhow.

Zevran turned thirty-three the day in Haring that Zelda and Antonu took him out to lunch at one of Rialto’s street restaurants. It wasn’t to celebrate- Zevran hadn’t said anything- but to question him. He’d been working nights in the Summer Lily for a bit more than a month, and given in to Ashera’s decision making and decimated the street gangs. What people who were still left avoided him, and stayed home or took up work at the docks and dockside inns and taverns. Zevran was firmly ensconced as the don arrion for Rialto’s less-prosperous quarter, and Rosso Noche was apparently taking exception.

“I must compliment you on your discernment,” Zevran said to Antonu, once he realized what was going on. “This is a much more pleasant and civilized interrogation than the one I had in the company of your brother.”

Antonu flushed, visible even through his dark skin, and Zevran wondered if that was shame or embarrassment.
“My father was almost ready to call Escipo here,” Zelda said. “Which should tell you a lot about how happy he is. But apparently the Crows are still too busy in the City. So explain yourself.”

Zevran did, slowly and patiently, because they just didn’t seem to get it.

“You said,” Antonu told him, a little accusingly. “That you wanted to kill Crows-”

“And if I was trusted far enough to be left be I would gladly-”

“-but you took over right where they left off!”

“I did no such thing,” Zevran said, letting some of his annoyance seep through. “I was asked to intervene with the gangs, and that is all I did. If people ask me for other help and I can help, why should I not? Why would I not? Had I my way I would not be don arrion, but here we are.”

“You can’t be don arrion and not be up to something!” Zelda exclaimed, and slapped his open hand down on the table for emphasis. “We were trusting you, Mahar, and-”

“Are they bothering you?” a familiar voice asked in Tevene, and they all looked up from each other. Zevran had seen the man coming down the street, and dismissed him. The color of his clothes, the reds and pinks and purples, were achingly familiar, but the cut of the clothes had been wrong for Amaranthine or Ferelden. His leathers were as quality as his clothes, and if he hadn’t stopped here to speak and let Zevran see him properly, Zevran would have ignored him and forgotten about him.

Instead, now he was close enough for Zevran to note both his face and the well-used state and familiarly-foreign design of the hilts on his blades.

He leaned back in his seat and looked up at Warden Andreas Kasteros.

“Not even half so much as they could be, my dear Andreas,” he said, also in Tevene. Antonu was looking askance between them, and Zelda’s face was screwed up in concentration as he tried to follow the foreign language he’d probably only ever studied out of books in classes before. “What a surprise to see you here.”

“The Captain sent me,” Andreas said, and that was-

Zevran was surprised to find that he was surprised. That was a neat little loophole ripe for exploitation, but he wouldn’t have thought that Alistair would notice it, or take advantage of it.

Good job, my friend, he silently congratulated.

He was also surprised to find that he had some mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, it was very good to know that Theron had respected his middle-of-the-night ill-advised note; but on the other hand, he was a bit hurt that Theron hadn’t come rushing after him anyway.

Which was stupid, he reminded himself, because Theron had always been very conscientious about respecting his decisions. It was part of why Zevran had fallen so hard for him in the first place.

“Our lord doesn’t know,” Andreas continued, diving the general subject of Zevran’s thoughtful pause, if not it’s particulars. “He valued your ability to choose too much to argue with you, even when the rest of us could see merit in not letting you go. So the Captain sent me, to make sure that you were all right.”

“Not to drag me back?”
“I have specific orders,” Andreas said. “‘No dragging. Dragging is bad’. Unless you’re just being too stubborn or emotional to come back, or are in trouble that you can’t get yourself out of.”

His hand drifted to one of his blades, and his eyes to Zelda and Antonu.

“Only a little bit of trouble,” Zevran promised. “And not them.”

“Hm,” Andreas said, unconvinced. “I have a letter.”

Zevran snatched it up as soon as Andreas produced it, but only flipped the unsealed letter open long enough to see that the handwriting was Alistair’s before leaving it be. He didn’t want to risk this in public- his eyes were stinging from nothing more than the simple knowledge that his friend had sent someone after him. The strength of emotion that simple friendship could bring still sometimes caught him off-guard, and this was definitely one of them.

“Could you,” Zevran asked Andreas, doing his best to keep his voice steady. “Be persuaded to wait for a return message?”

Andreas crossed his arms.

“I believe that I would have been extensively yelled at if I hadn’t forced you to write one,” he said, and then a pause before: “He misses you desperately.”

Zevran was halfway to saying something appropriately vague but understandable between them when there was a loud clatter nearby. Zelda, Antonu, and Andreas looked around, because they didn’t know any better. Zevran looked up, and saw the Crow who had made a stupid mistake while roof-running and missed her footing, now hanging from the edge of the restaurant’s roof and swinging herself around the corner into the alleyway, out of sight.

Not fast enough.

“Stay here!” he ordered the three of them, and dashed into the alley. The Crow was pulling herself back up to the rooftop and Zevran swarmed up after her, shooting over the edge of the wall and tackling her, legs pinned and empty hands where he could see them, his knife at her throat.

“What are you doing here.”

She was another elf, dark hair, a bit tall. Possibly graceful, except for the rank amateur mistake she’d made that had gotten his attention. She glared and tried to thrash away. Zevran pushed harder, more weight behind the hold and pressure behind the blade.

“What!”

“Apprentice hunting,” she spat. “House Availa, Maestra.”

There was hate enough in her every word to make Zevran pause a moment. A quick slice of his knife and the collar of her shirt was cut open enough for him to flick the fabric back and take a look. She went perfectly still and blank in a way that Zevran was far, far too familiar with as her skin was exposed to his gaze.

She didn’t bear the shawl of tattoos of a graduate. She was just an apprentice herself.

“You?” Zevran asked, keeping his tone clipped and cold. He didn’t like it but she’d called him Maestra, a senior Crow, and if he was going to get anything from her it was better to play to her expectations. There wasn’t time for anything else.
She glared wrathfully, but wasn’t good enough yet to hide her other emotions as well. Zevran’s heart clenched.

“You have a friend.”

The apprentice’s eyes went slightly wider, betraying her even before the moment the muscles in her left shoulder moved as she tried to bring a hand up to claw at his eyes and get away. Zevran caught it and shoved it back down to the surface of the roof, giving up his knife for a secure hold on her extremities.

She went perfectly still and blank again.

“You name,” Zevran said.

“Tiar,” she told him, her own words now as flat as his. Zevran was proving his superiority in strength and she had to do nothing more than look at him and his physical age to know his skill. It took quality to live to thirty-three in the Crows, quality an apprentice almost certainly couldn’t beat. She was giving up, resigning herself to being caught and dragged back for punishment, perhaps execution.

“Tiar Availa, I am going to let you up,” he said. “And then you are going to show me where your friend is. Otherwise things will go very badly for both of you.”

Zevran retrieved the knife he’d dropped in the same movement that brought him to his feet, ready and waiting. Tiar got up, much less fluidly, and true to expectations tried to come at him again. His back was to the alleyway below and if he’d truly thought her cowed and obedient, knocking him over the edge of the roof to his slow death or permanent injury might have worked. Instead, a swift strike of his knuckles into her cheek where the jaw hinged sent her crashing back to the roof.

“Don’t,” he told her. “Now get up.”

That hit was by far one of the nicer things he could have done to put her down, and they both knew it. Tiar watched him suspiciously as she pushed herself back to her feet. Zevran had put his knife away, anticipating roof-running, but they both knew full well that he could kill her with his bare hands if he tried.

She led him stiffly and reluctantly across the Rialto roofs, radiating rage, and under that, fear. It was three minutes before they came across their first Crow proper, caught by surprise when Zevran turned out not to be an unfamiliar face from House Availa given permission to join the apprentice hunt.

“Did you kill any of the others?” he asked Tiar as he shoved the body off the roof. If he left it up here it would just rot unattended and smell for weeks. Down on the street, the city guard or the Chantry would clean it up so no one had to see it. Tiar’s glare turned resentful and her shoulders hunched. No, then.

That left eight more Crows somewhere in Rialto. There were always nine on an apprentice hunt. Zevran kept a sharp eye out and found seven more as Tiar led him in a slow and misleading way to wherever the other apprentice was hiding, or where they were supposed to meet. Zevran pretended that he didn’t notice. It wasn’t worth fighting her on. She was trying to give her friend time to escape, both from the House Availa Crows officially tasked to come after them; and himself, whom she no doubt thought was simply hijacking the hunt to add to his own reputation.

The final Crow was found at the end of a blind-turn alley. She had the other apprentice pinned to the
wall. He was a boy, much younger than Tiar, perhaps twelve or thirteen, and the Crow had her hands-

Zevran dropped straight down from the roof onto her shoulders, pushing her down and away and she didn’t land right but he did, which was the point, even when the drop also served to give him enough force to drive his knife through her skull.

He was angry. He was so very, incredibly-

The boy was hugging Tiar when Zevran turned away from his kill. All he could really see of the boy from here was his thick wavy black hair, and his round human ears. Unusual, that.

“You are running from courtesan training,” Zevran said. The boy flinched violently and Tiar grabbed his shoulders, twisting him behind her, and tried to attack him one last time. He used his knife only to block hers, and threw her into the far wall of the alley hard enough to make her bounce off and stumble to the ground, hopefully to stay there, dazed, for a few minutes.

The boy had pressed himself up against the wall, in the corner. Zevran stayed right where he was instead of stepping closer.

“And who are you?” he asked, low and gentle. The last thing this situation needed was for him to act like a Crow.

The boy peered up at him and Zevran saw why the Crows would have made the unusual choice to pick a human boy for courtesan training. His skin was the general middling brown common through the northern Tevinter and Antiva, nothing particularly special, but his eyes were a surprisingly bright, clear green, very striking in contrast to his skin and hair.

He mumbled something.

“I cannot hear you,” Zevran told him.

“Diego Availa,” the boy said, a little louder this time, which was still not very loud and Zevran’s heart clenched again because Diego’s tone was not flat so much as dead, matching the look in his eyes. This was an apprentice who’d run when faced with his very last bit of strength before breaking, and now he thought he’d been captured again. He was shutting down, and giving up.

Andraste’s song, what was he supposed to do here? He could only think of what Theron would do to convince the boy that he wasn’t in trouble, and a hug was absolutely not the right move in this situation. Diego didn’t trust him and even if he did, Zevran-

He shook away the memories and tried to clamp down on his still-present anger. All he really managed to do was school his expression and give himself a raging tension headache, but at least he wasn’t yelling. Yelling was also not going to help. He wasn’t mad at Tiar or Diego and he didn’t need them to think that he was.

Now how to get back to the restaurant. He would have done roof-running again, but that seemed too Crow-like now. They would just have to walk back.

“Can you get up yet, Tiar?” he asked, trying to wrestle his tone into something approaching normal. Something fun, something non-threatening, something encouraging and light and that was very hard to do when he just wanted another Crow to pop up so he could take his sweet time on the killing.

He didn’t get a response, but did hear her stand. Good enough.
Zevran herded the out into the street, and then on the correct path back to Andreas and the others. Tiar was walking stiffly, but he was sure that was from fear and anger and tension and not from being hurt. Diego huddled and skittered away if anyone got too close, which was very seldom, because pedestrians took one look at Zevran and noticed the tattoos and the bits of blood on his sleeves, and perhaps his fraying self-control, and stayed well away.

Andreas’s response to Zevran returning with a scared boy and an angry teenage girl with Crow elf tattoos was a noncommittal and unfazed: “Hm.” Compared to Warden business, this was an extremely unremarkable situation; and given that he served under Theron, running off after people who should be mortal enemies and returning with them in tow was practically expected.

Antonu and Zelda were not so relaxed.

“But-”

“We are going back to your father’s house, Zelda.”

“You can’t just-”

“They are in need of a place off the streets and so yes, I am.”

“But she’s got-”

“Yes, she does.”

It was less of a walk and more of a march back to the house. Zelda and Antonu disappeared as soon as they stepped in the door, while Andreas lingered, blocking the exit, as Zevran worked to coax Diego and Tiar further into the building to the stairs, so he could put them up in his room.

“The fuck are you doing, Desoto,” Azieri growled, stomping down the stairs Zevran had just gotten Tiar and Diego near. “It was one thing to put you up but it’s another damn one for you to come dragging your filth into our city-”

“I am not,” Zevran said through his clenched teeth, focusing on where Andreas was leaning up against the doorframe into the seating area, quietly observing. If he turned around to face Azieri right now, or looked at Tiar and Diego, he wasn’t sure what would happen. What he’d do. “A Crow.”

“You can keep up with that tripe all you want!” Azieri snapped at him. “But I’ll believe it when you’re not down at the brothel every night lording it over the poor and when you don’t bring Crows into my-”

“These are not Crows, Azieri Amajuan; these are hurt and terrified children!”

Azieri’s face was two, three inches from his, and apparently unmoved by Zevran’s anger reverberating off the close walls of the stair area. Zevran could hear his own breath hissing through is teeth, feel his own fingers curling at his sides around hilts that weren’t there, his own anger making his tension headache spike and the muscles of his shoulders burn from the strain of not moving.

“Andreas,” Zevran said, once he was sure he could manage it without shouting again. “Please take Tiar and Diego upstairs. My room is at the end of the hall. The roof access.”

Azieri was trying to stare him down, or maybe Zevran was trying to stare him down. He couldn’t be sure.

“I don’t recall allowing them into my house,” Azieri said coolly, and that. That was it.
Zevran grabbed him by the front of the shirt and hauled him off the stairs, leaving room for Andreas and the children. The kitchen was just off in the next room and it had a door, one that he could put between him and Azieri and everything else.

“What exactly is it that I have done that makes you think that I would lead Crows to your home?” he demanded as soon as he’d kicked the door shut behind them. “The place where I am being forced to live and where you live, who are least trying to do something for the betterments of Antiva, and who could give up all the rest who are trying the same? Is it the way that I have been a respectful and unobtrusive houseguest? Is it the way that I have quietly gone along when you order me to on Rosso Noche business? Is it the way that I made no threatening movements upon your organization whatsoever when I discovered them in Rialto? Is it the way I helped Captain Daganin? Is it the way I have gone to work as protection for men and women who would otherwise have nothing and no one, and refused pay for it? Is it the way that I have, also for no pay, spent the last seven days destroying the street gangs that your organization inadvertently created and then let run rampant? Is it the way that I have consistently and frequently said that my only intention in coming to Antiva was to kill Crows and I am in fact no longer a Crow? No?”

Azieri’s nostrils flared as he took a deep, angry breath.

“You can say you’re not a Crow your whole life long, Mahar Desoot,” he said. “But it doesn’t mean shit while you use your House name and wear those tattoos.”

“And I did not ask for either of those things, Azieri!”

They could probably hear him shouting upstairs. So much for the door.

“These were forced upon me. I had name, the name my mother gave me, and the Crows beat the knowledge of it out of me and then they beat of my memories of her!”

Zevran reached up and yanked the collar of his shirt down, exposing his breastbone.

“This is the first tattoo they put on me, and I do not even remember it. It marks me as a slave, Azieri! An eight-year-old boy who had already done more than he ever should have just to survive sold off for a few coins by a foul man who had already used him! The Crows took me and I woke up with this, in a city I had never seen, packed in a room with nineteen other children—”

He let go of his shirt.

“Oscar tells me that the three of you used to be Red Jennies together, Azieri. You want to speak of the downtrodden and the abused and the ones who no one cares for it they live or die? Then let me tell you about the Antivan Crows, Azieri, because it seems to me that you in fact know very little on the subject. Did you not ever wonder what it takes to turn a person into someone like Lauro Escipo? I will tell you. To begin, you start young. You go to the poor places and the hopeless places and you come just ahead of the Tevene slavers and give money where it is asked for and no one says the word ‘slavery’ because no one sees the chains they come with. You take these children you have grabbed off the street or bought from the Chantry or off their parents and you pile them all together in a room in a warehouse in Antiva City that is barely big enough for all of them, and you lock the door. You do not give them food or water for two days, until they are weak from the emptiness in their stomachs. Then you put in a single bowl of water, one plate of food, and tell them that this is all they will get. Perhaps the children try to cooperate and share or perhaps they fight over it, it does not matter, because it is poisoned, and it may perhaps kill one or two of them or it may not. You do this for five days, the poison making these children vomit everything they try to eat up, after just long enough that they have managed to derive a minimal amount of benefit from it so that they do not starve outright.
“After these five days, then you bring them food that is not poisoned, and is enough for everyone, but you call them animals for being forced to live in their own filth for a week and for falling on the food in desperation. You keep them on untampered food for one week, two weeks. You keep the room clean. The children become a little stronger. They begin to bond, being forced to live in such close quarters constantly. And then you cut their food again, and for longer. You starve them down until they care for nothing but eating, until they would do anything but for a mouthful of breadcrumbs, even if it means a child or two more dies. You do not remove the bodies. You make these children starve and starve and leave them locked in with the rotting corpses of the ones who could not or would not fight for food enough of their own- and then, after another week, you include a knife with the food. When the food has been finished and there is blood on the floor, you come back. You point to the corpses, including the ones still fresh, the ones that were stabbed, and you tell them that this is what they are, that this is all they ever were, that they are meant to be killers and that the Crows knew this when they found them. Children, Azieri, forced to kill each other or let each other die or die themselves! Children!

“Then you clean them again, move them out of the room. Now they have a different room, but with their own cots and the illusion of privacy. They will stay here for four, five years; during which the Crows will use every means at their disposal to teach these children to believe that kindness and love and trust are nothing but lies and pretty words. They will learn to kill because to kill means that you will survive another day. Hesitation will mean a beating. Any mistake means a beating. Speaking of your life before mans a beating. Showing fear can get you killed. Showing you are hurt can get you killed. Failure means death. If you become attached- too friendly, too trusting, even simply too nice- you will be pitted against each other until you hate or until one of you is dead! The children that survive this and they are very few, Azieri, they live only because they have learned to push everything so far away that they can convince themselves that this does not hurt them, that they are not scared, that they are not so weak as to truly care for others simply because they are who they are and they are proud of these things because the Crows tell them to be!”

Azieri was just looking at him and it was infuriating.

“And then-”

Did he care at all? He was showing no reactions, he wasn’t acting like he cared one bit-

“the Crows say these children are finally ready to be trained, and they are taken into a House as apprentices, and they are hurt and hurt and hurt because the Crows are waiting for them to reach their second breaking point, where they stop thanking people for hurting them in the name of ‘strength’ and ‘training’, where they stop being scornful of kindness and love and trust because they are desperate to receive some for themselves but are no longer able to recognize what it is they want, the point where they kill themselves or try to run!”

Zevran jabbed a finger at the ceiling.

“Those children upstairs, Azieri, they ran! They are running from torture and rape and monsters who turned their own minds against themselves and they look at me and they see a Crow who would take them back to that, who would hand them over for torture and a slow death for trying to run and breaking under the weight of the lies the Crows have beat and cut and burned and twisted into them that tell them that every bit of genuine happiness they can find is a mask for some new way to be hurt, that everyone will use them, that the people they meet when they run who react in anger and fear and sheer blighted ignorance to the ways that they are hurt meant to cause the harm that they did and that it is safer with the Crows, where you can predict how and why and when you will be forced to take more pain and where people will agree with you when you say that you are lucky, that you are fortunate, that you are subjected to these things every! Day! For having to live cold and
numb, for having to live in shallow wants and shallow feelings and shallow pleasures, for *hoarding* every second of even the smallest happiness you can find because it can all be *taken* or used to *hurt* you, for living *constantly* in a terror and pain so *complete* that you no longer even *notice* it and never allowing yourself to stop angling for power and control because to do otherwise is to *let* someone kill you, *break* you, make you *finally* be the empty *nothing* that the Crows *really* want, a person-shaped *thing* that does exactly what it is told and can be discarded the *instant* it is no longer of use or because it would be *convenient* or *entertaining* because when something is nothing it is *worth nothing*.

“You’re crying,” Azieri said.

Zevran was. They were burning, silent tears, and he swiped them away angrily. More came.

“Ohate the Crows if you want, Azieri. Hate the Crows for the people they have killed and the ways that they have hurt you. Hate the ones like Lauro Escipo who order these things done. Hate the ones who were like me and followed those orders. Hate *me* for the things that I have done that I can never fix but *don’t you dare* hate the children they *torture*; and if you are going to say that you *care* about the people Antiva was wronged, well-”

A harsh smile.

“it doesn’t mean *shit* until you take a moment, just *one moment*, and even do so much as *think* about all the people who have been *destroyed* to make those Crows, Azieri Amajuan.”

The walk up the stairs did nothing to improve his mood. Somewhere in his tirade his rage had gone from burning to a biting, exhausting chill, curled up under his heart.

Andreas wasn’t in his room when Zevran opened the door, but the Warden had clearly procured extra blankets and pillows from somewhere- perhaps Zelda or Antonu had actually tried to help. Diego and Tiar were standing warily in a clear area of the floor, well away from anything.

Zevran closed the door behind him. Tiar twitched.

“And how much of that did you hear?” he asked. There was no answer from either of them, which was more than enough to tell him that they’d heard all of it.

“You may barricade this door,” he told them. “There is a bag under the bed that you are not to touch, and do not open any of the drawers but otherwise you are free to use the room. The door to the roof is to stay unblocked but I will knock before coming in. You may have the bed tonight. I will sleep outside. I will not- I will not try to hurt you, and I will not give you back to the Crows. We will talk in the morning.”

He grabbed a pillow and a blanket and went out to the roof. Andreas was there, sitting quietly.

“And how much of that did you hear?” Zevran asked, going back to the Tevene that the man had used at the restaurant. He clearly knew it better than he knew Trade, and Zevran was in no mood to muddle through sentence fragments to hold a conversation.

“I don’t know Antivan,” Andreas said. “But you sounded very angry.”

“I have discovered,” he told him, kicking the blanket out straight. “That I have a great deal of rage when it comes to the Crows. Quite recently, in fact. As in I did not realize just *how* much until now.”

The pillow thumped to the rooftop where he dropped it.
“I want-”

It was almost his usual time to go over to the Summer Lily, Zevran realized. He very much did not want to go. Not tonight. It was only late afternoon but he was ready to be done with the day.

“I want them all dead, Andreas,” Zevran told him, staring out across the city. “I want the Crows gone because otherwise they will do nothing but hurt more people. I do not even care about the assassinating- I am so angry about the things that they do to their own people and they should not be allowed!”

He took a deep breath. There had been yelling enough already.

“If I did not deserve what was done to me, then none of the others have either. There is no one else who can do something about this, Andreas. I am not certain that Rosso Noche ever would have been able to, for all that they say, and they certainly never will now. I am the only one who cares and I am the only person with the right skills and the right knowledge to accomplish anything, even if it is nothing more than yet more death.”

“You still haven’t read your letter,” Andreas said, holding it out to him again. “It is mostly yelling-on-paper from the Captain though.”

Yes. Right. The letter.

“But he does it because he loves me,” Zevran said, taking it. “Could I perhaps ask a favor?”

Andreas saluted him, fist over chest.

“Whatsoever you need, Messere Rivasina.”

Oh, to be called by his own name again.

“I have been working as protection for a brothel called the Summer Lily. I do not think that I should go to work tonight, so if you could go down and tell Signora Ashera that Mahar Desoto will not be coming and that you will be standing in for him?”

“Sounds interesting,” Andreas said.

Zevran gave him directions, walking with him part of the way to the quarter so that he could buy his own dinner, and ink and pen and paper to write his replies for Andreas to take back to Ferelden. Once he was safely back on the roof, most of the way through his food and after he had checked on Tiar and Diego through the roof window, he started to read.

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“You complete ass,

Come home. We’re worried about you and the longer we don’t hear from you the more worried we get that you got yourself into trouble you couldn’t get out of. Probably trouble starting with “C” and ending with “rows”.

If you’re dead: you’ll never get this letter, but I wanted to say that Andreas has orders to find out who and why, and when he comes back to tell us Theron and I will come right up there and somebody is going to REALLY regret it. We will raze the Crows to the ground if that’s what it takes to make them regret it. I write my oath here by my own hand- So long as your murderer and I walk this same ground that Andraste walked and breathe this same air that carried her song to the Maker, so long shall I search for vengeance, as like the Maker unto Tevinter for his Bride. In the time before
Andraste were the oaths of the Alamarri held sacred and unbreakable by their gods and now in the
time after her are they thrice hallowed by time and tradition and my descent from Andraste’s people,
and this oath none can break for me nor deny me, a Freeman of Ferelden and a Warden of the
Grey.

If you’re not dead: go read all that again and take a minute to feel bad, you COMPLETE ASS. You
ran off without EXPLAINING why you left so I’m a bit lost here, except for the part where your
behavior was STUPID and WORRYING. Theron’s forbidden me from coming up there and
dragging you back the way we did with him when he disappeared, because he’s terrified that you
blame him for not protecting you from the Magister and doesn’t want to hurt you more. I told him he
was being an idiot and now I’m telling you that if for Maker knows what reason that he was actually
RIGHT, you’re not a complete ass. That is far out past ‘complete ass’ territory. I’m sure what it’s
called but it’s awful and you should feel bad and when you finally realize just how far past ‘complete
ass’ you’ve gotten and come home it’s going to be you and me, sparring field, until I’m convinced
that you’re REALLY sorry.

If you’re already really sorry about leaving: Good. Come home. Stop being stubborn or scared or
whatever it is that’s keeping you in Antiva and come back with Andreas. Anora’s forcing us to be at
court for the spring social season to vet her potential husbands (ugh) and I have no idea how we’re
supposed to survive that without you. Teyrn Fergus has been given potential-husband-sitting duty
too, and he’s helping, but it’s not the same. I can’t manage Theron all on my own and Nathaniel is
going to have to run the Wardens from Amaranthine while we’re here and I’m not sure that
Morrigan will be any help.

Yes, Morrigan came back. I’m writing to you from the Vigil. We got back from Denerim and she
was standing in the courtyard, almost like nothing had happened between then and the Blight.

She brought the kid. She named him Kieran. Honestly I think he’s kind of creepy but Theron’s gone
all parental and they’re bonding. He even gave him a proper Dalish name so he could introduce the
kid to Ashalle and around Hallarenis’hamina the when we get there- Hathen Theron Sabrae. It’s
weird having Morrigan around again, but it’s also kind of… nice. Maybe. Anyway, it reminds me of
the Blight. Weird how I can be nostalgic about it now, but I feel like there was a lot to be said for the
zero supervision and ability to run for the other side of the country on a moment’s notice when we
didn’t want to deal with something.

Theron hasn’t said anything but I know he wants you here for this. He’s already got Kieran calling
me “Uncle” and the LOOK on Morrigan’s face the first time- that’s not the point. I don’t know what
he’d call you, but I know we’d all like to find out. Maybe even Morrigan. She got all snitty when she
found out you’d run off and left Theron, but she’s taking a look at those books we took from the
Magister and through her mother’s grimoire. Maybe Flemeth knew some weird magic thing that can
fix all this.

Uh, other news. Morrigan’s not the only apostate hanging around. Some people Anders knew from
Kinloch ran away and threw themselves upon Theron’s mercy- Neria Surana and Leontius Amell.
Yes, it’s THOSE Amells. The Kirkwall Amells. Theron’s sister-in-law (?) Amells. They’re debating
whether or not to write them about it. Leontius had his Joining and Neria’s been conscripted to keep
the Templars from getting her but hers is waiting until she’s had her baby. She insists that Leontius
isn’t the father and just helped her get away but I’m not convinced. I guess we’ll find out in seven
months. Anyway, Anders is happy to have more people from Kinloch around and has already
started making plans about how to keep Neria’s baby from the Circle. He’s convinced it’s going to
be a mage, and has volunteered Soldier’s Peak to be a sort of anti-Circle for Warden mages and
non-Warden apostates. I told him no- VERY LOUDLY- but I’m not sure that he didn’t convince
Theron to go along with it while I wasn’t in the room. I got him distracted from you not being here
by enthusiastically agreeing the Dalishification of the Denerim estate but that has to end before the spring and I do NOT want his next thing being taking on the Chantry. He’s already threatened, in my presence, to fight the Chantry if they try to take Kieran to a Circle.

You know he’d do it.

I miss you. Theron misses you. Fen misses you. We want to give Kieran the chance to miss you, the Vigil isn’t the same without you, and PLEASE don’t abandon us to the spring court we’re going to end up alienating the entire nobility and causing some sort of horrific diplomatic incident, I just know it. There’s going to be ORLESIANS, Zevran. You really want to leave me and Theron alone around Orlesians? Don’t answer that.

Whatever is keeping you in Antiva had better be really important.

-Alistair
It was something surreal to sit here, in this aravel with walls draped in donated furs and lengths of wool cloth because it had been made for Antiva and didn’t hold heat, and be introduced to Rajrad’s family.

Zevran’s family.

There were six of them, in Clan Revasina, three here currently- Rajrad’s wife and daughters.

“It’s just the change in weather,” Ellana, his wife, tried to reassure him as Nion hacked her lungs out. “It’s wet here, and cold. And it was such a long trip. The clans who have been here longer warned us about this, and told Rajrad and Nythashiral what herbs to look for.”

“That’s not a good cough,” Theron said.

Ellana’s smile was strained.

“You needn’t worry yourself over it, Arla’lanelan.”

“Theron’, sister,” he told her. “We’re family. A friend of mine grew up in these swamps. Her magic doesn’t tend much toward healing, but she’s very knowledgeable in herbalism. I can ask her to come.”

She’d looked at him oddly at his assertion of family, but he was waiting for Rajrad to return with his parents to explain.

“If she would,” Ellana said after a few moments, after another bout of Nion’s hacking. “We wouldn’t begrudge her help.”

“Did you grow up here?” the other daughter, Adhlea, asked. She was the elder by a few years, and was kneeling by her sister’s side, doing her best to work some simple healing magic. It kept slipping away from her, light stuttering and fading, but after a moment she managed to ease her sister into sleep.

“No,” Theron told her. “In the Brecilian, in the forest. I met Morrigan after I joined the Wardens.”

“Oh,” Ellana said. “She’s human?”

Mindful of the current politics, Theron tried to keep his tone mildly curious.

“Yes. Do you not want her, then?”

“No!” Ellana said immediately. “My clan, my old clan, before I married, Lavellan, we’ve always lived close to humans. It’s just another thing for my brother to get elitist about, I’m just-”

She looked him over, briefly.

“You’re the one who’s given us our third home. That’s very… Dalish.”

“I’m not any less Dalish because I live with mostly humans.”

“My brother would disagree,” Ellana told him. “He’s been an ass ever since this argument started, and I’m very tired of it. We’re not really talking, at the moment.”
“And who is your brother?”

“The First of Clan Lavellan, Mahanon Adahllin. Adahllin was our mother, which makes him an ass and a hypocrite.”

“He wouldn’t be the first Dalish with a city elf parent to say that city elves have no place with the clans,” Theron said.

“It’s Mamate’s fault, really,” Ellana said. “She just kept taking a couple days’ trips into Wycome until she got pregnant with us. Didn’t want any of the men in Lavellan, and didn’t like anyone in the neighboring clans enough to leave Lavellan for them, or convince them to come to us. The way she talked about whatever man conceived us- I’ve heard humans talk about their horses that way.”

“That was unkind of her.”

Rajrad returned a few moments later, helping along his elderly parents- his father Myathis, and his mother Sora, and Theron was able to put the last missing piece of Zevran’s mother’s name together. 

Nehna Sora Revasina.

Now if only Zevran were here to learn it, too.

They settled in a rough horseshoe, Rajrad in the bend with his daughters, monitoring Nion’s breathing as she slept and helping along Adhlea’s attempts at magic. His parents sat near him, and Ellana on Nion and Adhlea’s other side, next to Theron.

“Rajrad tells us you have news of one of our grandsons,” Sora said once everyone was settled.

“I do,” Theron told her. “Are we not waiting for Nehna’s other children?”

Everyone looked at him oddly.

“They are not of The People,” Myathis said.

“Oh,” Theron said, confused. “We’d been under the impression that she’d only had one child in the cities of Antiva.”

“She did?” Rajrad said, the question not for him, exactly, but a general indication of puzzlement.

“Are you sure you’re in the right place?”

“If you are the family of Nehna Revasina who left for Rialto in Antiva about thirty-three years ago, then I am in the right place,” Theron said. “But I think, beyond that, we’re working with different information. Keeper Nythashiral said something about that I hadn’t spoken with Clan Talanulea?”

“Ahh,” Rajrad said, tone understanding even as he scowled at the mention of Talanulea. “My sister had three children- Satheraan in Antiva, and Damien and Salladin in Orlais.”

“When was she in Orlais?” Theron interrupted.

“After she was in Antiva.”

…Oh Creators.

“Satheraan,” Theron said, throat thick with building emotion. “He thinks, and he told me, that Nehna died when he was seven, in Antiva.”
Rajrad’s scowl deepened, underpinned by fury.

“Shem’len filth,” he spat. “She didn’t die in Antiva, Arla’lanelan, some shem sold her to some other shem in Orlais, who raped her- that was Damien. Nehna gave him to some shem woman she knew and tried to come back to The People, to Talanulea, so she could have her elf daughter grow up as one of us. But when she told the Keeper about how she’d come to end up with his clan, he exiled her!”

“He had no right,” Myathis said stiffly. “No right at all. Maybe he was right to try to keep Salladin with the Dalish, but only Revasina was allowed to do that to Nehna-”

“Babae!”

“If his grounds for exiling her had been sound and if he had the authority, then he could have kept Salladin and we should have been thanking him for-”

“Excuse me,” Theron cut in. “You said that ‘only Revasina was allowed’? Are you saying that Revasina exiled her before that?”

Sora and Myathis glanced at each other, then looked away, like eye contact was hard.

“It was informal,” Myathis said after a moment. “Nythashiral never officially stripped her of her name. It wasn’t a real exile, and she knew that. It was just- a warning. She was being stubborn over that city elf. She was always strong-willed, always went hard for what she wanted. She got her vallas’lin when she was only fifteen.”

“She wasn’t supposed to take that man so seriously,” Sora said. “She walked out of our camp with her head held high and then we never saw her again. Our scouts found signs of her leading out of our range, towards the edge of the forest, but then she didn’t come back.”

“Love is always serious,” Theron told them.

“She was eighteen!”

“And I was twenty-one,” Theron said sharply. “I was twenty-one when I met Satheraan and I was still twenty-one the day I looked at him and knew he was ‘ma’sal’shiral, three years an adult, just like your daughter.”

Rajrad was staring at him, eyes wide, as was Adhlea. Ellana had actually covered her mouth with her hands to stifle her gasp. Nehna’s parents hadn’t seemed to process the information yet.

“That’s what you meant,” Ellana said. “When you called me ‘family’.”

Theron inclined his head a fraction.

“So you’re my… nephew-in-law.”

“Satheraan and I, we’re not married,” Theron said, and it never had before but it bit at him now, gnawed with little needle-sharp teeth at his heart. “We knew what we are to each other and that was always enough. But now he’s gone to Antiva for a time on personal business, and I’ve found what we have isn’t as respected by the humans around us as I thought it was.”

“But you would marry him,” Rajrad pressed.

“Of course!”
“But what would it mean to him?” Sora asked, and Theron just had to stare at her blankly. What wouldn’t it mean to him-

“He didn’t grow up Dalish,” Myathis said. “Nehna wasn’t there. He grew up with humans their prophet and her god. How much could he ever care about our traditions? How can he really know what being your sal’shiral means?”

Theron stood abruptly.

“I expect,” he said, holding down an ugly red rage tight in his throat. “To be so casually insulted by shem’len. I expect those people to be so immediately dismissive of Satheraan. I certainly never thought to hear it from his family.”

“He doesn’t know us,” Sora said. “And we don’t know him. You talk like you know him, but if he was Dalish he’d be here with you, or with another clan.”

He would not challenge for a contest of settlement with two elders not even of his clan. They’d as good as called him-

He was not going to challenge them.

Rajrad caught up to him outside the boundaries of the in-progress clan compound- outside of Hallarenis’haminathe, really. Theron had stormed off into the Korcari Wilds rather than climb back up into the city. He was in no fit temper for socializing, and with the politics the way it was, he didn’t want to let the insult get out and force a wedge between the clans out of Antiva and the ones out of Ferelden.

“My parents-”

“Your wife was telling me about her brother,” Theron cut him off. “I would have thought that your parents would have more of a care for elves not of the clans.”

“Ones who want to be Dalish, yes,” Rajrad said, voice lowered. “It wasn’t that Nehna fell in love outside the clans. It was that he wouldn’t join, but she stayed with him anyway.”

There was a rock about so wide as his fist in the soft ground near his feet. Theron pried it up and flung it out into the swamp. It cracked loudly against a stone outcropping some ways out before plunking into the water blow.

Rajrad looked at the lighter-colored scar the impact had left on the outcropping, visible even from here, and then glanced over at him, expression drawn and wary.

“It’s a Warden thing,” Theron said. “You have to be strong. And have you to be able to go for a long time. To survive darkspawn.”

“And angry?” Rajrad asked.

“No,” Theron said. “No. But sometimes it helps.”

“My parents-”

“I’m out here so I don’t fight anyone, Rajrad Myathis Revasina!”

“No challenge?”

He didn’t sound convinced. Theron pointed to the stone.
“It’s not a matter of fact, and I don’t want to hurt them.”

“But what they-”

“I know exactly what they said!” Theron roared, and then pulled his temper back, again.

“Ellana has been wanting to take it out of someone since she and Mahanon started fighting, and now she’s doing it on my parents,” Rajrad told him after a few beats of silence. “You could issue a challenge. We’ll talk them out of accepting it, and then the insult goes away, and we can- we can all try again.”

It was tempting.

But it would have to be resaid, revealed in public. And that would never go away.

“No.”

Rajrad leaned on his staff.

“No?”

Theron knew what it sounded like.

“It’s Revasina and Talanulea that are in the middle of this argument,” Theron reminded him. “If I challenge your parents then I get pushed to Talanulea’s side. That’s not where I want to be. A challenge makes the insult public- Rajrad, you’re First, you work it out.”

Rajrad watched for a few minutes longer as Theron hunted for more rocks, yanking them out of the mud with a vicious sort of satisfaction.

How dare they how dare they how dare they they are his family-

“I don’t see it,” he finally said.

“The parents of the woman who everyone started this entire argument about who gets to be Dalish over- they’ll take her,” Theron said, and threw the rock he was holding. It hit the stone further out and bounced off, a twock-plmp that left no mark on the stone. “Revasina nearly exiled her just for falling in love, and they’d take her back after spending more years gone than years there. But they won’t take her elvhen son, who never got a chance to choose-”

“Well, he’s probably my age, isn’t he?” Rajrad said. “He’s had plenty of time to choose.”

He would not challenge Rajrad either. You couldn’t challenge someone for not knowing something, for making ignorant comments, and he was not just going to hit the man.

He was not.

“But do you have any idea what living with humans is like? Any idea what sort of things our city cousins have to put up with, the things some of them have to do and all the work and the effort and the- the- there are still city elves, Rajrad, and there are some times I can only think that that’s the greatest miracle of the Creators-”

“We’re Dalish!”

“And they’re still elves!”
“Well if it’s so bad why don’t you leave!”

“I can’t!”

It was a bitter truth. And he was bitter, when he let himself think about it, if he got angry enough or frustrated enough, even as he knew that The People never could have had Hallarenis’haminathe without everything that meant he could never be a true part of it.

“I’m a Grey Warden. I hold lands in Ferelden. I have responsibilities. I have a duty.”

“You were Dalish first,” Rajrad said reprovingly. “What about your duty to us? Your loyalty-”

No. No, no, no, no, no he had put up with enough today—

“And what is that!” he demanded, pointing angrily up at the rise of Hallarenis’haminathe. “My duty, my sacred duty, was to become a Grey Warden! It was put upon me in a ruined temple of my own god, Rajrad, and yet you’d still stand there and question my loyalty and my—”

“Lovely talk you’re having, I see,” Alistair said. He’d turned up suddenly with Kieran, unexpected, unasked, an unsought blessing of an intervention before something actually happened.

Kieran was wandering through the long grass, investigating who-knew-what.

“Careful, Hathen,” Theron told him. He didn’t know what you could find at the edge of the swamp, at least not in the normal course of things. It had seemed pretty popular with the darkspawn, but they should all be gone now.

They had better all be gone.

“Yes, Babae.”

“You have a half-human son—”

“Rajrad Myathis Revasina,” Theron said, focusing on Alistair’s face and Kieran in the grasses. His brother, his son, he couldn’t fight Revasina, not if he wanted to keep things together, not if Zevran was going to have his family to come home to, not if he was going to be able to do something, to keep helping his people. “If you’re planning on finishing what your parents started and actually accusing me of being banal’vhen then do it outright and properly or leave!”

Rajrad left.

“Sounds like you’ve had a fun morning,” Alistair said after he’d walked out of sight and earshot. “Revasina not so welcoming?”

“Revasina isn’t—”

When he’d thrown these rocks at his feet he’d have thrown five six seven times, count them, focus, seven throws to calm down and go back up to the city and do what he’d come here for.

“It’s- it’s Dalish sodding—”

These rocks weren’t so big as the first two, not so comfortable to hold and not so easy to throw, but that didn’t matter. He threw another one, hitting the stone again, inadvertently scraping it down the side and leaving a new scar on its surface.

“Ookay,” was Alistair’s response to that, and he settled into an easy, spread-leg stance, weight
resting on his heels, arms crossed. Ready to wait, and listen. “Cursing your own people? That’s new.”

“The politics,” Theron snarled, and threw a stone. “Zevran- Zevran’s mother is alive, Alistair, that’s how everyone got started arguing about who gets to be Dalish, who gets to come back, who gets to live here-”

A moment for that to sink in, before the reaction.

“Maferath’s mercy.”

“Or she was alive-”

A rock.

“-a while ago, after Antiva, I don’t know how long but she was in Orlais-”

He didn’t hit the outcrop this time. His throw went wide.

“-he’s got siblings-”

Skimmed off the top with a clatter before hitting the water.

“-a half-human brother and an elven sister and he’s got an uncle, that was his uncle-”

“Looked pretty young,” Alistair remarked, either having recovered his good humor or gathered himself to fake it, after this news, Theron couldn’t tell, everything was just- how dare they. “Zevran might actually be older than him. Oh Maker, Kieran-! Leave those bones alone you don’t know where they’ve been, come back over here with me and your Babae.”

The last rock he had, he just threw straight into the swamp water at his feet. It made an unsatisfying plunk.

“He’s got a whole family in Revasina!” Theron yelled out into the swamp. “A whole family- he has his mother’s brother and his wife and two daughters and both his mother’s parents and all they could do was sit there and say to my face that he couldn’t possibly be good enough for me!”

“They’ve never met him?” Alistair said.

“He’s not Dalish,” Theron hissed. “He didn’t grow up Dalish and he didn’t try to become Dalish when he met me so they said he couldn’t possibly know what it would mean to marry me, how important and special it is that I call him ‘ma’ sal’ shiral and that because he can’t possibly know I don’t matter that much to him and he doesn’t really care-”

“Well, look, they don’t know him,” Alistair tried to reason. “When he comes back and you bring him down here-”

“They’ll never take him if he doesn’t become Dalish!”

“So? That’s not his fault.”

“He ran away from the Crows to one of the Dalish clans in Antiva when he was still an apprentice,” Theron spat, tears of frustrated prickling hot in his eyes, because he could just about hear what people would say about that, when it finally became common knowledge, like all the nasty details of his mother’s life were, now. “I don’t know which one and I don’t when and I don’t know how long but to Revasina, to Talanulea, to anyone- he had his chance and he threw it away and you don’t get
second chances like that, not when you’re a city elf, if he’d grown up in Revasina he could have left and come back to a different clan and no one would care that much, if he really wanted to be Dalish I’d sponsor him to a clan, I’d just take him back to Sabrae and it would be like when we were in Kirkwall and they’d all be too glad to see me again to fight about it, and once you get in no one’s supposed to say anything! He’d be safe! He’d be respected, and-!”

*How dare they.*

“They’re supposed to be better!” he yelled at the stone in the swamp. “They’re *Dalish* and they’re supposed to treat him better than the humans!”

“Yeah, I can’t really see him being Dalish,” Alistair said after a moment. “He really took to Hallarenis’haminathe while we were here looking for you, but it was kind of the same way he took to court. All friendly and smiling making friends. I’m not even sure that he was more comfortable here, with other elves.”

“Of course not,” Theron told him. “Of course he wouldn’t be, he didn’t- so many of my people say that city elves aren’t really elves they’re humans who look like us but they don’t know, they don’t know how city elves are different, how there are things we still share and things they’ve made for themselves, but even with that Zevran doesn’t know those things, he didn’t grow up with a community, he grew up with the *Crows*. He knows-”

He hated this. He hated everything, right now. He wanted Zevran back. He wanted to never have gone to Kirkwall. He wanted things to be like they’d been, the way they’d hoped it could be, in the days after the Blight; in the days after he’d come back from Antiva the first time. Their problems done. Everything settled. Any new problems, small problems. Home found, family found.

No more of *this*.

“He’s an elf but he’s just as out-of-place with the Dalish as he would be in any Alienage,” Theron said. “And people keep saying that’s a bad thing and I’m tired of it- if he was, if he was *Kallian*, if we’d picked up Kallian during the Blight and she was just as she was but I’d fallen in love with her and she’d come with you to find me and learned El’vhen and then decided not to become Dalish, they’d be *fine* with it, they wouldn’t understand but she’d be starting from- she’d be *banal’vhen* becoming *something* and even if she didn’t make it all the way they’d think she was better than she was-”

“Hold up a minute,” Alistair interrupted him. “I thought ‘banal’vhen’ was ‘not Dalish’, how is it ‘becoming something’?”

“It’s-”

Trying to explain it was hard. It would have been hard if he was calm but right now he wasn’t and that made it worse.

“It *does*, but ‘vhen’ is people, person, so *banal’vhen* is ‘not Dalish’ but it’s also ‘not something’, ‘not somebody’, ‘not a person’. It’s, it’s, you’re nothing if you’re not Dalish, Alistair, you’re not part of a clan and you don’t have a family and you don’t matter, you’re just- you’re not.”

“Okay,” Alistair said, doubt all over his tone despite the word.

He didn’t get it, and he *had* to, Theron needed someone to *understand this*.

“Zevran,” he said. “Ze- Satheraan’s mother, she *had* a clan, and she *left*- Revasina exiled her but not really so it’s a *worse* sort of *banal’vhen*, Kallian is just ‘not Dalish’ Nehna is Dalish who’s
banal’vhen now so Satheraan doesn’t get to be just another city elf he’s been stuck with all of this and he could have been Dalish but they’ll say he threw it away and they’ll say it’s because of he’s ungrateful and obstinate just like his mother and so he’ll never be good enough for me and they can say whatever they damn well please about him and the only thing that will change it, the only thing any of them would ever accept was him becoming Dalish and he won’t it’s just, it’s not him and I won’t make him but, but—"

He was going to cry. This was just too much.

“I promised him, Alistair,” Theron said. “I told him all these things about how his mother was Dalish so he’s Dalish too because of that and I told him that he had a people and now it’s not true.”

“He’ll understand,” his friend told him quietly, after a moment, stepping forward to put his hand on his shoulder. Theron leaned forward, past it, and Alistair caught him in a firm, gentle hug.

“He shouldn’t have to,” Theron said. “But the nobles won’t have him and my people won’t have him and I promised, I’m supposed to give him something better than he had and I can’t even get him his family.”

“Yeah, well, so what?” Alistair asked. “Blood family doesn’t always work out. I mean, me, we kind of spent a lot of time handling that one, remember? You gave him somewhere to belong, Theron, you know you did. He’s got us, and he’s got Vigil’s Keep. He has a family.”

“But it’s not enough,” Theron told him, voice muffled against Alistair’s chest and getting thick with tears besides. “It wasn’t enough. He left.”

The next couple of days in Hallarenis’haminathe didn’t seem to do much to improve Theron’s mood. He was calm and seething by turns, quiet through both, and Alistair didn’t know what to do about. He’d listened in the Wilds, and walked back up to Vhadan’ena’s compound with him.

At least he wasn’t alone in it- Kieran, Morrigan, and Ashalle didn’t seem to know how to help, either. Kieran kept bringing him tiny swamp flowers, and Theron was going around to hire crafters with the blooms tucked into the cord wrapped around the top of his scabbard. Morrigan had been waiting for them in the compound, having elected to stay behind when Kieran had started insisting that Theron was angry and needed them, and in the days since had been following up her initial high-handed dismissal of anyone holding an opinion that contributed to his mood with loud, pointed comments whenever Theron got particularly grim. Ashalle- well, Ashalle was being his mother, the way Alistair couldn’t help but be jealous of.

Three days after he’d gone to Revasina, Theron came back to Vhadan’ena with a worrying sort of expression, and a name- Tanis, possibly in Lydes. He’d gone to speak with Talanulea.

Alistair spent some time that night worrying about whether he should go around with Theron the next morning before discarding it, sighing into the darkness. Theron would have enough problems without a human tagging along after him, right now.

In the end, it turned out well. While Theron was out, people came looking for him. The first came only an hour or so after he had left.

“Arianne,” Ashalle greeted her when she came into the compound. The four of them had taken to spending the days in the courtyard by the entrance, waiting for Theron to return and doing small chores for Vhadan’ena. Alistair was sharpening knives, at the moment; and Morrigan was making notations to Keeper Lanaya’s notes on healing and herbalism in the Wilds while Kieran played with
some carved halla. “It has been a while.”

The new woman and Morrigan were glaring at each other, and Alistair put the knives aside to go diffuse it.

“Arianne like hunted-around-with-Theron-to-get-the-book-back-Arianne?” he asked as he walked over, and held his hand out for a Dalish greeting: forearm held to forearm, hands grasped just below the elbow.

“Yes.”

“Warden Alistair,” Alistair introduced himself. “Thanks for keeping him alive through all that.”

She snorted.

“He was keeping us alive,” Arianne told him. “I’m looking for him.”

“He’s out hiring crafters. You could leave a message, though, and I’ll tell him when he gets back.”

“We heard that he has been asking around Nehna Sora Revasina,” Arianne said. “Our Keeper sent me to tell him that she passed through Athenae some years after Talanulea. Her daughter was a mage, and she came looking for someone to take both of them. She was turned away, and as far as we know, that was the last anyone heard from her again.”

It was still seriously throwing Alistair that Zevran had family, alive, in the Dalish. It made logical sense, it wasn’t like his mother just wouldn’t have had a family. Dalish didn’t work like that- but they’d all gotten used to Zevran’s Crow background that even Theron hadn’t felt much urge to do much besides mild prodding at his Dalish roots. Maybe if he had, things would be different now.

Either way, it still felt pretty surreal, and it wasn’t helped by the appearance of Ellana’s appearance a few hours later.

Sure, elves didn’t show their age the same way that humans did, but there was no way that she was older than Zevran. He had an uncle who might be younger than him and an aunt-in-law from different clan- and he was part of Sabrae, right, kind of, through Theron? Three clans, because everybody was family in a clan. Zevran actually had a really big extended family.

Alistair kind of wished he’d waited to send Andreas off to Antiva. He deserved to have this news, good and bad.

“He’s not here,” he told Ellana.

“I know,” she said. “I’m not just here for him. He said he had a friend who knew the herbs around here?”

“You want Morrigan,” Alistair said, pointing over at where she was sitting; and that was how he met Zevran’s cousins. Morrigan was convinced to play healer for Nion, taking her off to Keeper Lanaya’s home with Ashalle while Adhlea stuck close to her mother, lingering in the courtyard. It was Kieran who broke the silence, edging up around Ellana to appear suddenly next to Adhlea, because he was sneaky like that.

Alistair was pretty sure that he’d thought that fondly. Weird.

“You’re pretty,” Kieran told Adhlea.
He wasn’t wrong. She shared Zevran’s eyes, and her deep, rich brown hair threw faint red and gold highlights in the sun, complementing the warm undertones of her skin. She wasn’t old enough to be ‘beautiful’ yet, but she was clearly going to grow into it.

Adhlea was not impressed, nor complimented. Her nose had wrinkled up and she was giving him a nasty look.

“And you’re human,” she said. “Humans aren’t supposed to call elves ‘pretty’.”

Oh.

“I am not and you are!” Kieran protested.

“Hey, hey,” Alistair said, interveneing before the situation could explode. “Adhlea Ellana Rivasina, this is Hathen Theron Sabrae.”

“Oh,” Ellana said, and Alistair looked over at her quickly to gauge the likelihood of her saying something. She caught his look, and then turned her attention to her daughter. “Adhlea, this is your cousin.”

“But he’s-”

“Your cousin,” Ellana told her firmly. “His father is sal’shiral to your Aunt Nehna’s son. It doesn’t matter what else he is.”

“Babae’s Dalish,” Kieran insisted, still upset. “And mother isn’t really human!”

Oh great.

“That’s right, pup,” Alistair told him. “But you mostly look human, is the thing, and when humans call elves ‘pretty’ they don’t usually mean something nice.”

“But it is!”

“It’s supposed to be, and that’s part of why Adhlea just got upset with you,” Alistair said, trying to figure out how he was supposed to talk about racism with a four-year-old. This was a discussion that required preparation. “But, hey, she’s a mage too, just like you. Maybe you two could talk about what you know.”

“Go show each other something,” Ellana told them. “I’m sure Hathen would like someone to tell him about what your father’s taught you, Adhlea.”

Kieran nodded enthusiastically.

“Mother taught me things, and I know things,” he told his cousin, tugging on her hands to draw her away from the adults. “I can show you.”

“Something safe!” Alistair insisted. “And stay here-”

They were already gone.

“Vhadan’ena will look after them,” Ellana stopped him when he started to go after them. “And Adhlea knows what she’s doing.”

“They’re not all mages,” Alistair protested. “And she’s like- ten.”
“Nine,” her mother corrected. “And so? She’s been doing this her whole life, and Vhadan’ena knows as well as anyone when magic is getting dangerous.”

It just felt wrong to Alistair to not have the children under direct supervision. They were off doing magic- but the Dalish did live every day with magic. If Ellana acted like this was no big deal, maybe it wasn’t. Maybe they really would be fine without someone watching them.

But still.

“So Theron,” he said, to keep himself distracted.

Ellana looked at him oddly.

“Yes?” she asked. “What about him?”

“You sort of implied that you were here to see him.”

“I’d like to. I might wait for him.”

A considering look at him.

“I don’t suppose you’d know his clan connections.”

“Maybe?” Alistair said. “I’m still not really sure how they all work, but- Sabrae, of course. Sabrae’s Keeper Marethari used to be of Vhadan’ena, and we helped save them from werewolves during the Blight, and his mother has been staying with them since about then too, so Vhadan’ena is the only one I’m really sure about, besides Velanna, but that’s because Keeper Velanna is one of our Wardens. He helped Athenae get one of their books back when it got stolen, that probably counts for something. His sister was First and she’s from Alerion originally, but her parents didn’t come with her and she was really young when she left so who knows about them. Revasina and then Lavellan through you- oh! Theron’s mother’s family was from Lanasten, they switched before she was born in a family exchange for a mage child. Sabrae was- in the Dales, maybe? Definitely in the Frostbacks. I don’t know who they would have known there, or if he inherited any favors from his parents.”

“You are very well-informed for a city half-human,” Ellana told him. “And your El’vhen is good. Arla’lanelan taught you well.”

“Oh, no, I- the language I kind of picked up myself, mostly, Zevran and I were here for a whole winter a couple years ago and it’s not like I don’t not use it ever with him and Theron and Velanna a couple of times- and, er, I’m not half-anything. Just human.”

“Really?” Ellana asked, seeming more curious than shocked or surprised.

“Yeah. Really.”

“Too bad,” she said. “You could be Dalish, otherwise.”

“…Thanks?”

Ellana nodded in acceptance, then hesitated.

“Do you know him well?”

“Uh, who?”

“Rajrad’s nephew. Satheraan.”
“Yes? I was just-right. ‘Satheraan’ turned into ‘Zevran’ in Antivan. That’s what he’s been called most of his life.”

Ellana muttered it to herself a few times, unable to get the correct pronunciation.

“He’s with Theron, of course I know him,” Alistair continued, to spare her the embarrassment. “I’ve known him basically the entire six years he’s been Ferelden.”

“Six years?” she asked. “Six years ago was the Blight. Why would he come here then?”

…Oh no.

“What did Theron actually tell you?” he asked.

“Not a lot. He came asking about Nehna and we told him what he knew, he said he knew Satheraan and they were sal’shiral, and then my parents-in-law insulted him so badly that he stormed off to keep from challenging them.”

“‘Challenging them’?”

“If you don’t care enough to fight for it, it doesn’t really matter.”

“He was mad enough to duel them?”

“I don’t know that word,” Ellana told him.

“Two people fight each other over a point of honor. Swords if you both know how to use them, but fists if you can’t. Nobody’s supposed to die.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well, yes, you can do it that way, if it’s a public challenge and anyone can fight for it, but usually we prefer an archery competition. Otherwise, if it’s a matter of fact more than emotion, the challenge is a debate.”

Alistair thought of what Theron had said about the way Dalish held grudges over historical fact. It was weird to think that that was considered a sort of duel, but at the same time it made a particular, peculiar sort of sense.

“What do you do when someone wins over a matter of fact, but then it turns out they were wrong?” he asked.

“Then they were wrong,” Ellana said, like it was obvious.

“Well, yes, that’s the point,” Alistair said. “But how do you reconcile that? Does it just-not matter that they won? Or do you have to fight it out again?”

She tilted her head at him, eyes narrowed in puzzlement.

“Why would it matter that they won?”

“Because if you win a duel it means you were right?”

“That’s a stupid way to do it,” Ellana informed him.

“Well, we think it would be kind of stupid to have a fight, otherwise,” he told her. “What’s the point of getting swords bloody if you don’t get something out of winning?”
“And what about having risked your pride on your conviction?” she challenged. “Is that not to be respected?”

Alistair shrugged.

“If you’re having a duel when all that’s left is your pride, that’s sort of-”

He waggled his hand back and forth, trying to convey the ambivalence of it. Quietly pathetic, but with its own sort of dignity, if you were properly honorable besides all that.

“Anyway,” he said, to get them out of the impending mire of cultural differences. “Zevran. Theron didn’t get around to telling you anything?”

Ellana shook her head.

“Great,” Alistair said. “Perfect. All right. Summarization it is then. His mother went to Rialto to be with her man, he died, she inherited his debt and ended up in prostitution—”

He was prepared for Ellana’s impending question. Theron had needed an explanation, too.

“Having sex with people for money—yes, we know you can do it for free; yes, shem’len are ridiculous. There’s a whole system to it, but it’s really not, uh, I don’t know if there’s a right word for it in El’vhen. Do you know ‘respectable’?”

“Yes.”

“It’s exactly not that, in the worst way possible. She lived in brothel—a house where prostitutes both live and have their sex—with Zevran until she died—he was told she died—when he was seven or eight, and then the brothelmaster—the person prostitutes have to give some of their money to to keep living in the house—sold him to the Crows—a group of famous and really good assassins.”

“He was a slave!” Ellana burst out, appalled.

“Yes.”

“A slave,” she repeated, quickly descending into fury. “They’re dead, right? All of them? What are assassins?”

Huh. Theron hadn’t needed this explained to him.

“People who kill other people for money.”

“Bounty hunters,” she spat.

“No,” Alistair told her, unhappy to find that they were starting to talk past each other again.

“I don’t see the difference,” Ellana said. “Bounty hunters come after us for the money the shem lords will pay them for our vallas’lin.”

“They what?”

Alistair still remembered, very clearly, the guards in Fort Drakon dragging Theron back to the cell, his face torn to shreds and unwilling to look directly back at him, hiding in his hair the entire escape.

“It used to be ears,” Ellana told him. “I heard once that it’s still like that in the cities. But we have healers. We can survive losing an ear, both ears. Faces are harder, and the shem’len know just
enough to know they mean a lot to us.”

“Bounty hunters can take whatever jobs they like,” Alistair explained, not wanting to spend any more time on this topic, not when he felt sick to his stomach at the memories and wondering if Theron had been thinking about that, when they’d taken surgeons’ knives to his face. “Assassins get hired directly for a specific murder. And you only send assassins after people you… well. People you think are worth something. If they weren’t worth your time but you needed them gone, you’d hire some thugs. Like bounty hunters. So- the Crows got Zevran. They trained him to be one of their assassins, it’s what they do with all the kids they buy, and it was- it hurt him, a lot. They hurt him a lot. He was a mess when we met him. He’d. Uh. I don’t know what you’ve heard about the Blight but the only Wardens around for basically all of it were me and Theron and the man in charge of the Fereldan army thought we were a threat to him and the country so he hired the Crows to get rid of us and they sent Zevran.”

Best to speed right past that part.

“But, see, that was a mistake, because Zevran didn’t really try that hard to kill us since he was trying to get out of the Crows and Wardens are really hard to kill anyway so we didn’t die and at the end of it all Theron decided to take Zevran along, he came along and helped us fight the Blight, we all became friends and they fell in love and together we saved the world, lots fun, great boding experience, really don’t recommend it.”

Ellana was staring at him blankly, working on assimilating all the information. Alistair spent a moment fervently hoping that she wouldn’t grab onto something awkward or difficult to talk about-

“Satheraan helped end the Blight?”

“Yeah,” he told her, relieved. “He was really helpful. Nobody had any idea how effective Crow stuff could be against darkspawn, or how you could apply some of it to things beyond killing. The number of times he’s kept me and Theron from making a social mistake when dealing with the nobility is kind of sad, really. And he and Theron are good for each other. It’s great seeing them happy toge-”

“Keeper Lanaya!”

“But on the downside,” Alistair said, watching Theron storm into Vhadan’ena’s compound. “Sometimes it seems like Theron’s forgotten how to handle himself when Zevran isn’t around.”

“Alistair, have you seen Lanaya!”

“No!” he yelled back across the courtyard. “You’ve got a guest!”

“I need armor first!”

“You’re wearing your armor!”

“I can’t be a Warden for this! Keeper Lanaya!”

“Theron Mahariel Sabrae what did you get yourself into while I wasn’t watching y- don’t you walk away from me! Excuse me, Ellana, glad I could be helpful-”

Ashalle had stayed behind in the Brecilian Forest for her sons, her lost and abandoned sons, and it had taken her some weeks to realize just how thoroughly she’d lost all three of her children.
Merrill had been up north somewhere neither of them knew with Sabrae, with Marethari to mother her and her duties to hold her attention. Ashalle had not been, was not unaware of the fact that she’d let her living child go to stay for the ones who had likely been dead. It was the choice she’d made. Merrill, at least, she’d thought at the time, could have her life with the clan the way it should have been. She could take over from Marethari and lead Sabrae away from the decisions the Keeper she’d apprenticed to had made for Sabrae, decisions that didn’t-

Tamlen had been lost to the mirror in the ruins, ruined itself, only an empty stand and a few small slivers and larger shards of sparkling glass Merrill hadn’t noticed when gathering up the Eluvian. Ashalle had camped there, using the construction as protection from the weather and killing any of the darkspawn or Blighted animals that came by. She’d never figured out where they’d come from.

Theron had been gone, gone, gone with the humans, with the man who had smashed the Eluvian Tamlen was in, forced away from the clan sick in body and grieving in heart and denied the right to say ‘no’ and die with his family- because his sickness would relapse, she knew, without Marethari and Merrill to work healing and magic on it, and the Wardens and their promised cure were far away. Ashalle had watched him walk away and known down in the depths of her soul where hope couldn’t reach that Theron was going to die on the road, with no one to bury him and no one to stand at his grave and remember and no one to sing the prayers.

She had listened to the human Warden say that Tamlen was gone past retrieving, watched Marethari stand by and agree with his ‘right’ to claim Theron like some property and then walk off with him, had stood in her place and refused to be moved to follow that Keeper from where she had lost her sons, and endured. She had sniped darkspawn from the familiar cover of familiar Fade-touched trees and hollows, and the forest had kept her from the werewolves when she wandered in search of some safety, finally driven away from the ruins where her children had been torn from her and where she had planted seeds for them, meant to grow into strong old cedars. She had planned to guard them, but someone had to know who the cedars were for, and where she’d planted them, so a Dalish mage could go out and magically encourage them into becoming saplings tall and hardy enough to survive and give the names to a Hahren for remembering.

Vhadan’ena had found her and taken in her, their own numbers weakened and requiring support, telling her that her son had come and gone again. She’d spent the evening hours at the camp statue of Falon’din in thanks to the god for his life and hopes that he would continue to be watched over, traveling with humans in a human country. She had gone with Vhadan’ena’s contingent of volunteers from the other clans in Ferelden and fought the horde in the city, following news of the Wardens to fight on top of Fort Drakon, using up arrows on the Archdemon.

She’d seen Theron rush at it with his sword, the light, caught him from behind when he’d been ready to fall on his tail afterwards, held him as he clung to her to regain his balance, whispering ‘Mamae Mamae Mamae’.

It was almost worse, somehow, standing here on the edge of the challenge field and watching him pace, tapping the flat of his sword impatiently against the side of his shin, because here she couldn’t do anything.

“I cannot believe he’s doing this!” Alistair hissed under his breath. “He could wear his armor at least!”

Theron’s Warden silverite plate and scaled quilting were in her house in Vhadan’ena’s compound. He’d borrowed hardened leather Dalish armor from one of the clan’s scouts who was of a similar height and build- but only two pieces of it.

Breastplate and a laced-up gorget. Nothing to protect his legs, covered only by the gray wool pants
that were part of his uniform, and his usual boots. Nothing for his head. Nothing for his upper armors
or shoulders, his lower arms covered in a Warden’s elbow-length leather gloves, thick but
unhardened through the arms and supple and sturdy in wrist and hands, buckled tight. He’d given
himself some protection from the easiest immediate ways to be killed, but was relying on his sword
and shield for all else.

He’d said it was supposed to be equalizing. A way to make up for his Warden strength and stamina
and experience. She had stared in disbelief when she’d realized that he really did mean it when that
was all the armor he’d come out in. Alistair had sputtered and tried guilting him into reconsidering by
talking about how Amaranthine was sure to fall to ruins without him alive to run it. Morrigan had
called him an idiot and thrown his quilting at him.

Ashalle had thought she could grow to like Morrigan.

A lot of people were turning up at the field to see. Theron had made his announcement, yesterday, to
the Keepers and Hahren taking their turn sitting court in the Tower of Ishal, that he was going to
issue a public challenge in the morning before storming back to the compound to find leather armor.
News had spread quickly and by now there must have been a couple adults from every clan, or near
that, and three times as many teenagers and children.

Keeper Lanaya stood in for Marethari, who by custom should have been one of the witnesses. She
arrived with the Keepers of Revasina and Talanulea, rounding out the required three, and the crowd
stirred. With such accompaniment, it was clear enough what the general issue of the challenge would
be.

Theron ceased pacing and waited for them to take up their positions and officially hear his challenge.
A moment of arrangement, and Lanaya inclined her head slightly, his invitation to begin.

“I am Theron of Clan Sabrae,” he said, loud and clear and carrying. “Son of Mahariel Soleanathe
Sabrae and Saeris Viera Sabrae. My god is Falon’din, and I call challenge.”

He looked out at the gathered Dalish, face set, and Ashalle wondered again at what had happened,
yesterday, to make him do this.

“‘Ma’sal’shiral is Satheraan Nehna Revasina,” Theron told the Dalish. “He is the son of Nehna Sora
Revasina, and I say that both of them are deserving of a place in our city. I say that all those who left
for the cities and the exiles who were sent away for problems that no longer endanger us and the
children of both should be allowed.”

Murming in the crowd.

“My son is Hathen Theron Sabrae. His mother is Morrigan, daughter of Asha’bellanar, and he is
half-human. I say that he deserves a place in our city. I say that anyone with heritage in The People is
allowed a place with the Dalish, and recognition-”

Someone quick on the uptake exclaimed wordlessly, outraged.

“-because they are of The People,” Theron insisted loudly. “Our half-human children and our city
cousins and their half-human children are still of the blood of Arlathan! We are the last of what
remains of the Dales and we will never submit- but neither have they!”

Outrage.

“How many of you have ever met a city elf?” Theron demanded over the noise. “How many of you
had ever set foot in a city before coming here? How many of you have ever even seen an Alienage?
Our city cousins live day by day surrounded by humans who would just as well see them dead, and yet they still live! Who of us can say the same? Who of you could live as they do, even for a day? Who of you could survive! They may not live our ways and they may not know our gods or our history but their souls are of The People and their courage of the Dalish, and we need them!”

“The Dalish are The People!” someone yelled.

“The People are the El’vhen!” Theron yelled back. “And we are not the only ones! We have been nomads for seven hundred years- what do we know of farming or diplomacy or running cities or constructing buildings to last or living as one community, whole and harmonious, and not just as a group of clans sharing the same land? In five years we have accomplished much but it will not be enough! If you don’t agree with me then come answer my challenge- let me know the name and face of one who would stand before me and tell me that my son and sal’shiral don’t deserve my love because they are not Dalish; that I am naïve to realize that any of the humans I care for disrespect me and hate our gods; and that elves who would chose the traditions of their parents and grandparents and communities, which came from the same ground as ours, over ours don’t deserve our friendship or help or mutual exchange! I am Commander of the Grey in Ferelden Theron Mahariel Sabrae called Arla’lanelan and Hero and Arl and ‘ma’sal’shiral, and the name that I will not have is banal’vhen!”

Someone pushed through to the front of the crowd immediately- maybe one of the ones who’d yelled, maybe not.

“I am Nathian Daneri Gebaras,” she announced herself to the Keepers, and then told Theron: “I say that flat-ears and half-humans have no place in The People.”

She had knives on her belt, human-style, a scouting trophy. She drew them, lunging; Theron blocked the blade closest to him with his sword as he sidestepped, and bashed his shield into her arm. She stumbled, leaving herself open. He tucked his sword up behind his shield, put his shoulder to it, and rammed her. Nathian fell, and bowed out.

Others stepped up to take her place. The challenge fell into an easy pattern of short, unimpressive fights and Ashalle relaxed. Her son was the next best thing to unarmored, but no one could get near touching him.

Next to her, Alistair stood and glowered and muttered to himself about ridiculous ideas and safety and self-presevation.

Her son had good friends.

“How long do these last?” he asked eventually.

“Until there are no more who come to answer the challenge, or it gets too dark to see.”

The morning passed. The sun climbed, and the Keepers made Theron break for water. Morrigan had arrived with Kieran shortly before with an early lunch to share- and Ellana, and Rajrad, and their daughters.

“His parents won’t come,” Ellana told Theron as they settled in with food. “But I’m not staying out of this.”

And he doesn’t get to, either. Clear, if unspoken, and somewhat undermined by the way Rajrad wouldn’t exactly look at Theron. Her son watched him, and his wife kept shooting him pointed looks, until he stopped being hesitant and said something.
“Thank you. For standing up for Nehna. And Satheraan. Even if I’ve never met him. I’d like to, I think.”

The next person to answer Theron’s challenge, after the break, came unarmed. Theron left his sword and shield with Alistair and took the armor off to leave with her. It was a longer fight than the others, Theron’s best skills clearly not lying in unarmed combat, but he did eventually manage to take his challenger down when the man grabbed him from behind. Theron got their legs tangled, threw his weight back, and smashed the other man’s torso between the ground and his shoulders.

“Zevran- Satheraan taught us that one,” Alistair said. “We’re supposed to use it if anyone tries to get behind us and slit our throats. You ever have someone in plate armor fall on you like that? Really not fun. He refused to let us practice it unless Velanna was around to heal everybody up. And for a good reason, it turned out.”

Theron’s challenger walked over to the Keepers with a broken collarbone and two cracked ribs for healing. Keeper Nythashiral did not look amused.

The next person to step up was Mahanon Adahlillin Lavellan. Ellana hissed in displeasure, and Ashalle finally saw Lavellan’s First. He was some fifteen or twenty years older than her son, black hair starting to go grey early, and much paler of skin than she was used to seeing in the Dalish, like his sister. His vallas’lin used colored ink, still strange to her eyes even with the years of Marethari and living outside of Sabrae, where tradition held that black was the only choice. Mahanon’s for Dirthamen could pass for black in some lighting, dark purple as they were.

And green, green, green eyes, the same green as the Fadefire wolflights of the Brecilian- or Merrill’s eyes. Ashalle wondered if that color was a particular trait of the clans out of the Marches, or if it was just coincidence. Ellana’s eyes were a fetching mostly-green hazel, but close family couldn’t count for this sort of thing.

“I say that you no longer deserve to be called Dalish,” Mahanon told Theron, loud enough for everyone to hear. “You lie with humans. You bring them here, to our city. You admit to relations with them, you proudly name a shem woman the mother of your son and a flat-eared son of an exile your sal’shiral. Others are too intimidated by your reputation to say anything- I am not. You are banal’vhen and your opinions don’t deserve our ears.”

Theron came to collect his armor and weapons in a clear, towering fury. Ellana looked completely mortified and wouldn’t met his face as Alistair refused to hand over his sword and shield until he’d checked the ties on Theron’s armor himself.

“Watch him,” Morrigan muttered as Alistair tugged at straps and laces and redid a knot. “Remember your knife.”

What knife? He wasn’t wearing one.

Theron snatched his sword and shield from Alistair and barged back onto the field, Mahanon backing up quickly and swiping his staff out in an arc to form a wall of ice spikes between them. Theron had to jump back to avoid being impaled and then go around it, which gave Mahanon the distance he needed, or wanted. A large, wild tangle of woody bushes, vines, and ground cover sprang up around his feet and lashed threatening at Theron when he tried to approach. Her son tested them a few times with his sword before stepping back, out of their reach. A stalemate, already?

“He’s going to wait him out,” Alistair leaned over and told her quietly. “The bigger a spell is, the harder it is to keep up over time. He’ll have to drop it eventually.”
“But my brother-in-law is a very powerful mage,” Rajrad said glumly. “It’s why our Keepers arranged for Ellana and I to get married.”

Morrigan scoffed, but held Kieran tighter.

“Theron is more than experienced enough with ‘very powerful’ mages to win against your brother.”

“There was one time most of the clan fell sick, including our Keeper and the halla, and we stayed too long in one place,” Ellana said, watching as the wild tangle cleared enough around her brother for him to swing his staff without impediment. “Templars came, and Mahanon killed them all himself. It’s not about how much magic he can pull from the Fade. It’s about how well he uses it.”

Mahanon swung the head of his staff out in front of him, one-handed, caught it just below the twisting carvings, pulled it up just to slam the butt down-

Thick roots exploded from the ground, ones that Theron had starting moving to avoid even before they tried to trap him in a cage. His lunge forward brought him back to the edge of the tangle.

It withered as he reached the edge, the spell released to die without a line to the Fade. Theron’s lunge took him right into a glyph on the ground Ashalle hadn’t seen cast, trapping his legs in swift-forming ice, and Mahanon moved.

No one, mage or no, should have been able to move like that; in the briefest flare of Fadefire and a geometric burst of white trails, in a whining tinkling falling tone that popped at the end and put Mahanon back on their side of the field. He swung his staff around his shoulders, assisted by the last of his speed and momentum, and executed a form-perfect shot of lighting.

It her son square between the shoulder blades.

Rajrad grabbed her as she started to move towards him, unconsciously.

“That spell always looks worse than it is,” he reassured her quietly as Alistair yelped: “What was that!”

“‘Twas a minor lightning spell.”

“You know what I mean! The other thing!”

The ice had misted away from Theron’s legs and he turned to catch Mahanon’s next shot at him, a simple bolt of pure magic, on his shield.

“Really old magic,” Ellana explained for him. “The very oldest books we have are ones we took from the Magisters in the time of Shartan, that form The Catalogue. One of them claims to have been compiled by a Tevene general of the Old Imperium who enlisted spirits to help him tear the knowledge of a particular discipline of magic from the minds of our captures mages. That’s one of the few spells we’ve been able to reconstruct. We don’t have anyone who can read Ancient Tevene, and the El’vhen of the time of the Dales our translation came from can be- difficult. Mahanon’s been working on it his whole life.”

The fight fell into a holding pattern for the next few minutes- Theron caught the arcane bolts on his shield as he advanced, and Mahanon let him come just outside of striking distance before blurring away, far out of reach.

Ashalle became aware that Alistair was muttering “c’mon c’mon c’mon c’mon” under his breath, and gave him a questioning look.
“Theron realized he can’t get close,” he told her. “But Mahanon’s got to be using a lot of magic to move like that, so as long as Theron keeps letting him up it up while conserving his own energy- this might be it!”

Sure enough, Theron stepped within lunging range and Mahanon didn’t speed away. He blasted lighting instead and Theron got his shield up just in time, dropping his sword. When the light faded, he dropped that too.

“What are you doing?” Alistair screamed at him.

Mahanon had taken a step back, trying to get room to swing his staff. He started a form- and Theron caught the adahl’amythal staff partway through, forcing Mahanon into overdoing the twirl the form called for and having the wood wrenched from his grasp.

“Oh for-!”

“Twas effective. What have you been up to, without me?”

Theron tossed the staff away behind him and knelt down to pick up his shield. Mahanon started to move, he grabbed the shield, surged upwards-

Mages didn’t need staves to wield magic. They helped focus a spell, and depending on how you made it and what you made it out of, they could boost certain spells or magical attributes, but there wasn’t a mage born who couldn’t use magic without one.

Mahanon held his hands up and cast ice in Theron’s face. Her son had his back to them, so all Ashalle could properly see of the spell was the way spikes of ice shot around the sides of his cheeks and over his temples, freezing strips of his hair.

But the way Lavellan’s First stepped aside and let the weight of the ice and Theron’s aborted surge to his feet unbalance him, watching as he fell forward and grabbing up his staff again as the ice cracked loudly, shattered between the frozen ground and Theron’s face- that was clear.

Morrigan hissed and Kieran screeched and Alistair reached for his sword and Theron didn’t get up.

Ashalle and Ellana had to grab the other Warden to keep him back. Rajrad was busy cancelling whatever magic her furious grandson was throwing out. There were sparks of light dancing in the grass.

“I’ve killed people like that!” Alistair raged, wrenching his arm away from her. Ashalle quickly grabbed it again, pulling back and down and bracing herself against the dirt. It was bad enough, interrupting a challenge, and he was human. “Those ice spells can freeze someone right through and that’s from across a room he was right in front of him and when you hit someone who’s been frozen like that-”

Mahanon had picked up his staff from where Theron had tossed it and was leaning on it now-steadying himself post-battle. Had he panicked, when Theron had gotten so close? There was no forgiving killing someone in a challenge, you didn’t kill other Dalish unless you had to; and if her son was hurt in a way that couldn’t be fixed-

She would not stand for that. If her son wasn’t well, Sabrae would just have to live with her declaring a blood feud when they weren’t around- or maybe Mahanon would be exiled for it, that would be almost as good, bana’vhen the way he’d unjustly called her son and thrown out into the human country whose Hero he’d just murdered, a mage target for the Templars-
Theron stirred, on the ground, and Ashalle could breathe again.

Momentarily.

He started to rise slowly, in sections- elbows and knees, draw legs under torso, get feet planted, push to hands. He tried to stand but only got a little way off the ground before falling to his knees.

Mahanon didn’t notice until Theron was on his knees, then whirled, and froze at the sight of him.

Ashalle did, too, and likely just about everyone else, as they all got a good, long look at his face. There was more blood than skin visible, and it was hard to tell at this distance but something about it just looked off and he kept blinking, like he couldn’t see, and was that- more blood?

Mahanon took a few steps forward, hesitant for a few seconds and fast, free hand outstretched and haloed with a faint magical aura.

She wasn’t sure what he’d been planning on doing- he was a First, so he could have been moving to heal Theron; but he’d cast that ice in the first place, so maybe it was something that would hurt.

None of them ever got a chance to find out. Mahanon got in close enough and Theron lurched forward, something in his hand-

Oh, Ashalle thought as Mahanon howled in pain, Theron tearing the small blade of his mi’ahar’mien tearing out through the thick muscles of the mage’s side. That knife.

Lavellan’s First limped backwards, his free hand clutching his side, glowing with healing magic and running with his own blood. Something important had been hit, and it flowed down his clothes and dripped in the scrubby, frozen grass at his feet. He held his staff out in front of him, diagonally across his body for protection, as Theron managed to stand again, having groped around on the ground for his shield and using it to support his rise.

He took a few steps forward, very deliberately, towards Mahanon. The mage struck out with his staff, limited with what he could do one-handed and resorting to arcane bolts once more. Theron stepped just to the side and forward, closing distance just the last bit he wanted. He brought his shield up and it interrupted Mahanon’s staffwork, jarring it out of his grasp again.

Mahanon clapped his other hand over his side wound and the healing light flared. Ashalle could just about hear her son counting the seconds in his head. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty-

The light faded, spell finished and wound healed. Theron brought the edge of his shield around before his opponent had the chance to do any more magic and slammed it hard into the side of his head. He collapsed, now, unmoving, with an ugly, bloody gash cutting through his hair and down to the hinge of his jaw.

After a few seconds, Theron dropped his shield and mi’ahar’mien, covering his eyes with his hands. As she’d done once before, Ashalle rushed to him and caught him under the arms, keeping him from falling over. She guided him into sitting on the ground as the others and the Keepers who’d been witnessing the challenge hurried over.

“Move,” Keeper Lanaya ordered, coming up against Alistair kneeling in front of her son and trying to get to him talk to him, to explain what was wrong. She kicked him away and he went sprawling on his side in the dirt. Lanaya took his place kneeling in front of Theron and pried his hands away from his eyes, gently holding a lid open.

“His eyes are cut,” she said, tone brisk and collected, the same tone Ashalle had heard more than
once before from a Keeper or First or any healing mage in the clans, that said ‘this is bad and we cannot panic’. Marethari had sounded much like this, once, when Fenarel and Chandan had come back to camp from new ruins with Theron slung between them. “And the bones here are shattered. All of you move. I need at least one more healing mage, and supplies, and space.”

He was not going to die. Morrigan was sure of that much. She had seen enough dying men to know better. Lanaya had gotten hands on Theron almost immediately after his injuries, and unlike the hobbled, sheltered Circle mages, Dalish mages had real tests of their power and skill, in the only way it mattered. If a mage in a Circle failed their Harrowing, it only killed them. A Dalish mage who failed killed someone else, maybe more than one someone else- and in the clans, no one would ever let them forget it.

If Lanaya let Theron die, Morrigan would never let her forget it.

He was not going to die. But everything else remained to be seen.

They were back at Vhadan’ena’s compound. The Keepers of Talanulea and Revasina had stayed to work on Mahanon, and someone had been sent to run for Lavellan’s Keeper. Lanaya had enlisted Rajrad, since he was there, and now that they were back at the compound, her own First was assisting the both of them. Ellana was watching her daughters. Alistair was off fretting somewhere and doing nothing productive. Ashalle was assisting the healers, as much as they could be assisted, bringing and taking water and cloths.

Kieran had screeched when Mahanon had shot ice into Theron’s face, and for a few moments she had been torn between twin worries- her son and his father, the only man she’d ever called ‘friend’. But Theron was a Warden, and had survived worse than ice to the face, and had gotten up again. Kieran had ceased screeching after that, switching to crying and little noises, of pain or fear she could not tell. There was no physical reason for pain, at least.

She had never understood exactly what bond the two of them had- or rather, what connection Kieran had to Theron. She’d been around Theron enough to understand that he had none of it in reverse. Perhaps if he had been a mage.

He was clinging to her leg, now. She looked down at him.

“Kieran,” Morrigan asked her son. “Are you angry?”

His small hands dug into the fabric of her pants, under the strappy skirt.

“Babae hurts,” he whimpered.

“The man who did it is a louse,” she told him. “And I am angry. If you are hurt, become angry. Turn it into anger. Leaving it pain makes you unable to prevent it from happening again. Shall you come with me to express my displeasure?”

Kieran looked over his shoulder, to where Lanaya had taken Theron.

“Babae wouldn’t like it,” he said, looking back to her.

“And he does not get a say in the matter,” Morrigan informed him. “If you do not wish to come you may not. Go find Alistair instead. He can make use of himself and entertain you.”

Her son perked up at that. He’d taken a liking to Alistair’s Fereldan stories and retold them sometimes, in the wandering way of young children. Morrigan had yet to find herself particularly
impressed by the plot of any of them, but they made him happy.

Kieran hugged her leg for a long moment before dashing off.

To Lavellan.

Morrigan did not have the great sweeping skirts of the Orlesian noble ladies, nor the heavy, trailing capes and trains favored for Fereldan winters and southern summers. Clothes could be a sort of armor, but she needed none besides her own skin—her own skin, and her own pride.

She shifted her booted feet against the winter-hard dirt, feeling it resist the hardened leather of the soles. This was firm ground, frozen ground, her home ground. She had walked this land before the Fereldans had come south, when this city had still been naught but a forgotten Tevene ruin, stripped of its magic and brooding over the frozen swamps. She had played in these tumbled and broken stones, shed young blood on them and slaughtered her hunting kills here, built fires and drawn glyphs ancient and of her own devising in the charcoal on the foundations, laid atop the walls in the nights and memorized the stars and, yes, danced in the moonlight when it was full, learning the feel and balance of her own body until she could twirl on battlements and leap off the guardtowers into the canyon below to rise on raven’s wings, her first transformation.

And the Dalish had done, what, exactly? Imported some colored rocks and plastered and patched over ancient bones. Perhaps that would enough to make it theirs, one day.

But on this day, the Wilds was hers. The old stones of Ostagar that had withstood the howling winters and the seeping summers were hers. This ground was hers, this air was hers, the stagnant pools and slow streams were hers, the play of cloud-shadow and light was hers. This was her home and she knew it and it was hers.

And Theron was hers, and Mahanon Adahllin Lavellan was going to know that.

It was easy to determine what Dalish she was encountering as she strode through the city to Clan Lavellan’s compound. Those from the clans out of Ferelden stepped out of her way, pausing respectfully. Theron had announced her as the daughter of Asha’bellanar and there was no clan that had made their living in Ferelden that didn’t know and respect that name, fear it a little, as it had pleased her mother to make it. Those from the clans out of Orlais she could gauge by their distance from the border—clans who habitually stayed in the Dales faltered uncertainly before giving her her space, those from further away showed a correlating disinterest in paying her any mind. Some, from far Orlais or any of the other corners of Thedas, not all but an appreciable sum, watched her thoughtfully, after Theron’s fearless, ultimately victorious attack on Mahanon that morning. What sort of a mage, they must have been thinking, and a human mage at that, could she be, to be the mother of Arla’lanelan’s son?

What sort of a man is he, to be the father of my son? she would have countered them.

A decent one. A better one than the man she was going to see.

Lavellan’s compound was surprisingly calm, for a place that had had its First’s head split open not an hour or two ago. She saw the reason for it easily enough—Mahanon had been sat, upright and awake, on a lightweight chair in the sun, a cup of steeping herbs in his hands and the right side of his face bandaged up.

Morrigan planted the butt of her cedar staff against the scrub grass, amber sphere set just so to catch the sunlight, and stood tall.
“So you live,” she said, putting every ounce of disdain she had for the situation into her words.

Mahanon glared up at her, only having one uncovered eye for the task, and—perhaps, but oh did she wish—unable to stand yet, with his healing head wound.

“You were not invited.”

“I have no need of invitations,” she sneered. “This was my home long before it was yours. And yet somehow, you feel you may simply waltz about insulting me.”

“The only ‘insult’ I’ve given lately is to that hypocrite who thinks he can ‘waltz about’ saying whatever he likes and have us meekly accept whatever he says. What sort of Dalish can stand there with a straight face and claim a different person for his sal’shiral and the other parent of his child?”

“Oh, hypocrisy, is it?” Morrigan asked. “Then I ask you, Mahanon Adahllin Lavellan—what sort of Dalish can sit here with a straight face and deride the one of his people who has done more for his people than he ever can for having a family? While he himself has pushed away his? Not spoken to his sister for weeks over a matter of opinion? Insulted his own people by walking into a challenge field and calling them cowards for not agreeing with him? Using a killing spell on the same field, when Dalish is not meant to kill Dalish?”

Mahanon was slowly flushing red.

“Why, I do believe that that would be you!” she told him. “If there is a hypocrite here, Mahanon Adahllin Lavellan, ’tis not the man who gave your people their third city, and would grow and strengthen them by welcoming new blood. ’Twould be the man who is so jealous of him that he would disrespect everything their people hold dear in the name of showing him up.”

“What do I have to be jealous of him for?” Mahanon demanded. “He’s practically clanless and he lives with the shem’len!”

“And yet the Dalish will remember Theron’s name in their histories all their days,” Morrigan said. “While you languish in the obscurity of your clan histories. ’Twill be nothing but pure luck if you are more than a name in a list of past Keepers, and if you are ‘twill be only for deciphering that book your sister spoke of, where you learned how to enfold yourself in the Fade and move unnatural fast.”

She took a step forward, close enough to be in his personal space, and leaned down to be face-to-face with him.

“There are no Dalish alive who know Ancient Tevene, Mahanon Adahllin Lavellan,” she told him. “But I know it, and there are soft, weak elven mages in the Chantry Circles who know it, whom you would see turned away at your borders should they ever learn enough spine and craft to escape. I tell you now, I promise you, that your precious book shall never be translated—not by your hand. Another will do so, in time, and you will have no fame for it to your name, not in all your days.”

“You can’t keep me from learning an entire language,” Mahanon said.

“Can I not?” Morrigan asked, turning away. “You insulted my son this morning, when you said he was not good enough for his father; and you insulted his father, my friend, with every word out of your mouth. You have insulted me. Speak with the others of your people, the clans who have lived in Ferelden for century upon century. Ask about my mother. Hear what they say Asha’bellanar has done to those who insult her, and know that you shall not be forgiven.”

She strode back out the compound as surely as she’d strode in, a satisfied smile on her face.
Theron would live, and Mahanon-

He would get his just deserts.
Clan Ralaferin had been a desert-edge clan, crossing nearer or further to the villages and ancient Chantry cloisters of the scrubby wine country of the Drylands as sandstorms or suspicious and scared and hateful humans became a problem. Zevran had found them at age seventeen, two weeks of running from Antiva City, drawing bucketfuls from the well of an ancient Magister’s estate long gone to ruins to top off the water-carrying aravels in preparation for a trip into the sands. Keeper Gisharel had never heard of the Crows but Zevran’s demonstrated ability- and willingness- to dump Ralaferin’s Second in the dusty garden dirt and have one knife at the back of his neck and another against his kidneys faster than anyone in the clan could even get a bow out spoke for itself. Keeper Gisharel had taken him in personally, much to her Second’s distaste.

Zevran remembered Naema very well. Ralaferin’s Second had instantly disliked him after the knives incident, and Zevran had never quite figured out why. It could have been a grudge, certainly, but why hold a grudge against a seventeen-year-old who was very good at killing but, in all honesty, awful at most other things? He’d certainly embarrassed himself enough amongst the clan, trying to do the tasks assigned him, for Naema to have felt that Zevran had been properly humiliated.

But, at the time, Zevran had thought it was justified. Seventeen-year-old him had been in deep and thick with Crow thinking, and Crow thinking said that publicly defeating a senior Crow in a spar so easily meant that the senior Crow was out for your blood. He’d watched himself around Naema, as much as possible, but the man was in charge of things like scavenging and keeping guard, and part of being a city elf joining the Dalish meant learning a little bit about everything.

The early days of Naema’s grudge had been comparatively tame. When tasked to teach Zevran about signs of an approaching oasis, he’d made a number of pointed comments about water being the clan’s most important resource. A week outside the oasis they’d stopped at, Keeper Gisharel had noticed the way he’d stopped sweating and forced him to drink two entire skeins of water. Zevran had fallen back on every bit of trained impassivity to not let on just how much he liked having more than the mouthfuls he’d been taking only to stave off dizziness.

“This is the desert, silly little crow,” she’d told him. “You have to drink.”

“But if we run out-”

Keeper Gisharel had given him a look and filled his skein with conjured ice.

“We get water from oases because we can, Zevran,” she’d told him. “And when we must be in the Drylands because of sandstorms we search for wells because of the Templars. But out here, I fill the barrels with ice in the morning, and when we stop it is melted and ready for us to use however we like. Water is necessary, yes. But with magic it is easy. Drink more.”

The month had worn on, and Ralaferin had come to a set of rocky bluffs, high and sharp. Naema had been ordered to take Zevran up and teach him about the rock paths and the scavenging opportunities there for small birds and insects and plants. The rocks were cover enough, and Naema had taken the opportunity to turn on him.

Zevran had taken the beating. It was what you did, when you were a Crow apprentice.

“You aren’t even trying!” Naema had raged at him. “No smart words, no tricks? You placid piece of flat-ear filth! You want to be Dalish, when you flinch at shadows and watch the dark for the shem’len carrion birds you say you left? Dalish have pride! We are strong! We do not submit!”
Keeper Gisharel had been told that Zevran had missed his footing and skidded down a bad bluff. Zevran had not said a word different.

A week later they’d fled back into the Drylands in face of a sandstorm. Zevran was on perimeter patrol when Rinna and Taliesin had popped up from behind a large rock.

“What are you doing here!” he’d hissed, quiet to keep from drawing attention from any others of Ralaferin nearby and in fear of nearby Crows. “They kill you for running!”

“Not if we come back with you,” Rinna had told him, in a certain tone that made it clear this had been all her idea.

“They’ll kill me!”

“Not if you chose to come back,” Taliesin had said.

“It’s us or the apprentice-hunters, Zev,” Rinna had said. “We were almost graduated, you idiot! We were almost done! We were going to be out, and be our own cell, and I could have been able to protect you for running off and doing something so stupid!”

“If you don’t come the apprentice-hunters will be after us, too,” had been Taliesin’s second contribution. “And they will kill us. Especially if you keep running.”

‘And it will be all your fault.’ Unspoken, but understood.

Zevran had hesitated, actually hesitated, terrified of the Crows but still glancing back towards where Ralaferin was camped in the sheltering, craggy hills-

“Listening to shem’len and flat-ears,” Naema had snarled from the top of the rock they’d been standing next to, making them all jump and go for knives. The Dalish might not have been up to Crow fighting standards, but they knew a lot about stealth in a natural environment. “Fly back to your Masters, little crow, before you bring them here. You’ve been broken to leash and you will never be Dalish.”

In the dark, with nothing but Rinna and Taliesin and Naema’s voice and the threat of apprentice-hunters, it had been impossible to believe anything else. Zevran had left, and the Crows had nearly killed him while Rinna and Taliesin had stood their graduation trials, their reward for bringing him back.

Here in the Fade, with both of them years dead and the demon unable to decide if Naema should wear his own face or Theron’s, it was much less compelling.

“I remain unconvinced that you are actually exerting any effort,” Zevran told it, ignoring the Fade-doubles of his old friends. “Are you certain that you are a demon, and not, perhaps, the stress of my day catching up to me?”

“You will never be Dalish!” the demon tried again.

“Oh, I know,” Zevran said. “I do not much wish to be, in truth. Even when I ran, it was not that I wanted to be Dalish. I just did not want to be a Crow. I am quite content with what I have gotten of my mother’s people through knowing Theron.”

The demon didn’t seem to know what to do with that.

“Perhaps you should pick something else?” Zevran suggested. This was actually fun. “Should you
happen to be a desire demon, or know where I can find one, there are any number of—"

The dream shivered, broke, the demon disappearing and he felt warm, and happy, and filled with the same soft and quietly-amazed joy that he felt waking up to too-bright mornings to find Theron still asleep, just there, with him.

Under Zevran’s feet was the edge of the big Rialto Chantry’s roof. The drop was dizzying and the day was clear and the Chantry’s deepest loudest bell tolled and the sound shook in his bones and Zevran nearly laughed because why not? Up here was king of the world, and the sense-memory of Theron clutching his arms halfway down the stairs of Fort Drakon, laughing in relief and disbelief and eyes too bright with battle high, needing Zevran there and laughing with him, kissing him with fierce joy to steady himself, fed into the adrenaline of the drop. Of the anticipation, of the possibilities—

Zevran jumped.

Impact, roll, run.

Antivan rooftops, flat with short raised edges to keep children from falling over, or tiled with fired red clay. Familiar ones, from Rialto, the City, Treviso, Salle, Ayesleigh; and ones that could have been from anywhere in the country.

Clay and adobe changed to salt-soaked wood and Llomerryn’s roofs creaked and rattled under his boots, wood planks warping in years of warm sea air and stress, peeling paint providing some slight grip against the humidity-slick wood that needed precision as much as speed to master. At the dockside warehouses he jumped for Isabela’s old ship and grabbed stone.

The face of the palace in Denerim was rough with wear and ill treatment, refaced and expanded with cheap Orlesian Heartlands limestone during the years of the occupation. Ungentle construction by Fereldan workers had roughened it before building had even finished, and the assault of Maric’s army- and later, the darkspawn horde- had not done it any favors. The walls of Fort Drakon were harder things, dry polygonal Fereldan sandstone, off-beige with dusty pale pastel banding, darkened with age and exposure. He breached the curtain wall with ease and climbed the tower, darting over the length of the flat rooftop, past the ballistae that had been so much use against the Archdemon, and dropped over the other edge into thin air—

Amaranthine granite, red and pink and orange; and oak shingles dyed to match. The rebuilt city spread out before him and slowed, trotting the roofs instead of running them. He could hear the city chatter when he closed his eyes and listened, an indistinct yet welcoming noise, but it was silent with his eyes open. The people in the streets seemed too small and far away- unreal.

He balanced along the roof peaks of the townhouses of Amaranthine’s wealthy merchants and the winter homes of her banns, stopping a moment to test himself one-footed on the main chimney of an estate. Ahead of him, Our Lady Redeemer stood high and proud about the city, stained glass windows sparkling and the gilt edging on the roof shining. At the right hours the new Chantry blazed in the sun and it had stolen his breath away the first time he’d seen it, as bright and bold as Andraste’s own fire.

He would feel better atop its roof, ready for whatever was building this dream for him.

Zevran went most of the way on roofs, but the final approach necessitated leaving them for the city walls. His boots left the last roof and it was the walls of the Vigil he came down on, just above the gates, looking out over the downslope of the hill it stood on to the growing market town below.
“You are far from home.”

The man next to him was in a warrior’s Warden armor, one hand resting atop his winged helmet, set on the battlements, the other with pommel tucked in palm with thoughtless, habitual comfort of someone wore their sword as naturally as their clothes.

His face was- almost familiar. A strong Ander profile, high cheekbones and outwards bump in the blade of the nose. His beard was more scruffy stubble than anything, as though he didn’t have the time or the knowledge to shave. Both stubble and hair were dark, with the sun picking up streaks of subtle gold as the breeze blew. His eyes were blue, blue, blue as the summer sky and bright as Our Lady Redeemer at sunset, and the silverite plate and scale of his armor had just the slightest same glow to it-

“Justice?”

“Why are you here?” the spirit asked him. “Where is Anders, or the other Warden mages?”

“You have your own face,” Zevran said.

“Do I?” Justice rubbed at his scruff and frowned slightly. “I had thought it was Anders’.”

“It is some of his, yes,” Zevran told him. “But Kristoff also, and just… you.”

“Hn,” he said, and frowned more severely, scowling at his hand. “You have not answered my question.”

“You know very well what happened to me. This is not the first time you have decided to barge in on my dreams.”

“I did not know it was you,” Justice said, almost grumbling. “I sensed a young and troubled mind, and a mortal wide open to the Fade. I assumed there was a child mage in need of rescue, not you so near another’s nightmare.”

“Someone else’s-” he started to ask, immediately thinking of Diego and Tiar asleep in his room.

“I called for aid,” Justice said. “We drove them away, and the children awoke.”

“‘We’?” Zevran asked, looking around for more spirits. Justice was the only other person he could see-

The breeze picked up briefly, smelling of the warm northeastern sea, and the little thrill of the roofs shot through him again.

Laughing, Isabela materialized on the battlements.

“Justice was right about you,” she said, and poked him in the hip with the toe of her boot. “You’re a lot of fun.”

“I never said that!” Justice growled.

Isabela- Isabela?- waved a hand dismissively at him.

“You’re a grumbly old man, Justice,” she said. “All bound up in what you think is ‘right’, and all those little mortal things.”

“The mortal things are the important things.”
“No kidding,” this-was-not-Isabela sighed, and gave Zevran a suffering look. “The *things* your kind do to each other, sea and sky. But you know.”

“I know what?” Zevran asked.

“Freedom,” Freedom said. “Do you know how hard it is to find a mortal that values Freedom so much that I even notice? So many of you wish for it, and I do what I can, in dreams. But not so many fight for it.”

“Are you sure you should not be Anders?” Zevran asked. “I have heard that he is quite passionate about it.”

“That’d make Messere Grumpy-pants over there—”

“My pants are not grumpy. Pants do not have emotions.”

“Messere *Passive-Aggressive Sarcasm*, excuse *me*, get bent all out of shape,” Freedom said. “Anyway, I’m not here for him, I here for you. And isn’t she Freedom, to you?”

Zevran paused. There were a few answers he could give, but—

“I would have thought the Wardens,” he said. “Thought it occurs to me that ‘safe’ is not the same as ‘free’, and so I suppose- yes. It was not a safe friendship I had with her, after I killed her husband. But she is the one thing I have that the Crows have never touched.”

“And you’ve always helped her fight for her Freedom,” the spirit said. “She’d help you too, I bet. If you wrote and asked her to come.”

“You won’t do it,” Theron spoke up, and Zevran whirled towards his voice. He was standing there at the top of the nearest flight of stairs from the courtyard below. “You’d never ask that of someone you care about.”

“No,” Zevran told him- it. “I have been forced to suffer through demons wearing him like a mask for too long! I will not stand for this!”

Whatever-was-pretending-to-be-Theron’s face fell and Zevran’s stupid, stupid indiscriminate heart clenched even though he knew better.

“But I’m not a demon,” it said pleadingly. “*Vhenan-*”

*Rage* flared in him and not-Theron flinched away. Behind him, he heard Justice loosen his sword, just in case.

Freedom spoke before Zevran could.

“Sorry, Love,” she said. “Best to go. You tried.”

Love looked at him sadly and Theron disappeared. A moment later he felt the spirit twine around him, offering a silent apology and nudging happy memories of Rinna, Taliesin, Theron, Alistair, his mother, and Ashalle to the fore in recompense.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Zevran told him, mollified. “Just do not try that again.”

“That is a young Love,” Justice said as it departed. “It has not had experience with mortals outside of dreams. Such spirits often make hurtful mistakes when first meeting a mortal awake enough to react accordingly. It had not yet learned that what a mortal may accept in dreams is much different than in
their waking hours. I will check on it later to make sure that it understands what went wrong here.”

“That’s awfully mortal of you, Justice,” Freedom said. “Feeling Responsibility and Compassion?”

Justice huffed and crossed his arms.

“What are you implying?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” it told him. “Just what I said. You’re not the same as you were before.”

“Neither would you be.”

“Didn’t say I wouldn’t.”

“So the two of you are friends, then?” Zevran asked.

“Old acquaintances renewing a friendship,” Freedom said brightly. “You try guarding a village full of humans stuck here for a couple hundred years, crying for Freedom from an oppressing overlord, the Freedom to go home, and not have me come by every so often to check up on things.”

“I was doing perfectly adequately on my own.”

“Sweetness, you had to wait for some wandering mortals to come along to save that village, and then you got stuck outside for far too long. We both know exactly how far you weren’t from a decision you might not have been able to justify. Not that I would have stopped you, your choice and all.”

“Justice is required.”

“And Justice is going to be satisfied,” Freedom said, rolling its eyes and then taking a moment to wink delightedly at Zevran. “But now you’re doing it a way where you’re sure whose decision it is. You two are better free of each other. It’s not maybe unjust, so you’re happy, I’m happy, and everything is good.”

Zevran looked between the two of them, misgivings starting to surface.

“What are you doing?” he asked. “Wait, Justice- why are you in Antiva?”

“We are correcting injustices,” Justice said.

“Getting people the Freedom they deserve,” Freedom said at the same moment. “It’s been a long time coming, and Justice’s little vacation amongst the mortals gave us the knowledge we needed to start. But I think I’ll come back here, I like you, you deserve your Freedom too, and the Freedom you’re fighting for for the others. I can’t do much for that but I’ll keep the demons away, you won’t have to worry about that with everything else.”

“I- thank you,” Zevran said. “But what freedom am I fighting for for the others? What others? And what, exactly, are the two of you doing?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Freedom said, and this was alarming enough- he was alarming himself enough that he was waking up now was not the time! “It’s a much better plan that drakestone and sala petrae.”

‘Drakestone and sala petrae’- that was familiar, why-

“And you’re fighting for Freedom for the other Crows, of course.”
There was no ‘of course’ about fighting for the freedom of Crows. People like Claudio Valisti and Eoman Arainai and Lauro Escipo didn’t need any more freedom. They deserved quite a lot less of it.

Zevran sighed, staring up at the stars. They were beginning to fade. False dawn was coming.

No, there were plenty of Crows who just needed to be stopped. But, as he’d yelled at Azieri, there were plenty of victims, too. He’d gotten his second chance- third chance, maybe, or fourth- no matter. Theron had spared him and trusted him with kindness and respect and it had been what he’d needed to pry himself as far out of the Crows’ indoctrination as he had.

Surely there were others who deserved the same chance. Tiar and Diego, for one. Any of the compradi children or apprentices. Graduated Crows, though it would be such a risk-

The courtesans, though, they could be… safe. There couldn’t be more than a hundred or so of them, likely less. It was never a popular choice for training apprentices in, and it was surprisingly deadly. Suicides, mostly. He’d never heard of a graduated courtesan who hadn’t tried. He himself had been the only one who hadn’t tried in his apprentice years, mostly because he’d had Rinna and Taliesin to live for and bolster him up, but he could no longer claim that particular point old, ruined pride.

Zevran knew most of them, at least if they were still alive. He’d felt comfortable leaving them alive when he’d purged Arainai of the people most likely to recognize him out of more than just sentiment- no Crow paid attention to the courtesans. They were a bare step above any other whore, as far as most of the other assassins were concerned, differentiated only by their training and exclusive clients, if one could even call them that. Zevran had certainly never heard of anyone being paid for any of the nights he or any of the others had been sent out, alone or with another courtesan or a small group, to a noble’s or merchant’s party to flirt and seduce and take someone, any one of the guests, to bed.

Crow courtesans would have been useless if they only slept with people they killed, after all. Everyone would know, and then what would be the point? And they lent a certain mystique and romantic cachet to the actions of the rest of the Crows, rumors of dashing roguish men and beautiful deadly women, elves sweet and delicate and pretty-

Zevran’s tongue curled in disgust in his mouth. Eoman Arainai had been good enough at his job to realize the sort of cell he could build between him and Rinna and Taliesin. With Rinna being the leader and congradi and Taliesin being the compradi muscle and a solid cell second-in-command, Eoman had shoved him into cross-training, trying to fill skill gaps in stealth and strike-and-run. Zevran hadn’t been ‘delicate’ since his mid-teens.

He’d seen what it had done to the other elf courtesans- so, most of the other courtesans, period- and he was- not grateful, never grateful, to the Crows- but he could acknowledge that he’d come off better for it. The only other courtesan in Arainai, Salvail, had been an elf as well, and only just resilient enough to survive training. He’d had a terrible tendency towards being a nervous wreck, except for when he’d been at the parties. He was an excellent courtesan, one of his few redeeming qualities to the Crows. Salvail had always rallied to an immediate threat of personal danger, even if he half-panicked his way through it; and he could kill- quickly, undetectably, and likely painlessly, so long as it was a job. The one time Zevran had seen him kill an apprentice who’d thought the perpetually anxious elf would be an easy target, the results had been very messy. Impressively brutal. He’d been left alone until he’d graduated, for that. He’d shown he was minimally competent. A courtesan didn’t do the same sort of contracts that the other assassin specializations did, do someone like Salvail could have a bit of leeway in the personal foibles department. They could make him endearing, to a particular sort of mark.

And- well, and Zevran had covered for him, more than once, during their apprentice years, without the usual fear of any of the more senior Crows finding out or doing something about it. Salvail had
known exactly who he’d been indebted to. He wasn’t going to tell on the one who was keeping him alive, any more than Zevran or Taliesin would have thought about turning on each other. He’d told himself, at the time, that this was the usual sort of Crow indebtedness, gaining favors owed or reputation or even outright respect, ignoring the fact that Salvail was completely useless for any of that. Salvail could have owed him every favor in the world, and it wouldn’t have helped Zevran any, when it came to getting ahead.

The true answer had come out during one of his grueling self-examination sessions, a year or two ago. From that vantage point, Zevran had been able to admit that Salvail had had nothing to do with his pretenses at ambition. Arainai had been high enough on the pecking order of Houses to be able to afford two courtesans, and Salvail had been the only other person there in the same situation as him. It had been unacknowledged sympathy, oddly-placed loyalty, and the base impulse to help that he’d uncovered with the Wardens.

He hadn’t killed Salvail when he’d taken out Arainai’s leadership. Zevran wondered, idly, staring up at the stars, what had happened to him. He wouldn’t have been surprised to learn, at some future point, that Salvail had been an unremarked casualty in whatever infight had undoubtedly gripped the House. No one would have cared to protect him, or cared for his support. Upkeep on courtesans could be expensive and irritating, as well, and there were certainly senior Crows who were very dubious that their usefulness outweighed that. With so few courtesans in comparison to the other tracks, there were plenty of Houses that got stuck with an apprentice courtesan but no graduated ones of their own, and had to shuffle them back and forth to a House that did for training.

It was yet another reason courtesans were looked down on. There was always the quiet suspicion of divided loyalties, of the possibility of subversion to someone else’s agenda; not helped by the way that the courtesans very quietly had their own sort of sub-community within the Crows that cut across every line but that of compradi and congradri, a network of silent understanding and attachments formed during training and a complex of favors and information and even simple gossip that none of the other Crows were in on. For the longest time Zevran had thought that the courtesans only had it because none of the other Crows had bothered to consider any of them long enough to notice, but it had occurred to him, one evening in the Vigil, that it would have been impossible to keep it a secret, not with the age and persistency of it.

It had been another method of control, as much as anything the Crows ever allowed their assassins. It hadn’t affected Zevran so much, as bound up with Taliesin and then Rinna as he had been- but for someone like Salvail, who hadn’t had anything else, the tacitly accepted bonds that formed when being hands-on trained in sex and then reinforced with mutual understanding and constant contact had been the same sort of control mechanism that Eoman had used him for, with their cell. Rinna and Taliesin would never have meshed so well, the elf-blooded bastard princess and the compradi human as common as they came, without Zevran there to seed the beginnings of a strong cell unity as a source of easy, frequent live-in sex and companionship trained into being genial and pleasant.

Courtesans could attach to outsiders so easily, cultivate a relationship long enough to make off with enough money and information to make a good attempt at disappearing, or to get just far enough to establish themselves with someone the Crows wouldn’t find it worth to touch, without something at least as strong holding them back. Having someone who’d been through the same things you had, who understood what it was like to live as a Crow courtesan, who could be trusted far beyond what you’d dare give to any other Crow because you had no choice but to-

It was probably why Eoman had thought he could get rid of Rinna and still keep him and Taliesin. If he’d been a normal courtesan, Zeran would have had that network sucking him back in, somewhere to go that would have reinforced the Crow indoctrination with sympathy and the promise of losing the pain in sex. He would have been able to hold Taliesin, and Eoman would have gotten what he’d
wanted- an established working pair with a good record, without any dubious connections to the royal family that could undermine his own power, loyal just to each other and him, for bringing them along to his rise to the top of the Crows.

By Andraste, he was a mess. Every Crow was, every courtesan, and yes, he could admit it to himself- he had a lot of rage about the Crows, but he wasn’t angry about their chosen profession, or even so much what they did to Antiva. Assassinations would happen with or without the Crows, and what they did in Antiva was objectively bad; but Rialto’s poorer areas had been a good object lesson in the fact that others would just step into the spots left by the Crows, if they ever fell. The Crows perpetuated a lot of what was wrong with the country, but getting rid of them wouldn’t fix the problems themselves, like Rosso Noche seemed to think.

And, well, he’d lived being a Crow. That was what he cared about. The people like him, the compradi, the courtesans, the elves, everyone who’d been forced into a life they’d never asked for and had been near destroyed for it.

Zevran wanted to stop the Crows to save the assassins.

“This is a ridiculous idea,” he told the stars. “Completely ludicrous. I cannot seriously be considering this. It is entirely too much for one person to do alone. I should keep my head down until I can return home unsuspected.”

Still, he had to spend quite some time listing all the reasons why he shouldn’t to himself before he could fall asleep again.

He awoke again at true dawn, and got up to knock on the outside door of his room. He waited a few moments, listening for a response, but finally opened the door when nothing came.

Diego and Tiar were standing in the middle of the room again, straight and stiff and away from everything else. The extra blankets from the night before were tangled up in the floor, with the pillows.

Zevran discarded the first question he thought of: You did not use the bed? The bed was his, of course they wouldn’t have. That was too easy, too obvious. Take the bed, and in the morning, the strange Crow Maestra won’t live up to his words, and it would be a punishment for daring to presume you deserved any better than the floor.

How well did you sleep? would have just sounded polite to anyone else, but it smacked of performance evaluation to Zevran. Also not a good choice.

“Is Availa likely to send more apprentice-hunters?” he asked instead, otherwise ignoring the children in favor of going to his dresser and getting a new shirt. He, like the children, had slept in the clothes he’d worn the day before. The shirt still had blood on the cuffs, and dust from the rooftops. And he should change his smalls and socks, too.

“Avalia is falling apart,” Tiar answered after a long moment. There was a pause just at the end, a defiant silence where ‘Maestra’ could have been- a test.

Zevran ignored that as well.

“So they will think, if anyone bothers to ask, that they attempted to switch House allegiances and were killed for their troubles?”

“Or Rosso Noche found them here,” Tiar said.
“True enough. So Availa was falling apart and so you took the opportunity to run?”

Defiant silence again, tense with fear. Zevran let it stand, rummaging in the back of the second drawer for the other half of a pair of socks. He didn’t really need that question answered. It was a strong, plausible hypothesis, but he’d really only asked for his own curiosity. He didn’t need to know.

“Tiar didn’t mean to, Maestra!” Diego burst out suddenly, and the knock of Zevran’s hand against the inside of the drawer as he jumped in startlement was lost in the louder thump of the boy dropping to his knees on the wooden floor. “She didn’t! I- I was scared and weak and she thought she could bring me back.”

He was not going to be angry with Tiar. Taliesin had tried to help him the same way.

“I helped him escape!” Tiar said loudly over Diego’s protesting, and oh. “If he didn’t run he was going to die and he’s—”

“I convinced her to it wasn’t her idea—”

“He never could have done it if I hadn’t planned—”

Zevran put his change of clothes down on top of the dresser and turned. Diego and Tiar ceased speaking immediately, and by the time he was facing them Tiar had pulled Diego behind her and it was just like the day before, defiance and fear and on edge, ready and expecting to have to fight.

“I meant everything I said last night,” he told them. “I am not going to return you to the Crows. I am not going to beat you, I am not going to hit you, I am not going to toy with you or play mind games with you. I am not going to do anything to you for running, or for attacking me yesterday because you did not trust me. If you attack me, I will defend myself, but otherwise I will not deliberately hurt you. You did the right thing, in running. I ran. This is what saves us. It is not an easy thing to do and it is hard to manage without someone helping you. I had people who helped me when I tried escaping from the Crows, and now I would help you. I have no wish to see anyone who has run go back, because they cannot understand people who are not Crows and are afraid of this perpetual uncertainty or because they get killed misstepping in a place they have never learned to live in or because they are so constantly unable to trust anyone that it is easier to go back where things are at least familiar rather than live all their lives watching their backs and looking over their shoulders and waiting and waiting and waiting for the Crows to come for them. The Crows are not so all-powerful as you think, nor necessarily as successful. They miss marks, they miss people, and they do leave business unfinished and make mistakes that cost them.”

“No they don’t,” Tiar said.

“Oh?” Zevran asked archly. “Then I suppose I have been a ghost with delusions of continued life these past six years, Rialto is a conspiracy, Rosso Noche is nothing but silly stories, there were no Grandmasters killed during Satinalia and the two unfulfilled contracts out on the Warden-Commander of Ferelden do not actually exist, being perhaps a bad joke on the part of some Crow with a particularly nonexistent sense of self-preservation. And who knows what you two are, since it is quite impossible that apprentices could escape apprentice-hunters, yes? The Crows may indeed be very good at what they do, Tiar, but they are not infallible. They can be tricked, or driven off, or killed, or escaped from.”

They probably didn’t believe him—wouldn’t believe him, not for a time yet. He knew how long it had taken him to trust others, but that was him and his particular situation with the Crows and Theron and Alistair and you couldn’t really generalize the way a Blight forced you together. How long
would it take for either of them to believe his intentions? What should he do to help that along? And what if he hurt them worse, trying not to, and drove them away-

This was unproductive thinking. Take one moment at a time, as they came, in calculated instances of trust.

Such as this.

“I am going to change,” he told them. “You can stay here or go outside, it matters little to me.”

They stayed, as he’d suspected they might. Staying gave them an opportunity to read his tattoos. The graduation one they could have guessed and the compradi one was likely not a surprise, though he thought, perhaps, that Tiar got a fraction less wary after seeing it.

Stripping to change clothes was a good, thorough, easy vulnerability to give in trust. There were plenty of moments where he’d be tangled up in cloth if someone attacked, and changing shirt and socks and smalls meant taking off boots and pants as well. It revealed all his hiding places for weapons, though Tiar and Diego likely missed a few, even when he turned his shirts inside out to swap the contents of the pockets he’d sewn in.

Crow courtesan tattoos were artful, graceful curves curling in the triangle of flesh above the pubic bone and draping over the hipbones to drip back down and curl again on the broad, indeterminate plane were lower back transitioned into buttocks. Tiar had probably only heard them described, but Diego had undoubtedly seen them, as he was standing, staring shocked at the black lines, eyes still focused on his hips even after Zevran re-donned his pants.

Good. Let them think on that, for a bit, and consider what I meant for his promises.

Breakfast was a challenge. Tiar and Diego didn’t seem keen to leave the room, but Tiar was also not about to trust any food Zevran brought them. It was an understandable, if difficult, dilemma.

Zevran excused himself from the room when Tiar and Diego’s insistent whispered conversation about food got so quiet with his continued presence that it seemed that they were trying to hold it entirely in silent looks and the tiniest of changes in expression. He said that he would be back later to hear what they decided, and went to find out where Andreas had gotten to.

It didn’t appear that he’d come back, and Azieri was conspicuously missing from his usual spot in the sitting room, an old stuffed chair that caught the morning sun. That left Zevran alone in the front hall, trying not to worry.

“Mahar?”

Right. It was Antonu’s turn to make breakfast, which meant that- yes, Zelda was spread out all over the kitchen table, books open and propped up and sheaves of essays and pamphlet drafts arranged out-of-order for him to reference as he wrote his own revolutionary literature. Today the centerpiece of the writing process seemed to be a worn, red-bound copy of the Canticle of Transfigurations, familiar from Garrastazu and Zuñiga’s print shop. It occurred to him that he’d yet to ask what Rosso Noche’s supporting literature was, despite Zelda’s frequent writings.

The kitchen smelled of bread. No one in the house was usually up early enough to make bread, and yet there were egg-glazed breakfast buns cooling on the sideboard.

“Did you not sleep?” Zevran asked Antonu.
“I didn’t,” Zelda said. “I’ve been-”

He gestured at the books and papers.

“An idea that could not wait?”

“No- yes-”

He rubbed at his eyes and sighed before looking Zevran in the eye, serious and somber and- a touch regretful?

“I’m sorry about yesterday,” Zelda told him.

Zevran arched an eyebrow at him wordlessly and crossed his arms, waiting for an elaboration.

“For lunch,” Zelda said. “You were right. We should have trusted you and we should have listened better. You cleaned up our mess and you didn’t have to. We- Rosso Noche here- we just heard people praising the new *don arrion* and there were a lot of dead bodies, and it seemed so obvious what the story was.”

“If you are truly sorry you will come up with a plan to keep the same thing from happening in the rest of the country when the Crows are gone.”

“Right,” Zelda said. “Right. Okay. We can come up with a plan.”

“And the proper resources to do something about it,” Zevran insisted. “You should return to the Summer Lily and speak with Ashera and Deyna. A plan is no good if you cannot execute it, or salvage something if it falls apart.”

“We’ll go after Zelda’s slept,’ Antonu promised. “But I’m not sure how much it will do. We really haven’t got those groups of fighters around that she’s sure we do.”

“I have spoken to her of it; she knows now that Rialto is free of Crows because of political infighting and not because of anything Rosso Noche has done,” Zevran said. “I said nothing to her of the alliance with your brother. I certainly understand why such a thing is not spoken of but it is a lie that will destroy any trust you build with the poor and the near-poor once it comes out.”

“We’re not lying,” Antonu hedged.

“You are omitting relevant information,” Zevran said. “It is information that runs counter to your stated values. Even if it is not *technically* a lie it will feel like one once people learn of your brother.”

“If they never-”

“They will.”

“So what should we do?” Zelda asked.

“Let me speak-”

No, wait.

“You father, Ashera knew of him. Does he know her?”

“I don’t know,” Zelda said. “Maybe. I wouldn’t be surprised. He knows a *lot* of people, here and in the City.”
“How many people know how much he hates the Crows?”

“Oh, everybody.”

“Then go with your father to speak with Ashera,” Zevran told him. “Let him tell her the truth proper. He hates the Crows enough that the feeling will come through. She will believe him when he says that Rosso Noche was coerced into this. She would not believe either of you, and she might not believe me. Where is your father?”

“Not really sure,” Zelda said. “He went out. Very early. Or late, maybe. A long time ago. That’s what he usually does when he gets thrown by something, or is struggling with a difficult idea.”

So Azieri had been affected by last night.

“Have either of you seen Andreas?”

“Your… friend?” Antonu asked. “No. I don’t think he ever came back.”

Hopefully he’d just stayed over at the Summer Lily, and not gotten surprised in the streets. Wardens were generally quite good at not dying, but they were not immune to surprises.

Or he could just be lost. Lost was a good alternative. If time-consuming to fix.

“But you fixed the quarter by killing people,” Antonu said, returning to the previous topic. “We can’t really… do that.”

“Yes, I have noticed this is a downside of your organization,” Zevran said. “This and forward planning. For instance, tell me- when the Crows are gone and Antiva no longer has the safety of family ties to all of Thedas’s nobility with Asha Campana’s bloodline ousted from power, killed or scattered on the winds to foreign countries more than happy to use them to gain a stake here, how will Antiva protect itself? Have you undisclosed plans for building an army? A navy? Who will make these decisions? A committee of city leadership is very fine and well but committees generally take quite a time to accomplish things, and that is not what you want in an emergency. Who is the one who decides to go to war or not? How will they have that authority? And other problems of the Crows being gone- the gangs we have already discussed. But what will happen to the apostate mages, Oscar and Feynriel and Ella and all the rest? Will they be forced into hiding or running or the Circles without the Crows to threaten the Chantry for them? Are they included in these Chantry reforms I saw promised and yet have heard very little of? Do the people of Antiva even want such a thing? Who will support it? What if they support everything with the Chantry but the mages? Will you fight them or shall you leave Oscar and his people as the rest of Rosso Noche left your father? Have you any assurances to give to all the people who have never met a mage in their lives and know only the stories of them the Chantry tells, or how they are dangerous and not to be trusted except under the supervision of a Sister or Templar? Any practical, useful information about magic and the Fade and how it all works to combat false notions people have since the Chantry has not made any of said information available? And what, when the Crows are gone, are you going to do for the orphaned children, those in the Chantry orphanages and those badly hurt because they were sold to the Crows and those who have yet to go to the Chantry orphanages but will come, and will most likely been seen as ‘extra’ or ‘a burden’ because there are no more Crows to come take the children the Chantry did not care to keep? Or shall they simply be sold into slavery in Tevinter instead of here?”

“I don’t know about all of them,” Zelda said after a moment. “But I know we have answers for some of them. Or my father and his friends do.”
“A start then,” Zevran said. “With more work to be done. I must go find Andreas. I shall tell Ashera that the three of you will be coming to speak with her soon. And I must find out what Diego and Tiar have decided about breakfast.”

“They can have the bread,” Antonu said. “There’s enough of it. And it’s fresh.”

“And I would be surprised if they did not assume it was poisoned, as they were not here to see it baked and we three have been around it without them,” Zevran told him. “I could tell them to eat it. They may be scared enough of me to do so, despite any beliefs about poison- but it would not matter, after, that it was clean. That is no way to build trust, and I will not set such a precedent.”

The silence was uncomfortable, or at least it was for Zelda and Antonu. Zevran refused to let it affect him.

“They’d really think that?” Antonu asked after a few moments. “We’re not Crows.”

“Once you have been hurt enough, no one and nothing is worthy of your trust, until it has been tested and tested and tested again, and even then there will be cause to be wary,” Zevran said. “It took me the better part of a year and extremely fortunate, if intense, circumstances to trust people. And even then, it was only a very few people. I felt secure enough by the end of it that most people would not try to kill me, given the slightest opportunity or reason, but it does not mean that I did and do not still watch for these things in a number of settings. I just do not expect them as a matter of course any longer- and amongst some people and in some places, I can trust that they will not happen.”

“But here,” Zelda said, sounding a bit regretful.

“No,” Zevran agreed. “Not here. I can believe that you would not intentionally give me over to the Crows, or willingly, but you are all far too close to Lauro. He would, if it served him. And I am not entirely convinced that Azieri would not give me to him- perhaps with my tongue cut out and hands broken and healed wrong first, so that I could not betray your names or plans- or that Rosso Noche would not try to have me killed if they thought it was necessary or more convenient.”

They didn’t have anything to say to that.

“So,” Antonu eventually said. “All of that. And what you said last night. Is that why- Lauro-”

“Congradi children are not so harshly treated,” Zevran told him. “Because they are allowed contact with their families again once graduated, to keep the nobles and merchants and all the rich who are the ones who have the money to buy a Crow contract happy and feeling as though they have some control and not having to think about the people they hurt. They are beaten, yes, but not so often and not so badly. Once they are older they are given the same torture training as any Crow. Congradi children die as well, but they are not raped, and they are not threatened so often, and the manipulation and the mind games are different. They learn not to trust more from each other rather than from the training. They are encouraged to try to kill each other and amass power and influence and gather compradi to them, once they are apprentices. I knew one such. She killed more than one of her fellows, but the one I remember best was when she had me appear sexually available and vulnerable to a congradi apprentice some years older than us, just about to graduate, who was nuisance to her personally and a threat to her position professionally, until he dragged me off behind one of the buildings in our House compound to have his way with me in private. He was fucking me into the wall when she killed him.”

“That’s sick,” Antonu, whispered, and Zevran wasn’t sure if he’d meant to say it aloud or not. Either way, he ignored him in favor of Zelda- sitting frozen with horror, a thousand thoughts flashing
behind his eyes. He met Zevran’s look after a few heartbeats and they went wide with… something before he shoved himself away from the table, chair scraping loudly against the wood floor.

“I can’t write this,” he declared. “I can’t-

“You haven’t slept,” Antonu reminded him. “It’ll start working once you have some rest-”

“No!” he exclaimed. “No! No no no-”

Zelda looked to Zevran.

“It has to be you,” he said. “It has to. I’m angry, and I hate them, but it isn’t the right sort-”

“What exactly is it that I must do?” Zevran asked.

“Everything you said last night,” Zelda told him, pointing to the mess of paper on the table. “You were right. We don’t know what we’re talking about. Nobody does, nobody who’s not a Crow, but they should. They should know what goes into making their assassins and they should know what they do to the children they give up and it would be a big blow to the Crows, right, not to be all mysterious and unknowable. Once people know things they’ve got their own power-”

He shook his head, trying to cut through the fog of no sleep to attain a better chain of conversation.

“I hate the Crows,” Zelda said. “And I’m scared of them. And I’m really angry about what they do. But I’m not angry in the right way. You are. I try to write what you said and it’s just angry and it doesn’t feel like- it doesn’t feel like when I’m writing that people will be sorry like the Crows are people it needs to be like-”

He shuffled through the papers on the table until he came up with a short, thick stack.

“It needs to be like this,” he said, thrusting the papers out. Zevran took them, curious. They were printed pages, in two parallel columns- the left in Trade, the right a translation into Antivan.

‘On the Rights of Mages

“Magi was made to serve man, never to rule over them. Foul and corrupt are they who have taken His gift and turned it against His children.”

Since Maferrath betrayed Andraste to Hessarion, these words of the Prophet have been used to invalidate all of her others- her exhortations to help the unfortunate and the needy, her prayers that show her care for those who would profit from the despair and destruction of others, and her clear and frequent repetition that we are all the Maker’s creations, and that He looks upon us all in and judges us all in sorrow when He sees us harming one another.

“All men are the Work of our Maker’s Hands, from the lowest slaves to the highest kings. Those who bring harm without provocation to the least of His children are hated and accursed by the Maker.”

The Chantry says that mages are responsible for the blackening of the Golden City, and the existence of darkspawn, and the devastation of the Blights. The Chantry says that mages may fall prey to demons and become Abominations at any moment. The Chantry says that mages and magic are a curse in the eyes of the Maker.

But if the Maker blamed magic for the Magisters’ actions in the Black City, why would He still gift us with it? The oppression of mages stems from the fears of men, not the will of the Maker.
Fears of men, who see others with a power they can never possess, and wish to crush out of the existence. Fears of men, living on rumors of an empire in the north that has lost all of its glory and power. Fears of men, who will give up their very children the instant that they show magical ability. Fears of men, who lock away healers who could cure the sick and wounded, who lock away those who could bring water in droughts, warmth in the depths of winter, shore up bridges and roads and houses, drive away bandits and brigands with mere thoughts, deflect lightning from ships and suppress fires in cities.

The Chantry keeps these people locked away, abused and tortured, for one simple reason: they will not stand for any challenge to their authority. They fear our magic not for the presence of demons, but because it can do more for the Maker’s children here in this world than they have ever accomplished, and can ever hope to accomplish, and they do not want you to realize that.

The Chantry as a whole is a vehicle for the rich and the nobles to play power politics. How often have the countries of Thedas muttered about the preponderance of Orlesians in power in the Chantry? Or the Divine’s presence in the Imperial city of Orlais? When was the last time a Divine came from any country but Orlais? The Chantry does not care about the Chant- the Chantry cares about staying in power.

Why else have their own army of Templars, who have always been pulled from their ‘true’ and ‘sacred’ assignments in the Circles to form the core of the armies on an Exalted March? Mages and magic are an excuse and a justification, because the Chantry DOES NOT CARE about the Word of Andraste.

The Word of Andraste is that magic was made to serve man.

I challenge the Chantry to LET US SERVE, even as I know they will never listen. I can only hope that the rest of Thedas will, and cry for justice with me.’

That was the first page. There were a lot more.

“Oscar’s work?”

“No, but we got it from him,” Antonu said. “You said we hadn’t heard a lot about our ideas for the Chantry reforms. This is basically it. He and the Grand Cleric had already worked out a lot of it, but this put the points into an argument, in writing, full of passion and experience and pathos. ‘Go back to the Chant’ is the foundation of a lot, staring as the justification for breaking with the Orlesian Chantry. You were asking about an army- later on, in that, he talks about the damage mages can do in war. He cites the last battle of the Fifth Blight. I think he was there, or he knows people who were there, it’s pretty specific and we know he’s Fereldan-”

“Really?”

“By way of Kirkwall. An apostate healer. We heard he did a lot of good work.”

This wasn’t-

Zevran checked the end of the manifesto.

Sweet Andraste he’d signed it; it was a miracle Anders had survived long enough for Theron to ever find out that he hadn’t been executed in the burnt-out ruins of Amaranthine.

“I’m the one who translated it,” Zelda said. “It was hard enough getting it to sound like the same feeling and experience and- and caring ast he original so I had them print both so people could see-”
“How many?”

“What?”

“How many of these have you printed?” Zevran asked. “Distributed?”

“Oh- well, we did enough for us at first,” Zelda said. “But then when Kirkwall blew up, one of the things we decided was to print a lot of these. The author was in Kirkwall, it’s all right there, the Grand Cleric didn’t think we’d ever get a better opportunity than to sever ties in response to no one doing anything about Kirkwall. The announcement is just waiting until the printing is done, it’s taking a while because all the Rosso Noche printers have to pretend they have nothing to do with us, except the ones here, and they have their usual things to print, too. The Grand Cleric is paying for it, but-

“How many?”

“Garrastazu and Zuñiga are doing ten thousand or so,” Antonu said. “If Rialto likes it enough, they’ll do more. They’re doing seven or eight thousand in the other cities, for the first run. Once the Grand Cleric sees how people react, they’ll print off more, edited as needed.”

So forty-five thousand on the low end of the estimate, fifty thousand on the high, with more to come. Well. It would be an interesting day in Antiva when the Chantry passed these out.

“And you wish me to write this thing, but about the Crows instead of the Chantry.”

“Yes,” Zelda told him.

“No.”

“But you-!”

Zevran held up a hand.

“If I write this and Rosso Noche prints it then Lauro knows exactly who it has come from. I am the only possibility,” he said. “I would like to do such a thing, but I cannot. I can accept that danger to my own life; but I am responsible for more than that, now. I will not put Diego and Tiar in that sort of danger. He would not be forgiving of runaway apprentices. He would not turn them over to the Crows for the same reasons it could be unwise to do the same for me, but he would kill them himself. They would not be kind deaths.”

“They’re children,” Antonu said quietly.

“To your brother, they would be slaves who ran away. I would say that perhaps I am wrong and he would leave them be, but ‘perhaps’ is far too much risk- and his is a Talon. One does not rise to such a position without condoning everything the Crows do, and believing in it. It would not be the first time he had killed apprentices. I will not do this thing. Not now. If they are ever safe, well and truly-ask me again, then.”

The children’s solution about food was that Diego would go with Zevran to buy something, and then bring it back. They’d run with money stolen from somewhere- apprentices wouldn’t have had the opportunity to do so from anyone who wasn’t a Crow, which meant that it was from graduated Crows, most likely a Maestra who was a little lax about item security around apprentices. Zevran was impressed by the guts it had to have taken. He suspected Tiar. Diego seemed more of a reactive
personality.

Which is why he was surprised that she was having Diego go with him, rather than coming herself. He was certain that she didn’t trust him with the boy, and said as much.

“I can’t,” was her answer. “I’m memorable.”

Zevran was about to point out that most humans did not pay much attention to elves, but then he remembered. She had the Crow elf tattoos, and would be. So it did have to be Diego.

“We will be going another place than just for your food,” Zevran told him as they left Azieri’s house. “I must find my friend. I believe that I know where he is but if he is not then we will get you your food and return home before I go searching the city for him.”

Perhaps Andreas was not exactly a ‘friend’, but it was better than saying ‘acquaintance’ or ‘associate’ or ‘colleague’. The children were in need of concrete examples of a decent lifestyle- or at least as much of one as Zevran could give them while in his situation- and validating their relationship with each other was a good place to start.

They took back alleys and roofs once they reached the quarter, Zevran having a moment of panic as he saw the stall vendors at the market but they hadn’t seen him yet and remembering that they would call him ‘Maestra’. He needed to explain to Diego, before that happened.

Andreas was sleeping on one of the couches in the Summer Lily’s lobby. Ashera was still downstairs, having dozed off in her chair waiting for him to come looking for the man. Zevran woke her gently.

“Okay?” she asked, still muzzy with sleep. “Crow rumors last night.”

“Yes, there were Crows in the city yesterday,” Zevran told her. “I killed them. How was Andreas?”

“His Trade is shit.”

“That is sadly true, yes. But he was otherwise fine?”

“Clients were real impressed that you could get some Magister’s guard to sub for you. Missed you, though. He’s not as fun.”

She levered herself out of the chair and caught sight of Diego.

“Who’s the kid?”

“A reason I was not available last night,” he said, glancing back at Diego. The boy had hung back by the door, sticking close to the planters under the windows, absorbing himself in the plants there.

“The Crows were here after runaway apprentices.”

Ashera looked squarely at Diego for a moment.

“‘Plural’,” she said.

“An older girl, fifteen or sixteen, an elf named Tiar,” Zevran told her. “And Diego here.”

“Why’d they run?”

He gave her a long, long look.
“Well, of course, they’re Crows,” Ashera said. “But you never hear about runners, so it must have been something even more awful than usual.”

“Of course there is not news of runaway apprentices,” Zevran said. “That would make the Crows look bad. If you come back on your own, within a certain period of time, you are not killed outright.”

Understanding washed across her face.

“How many?”

“Many,” he told her. “I ran when I was an apprentice as well. But my- friends, they scared me into coming back.”

A pause.

“I have no particular right to ask this of you,” Zevran said. “Nor do you have an obligation to accept. But my position is not necessarily the safest one and I suspect that I may be called on by Rosso Noche in the near future, and action always carries the risk of attention. If something happens to me-”

“It’s a cold day in Seheron when I don’t do what I can to protect some kids from the Crows,” Ashera retorted before he could properly ask.

That was a relief. So long as Azieri and Antonu and Zelda didn’t say anything, Lauro would have to actually ask around and do the groundwork himself to find out that Zevran had connections here. That would be time enough for the children to gather supplies and run. A head start would go a long way towards saving them.

He beckoned for Diego to come over.

“This is Ashera,” he told him. “Should something happen to me and Azieri’s house is unsafe, you and Tiar come here. She will give you space and you will have a little time to hide and plan.”

Diego glanced between them, ill at ease, and looked down at the floor when Zevran tried to meet his eyes.

“Diego,” he pressed gently. “What is it?”

Nothing.

“If you do not say anything, then I will not be able to help.”

He mumbled something.

“I cannot hear you.”

Diego spoke a little louder, barely more than a whisper.

“How much will I have to work, Maestra?”

Ashera eyed him critically, but with a little humor behind it.

“Awfully little to do your job, but if he’s willing-”

Zevran held up a silencing hand.
“I am not one of the house prostitutes, Diego.”

The boy still wouldn’t meet his eyes, and looked like he wanted to go huddle in a corner.

“But you’re a courtesan, Maestra.”

“My job here is to provide security for the house against the clients and reassurance for the residents,” Zevran said. “I have not done that job since I left the Crows, and I will not stand for anyone attempting to make you take it up again.”

“We’re not that kind of brothel, chichino,” Ashera told Diego. “Go on, I need to talk to Mahar. You can be useful and get the flowers watered. Kitchen’s through that door.”

Diego vanished to get water for the plants.

She turned back to Zevran, expression set in hard lines. Old anger and despair, not at him, but for a familiar situation.

“So you did end up a whore. Fancy one, but-”

“I was no such thing,” Zevran cut her off. “Even whores get paid.”

Ashera glared angrily through him and, after a moment, muttered a curse under her breath.

“It seems I must be explicit,” he said. “I was a slave for twenty years, Ashera, and as far as the Crows are concerned I still am. All children the Crows take from areas such as these, from the Chantry, wherever money is ‘gifted’ as ‘compensation’ or as ‘thanks’ or ‘in gratitude for your help’- they are buying slaves to make into more Crows. It is a pretty lie we tell ourselves in Antiva, that we will sell our own people into slavery in Tevinter but keep none for ourselves. The only things that changed between my working here and being bought by the Crows was that the rape was no longer entirely about the sexual gratification of the ones doing so and that I did not get a handful of silver at the end of the night to make up for it, only my continued life.”

“I could almost wish that man alive right now, if only for the pleasure of seeing him dead again.”

“Who?” he asked. “The old brothelmaster?”

She nodded.

“What did happen to him?”

“One of the young ones got real upset about Tanis being sold off,” Ashera told him. “Got loud about it after a couple weeks, right after he sold you. She got sick the same way your mama did- and now, you and Tanis were around her all that year and never got sick, so it was real suspicious. Deyna and me, we poked around, thought about what was going on with your mama around the time she got better, and when I found the bottle of taliacaea hidden in the kitchen cabinets Deyna threw out all the extra food the girl’d gotten from the brothel and I deumped the rest of the taliacaea in that man’s dinner so it wouldn’t end up in the stomach of somebody who didn’t deserve it.”

Taliacaea was a poison derived from a plant related to the ajo lilies the brothel was named for. Where the ajo lilies were white or silvery, and bloomed in early summer in the deserts, tracassi lilies were a sunset pink-purple with white borders on the petals, blooming in late summer near brackish or saltwater. A proper dosage would kill over a period of days and look like a simple but stubborn aching fever- a too-low dosage caused unbearable tiredness, severe aching pain, and a total lack of appetite. It wasn’t a particularly potent poison, or a popular one amongst the Crows- better to make it
clear that a contract had been fulfilled by poisoning rather than preempted by a sickness- but excitable writers had ascribed all sorts of romantic notions to the flower.

“How much was left in the bottle?” Zevran asked.

“Most of it,” Ashera told him. “About so big.”

She held her thumb and forefinger apart as far as they could go and still crook the finger.

So a standard-sized bottle, presumably at the standard Crow concentration- a severe overdose. Acute dehydration through excess sweating and an inability to retain water, burning pain in the joints and more delicate muscles, a feeling of intense heat, and final death by a too-fast heart.

His mother had been being poisoned, inexpertly enough that she’d never died of it, likely with the man responsible too afraid to up the dosage and be caught out by the Crows for trying to escape his association with them by doing away with one of their debtors.

“Thank you,” he told her. “That is a little justice, at least.”

“Course.”

“And I have some good news for you, if you would like to hear it.”

Ashera smiled.

“I live for good news, boy.”

“I spoke with Zelda and Antonu this morning. They have agreed to return and talk out a plan for how to keep what happened here, with the Crows gone, from happening in other places once they are gone from all of Antiva.”

“Will they?” she asked.

“Come?” Zevran said. “Yes. They promised me. The Crows gone? Well- they shall be, if it is up to me. As much as I can.”

“And how much can you?”

“There were nine Crows in Rialto yesterday,” he told her. “None of them survived the afternoon. I like to think that my chances are pretty good. And I had not yet gotten to the best news- they shall be doing their best to bring Azieri, as well.”

“Caught us the big fish, have you?” Ashera said delightedly, clapping him on the shoulder. “Good job, boy, it was a good day when you walked in here!”

“It was.”

“Wake your friend up and get going. Take care of your kids and I’ll see you this evening.”

“One thing first.”

Zevran handed off his letters and papers to Andreas to take back to Amaranthine and walked him out of the district to the main road, where it was a straight shot down to the docks, with a slight, ignorable unease. When they were about to part ways, he realized what it was- he didn’t want to lose this one person whom he didn’t have to hide from.
But the Warden couldn’t stay.

“Andreas?” he said, half a question. “I know we are—”

This is ridiculously embarrassing, but it wasn’t like he really knew Andreas.

“I would like a hug, should you be willing.”

It felt so good just to be touched again, purposefully, without malice. He’d gotten brief, thoughtless things from Ashera and her people, on occasion, but the last person to really lay hands on him had been Lauro.

He didn’t want to let go, but- Andreas couldn’t stay. Zevran was stuck by the sudden urge to kiss him, push him against a wall, get their thighs-

It had been quite a long time since he’d last been starved enough for intimacy for his mind to jump right to sex.

If only he’d spoken to Theron before leaving. They could have discussed this.

If he’d even thought of this.

Antiva was really not good for him.

He made himself let go of Andreas.

“There is a printers’ bookshop in the artisan’s district, in the vicinity of the market on this road,” Zevran told him. “Garrastazu and Zuñiga. There is one particular book, by an Ezecil- it is on the red shelf, it is easy to find. Take a look at the others that match it if you like, but buy that one and take it back for me, as a present for—”

Maybe Andreas could refer to Theron obliquely as ‘lord’ but Zevran couldn’t. He didn’t even have to try to say it to know the word would stick.

He smiled ruefully instead. Andreas would know who he meant.

“Well. Tell him I hope he finds it informational.”

And then the Warden was gone.

Deep breath. He had been living with this. He could continue living like this.

“Come, Diego,” he said. “I need your knowledge.”

The boy didn’t outright stare at him in disbelief, but he hadn’t yet perfected making a careful non-reaction look like anything but a cover-up. There should have been nothing Diego could offer him, in the way of knowledge, not that a Crow would care about.

Ashera had given him the name and location of the apothecary she hired for the Summer Lily and sent her people to, and Zevran took Diego there, a corner shop with diamond-pane glass windows that really proved that the Summer Lily was practically respectable now. It smelled of kitchen herbs and spice powder and good rich wet dirt and sun and seawater and distilled alcohol, the mark of a good shop. It was nothing at all like the dry overheated woody staleness the Fereldans sealed their shops to in an attempt to keep rot and wet away from their dried herbs. It wasn’t like they hadn’t heard of glass jars.
Some things stayed a mystery no matter how long you lived in a place, and some things would always hit a level of comfortable familiarity no matter how long you’d been away. This was almost as good as the coastal chowder or the language or the smell of leather to say ‘Antiva’ to him. The Crows had mixed all their medicines and associated goods in-House for quality control and tampering prevention, but he’d had to be intimately familiar with apothecaries’ shops as part of courtesan training, as had the Crows who’d eked through training on the basis of intelligence and technical aptitude more than actual skills at assassination- the poison-makers and the chemical artificers, the Crows’ own apothecaries. There was so little difference between a medic and a toxin, after all.

Something in his mind poked him. The technical specialists had an accepted and expected animosity towards the ‘real’ assassins- a good starting place for people who would turn from the Crows.

No, Zevran told himself sternly, even while remembering that people like Rinna and Taliesin had dismissed the poison-makers’ and the chemical artificers’ grudge as mere jealousy more than once, while he stayed quiet because while everyone looked down on the courtesans, the technical specialists were in much the same positon. Without a multitude of kills to their name they were nothing. Without difficult contracts accepted and completed, they were nothing. Like courtesans, they cost more to train and supply than most House Masters and Maestra could be happy about, even as they acknowledged the absolute necessity of having them tied to a House, where they could be insulated from the temptation of ability to be bribed and suborned to turn on their fellow Crows, rather than spreading the cost of them over all the Houses as a whole. No one trusted any of the others that much.

Stop thinking this way.

He was going to focus on what he came here to do, not wild ideas implanted by spirits who were obviously up to something.

There were standing shelves of body care supplies along the wall next to the biggest, brightest window, full of oils and lotions and soaps and cosmetics; evidence that this particular apothecary was drawing from more higher-end brothels than just the Summer Lily, and possibly some independent minor courtesans as well.

“Pick the one that is closest to Tiar’s color,” he told Diego, pointing to a set of backless shelves pulled away from the wall and situated directly in the light, filled with clay pots designed to fit easily in the hand. They were facepaint, seven or eight parts tallow and two or three parts olive oil, tinted with ochre and whatever else the apothecary could get their hands on. Rough color estimates were provided by the leather scraps pressed into the pot lids- a few different types of dye approximating the common averages of skin tone in Antiva, swiped with samples of the particular paint batch for examination. This shop must have been selling to this entire portion of the city. Ashera had praised its quality, both in color and ingredients. Properly-made facepaint acted as lotion as well as cosmetic, and this apothecary had supposedly struck the perfect balance.

Watching Diego hunt through the shelves for the best fit, Zevran was seized with a sudden longing-well, he was in Antiva, wasn’t he, and things he could buy in small glass bottles at outrageous import prices he could get by the pot or jar here, and he wouldn’t have to cut them with vastly inferior Fereldan or Marcher substitutes or use rarely, in sparing amounts. It was even looking like he might not have to run from here, so why not finally let himself buy things he’d only take if he had time to pack and didn’t have to do so lightly?

So- a fat jar of hair oil the size of both his fists. Another of skin lotion, and a tiny bottle of scented oil to add to it if he pleased. Another bottle of scent, a blend of tailings from the truly expensive fine
export perfumes foreigners thought of as ‘Antivan’, warm-weather coastal flowers and swamp orchids from the Telleri and jasmine and lotus from the water gardens, a common scent for people with money to spare but not enough to be called wealthy. He’d see what Theron said about it, and if he didn’t want it, Morrigan might, if she was still around. Or Delilah.

Diego came creeping over with a pot of facepaint and Zevran decided to continue indulging himself and grabbed kohl, too. You didn’t need it so much in the winter, but if he was still around in spring-

And if he wasn’t, well, it looked nice, and sun glare off Fereldan snow and ice in winter could be just as bad as off Antivan sea or sand in summer. Fashions had changed since he’d been gone, anyway, and it seemed that thin lining, barely noticeable, was the way people were going during the winter months now. Plus, it wasn’t like there were any rules about when and how you could wear it. Zevran hadn’t been bothered for not wearing it up until now, and no one would say anything if he did. He’d even fit in better, and it would be another little thing of Antiva to have.

He paid for the purchases and didn’t miss the way Diego’s attention went to the apothecary’s herb planter boxes rather than focus on him. He’d been content to stay with the Summer Lily’s plants after he’d finished watering them, too.

Food for Diego and Tiar was bought at a stall on the way back to Azieri’s, and when they returned to the room Tiar was in the middle of the room, as he’d come to expect, acting like she’d been there this whole time. She probably hadn’t, but Zevran worried a little anyway.

Diego handed over her food as Zevran arranged his things on the top of the dresser, then held the facepaint out to Tiar. She took it gingerly, obviously unsure of what it was.

Zevran tapped his face tattoos.

“So you can go out,” he told her. “It would be worthless as a disguise trying to fool a Crow or those who habitually watch for them, but it is plenty to keep most from looking at you twice. Even visibly armed, you can simply be taken for someone self-employed in the business of keeping company with weapons- a privateer crew member, perhaps, if you dress correctly. I would suggest a pirate, but unless you know things about sailing…?”

She shook her head.

“I thought not,” Zevran said. “I do not either, despite the best efforts of a Rivaini friend of mine. A marine fighter on a privateer it should be, then. You would not want to be thought a gangster or a bandit.”

She watched him silently for a few moments, hunched defensively over her food as she ate it, tracking him as he sat down on the bed and took his boots off.

“You don’t cover yours,” Tiar said, and that was almost a question! Good. Encourage that.

“I came here to hunt Crows and I thought that this would be a standard city, run and controlled by a House,” he told her. “As I said, it would be a pointless exercise to use facepaint against Crows. And suspicious, besides. Better to lay low and keep up a fiction that does not try to hide training too deeply ingrained for any of us to lose. And now, Rialto knows that there is an elf with Crow tattoos taken in by Rosso Noche, and this offers much more protection and power than I could obtain through any subterfuge, at least within this city.”

“I don’t look like a privateer marine,” she said. A challenge, of sorts. Back-talk a bit, too. She was still testing, pushing a little more to see if he’d keep his word.
“And we shall fix that,” Zevran promised. “After you finish eating, I would like to go out again. With both of you, this time.”

He’d been hoping she’d try pushing him on his phrasing, his implicit suggestion that she could refuse, but nothing. Well, time. Just because she had mustered enough suspicion and courage to be pushy on a few occasions didn’t mean she’d try at every opportunity. He could only keep giving openings until Tiar felt secure enough to go further, and Diego enough to express an opinion at all.

Shopping for both of them turned out to be a surprisingly exhausting experience.

It was not physically hard to walk to the shops and stalls, nor to supervise the selection and purchase of clothes for the children so that they would have something more than what they’d run away in, or to spend his own money to outfit them, and then send them by shop runner to Azieri’s house when necessary alterations or construction had been finished. Tiar and Diego weren’t energetic, or demanding, or stubborn. He’d had worse market trips with the Wardens.

But it was so tiring to be constantly on watch— the usual crowd awareness, the unusual focus on Tiar and Diego, catching and analyzing every bit of body language and expression, calculating if they were feeling pressured or nervous or panicky or wary, knowing that the hesitance both displayed was because everything they’d learned in the Crows told them that this was a trick, and that the way Tiar stood prickly and silent and unresponsive when faced with choices of style and colors in the last shop wasn’t her being obstinate but a reaction to the shopkeeper’s polite standard prompt to ‘pick what you like’.

She’d never had the opportunity or safety enough to have an opinion like that. In the Crows, you had to take what you were given. Zevran had always had to fight with his particularly strong preferences, eventually wrestling them down to the point where he could not think about them except when an opportunity to indulge extravagantly turned up; but Taliesin had been more like Tiar, struggling with making choices where indoctrination had no answer, freezing up when faced with a preference that required on aesthetics and sensuality and needing him to talk him through it, or just choose for him.

“Pick seven,” Zevran suggested. This was their third stop, after the Rosso Noche armorers’ for some simple pieces for Tiar to support the mercenary fiction and provide marginal protection against an ambush, a cobbler to replace Diego’s almost-outgrown shoes, and a row of cheap cloth stalls for smalls. All three of them were wearing thin. “One for each day and washing too, and then a nicer one for your eighth.”

She picked the seven plainest shirts of those closest to her, hesitating a moment over the eighth before taking a blue with bits of decorative white stitching. It wasn’t particularly what Zevran had had in mind when he’d told her to get a nicer one, but it was a step up from the others, so technicalities.

He repeated the process with Diego as the shop assistant took Tiar over the side to fit another pair of pants for her. He kept half an eye on that, as he had when Diego had had his turn while Tiar had been stuck on shirts, and noted how she lingered by a bin of skirts a few moments when the assistant asked her to step aside before investigating the contents.

Zevran collected the shirts.

“Diego, please tell Tiar she may have one if she wants one.”

He paid attention to the interaction as the shopkeeper got his order for Diego and Tiar’s adjusted pants noted and added the cost of the shirts to it. Tiar dropped the skirt she’d been looking at as soon
as Diego began talking, and when he was finished, she walked stiffly over to him at the counter.

“They aren’t practical,” she said.

“Oh?” Zevran said. “If you are not used to them, perhaps, but I cannot imagine that people have continued to wear them for so long if they impede functioning that much. I grant that it is not an ideal garment for fighting in- but that is not all there is to life. If you want one, there is no reason not to have one.”

Tiar eyed him and sidled off back to the bin, and Diego, who was also looking through them now, feeling the different types of cloth.

“And a sash that matches whatever she picks,” Zevran told the shopkeeper. “I leave the choice to your discretion, I am certain it will be lovely.”

The shirts got bundled up and Tiar’s skirt added to the pants order to be properly taken in at the waist. Zevran herded them back out to Azieri’s, stopping only to pick up a sun-pot and a few simple potted herbs, hoping he’d read Diego right.

“Soup is a simple food, and this is what those with precious little time or money to cook it,” he told the children as he showed them how to set it up on the roof outside. “Simply add water or milk or broth for your base and you may use whatever vegetable or meat extras you have from your other purchases to provide a meal you do not have to go far to obtain, or stand about in the kitchen watching. The sun will cook it slowly, over the course of the day, but it can be continued indefinitely with the addition of more scraps and the flavoring of whatever herbs you like.”

He explained that last with a wave at the small pots set up by the door. He’d given them to Diego to place, and the boy had spent a good amount of time on his choices, looking around at the sun and possible shadow areas, examining the leaves and poking in the dirt. Diego, it was seeming, liked plants. Putting them in his care would give him something good to focus on. Plants weren’t stressful, and he would need something not stressful now that he had to learn how to live outside the Crows.

Zevran left them there for a bit to go out again as the day shaded into late afternoon, because the other thing he’d wanted to get them wasn’t common except closer down to the docks- not a place to take them, not when, they were still working on trust. Too many people could take news too many places on docks; and you never knew who was coming through.

He came back to the room with two footlockers, the small sorts sailors used, mostly to keep their coin in. They were sturdy, watertight, storable- and they had locks.

“For your things,” he told them. “Put them wherever you like.”

Zevran held out the keyes for the lockers- one each- and the children didn’t reach to take them. Disbelief, confusion, mistrust, tiredness- he could see it all.

It had been a long day for everyone.

“It is not a trick,” he said. “They are yours, and these are the only keys. What things of yours you put in the lockers will not be disturbed by me. This is not the Crows.”

Zevran moved to put the keys down on the dresser top, on the chance that this latest change would be less threatening a step removed from him- but then Diego reached up and took one, their fingers brushing.
Chapter 18

“We could probably find you another place,” Antonu offered a few days later.

“Tired of the house ghosts?” Zevran asked. Tiar and Diego had been slipping around in the early hours of the morning when everyone else was usually still asleep, otherwise only venturing out of Zevran’s room with him, to shop for food. Yesterday, Zelda had stayed up to write, and shrieked loud enough to wake the whole house when Diego had accidentally knocked over a basket of oranges in the kitchen. He’d thought it was a robbery and Diego had bolted up the stairs, fearful of retribution, colliding with Zevran halfway up. Crow training was the only thing that had saved the situation- Zevran had had his knives out. There was a hole in the stairway wall, now, where he’d sunk the one he couldn’t stop into the plaster to keep it out of Diego. They’d sat there on those stairs for a while, trembling and hearts racing, Zevran with one hand clutching the stair rail and the other wrapped tightly around the boy, trying to calm down.

“I meant another place in the house,” Antonu said. “But if you’d rather move out- if you think it would be good for them. It’s just that you’re still sleeping on the roof.”

“I have slept in much worse places.”

“But it’s Haring. It’s winter. It’s cold outside.”

Zevran honestly had not noticed. Winter meant freezing rain followed by snowstorms, weeks and weeks of iced-over stone steps and walkways, and ground so thoroughly frozen that there was no functional difference between it and the dressed stone of the Vigil and Amaranthine.

Ferelden had ruined him for proper weather. What trees there were here hadn’t even lost their leaves, and he’d been thinking that the nights were warm. He’d been sleeping on the blankets, not under them.

“There are no other rooms in the house,” he pointed out, to avoid gloomily dwelling on this change in his perceptions. Not that there weren’t nice things about Fereldan winters. Big fireplaces. Fur rugs. Fur rugs in front of big fireplaces, and Antivan brandy warmed by the flames, and Theron blocked from doing work because everything was snowed in-

Not the time.

“I know,” Antonu said. “My family owns a townhouse here in Rialto. My father gave it to me when I came here. He was hoping I’d get Zelda to move in there with me, instead of me disgracing the family name by living with elves. I was letting Oscar use it for the Organized Apostates, but Rialto doesn’t really get mages on the run any longer, and soon they won’t need it at all. It should be nice and quiet. Hidden away.”

“If there is a problem with me living here now,” Zevran said. “I would rather you simply told me outright.”

“It’s not a problem,” Antonu reassured him. “I mean, it could be. But it’s not you.”

“I am not turning out the children.”

“My brother never tells us when he’s going to come by. He just does.”

That- had not been what he’d been expecting to hear.
“I had thought I was simply not told,” Zevran said.

“Why would we not tell you?”

“An easy power play. If I never know when he is going to come, then I will always be fearing his arrival, and be less likely to run. If I chose the wrong time, then he could be only hours behind me instead of days or weeks.”

“We’re not those kind of people,” Antonu protested.

“Aren’t you?” Zevran asked, and left it at that. “But you are right. That is an unconscionable circumstance.”

“With what you said about my brother, I thought you might think that.”

“I said nothing that was not true.”

“I didn’t say you didn’t,” Antonu said. “But he’s still my brother.”

“Does he feel that way?”

“He’s representing our father still, even if he does probably have his own agenda.”

“And if I was faced with the man who sold me to the Crows, I would use a broken wine bottle if that was all I had to kill him with, as well,” Zevran said. “You cannot assume this thing, Antonu. It is possible that his only problem is with your father, but it is also entirely possible, and much more in line with the Crow teachings that he must as a Talon uphold, that he feels no particular tie to any of your family and would be just as happy to have you gone.”

Antonu had gone defensive. He could see it in the set of his shoulders and the way he’d tilted his chin up.

“You think your children can be saved,” he said. “You’ll forgive me for wanting the same for my brother.”

“Then I wish you good luck for it,” Zevran told him, unwilling to begin a fight over the topic. He personally would never have tried, and would feel more secure with Lauro dead and burned, but this was Antonu’s prerogative if he wished it. “You do mean it about the house?”

Antonu assured him that he did, and actually took him out to see the place- partly, Zevran suspected, as an excuse to keep him and Azieri away from each other. Azieri had been suspiciously silent and absent since their fight earlier in the week, and he hadn’t said anything yet about the new knife hole in his wall. Zevran would not mind moving out of the man’s house.

The place Antonu’s family owned was in a nicer part of town than he’d had reason to visit before, and said a lot about the social status of Antonu’s family. Rich merchants, certainly, but not one of the princely merchant families who traced their descent from one of the many, many illegitimate or disinherited children in the line of Asha Campana. They clearly aspired to that, though, and Zevran remembered a comment Antonu had made during Satinalia about his father trying to marry his sister off. He would not be surprised if it was to one of the current Antivan princes. Not Claudio Valisti, for certain; but there were his brothers, Aita and Estefan and Duello and Basinar. But which of them were even still alive? Prince Fitu and Princessess Garailia and Kemina had been killed all in one contract, and Princes Idele and Jimeon hadn’t even lived to see adulthood because of other ones. Queen Izaranta had been pregnant with King Fulgendo’s twelfth child when she’d been assassinated- it was a dangerous job, being royalty in Antiva, and Zevran was years behind on the
“I’m not sure how much it’s been cleaned,” Antonu told him apologetically, unlocking the front door and leading him through the low tunnel into the small house courtyard. There were two old trees growing here, fighting for sunlight and water- an Andrachne strawberry and a clementine. The strawberry was in full fruit, its branches hanging over the shaded stone rainwater basin. The water itself was slightly stagnant, and there were exploded fruits on the stone paving, attended by ants and fruit flies.

“Well, the rooms should be better,” he continued, sounding slightly disheartened. Zevran toed one of the strawberry tree fruits, disrupting the ants. “Oscar let people in the back, and he was supposed to make sure they cleaned up after themselves.”

It appeared that Oscar had kept his word. The kitchen was a bit dusty, but scrubbed under that, and the beds had clearly been stripped of linens after their last use and the mattresses left out for a sun-cleaning in the front of the windows. The linens themselves were washed, and back in their cedar chests. Zevran helped Antonu put the mattresses back into the bed frames. The last one puffed dust, making Antonu sneeze.

“Perhaps they need beating?” Zevran suggested.

“You do that to featherbeds?”

“I have no idea,” he confessed. “The Crows did not teach me about this aspect of beds. All else seems in order, but- your brother will not come here?”

“He never has before,” Antonu said. “I never lived here, and he’s never lived here, so there’s no point.”

Zevran tried to reason through the pros and cons of moving house as Antonu went to check on the basement stores.

Getting away from Azieri was a definite plus, and now that he knew that Lauro only ever showed up unannounced, he couldn’t let the children continue to stay in that house. There was more room here, and everyone could have privacy and personal space.

But this was still connected to Antonu, and so to Lauro. It was further away from the Summer Lily and the cheap food options. This was a different neighborhood, and surely there had been talk about Antonu letting Oscar use it, but two elves suddenly living in an essentially-abandoned townhouse with a human boy was a prime opportunity for rich humans to get ideas.

“Neighbors?” he asked Antonu. They were in the wine cellar now, and Antonu was quickly checking the homebrew barrels- wine or brandy, likely from the fruit trees in the courtyard.

“What about them?”

“What are they like?”

“Gone, since Rosso Noche took over,” Antonu told him, straightening up from checking the undersides of some kegs. “They’ll send ships to trade and keep a fund to guard and clean, but none of them wanted to stand so blatantly against the Crows by staying.”

Useful. Very good, in fact. So long as they stayed away from the other houses, it was unlikely anyone would care, and possibly even notice.
That made it an easier sell. A lack of quite-so-impending danger carried a lot more weight than the inconvenience of more walking.

“What would you want for rent?” he asked. This was the last potential obstacle. He had run off with enough money not to worry, but rent on a place like could be terrible.

Antonu just looked confused by the question, looking up from the lock he was struggling with.

“Don’t break anything?” he said, trying to shove the door open. It unstuck suddenly and he went stumbling over the threshold, catching himself when the door swung into a stack of full crates.

This was a big room full of crates and boxes. In the back were the shapes of large decorative objects covered with dust clothes, statues and what were either folding screens or paintings, partially obstructing the view of a wall of scarcely-filled bookshelves. It looked like someone had started to unpack and organize, but then given up.

“I’m just going to check for leaks,” Antonu said. “It’ll be quick. This is a newer house than it looks like, and the foundation should have stayed sound.”

“What is all this?” Zevran asked. “The house furnishings?”

“Oh no,” Antonu said. “There was a craze a few years back for anything of Old Antiva. It was fashionable, so my father bought whatever he came across, and it turned out that the people doing the best research and recovery work were people like Ezecil Romão and Zelda, which is how he got involved with Rosso Noche. It didn’t take very long for people to catch on that studying Old Antiva was really about coming up with a better Antiva now, and it started falling out of fashion pretty hard not very long ago. Father saw it coming, and he shipped off most of this with me when I came to be with Zelda. I thought that he might like looking through it all, but then we got busy.”

Zevran re-evaluated the crates and boxes.

“I had no idea that there were so many things left from it.”

“You can look if you like,” Antonu told him. “If you want some way to pay rent, I have the shipping inventory that I never finished checking all of this against. You don’t have to.”

“I will take it,” Zevran decided. “It will be something to fill free time. There is only so much pointless inactivity one can stand.”

“As opposed to pointed inactivity?” Antonu asked with a little smile.

“Of course,” Zevran said, facetiously serious. “Surely you are familiar with it? There is such a difference between doing nothing because you can come up with nothing to do, and doing nothing because you could be doing something. The first is merely boredom; the second is a lifestyle. Were you never struck with the desire to do no more than exist on your money and write emotionally-fraught poetry?”

Antonu had barked out one rather embarrassed laugh as he’d realized where Zevran was going with his point.

“There were these jasmine vines that were on my mother’s balcony, and they migrated to tangle through mine and my sisters’.”

“No, do not tell me,” Zevran said. “‘Starry nights upon the vine / and sweet blossoms in the sky / Our Mother’s thousand wishes shine / lanterns for those who this day die’.”
"Look, in my defense, everyone of a certain age wants to be General Iashnera," Antonu said. "We all love a good warrior-poet, and perfectly respectable lyricists have spent their whole lives hoping to be the one who can match Lament and Exultation for the Priestesses of Anummu."

"And everyone loves a good tragedy now and then."

"It’s a story about the victory of dignity in defeat and loss, but also making sure that everyone else burns right along with you. Very Antivan."

"I always thought that her situation could have been improved with the judicious application of poison," Zevran told him. "Fertanou was First Priestess. I never understood why she flung herself into the sea weighted with Iashtivar’s holies. It only meant that Sister Cleafilo could have the last temple of Iashtivar burnt and razed so that no one would ever know exactly where it was. The poem says the temple bred venomous snakes. There was no good reason for to not, say, order a basketful of cobras to be released into Cleafilo’s tent."

"Well, most people’s reaction to ‘the leader of the army who wants us dead or converted is camped outside the walls of our holy city’ isn’t ‘assassinate her with snakes’," Antonu said.

"It would have been nicely symbolic,” Zevran said. “The world is fundamentally deficient in inherent dramatics."

"That must be terrible for you."

"I exist in eternal disappointment. It is very trying."

"But you like the love story at least, right?"

"Iashnera and Fertanou have an epic love story, to be certain,” Zevran said. “Which is to say that they both die in heartwrenching tragedy agonizing over all they have lost, clinging to the possibility that they may be reunited after death under the grateful smile of their goddess. It is a fine thing for literature, but in truth I would prefer a more mundane sort of love."

"Me too," Antonu said. "But it’s still such a good story. And it’s not all tragic. You’re forgetting about the prophecy at the end."

"It makes up for nothing."

"It’s hopeful! She has a vision of Anummu rising again, greater than before; and Antiva City stands there now!"

"A thoroughly Andrastean city full of Crows and merchant princes unable to be controlled by a weak king."

"We’re fixing that," Antonu said. "It’ll be better. We’ll live up to that prophecy someday soon."

Zevran moved himself, Tiar, and Diego into the new house before dinner, and cooked the meal for all of them that night. It worked, and they ate it, and he felt an absurdly disproportionate sense of victory over it. The kitchen was big enough for the children to observe and participate in every step of the food preparation process, and they weren’t too skittish to stand his prolonged company- that was all this was.

Still, it felt like a turning point. They were willing to take food from him.
Only because they knew you would be eating the same thing, and it would be stupid to poison it then, was his treacherous thought on the subject in the late, sleepless night of a space that was too large without someone else lying next to him. He tried to forget it.

The nights in the new house were fits and starts of sleep. Freedom was keeping its word, because he was sleeping with no hint of demons from the Fade in his dreams—only those of his own mind.

His nightmares were of a different sort, now. Instead of Theron, he dreamed of Tiar and Diego—taken by the Crows, killed by Rosso Noche, failed in any number of fundamental ways by him. There were the dreams where he pushed them for independence too early and they broke. There were others where he broke their newly-given privacy and they never trusted again. Yet more where he held them too closely and they turned on him to gain their freedom. In some, he killed them and he had no idea why; in others, they killed him and he never learned the reason. On occasion, they would just be gone, and he would wander this house and Azieri’s and the Summer Lily and the familiar streets of Rialto looking for them but finding nothing.

Zevran had barely slept before the morning Ashera met with Azieri, Zelda, and Antonu. She’d asked him along, and he hadn’t felt able to say no.

He brought Diego and Tiar, too. Tiar needed to be shown her bolt-hole, after all; and he hadn’t wanted to leave them alone in the house all day. It felt wrong. Here, they could sit in on the meeting, or they could socialize with the residents who were awake at the hour.

Well, perhaps not socialize. Diego was just young enough to still be allowed a place in children’s games, but Zevran had no idea if he knew how to act during them. Or if Tiar could hold a conversation with someone who wasn’t either of them. But maybe there were some chores or projects they could assist with.

Ashera put Diego to watering the plants again and told Tiar to go check all of the locks in the building. And Diego could take care of the window boxes when she checked those locks, too. Zevran was almost grateful for that, though unsure if he was pleased or worried about the fact that she was so good at handling people so hurt as his two children.

They were at the table all morning, Zevran zoning out more than a few times, and he was happy when they broke around mid-morning, immediately going to look for the children.

Tiar and Diego were on the roof when he found them, sitting together on the peak. Zevran joined them.

“All is well?” he asked.

“The locks are fine,” Tiar said. “And the plants.”

“Any trouble?”

“There were stories,” Diego said, and Zevran was surprised to hear him answer.

“Stories?” he asked.

“There was a room with sea lavender and wax flower in a vase and the window boxes had ranunculus and orange poppy,” Diego told him. “The woman was telling stories to a bunch of children. I didn’t know the stories so I tried to listen in but she noticed and asked if I had one that I liked and I told her I didn’t know any ones like that and they all acted like it was bad but I do know stories so I told one. And they didn’t like it.”
“You told them a Crow story,” Zevran said. Tiar snaked an arm around Diego and gave him a sour
look, but she didn’t try to pull Diego away from him.

and it makes things hard so I thought they’d learn something. I thought it could work. This is a
brothel and it was the only one about a courtesan.”

What?

“I was never told any stories about a Crow courtesan,” Zevran said. “I heard the usual ones- Calien
d’Evaliste and Pachivica Caldera and Unor Banat. Runn Dalia a few times. Mediya Pohera was
quite popular for a number of years. But I never heard stories of courtesans, even from the other
courtesans. It was all current gossip. We are not worth remembering.”

“One is!” Diego exclaimed, and the way he straightened up and lit up, excited and confident, made
Zevran’s heart twist. This was why the Crows told stories about the most successful of their number.
At the right time, in the right place, they could do this to a person; give them what they needed to
stay instead of running or suiciding.

And whatever courtesan Diego had heard about, even after leaving the Crows, this story was still a
source of some comfort and support for him.

Zevran debated trying to pick it apart, once he’d told it. Idolizing a Crow could lead nowhere good-
but he was already away from them, and it could be needlessly cruel to tear apart a story that
obviously meant so much to him still. There would be time enough to take it apart later, when he had
something more to feel good about than this. For now, encourage sharing, especially since it hadn’t
gone over well not that long before.

“Would you tell me?” he asked Diego, who nodded eagerly and straightened up to begin.

“In the Dragon Age, the Crows had a courtesan named Zevran Arainai.”

Oh shit.

“He was the best courtesan of all of them,” Diego continued, and Zevran felt his stomach roll over.
Yes, he had been one of the best; but only because he had learned how to be what a client wanted
before the Crows had ever come for him. Where the other children selected for courtesan training
froze or flinched away when the trainers came for them the first time, he’d feigned innocent interest
and naivety the way he’d learned got him extra money at the Summer Lily. When the trainers had
been surprised, and told him that Crow courtesans were expected to be experienced and act like it,
he’d switched the fake ignorance for an imitation of a sultry flirting some of the prettiest women had
used when trying to attract clients.

He’d been praised for his acting and his skill, after, and been relieved he’d done well- and a bit
proud, and happy, that he’d done something right and been told he was good. At that point, it had
been years since anyone had.

Remembering it now, Zevran wanted to slide off the roof and go empty his stomach in the privy.

“He could keep a person engaged all night, and he knew how to poison without detection; and he
could pass unnoticed and he could get in anywhere; and he was part of a real cell, with Crows just as good as him.”

It was strange, to feel old pain mix with new. He’d put Rinna and Tali’s memories to rest, as much as
he ever could. Hearing of them from Diego was only a twinge, nearly lost under the urge he had to
tell the boy to ‘stop, just stop’ because this wasn’t a good story- this wasn’t something to retell with bright eyes and excitement because a ‘real cell’ got proper contracts and that was power, and safety, and if one courtesan had done it why not another?

This was hope. Pure, manufactured, manipulative hope.

“And they were the best of the Crows,” Diego continued. “Zevran and Taliesin and Rinnala Arainai, the last two compradi of their year, surviving through an alliance made as soon as they’d met, and the congradi who fit them so well that they’d been recognized as a cell before they graduated.”

That was… skating right on the edges of personal. Someone from Arainai had to have told this story first, someone around their age, who had been apprenticed at the same time as them and seen what they were like together. But who would ever have chosen to focus a story on the courtesan instead of the bastard princess or even the compradi muscle? Congradi were the ones who got the real stories, the popular ones; and the names of the compradi that got passed along were never court-

“Everyone knew that one day Rinnala would be Master Arainai, and Zevran and Taliesin would be her lieutenants, Maestra even other Maestra would be under.”

He’d killed Eoman Arainai and the Maestra under him. He’d purposefully left the mid-ranking ones and the mere graduates to abandon the House or face off against each other; and given the probably partnerships and favors that could have been used, and he and Rinna and Tali’s particular circumstances as Eoman’s favorites, there hadn’t been many who’d been around the three of them enough to really think that Rinna wouldn’t have dropped Zevran, at the very least, long before taking over House Arainai for herself. And to have been so close and still be alive-

There was only one person who he hadn’t killed who could have survived the fatal disorder of a fracturing House, and done it without taken Arainiai for themself or being killed by ambitious Crows.

Savail was fundamentally scared enough to have laid low and stayed quiet- yes, he could have managed to be ignored by everyone else, with a high enough level of other people plotting and some luck. And only a courtesan would think to tell stories about another courtesan.

“But Rosso Noche was scared of what such good Crows could do to them if they got that far, and made a plan to kill Rinnala to destroy their cell before it got that far.”

…what?

“They laid an ambush for her. Zevran and Taliesin knew about it, but got there too late to stop it.”

“This was perhaps an unwise story to tell in Rosso Noche’s own city,” Zevran chided, because he couldn’t say ‘no, that’s not what happened, but I wish it was’.

“I didn’t say Rosso Noche when I told it,” Diego said. “I said it was a Maestra who wanted to be House Master. It was the only thing that still worked with the end, because if it wasn’t someone more powerful than Zevran then he would have just killed them, and not have just killed them, and not have to take an impossible contract on the Blight Wardens of Ferelden to get his status back, but gotten killed by darkspawn before he could finish the contract and return to Antiva.”

Because Crows always died at the end. That didn’t make it sad, just a story. It was what they did during it that really mattered, and Zevran thought that he could see the point of this particular one.

‘Being a courtesan and even losing his congradi patron couldn’t stop Zevran Arainai, only the curse of the Maker Himself. Be good enough, and you could get where he didn’t live long enough to. Even
compradi can rise.’

“Interesting,” Zevran said. He didn’t trust himself with more than that, at the moment.

“I hate that story.”

Diego wilted a bit and Zevran took a chance, placing a hand between his shoulderblades in comfort.

“Why?” he asked Tiar.

“It’s fine when the courtesans tell it, or the compradi or the apprentices,” she said. “But when Master Escipo did-”

Zevran smashed down the impulse to go check all the roofs now. This was the safest part of the city for them. A talon was far too high up on the hierarchy to deign to come to a brothel when there were courtesans in the Crows and rich young merchants’ and nobles’ daughters and sons to choose from.

“Why was Master Escipo talking to apprentices from House Availa?”

“Because he takes the fallen Houses,” Tiar told him. “Everyone was saying he was an idiot for giving up Rialto to Arainai, but then Rosso Noche took Arainai apart. Then they said he was an idiot for taking what was left of Arainai and letting them join his own House without demotions or killing any of them or anything- but he did it for them, and for Runn and Availa when the Grandmasters were killed. Now it’s like he has three houses. Everyone’s saying he’ll be Grandmaster, and that he’s only making noise about figuring out who killed Runn and Availa because he’s waiting for whoever did it to take out more House Masters first.”

She glared wrathfully at the roof tiles, shoulders hunching.

“I thought we’d be fine with Escipo,” she said. “It’s so big now. I could stay unnoticed until I knew where to owe favors and get favors. The courtesan Diego was apprenticed to, he was… decent. Nice. He didn’t really push, when he saw Diego-”

She stopped, and changed her sentence.

“But he was from Arainai and Master Escipo had heard the stories he told and wanted something like they were. He found out that I was- I wasn’t cold enough to Diego and he had me in his office and he told me the story and I knew what he wanted out of us and I could take more training but Diego-”

Tiar didn’t continue this time, and she didn’t need to. Zevran remembered the way Diego had been not so long ago, in that alley. He had barely been surviving the training he’d been getting. He never would have survived something like what Zevran had gotten.

“Arainai, you said?” he asked. He would have to make this topic dropped, soon, for the sake of his children; but he needed information, too. “Was this courtesan perhaps Salvail?”

“He was,” Tiar said.

Diego scooted a little closer to him.

“Did you know him?”

There were enough courtesans that he didn’t have to lie. And Salvail had been popular amongst their own people, in a Crow sort of way. Being so entirely unthreatening meant that everyone felt comfortable around him.
“I did.”

“I thought,” Diego said. “Maybe you did. When I saw your tattoos. You’re nice like he is. And he doesn’t like hurting people either.”

“Did he treat you well, then?” Zevran asked, and then amended: “As well as he could?”

“He didn’t want what Master Escipo wanted, but he couldn’t say no,” Diego told him. “And sometimes- lessons would just be stories. I’d have to listen to the graduated courtesans and then tell them what the important things in the stories they told were. It was Maestra Salvail’s idea, and then the other courtesans started doing it too, so there was a group of us. Apprentices. We’d all go to House Matez and we’d get orange slices or grapes when we answered a question right.”

House Matez was traditionally heavy on courtesans, keeping five or six at a time, and Zevran remembered the courtesans’ salon there well. It was a spacious room, richly appointed and very comfortable with stuffed chairs and pillows and big picture windows that made it too dangerous to use for anything that involved real Crows. He had some pleasant memories of the place as well- evenings spent talking and making jokes as everyone got ready to go out to the parties in the salon’s mirrors; and a few dalliances with other courtesans, luxuriating in silk and velvet and skill. It was… good, to think that it was a nice place for the apprentices, now, too. As an apprentice, he’d had far too few good things.

Diego ducked his head.

“Sometimes if I’d done really well,” he said. “And there wasn’t anyone else around. Maestra Salvail would hug me. Just a little.”

He could do better than that. He’d been party to a lot of hugs since coming into Theron’s company, and learned quite a bit about them.

Minding their balance, Zevran tugged Diego into his lap; gave him the longest, warmest hug they could stand; and told him what Theron told him, when he was feeling particularly weighed down with the past.

“I am glad you are here. You deserve more good memories than you have, and I hope you get to make them up, twice over.”

Still, the story haunted him as he went to work that night, and again the next morning. He wandered off to a far corner of the house, finding a window seat in the matrilineal bedroom that looked over the courtyard, and sat leaning against the warm glass, curled around a pillow.

It was a very nice house, this place of Antonu’s family’s. But Lauro Escipo knew his children, personally, and even the margin of safety they’d gained by moving out of Azieri’s seemed useless now. Forget Lauro finding the children and killing them- he’d take them back and do his level best to break them into the model of the Crows. Diego might not get the chance to kill himself but he’d die all the same, and Zevran that he had enough of an idea of Tiar’s personality, now, to know that she wouldn’t survive him by long. She wouldn’t go quietly, but she would die, quite likely by going after Lauro himself.

They weren’t safe around Rosso Noche, but he couldn’t send them off alone. None of the people he’d trust with his children- Isabela, Theron, Alistair, Morrigan, or Leliana- were here to send with them, and besides that he wouldn’t send them off by themselves to some strange place with people none of them knew. He wouldn’t abandon them when they’d made so much progress in trust.
He could make his day trip to Salle, perhaps, and buy them a berth on a ship going directly to Denerim or Amaranthine. They’d be fine at sea, and safe enough with Crow training in Ferelden, especially if they minded their own business. If he told them to travel to the Vigil and tell their story to the first Warden they could get to listen-

Zevran curled his fingers into the soft squish of the pillow and sighed, pulling it closer against his stomach, looking blankly out the window and feeling the warmth of the sun on his face.

And why would that not be berth for three and not two? he asked himself. Why are you really still here?

Lauro Escipo-

Is an excuse, and you know you have been using him as such. You could have gone to the city a day or two after being left at Azieri’s and killed him, then disappeared again. You know you could have, and instead you have sat on your hands for four months but for helping Ashera and the children and Isabela and killing Runn and Avalia over Satinalia. Why haven’t you gone home, or done more?

He closed his eyes and banged his head lightly against the window.

“I am conspiring against myself,” he muttered, and thought of the letter he’d received from Alistair, and Andreas’s arrival, and the letter he’d written in return, nearly a full month ago now. He’d been honest in it, he’d thought— he hadn’t wanted to stay and be a constant reminder to Theron that he couldn’t be fixed, and hadn’t wanted to be constantly reminded of it, either.

But what good had that really done? Didn’t Theron have the same words he did, to counteract the Magister’s blood magic? Didn’t he know just as intimately that this couldn’t be fixed? And hadn’t he, himself, adjusted to both the demon dreams and the words as time had passed, more or less? He knew from the Crows that people could become accustomed to anything, no matter how terrible— why hadn’t he just resigned himself to living with this as he had everything else?

Yes, he’d had new information to live with. But was admitting that he’d been a slave really that different from the way he’d been talking about the Crows since he’d first met Theron?

It wasn’t. He’d just never used the word ‘slavery’ before. He had a faint memory of the phrase ‘golden cage’; and wasn’t that much the same, in this instance?

He’d had to realize how much anger he still held for the Crows, perhaps? But he could have done that in Ferelden, surely— and Andreas had left the day after he’d come to that particular realization. He could have just left with him instead of sending the Warden off alone.

If Zevran had believed a little more in divine intervention, he might have said he’d stayed in Rialto because he was meant to find Tiar and Diego and help them. But the Maker had left long ago and the Creators had been barred from their people for even longer, and even the Old Gods were dead or sleeping or, most recently, re-embodied in a young boy. Theron could say what he liked about Falon’din; Zevran was where he was because of his choices, and nothing else.

So why hadn’t he chosen to go back? Why had he stayed here, when he had easy trust and people who loved him and a secure place back in Amaranthine?

He sat there with his thoughts, getting exactly nowhere, until movement out the window caught his attention.

Tiar was down in the courtyard, knives out, trying to practice against an imaginary opponent. Her
movements were a bit jerky and hesitant—she wasn’t used to shadow fencing, and she was feeling awkward trying it.

Well, that was something he could help with.

Tiar went wild-eyed when he walked into the courtyard, expression flashing into a sort of fearful determination before she tried to hide it behind Crow opacity.

Zevran glanced up at a slight rustling—Diego was in the strawberry tree, in a low branch, watching him.

“I can assist,” he said, looking away from the tree. “If you would like.”

From body language alone, he couldn’t tell if she was more likely to bolt or lunge. Neither, he hoped.

“I can stay right here if you are more comfortable with that,” he told her gently. “I can offer suggestions, or talk you through things. Or I could come over and you can have someone to spar against.”

“Stay there,” Tiar said, Zevran nodded and leaned against the tree, ignoring how she kept eyeing him and wouldn’t put her back to him. As he gave her suggestions and verbally corrected her stances and lunges, Diego slowly moved closer until his feet were dangling down by Zevran’s face.

He had to resist the urge to tickle the boy’s ankles. There was too high a probability of getting kicked in the eyes or teeth. He settled for resting a hand on Diego’s knee.

Diego fidgeted at the contact, and Zevran looked up at him.

“What do you not want to be—”

“What do I have to train too,” Diego rushed the sentence out as almost one word, and Zevran turned away from Tiar to give him his full attention.

“No,” he said. “You never have to, Diego, never with me. I will not say that there are not many skills the Crows reach that are useful, especially when living a life with a certain standard threat of danger, but you do not have to keep up any skill you do not wish to, and I shall not force you to.”

He paused.

“And if you do choose to do keep a skill up, I will help. And I will not make it like the Crows. I will make it fun. I promise.”

Diego seemed unconvinced that training could be ‘fun’; and Tiar was giving him an incredulous look as well, shadow dueling abandoned for the moment to listen.

“I don’t want to kill people,” Diego said after a moment. Zevran held his arms out in invitation, and the boy slid off the tree branch into them. He kept Diego off the ground in a tight hug for a moment, before setting him down. Diego stayed close, pressing up against his side, and Zevran smiled at him, keeping an arm around him and squeezing reassuringly.

He waited for Tiar to say something about Diego’s new willingness to trust him, or even to come over and do something about it; but she did. She looked away, instead, and went back to shadow dueling, getting her foot placement right this time and turning her first lunge into one fast, continuous movement.
“I have to be good enough to keep running,” she said.

“A good goal,” he told her. “There are a sadly-large number of people in the world who should be run from—"

And Theron wasn’t one of them.

Zevran kept his smile on and let his sentence drop like he’d meant to end it there, and told himself he’d deal with that thought later.

He went back to the Rialto Chantry to deal with it. After Tiar had stopped for the day, they’d had lunch, and Zevran had left the children with Antonu’s father’s shipping manifest to structure their exploration of the room. He’d left the door open a few days ago, hinged oiled, to see if it would unstick and stay that way, and Tiar had found an excuse to come down and see what he was doing. Both the children had poked around a bit since then.

There were some ancient chests listed on the shipping manifest as ‘unopenable’, and it wouldn’t hurt to have the children try picking their locks. It was good practice, and if they didn’t want to or got bored, there were plenty of crates to pry open, or already-unpacked books to look at.

The noon bells struck as he trotted across the roofs, avoiding flat ones with people using them as extra work and living space. The echoes had long died away by the time he took his spot against the steeple, startling some pigeons as he settled in. They came back quickly enough, once they realized that he wasn’t paying attention to them.

He’d made a mistake.

Oh, he’d already know it was, but he hadn’t admitted to himself just how much of one it really was.

So he’d panicked. Fine.

But his response to feeling targeted and deeply unsafe and in danger of losing his autonomy in a way that even the Crows couldn’t do had been to run away from the person who had given him that safety in the first place?

He was an idiot. He’d run from safety when that was what he’d been desperately wanting; and now he was halfway across Thedas, living in his enemies’ territory because he’d thrown away what he’d run from wanting but never expecting to find, or be given.

Zevran remembered how Alistair had closed his letter: ‘Whatever is keeping you in Antiva had better be really important.’

It had better be really important. Running had been the wrong decision and what little plan he’d had hadn’t been particularly important- but he would make this mistake good for something.

He had to protect his children. None of them would be able to move freely, and only in limited safety, until Lauro Escipo was gone. So what if Rosso Noche was ‘protected’ by him- if you were going to change Antiva you couldn’t cooperate with the Crows, and all Lauro had done was build up his own power from what Zeran had done in an attempt to hurt the Crows.

When Lauro Escipo died, it would mean that the Crows would finally have to deal with the true effects of losing four Houses- and not spread out like they could have been, no. It would be all at once, a disaster of a magnitude unlike anything the Crows had ever dealt with before.
And it could even be worse. The Talons were still in Antiva City arguing over who was in charge. That was d’Evaliste, Martell, Valisti, Ibarra, Desoto, Lanos, Riez, and Escipo— for the moment. If Escipo and, say, the venerated House d’Evaliste and their four hundred years of unbroken power in the Crows fell within a few days of each other…

Or he could go for Desoto, simply for the irony of it. Or— he did owe Claudio Valisti a visit. Especially if he was going to be serious about this.

And he had to be. If he was going to go home, and have the mistake made up for, he had to.

Haring was almost over, and in two months 9:35 would become 9:36. The year was turning, and Andraste help him: so would he.
Chapter 19

Nehna continued to teach Salladin what she could of magic until spring. By the time the first fleet of koch boats left to break the ice to Sulfur Point, Salladin could hold fire in her hands, alternately bright enough to be a ship’s lantern or only warm enough to keep a drink or her hands heated. This seemed sufficient, and practical enough, and Nehna took them on one trip on the koch boats to break the ice to Sulfur Point before returning and seeking out some of the traders who were still waiting for the spring trade to arrive.

“I need someone to teach my daughter magic,” she told the Chasind traders.

She was known in Mont-de-glace, which was the only reason that they didn’t turn her away immediately. They conferred with each other. They told her to ask again later.

Nehna and Salladin went a second time with the koch boats, Salladin carefully melting the ice off iron tools under her mother’s sharp supervision, to the general approval of the boat crews. When they returned to Mont-de-glace the second time, the head Chasind trader, Dovachay, came and found them.

“We can’t promise anything,” he told Nehna, on the docks. “But you can come ask the sorceresses.”

So Nehna packed them up for another long journey, said goodbye to the people she knew in Mont-de-glace once again, and left with the Chasind. They sailed in the small, wide boats for two and a half weeks, the shorelines they camped on each night gradually changing from stone to the warmer coastal wetlands of the Frostback Basin to the frozen saltwater swamps of the sea-edge of the Kocari Wilds.

The Chasind stopped here, at a town that started on stilts far above the waterline and ended high in the trees. Nehna could see the waterlines on both stilts and trunks, and made sure to get a place to stay as high up in the city as they could, when Dovachay and his traders talked to the locals and got very nervous and hurried, unloading their goods as fast as possible and hoisting the boats up onto the roofs. The snow was melting in the Frostbacks, and the waters would come, soon.

She was advised against traveling inland, and was grateful to have taken the advice when, two nights in, she woke in terror to the walls shaking and a noise so big that it was almost an experience, not a sound.

The swamp channels below the houses were gone, replaced with feet of roaring, frothing whitewater. Somehow, the ancient trees stood firm against it, and the stilt-houses weren’t washed away.

“Because those are the sorceresses’ houses,” Dovachay told her in the morning, when she commented on it. “They are always protected, even when the wise women are somewhere else.”

They would have to wait for the snowmelt flood to recede for the sorceresses to come back. While the water lasted, the Chasind used rope-strung bridge walkways between the trees to travel, and threw massive, thick, heavy nets out into the flood, dragging in parts of trees, smashed rocks, drowned animals, and dead humans.

Tools and useful lengths of wood were kept. The animal carcasses were hung from the trees to dry out and be investigated for rot or infestations before skinning and smoking. The humans-

“Avvari,” Dovachay told her, sorting the corpses the tree-town had caught over the last few days.
Nehna was helping and had found a body she couldn’t identify.

“How can you tell?” she asked. It was an easy thing to sort Avvari from Chasind from Fereldan when they still had their clothes, or most of their heads.

Dovachay picked up the remains of the hand that were still just barely attached to the arm, and gently prodded under the single extant fingernail.

“The Avvari and the Alamarri are lighter-skinned than you and I,” he said, and showed her the white flakes he’d dug out from under the fingernail. “Stone-paint. Only Avvari use that.”

Nehna was rather impressed by the Avvari’s stone-paint, at least what she’d seen of it in the detritus of the flood. Chasind and Fereldan corpses often came only in sundered parts, but Avvari bodies often stayed in mostly one piece, protected by the way the white plaster-like paint they used for decoration dried rock-hard and just as insoluble when applied to furs. It was probably as good as ironbark, and definitely better than leather. She wasn’t sure how it would compare to metal.

The flood started to recede after nine days. The Chasind still threw the nets out for a few days after that, but caught much less, except-

The morning of the last day of the nets, the Chasind dragged in two drowned Dalish, bloated with water and fouled by opportunist carrion-eaters from when they must have gotten stuck temporarily, somewhere upstream.

“We make nests for the Avvari and leave them for the birds, as their souls demand,” Dovachay told her softly, a hand on her back as he led her away from the bodies of her people. “The Alamarri we string in the trees until they are dry, and then burn on the rocks and leave to hear the song of their goddess on the wind and feel of warmth of their god in the sunlight. Our own dead we put out to the sea, and sink. What do your dead ask for?”

“Trees,” Nehna muttered. She was not crying, and she was not going to cry. She hadn’t known the dead Dalish- and she was an exile, they wouldn’t have accepted her if they had met her, while they’d been alive. “We’re buried. And I need- cedar staves.”

The Chasind didn’t have cedar, and they didn’t know what mythal’adalh were, which was the generally-accepted substitute. But the Dalish had long had to make do, and Nehna accepted the long oak staves Dovachay produced from the boat-repair supplies. They were close enough.

The burials had to wait until the water was fully settled and flowing in the proper channels again, but once the Chasind were satisfied that there would be no after-surges, Dovachay took Nehna, Salladin, and the bodies out to one of the few islets both large enough to accommodate bodies and with trees growing on them- or maybe more like through them.

They brought the staves, and shovels. Nehna gave Salladin the task of watching over the canvas-wrapped corpses, the cloth painted with the appropriate patterns in acquiescence to the fact that she hadn’t been able to find any Chasind with colored thread to embroider them, and started to dig.

The ground was soaked, more mud than dirt after no more than a few inches. It squelched when a shovelful was laboriously pulled free of the suction the water created, and more swamp quickly oozed back into the laughable excuse for a grave Nehna and Dovachay were trying to dig.

After an hour of this, and almost no progress to show for it, Nehna leaned on her shovel and tried to swallow tears. She couldn’t do this one thing right-

“Deva Stralchaka,” Dovachay murmured respectfully, and Nehna looked up, eyes watery.
A Chasind sorceress had arrived, her layered, patched-together clothing including cloth, scraps of tooled and dyed leather, and bits of worked metal that were obviously sourced from Ferelden. Leather cords tied around the top of her staff dangled in stones, more metal scraps, and interesting bits of wood that clacked as she walked towards them.

The sorceress didn’t speak to either of them—just Salladin, and even then it was only a simple command.

“Watch.”

She held her staff out over the ground, stray flecks of quartz in the rocks catching the light, and the water rose from the ground to meet it.

Nehna and Dovachay finished digging the graves with the sorceress looking on.

They stayed in the Chasind tree-town through the summer and autumn. Deva Stralchaka took up the job of instructing Salladin in magic and the other arts of a Chasind sorceress, herbalism and ethics and poetry and philosophy both mystical and natural.

Nehna made sure that her daughter got lessons from her on ethics and philosophy and poetry as well, of course. She found the Chasind’s lack of particular gods and focus on the rhythms of the interactions between everything around them, other people and animals and non-living phenomena such as the coming of the yearly floods and change of moon phases and swamp tides, to be broadly adaptable and inoffensive. The Chasind didn’t care who had taught them about the things they knew and didn’t concern themselves particularly with an afterlife or historical personages; while Dalish only cared about the surrounding environment inasmuch as it prevented people in getting killed in particularly thoughtless ways, not for the environment itself. The two systems complimented each other, and Nehna could see Salladin grow comfortable in both, learning both her magic and her heritage with no sense of shame.

Salladin had been a few months past six when they’d come to the Chasind, and they stayed with the tree-town and Deva Stralchaka past her ninth birthday. Nehna spent her time much as anyone else in the town did, though the tasks she turned her hand to were a bit more varied. Most often she used her experience in woodworking to do repairs on the houses and boats, but she helped tan and sew hides and weave baskets, as well. In late summer and fall she fished and hunted and harvested in the small gardens the Chasind kept as well as in the surrounding swamps with the rest of the town, putting food away against the winter. The height of summer didn’t last as long here as she was used to, but when it arrived she was either on the scanty stretch of dry sand beach with the smiths, expanding her very basic metalworking skills, or she was off with the traders in Mont-de-glace.

She trusted the Chasind. She could leave Salladin with them for a month and some without fear. And she did. She went to Mont-de-glace, returned, and—

“She has made a strong mind for herself,” Deva Stralchaka told her, about Salladin, when she got back. “You will not need to worry about spirits. She should learn from others.”

There were no other groups of Chasind on the coast that hers could recommend, so she took one more trip back to Mont-de-glace, to tell the people she knew there that she would be going further away again, and that she didn’t know when she’d be back.

They clucked their tongues at her and fondly told her that she had wandering feet, and she was welcome back any time.
Nehna and Salladin went north and east, further into the swamp of the Wilds. They passed through the heart of it before finding another sorceress, Deva Anatzavoy, to settle down with.

Deva Anatzavoy didn’t live in a town, but in a house by herself in the vicinity of a few different villages. Nehna fell into a habit of cycling through them, for work and company.

Eventually, some asked her about her clan. They were far enough north, here, she learned, for the Chasind to have had encounters with Dalish- regular encounters, even. The clans in Ferelden were apparently much more open than the ones in Orlais.

Nehna told the Chasind she didn’t have a clan any longer and bit down the urge that rose within her to take Salladin and go more north and east, into the Brecilian Forest, because maybe-

She couldn’t hope. Not like that.

Deva Stralchaka had been a reserved, distant woman. Deva Anatzavoy had a rather different personality; not particularly outgoing, exactly, but warm and easy to get along with. The local Chasind dropped by her house often, but it still took time, longer than it had on the coast, for them to accept her. Salladin was easier- a child still, and no one was going to question a sorceress too hard about whom she chose to apprentice. But Nehna was too clearly Dalish to fit in so easily.

She worked on it over the fall and winter, gathering wood and herbs and bringing them to whoever needed them. She carved little toys for the children, something she hadn’t done since Antiva, and one of the women with many younger ones, Laykan, taught her about carving buttons in exchange. She laid snares for hares and foxes and beavers, though she didn’t catch anything more often than not.

By the time the swamp started to thaw, the Chasind here had taught her some of the trail sign. She went out most often with a man named Hachatshir- Laykan’s husband- and he taught her how to look for rotted ice, and how to mark it for everyone else. They hunted, too, for the early deer and rams that ventured further than their brethren past the edge of the Wilds.

After spring was full underway, and spring rut was upon them, Hachatshir invited her along for an expedition.

“Bring rope, and hunting weapons,” he told her. “And your armor.”

She turned up at his village in the early morning, sky still grey, to find that most of the adults from the surrounding villages were here as well, armed, many with heavy coils of rope slung over their shoulders.

They were painting their faces.

Nehna went to find Hachatshir.

“Is this a raiding party?” she asked.

“No!” he said, more exuberantly than he usually did. There was a faint smell of wildwine everywhere- people had been drinking already. “We catch sheep! Here!”

He held a paint pot out to her- red.

Nehna took a step back, involuntarily, her free hand coming up to her face.

“Eh?”
“You don’t cover your vallas’lin,” she told him. “I might be- I can’t.”

He shrugged good-naturedly and let it go.

The party set out soon after, headed northwest, following a route that had been marked out with old trail sign, the stone cairns sunk into the swamp ground and built up again as they started to disappear. They camped in what must have been the usual place, with the speed at which the Chasind got fires and shelters set. That night, some of them- Hachatshir included- performed twirling tricks with their ropes, dancing in and out of the loops they’d tied in them.

At the end of the next day they were still in the Wilds, and Nehna couldn’t see why.

“If we’d kept going north, wouldn’t we have been out of the swamp by now?” she asked Hachatshir.

“Only fools go there,” he told her, tone surprisingly stern. “Witches live there. Men go and few come back. Even sorceresses can disappear. We go west, and don’t disturb them.”

On the third day, they finally emerged out of the Wilds into the Hinterlands of Ferelden. It was higher country, rugged, with scrubby bushes and grass and stands of grown-over rocks and hillocks.

They tracked the rams in rut, following them to the flocks of ewes and last year’s late-season lambs, almost full-grown now. Nehna helped the Chasind startle the flocks to see where the head ewe was, and strung ropes across paths through the rocks to create dead-ends to drive the sheep into. Some Chasind- the ones with the most paint on them, who’d been the most drunk that first morning, Nehna realized- then leapt off the rocks into the flocks to tackle and hobble the lead ewe.

One of the women who’d jumped in shouted in triumph and hoisted a hobbled ewe over her head. The Chasind on the rocks yelled and applauded while the others down with the flock groaned before joining in.

“And now she and her wives get first pick of this flock,” Hachatshir told her. “Come. They will be doing this all day.”

Nehna followed him away from the others, sliding down the rock crag after him. A few of the other Chasind were descending, too.

“We have somewhere better to be?”


Hachatshir and the others, Nehna learned, were hunting the rams. The rope dances they’d done on the first night of the expedition had been boasts of skill, which they now put to more practical use, chasing down the rams and driving them off the rock faces they liked to escape to back down to the flatter ground, where the same twirls and tosses of rope loops the Chasind had danced through caught horns and hooves.

Nehna couldn’t work the ropes. Her job was to use her spear to prod the rams into the right direction, to keep them from running too far away from the Chasind.

The ram-hunters clapped her on the back at the end of the day, when they’d dragged the kicking, furious rams back to the captured flocks and given them limited rein to mate with the ewes. The Chasind egged the rams on and placed bets on which ewes would get chosen, passing the wildwine around again.

There were four days of this, and then the Chasind drove their captured sheep back to the Wilds.
“There are humans who breed sheep,” Nehna told Hachatshir, on the way back.

“Pah,” he scoffed. “Drylanders. Sheep don’t survive swamp winters. You catch them in spring, you take their wool, you let some of the little ones go back outside the swamp at the end of summer, and kill the rest. Winter meat for everyone!”

When they returned to the villages, Nehna discovered that the Chasind who’d stayed had been busy creating sheepfolds out of rope and branches on the longer islands. The flocks were split up by village, and everyone went home to recover from the hunt for a few days.

They gave Nehna Deva Anatzavoy’s share of the sheep to take back to her house. Nehna returned, leading the two ewes and their lambs and yearlings, to find the sorceress and her daughter drawing out complicated arcane circles on the ground.

“Mamae!” Salladin yelled excitedly. “Mamae look!”

She dropped the stick she’d been drawing the current circle with and dashed over to a completed one, flinging her arms up. The circle glowed yellow-brown, and the ground rumbled, more dry land rising from the swamp.

“Very nice,” Nehna told her. “If Deva Anatzavoy can be done with you, come help with the sheep.”

It turned out that Deva Anatzavoy had taught Salladin the ground-raising spell for a reason. Nehna spent the next month following them around as Deva Anatzavoy inspected nearby areas of the swamp, teaching Salladin about water flow and types of soil and things Nehna couldn’t quite puzzle out. The sorceress was looking for something specific, was all she could tell. She did eventually find what she was looking for, but it was some patch of swamp that looked essentially like the rest of the Wilds, to Nehna.

At midsummer, they returned to the spot, accompanied by the surrounding villages. Deva Anatzavoy and Salladin raised the ground all day, balancing out the changes in water by sinking other islets and channels.

Well, Deva Anatzavoy did. Salladin tired more quickly than her teacher did, and when she was ordered to stop before she entirely depleted her strength and her frustration disrupted the circles, Nehna pulled her daughter down into her lap, where she sat with Hachatshir and Laykan and their children. Salladin promptly fell asleep on top of her.

“It’s good peat,” Laykan told her, and that was what they were doing. “We won’t go cold this winter, not like last season. Your daughter is very strong. Deva Anatzavoy has never been so good at this magic.”

Nehna smiled and thanked her and tried not to think about what her daughter’s strength could have done for a clan.

They cut peat until the season started to turn, and then it was time to shear and slaughter the sheep. It was a long process, getting the wool off the sheep and packed away, then slaughtering them and setting up to tan the hides and smoke the meat. It took most of the Wild’s short autumn, but they did get it all done before winter hit.

This winter, Nehna was a known element, and she was welcome in the villages and the houses of people she knew. She carded the wool with Laykan and Hachatshir’s village, and the younger children taught her how to spin it into thread, the ten-year-olds and teens giggling at the sight of a grown woman swearing at making the spindle go the wrong way and having her thread unravel. The
professional weavers hid smiles behind behind their hands at their carefully-maintained wheels, and had the children teach her how to make yarn instead, which was a little easier.

That was winter, with the Chasind-wool. Carding the wool, spinning the wool, dyeing the wool, weaving the wool. Nehna could get through the first three steps well enough, though her spinning was always slower and of a more dubious quality than everyone else’s, but *weaving*.

It made pretty things. Nehna could appreciate the skill involved. But the Dalish used back strap looms, not the Chasind’s more permanent warp-weighted ones, on a wooden frame with rocks to keep the warp straight, and the transition proved very difficult.

Laykan sympathized.

“It moves too fast for me,” she told Nehna one day, pulling her aside to a corner with a great basket full of yarn. “I can’t keep up fast enough to be a weaver, like my husband can. I’ll teach you how to knit.”

Knitting was better. You could put it aside, and it was easily portable. Nehna liked it much better than the other options.

But she was still *sick and tired* of wool, by the time spring came. She’d given up on all fabric work over a month ago, even the embroidery she’d been showing the Chasind to break up the monotony of yarn, and gone back to carving. She made bowls, and plates, and cups, and watched as the weavers took apart their spinning wheels, and learned how they were put together. She carved some new parts for them, but as soon as it was warm enough to spend most of the day outside, she ranged in the swamps, hunting birds with the Chasind’s weighted nets and gathering plants and bark for Deva Anatzavoy.

That spring, when she went out on the sheep expedition, she *understood* why there were Chasind who volunteered to jump into the herds. *She* wanted to fight a sheep, too, for being so *gods-cursed wooly*-

And it felt good to be cheered by the Chasind, when she hauled up the hobbled ewe she’d tackled and headbutted into submission.

In Salladin’s twelfth summer— their sixth year with the Chasind and their third with Deva Anatzavoy—Hachatshir and a man Nehna didn’t know came rushing to the sorceress’s house, calling for help.

“My wife,” the strange man gasped, tears running down his cheeks. “Deva Dalya, there were Templars, she and our son— they killed her and took our son!”

Nehna detached, right there, overwhelmed by her own thoughts. Deva Anatzavoy wouldn’t be able to do anything— no sorceress would. Not even a group wanted to go up against Templars. The Chasind would raid the Fereldan settlements, but those were outlying farmsteads, or if a season was particular desperate, the quietest, furthest hamlets. Chasind knew strike-and-run, and when faced with armor, they ran. They knew they couldn’t stand up to a knight, not without preparation. And a good ambush.

Yelling brought her back. Deva Anatzavoy had just told the stranger that, and he was shouting, screaming, that he would go to the witches, he would get his son back-

The sorceress knocked him out. Hachatshir sighed.

“A terrible thing, to lose a child,” he murmured, and left.
It took Nehna a moment to catch up, to reengage, but then she followed him out of the house.

“Hachatshir!”

He stopped on the edge of Deva Anatzavoy’s island and turned back to look at her.

“Can you rope a man the way you rope a ram?”

He thought a moment.

“I’ve never tried. Maybe. They’ve got big swords though. Ropes can’t stop that.”

“Kill them fast enough and they won’t get a chance.”

“Let me ask some of the others,” Hachatshir said. “I’ll meet you.”

Nehna went back inside. The armor she’d taken from Master Escipo fourteen years ago was still in somewhat decent condition, not quite as good where she’d had to repair it, but still good enough for fighting Templars. Knives, spear- she was ready to go.

By the time she got to Hachatshir’s village, he was standing outside it with two of the other ram hunters, ropes ready and carrying their own weapons.

“Where did you find him?”

Hachatshir led them to the place, and they followed the trail of the dead sorceress’s husband back to her body. Nehna waited while the Chasind recited the death blessing and tipped her body into the swamp. Then they followed the Templars.

They caught up with them in the later afternoon, bogged down by their inexperience and plate armor and cursing loud enough for the sound to carry.

The boy was seven or eight, quiet and unrebellious because he wasn’t expecting anyone to come for him- and shock, Nehna thought. It was likely he’d seen the Templars kill his mother.

“Let me get closer,” she said quietly to Hachatshir. “Then ropes.”

There was little enough cover in the swamps, but the Chasind and Nehna knew how to use it. She snuck up on the Templars and lunged, stabbing up between plates to deal a lung wound in one. He gurgled in alarm and she pulled him down into the swamp water as the other Templars started yelling, surprised by the ropes and the force the Chasind could put behind them. At least one of the others was yanked backwards by her neck into the swamp.

Kill the ones inconvenienced by the ropes, first, so they couldn’t themselves free. The Chasind knew the flicks and twists that loosened the nooses and got them twirling again to close around another neck or arm, so she didn’t have to worry about that. Just the killing.

It took longer than she’d wanted it to. Some Templars landed hits, and the last one was only dispatched by one of the Chasind coming in with his maul to smash the man’s shoulder to splinters through his armor. Nehna had to limp back to Deva Anatzavoy’s.

The look on the man’s face when he woke up to find Salladin bossing his son around was entirely worth it.

The boy was Jarik, and his father’s name was Elach.
Deva Anatzavoy took on Jarik as a second apprentice alongside Salladin. Nehna, by default, ended up in charge of Elach, introducing him around to the villages and finding him helpful jobs. He didn’t seem particularly interested in joining anyone’s community.

“I am still grieving,” he told Nehna, when she asked. “It will pass in it’s own time, and then I can consider it.”

In Nehna’s experience, grief didn’t pass at all, but it was a very Chasind mindset. She let it go.

‘It’s own time’ still hadn’t come by the time fall arrived. Nehna was staying around the sorceress’s house instead of the villages, partly to avoid the sheep but mostly because they needed more room, if Elach wasn’t going to move on or move out.

She and Elach were up on the roof of the house extension, checking the beams and tying down thatch, when Salladin’s voice rang loud and clear from the yard where Deva Anatzavoy was teaching them more about the glyph circles she so loved to use.

“Of course you can be my brother!”

No! Nehna wanted to scream down. No! No!

“You don’t like that, Laochvon Nehna?” Elach asked quietly.

She glared at the bundle of thatch she was tying down and yanked the knot tight.

“You don’t need to call me that,” she snapped at him. ‘Laochvon’ was Chasind title for someone who’d distinguished themselves in battle. The other Chasind were calling her that, too, and Hachatshir and the two men who’d come with them to save Jarik.

“I’ve traded with Dalish,” Elach told her, tying his own thatch bundle down. “I understand if you don’t want her getting close to a human boy.”

That wasn’t it. She hadn’t spoken at length of her past to the Chasind. Hachatshir and Laykan knew the most, and all she’d told them was that she’d been married once, and driven away, and that Salladin’s father was dead.

“She had a brother,” Nehna said.

“He’s dead?”

“Humans took him, before she was born. I hope he is. It would be-”

Movement. She looked up to see Elach turning his face away, looking out over the swamp behind the house.

“I understand,” he told her. “When they took Jarik- their mages pass through the edges of the Wilds, sometimes, and join our villages. I’ve heard their stories. I would rather they’d killed him, than have him live to go through that.”

His voice dropped.

“I’d thought- what sort of father wishes that for his own son?”

They continued thatching in silence.

Winter set in. Elach was a hunter more than he was a craftsman, so Deva Anatzavoy’s was blessedly
low on wool and wool products. Nehna carved in peace while Elach watched, sharpening blades and repairing his bird and fish nets, tiny row by tiny row.

“Do you want to talk about your son?” he asked, one morning. Deva Anatzavoy pretended not to hear from where she was sorting dried herbs, but Salladin and Jarik both looked up in astonishment.

“I have a brother?” Salladin asked. “You never said!”

“I did,” Nehna told her. “You were younger.”

“How young?”

“Five.”

“That doesn’t count! No one remembers that far back!”

“I do,” Jarik said loftily.

“Who was he?” Salladin asked. “Mamae, I want to know, where is he?”

“Satheraan. Your brother’s name was Satheraan.”

She didn’t tell the whole story. She’d left her clan to marry a city elf, a Crow, an assassin- she said that. She told them that Adan had been a slave of his House, and killed by his masters for marrying her in secret. She’d had difficulties after his death, and met a woman. Then they’d both tricked and sold to Orlais.

“And you never saw your son again,” Deva Anatzavoy finished for her, speaking up suddenly. “This Tanis. You were sold together?”

“And escaped together. The last time I saw her, she had a good job as a personal servant to an Orlesian noble.”

“When was the last time you saw her?”

Nehna had to think about it. It had been- it had been ten years since she and Salladin had set out from Lydes to find someone willing to teach her magic.

“When the spring comes, you will go see her again,” Deva Anatzavoy ordered. “It has been too long for you. Go find her again. It’s past time for that bond to renew, and for you to lay your son to rest.”

“I have,” Nehna told her.

The look the sorceress gave her told her that she wasn’t believed, at all.

You never speak of him, Nehna could hear her silently thinking. Your own daughter didn’t know she had a brother. You ran off after a boy you didn’t know who we wouldn’t have been able to recover because you didn’t want to be confronted with it. You’re trying to forget him. You’re not finished with this, not yet.

The Chasind didn’t weave the sort of cloth she needed. She went to Elach for help, and told him what she needed. He knew where to go. They braved the winter swamps to get to the Fereldan trading town of Lothering, where she got what she needed- two lengths of undyed fine wool cloth, tightly woven, large enough for blankets, and old scrap copper.
When they returned to the Chasind, Nehna bartered or asked for more thread from the people she knew, in the right colors.

Laykan helped her set up the dye baths for her cloth, and arranged the space in exchange for instruction for herself and some of the weavers in the dye process she was going to use.

And it was a process. Dye had to be made from fresh plants to give the best color, and Nehna took out the Chasind’s laceflower green. It was an unobtrusive middling color, but not vibrant enough for what she needed. Adding aged copper would do it, but that took a while. She had to scrape off the green patina on the old copper she’d bought in Lothering, and then soak the renewed, bright metal in a vinegar and salt mixture and leave it to the air to change color. This took time. A lot of time, to get the amount of green she needed.

But finally, after midwinter, she was sure she had enough. Laykan and Hachatshir helped her set up the green dye vat- copper as well, because the Chasind knew what they were doing- and the vinegar soaking bath. The wool cloth went into the soaking baths overnight, and Nehna got up early in the morning to prepare the dye vat, filling it with the laceflower green and mixing in the copper powder until it was dissolved. It had to heat, and then in went the cloth to soak.

They dried into the brilliant bright green she hadn’t seen since she’d last lived with the Dalish.

“It’s so pretty,” Hachatshir said, admiring the lengths of cloth as they hung from the rafters, losing the last of their damp. “So bright!”

“It’s our mourning color,” Nehna told him.

Fire green, the People called it, or dreaming green. It was Falon’din’s color, for the paths he’d once walked and the light their ancestors had seen by, in uthenera.

The colors of her embroidery thread were important, too. Black, for the soil of the graves and the shadow of Dirthamen’s free ravens that you prayed the dead could drive off or avoid. White, for death itself, but also the color of halla, of Ghilan’nain, the Great Guide, to light the proper path for the dead to travel to their ancestors. Grey- silver- another of Falon’din’s colors, for his scrying mirrors, and the hope that the dead would speak again, and walk, one day, bringing back the knowledge they had gained. Yellow- gold- for uthenera, for the ancestors, for the Evanuris, for peace and joy and hope.

Deva Anatzavoy nodded approvingly, knowingly, when Nehna spread the base fabric for her blessing cloths out on her floor and started planning the patterns.

The borders were easiest- those were standard, stylized owl-swooping-ravens in the corners, joined by knotwork, endless twisting geometric patterns.

It was the interiors that were hard, because they were individual to each person. Nehna had only finished Adan’s by the time winter had ended and she was meant to go west. Black birds, for the Crows, looming over Rialto in black and gold and white, a human city that took and took and took. Black and white for the night they’d killed him, abstracted in slashing lines and harsh angles. She threaded gold along them, for Adan’s hair and his smile and the love he’d given her, and carried it down, into the outline of pine trees in silver, picking out details and embroidering in the ground she’d grown up on and the ground she’d never gotten to bury him in.

She took Satheraan’s with her, pattern undecided. The cloth and thread weighed her down her entire trip to the tree-village on the coast she hadn’t seen in three years, and on the boat ride to Mont-de-glace, where she was deeply surprised to be remembered, still. But she was the only Dalish Mont-de-
glace had ever seen, and she’d made an impression.

She didn’t take the cloth out here, either. She didn’t take it out on the road to the Gamordan Peaks. She only took it out her first night in the Arbor Wilds, and stared at the featureless green expanse between the borders she’d done months before.

Nehna camped in the same place in the Arbor Wilds for five days, embroidering. At the end of it, she traced the lines of the spread-winged eagle-owl she’d sewn into the center of the blessing cloth, the tones of her embroidery matching the darks and lights of a real life owl, and cried.

Not sobs, not grossly- she just sat there, and cried, and stitched a halla horn braid pattern in a circle around the owl.

*Ghilan’nain guided him, Falon’din took him.* That was the hope, the prayer.

She continued on the road the next day and kept traveling in fits and starts, some days on and some days off, as alternately she found herself to exhausted to work or driven by a new idea.

Satheraan’s design slowly came together as she traveled in the Dales, looking for the summer house Tanis had said she’d be in. Nehna used up the rest of her gold trying to express his personality, his smiles and the happiness he’d brought and his sunny disposition. It came out in a delicate tracery pattern, light and beautiful and fragile.

It shattered, at the bottom edge, where she’d started to run out and gotten angry, frustrated, and cried over the fact that she wasn’t going to be able to finish the pattern. Under the great *mythal’adahlen* trees of the Emerald Graves she twined black around the ends of the gold, and when the gold ran out silver around the black, and dropped tree trunks down the cloth, everything about the People had had been stolen from him, living in a human city, growing up in brothel, no father and a mother who’d had to trade on *shem* perceptions of her culture to make enough money to keep him.

At the bottom- she left the bottom for the long bright deserted nights of the Exalted Plains, of Dirthavaren, when the wild halla stepped into her firelight and let her sit with them, resting up against their sides or leaving her work to wrap her arms around their necks and breathe in the familiar scent of them.

The first night the halla came, Nehna did no work, weeping, overwhelmed by their very presence. Halla, the own children of the goddess she’d given her Oath to, cared nothing for the word ‘exile’.

The second night, she sat in he midst of the halla’s comforting, steadying presence, and counted, as best she could, the nights Satheraan had worked in her place. For three weeks she traveled slowly, sleeping early and breaking camp late, using the daylight to stitch one tiny white lily at the base of the tree trunks for each night she’d counted. They’d filled the bottom of the cloth, by the time she’d stitched the last lily.

She tied off the thread and sat back in the morning light, resting against the broad side of the only halla that had stayed past daybreak, a doe old enough to have gone through four or five birthings. The cloth spread out across her legs and onto the ground before them.

The doe’s fawn snuffled at the bright green base fabric, curious, and lipped the cloth to see how it tasted. The doe snorted at her young one, tossing her antlers, and Nehna smiled as the fawn jumped away only to sidle back and slowly edge it’s head towards the cloth again. Nehna watched it and it watched her as the fawn got closer, and closer, and closer…

Suddenly it’s head shot forward and it nipped at the cloth, very obviously and deliberately, and then
just as fast turned and bounded away, racing around in loops and zig-zags.

The doe heaved a great sigh.

Nehna *laughed.*

“*Yes, you were very bad!*” she called after it. “*Terrible, terrible disobedient da’len!*”

The fawn calmed as Nehna bundled her finished cloth up and packed it away, strapping on her quiver and bow and taking up her spear to use as a walking staff. She rose from checking to make sure the embers of the fire were well and truly dead to find the fawn standing right in front of her.

“Oh?” she asked it archly. “*Come to apologize?*”

It stood there a moment, staring up at her with big dark eyes-

-and then lunged forward and headbutted her in the hip, twisting and racing away again.

“So *that’s* how it is!” Nehna yelled after it. She took a deep breath, felt the breeze blowing across the plains, and saw the fawn stop, off in the distance, to look back at her.

She spun her spear into a new position, holding it firmly and easily parallel to the ground, and stared the fawn down across the grass and the blooming summer flowers.

When it turned and ran, she ran after it, sprinting over the grasses and leaping stones. The fawn’s mother caught up and kept pace with her, her hooves thundering against the hard dirt, *t-t-thm t-t-thm* in time with Nehna’s racing heart.

The fawn disappeared over the top of a low rise. Nehna and the doe crested it to find the fawn stopped on the other side of a small river, waiting.

Nehna stopped as well, on the rocky bank, to catch her breath. She laughed again, shaky with exertion, and leaned on her spear.

The doe stepped up next to her and nuzzled her hair.

“No more,” Nehna told her. “I can’t run any more. Your young one is too fast for me.”

She straightened, and wrapped her arms around the doe’s neck, resting their foreheads together.

“Thank you for staying with me until I was done, sister,” she told her quietly, and let her go.

The doe turned and leapt the river, rejoining her fawn, and Nehna watched them until they’d trotted out of sight.

She followed the river downstream, northward as it flowed towards the Waking Sea, for four days. During the morning of the fourth day, she saw signs of halla on the far bank and crossed, following faint impressions of a trail to a clump of woodlands.

There were voices, and she proceeded slowly, spear ready, anticipating bandits, or human poachers.

But she found a clearing instead, occupied by an Orlesian noble girl, seated in the grass and surrounded by her mass of skirts, clucking at the halla and trying to get them to come closer. Standing was a boy, nearly a young man, finely-dressed as well, but clay brown and black of hair and eye where the girl was Orlesian powdered ivory and blonde and blue. He was cradling a halla
fawn that couldn’t have been more than a few weeks old, a late season birth, to his chest with all the
care expected of holding a human child. They were talking, in Orlesian, and off to the side, scattering
oats from a bag for the herd-

Nehna stepped out of the trees. The girl shrieked and scrambled to her feet, making the halla jolt in
surprise, and ran away still shrieking, skirts in hand.

“Sévérine!” the boy called after her, but didn’t move to chase her. “Sévérine; come back!”

Tanis dropped the bag of oats and seized her in a crushing hug.

“I’m sorry, I know it’s been ten years-”

“I-” Tanis sniffed. “I’m just glad you’re alive, Nehna, I-”

“This is my mother?”

Nehna studied Damien’s face. He didn’t seem angry, or upset, or hurt.

“You told him,” she said to Tanis.

“She had to,” Damien answered for his real mother, sounding defensive now. “The empress’s
cousin, Gaspard de Chalons, he’s been patronizing people at the University in Val Royeaux-”

“He’s paying people to write horrible things,” Tanis told her. “About elves, and the Dalish. And the
University people- the art ones get their funding from the empress. The research ones have to bid for
money from the nobles, or work for the Chantry, and the Grand Duke has a lot of money. Everyone
knows that he’s having these papers written and these pamphlets distributed because he’s trying to
undermine his cousin by making all the nobles think what his people say when they see her with her
maid-”

“Tanis, what are they saying?”

“It’s awful-”

“Orlais is awful,” Nehna said. “Antiva was awful. I want to know what they’re saying.”

Tanis wouldn’t look at her when she spoke.

“That elves are- aren’t much better than talking animals. Pets, at best, if they’re- if they’re ‘properly
trained’. That they’re vermin, that they infest the cities, that- the Grand Duke, he’s head of the
Chevaliers, and they’ve always ridden through the alienage in Val Royeaux when they have a new
group of initiates and killed whoever they find and no one ever stopped them but now they’re doing
it in the other big cities, and whenever they feel like it, they did it in Lydes, last month-”

“You’re safe?”

“We never go near the alienage,” Tanis told her. “We couldn’t risk anyone even thinking-”

“We’ve lost the Game,” Damien said. “There’s a pamphlet going around. About how to tell if any of
your servants are ‘hidden half-men’.”

“I told him,” Tanis whispered, and Nehna held her closer. “I told him when I heard about it first, just
in case, and Sévéline got one right before we left to come out here for the summer and she read it
and she told Damien she knew, and he shouldn’t even try to deny it, because he’s always had a way
with halla-”
“This is the wrong sort of activity to keep up when you’re trying to hide.”
Tanis smiled at her, tearfully.
“But he loves them so much. How could I tell him to stop?”
Nehna wiped her tears away and kissed her.
“I’m sorry-”
“No,” Tanis said. “No, we haven’t lost yet. Sévérine only ran. She might not even have said anything to the duchess. Just- wait here, Nehna, we can sort this out. I’ll come back-”
Damien put the newborn halla down and brushed his shirt off. He and Tanis checked each other over for the proper exactness of orderly dress, and went back to the estate. Nehna sat down with the halla, took out her carving knife, and picked up a branch to occupy herself. She stripped the bark off, and whittled off the length she wanted, then followed the suggestions of the wood grain and feel of the glide of her blade.

By the time she realized what the idle curves could turn into, she was too engrossed in the work to give much thought to it. She’d finished the pendant of Sylaise’s flame and was working with the thick base of the branch to make something else when Tanis and Damien came back.

They had bags. Nehna wasn’t that surprised.
“I’m sorry,” she told Tanis again.
“No,” Tanis told her. “Don’t be sorry. I’d rather have seen you, and known you were all right, and- and have a reason to leave before Orlais hurt Damien worse. It’s not hopeless. The duchess only dismissed us and only kept what we couldn’t carry away-”

“She stole your things?”

“She’s the duchess,” Tanis said. “We lied. She’s allowed. But I got the coin and the jewelry and the best clothes, and we still have what’s in the house in Lydes. So long as we get back before she does, or any letters or messengers from the household, we can sell before the news gets out and get full price. It’s coin enough to start somewhere else. The Free Marches, maybe- they always want Orlesian-trained servants there.”

“You could come with me,” Nehna offered.
“To Mont-de-glace?” Tanis asked. “Or the Dales?”

“The Kocari Wilds, actually.”

“Ferelden!”

“I know some people who would be very upset you just called them that,” Nehna told her. “Tanis- the Free Marches are a long way away.”

“I know. But we can’t stay here. And we wouldn’t be happy out in the wilderness, Nehna.”

She’d already known it, from when she’d visited Tanis in Lydes; and it had been apparent from the few moments she’d had to watch them unknown through the trees; but it still-

“I’ll come with you,” Nehna said.
“No, Nehna, this isn’t ten years ago, they’d kill you if you showed your face near Lydes or Halamshiral.”

“Just a little ways,” Nehna said. “To the road.”

“There is no road!”

“To the next town with one, then. Tanis, I’m not ready to leave you yet.”

Tanis sighed and looked down, briefly, like she might cry; but she fought it back and brought her chin up again. Nehna stowed her own projects in her pack and tied Tanis’s bag to her own-

“Nehna, you don’t have to.”

She set the butt of her spear securely against the ground, and took held Tanis’s hand with her free one.

“Yes I do.”

It was more than day’s walk, going at Tanis and Damien’s city pace, to get to the nearest reasonable town. Nehna could have made it before dark, but she wasn’t going to push them when they wore out, and walking badly on sore feet that she suspected were blistering. She left off walking with them in the late afternoon, when it became clear they were going to have to camp, and started ranging around them, looking for a good spot. She found a small stream winding along the base of a rocky hill with a cleft clearing in it—good.

“Soak your feet,” she directed them, and went to make camp. A hare she’d caught supplemented by roots gathered on the way was going to be dinner—sparse for three, but better than nothing. She built the fire and finished carving away the base of the branch she’d started that morning, adding the excess to the fire, and sweeping in shavings as she whittled out the form.

Dinner finished. She collected Tanis and Damien from the stream, and supported Tanis as she winced her way up the path. Damien tried to be stoic about it, but she could see it hurt him too.

After they’d eaten, Nehna tested the stones she’d set down to heat near the fire, and picked the coolest one, pulling one of Tanis’s feet into her lap.

“Ow—Nehna!”

“Shh. It’s going to help,” she told her, and pressed the smooth, heated stone into the arch of her foot.

Nehna felt muscles twinge and ripple in Tanis’s foot and all up her leg, as the other woman gasped at the sensations before going limp with relief. She kept massaging with the stone until it was no warmer than either of their skins, then picked up a new rock, carefully examining the tender spots that might or not might have become blisters, come morning, before going to work again.

“You have terrible shoes.”

“We changing into the best ones we had, for walking.”

Nehna did Tanis’s other foot, and then got Damien to admit that he was hurting and did his, as well. By then it was dark, and Tanis and Damien were flagging, and halla had come to investigate the fire.

“They’re very welcoming,” Nehna told him. “And bery comfortable. When we have fussy babies who won’t sleep, we leave them with the herd. It’s very effective.”
Even in the low light of the banked embers, she could tell that he lit up. Damien scrambled into the company of the halla that had come, and promptly fell asleep amongst them, sprawled happily with the yearlings in a tangle of heads and limbs.

“Sometimes I wonder how he would have been, if he’d grown up Dalish,” Tanis said quietly, cuddled up against her side.

“He’s your son. He couldn’t have.”

“But in another life, Nehna.”

She tipped them over, onto the ground. She’d have Tanis until sometime tomorrow morning, and she wanted her as close as possible until then.

“In another life,” Nehna said. “In a perfect life- you and Adan met. An accidental pregnancy, and the two of you ran away, to save yourselves, and you came to my clan, and Damien would be born with Revasina, and Adan would join and you would too, because no one would want to turn you away—”

“You said his name differently,” Tanis whispered. “I’ve always heard you say it the Orlesian way. Never dah-myen.”

“It isn’t a good name, in Elvhen,” Nehna told her. “It’s not even really a name. It’s- Da’mien, ‘little violence’, ‘little outrage’.”

Tanis kissed her, softly.

“Don’t tell him. He doesn’t deserve that, he doesn’t need to—”

“I won’t. Tell me about the perfect life.”

“Adan is Salladin’s father too. Satheraan grows up well, they all do, Adan- Revasina would make Adan our Second, with his training, and Salladin would be First, the Keeper’s apprentice. I might be Master Crafter by now and Damien would be apprenticed to the halla tender and Satheraan—”

She… she couldn’t think of anything, for him. He’d been too young, and her strongest memories of him were still—

“How old would he be, Nehna?”

“He’d be twenty-one,” she said, voice wet. “Twenty-two this winter. He would have finished his apprenticeship by now, he would have given his Oath and gotten his vallas’lin and—”

Crying was only a little better in company, but Tanis knew. Tanis had been there.

Nehna gave them the carvings she’d done the next day, out of sight of the town they’d buy cheap turnaround horses in to get to Lydes.

Damien got the second one, a rough halla she’d made out of the base of the branch. She gave Tanis Sylaise’s flame, a little against her better judgement.

“Because I love you,” she told Tanis. “Because you’ll always have a home with me, and if I have nowhere else to go I know I can find you—”

Tanis gave her one last, long kiss.
“Write to me.”

“I think it would be hard to deliver post to the Chasind.”

“Send it to Lothering,” Nehna told her. “It’s the Fereldan trade town closest to the Wilds, the Chasind trade there sometimes. I’ll stop in and check, every so often.”

Tanis and Damien left. Nehna turned to retrace her path back west, to the edge of the Dales and the road that would take her back to Mont-de-glace, but-

The wind was blowing, stirring the grasses and the flowers. It was warm, the height of summer, bright with a clear sky.

The wind was blowing east. Nehna followed it.

She camped across the Dales, turning north at the foot of the Frostbacks late in the season, reaching Gherlen’s Pass by mid-autumn. She could go more quickly through the mountains, not having to avoid Orlesians by backtracking or taking days to circle around a populated area, so she was in Ferelden by winter.

Winter by the mountains would be unfeasible. She kept going east, traveling the far shore of Lake Calenhad, camping and foraging and occasionally offering her technical expertise for a place for the night or food she hadn’t cooked herself. She went slowly, in no hurry to be south before spring set in.

It did, eventually, and after that she picked up her pace and stopped wandering the countryside, headed straight for Lothering.

A letter from Tanis had preceded her.

*My dearest Nehna,*

*We’ve found employ in Starkhaven. It was a bit of a trying process. We tried Kirkwall first, but they only needed temporary help, and the city was… unpleasant. But there is a banker here who was very pleased to find that a pair of Orlesian-trained servants were up for hire.*

*Unfortunately, here we have not been able to hide Damien’s parentage. References must be sought, after all, and since we came with none, inquiries were made. Nothing has yet happened, but we will keep an eye out.*

*Please write me back, when you get this. I cannot stand the waiting. It was hard enough before, not knowing how you were and with no way of knowing, but it is completely intolerable now that we’ve established a way to communicate. I want to hear how your trip was, and how Salladin is doing, and everything you didn’t have time to tell me about the Chasind and the Wilds.*

*With all my love,*

*Tanis Daganiri*

Nehna sat down in the inn and wrote her reply right away, filling it with information about her trip, about the things she’d seen and the people she’d met, and sent it off back to Starkhaven.

She stayed the night near Lothering, then ventured out into the Hinterlands. True to expectations, she found the Chasind chasing sheep. She snuck up on a flock they were eyeing and popped up from behind a bush right under the nose of one of the older ewes. The flock startled and ran; the Chasind
who’d done the pre-hunt rituals for hobbling a head ewe dashed after.

Hachatshir and the ram hunters hung back, slapping her on the back and welcoming her heartily.

“Good trip?” he asked.

“Good enough.”

Deva Anatzavoy was waiting for her outside the house when she returned from the sheep hunt, leading the sorceress’s share of the flocks as though it were any other spring. Nehna didn’t know how or why the sorceress knew she was coming—she was pretty sure no one had come by to tell her.

Deva Anatzavoy looked her over as she penned the sheep, and nodded decisively to herself.

“You have mourned,” she said. “But you still do not love your daughter.”

Nehna fumbled the ties on the sheepfold gate.

“I—”

“Do not argue with me. You see her cared for. You put some effort into raising her. But it does not take a year to go and come back. You tarried. And you never tell her you love her.”

“I’m not going to lie to her,” Nehna told the sorceress. “Not about this. I’ve never loved her. You Devas have been better mothers for her than I have.”

Deva Anatzavoy gave her a long look.

“You could have done much worse,” she said. “Or left Salladin to someone and walked off without her, satisfied your wanderer’s soul. No— I know that about you, Nehna. You are happiest leaving and coming back. You can be settled. But you require new things, eventually.”

It occurred to Nehna, suddenly, that it had been five years since they’d come to live with Deva Anatzavoy, but neither of them really knew each other. They knew generalities, they knew habits—but they didn’t know each other.

Yes, she liked traveling. But the only reason she took so long was because she had no pressing reasons to come back, besides her own sense of responsibility for Salladin’s well-being.

And that was growing more tenuous, each and every year, as she grew older and grew more Chasind.

Nehna didn’t know Salladin, either. And Salladin didn’t know her— couldn’t know her, because there were things Nehna wasn’t going to tell her about, and—

And Antiva was who she was. She was a widow and an ex-slave and an exile and a mother who’d had her son stolen from her. She could never leave that behind, and that—

That made her an outsider everywhere, she realized. It felt like an old thought, resigned, even though it was new. It must have been stewing, somewhere deeper in her mind.

She wasn’t Dalish enough for the clans; but too Dalish to ever belong somewhere else. She carried grief she couldn’t speak of with anyone but Tanis unless she wanted to be judged, met with disgust, and run off.
No wonder she could just fall into a whole year of traveling, with no particular aim but to get back to where she’d started, eventually. She had no roots, no clan, no community. No family she could be with, not unless Tanis would move out to the countryside somewhere where they could be ignored, or tolerated.

Was this home? she wondered suddenly, thrown off-balance and ungrounded by the direction of her thoughts. She had people she knew here, friends of a sort, but how much did they know her, any of them? How much did she know them? She remembered thinking of Mont-de-glace and Sulfur Point as home, once, but that had been so long ago, and had it really been true? Had she just been fooling herself?

Had she truly connected with anyone, since losing Satheraan? No- since meeting Tanis?

Nehna wasn’t sure she had.

“You have a point?” she asked.

“She wants to be a Deva,” the sorceress said. “But she asked me to ask you, because she was sure that you would try to drag her off to the Dalish. I will not let you.”

“I wouldn’t” Nehna said, throat closing momentarily against the knowledge that she’d somehow failed, with yet another child, even though she wasn’t certain that she’d even really tried. Salladin was alive, had a home, had someone who cared for her- but she was Chasind, not Dalish.

None of her children were Dalish. Satheraan had learned a bit of the language and the stories. Salladin had only hung onto ‘mamae’ in the face of Mont-de-glace’s Sheletk and then these years with the Chasind; and who even knew what she remembered besides that, with how long it had been since Nehna had tried to teach her. And Damien, as little hers as he was, didn’t even have that, only a simple, easy love for halla.

“I’ll go talk to her.”

Salladin was inside the house, correcting Jarik on… something, at the table, something with string and feathers and a couple swamp flowers. She didn’t even know what Deva Anatzavoy had been teaching her.

The children looked up when she entered. Jarik slid away from the table and vanished from the room, able to recognize something he didn’t want to be involved in easily enough. It was in the set of Salladin’s shoulders, when she turned to face her, and the tight defiance of someone who’d been working up to this moment.

“If you really wanted me to be Dalish you should have left me with the clans in Orlais even though they wouldn’t take you-”

“If you want to be Chasind, you can be Chasind,” Nehna interrupted her. “You’ve lived with them most of your life. The Devas have taught you everything about your magic. I’m not going to stop you becoming one of them. I want you to be happy.”

Salladin’s shoulders slumped. Nehna wanted to say ‘in relief’, but then-
“You don’t have to pretend, *Mamae,*” she said, turning back to the table. “I don’t love you, either.”
Chapter 20

It should have been a quiet night.

Zevran had returned from the Chantry roof and brought dinner for the children. Tiar and Diego had had to be pried out of the basement. They hadn't made much progress on the supposedly-unopenable chests, only having attention enough for one before becoming distracted by the books.

"I can read it, but I don't know what it says," Diego had told him when he'd come in to see how much progress they'd made. He had a book open in his lap, open to a lavishly-illustrated page with text on it. Zevran's eyes had picked up on the form before the content- he'd recognized it as a poem before he realized it was in El'vhen.

Of a sort, at least. It looked like it would sound like El'vhen, but most of the words were spelled rather differently, and he could only get through the first couple of lines by muttering them to himself.

"They're all like that," Tiar had said. "Do you know what it is?"

"This, my dear," he'd said, trying to think through the next few lines- this was poetry, yes, but was it more a prayer? A song? It was religious, at the very least. "Is in El'vhen. Quite old El'vhen, if I am not mistaken."

"You know elven?" Tiar had asked, and Zevran had caught the particular tone of her voice.

"El'vhen, da'gaasha," he'd told her, correcting her pronunciation. "Not so well as those who grew up with it, but well enough. I could teach you."

"It was with this," she'd said, handing him a sword, which was its own sort of 'yes, please'. "In the box we got open. It has an owl, like your sash."

So she'd noticed that, had she?

"Tiar got it open," Diego had said. "It glowed when she touched it and we thought it wouldn't be good but it was fine."

"Glowed?"

"It went all green," he'd said. "Really bright green, and I'm sorry but we found the book and then we looked at the shelves to see if the other ones were like that and we haven't found any that were and we didn't go back to the other chests-"

"Which is fine, Diego," Zevran had gently interrupted him. "I have brought dinner. Why don't the two of you go eat?"

They'd left and Zevran had cleaned up, putting the books back in order and examining the open chest and the sword. The chest was nothing particularly special, any decoration it might have once had worn away by time, and neither was the sword, really. Quite plain sheath and hilt, though the pommel was sculpted in the form of a stylized owl, broadly similar to owl stitched into his own sash.

An owl for Falon'din. Fitting enough that some ancient elf had made a sword with the symbol of the god of death, if still a bit strange, given the gentle temperament all the stories gave him. It seemed in good order, when he pulled a few inches free of the sheath, still sharp. The metal of the blade had an
odd blue sheen, and Zevran idly wondered if Antonu would sell it to him. Theron would like this.

He'd like the book, too, and Zevran had brought it and the sword up to his room. He had time— he could transcribe at least part of the text and bring it back as part of his apology.

Zevran had taken dinner with the children and then gone off to work at the Summer Lily, played the usual round of cards and dispensed advice where it was called for, stayed until the dark hours of not-really-morning as he always did, until closing, and then walked back to the rented house.

And then, when he'd gone to check in on the children, found a dead shriek in Tiar's room. And no children.

There was a crash from down the hall, his room, and there were more shrieks, two of them, alive, and a hurlock, and Zevran got the hurlock in one blow, two knives into the back of the neck and use the body as a momentary shield, make the shrieks chase him back to a doorway where so long as he held it only one could attack at once because he was not wearing armor, where were the children, Tiar-

The shrieks died. In his room was a hurlock emissary, bottom drawer of the dresser torn out in pieces around its feet, eyes half-closed as it listened to the song of the red lyrium it held, the red lyrium Zevran hadn't thrown into the sea on the way here from Amaranthine like he'd told himself he would.

The hurlock emissary, caught by surprise, died. Zevran's hands were shaking as he did the reflexive check for open wounds that could have been bled in, bites he'd missed, or the lingering taste of what darkspawn blood smelled like his mouth. Familiar checks, ones he shouldn't have had to do, not here.

The corpses were draped with bedsheets to soak up the blood, and Zevran was still shaking. He washed what blood he'd gotten on himself off and put on the silverite armor he'd kept tucked away. It was meant to protect against things like this. A weapons check, a pause— he'd brought knives with him from Amaranthine, mostly, usually he used a paired sword and knife but with darkspawn the further away the better— and he switched the other knife for the sword he'd brought up from the storeroom.

Storeroom. Downstairs. Darkspawn came up from the ground, check the basement—

There were no holes in the walls or the floor. The door was open, the wood cracked where it had hit the stone wall, and there was a shriek emissary there, touching boxes and crates that glowed bright Fade green and pulsed golden sparks that made the darkspawn hiss and jerk away before trying to claw them open again.

One of the large wrapped objects Zevran had assumed to be, and dismissed as, a painting or decorative screen had had its covering torn open. The canvas hung in ribbons and the ropes were split, scrap settled around the base of the revealed eluvian, rippling indigo-purple-white across its surface.

The shriek emissary died, not as easily as the other darkspawn had, and Zevran rocked back on his heels a moment, staring at the eluvian, before steeling himself and going through.

Everything was... more.

That's all there was to it, 'more'. It was such an inadequate word, but what else was there to say?
That the sky shimmered in rainbow glass fragments? That the bushes were an autumn amaranth that would have made him homesick if he'd only seen them a few hours ago? That this alien geography should have put him on alert, but settled something inside him instead? That the lines were sharper, the distances greater, the light brighter, everything just... 'more'?

There were no darkspawn here, at least not immediately. Zevran hesitated a moment, looking around, before removing his sash and tying it to one of the statues flanking the eluvian on this side—birds of some sort. Hawks, perhaps, with those hooked beaks.

The paths were high, ground below lost in mist and clouds, but even the parts that were crumbling seemed sturdy, somehow. A tumble of dressed stone, a growth of trees, grass overtaking the cobblestones— it all had the air of someone sitting back and letting things take their course. It wasn't neglected, just left to its own devices.

It felt like watching a dream and that thought made Zevran stop short and sink down on his heels. A dream? All this? Certainly darkspawn in Rialto was illogical. Laughable! The children were fine, of course, this was just some strange new variation on his nightmares of losing them.

That was all this was. Just a nightmare. He would turn around, retrace his steps, wake back up, and feel stupid when Tiar and Diego were both safely asleep.

_Are you sure? Are you really sure?_

He knew that voice.

"Of course I am certain," he told the black birds. "You are here, are you not? I will have no business with demons, whether or not Freedom is here."


_Silly boy, silly little boy, hiding behind freedom._

 Hide behind power, hide behind secrets and masks and knowledge and lies.

_Freedom is honest or it is chains, and since when have you been honest?_

Zevran ignored them.

_You know nothing of honesty_, one of the birds said, dropping down into a red-purple bush in front of him. _You lie to everyone. You lie to the people who took you in, you lie to the children you say you care for, you lied to yourself! We remember! We remember! “Theron would be grateful simply to see me.”_

Zevran startled and nearly lost his footing, hearing his own voice from the birds.

_You said! the other bird cackled. You said! We offered you a gift, a good gift, the best gift, for him, and you said he didn't need it! Won't you go home, silly little one, little running boy, can't you go home without a present! Thinking to copy old prayers and bring old swords to say you're sorry! So you do need to buy his care!_

"That is not the same!"

_Isn't it? I'm sorry I ran Maestra, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, leave me my life you can have my body; please, Theron, please, love me, I'm sorry, leave me your love I'll give you-"
"He is not like that!"

*But you would,* one of the birds said.

*Whatever he asked, if it was the price of his affection, you'd give it,* the other said.

*You did once, you know you did, you would have stayed forever even if all he ever did was smile at you and all you had to do was joke, pretend you didn't care, lie and say you were fine.*

*You would have stayed forever and given him anything of your body so long as you got his attention, his kind words, his little affections.*

*He didn't even have to love you or like you or care about you, just be nice.*

"He loves me," Zevran said, focusing on reaching the eluvian he'd come through. He'd be able to see it in another turn or two.

*Maybe, maybe,* a bird said. *But you-

"And I love him!"

*Then why are you here, why aren't you with him? Why did you run, why didn't you go back? Lies and excuses, little boy, running boy, you lie to yourself and you never know until too late.*

*You tell yourself you love him and you run, you tell yourself they were wrong and you can love.*

*But that's not love, that giving anything, that's desperation.*

*You use him, he's nice to you, he's kind to you, you liked how he made you feel so you told him what he wanted to hear and when it hurt you left. That's not love.*

*You only care about what he could give you. He could keep you safe from the Crows, he could make you feel like you meant something-*

*And then it stopped working, reality came back, he can't keep you safe and the rest of the world won't see you the way he wants them to-*

*Crow, courtesan, didn't grow up with the city elves didn't grow up with a clan, you say you don't belong to anyone and you tried to be proud of it, is that what freedom means?*

"I have a place," Zevran told them. "In Ferelden. Andreas-*"

*Andreas came because Theron said not to follow you. Are you sure you have a place?*

*You threw it away. You threw the Crows away for the Wardens and now you've thrown the Wardens away. For what?*

*What has it gotten you?*

*Missing children, gone children, children and darkspawn and nowhere to turn because you lie-"*

Zevran stopped, spun, threw his arms out.

"What!" he demanded. "Why are you here? What is it you want from me?"

*Us?*
Us?

Nothing.

Not yet.

Someone wants you though.

"Who!"

One of the birds perched on top of an eluvian and started preening.

You'll find out.

Secret-keeper, one who knows, half of two and whole of one, we find things for him.

We found you.

The one on the eluvian flapped down and hopped around his feet, tail twitching.

You, him, his, her, Inheritor, Beauty, Traitor! it said. All of you! Found you!

Zevran tried to kick it. Either he missed by barely nothing, or his foot went through it. It bounced back into the air.

"Leave me alone," he told them. "And leave Theron alone, and leave- whoever those others are, I am certain they do not deserve this, you leave them alone as well!"

Shan't, can't, won't!

"Why do I even bother? You are demons, and demons do not listen."

Demons?

Demons?

He said that last time too.

There was the eluvian, finally. Time to leave this dream behind.

We're no demons, brother.

"I am no family of yours."

The birds settled on top of the eluvian's stone frame.

Little crow, little crow, how little you know, one of them said as Zevran worked at the knot on his sash.

This isn't a dream, the other said.

"Of course it isn't," muttered Zevran.

Then why bother to retrieve his favor?

Zevran paused, and then very deliberately lowered his hands.
"I am leaving now," he told them. "Should we ever see each other again, it will be too soon."

_Not a dream_, one of the birds- no, both of them- said, and looked off to the side. One of them hopped off the eluvian and glided over to land on the dead shriek, picking at the fletching of the arrow that had gone through its eye and out the back of its skull.

The other flapped onto Zevran's shoulder, slipping slightly trying to get a hold on the silverite, but Zevran didn't shoo it off.

In the midst of all the _more_, the darkspawn was even more wrong, real and unreal at the same time, in a horrible way, a threat you couldn't run from because it was already here.

If it was _here_-

"The _children_," he gasped. "The _children_, I have _wasted_- demons, demons, both of you, and I _will_ _not_ _have_-

_We are not demons_, Zevran Rivasina, said the raven on his shoulder. _We are watchers and seekers and teachers, not demons._

Follow, said the raven perched on the darkspawn corpse. _You seek your children? Follow._

For lack of a more effective option, Zevran followed.

They passed more darkspawn in short order, all with arrows in them. One had a knife wound, fresh, and Zevran's breath caught to see it. He still kept a knife close at hand when he slept; doubtless the children would, too.

Coming upon the darkspawn was a sudden experience- no warning, because Crows were trained into silence when they fought, and because the sound of fighting that was mostly hand-to-hand didn't carry far.

Zevran had his swords out and was driving a shriek away from where Tiar had fallen, curled up on herself, within an instant. The raven on his shoulder flew into its face, clawing at its eyes, and Zevran ran it through.

Then it was turn, engage another, stand between the darkspawn and Tiar and hold his ground, taking them as they came and keeping one eye on the other fighter.

He was Dalish, and Zevran was waiting for him to succumb to the Taint. His quiver and spilled arrows betrayed his weapon of choice, but he was currently engaged in a close-quarters fight with a hurlock, grappling with it and stabbing with the small knife all Dalish carried as a weapon of last resort. The man clawed with his free hand at the darkspawn where he could, apparently oblivious to the nature of the creature he was fighting; and as Zevran dispensed with the last of the shrieks he saw him _bite_ the darkspawn, tearing into its neck with his teeth. The hurlock screamed and toppled, the Dalish landing on top, snarling wordlessly, and it turned into a furious flurry of clawing and blows. Zevran turned away as the man started to punch the hurlock repeatedly in the face, apparently intent on beating it to death.

"Tiar," Zevran said urgently, putting the swords down and kneeling next to her. "Tiar, you must tell me- does it burn?"

She curled up on herself more.
"Tiar!"

She lashed out and Zevran caught her elbow. They struggled a moment, Zevran temporarily forgoing physical boundaries in favor of checking Tiar over for signs of the Taint. He got her uncurled and she started shaking. She was already crying silently, and Zevran reached up and stroked her hair after his first desperate check showed no obvious open wounds.

"Did you get any blood in you?"

"What?"

"Blood, Tiar, in a wound or your mouth."

"Why-

"These are darkspawn, and their blood carries the Taint."

She shuddered, right down her body, and Zevran tugged her upright.

"Tiar-

"No! No, I didn't-!"

"Where did they take Diego?"

"They didn't, I told him to run and he went out the window-"

So he was safe on the other side of the eluvian. They could take a moment, and rest. Zevran could let himself sit on the ground and pull Tiar against him, tucking her face into the crook of his neck and shoulder and holding her while she shook and tried to swallow her tears and her fear, subconsciously pressing closer to him. He went back to stroking her hair and began to murmur reassuringly at her.

"You are safe now. I will protect you. I have quite a lot of experience against darkspawn-"

One of the ravens settled in next to them watching him, and Zevran scowled back at it, silently threatening that if it even thought about trying to speak to Tiar the way they taunted him-

The birds held their peace. The interruption came from the Dalish man.

He came over after a few minutes, stepping close enough that Zevran had to crane his neck up to look him in the face. The man was filthy with layers of old blood and dirt, but the other raven perched on his shoulder without care for the filth. He looked suspicious, and a little angry.

Zevran shifted his grip on Tiar and glared at him, ready to lunge for one of his dropped swords when the other started getting distracted by the pain of the Taint.

The Dalish man ended up speaking first.

"I never thought I'd see flat-ears here."

"Given your current state, I would have thought that you would consider better than to pass judgements on the states of others," Zevran replied sharply in El'vhen.

The man's entire demeanor changed in an instant.

"Apologies, brother," he said. "I haven't seen vallas'lin in that style before. Who are you dedicated
"Your brother, the raven on his shoulder said.

"Ha ha, very funny," the man told the bird. "And you still haven't told me what happened to him! That was the last darkspawn, and you promised!"

Ask him, the ravens said.

"I don't recognize his vallas'lin style, he won't know my clan."

"Won't I?" Zevran challenged. "True, I do not know most, but I have certainly met a number of individuals from a number of different clans. Tell me your name."

"Tamlen Ryatha Sabrae."

"Theron's brother," Zevran said, and didn't realize he had until the other man’s eyes went wide. A swift kick and a half-turn that put his body between Tiar and the falling Tamlen took care of the immediate threat. Tiar didn't need a nudge to move, to get up; so seconds later Zevran had his swords again and had settled into his stance, just ahead of the Dalish man getting back to his feet.

"What-"

"Tamlen was Tainted five years go," Zevran cut him off, holding the point of one sword to his throat and the edge of the other against his neck, threatening the same artery he’d bitten open on the Hurlock a couple minutes ago. "Whatever you are, you cannot be him. I would prefer the option where you leave peacefully-"

"I'm right here!"

"You certainly are, but that does not make you Tamlen."

"I am! Tell him!" the man demanded of the ravens.

We led you to her, one said to Zevran.

If you are wrong and you drive him off, what will you say when you go home? the other asked.

"The birds are talking," he heard Tiar say in an undertone, tense with fear.

"On occasion the world is an exceedingly odd place," Zevran told her, switching back into Trade momentarily for her, and considered the merit of applying that knowledge to the current situation.

Surely it couldn't be Tamlen. But surely there should not have been a way for a Warden to survive killing an Archdemon, either.

"Explain how you still live, then," Zevran told the other man. "Has a Warden come through here?"

"The only other people I've seen come through here, here didn't like."

"Excuse me?"

"This place. It didn't like them. It's... alive. It thinks, it reacts. It's like trying to talk to someone who's still mostly asleep, but it's there. It doesn't like the monsters. It's saving me so I could fight them. So long as I'm here, I'll live. I can feel it, the way the monsters feel, inside me."
"It is the darkspawn Taint," Zevran told him. "Five years ago, when Tamlen died, was about the beginning of the Fifth Blight."

"I'm right here."

"Perhaps."

"Tell me what happened to my brother."

Zevran looked at the birds, thinking, suspicious.

"What does he want?" Tiar asked. She sounded closer, and nervous.

"News of someone," he told her. "I am deciding how much it is wise to say."

The ravens had been helpful. But their first meeting had not been so positive an experience.

"If I tell you, you will not use this to hurt him."

"So he's alive?"

The other man sounded desperate, and hopeful, but-

"If you hurt him I will find you and I will kill you."

"He's my brother!"

"Theron lives," Zevran told him. "He was found unconscious in the woods, suffering from the Taint. He wanted to go save Tamlen, but the Grey Warden Duncan who Keeper Marethari knew said you were lost forever. Marethari made Theron leave Sabrae to join the Wardens-"

"She exiled Theron?"

"They seemed perfectly happy to see him again once the Blight was finished."

"She exiled Theron," he repeated, voice full of disbelief. "Theron. He loves the clan, he loves the Dalish, and she exiled him."

"That does not seem to be the case-"

"So she never said anything officially," Tamlen cut him off. "She gave him to a human and made him leave the clan. Better to have let him die at home than throw him out like that."

"I happen to be very fond of his continued state of living," Zevran said sharply.

"He needs me," Tamlen said, mostly to himself by the way he stared off into the distance before snapping back into focus. "Shems, if you don't tell me this thing that's supposed to let me leave, I swear by Sylaise I will wring your wolf-damned scrawny little neck! I've killed all the monsters for you, so now."

"Wait," Zevran said, just catching on. "You named the birds 'humans'?"

"One of them's 'humans'," Tamlen said. "The other one's 'lice'. Two annoying things that are hard to get rid of."

One of the ravens ruffled its feathers, affronted.
Those are not our names, it grumbled.

"Well they are until you tell me what else to use!" Tamlen shot back. "And you, if you don't tell me what your name is I'm going to make something up for you, too."

Zevran was opening his mouth to reply when the other raven spoke- in Theron's voice, again.

“Ma'sal'shiral” it quoted, that one word so full of joy and adoration and he might just have to kill the birds for that alone, for intruding on his life like that.

Tamlen was staring at him.

"Oh," he said after a moment- and, yes, Zevran was willing to believe, for the moment, that this was Theron's brother, if only because if he wasn't asleep than he was unlikely to be a demon in disguise; and because Tamlen's sort of subdued, silent wonder at hearing the news was rather more subtle than demons usually went for. "Oh, I- An'daran atish'an, lethail'lin."

"Enaste," Zevran replied, because he could be formal and polite as well, and removed his swords so Tamlen could stand. "I have a number of names. The one you would most care for is Satheraan Nehna Revasina."

"Theron got pretty far, then."

"I came to him," Zevran said. "He has yet to venture quite so far from Ferelden. His loves his people, as you said."

You want to leave? one of the birds asked Tamlen. Zevran wondered if extended exposure had let the other man discern some subtle difference between the two ravens, because he couldn't find them. They looked and sounded identical. Perhaps the names were just for the sake of annoying them. He could certainly approve of that. He knows how.

Wait.

They had promised Tamlen he would have news of his brother and a way out if he killed all the darkspawn here. And then birds had come to him, specifically, as he lay dying, and now he was here.

"If you are the ones who are the reason the darkspawn came to the house-"

You brought that on yourself with what you did not throw away.

We can't stop them from getting in or getting out.

That's why we have that one.

They would have come to you eventually.

If only we had so much power, one of them lamented. If only we could make people do as we pleased.

And that was it, this was over, these ravens could say what they liked but they had endangered his children.

There was nothing good to throw on hand, but he had his swords. He sliced at the one still on the ground by his feet. The raven hop-skip-flapped away, but his sword caught it on the wing, sending it careening, squawking, into a messy crash against the ground.
The other raven, back on Tamlen's shoulder now, mantled its wings like a hawk and growled, like no bird ever should. Tamlen gave it an alarmed sideways look and brushed it off its shoulder.

"Call yourselves demons or no or whatever else you like," Zevran told them. "But you will you stay away from me, and the children, and Theron, and everyone."

No, the one who had been on Tamlen's shoulder said. It had gone to perch on a high branch, far out of reach. Zevran glanced down to where the bird he'd wounded lay, and it was gone.

You will see us again, little crow. All of you will.

The bird on the branch was gone when he looked up.

One day you will meet us again, and it will be in a place of our choosing.

"What happened?" Tiar demanded as Tamlen scavenged the darkspawn corpses. "Why did the birds talk? Where is this? Who's that? How do you know about darkspawn?"

"I will explain," Zevran promised. "But in a little while, Tiar, please. Let us find Diego first."

Either she trusted him that far or she wanted to get back to the house more than she wanted to argue. Tiar ran off ahead down the path Zevran had come in on, not far enough to be out of sight but far enough that she was thoroughly away from the scene of the fight.

Tamlen trotted to catch up.

"Were they telling the truth about that, too?"

"About what?"

"You know how I can leave."

"Join the Grey Wardens," Zevran told him. "You will die more slowly."

"And I'm supposed to find one here?"

Zevran considered a moment, weighing what he knew and what he might be able to accomplish.

The Wardens of Antiva were based out of Antiva City. And he'd need to go to the City anyway, after all. He might as well.

"Wait by the eluvian," he told Tamlen. "It will be some days, but I will return with your solution."

Even with that promise, Tamlen didn't seem happy to be left behind when Zevran and Tiar returned to the house. He steered her clear of the dead emissary in the storeroom and started considering how to dispose of the corpses. It wasn't like he could just dump them in an alley. Darkspawn corpses had to be burned, and pyres needed lots of fuel, and then there was the problem of where to put such a fire, in a city. It would be better to cart them out to some rocky scrag and do it there, but then there was the problem of how to transport corpses without people asking questions-

'You lie to everyone'.

The raven's recent words were fresh in his memory still, and he shook them away.

Just ask the Wardens, part of him thought as they started to search the house for Diego, just in case
he'd returned while they'd been gone.

But if he did that the Wardens would have to speak to Antonu at the very least, if not his father, and then they would ask questions; and people would mark a sudden Warden presence in Rialto and there would be rumors and if people started taking too close an interest then eventually someone would mention him-

*But how much of a secret are you, anyway?* the inner voice challenged. *Don arrion of the lower quarter and already seen by Escipo. It's a miracle that word hasn't filtered back to Antiva that the Warden-Commander of Ferelden keeps a pet Crow. You may not be at court but foreign dignitaries are, and spies, and people talk. The only reason the news didn't come to Antiva City directly is because you threatened the ambassador in Denerim.*

*So the Crows will never take you back, and you call yourself free of them. But how much freedom is it if you won't even use your own name?*

This was too much to worry about at once- far too much. The important things to do now were to find Diego, tell Antonu to stay away from the house, and get to the City.

Diego turned up on the roof, too scared to run further away but too scared to come back inside until Tiar went out to get him. He dropped down onto the second floor courtyard colonnade and stared at Zevran.

"That's really nice armor," he said after a second.

Tiar was starting to eye him pointedly. Zevran sighed.

"Pack your things," he told them. "We are moving out of this house until it has been decontaminated."

It didn't take long to pack up everything and go. Zevran took the longest, changing out of his armor and tying the box of red lyrium securely shut before putting it in his bag. He wrote a short note to Antonu warning him of the dead darkspawn and informing him that he was taking care of it while the children had something approximating breakfast, and they went out into the city in the morning dark.

They stopped by Azieri's, briefly, to slip the note under the door, and not long after Zevran was knocking on the back door of the Summer Lily, hoping that someone was around to hear him so he wouldn't have to break in.

Ashera answered it eventually, in a bit of disarray from getting ready to go to sleep for the day, and let them in without asking a single question.

"Could you possibly take the children for a few days?" Zevran asked her once they were safely inside. "I must go to the City, and the house we were in is no longer safe."

"I don't have any rooms free," Ashera said. "But they can stay in my office until this afternoon, and I can ask if there's anyone who wants to share for a bit."

"You are truly a treasure, Signora. I shall be leaving directly and I will try to be back within a few days, but if-"

"You promised you'd explain," Tiar cut in, and lifted her chin stubbornly when Ashera and Zevran looked at her.
"Just sort this out, boy, and you'd better come back," Ashera told him, giving him the key for her office off the master ring. "Don't let your Crows catch up to you."

She looked at the children.

"I'm going back to bed. You want food and water, you get it from the kitchen. No alcohol, and no fancy food."

Zevran steeled his nerve as he took the children to Ashera's office and their things settled out of the way against the wall. He got even more nervous as the children turned their full attention on him- this was ridiculous, this was only Tiar and Diego, he was not going to be scared of them. This dread anxiety in the pit of his gut was something for facing Crow Maestra without weapons, not simply telling the truth.

"Would it entirely surprise you to know that Mahar Desoto is not, in fact, my name?"

The children shared a glance.

"No?" Diego ventured hesitantly.

He could do this. He would. He could. He had to, to explain tonight.

"Yes. Well. It isn't."

Breathe- breathe!

They aren't going to hurt me.

"I am Zevran Arainai."
His first order of business in Antiva City, after getting a room just big enough to sleep in and keep his bag, was to go speak to Wardens.

The Order of the Grey in Antiva was headquartered in one of the oldest buildings in the City. He’d never had cause to leave the main city on the hill atop the cliffs and travel across the spit of land that connected it to the Old City, now the provenance of the Circle in Antiva, in the old Grand Chantry; the Wardens in the Fort Palace; the Archive of the Crows; and the Crows’ slave pens, only ‘hidden’ inasmuch as most of the city didn’t come here. The houses of the Old City had held regular workers and artisans and shopkeepers, once, but now they were quarters for the Templars, a small and very self-contained neighborhood for what few servants the Circle, Crows, and Wardens actually employed; and physical locations of business and finance for the Tevene slavers who bought from the Crows.

Everyone here would know an outsider, and his best refuge was, as he had in the Crow Quarter during Satinalia, his sheer visibility. Let everyone who passed him in the street see his swords and his tattoos, and they’d never see his face.

One thing he couldn’t do openly, though, was simply walking up to the Wardens’ headquarters. The Circle, Crows, and Wardens coexisted in the confines of the Old City by ignoring the existence of the other two- particularly the Crows and the Wardens. Away from the Old City, the Crows interfered with the Chantry and with mages all they pleased, but the truce of the Old City held over the entire country for the Wardens.

Ah, but that just made things more fun. He’d always wanted to try to break into a palace.

Fort Palace was, as the name implied, more of a military building than a state one. It shared some similarities to Vigil’s Keep, namely the stone walls, fortified buildings, odd additions where someone had tried to make it more of a noble seat than a fort, and a terrible, terrible guard system that was easily exploitable by anyone who knew how these things worked. Clearly it was only the Crows’ centuries-long aversion towards accepting contracts on Wardens that had kept the Order of the Grey from being entirely assassinated before this.

Zevran had a theory about Warden guarding, actually. It was the way they simply did not use their eyes and ears properly. Likely they all, even his own dear Fereldan Wardens at times, came to rely too much on their mysterious special Warden darkspawn senses to remember to watch for more mundane threats. It was simply inexcusable, the ease in which he was able to scale the walls, get onto the roof, observe for a time to determine where the Constable’s office was, and then break into the proper hallway window to present himself at the door.

He knocked, and heard the Constable call: “Come in!”

He did.

The Warden-Constable of Antiva was a human man, a mage by his staff leaning upright in the corner of the room. Zevran came just far enough into the room to be clear of the door, leaving it open behind him, before making a little discreet noise. The Warden-Constable hadn’t looked up from what he was reading on the desk.

“I told you, Hanara-”
“I am not Hanara.”

The man’s head shot up so fast that Zevran had to restrain himself from taking a step back out of reflex, especially when he reached for his staff.

“There is no need for that,” Zevran told him, holding his hands up in peace. “I have come to report a matter of darkspawn.”

The Warden’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Darkspawn-”

“In Rialto. A small number, comparatively, only eight. Mostly shrieks, and two emissaries-”

“And what would you know of darkspawn?”

“I have been to the south. I have seen my share in Ferelden-”

The Warden made a sudden lunge for his staff and whipped it around in front of him, pointing the head of it threateningly in Zevran’s direction. He had a knife in the other hand, held low and back near his body. Someone must have taught him a hard lesson, once, about the ways one could disable a polearm.

“I-”

“I don’t care what you have to say. You’re having me on and you’re in violation of our orders’ agreement and you will tell me why you’re really here, rattus-”

-he was on the roof of one of the houses in the servant’s neighborhood, crammed into the space between a raised roof exit and the roof wall.

Zevran took a deep breath and uncurled, stretching his legs out and dropping his head back against the wall.

He was a Warden mage, not a Magister, he told himself. Rattus is a word we borrowed from the Tevenes. Insufferably offensive, yes, but not only Tevene.

Regardless. He would not be going back to the Constable. Some things did not bear repeating. Perhaps the Warden-Commander, next time, and with less sneaking. He’d proved he could break in once, it didn’t need to be done again.

And perhaps in a day or two. To give the Wardens time to calm down and realize that the Crows weren’t coming for them.

House Escipo didn’t have an actual house in the City. Few of the Houses did, but Availa and Arainai had. Lauro had taken House Availa for his headquarters while in the City, and Zevran spent a day watching it as best he could without getting caught.

It was easier than he’d expected, and while that wasn’t disappointing it was a bit… worrisome. It seemed like the most of the Crows here were rather apprentices or artificers than ‘real’ Crows, the sort who would have the most experience fighting and killing.

Not that there still weren’t a decent number of these; only that there were so many packed into House Availa- House Escipo?- that they were still a minority. Presumably the ‘real’ Crows were back in the town Escipo had claimed when he’d given up Rialto, and it would not have surprised Zevran to learn
that Lauro had deliberately sent the ‘real’ Crows of Houses Arainai and Availa there and only brought his core lieutenants to Antiva City to watch his back while he angled for power and ‘protected’ Rosso Noche.

He stayed out very late that night, past all the Chantry bells, watching. He noted the areas of high activity. He noted where there appeared to be less security. He noted that the apprentices seemed relatively unsupervised, given the blatant power displays between them and the way that one or two snuck around where they really shouldn’t have without anyone watching but his own self. No wonder Diego and Tiar had been able to get so far.

…Diego and Tiar were expecting him back in four days. In six days, Ashera had a note she was to open that he’d promised contained a safe location to send the children. Just in case.

The note told her to send the children with Captain Daganin, in his name, to Amaranthine. From there, they were to travel to Vigil’s Keep. He had left no instructions past that besides ‘be seen’. Tiar had the same facial tattoos as him. Someone would tell the Wardens, and Theron was sure to provide for them.

But that was not going to happen, because he’d told the children who he was and after Tiar had gotten over her shock she’d snarled and yelled and tried to hit him, but hugged him, tightly, when he’d caught her hand and stepped forwards to put himself too far within her range to be properly punched. Diego had wiggled in between them and clung, rather desperately to Zevran’s mind- but that had been the sort of night it had been.

“You’re not just some courtesan,” Tiar had told him, as he’d been leaving the Summer Lily. Diego had been asleep in Ashera’s office and Zevran had already said goodbye to both of them, but Tiar had followed him out to the door. “You’re Zevran Arainai, and you got out. You can-”

She’d swallowed and hadn’t finished the sentence, but Zevran had understood. Mahar Desoto, a man who didn’t exist and had no past- it didn’t mean a thing that he’d escaped the Crows and survived. But Zevran Arainai had had a career, and run, and found people who cared about him and helped him and survived and lived, had made a place for himself in defiance of everything the Crows said about those who tried to run.

Zevran Arainai meant something, and he meant a lot more returned to Antiva, in the flesh, and helping them.

Tiar and Diego had some firm conception of hope and future, and he was not going to ruin that by not returning. He would kill Lauro Escipo and they would all be safe.

He took the next day to continue his observations, focusing on tracking Lauro specifically, and discovered which room was his. It was a sign of his perceived power or the crowding in House Availa or both that he had a room with an external window. It was a stupid security weakness- but yet the Grandmasters of the Crows he’d killed had all had them. A statement of ‘I’m such a good assassin that I can leave a gaping hole in my security and still live’ only worked up until the point where someone broke into that window and killed you from it.

Zevran argued with himself the evening of the second day- did he go after Escipo now, or observe more? He knew where Escipo was, right now, and he could evade the posted guard, but if he was wrong…

Lauro Escipo lived through that night. Zevran came back the morning of third day in the plainest clothes and armor he’d been able to put together, all his gear cleaned, inspected, and maintained. There would not be a fourth morning of this.
He waited, and waited, and waited. Morning turned to afternoon, and he ate a little. Afternoon to evening, and he made sure to remember to drink. Evening to night, and he did one final check.

The lamps were on in Escipo’s room. Unsurprisingly, he’d taken the master suite of the House-Zevran knew because Antivan city villas all had the same general layout-and the window to the left of the one he’d been able to Lauro at his desk through the day before would be the toilette room. Easier to enter there, and surprise him in the bedroom.

Get over the House walls. Find an unobserved corner, in shadow with a strange angle. Wait. Climb up to window, fast; and pop the window, faster-

Tub and washbasin in the toilette. Folding screen, with discarded clothes. Cabinet for toiletries. Don’t close the window, it was an escape route.

The door to the bedroom was open, light spilling out. Carefully, carefully…

Lauro had his back to the door. Someone was on their knees in front of him, and- yes, he knew those sounds. No better time for being distracted.

Zevran took a small knife in hand and ghosted up behind Escipo. Shoot out free hand, clamp over mouth, bring knife up at same time and slice.

It was an absolutely classic clean kill, as close to instant as you could get with a knife- nearly-silent, with minimal mess, and you were pressed so close to your victim that you could feel them die. Utter perfection. His trainers would have cried, if that was a thing Crows were allowed to do.

It also put Zevran in the position of looking down over Lauro’s shoulder at Salvail, still kneeling on the ground, drawn back now to stare up at him in shock and disbelief.

Zevran winked at him and flashed a smile as Lauro stopped breathing.

Salvail kept staring.

Lauro Escipo was dead, and Zevran quietly manhandled his corpse to the bed and left him there, atop the sheets.

“They’ll think I did it.”

“Does anyone know you are here?”

“The whole House knows I don’t go to parties any longer because I’m here each night. Keeping him happy.”

Zevran considered a moment, watching his old colleague as he got up from the floor and tied his silk robe tighter around himself. He remembered those robes- pure hedonism, and essential in the construction of all sorts of illusions, when it was time to put on an act to get someone in bed.

“If you can find it in yourself not to betray me to the others or attempt to pull me off the wall, the way I came in is still available.”

Salvail brushed past him to the toilette. Zevran stayed a moment before following, twisting Lauro’s Talon ring off his finger and slipping it on for the moment. In the toilette, he sat on a stool on the near side of the folding screen and cleaned his knife while Salvail got back into his clothes behind it.

It was very much, suddenly. The spare cloth he’d brought for the purpose was bloody and he could
hear Salvail’s familiar breathing from behind the screen, and he felt like he’d just finished a partner contract, and he and Tali had all the time in the world to leave the city villa and report back to Rinna.

"You killed Eoman," Salvail said suddenly, and Zevran looked up from where he’d been staring pointlessly at the cloth. Not good- he could not be distracted like that while still here, in an enemy House.

Salvail was looking at the Talon ring Zevran had taken.

"You killed Eoman,” he said again, with the tone of man suddenly seeing the pattern of some great mystery. “And the ones who could have taken his place. And Runn. And Availa.”

“Escipo now, as well,” Zevran said, stowing his knife. “Come- this way.”

“But why?” Salvail asked as Zevran opened the window again.

“Because the Crows are a terrible organization and no one should be treated like this,” he said. “Much less bought into slavery as children and shaped into accepting it with rape and murder and abuse.”

Salvail mounted the window frame.

"But why Escipo?"

“He is a Talon. What more reason do you need?”

“He never did anything to you.”

“He did to other people,” Zevran said sharply. “Are you moving or no?”

Salvail swarmed down the wall, practically falling instead of climbing, and disappeared into the shadows. Zevran followed him out onto the wall, balancing precariously to get the window closed behind himself before descending.

He reached the ground and Salvail grabbed him. Reflex and environment- Zevran tried to throw him. It ended up a very brief struggle as Salvail countered, then let go and backed up.

“Sorry sorry sorry,” he muttered, almost inaudibly, and Zevran didn’t draw a knife on him. “Sorry, you’re just- they found Taliesin so you, you had to be dead-”

“I am very much alive, thank you.”

“You can’t- it’s been five years.”

“The Crows are not so good as they like to claim they are, Salvail,” Zevran told him. “And- I have learned. There are people in this world who will care for you. Help you. Whom you can trust.”

‘Trust’ was a pointless, suspicious word here, in House Availa. And Savail was certainly suspicious, at least of that. Zevran could see it. But also- he was standing here, right here, alive and free far past the point where either should have been possible.

“Meet me at Arainai,” Salvail said. “Early.”

It had been… a while, since he had set foot in House Arainai.
Crow Houses were city villa complexes, walled and barred, similar to the city villas of the princely families, the sufficiently-rich nobility, and the wealthy merchants in most details.

House Arainai had a slate roof, sloped, in the way that only the rich could afford to do. You couldn’t walk on it when it was wet or you would fall off. One of the apprentices in Zevran’s year had died like that- or been murdered like that, either was possible.

In a regular city villa, the narrow strip of land between outer wall and house walls would be a shaded garden, full of trees. In Crow Houses, they were entirely bare, open and unforgiving, salted so that nothing would grow and then covered with gravel. If someone came in the wall gate, and it was closed behind them but the gate to the villa courtyard wasn’t opened, the strip turned into a murder run. You could climb the wall out and over, but that made you an easy target for arrows and knives.

Zevran avoided House Arainai’s murder run the same way he had House Availa’s- jump from the top of the outer wall to grab the outside of the building wall, and climb. Zevran opened a window and slipped in, rather than chance the roof. He was here before dawn, but the sky was gray, and if anyone was waiting for him in the courtyard, there was no point in silhouetting himself on the roof.

Stone walls and stone floors, bare, familiar. Heavy wooden doors, and a porticoed balcony overlooking the courtyard and its lower buildings. Three stories on the main building, and he was on the middle one. Third floor- Master’s apartments, business office, private rooms for the favorites, House treasury. This floor- rooms for the House assassins, by cell. First floor- apprentice’s rooms, training rooms, classrooms, artificer’s workshops, kitchen. Basement- storage and torture. Courtyard- for training, also for making examples of people.

City villas were meant to be great complexes, massive uses of space in a city where space was at a premium, but Zevran had lived more than a decade here. He knew what turns to take, how far down the hallways to go.

The door he wanted wasn’t locked. It opened easy enough, still weighted exactly the way he remembered.

Before, there had been a small table, there, in the corner by the bed. They’d had an oil lamp- harder to tip over and start a fire than a candle, and less mess. The bed was still there, though moved slightly to the left. The two heavy old equipment chests were in their old positions, but stood open and empty. The rugs were gone, and the blankets on the bed. The large table was still here, one long side against the far wall, with one, two, three chairs.

Rinna had always sat on the long side, where there was room to spread out. Tali’s place had been on the short side to her right; Zevran on her left. The bed had been a comfortable fit for two but slightly precarious for three, even with the ways Zevran could bend, and it had informed a lot of their sex. He had a strong sense memory of exactly how it felt to be pushed against the door and manhandled, and another of what it felt like to be left kneeling at the lower corner of the bed, hands tied to the post, while Rinna played with Tali and ignored his begging to be let in.

He remembered what it had been like in winter, too, when everything was just slightly too cold and he and Rinna had slept on top of Tali, as best they could. Sometimes they’d woken up on the floor, tangled in their blankets and each other.

When they’d won a bid for a contract, Rinna had always spread the planning out on the table. Taliesin had sat on the equipment chests and inspected what they’d need, checking what Rinna wanted against what they’d had. The papers had been off-white or the dirt-cheap yellowed pulp paper, and they’d covered up old marks in the wood from previous residents of the room. When they ate, they ate together, at that same table. The wood probably still smelled like wine and fried
Zevran stood in the doorway for a long time, just looking, arms crossed.

“We could have been better for each other,” he said to the room. “But we were so much better than nothing. I love you both, still, and I hope that you have found each other and are content and watching me and laughing when I am a complete fool. I am sure I must be terribly amusing, no?”

The room seemed smaller, or bigger, or just different than it had before.

“I loved hearing you laugh, both of you. I loved being able to make you, because it meant you were happy. I hope you are happy now, for me, for what I have found for myself outside the Crows. I like to think you are. Theron- you would like him, at the very least. He is too nice not to like. And the care he would show you- there are not enough words. I do hope I get to introduce him to you properly, someday. Especially you, Tali, you made a terrible first impression.”

The abandoned square in Denerim came back to him, and his throat was too thick for words, for a moment.

”Neither of you should have died,” he said, quietly, some moments later. “I could have prevented it, both times, and I did not. I am so sorry, and I- I would like your forgiveness, if you feel you could grant it. My only apology can be that I will not make that mistake again. No one I love will die from my negligence, not ever again.”

He turned, walked out, closed the door, stopped. Zevran reached back and touched the wood of the door, a goodbye he couldn’t give voice to, and went out to the courtyard to wait for Salvail.

Salvail came later than ‘early’, or at least ‘early’ as Zevran would call it.

“They found him,” were Salvail’s first words.

“And I take it they do not suspect you, given that you are here?”

“Someone who killed him wouldn’t still be around in the morning,” Salvail said. “Someone who killed him would have announced it to everyone and then killed all their rivals. Anyway, everyone knows I’m too much of a coward to do it.”

Zevran had been swinging his leg in the free air beneath them, off the edge of the roof, but stopped. There was no hint of the nervousness he’d always known Salvail to have.

“You are not the same,” he said.

“Ha!” Salvail looked at him. “And you are? It’s been five years, and Arainai fell, and I- I couldn’t be that person if I wanted to stay alive, not if I didn’t want to wa-”

He stopped himself and looked away again.

“Watch what?” Zevran asked; and when he didn’t respond: “Watch what, Salvail?”

“You’re still an entitled fucking shit.”

“Excuse me?“

“Why aren’t you Master Arainai!” Salvail exploded at him. “Why aren’t you Grandmaster! You killed Eoman! You killed Runn and Availa! You went to Ferelden and survived the Blight, that
“killed all the other Crows in Denerim!”

“The darkspawn did not kill them,” Zevran said. “I did, so that they could not report that I lived.”

"You-

He’d never seen Salvail angry before.

“I am not Master Arainai and I am not Grandmaster because the Crows should not exist, Salvail,” he said. “It is irredeemable, this system. What it did to us, what it does to all the compradi, the courtesans, is reprehensible and unforgiv-

“And what good are you doing?” Salvail demanded. “Dead Talons and dead Grandmasters and no one stepping into their place makes nothing but chaos-”

“If they are dead they cannot hurt anyone any longer!”

“They call you ‘the Black Shadow of the Crows’,” Salvail spat at him. “You slip in and out of places no one should be able to get and you kill people and then you disappear, and everyone else is left with the consequences!”

“The Crows deserve to fall.”

“And what happens to the rest of us! We can’t all be you!”

“There is certainly no call for that,” Zevran said. “What do you even mean by that?”

“You!” Salvail nearly yelled. “You- just- you! You’re the best, Zevran, and no one else can just leave like you did-”

“Just leave?” Zevran quoted back at him, his own temper rising. “What is it that you think I have been doing, Salvail? Frolicking about spending coin and having people throw themselves at my feet to offer them contracts? I fought a Blight, and for five years I have been unlearning the lies the Crows break us into-”

“Fought a-” Salvail said, the words slipping out in realization. “You’ve been with the Wardens? They actually- went with that? How many of them did you have to sleep with to pull that off?”

“None of them!”

Salvail rolled his eyes.

“We’re courtesans, that’s what we do. Fine. How many of them do you have to be available for for them to let you stay around?”

“None. Of. Them,” Zevran repeated, teeth gritted. “They are good people-”

“Good liars,” Salvail said. “Or stupid people. No one is- you can’t get to be old enough to be a Warden, or be a Warden, and be a good person.”

“The Wardens-”

“They sold you on a story, Zev,” Salvail cut him off. “It’s only in stories that Wardens are heroes. They recruit from the prisons. They’re no better than us.”

“The Wardens of Ferelden-”
“It’s the bastard prince, isn’t it? He’s got to have power for the Queen not to have had him killed— or, no— you ran away to the Dalish, it’s the Dalish one.”

“That’s what I mean, you’re the only one good enough to seduce one of the men you were sent to kill and then stay on his good side for five whole years! Only you, Zevran, that would only work for you! Stop acting like you’re not a courtesan and step up, say it was you who killed all of them—”

“Are you not listening?” Zevran demanded. “I will never lead the Crows; and I did not seduce anyone! They care for me, and he loves me!”

Salvail was silent a few moments.

“You’re crazy,” he finally said. “You weren’t quite the same after Rinna, but I didn’t know it had broken you. Love is just pretty words we say to keep people happy, Zev. You used to know that. Can you even realize how far you’ve gone?”

“It is not how far I have gone,” Zevran said, standing. “It is how far I have come. The only ‘pretty words’ are the lies the Crows tell us to keep us enslaved. I have learned better, with help.”

‘Enslaved’ is overstating it.”

“No- it is exactly the truth, and you know it is, Salvail. It is what they call us— ‘compradi’, ‘with silver’. They buy us as children and then they wait for us to die and they use us in the meantime. We are not people to them. We are inconvenient property that must not be allowed to have opinions, or choices, or a sense of self, or dignity, or autonomy, or respect.”

“Respect is for compradi.”

“That is what the Crows wish us to believe,” Zevran said. “It is false.”

“You lived it. You know that’s not true.”

“It is only because they hurt us that this is so,” Zevran told him. “I am free of the Crows. I have lived love, and care, and respect, and I know them to be true in far more of the world.”

“You can’t be free of the Crows. The closest you can get is power; and you could take it, you could be Grandmaster, and you won’t.”

“I would rather be hunted my entire life than have the Crows’ type of power.”

“Then you can’t help me,” Salvail said. “You can’t help any of us. Just go.”

Zevran went.

Lauro Escipo was dead and it was time to go back to the Wardens. He had to get someone to listen to him so they could come to Rialto and make sure the Taint was contained. He was not going to leave that mess to threaten anyone any more than it already had.

He did things the proper way this time, as much as he could. He only breached the wall undetected. He waited in the open tract between fortress and wall for someone to approach him. He told them his business. A Senior Warden was fetched; and he was taken inside to see the Comma-
He woke up as he had far too often in recent memory—chained up, in the dark, underground. The real change was that this was no simple cave or basement, but a true dungeon.

This was so incredibly unnecessary. He had told the Wardens there were darkspawn, why weren’t they doing something about it! Throwing him in the dungeon accomplished nothing!

“He’s awake,” someone said, and Zevran looked over. There was a dwarf standing just on the other side of the bars, arms crossed—by his armor, this was the Warden-Commander of Antiva.

He opened his mouth to make a cutting remark—

“Zevran Arainai, these are not the Wardens the contract is for.”

Claudio Valisti.

“Just clean up when you’re done, Prince Valisti,” the Warden-Commander said.

“Certainly,” the Talon replied. “The Crows thank you for your cooperation, Commander Aminti. You will not be bothered again.”

“Good. The Wardens like our arrangement,” Commander Aminti said, and left.

The Wardens had given him to the Crows.

Claudio Valisti had been a Talon too long, and was too good a Crow, to come near the cell bars, even with Zevran chained up. He pulled up a stool and sat just outside of arm’s reach.

“I had honestly thought you were dead,” he said conversationally. “The Nuncio in Denerim sent notice that Taliesin and his group had been found dead, presumably killed by the Wardens. And then Ignacio and Cesar disappeared during the darkspawn attack on the city. Surely your corpse was rotting somewhere out in the countryside. But yet…”

He gestured to Zevran, and waited. Zevran stayed silent.

“You learned your lesson well, at least,” Valisti said. “No returning until the contract is done, and no one escapes the Crows. Anyone else would have given up by now. Still, you must have failed at least once by now.”

His expression went thoughtful.

“So perhaps you didn’t,” he mused. “Perhaps you waited and watched and let Taliesin take the first fall. It would be clever of you—and you wouldn’t still be alive and here if you weren’t clever. You’re certainly not smart, or else you would have made your move on the Wardens in Ferelden, instead of trying to lure them here. Were you hoping familiar ground would give you an edge? Did you have some grand plan? Or is it just that it would be easier to escape, if you even survived, if you don’t have to run through a bunch of barbarians howling about how you just killed their Hero? Or perhaps you were desperate? Five years is no short time.”

He waited, again. Zevran didn’t say anything, again.

“It wasn’t even a very good plan,” Valisti told him. “There are Wardens here. Why would a report of darkspawn lure the Fereldans out of their own country? Commander Aminti didn’t even ask for help when he sent the letter to Amaranthine to tell his counterpart that some Crow was claiming to have fought darkspawn in his territory. Still, I suppose you make up for this particular miscalculation in sheer persistence. That has a certain value, these days. We have a persistent problem of our own. But
for you—well, think of it as an **opportunity**. I’m sure you’ve heard, someone keeps killing Talons and Grandmasters and not stepping up. Terribly against how things are done. We’ll lose our reputation if this keeps up.”

He stood.

“**Normally you would have woken up dead,**” Valisti said. “**Or at the very least in Velabanchel. But we’re not so rich in senior assassins at the moment that we can afford to lose one who lived into his thirties,** _while_ on a contract for Wardens during a Blight. You could be useful. You could find me this ‘**Black Shadow**’, kill him, and with me as Grandmaster you will be as high in the ranks of the Crows as you deserve. **Or** I resolve our other great embarrassment, gather up the coin Teyrn Loghain and Bann Esmerelle paid us for the contracts on the Wardens, and send the coin, contracts, and your head to the Warden-Commander as apology and a promise that we have returned to the old ways laid down by Grandmaster d’Evaliste after the Fourth Blight. The less enemies we have, the better. **Your choice.**”

Nothing. *Say nothing.* He would never rejoin the Crows, but he couldn’t let Theron—

Valisti sighed.

“**I suppose you have time to decide,**” he said. “**Whether you live or die, there’s torture first. A formality. You know how it is. Just say something when you’ve made up your mind.**”

---

The first time he made a noise, Valisti had the torturers stop.

“**What?**” he said. “**Made up your mind?**”

Zevran resolutely clenched his teeth and _silent_, he had to stay _silent_.

“**No? Very well. Proceed.**”

And then he did it again, every time Zevran lost control of it again. It disrupted the rhythm of the pain, where you could begin to ignore it otherwise, and it kept Zevran constantly on edge, trying to catch himself. It was a much more subtle torture than Lauro had had the care- or knowledge- to try, those months ago in the print shop basement.

He would hold out. Both of Valisti’s ‘**choices**’ were unacceptable. He would not rejoin the Crows. But he would not let himself be killed and shipped to an unsuspecting Theron. Valisti and his torturers would make a mistake.

Eventually.

They had to.

Days passed, and he only knew because surely it had been going on too long, otherwise. They wouldn’t let him sleep. They wouldn’t let him stay passed out, when he fainted. He _knew_ his mental filters were gone so he couldn’t, he _could not think_, he had no idea if he was speaking aloud or not, not any longer—

_Hear now Andraste, daughter of Brona_
_Spear-made of Alamarr, to valiant hearts sing_  
_Of victory waiting, yet to be claimed_  
_From the steel-bond forgers of barren Tevene_
“Religion isn’t going to help you.”

_Long ago, when time itself was young, the only things in existence were the sun and the land. The sun, curious about the land, bowed his head close to her body, and Elgar’nan was born in the place where they touched. As a gift to Elgar’nan, the land brought forth great birds and beasts of sky and forest, and all manner of wonderful green things._

“Are those even words?”

_And when Mythal lifted up the coals of the sun’s bed on earth and formed the moon, the two faced each other across the sky. And from the rays of the sun’s light walked Sylaise, and from the beams of the moon’s light walked Andruil. And in the shadows of the earth came Falon’din and Dirthamen, dark where their sisters were bright and of the earth where they were of the sky. It was the brothers who came first to the People, stepping from the caves and shadows where they had hid from the sun-on-earth, and gave them minds and words and music. And so all creation was filled with song, and the Evanuris came to us._

“Now you’re just babbling sounds. I wonder if we broke you.”

_Here lies the abyss, the well of all souls._
From these emerald waters doth life begin anew.
Come to me, child, and I shall embrace you.
In my arms lies Eternity.

“That sounded like a _decision_, Arainai,” Valisti said.

“No.”

His mouth was so dry. When was the last time he’d had water. Before coming back to the Wardens? But that had been so long ago, hadn’t it, surely it couldn’t-

“He speaks!” Valisti exclaimed, and the torturers backed away. “You used to be so mouthy, Arainai, I was wondering if you’d kept that or not. Maybe you have. So- you had an answer for me? ‘No’ to what?”

_They shall cry out to their false gods_  
_And find silence_

“I suppose we’ve been at this long enough. You’ve taken your punishment. Go to sleep, Arainai. You’ve got to a decision to make when you can wake up and think straight.”

He fell hard, and fast, and he didn’t remember dreaming; but it felt like far too soon when something startled him awake again.

Valisti had banged on the bars of the cell.

“I have no idea how you did it, Arainai,” he said, with something like _respect_ in his voice. “But I guess you really _did_ know what you were doing, because the Warden-Commander of Ferelden and his people just got off ship in the harbor. Lucky you, you don’t have to make a decision at all. No point in killing you and sending our apologies when we can just kill them here. It’s even a good challenge- I’ve sent messengers to the other Talons. Whoever kills them and installs themselves in the House of Crows first gets to be Grandmaster. It will be me, of course, this was my idea- and it’s a neat little fix, no? Cleans up both embarrassments at once.”

He smiled, and turned to leave.
“The Crows thank you for your assistance, Zevran Arainai. Welcome back.”
Dalish metalworking was always a bit idiosyncratic. Without permanent forges and no guaranteed source of charcoal for burning or metal for forging, the best way to acquire metal tools was scavenging, or raiding. Discarded or abandoned human scrap could be melted down to be reforged into something new. Bandit camps cleared for the safety of the clan would yield swords, axes, knives, arrows, cookware, and on occasion, decent armor; and the claimed gold could be used for the rare ventures into human settlements for the purchase of iron, copper, and tin ingots.

Dalish crafters weren’t the best at forging, but what they made lasted, if only because the clans couldn’t afford to throw much away. In the colder climes of the south, the conservation of resources was even more important. Everything had a use and everything needed to be used, and it was a lesson that the clans of the north had no doubt learned hard, their first months in Ostagar.

The clans of the Brecilian had their own particular ways, of course, as every grouping of clans from roughly the same area did. In a way, clans like Sabrae and Vhadan’ena had had things better than most- the weak Veil pervading the forest left many materials fade-touched, lending an inherent low-level magic to anything made of them. The possibility of spirits was more effective against humans than the threat of Dalish arrows, and it had meant that they could stay longer in one place, and weigh themselves down a bit more, and do things like return to the same campsites on a regular schedule and even leave small caches of hidden supplies for when they returned.

But the magic of the Brecilian didn’t make Fereldan winters any less harsh, and the clans had responded accordingly. Aravels were wooden and meant to move, and so unable to rely on thick Fereldan stone walls to conserve heat. Clans in the Brecilian draped the insides of the walls with woolen rugs and blessing cloths and wearing-out furs, invited the halla inside, and built their fires in large copper pots, kept off the wood by a stand.

In Theron’s memory, winter smelled of heat and halla and burning pine, underscored by constant talk of many people sharing a space and the colors of the draped walls; so it took him a moment when he woke to find a young halla doe with her antlers still coming in snuffling at his face to remember that it had been five years since he’d spent a winter sharing an aravel in Sabrae’s camp.

“Babae!” Kieran crowed excitedly when he saw his father’s eyes open. He was hanging onto the doe’s neck, clearly enjoying himself.

“Shoo,” Theron heard Ashalle say, and Kieran and the halla fawn shuffled aside to let her kneel down next to him. “Let me see your eyes, Theron.”

It was very warm, and he was comfortable, and that was hard.

“Halla,” he mumbled.

“A storm started overnight,” she told him. “It’s still going. The city is snowed in.”

“Mm.”

“Go back to sleep, da’lath’in.”

He did. The second time he woke, the fire was low and everyone else was asleep, in dark, silent bundles of fur scattered across the floor of the main room of the little house. Fen was curled up against his stomach and hips, and at his back was a halla buck, large and mature, seven or eight years old.
Theron extracted himself and shuffled over to the firepot, still wrapped in his own blankets, and added more wood until the fire was going brightly again.

He was hungry. The cooking fire pit had an iron cauldron of halla milk and seed porridge—classic, given the season—and he found the sack of red beans the Dalish had started to grow and added a couple more handfuls, as well as two cut-up potatoes. There was a stewing pot sitting next to the fire, meat stew with herb seasonings, and Theron added more water to that before going to look for the samovar.

It had been emptied recently, likely the evening before, and been set next to the door. Theron went outside just long enough to relieve himself and pack the samovar full of fresh snow. It was a harder job than he was used to. The brunt of the storm had abated and the snow fell gently in the false dawn gloom, but it had fallen lightly, and didn't make for a good dense pack. He filled it eventually, though, and took the copper can back inside to go boil over the heating fire, hooking it into its proper place.

Then he had to find the honey, and the herbs—

“What did you make?” Alistair asked when he woke up and saw Theron drinking something steaming with Ashalle. The samovar sat next to the fire between them, staying warm.

“Ise’haurasha,” Theron told him. “You boil water and honey, and put herbs in it.”

“Wait- sbiten?” Alistair came over and sniffed the samovar. “It is! That’s sbiten! I haven't had that since I was living in the stables at Redcliffe!”

Theron poured him a cup and handed it over.

“I used rose hips, embrium petals, and cloves, and there are cinnamon sticks in the samovar.”

You drank ise’haurasha slowly, out of fist-sized cups, but Alistair knocked it all back at once.

“Huh,” he said. “Not exactly like sbiten, I guess. When did the Dalish connect to the spice trade?”

“Always,” Theron told him. “It will be harder now that there aren't clans who can harvest them wild directly to trade with us, but we’ll manage. I’ll make sure they can buy from Amaranthine.”

“The clans out of Antiva brought their own stockpiles of seeds,” Ashalle said. “They will be planted once we’re sure we’ve learned how to force-grow in sustained heat again. I know that Ghananel and Tillahnmen were discussing experimenting with the tunnels in the rise. Once they're warmed, so long as they stay heated, they think they should be able to make up for the lack of sunlight with magic.”

“Uh,” Alistair said. “These wouldn't be the darkspawn tunnels, would they?”

“The darkspawn are gone and we blocked the Deep Roads entrances,” Ashalle said. “You surveyed that for us, Alistair, why shouldn't we use them?”

“How is sbiten different?” Theron asked him.

“Oh, well, it's sweeter by a bit,” Alistair explained. “And the spicing in this is stronger. By a lot. Uh.”

“Have some of the porridge,” Theron advised. “And drink it slower next time.”

“You're nowhere near the north,” his friend said between mouthfuls of the milk porridge. “Why does
“You're Fereldan. Why does sbiten have so much spicing?”

“Because the Tevenes introduced the Alamari to ginger and nutmeg, and our winter food and drink were never the same again.”

“Arlathan was directly south of the Boeric Islands,” Theron reminded him. “And in its own rainforest. The problem isn't 'why does it have so much spicing'; the problem is that it doesn't have more.”

“Wonderful,” Alistair grumbled. “If this means you're about to start complaining about cheese and fruit preserves—”

“Of course not,” Theron said, and tried not to notice the Antivan spices in his drink. Zevran had been the one to complain, eventually, about the Fereldan habit of taking fruit preserves with everything. “If it doesn't make you sick, it's food.”

“That's horrifyingly broad.”

“You don't eat halla, you don't eat other people, and you wouldn't eat mabari either. But everything else is fine.”

“It's really not.”

“Shall I have to correct you on the edibility of insect larvae again, or shall you cease speaking on the subject yourself?” Morrigan asked from her part of the room. She’d gotten dressed quietly, under the blankets, without any of them noticing. The wiggling mass under the furs could only be Kieran doing the same.

Theron smiled. This was a game they hadn't gotten to play in a while.

“Crickets,” he said.

“Dragonflies,” Morrigan countered.

“Mealworms.”

“Water beetles.”

“Caterpillars.”

“Flies.”

“Weevils.”

“Earthworms.”

“Bees.”

“Grasshoppers.”

“Ants.”

“Spiders.”
“Wood lice.”
“Cicadas.”
“Cockroaches.”
“Maker preserve us, *stop.*”
“There’s nothing wrong with cockroaches,” Theron said. “They're very easy to care for. If you keep them in a big tin box and put in leaves and berries as you find them, then they're quite happy. And very transportable. Mealworms too.”

“*Bugs. Are not. Food.*”

“And to think we have not even said a word about locusts!” Morrigan exclaimed.

“Roasted locusts are quite good,” Ashalle agreed.

Kieran poked his head out from the furs.

“Mother?” he said. “Bugs?”

“Yes, my dear,” she said. “*Bugs. Tell your ‘Uncle Alistair’ about the crickets.*”

“No!” Alistair said. “No! No! I'm fine! I don't need to know about the crickets!”

“You are a coward, Alistair Mac Marie.”

“Neither of you are ever going to get me to eat bugs. It's never going to happen!”

“You’ll be hungry enough not to care someday,” Theron told him. “You may as well try them now, when there are fruit preserves to go with them.”

“You said you weren't going to complain about the fruit preserves.”

“I’m not,” Theron said. “I like them. Fruit preserves are a wonderful thing. Vegetable gardens, too. And potatoes.”

“Potatoes are pretty great,” Alistair agreed.

Kieran crawled out from under the blankets and came to see what the adults were drinking, opening the samovar and sticking in his nose in before anyone thought to grab him.

“It smells like temples!” he exclaimed happily. “*Kastium!*”

“Cinnamon,” Morrigan corrected him. “Have you kvass or only this honey tea?”

“Just the *ise haurasha,*” Theron told her. “Kvass?”

“Rye beer with fruit preserves,” Alistair said at the same time as Morrigan’s: “Chasind beer, from the bread tailings.”

“*Bread tailings?”* Alistair exclaimed. “*Bread tailings?”*

“And when you have stale or burnt bread, you feed it to the pigs,” she said, and sniffed disdainfully. “*Wasteful.*”
“Burnt bread alcohol can't possibly taste any good.”

“What is truly disgusting is the Fereldan insistence on having everything sweet. ‘Tis unnatural. Some things were not meant to be.”

“We don't really do bread,” Theron said, trying to defuse the conversation. “You need ovens for that. And grain fields. And mills. Though I guess we could buy flour now from Redcliffe and South Reach and try making bread.”

They had a lot of similar not-actually-arguments as the days wore on. The storm had ended but the snow kept falling until the next morning, a few hours after the sun had come up, and while there was some alleviation of the closeness that being snowed in forced you into, there was only so much snow you could stand to move in one day. The clans were generally confined to their compounds for the next five days.

Theron enjoyed himself immensely, for the most part. This was what winter was supposed to be, cuddling with the halla for warmth around the fire and sharing stories and having discussions and generally reaffirming your community.

If only Alistair and Morrigan would cooperate. They were into the fast days of Satinalia, so Alistair wasn't eating or drinking during the daylight hours, and it was making him crabby. Morrigan’s natural aversion to being forced to spend long spans of time in company wasn't helpful, either.

“You're all going outside,” Ashalle decided for them on the seventh morning.

“Alistair shouldn't move snow,” Theron said. “He almost passed out yesterday. He needs to stay still and warm.”

“I can do my share!”

“When we get back to Amaranthine, I’m going to ask if Wardens get dispensation,” Theron told him. “It's important to follow the religious laws, but other people don't need as much food as Wardens. You need to eat.”

“No,” Alistair maintained. This was the eighth or ninth time they'd argued about it; at least this year. It was an annual ordeal at the Vigil. “You're supposed to fast; I'm going to fast.”

“Mortification of the body accomplishes nothing but making you feel miserable. ‘Tis no spiritual gain anywhere in it.”

“Out!” Ashalle ordered before Morrigan and Alistair could start taking shots at each other’s faith again, shoving Theron’s cloak at him. “Teach your son about snow shelters, if Alistair has to stay warm and still!”

“Yes, Mamae.”

 Paths had been mostly cleared through the clan compound now, but there were still patches of untouched snow and plenty of snow piles left over from what Vhadan'ena hadn't been able to fit into the great water drums that had been adapted from the desert-dwelling clans. It was a long walk from the proper city of Hallarenis'haminathe to any water source, and further than that for something potable. It was so much easier to make use of the water that came to you.

Theron used one of the larger snow piles to explain to Kieran how to make a temporary shelter out of a dug hole in the snow to help preserve heat. Morrigan assisted in the explanation, showing how the snow could be melted slightly with a little application of magic or fire to freeze together and retain
Kieran seemed to be more interested in digging in the snow and then making little fires to warm his hands back up, but that was all right. He was only four years old.

But that did mean that Alistair was mostly buried in snow when two unfamiliar Dalish mages turned up at the compound. They introduced themselves as Siona Lauma Irosyl and Evunial Shae’lin Brasirotha.

“Out of the Anderfels,” Theron observed, after he’d made their introductions. “Have you come about the other Dalish Wardens?”

“We have,” Evunial said. “It has been discussed.”

“Then be welcome in my mother’s house.”

Ashalle obligingly left the house to their use, taking herself outside to dote on her grandson some more and help extract Alistair.

“A mage child is a blessing to any clan,” Siona said as Theron poured ise’haurasha for everyone. “But I am surprised to know you have a son.”

“It was sudden,” Theron told her. “His mother’s idea, but not unwelcome.”

“And a mother,” Evunial said.

Theron put the samovar down carefully.

“I was told that those of the People who traveled the Anderfels hold Dalish Wardens to be i’tel’melin,” he said. “The clans in Ferelden knew of Wardens only from stories. I thought that I was the only one. I didn't know I was supposed to be i’tel’melin. I have clan and family, from before and after my Joining.”

“Then that is something to put to the Creators,” Siona said. “Think on it.”

“It doesn't mean you never see them again,” Evunial told him. “My own child went to the Wardens, and they are not a stranger to Brasirotha or the People. They are still Dalish, even if they are apart. That’s why we came- if you have any influence in the Wardens, we ask that you use it to bring them home, now that we have one.”

“I was already planning on it,” Theron assured him. “I was going to come speak to the clans out of the Anderfels, but things- happened.”

“They did indeed,” he agreed dryly. “Very dramatically.”

“Tell me, Arla’lanelan,” Siona said. “If you did not become i’tel’melin when you left your clan, how did you leave?”

“My Keeper ordered me to go,” Theron told her. “I didn't want to, but she forced me. She knew the Warden who she sent me with, and trusted that he'd have some way to keep me from dying. Though he called it a ‘cure’ when it wasn't, really.”

Siona regarded him for a long moment.

“Then I would advise, Arla’lanelan,” she said. “As Keeper of my own clan, that you really do consider becoming i’tel’melin as the others of our people are. It would be easy, otherwise, for those
such as Lavellan’s First to call you ‘exile’ instead. And they would not be wrong enough that the rest of the People would not have to consider it.”

He didn't say anything about what Siona had told him for a while. He’d thought he could reflect upon it with the inactivity that the snow was giving them, but after another couple of days had passed Alistair started asking when they were going to be going back to Amaranthine.

Theron deferred. They couldn't leave until he’d confirmed with all the crafters. The snows were still too deep, and what if another storm caught them before they’d made it to the Hinterlands or into the South Reach? It would take the crafters he’d hired a while to get to Denerim, and it was better to talk generalities in more detail now so they’d know what to plan for and if they’d need to bring any special materials or tools. He wanted to stay a bit longer to see how the political situation was falling out in the aftermath of his challenges, now that Hallarenis'haminathe’s connecting roads had been cleared of snow and the Dalish could circulate in the city again.

Eventually, over dinner one evening, Alistair lost his patience.

“Theron I swear, if you’re putting off going back to Amaranthine because Zevran won't be there I will drag you out of this city and onto a ship going to Antiva and we will use the rest of the winter to find him, no matter what you think about his note!”

“I’m still busy,” Theron said, and Alistair made a grumbling noise and glared intermittently at him for the rest of the night, but didn't push it.

The next morning he found Morrigan waiting for him just outside the door of Ashalle’s house, dressed in her traveling clothes and staff in hand.

“I had a mind to see what is left of Flemeth’s hut after these years without maintenance,” she announced. “Twould not surprise me to find that the Chasind burned it to keep her spirit away.”

“And Kieran?” Theron asked.

“Alistair can watch him well enough for one day,” she said. “Bring your sword. ‘Tis not impossible that we shall be beset upon by some desperate bandits who know naught of whom they choose to engage.”

They were in the marshes, fully frozen now from the winter but treacherous with rotting ice from the heat of the decomposing plant matter trapped beneath, before Morrigan began to prod him.

“You have been ill at ease since the Anderfels Dalish came about the Wardens. Speak.”

“I haven't finished thinking about it yet,” Theron told her.

“And have you begun to think about your ‘it’, or have you simply worried over ‘it’?”

“It's not a light topic-”

“And what an ordeal I am certain it shall be to hear, after a Blight and an Archdemon and my mother!”

“It's personal.”

“Many things are, but yet you should speak of them.”

“I don't know what to do.”
“And so you chase your own tail rather than make a decision,” Morrigan said. “Share your thoughts or do not, but cease making excuses for your behavior and inconveniencing the rest of us. Alistair is becoming insufferable with concern and Kieran is beginning to ask questions.”

“Do you two talk about me while I'm not around?” Theron asked, feeling warm in his chest at the thought.

“A great many people talk of you when you are not there and without your knowledge, Theron,” was her answer. She said it dismissively, so he knew she did it because she cared. “’Twas the price you paid for your dramatics atop Drakon.”

“All the other Dalish Wardens are i’tel’melin,” Theron told her, and it was sort of a relief to say out loud instead of keeping it in his head. “But I’m not, and I maybe should be.”

“Explain.”

“It’s a good thing,” he said. “To be i’tel’melin is a sacred and important thing. You’re working for the good of all of the People. But i’tel’melin don’t have families. They don’t have a clan. They gave up having parents and siblings and children and lovers. You don’t never see them again, and I’m sure you’d still think about them, but it’s not- it can't be the same.”

“So do not become one,” Morrigan told him. “You are living a good life. ‘Tis their problem, should they judge you for it.”

“But Keeper Siona said, basically, that I can be i’tel’melin, or I'm an exile.”

“And does she arbitrate what your clan says about you?” Morrigan demanded. “Or better, what you think of yourself? She knows nothing of you. Ignore her.”

“But the other clans-”

“Are fools should they throw you away, and ungrateful should they do so after all you have done for them. They would not deserve your respect, nor your time.”

“But what have I really done for them?” Theron asked worriedly. “I got the land, but I'm barely here and I'm not-”

Morrigan’s hand shot out and she hauled him around by the front of his armor until he was facing the rise of Hallarenis’haminathe over the Kocari Wilds. The massive fresco murals of the founding of the Dales on the temple exterior were visible for miles around. On this side, Sulahnera asha Shartan looked out across the Wilds towards the Dales, standing proud with the old standard of the homeland she had led her people to in hand.

“You won them tolerance from Ferelden,” she said. “They come and they settle and they build, and create, and live without fear atop land that not five years ago was the center of a Blight, and still you stand there and worry you have done too little? Everything they have is because of you. Mahanon Adhallin Lavellan may wish to pretend otherwise, but they owe you a debt that can never be repaid, and his opinions should be worth less to you than Loghain’s once were.”

“But he’s not that wrong,” Theron said. “I barely have a clan any longer, and I don't really keep to the holy days because it's hard when you're the only one observing them, and I haven't even been able to protect the people I have a responsibility to-”

“Oh? Since when?”
“I wasn’t there to protect Anders,” Theron told her. “And I- with the Magister, I didn't- you’re supposed to fight and I-”

He couldn't look at the mural of Sulahnera any longer. She hadn't given in to the humans, nor her father Shartan. They’d won the People from slavery in Tevinter; and what had he done? Broken his oath, and driven Zevran away, and if the rest of the People ever found out they’d never hesitate to call him ‘exile’ and chase him out, no matter what he’d done, and they’d be right to.

“I should have killed myself in Kirkwall rather than come back in disgrace,” Theron admitted, looking away. “If I became i’tel’melin, maybe I would- it could make up for it. That could be my res-”

Morrigan slapped him.

“You are better than this!” she hissed at him. “Where is your confidence? Where is your pride? Where is the man who stood up on the challenge field and fought all comers who dared disagree with what he had to say? I cannot find him here!”

“I don't have a right to any pride,” Theron told her. “Not here. Not-”

The city was at his back, standing strong and defiant by its very existence. No matter that it was divided at the moment- the People had lived divided since the fall of the Dales, and they had survived to make it here.

Theron was struck by the sudden urge to just keep Hallarenis'haminathe at his back and walk, never turning back and never looking back. If kept going west for long enough, he’d come to the Emerald Graves, eventually; and the Arbor Wilds beyond that. He could walk into the trees and just… disappear.

“I shall not stand for you suiciding,” Morrigan declared. “It will not occur.”

“I’m Dalish,” Theron said, sounding miserable even to himself. She ignored him.

“And you shall not throw away your family for something so trivial as the opinions of those you have never met.”

“I might-”

“You shall not!” she insisted; and then when he didn't respond: “Very well. Have your pitying sulk. I do not require your presence. Leave me be until you care to do something.”

He let her walk off alone. He couldn't go back to the city, but for miles around there was only the Wilds or the Brecilian.

He ended up in the old Warden ruins where he and Alistair and the two human men who hadn't made it past the Joining had gone looking for Ferelden’s copies of the Warden treaties. He sat down on the tumbled rubble and stared blankly at the opposite wall.

Night came, at some point. He only really noticed because Morrigan came carrying a mage-lit aravel lamp, and Fen was visible only as a dark shape nudging at his knee.

“Hey, come on,” Alistair said. “You've been out here long enough.”

“Da’len,” Ashalle said quietly, when he didn't respond.
Alistair took him by the arms and gently hauled him to his feet. Ashalle prodded him into walking, and Morrigan said a few soft words to their son and Kieran came over to hold his hand.

He was feeling marginally more verbal and present by the time they’d gotten back to Vhadan’ena’s compound and Ashalle had fetched Lanaya to check him over to ask the Keeper: “What are you supposed to do when you’ve broken an oath to the Creators, but you can’t make the prescribed restitution because it interferes with your other duties?”

Lanaya’s eyebrows very nearly disappeared into her hair.

“Well, what did you do?”

Theron couldn’t even attempt to tell her. The shame was too strong, and the dread of how she’d react to knowing what he hadn’t done.

“If you can’t tell me,” she said after a few moments of waiting. “Then take it to the temple. Maybe you can find an answer there.”

Theron did take it to the temple, the next morning. He arrived at sunrise, as befitted a supplication to Sylaise. Each of the Evanuris had their own sanctuary within the temple, and Theron went directly to hers, kneeling on the stone in front of the great fire.

In an attempt to clear his mind, he prayed for Zevran first.

*Please let him be safe. Please let him be happy. He doesn't have to come back.*

It hurt, so much, to think that he wouldn’t, but he could no more pray for Zevran to come back than track him down and ask him to. They both amounted to the same in the end.

*Just keep him safe and well.*

It didn’t help much. Now he was thinking of Zevran, and the politics here, and the politics he was going to have to face in Denerim, and he was going to have to do it without Zevran-

*If Nehna Sora Revasina lives still, bring them back to each other. Please let him find out what happened to her. Give him back the family Antiva stole from him.*

*Bring Sabrae safely to our city. Keep Merrill safe in Kirkwall and happy with Marian. Help Alistair and Morrigan and I live harmoniously together.*

There. He’d asked for something for himself.

Theron prostrated himself and murmured the proper general prayers for Sylaise, part of the very first set of proscribed devotions for the Evanuris he’d had to learn, to prove himself good enough to apprentice to Hahren Paivel. He came to the end of them and paused, unsure of how to continue. His thoughts wouldn’t go in the direction they needed to, and speaking aloud seemed far too daunting a task.

“Sheatherkeeper. Greatest of Healers. Burningheart, Weaver, Kindler of Fire. First Keeper, Teacher, Highest of Elders, She Who Comes and Calms, Hostess and Guest, Light-bearer, Sunlit One, the Knife Near the Coals, Blessing-bringer, Guardian of the Clan, Tender of the Stars—”

He was going to run out of epithets soon.
“-Lady of Life, Comforter of the Bereaved, the Great Uniter, Singer, Binder, Most Artful please what should I do to pay for my oathbreaking, what is required of me, am I supposed to-”

He’d been about to say ‘give up my family’ and stopped himself. That wasn't what being i’tel’melin was supposed to be. That was the wrong way to think about it. He wasn't going to lose them. They would still be there, because he couldn’t just leave Amaranthine.

Well. He could. Alistair would never forgive him for it, but he could.

And maybe it would even be better. There wouldn't be another Blight anytime soon. The Wardens were comfortably in place in Amaranthine. He could become i’tel’melin and leave so no one was tempted to resurrect relationships that weren't supposed to be- he could go to the Dales and guard what his people had left behind, he could-

He wouldn't be there if Zevran came back.

It was a very bright fire, scented with the woods and herbs used for fuel. Pine, holly, rose, embrium, lavender. Come Nir’saota, the day in late winter set for weddings, the whole city would smell like this as the clans held their celebrations.

Zevran wasn't coming back, Theron realized bleakly. He’d failed him, and Zevran had gone to find somewhere safer. Somewhere to place his loyalty that didn't get him pulled into darkspawn and blood magic and demons.

Zevran wasn't coming back.

Theron pushed himself off the floor and drew his knees up, huddling in on himself.

Ashalle had said that you didn't disturb people when they were at the temple, which was reasonable.

But on the other hand, Theron had been gone for a very long time, and he was worried. Morrigan had told them what he’d said in the Wilds yesterday before she’d walked away, and Alistair was still mad at her for it. Theron had said all that, and then she’d just walked away? And the state they’d found him in last night-

There was only so much busywork you could occupy your hands with, and Alistair had already done everything he knew how to do distracting himself from being hungry during the fast days. His armor was clean. His shield was taken care of. His sword was sharpened. The horses had been fed already today. None of his clothes needed mending. Morrigan had had Kieran out here earlier for lessons, teaching him about reading with the letters of both the Dwarven and Justinian scripts writ large in the snow. Alistair had been too worried about Theron to be concerned when Kieran had learned the proper names and sounds all at once after his mother had added Old Imperial Tevene underneath.

Fen was the only one out here now. Morrigan had taken Kieran inside ten or fifteen minutes ago to nap. Vhadan’ena was busy around him, mostly ignoring him, and he started wondering again when they were going to go home. It was probably- or had been, anyway- comforting for Theron to have an extended stay here, but Alistair was finding that his tolerance for being looked down on was a lot less now that he’d been away from it for so long with the Wardens. If other humans didn't get to judge him for being born a bastard, the Dalish didn't get to judge him for being born a human.

And now it was wearing on Theron, too. It was time to leave. It had been almost a full month since they’d arrived. They should have some time in Amaranthine to not be traveling or at court before they had to do the social season and babysit Anora’s potential husbands.
He knew his friend was coming back because Fen raised his head and perked his ears up, whining.

"Woah, okay," Alistair said, alarmed, when his friend entered the compound. "That did not help, inside, let’s go—"

Ashalle was out, and he could hear Morrigan singing softly to Kieran to get him to sleep. There was ise’haurasha still, because apparently there always was in a Dalish settlement in winter. He paused a moment before crushing some cinnamon directly into the cup he poured for Theron and handed it over.

“You've been crying,” he said when Theron just sat there holding it. “You need to drink something. Come on, it's warm. It’ll be nice.”

“I can't do it,” Theron said after a few moments.

“The drink, or…?”

“Zevran’s not coming back.”

“Uh—”

“He’s not,” Theron cut him off viciously. “He’s gone and he’s not coming back and it hurts so much and I can’t lose any of the rest of you, I can’t be i’iel’melin I’d just- but I can’t do this without you—”

“You’re sodding right you can't,” Alistair said, and quickly found one of the heavy woolen blankets they used when it was time to sleep. Dropped over Theron’s head, it turned into a dark, comforting weight. He wasn't sure why hooding Theron like a falcon made him feel better, but it did, and he wasn't going to argue something that worked.

“But I can't be an exile,” Theron continued, voice muffled. “I can't lose my people, I-”

“You’ll have Merrill no matter what,” Alistair reminded him. “Ashalle left Sabrae in the middle of a Blight to go looking for Tamlen- she’s not going to let you go. And Velanna was an exile. It won't make any difference to her. And you've got me and the other Wardens. You’ll survive it. We won't leave you.”

“But you’re not my people.”

“Hey,” Alistair said warningly. “I’m not Dalish, but I’m definitely part of ‘your people’.”

“It wouldn't be the same. You don't understand, you’ve never had a people like this—”

“Wow,” Alistair said. “Amazing. It's almost like I’d forgotten that I spent eighteen years of my life being the designated target because I had no parents. Or no, wait, maybe I’d forgotten about all the Wardens who took me in and gave me one of the best six months of my life before they were all slaughtered and I was forced to go on the run for an entire year. During a Blight. That started in the city we’re standing in.”

The blanket huddle that was Theron stayed silent.

“I'm not yelling at you right now because I know you already feel awful about it,” Alistair told him. “I get it. People say things they wouldn't otherwise, or even think of if they weren't upset; but I'm not going to stand here and listen to you put your foot in your mouth. I’m glad you’re not going to be i’iel’melin; but you're not going to be exiled over it. So you're not dead and the Magister used blood magic on you- that's not your fault and it’s also not you submitting, and anyone who says otherwise
is wrong and if someone does say it, we’ll have another round of challenges and I’ll get up there and let anybody fight me about it.”

“It wouldn’t work. You're not Dalish.”

Alistair sighed heavily through his teeth.

“You're going to be all right, Theron. You’re worrying about this too much.”

He had not thought that accompanying the Wardens away from Kirkwall would result in so many ships. The Boundless Skies had put out from port half an hour ago, and had finally caught the wind that took it around a bend in the coast and put Amaranthine out of sight. The shore looked much the same with its high grey-white cliffs, though the stone was starting to shade into a darker storm grey than around the city.

“So!” Kallian said, coming up to railing next to him. “More sailing!”

“Yes,” he said. “Much more sailing.”

“Not that much,” she reminded him. “Six days or so.”

“Still a long time to be confined to one place.”

“Well, we’ll be in Gwaren at the end of it,” Kallian said. “And then the Brecilian Forest. And Hallarenis'haminathe!”

“You admire the Dalish?” Fenris asked.

“Sure, I ’spose,” she said. “I wouldn't want to be one, I don't think, but Warden-Keeper Velanna has been good for Nesiara and the Arl-Commander’s Dalish.”

Kalian paused and glanced around before resting her weight on the ship’s rail and leaning closer to him, close enough that her breath brushed across his skin when she spoke again.

“You know how the humans will do things, y’know, and you can tell they're not thinking of you even though you're right there?”

“No one thinks of slaves.”

“Oh-”

She stumbled, clearly unsure about how to respond, and Fenris raised his eyebrows, just a bit. They’d had this conversation. He didn't need pity and he didn't want anyone lingering on the topic.

“The Commander never does that,” Kallian continued, passing the topic by. “And I know that I could come to him and say I’d found some shem abusing elves and his first question wouldn't be ‘can we do anything about it?’ but ‘did you kill him?’ I never thought I’d meet somebody like that.”

“He is an elf.”

“Yeah, but it's different,” she insisted. “If he- so I noticed something, because he’s Dalish, he doesn't think of stuff the same way. He wouldn't have made me a knight, probably, and he wouldn't- it's just in the way he thinks. Somebody from the alienages would put elves first, sure, that's what you do; but they’d still be thinking about how the shems would react and how they'd think when they did it. The Arl-Commander doesn't. He just puts elves ahead of humans and doesn't have second thoughts.
about it."

“It will get him in trouble,” Fenris observed.

“Probably,” Kallian agreed. “But it's great. And anyway, about the Dalish, they've got a whole city of nothing but elves! I have to see it.”

The mabari huddled against the railing, whom Fenris had been doing his best to ignore, whined a little.

“You’ll love it too, Aditi,” Kallian told her, scratching her head. “Plenty of new things to see and sniff.”

The very large, only-technically-a-puppy leaned into the scratching for a moment before turning her head to look at him and whimper implorably.

Fenris crossed his arms and stepped away.

“She’s your mabari!” Kallian hissed at him. “Treat her like it!”

“I did not want this,” he said defensively, and looked out to the ocean.

“She’s bonded to you, you can't just—”

“I want no part of this, Kallian!”

“No part of what?” she asked, exasperated. “Having a mabari is a judge of character, Fenris! It's an honor!”

“It was an honor for the Magisters the more slaves they had,” he snapped back.

“What?” Kallian said. “That's got nothing to do—”

“Since she followed me back from the training ground I have been told multiple times that mabari are just as smart as any human. I will not own a person.”

“Fenris—” Kalian said, putting a hand on his shoulder. He shrugged it off and stepped aside, and she dropped her hand.

“It's not about owning,” she told him. “It's a partnership. You help mabari because they can't use words and they haven't got hands or money, and then they help you.”

“Silence and destitution with no recourse but dependency,” Fenris spat. “Is not a partnership.”

“Well, that's how I heard some guard captain explain it to a noble girl who'd gotten one bonded to her—”

“You would trust a human on this?”

“Just talk to Aditi,” Kallian said, looking to the sky. “Merciful Andraste, Fenris, mabari will make sure you know if you're hurting them. You’ve got to trust them.”

“Magic was involved in their making,” he said. “How much choice do any of them have?”

“I'm going to go check on the Dalish,” Kallian said. So she was dismissing him. Very well. “Talk to Aditi.”
She left. Fenris looked at Aditi. Aditi looked at him.

“I will not own you,” he told her, leaning on the railing and looking away to watch the seaside cliffs fall away as they approached the mouth of Hafter’s Bay.

Fenris heard her sigh, and refused to look back.

Over the next few days they passed the Blackmarsh Peninsula, Denerim Bay, and the mountain cliffs of Henalmar Point. Once they turned southeast around the Point, the coast stayed rocky, but the dark cliffs were replaced by the dense, dark trees of the Brecilian Forest.

At night, the air felt on edge. The wind sparked bright green in the sails and on the ropes, and the sailors muttered.

Fenris just itched.

“Keeper Marethari says it's Fadefire,” Kallian told him the second night. They were out on the deck, on the raised part above the captain’s cabin, feet hanging off the back of the ship through the railing. “She says you get it naturally where the Veil is thin enough for magic to leak through. It's the first and easiest clue of a spirit-touched place.”

“And we are going through it.”

“If you can get it to stick to something it burns without heat or fuel,” Kallian said. “Sounds useful. If we find some I'm going to try to stick it in a jar. Maybe a couple of jars; they'd make good presents. You know how hard it is to have Andraste’s Fire lit in your house without it burning down?”

“It is not a Chantry duty in the south?” Fenris asked.

“No, it is,” Kallian told him. “But that's for humans. Everybody in the Alienage keeps a flame for Andraste going in their house. Usually it's the cookfire, honestly, but candles are cheaper. But they also make it easier to burn your house down. Sometimes people can get a big rock out of a construction job, if a dressed stone breaks, and if you stick that in a corner and use the melted wax and candle-ends to keep a candle upright, it's a lot safer.”

Fadefire sparked along the railing, flying up Kallian’s sleeve and twinkling in her hair. Some of it jumped to Fenris and he activated his lyrium brands out of some reflex.

The Fadefire swarmed him, lighting up the whole top deck in bright blue-green. Aditi barked excitedly and tried to catch the motes and hovering starlights in her teeth.

Fenris felt very watched. He was lit up, the Fadefire was acting strange around him, certainly the sailors-

“Wow,” Kallian breathed, and he looked at her. She was watching the Fadefire gravitate into brief twisting ribbons and the delicate, hovering starlights. She reached for the nearest one and it puffed away, disturbed by the merest displacement of air.

It was surely a trick of the lyrium glow and the Fadefire light- but Kallian looked awed. Enchanted.

Fenris let the lyrium fade out slowly, on its own.

Captain Isabela had said that they’d be putting into port in Gwaren after lunch. It was going to be the shortest stop they could manage, and she, Fenris, and Warden-Keeper Velanna were meant to leave
as soon as they got off the ship. Warden Amell had made sure they had horses, but Kallian was…
dubious. They’d all had to get up on one in Hafterport to prove that they could guide one and not fall
off, but it was still a horse.

Kallian’s entire experience with horses was avoiding them in the streets in case some noble had an
‘accident’ involving the placement of their hooves, or the nerves of their mounts.

But. She was a knight now, of the Silver Order of Amaranthine. She was Ser Tabris. Fereldan
knights rode places, and she was as good as any of them now. Better, even, because she knew how
to be polite and wouldn't go around hurting people just because she could.

No time to worry about the horse now. Now was for getting outfitted for her arrival. She represented
the Arling of Amaranthine and the Arl-Commander, and she was going to make people think
‘knight’ before they thought ‘knife-ear’.

She’d brought one large trunk, packed with stuffing. Captain Isabela would have it shipped back to
the Vigil when they went back to Hafterport to pick up the rest of the Dalish, because this was not
something to travel cross-country with.

Kallian opened it. She took the cleaning and caretaking supplies out first and added them to her
travel bag. It was most of the weight she’d be bringing. They were trying to travel light, but you
couldn't go around with uncared-for equipment.

First, the linen undershirt, wool socks, and yellow-dyed canvas pants. Over that, a long-sleeved
gambeson of quilted canvas, meant as much for warmth in the southern Fereldan winter as for
protection in a fight. Then came the high-collared, knee-length hauberk, woven with chainmail
everywhere but the heavy hood. This was easy enough to do, and she tied the lacings tight in little
bows. Over that was a light surcoat, cut to follow the hauberk, meant to keep the chainmail from
getting too damp. It was dyed warm wheat gold, the same shade as thea arms of the arling- but it was
the surcoat more than the silverite cuirass, backplate, pauldrons, tassets, gauntlets, and helmet that
had made her stop and take a moment to acclimatize to the sheer cost of her gifted armor, once it had
been delivered from Wade’s for her official knighting ceremony.

Kallian had no conception of how much plate armor cost, only that it was a lot. But she’d worked in
noble households for most of her life before this, as had her neighbors, friends, and family. She knew
what an expense fast, bright, even dye was.

The plate went on next, over the surcoat, but for the helmet and gauntlets. Kallian sat down on the
cot she’d been given for the trip to pull her boots on, then braided up her hair.

She had ribbons to put in them now, and she carefully unwrapped them. They were amaranth red,
and were an expense she wouldn’t have bought for herself without the salary that the Arl-
Commander had set for Amaranthine’s new knights. It was a lot more than she’d ever really
expected to make, and she’d pocketed the difference between what she’d gotten and what she
usually sent home- just for this once.

Kallian tied the ribbons to either side of hair and braided it back, eventually joining them and coiling
the end at the nape of her neck to keep it all out of the way and to prevent it from snagging in her
armor.

She put her sword on, secured her helmet to her belt, pulled on her gauntlets, and took a deep breath.
They’d be in Gwaren, soon. Time to grab her bag and go up to the deck to wait.

Fenris was already there when she hoisted herself up off the ladder, back in his molded leather and
light plate, now strapped on over a heavy shirt.

“You really should wear a coat,” Kallian told him, walking over to watch the Brecilian Forest peter out into the rocky shores of Gwaren. Likely they’d start to pass fishing villages soon. “You’ll freeze.”

“Shift your stance,” he reminded her. “Like you have pride. You’ll carry the weight better.”

_Pride_, Kallian thought. _Mother would love to see me like this, and Father was so happy._

The armor redistributed, just a touch, and it made a noticeable difference.

“Or you could get new armor,” she continued.

Fenris scowled.

“I know how to care for this set, and how to move in it.”

“It’s warm-weather armor.”

“It suits me.”

“Does it even fit over that shirt?”

“No,” he grumbled.

“Then you should get new armor,” Kallian told him. “You could get leather and maybe a little plate with what you’re getting paid for this job plus saving a little.”

“It wouldn’t be as good,” Fenris said.

“No, but you won’t freeze to death or have to live with misfitting armor,” she retorted. “You could even dye it as black as your soul if it would make you happy.”

He actually chuckled a little, and Kallian counted it a win.

They were eleven days on horseback through the Brecilian Passage, and encountered no more trouble than their own horses. The hunters, trappers, small merchants, Ash Warriors, and the odd timber caravan that habitually used the Passage ignored them, for the most part. The ones who didn’t saw Warden-Keeper Velanna’s _vallas’lin_, mage staff, and Fenris and herself as her armed escort and ducked their heads respectfully, muttering something in El’vhen. They were mostly elven trappers, as Kallian would have expected, wild woodsmen who were practically Dalish as far as the rest of the world was concerned, but some of them were human. Generally these were trappers again, or Ash Warriors trotting along with their mabari, but some of them were merchants.

“You can make barter for some nice bits if you’ve got the right goods and the manners your mother taught you,” one of them said when Kallian asked, at the mouth of the Passage. “The Dalish don’t go in for gold, but they do the best elfroot and their hides and furs are better than the Chasind’s. Come with some junked-up iron or copper or tin or bronze and a bunch of wool and you’ll have happy customers. Doesn’t hurt to learn a few words, either.”

The city, when they got to it, was-

Well-
'Disappointing’ wasn’t the right word. Kallian wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting, exactly, but it wasn’t a bunch of little Alienages centered around a fortress.

But still, what a thing it was. Old Ostagar towered over everything, patched and repaired with colored stone and whitewashed and painted unlike anything she’d ever seen. Noble houses had paintings, and Chantries sometimes, but she’d never seen someone paint directly on a wall like this before, or so large, or in great blocks of shading color and clean, strong lines.

They had to stop, outside the city, because Warden-Keeper Velanna had slid right off her horse and planted herself face-first on the ground, murmuring things in El’vhen while Kallian and Fenris awkwardly got off their own horses and stood around. She’d had a nice long look at those murals.

“What are they of?” she asked the Warden-Keeper as they entered the city.

“On the temple dome,” she said, pointing to the round building on the highest outcrop of the fortress. “Are the Evanuris, the gods of the People. Andruil of war and Elgar’nan of vengeance face us. Mythal of protection is on his other side. You can just see her. The walls are scenes of the Dales. That is Halam’shiral.”

There was a city, gilded and arching in many levels, painted beneath Elgar’nan. Roads emanated from it, or light, she wasn’t sure which. It was flanked by rearing halla with riders in green armor. The one on the left brandished a spear; the one of the right a sword.

“What about the warriors?”

“Emerald Knights of the Dales,” Warden-Keeper Velanna told her as they approached the city, leading the horses. “Vaharel, our first General to die with the Dales, who fought and died with our only human allies of Muntsemur when the Exalted March came; and Lindiranae with Evanura, our last General. She was our champion on the Exalted Plains against the Orlesians, and died to leave the survivors of Halam’shiral time to flee south into the Arbor Wilds and tell our already-fled family that the Dales were lost.”

They were approaching a perimeter guard. The Warden-Keeper held out a hand to keep her back and stopped, turning to look at her.

“You are not Dalish,” she said. “And you aren’t an Emerald Knight. But you are the first el’vhen knight since the fall of the Dales, Kallian Tabris.”

“I know,” Kallian told her, and she turned to introduce them to the guards, stepping forward and going off in El’vhen. Kallian couldn’t follow any of it, but she couldn’t miss the way the guards’ eyes went wide after her name and the way they looked at her afterwards.

“They will take our horses to be with the Commander’s and the halla,” the Warden-Keeper said to them, once she’d finished with the guards. “And we will have a guide to where they are staying.”

One of the guards stepped forward to take the horses and the other turned, heading for the city. More appeared Dalish appeared from nowhere to take their place.

“What about these?” Fenris asked as they approached the great tower. The whole picture was impossible to see from this close, but from the way they’d approached it she’d been able to see buildings around the bottom, and two half-seen figures- one holding a staff, standing on ravens, which they were walking under now, the other veiled, holding a hammer in one hand and a knife in the other. The veiled one was around the curve of the tower, and there was yet another panel here.

“Arlathan,” the Warden-Keeper said. “This is where we keep our books now, and our Hahrens and
Keepers meet. There is June the Craftsmaster, and Falon’din-Dirthamen. Shown as one god, with Falon’din’s staff and Dirthamen’s ravens of Fear and Deceit underfoot, he stands for history and true knowledge of our past. Sylaise the Healer is on this side by the ravine, with her hands upraised.”

The ravine was very, very deep. Kallian tried not to look down, and kept staring straight ahead as they entered the city proper and became the object of interest looks and stares.

*Walk like you own the place*, she reminded herself. It was how she’d gotten through Gwaren, where much the same thing had happened. *Head high. You have your pride. Own it. You’re a knight.*

She kept telling herself that until they reached one of the little Alienages, which were not so little from close up. On average, they seemed somewhat bigger than Denerim’s, and she kept herself from looking for humans as their guide passed them off to the perimeter guards here.

Fenris watched the walls warily as they passed under them, and Kallian found herself jealous of what the Alienages were like on the inside. The way they cordoned off space within the city had made it feel a bit unwelcoming, even with the wide ‘roads’ and clear areas between them, but inside the walls held just as much space, mostly cleared of snow and showing all the signs of active foot traffic and outdoor work. The houses were tiny even in comparison to those she’d grown up with, but they were in much better repair- and for all that it was the midst of winter in southern Fereldan, and on the edge of the Wilds no less, none of the elves out working or playing or talking looked sickly or underfed or cold.

“*Velanna?*” she heard Captain Mac Maric call. She looked around and found him rising from the stoop of one of the houses, a sharpening stone in one hand and a knife in the other.

“We have news,” the Warden-Keeper called back. “You won’t like it.”

“*We should leave,*” was the best thing he’d heard Theron say in *weeks.*

“Yes!” Alistair agreed immediately. “Pack up, let’s go, Amaranthine needs us, we can’t waste any time!”

“We can’t,” Theron agreed. “How long does it take to get to Haven?”

That brought him up short.

“What?”

“What?” Theron asked. “Leliana is still in Haven, isn’t she? I don’t think we know anyone else in the Chantry to ask about what we can do to circumvent a Grand Cleric.”

Unfortunately, that was an entirely reasonable response to the problem, even it still smelled suspiciously of an avoidance tactic.

Alistair counted the days in his head.

“We really *do* have to be back on time.”

“A month and a bit is time.”

“Not a *lot* of time,” Alistair said. “And what are you going to do about the crafters?”

“They know what they’re doing,” Theron said. “I think we should camp our way there.”
“It’s winter and we can claim hospitality from the banns. Why would we-
”

“If we stay with the banns, Arl Eamon will ask why we didn’t stay with him.”

“What’s wrong with Arl Eamon?”

“Nothing.”

“So we’ll stop by Redcliffe, it’s basically on the way-”

“Alistair,” Theron said. “My son is a mage who I’m not sending to the Chantry. We can’t stay with Arl Eamon.”

Oh.

“He’ll find out eventually,” Alistair told him. “You’re not hiding it, so he’ll hear about it at spring court at the latest. We’ll take that pass when we come to it, and in the meantime let’s not torture ourselves by camping in the snow.”

They left Hallarenis’haminathe the next morning around dawn- he, Theron, Morrigan with Kieran, and Kallian and Fenris. The other elves had volunteered to come. Kallian had said it was because Theron was her lord and she wanted to see Haven, while Fenris’s reason was ostensibly because he would get paid more.

Well, that probably was a reason he’d agreed to come, but Alistair had suspicions about Kallian being another, maybe more significant one.

They did have to camp, at least for the first couple of days. It was just as awful as Alistair had feared, though he tried to put a good face on it.

“Too much for your delicate sensibilities?” Alistair called to Fenris, one day on the road, when the other man was obviously trying to pretend that he wasn’t freezing.

“I am not delicate!” Fenris snapped back. His mabari growled, and Alistair fell to the rear of the group with Morrigan. She would appreciate his travel banter.

It was tolerable, though, because Theron’s overall mood seemed to improve once they were away from the city. He asked Kallian and Fenris how they’d been during the time he’d been gone, made sure that Kallian was happy with her armor and her newfound status, and told Fenris that he’d find him a permanent job somewhere so he wouldn’t have to worry about the Chantry boards.

He started sparring with Alistair again, which he hadn’t really while they’d been in the city, and Alistair was very glad for it. Even if they were too evenly matched for it to do much. They switched things up eventually, joining in on one of Fenris’s sessions with Kallian. She committed herself well against the three of them, given her relative experience and the fact that two of them were Wardens, but Alistair found that there was still something missing in it for him, even after he and Fenris had a spar that just dragged on and on, neither of them quite gaining the upper hand.

“Maybe I should learn something new,” he mused aloud to Theron as they approached their first real stop of the trip to Haven. “Maybe I could take up archery. We don’t have a lot of archers.”

“We don’t really need more archers in the Wardens,” Theron pointed out. “We have mages.”

“Still,” Alistair said. “Something. I’ve gotten too good at sword and shield for it to be a challenge any longer. Great for when I have to fight somebody! But I’m not really learning anything.”
The Bann of Calon was a very young man, younger even than Alistair, and extremely flustered to have the Hero of Ferelden suddenly appear at his gate. He spent the majority of their visit apologizing for not being a better host, forcing Theron to assure him that no, this was fine, they just wanted dinner, walls for the night, and then breakfast.

West of Calon was Foxheath, where they received much the same reception. The night after they stayed in Garsland, and the night after that in Lallorlyn, and the night after that-

“There’s an inn,” Alistair told Theron quietly as they stopped briefly in a river town.

That was where they stopped. Theron was flagging, now, and by silent agreement Alistair and Morrigan kept the group staying at inns, following the river, until they reached Ash Lake and Ashengard Keep.

Arl Mallory was prepared for them. She was an older woman, aged to Fereldan perfection- the sort of noblewoman who would go out, put sword to bandits, then come back and host her guests with the sword shined to perfection and hanging in a place of honor over the mantelpiece.

That was exactly where they met her, actually, out fighting an encampment of bandits on the road leading to her keep.

She saluted Theron with her bloody sword, one arl to another, once they’d finished the last of the bandits. The guards she’d brought with her were mostly archers, and their arrival had been fortuitously timed.

“My thanks to you and your fainsmen,” Arl Mallory told him. “Your swords were welcome, though your sorceress was… unexpected.”

“She fought the Blight with us,” Alistair said. “Thank you for your compliments, though you were holding your own.”

“I’m afraid you’ve got me at a disadvantage,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here, Warden-Commander. Will we be seeing you at court?”

“We’re going to see a friend in Haven,” Theron told her. “And then we’re back east.”

Everyone was introduced around, and Alistair watched Theron note Arl Mallory’s reactions to hearing that Alistair had been given the bastardy title, Morrigan was the mother of Theron’s bastard son, and the knight they’d brought along being an elf.

So long as Theron was still paying attention to the social niceties they could muster, they would get through this fine. He just needed to hold out until Haven.

They followed the shore of Ash Lake west two days later, and then the Ash River beyond that. A minor mountain pass let them wend their way past the spring at its end and connect to the River Hagen. From there, it was just a ride upstream to Haven.

They arrived in the village one month before the end of the year, and two before they were expected back in Denerim. Alistair wouldn’t have recognized the approach but for the fact that the river looked just as it had when they’d followed it up into the Frostbacks during the Blight. The road had been widened and remade with dirt pounded with gravel to cut down on the mud. Someone had built a bridge across the mouth of the lake, and there were signposts. And people.

Morrigan stopped near the bridge, just off the side of the road, and looked back and forth across the river and up the forest rise ahead of them.
"'Twas on this side of the lake when we last came this way, was it not?"

"The Temple is on that side, though," Alistair reminded her, pointing across the river to where the road curved out of sight around some lakeside cliffs. "I bet it’s near the launch point for the temple path, the one on the outside of the mountain."

"Then 'tis not truly Haven we travel to," she said, and nudged her horse into moving again. Kieran bounced in front of her, and their horse snorted in annoyance. "What point is there in taking the name if you have not taken the town?"

"There’s probably nothing left of the Haven we went to at all," Alistair said. "I bet they burned it. It was full of heretics, after all. Uh. Well. The corpses of heretics."

"I wonder if the dragon is still here," Theron said uninterestedly, and started across the bridge. Alistair almost didn’t hear Kallian mutter 'Dragon!' behind him, too distracted by the fact that Theron had actually, finally said something today. He couldn’t figure out, given the tone of the words, whether it was a good sign, or a bad one.

The new village of Haven was a proper Frostback mountain outpost, situated on the most reasonably flat rise in the immediate area and protected with log fort walls. There were few buildings beyond the large Chantry that had been built, and it was obviously meant to be a pilgrimage rest rather than a real town where people lived.

Still, even with all the traffic Haven must have regularly gotten, they were stared at as they came in. Out of old habit Alistair and Theron fell in on either side of Morrigan when they saw Templars. Alistair didn’t even notice they’d done it until the Chantry Sister he’d flagged down for answers looked between all of them, confused as to who was the highest of rank and the one to address first.

He glanced over at Theron, who didn’t seem to be particularly interested in speaking up again, and took charge.

"We’re looking for Sister Leliana," he said. "Do you know where we can find her?"

The Sister looked downright terrified.

"What happened?" she asked. "Did another Circle rebel? You don’t just come in person to deliver reports!"

"Repor-"

"Go to Butler!" she said frantically. "Above the blacksmith’s!"

She raced off, skirts in hand.

"Sure," Alistair said. "Okay then."

It took more work than it should have to find out how to get to the building hidden away above the blacksmith’s, but they reached it eventually. Alistair, once again, took charge, dismounting and knocking.

The door opened halfway. The person behind it was only barely visible, between the angle and the shade of the close walls.

This was almost as bad as old Haven.
“Look,” he told the man who was trying to keep the door between them. “All we want to do is talk to Leliana.”

There was a moment of silence, and then: “Who’s asking?”

“The Queen of Rivain, who does it look like?”

“The Grey Wardens of Ferelden,” Theron spoke up, quietly.

“Go talk to the Reverend Mother,” the man said after a moment, and shut the door sharply in Alistair’s face.

“Well, goodbye to you, too!” Alistair yelled through it, and turned back to the group. “Really living up to the history of the name, aren’t they?”

He waited a moment, giving Theron time to say something. He didn’t.

“Right. Let’s get the horses taken care of.”

The Reverend Mother, once they finally tracked her down, told them that Leliana had been summoned to Val Royeaux upon the ascension of the new Divine and was not expected back, but that she could send a message on if they so wished, since they were her old comrades.

Back at the inn, where Kallian and Fenris had arranged lunch for them all, Morrigan took Alistair aside.

“I have no wish to linger here,” she said, with a significant glance to the table where Kieran was sitting on Theron’s lap, sharing food and talking animatedly about something.

“Just one day,” he promised. “Long enough to get a letter written to Leliana and to rest a bit. And then it’s back to Amaranthine, as fast as we can.”

“Good,” Morrigan told him. “I must say, Alistair, ‘tis quite something to see you voluntarily leading things.”

“I don’t do it much,” he said. “Just when I’m needed.”

“It should not be needful.”

“Well, do you have any ideas about how to make him start acting like himself again?” Alistair demanded.

“Certainly,” Morrigan said snippily. “Take a ship to Antiva and find our wayward assassin.”

“And kick his ass,” Alistair agreed darkly. “But Theron wouldn’t stand for it. We’ve got to come up with something else.”

“Could not the mere act of seemingly willfully ignore his opinion on the matter and packing for Antiva be enough to set him off?”

“I want him to start acting like himself again, not make him angry.”

Morrigan pursed her lips thoughtfully.

“Perhaps we can find him some darkspawn to kill.”
Alistair dropped his voice to almost a whisper.

“I really don’t want to take him anywhere near the Roads right now,” he said. “I know he says he’s not going to kill himself, but he’s been so… hopeless, and convinced that he’s losing things he can’t replace.”

“He is not well,” Morrigan agreed. “‘Twould be wiser to deny him the temptation, or the opportunity.”

“Exactly. I’d say we should find him some elven ruins or something, but he’s not having a great time with the Dalish right now either.”

It was really unhelpful that everything that usually made Theron pleased was causing him troubles now. In a way, he almost wished that the season at court were here already. Maybe that would help. Somehow.

Alistair sighed, ran a hand through his hair, and fervently wished that they’d have a fast and easy trip home.
Chapter 23

Nehna wasn’t often at the house, after Salladin told her that there was no love between them. Elach and Jarik had integrated into the household while she’d been gone- the extension they’d built felt like part of the house, now, as lived-in as the rest of it, though still obviously newer.

She ranged the Wilds, hunting, bringing back herbs and plants and seeds. She’d stay out for days, tracking an animal; then weeks. She went up into Ferelden, haunted the Hinterlands, killing wolves for money or just because they were there, stopping in Lothering to sell what she’d found or killed and check for letters.

My dearest Nehna,

Starkhaven is much duller than Lydes, and exciting for it. The accents are so different, and Messere Anhuis was very pleased to learn that I can speak Antivan. He is arranging for a wife from a merchant house in Salle and says he feels much better about it now, since there will be an older woman who speaks his to-be wife’s language and can advise her on matters of motherhood and household-

Hachatshir and Laykan were concerned for her, she could tell, but had no idea how to help.

“They grow up,” Laykan tried to comfort her. “But Salladin will be fine. She’ll be a good Deva, and that Jarik- well, he might be a Deva, too. Three of them, all here! Imagine!”

Tanis,

I pressed some of the swamp flowers I was telling you about, and a few from the Hinterlands. They’re growing in huge clumps this year-


Nothing seemed to change, at the sorceress’s, regardless of whether she was there or not. A year after returning to the Wilds, she walked right up to Deva Anatzavoy and spoke directly to her for the first time in months.

“Does it even matter if I’m here or not?” she asked.

Deva Anatzavoy looked over at Salladin, who was slowly copying out one of the massively complex recipes the Devas used for their strongest medicines. She didn’t look up, only continuing to note the exact usage of each part of the spindleweed plant at each stage of freshness.

“Do you want me?” Nehna asked her. “Salladin?”

“And me?” her daughter asked.

Of course she did. Of course she did; she still didn’t love her but she was her responsibility-

Nehna packed up her things from Deva Anatzavoy’s house that day, and went to the tree-town on the Sundered Sea. Salladin was sixteen. Nehna had already been an adult of the clans a year, by the time she’d been her age. Her daughter was in her apprenticeship, settled, and had people who would take care of her.
Mage children always had the potential to be traded away to other clans, anyway.

Deva Stralchaka was younger than Nehna, by a good bit, but after seven years her dark hair was striped with grey, regardless.

“A family trait,” she told Nehna. Deva Stralchaka had never been much of a talker, and Nehna spent some comfortable, mostly-silent weeks with her, running errands and helping with repairs.

Dovachay was out at Mont-de-glace, trading. Nehna waited to leave until after he’d come back, but then ended up agreeing to go with him for the last trip of the season, in another few weeks. They still knew her name, in Mont-de-glace, and she still knew theirs. Faces rarely changed, on the Sundered Sea.

It was… calming, perhaps, was the word. She stepped onto the docks in Mont-de-glace and the wood creaked in the right way, and the thick wood iron-hulled koch boats sat low and familiar in their summer berths, grounded high up the beach, where the water and salt couldn’t eat so fast at the iron.

She and Dovachay returned to the tree-town, and she almost felt happy, back here. The Sundered Sea blew cool and salty and she could taste it, no matter where she was.

She’d miss it, when she went north to check Lothering for letters from Tanis. And she should bring things to trade, if only to keep the humans happy with her presence-

“Dovachay?”

“Hm?”

“Have you ever thought about trading with the Alamarri? Or the other villages?”

Dovachay sucked thoughtfully on the last of the summer’s honey-candies. They were sitting out in the chill early autumn night, watching the sea and the stars from the trees.

“Other villages don’t have a lot we need,” he said. “And what do we want Alamarri for? They bring their fire priestesses with them wherever they go, and their knights.”

“They don’t have to come here,” Nehna told him. “They don’t want to. But the Chasind further north trade a little. There’s a town I know. They know me there. Think about it like this- trade for other villages’ extras, and ask the Devas. They always have healing things that they made too much of, so they don’t waste what they gathered or what was given to them. Come with me and bring it north, sell it in Lothering. Get coins for it-”

“And bring the usual goods and the coins to Mont-de-glace next spring,” Dovachay said thoughtfully, recognizing her train of thought. “Hm. And extra coin?”

“Keep it,” Nehna told him. “For a bad trade year. Or you could go to Sulfur Point. There are salts and minerals you can use for all sorts of things. If you can’t use them, the Alamarri could. And obsidian makes a very fine edge.”

“Hm,” Dovachay said again. “Hm.”

The next week, he came north with her, to see Lothering. Nehna picked up Tanis’s newest letter and wrote her back while he poked around the town.

Tanis,
Dovachay came back with a mental list of things the people of Lothering seemed willing to trade for, based on what they already had and what they were using.

It was better, somehow, living by the sea. She and Dovachay spent the winter going around the nearby villages and towns, trading for things they hoped to sell- wild sheep wool no one was using yet, sack mead, wildwine, honey, dried herbs, Devas’ extra supplies, dried meat, furs. They ended up with a lot- enough that Dovachay had to convince the usual trade group to come with them, in winter-not-quite-yet-spring, to help carry it all to Lothering.

The Fereldans were very surprised, but also very interested. They sold most of what they’d brought, trading in kind for ryott, wheat, and metal, or taking coin.

“It’s not the right season for this,” Nehna told Dovachay as they left Lothering, hurrying to get back to the tree-town before the floods did. He nodded in agreement- they should have gone to Mont-de-glace first, and maybe Sulfur Point, before coming north. There would have been foodstuffs to trade for then, summer-becoming-autumn, to keep against the winter.

Ah well. Next year.

They went to Mont-de-glace. They couldn’t convince most of the traders to go any further, but she and Dovachay were accompanied to Sulfur Point by two others. They bought enough salts to fill the boats, and two large baskets of obsidian. When they got back to the Wilds she and Dovachay decided to do their best, and the four of them carefully navigated the boats up through the Wilds to try Lothering again.

Tanis,

*Chasind traders in barely-spring were a curiosity, but the looks on these people’s faces when we told them we had salt to trade, and alum and lime, were something to see. I think this will go well.*

That first year, they made mistakes. The next year, they knew what order to trade in- Chasind, Mont-de-glace, Sulfur Point, Lothering- and turned a profit that left Dovachay smiling happily through the winter whenever he looked at his little chest of coins, and bought Nehna a small hoard of cinnamon. She boiled water and Chasind honey that winter, added a pinch of the cinnamon, and had her first cup of *ise’haurasha* in twenty-five years. It wasn’t very good, or strong, but it was something.

Twenty-five years, since she’d done this. Thirty, next year, since she’d left her clan. She’d lived longer away from the Dalish than with them.

The third year-

It didn’t start then. They saw the signs of it coming, before, even though they didn’t know what it was. Coming back from Lothering the autumn previously, laden with flour and metal, their channel-checker had come racing back.

“Alamarri knights!”

They’d pulled the boats into a side channel, trying to hide them. Nehna and Dovachay had crept forward with the channel-checker to see what the knights were doing.

“Those aren’t Templars,” Nehna had told Dovachay quietly, in their hiding place. “The Chantry doesn’t take elves. They aren’t from Redcliffe either. I don’t know who they are. No one gives city
elves armor and weapons.”

It had been hard to tell who they were, and what they’d been doing. Nehna hadn’t thought that they were bandits, because there had been a uniform—blue, white, and steel-silver. Given, she hadn’t had much experience with mercenaries, but from what she knew, mercenaries didn’t tend to have much in the way of uniforms, and the ones that did picked more war-appropriate colors, dark ones that didn’t show stains well. The strange armed men had been fouling their colors with the swamp water and sticking mud, white staining dirty black-gray and the blue darkening to something indeterminate. And the bright steel had been almost a beacon, so bright in the sun. Brighter than anything the Chasind would ever use.

“Drylanders,” Dovachay had muttered, exasperatedly, as they’d watched one of the heavily-armed warriors slip and yell as the swamp sucked at his weight, his fellows rushing to help him. “We go around.”

It had taken an extra day, but they’d made it back to their original course south, returning to the sea. The detour had taken them past a hunting group in an odd place, also driven out of their way by the armed strangers. Hachatshir had been in it, and waved them down to give them advice on where to avoid.

“And be careful when you land,” he’d told them. “The Devas say there’s something wrong with the ground.”

Everyone had looked around nervously.

“Did the swamp freeze through?” Dovachay had asked. “When I was young it did that by the sea. People were falling down holes everywhere. Some people died when the water rushed in after.”

“Not ice,” Hachatshir had told them. “They don’t know. But the ground sounds wrong. It shifts wrong. The water doesn’t flow like it should. And people are disappearing where the drylanders are.”

“We’ll be careful,” Nehna had promised for the trade expedition.

But they’d made it back to the tree-town without issue, and forgotten about it over the winter. They put the boats out and set sail a couple of days before the floods were likely to come. They put into Mont-de-glace with Wilds wool, dried meat, pottery, baskets, furs, and the detritus from the previous year’s spring flood that no one had used yet. They left for Sulfur Point with gold, food, and what they hadn’t sold in Mont-de-glace, and traded it for salt, alum, lime, obsidian, and mineral powders that the craftsmen and merchants in Lothering had asked if they could acquire.

They returned to Mont-de-glace to find Deva Stralchaka and the tree-town camped on the shoreline. The Chasind all rushed off the boats and over the docks. Nehna tied up, and got the story later, once the traders had stopped yelling in the camp.

The spring floods had brought dozens of corpses down from the north. Avvari, Chasind, and Fereldan—peasants and soldiers and knights—all in greater numbers than before.

And something else. Corpses that looked almost human, until you looked at their faces, or saw their eyes, or, as one Chasind had, found one half-drowned but not yet dead.

“It tore him apart,” Deva Stralchaka told her. “And then the women who killed it, their blood burned, and they turned into it. The floodwater poisoned more, and the trees and the ground. We gathered our things and burned it behind us.”
Nehna had a moment of panic, when she said that, but Deva Stralchaka brought her to the bags she’d packed of the traders’ things and there, wrapped around everything else to save space, were Adan and Satheraan’s cloths.

It had been a long time since she’d kept a home in Mont-de-glace. The room she’d rented when she’d lived with here with Salladin wasn’t available, and neither were any others. She found a small room in an inn, with, with the traders and trappers and sailors, all frozen here, the normal activity of the season halted, thrown by the fled Chasind and scared by the stories they brought.

And the stories just kept coming. The tree-town had only been the first movement. It was the biggest—other Chasind came out of the Wilds through the Frostback Basin, in family groups, or in swamp boats, hugging the coasts in twos and threes.

The Wilds was overrun, they said. The monsters hunted Chasind across the swamps. Traps wouldn’t keep them away, nor leading them into deep waters. The living ones just kept coming, over the dead bodies of the others, or erupted up out of the ground, dragging people down under the swamp muck with them. The Wilds were clogged with corpses, they said. The rot poisoned even the good water, and the monsters’ sickness poisoned everything, even the animals, and the Devas. Devas infected with the sickness turned into demon monsters, turning on the people they’d previously helped and guarded. The ones that still lived were said to have led the Chasind who hadn’t fled south to the east, towards the forests and higher land; or had decided to risk their lives, and give them for their people, traveling the Wilds and burning the swamps and corpses to destroy the sickness, and leave nothing left for it to infect, when the monsters came around again.

No one could give her any news of Salladin. She couldn’t muster an emotion about it, and wasn’t sure she wanted to. This heavy nothing was familiar to her, from the worst days of the Summer Lily.

Avvar came, too, down out of the mountains and up from the basin. The monsters had moved north, out of the Wilds, into the Hinterlands and the central Fereldan plains, pursuing people wherever they fled. They attacked holds, or ambushed raiding and hunting parties, or the bandits driven ahead of the monsters, who preyed on the lowlander refugees, turned on the holds as a better source of loot—leaving them weak and next to defenseless when the monsters came.

In late spring, news arrived in Mont-de-glace from the north, only a few days before the Dlanikik traders from the Sunless Lands sailed in from the south, with stories of the coastal estuaries and tributaries washing corpses out to sea to freeze in the water.

Blight. The King of Ferelden was dead, a regency claimed by his wife’s father, despite the lack of heir. Bandits ran wild, the army and Fereldan’s Grey Wardens destroyed in the first battle at the edge of the Wilds, a month into winter. Fereldan refugees were pouring into the port cities of the Free Marches. In Kirkwall, Cumberland, Jader, Ostwick, Markham, Hercinia, Halamshiral, and Val Chevin, the city guards and the noble’s militar’s had been called out to suppress riots. There would be no ships this year from Highever, or Amaranthine, or Denerim to bring the produce of the great grain fields and grazing pastures of Fereldan’s Bannorn and coastlands to the rest of Thedas.

In Val Royeaux, the Divine had announced a charge to the Templars, commanding them to assist the refugees, and the city guards and militias, in whatever way the Knight-Commanders saw fit. Empress Celene had issued price fixes for Heartlands wheat and rye this season, trying to stave off bread riots in the cities come summer and autumn.

And she’d called for the army. The chevaliers were leading the muster, at Lydes. The Grand Duke de Chalons was expected to begin requisitioning supplies en masse, soon.

“Just a way to make less mouths to feed,” one of the trappers crowded into the inn muttered, close
enough for Nehna to hear. “Gets ’em out of the cities, out onto the plains. Nobody to fight there but people like us, and less to burn.”

Nehna was very glad that Tanis had left Lydes. She wrote a letter to her in Starkhaven, telling her that she’d made it out of the Wilds alive, that she was safe, and that she should send her letters to Mont-de-glace now- but didn’t get a response.

When the Dlanikik arrived, Nehna and Dovachay conferred on the docks, eyeing the Dlanikik’s slabs of dried and smoked meat and pots of fat and oil. They couldn’t sell what they’d bought at Sulfur Point in Lothering; and the Chasind, and Mont-de-glace, needed food.

Nehna spoke to the people she knew in town, and in the two weeks following, they cobbled together a tentative trade alliance- Dovachay and Deva Stralchaka standing for the Chasind, and the Avvar who had joined them; the most senior koch boat captain, Olnara, for Mont-de-glace; and Nehna as the mediator.

The Chasind traders and seven of the koch boats of Mont-de-glace followed the Dlanikik south, at first along the coast along the Frostback Basin but tacking further and further away from the shore as they approached the Wilds.

The last glimpse of land they had for a month were the swamps, grey with snow muddied by ash and soot, the burnt trunks of trees standing in black, broken columns against the gray sky.

They relied on the Dlanikik to guide them, out in the open water. The nights were bitterly cold, making the wood of the koch boats creak and metal unsafe to touch with bare skin, but beautifully clear. The Dlanikik knew the right stars to navigate by, and the boats kept the lamps dim to save people’s night vision, hanging heavy ships’ bells on the decks and carving high wood whistles for the lookouts.

Two weeks after passing into open ocean, in the bright glare of the noon sun, the ocean broke around a great dark mass of-

“Those can’t be fish,” Olnara whispered, voice full of dread.

There were- ten, twenty, thirty? More? Less? It was impossible to tell, outlines confused by the sleek black and white masses when the arced above the water and any hope of accurate counting lost completely whenever they slid back below the water’s surface.

The Dlanikik were turning aside. The koch boats did the same, more slowly, and came within a few boat lengths of the… creatures. They were as long as the boats themselves.

Something bumped the hull of the boat Nehna and Olnara were on. Someone in the crew shrieked as the boat rocked, side to side, swaying to an angle that made footing precarious.

One of the creatures surfaced mere feet off the side of the koch boat, dipped underneath the water, and came up again, rising almost it’s full length into the air, showing off the white patches on its underbelly. It landed in a massive slash of freezing water. Everyone scrambled to get out of the way. No one quite did, and by the time the boat had steadied, one the creatures- the same one?- was off on the other side of the boat, watching them, mouth open in a caricature of a smile.

Its teeth were at least as long as Nehna’s fingers.

Fish were not supposed to have teeth.

The head Dlanikik boat dropped back to sail next to them for a few minutes, once the koch boats had
fully turned and left the group of creatures behind. They learned the name for them- ‘killer whales’.

“A ‘whale’?” Olnara asked the Dlanikik.

“Very big fish.”

“There fish were plenty big already!”

“They get bigger.”

That was not news that you could hide, and the Chasind and the koch boat crews grew uneasy-increasingly so, as the week wore on, and the Dlanikik named ‘killer seals’, ‘toothed seals’, ‘horned whales’, and ‘snow bears’ for them, directing the boats away from each different creature with warnings of mortal peril.

“Everything is trying to kill us,” Dovachay moaned quietly, one night. “The weather is trying to kill us. The sea is trying to kill us. The fish are trying to kill us. And-”

It was silent. You got patches of magical fire in the Wilds, sometimes, if you went far enough east towards the Brecilian; and you always had to watch for spirit lights, but those had a very faint sound to them.

These didn’t. The green light bloomed across the stars, in great shimmering paths, reflecting on the dark nighttime sea.

“The sky is breaking,” Dovachay whispered hoarsely, staring up at the light in terror, along with the rest of the Chasind and the crew.

Nehna went to her knees on the deck and bent forward, touching her vallas’lin to the backs of her gloved hands, resting against the freezing wood.

There was Fadefire dancing against the stars, turning the world green and gray, white and black. This was a land of death, yes- and Falon’din had left his mark on it. They would not be without friends, or a guide.

A few days later they reached ice. They worriedly counted the days, and still came up with a summer month. Things didn’t freeze in summer-

“This water always has ice,” Katay told them. He was head of the Dlanikik traders. “This is good. Summer ice is weaker. You have large, strong boats. You will break the ice, and the ice will not break you.”

The koch boats went up against this ice cautiously, Nehna and the crews jumping off onto the slabs of the massive ice floes to check their thicknesses. They proceeded slowly, adjusting their course often to keep away from the biggest floes, picking their way east, following the Dlanikik.

They sighted land again a few days later, a distant, gray mass far away on the horizon, jagged with rocks. The Dlanikik set a course for the largest one, huge even from a distance, but round and smooth from being on the tideline.

They got closer, and closer. The rock got bigger, and bigger.

And suddenly it wasn’t a rock any longer. It was gray, yes, like the rocks, but by the time they were
close enough to see the Dlanikik town, it was clear that there were people climbing on it, cutting strips off of it, as though it were-

“Creators,” Nehna realized. “That’s a whale, isn’t it?”

It dwarfed the koch boats, easily four or five times their size. The Dlanikik were carving huge slabs of meat off it, slicing away the fat to place in large pots, skinning the animal, breaking apart the skeleton. It was an entire production, up and down the rocky beach, that seemed to be taking the time of everyone in town.

Activity slowed significantly as the Dlanikik traders beached their light boats and the koch boats tried to find a good place to set anchor and get to shore. By the time they’d managed it their presence had been explained, and they were welcomed to the town, escorted up to the houses in a large group and invited to dinner.

The Dlanikik were swathed in furs and thick cloth, layer upon layer, and the only thing that any of them had really been able to tell, through all that, had been relative size. The Dlanikik in the town were a wildly mixed bunch, in build and height, but when they unwound their scarves and shucked their outer layers and hoods-

“Qunari!” Nehna blurted, shocked by the sight of molded and decorated horns.

She was a woman with backwards-sweeping horns and a long tumble of thick, curling brown hair, and laughed at the exclamation. Familiar delicate gold lacework shimmered, engraved into her horns, and the patterns beaded onto her undercoat-

“Hail, sister!” she was greeted, in Sheletk. “Be welcome and in peace, with sea and stars.”

“Since when do Qunari wear Elgar’nan’s sun?” Nehna demanded, staring pointedly at the intricate beaded pattern across her chest. It was made from a combination of rounded, squared, and faceted beads, gold and amber and other orange and gold stones she had no name for, but the pattern was unmistakable. The El’ven had drawn Elgar’nan’s sun such since the Tevinter enslavement, if not long before that.

“Those who follow the Qun left us a long time ago. I am a ghosith from Feana.”

Nehna turned and glared at Katay and the Dlanikik traders, who had, for as long as anyone had known, brought goods from the Feana along with their own. Up until a few seconds ago, Mont-de-glacé had had the reasonable assumption that the Feana were another one of the strange human groups from the far south.

Katay blinked at her, and shrugged.

“Some come and stay,” he said. “Some go back. They are Dlanikik when they stay. But only Kossik-”

He pointed at the ghosith.

“-and Feakik-”

He reached up and tugged Nehna’s ear. She slapped his hand away, utterly affronted, and threw her hood back up.

“-can come and go, Shamaekik-”
He made a circling gesture with his hand—humans?

“-must stay here, and Talak’lik must stay there.”

“‘Talak’lik?’” Olnara asked.

“The mountains,” the ghosith told them. “In Feana they still walk, and they speak with a thousand voices and write with two thousand hands.”

“Right,” Olnara said.

“‘Still?’” Nehna said. “They never have.”

The ghosith hummed sadly, and tilting her head slightly from side to side.

“Irtun ghabriannas, taena gathe subelas raza,” she said. It had the cadence of a set phrase, but the sound of it-

“There are elves in Feana?” Nehna asked. “Dalish? I hadn’t thought any would come this far south.”

“I know no Dalish,” the ghosith said. “Only Feasaan, like myself.”

“You said you were ghosith.”

“When I am home, I am Feasaan, like everyone else in Feana,” the other woman explained, with an air of calm patience that Nehna found very grating on her nerves. “When I am here, I am Dlanikik ghosith.”

“Where you are doesn’t change who you are,” Nehna said. “Dalish. Elves of the Dales, like—”

She indicated her vallas’lin.

“We are Feasain zuhar,” the ghosith told her. “‘Searchers of the gold’.”

“‘Zuhar’,” Nehna pressed. “Su haur- that’s El’vhen, that’s ‘for gold’. Esayelanen su haur. You’re speaking El’vhen, or it was El’vhen once—”

“‘Althenna’,” she was interrupted. “‘Our people’. That’s an old, old word, and no name for a language. Do you call everything else ‘Es’vhen’?”

She said it oddly, the ‘vh’ more of an ‘f’.

“No, that would be ridiculous,” Nehna told her. “‘Their people’- that doesn’t even make sense. Whose people?”

The ghosith shrugged. The Dlanikik were working around them now, putting a dinner feast together, and leaving them to argue.

“It’s simply logic;” she said. “If your language and your people are ‘our’, then everyone else is not. The east has not had a good history with this, from what little we know.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t be judging,” Nehna told her. “If you know so little.”

“And mayhap you should not be, either.”

Nehna stayed well away from her for the rest of the night, observing the rest of the Dlanikik around
the fires. There were humans here, plenty- but there was obvious elven blood here, and Qunari as well, even if the ghosith was the only true one in the town.

The next morning, they started trading. The town agreed to share some of the whale meat, and was more than happy to take the salts and metals they’d brought from Mont-de-glace in exchange for going out to find more meat for the northerners.

The ghosith hung back for most of the morning, watching, but came up to Nehna once Olnara and Dovachay were deep in conversation with the Dlanikik about just how much meat they’d need and how much they could take back. She had a long garment folded over her arm, and shook it out in front of Nehna to reveal it as a long, wrapped overtunic. It was a rich dark blue, with gold and purple beading. There was a sort of sash or wrap that went with it, yards long, woven of the same dark blue and purple in multiple layers, threads twining around and away from each other to make subtle, near-black stripes in the fabric.

Nehna crossed her arms.

“It’s nice,” she said curtly.

“A present,” the ghosith told her. “Because we did not start well. I am Annika. Would you give an offering to our better relations?”

“Nehna,” Nehna told her. “Everything I brought to trade I have to give for food.”

“And there is nothing you can do?” Annika asked. “No arts you can make, no knowledge you can share? I would know more of our cousins here in the west, to bring home, when I go.”

Nehna thought about the map of Thedas for a moment, and gauged how far they’d traveled in the koch boats.

“There’s not a lot of anywhere for this to be ‘the west’ of,” she said.

Annika pointed east, out along the snow.

“The sea freezes on the other side of the land, as well,” she told her. “When you come in the right season, following the dragons, you can walk out of Feana. It is better than sailing. When you walk, you can go slowly, and adjust.”

“Dragons?” Nehna asked.

Annika smiled, and refolded the tunic and sash, handing it to Nehna.

“Come with the hunters to find your meat,” she told her. “And we’ll show you. Wear light colors.”

Nehna found that she didn’t have a lot of light anything. The best she had was her armor, that she was wearing more for the protection the old, faded leather offered against the cold than any blades. She did her best.

Annika still threw a white fur cloak over her when she showed up to accompany the Dlanikik expedition. It was too long, and dragged in the snow. The ghosith waved her objections away once she voiced them, saying it wouldn’t matter. They wouldn’t be walking.

Surely it was too cold to have horses-

White on white, gliding silently, leaving only light prints, all outlines lost against the snow-
Nehna grabbed the fur of the cloak to reassure herself. It was the wrong texture for a halla hide, even with the evidence of these furry, shaggy halla in front of her, taller and thicker than the ones she was used to, with heavier antlers. They clustered around her, snuffling at her hair and clothes in interest, and Nehna tried to pet them all at once as they gently butted each other out of the way for a chance to get under her hands.

“Hello, hello,” she whispered to them. “We’re all far from home, aren’t we? It’s so good to see you, lethal’lenala. Look at all of you, so big and strong!”

The biggest stag of the group tossed his head and snorted, breath misting white in the air, pleased at the compliment.

The halla drifted away slowly, after that, pairing up with Dlanikik to let the humans ride them out into the snow fields. Only the big stag stayed by her side.

Annika smiled ruefully when he snorted at her, when she approached him, and pressed close against Nehna.

“He has always taken me,” she told Nehna, and mounted the second-largest halla. “I suppose he likes you better, cousin.”

They rode out into the snow, Annika leading, and eventually reached a new strip of coast. They rode along the shore ridge, not quite on the rocks but also not entirely on the snow, until the halla stopped, ears swiveling up and mouths open, scenting and tasting the air. Nehna’s stag stomped a few times, dancing in place. She stroked his thick ruff of fur and leaned over his neck, to hug him-

And he went flying off, tailflagging up, as soon as she’d gotten a firm grip around his neck. She hung on as he bounded away, spraying snow and stinging her face and eyes with tiny flecks of kicked-up ice. Nehna buried her face in his fur and breathed the warm, musky scent of him.

They stopped some minutes later, on a high part of the ridge, overlooking a dragon.

She was a sturdy, stocky creature, who looked too heavy to possibly be able to fly on her wings. Her wedge-shaped face, oddly snakelike in something so large, was buried in the ribcage of a whale even larger than the one on the beach by the village. When she pulled away, revealing two more, untouched corpses behind her, her jaw was smeared with blood and gore, a brighter red than the broad stripes running along her body. She was blue-gray and green and charcoal black and white otherwise. Her short spikes reminded Nehna of the ice floes more than anything, and when the sun shone through her partially-stretched wings, the membrane turned the same bright blue-green as the largest chunks of sea ice, on the warmest winter days, when the snow had sloughed off and the frost had yet to reform over the ice that never melted.

The dragon’s eyes were that same blue-green, and they came very, very close as she raised her head to the level of the ridge, and shone with their own light under the dark shadows of her heavy brow ridge.

The halla stag she rode stood firm and proud, and bellowed out the long, low wail of halla calling to each other.

The dragon didn’t even have to roar back, only breath in their direction. It came as a blast of heated, blood-thick air with an after edge of freeze. She was so close, and the teeth were so large-

Annika rode up next to her and called something, in a musical toned tongue that rolled and rose and
fell, and the *sounds* were right, she could *almost* hear-

It ended.

The dragon breathed out, again. It rolled this time, with a toned edge, deep and- surely not. *Surely not.*

Annika raised her hands and Fadefire spread out around them, tracing patterns across the snow and through the air, swooping into curves and loops.

A third breath from the dragon, this time roiling with the bright blue of ice magic and flashes of answering Fadefire. It was blowing towards them but neither Annika nor the halla were *moving,* it was going to-

It washed over them, cool but not cold. Annika’s Fadefire lines flared as the magic mixed and

*Small ones, little spirits. Those ones have crossed, those ones know home*

*[floating cities trees so tall colors so bright water and stone flow and stay as they will magic heavy in the not-air]*

*that one has never seen the world as it is*

*[mountains move spheres of space brush and the world wavers which will to follow the people shapes changing as thoughts and feelings come]*

*Small ones need food. Come, little sisters, I will share.*

the dragon beat her wings once, blasting air over them. Nehna had to shut her eyes, still reeling, and only opened them again as the dragon dropped back down, just for a moment, and snatched the other two whales up in her talons, gliding off with them in the direction Nehna’s stag had taken her.

“Come!” Annika said, her and her halla wheeling and galloping off after the dragon. The stag she rode moved without any more prompting and she clung to fistfuls of his ruff, legs clamped too tightly to his sides.

They came to a line of stones in the ground, of uneven heights but all smoothed and low enough for the halla to jump over. They were black, and covered in crystal clear ice, and sparkled with more Fadefire, both deep within the stone and skittering in sparks over the ice. The halla pulled up just on this side of the wall, and they watched the mounted Dlanikik, who hadn’t followed them, yell and try to control and calm their panicking halla as the dragon passed overhead, angling in low to deposit the whales back on the shoreline. The rock wall continued out into the ocean, Nehna saw, even out past the point where anyone could have swum out to place them, rising in tall black spires over the waves, separated by distances of half a mile or more.

Annika called more Fadefire and the dragon wheeled, honing in on the green light. She flew low enough to raise a sheet of snow with her passage, and groaned- quietly, for a dragon- finally answering the halla’s earlier bellow as she flew off away, back to her whale corpse.

The halla jumped the rocks, and helped herd their fellows back into order.

“What was *that?*” Nehna demanded of Annika, after they’d returned to the town. The halla had been hitched to large sledges and most of the Dlanikik and all of the other Chasind traders and koch boat crews from Mont-de-glace had gone with the halla, trooping out on foot across the snow to go strip
the whale carcasses.

“We crossed the furthest border of Feana,” Annika told her. “And asked for a gift.”

“Dragons are animals!”

“When they’re here in Delaina, yes,” Annika said. “Which is why I called the magic. She would follow it back, and not be lost. She was trusting me.”

“The- when you called the Fadefire, and the dragon-”

It hadn’t been hearing. It hadn’t been experiencing. It had just been there, in her head.

Annika’s expression went a little sad, soft around the eyes.

“This,” she said, indicating their surroundings- the almost-deserted village and the snow outside, the two halla they’d rode earlier resting next to Annika’s fire, the trappings of her house itself. “Is not how things are supposed to be. There is not meant to be magic and not, waking and dreaming, physical and not. It is all one. The break is an illusion; but too real at the same time.”

“It can’t be both,” Nehna said.

“It’s the nature of the problem that it is,” Annika said. “Ten thousand eight hundred and fifty-three years ago, the world ended. Everything sundered, shattered. Millions died, trapped with little or no magic, either when their physical forms gave out or when the cities fell. Thousands of others went mad, suddenly faced with a mortal life and a world that would not respond to their thoughts, or trapped with no stability, cutting out their own ability to feel to lessen the chaos until they were pared down to next to nothing, no longer remember a time when they had been anything different and going hunting for what they had thrown away.”

“The People began to die before Arlathan fell,” Nehna disagreed. “And that was only a thousand and nine hundred and five years ago.”

“It was ten thousand eight hundred and fifty-three years ago,” Annika maintained. “We have spent our efforts to recover the time we lost, as we weakened the illusion. We have never been able to fully break it, but we have been able to thin it. It fights us. The rock line is the furthest we have been able to push before the resistance of the magic that put it in place becomes too strong even for us. But the further east you go- the more the world is like what it should be. Even this close to the border-”

Her hands flexed, curled.

“It still hurts,” she said quietly. “I can go no further away. Some days it hurts too much to move.”

Nehna was hit by a blinding memory, of the early days of her sickness in Rialto, and pushed it away.

“Those days, I feel I am going mad. They say that the longer you stay, the easier it becomes, but still. I think I may not do this much longer. I understand now why so few stay here.”

Nehna turned over what Annika had said in her mind, picking it apart, because it was- it was mad, it was ludicrous!

But the dragon. And the halla had stood, unafraid. And the Fadefire.

“You’re a spirit,” she finally said.

“So are you,” Annika told you. “You just don’t know what you’re missing.”
They returned to Mont-de-glace at the start of autumn, holds heavy with dried and smoked whale meat, rendered whale and seal fat, and ivory to trade. The boats sat so low in the water that they didn’t fit properly on the docks.

The halla stag from the Dlanikik village, who’d only let Nehna near him after that first day and had somehow gotten onto one of the koch boats and staunchly refused to budge, vaulted gracefully off the deck and onto the docks.

“Careful, Eirlin!” she called after him.

Olnara shook her head, even though she was familiar by now with Nehna and Eirlin’s relationship.

“I never quite believed the stories about Dalish and halla,” she told her, not for the first time on this trip. “But hearing you talk to him…”

“We’d better unload,” Nehna said. “Can’t you feel the air? The boats will freeze in the sea in another few days if we don’t get them out.”

True to her prediction, the brief Sundered Sea autumn ended later that week, in a cold snap that iced the shore out past the docks and froze the road north out of town.

The citizens of Mont-de-glace, and the refugee Chasind, were not unhappy about this. They chevaliers had come south while the koch boats had been gone and stripped the both their town and Sulfur Point of resources, carting it all off up north for the army and the Blight that was sure to soon spill out of Ferelden and overrun the Heartlands.

No one had gotten paid for their goods. The whale meat and what winter ice fishing could be accomplished were what saw them through the winter. Nehna spent the season ensconced in the inn, venturing outside to treat her share of the ivory, softening it for molding and carving. By the time the captains declared that it was time to put the koch boats back out, she’d carved most of it. Some she planned on selling. Some of it she’d made into decorations for her, beads and pendants and bangles, mostly to keep her skills up. More of it she’d used for fittings for a tack set for Eirlin.

The rest she’d carved into a gift for Annika, to repay her for the tunic. When the Dlanikik came north to check on them, she handed off the carving- a series of jointed panels representing the most important points of the history of the El’vhen in Thedas that she’d shared with the Feasaan the summer before.

The koch boats went out to Sulfur Point to see how they’d fared. They reported that they’d found the houses almost entirely deserted, some in shambles from being scavenged for wood, some burned, almost certainly as makeshift pyres. Some former residents had trickled back in by the time the boats had arrived- they’d gone and spent the lean, starving winter in the hot springs, doing their best to eke out the season in the warmth.

Time would only tell how many would manage to come back, before the next winter.

Some weeks later the road unfroze. Mont-de-glace and the Chasind got nervous, the energy running in an undercurrent through the settlement, even though everyone pretended not to be. It had been months since their last bit of news. Who knew how far the Blight had gotten, in the milder northern snows? Their only visitors this year might be darkspawn, not merchants.

But it was merchants who came. The first of the usual early season trappers and traders brought the news that the Blight in Ferelden had been ended, in just over a year, and that it had never even touched Orlais. Ferelden had a new Queen, and though everyone was expecting grain shortages still,
the immediate danger had passed.

Mont-de-glace had a party. When summer truly came, Dovachay and some of the other Chasind cautiously went sailing off to scout the Wilds. They returned with the news that the darkspawn did indeed appear to be gone. They’d traveled as far north as the edge of the Hinterlands, and found some others of their people, but no monsters.

“I heard news, though,” Dovachay told her. “Lothering was destroyed.”

Nehna wrote another letter to Tanis in Starkhaven. By the time the winter came again, there was still no reply.

Now she knew how Tanis had felt, not knowing whether she’d been alive or dead, for all the years she’d been out of contact.

Tanis had better be all right. She had to be safe, and employed, and well. Nehna wasn’t sure what she’d do, if she found out otherwise.

The next spring, a full year after the Blight had ended, the Chasind moved back to the Wilds. Nehna came along, with Eirlin tacked out in his new leather saddle and hackamore and fine wool saddle pad. She’d spent all winter working the leather, dyeing it and her armor the same white to match his fur, then embroidering it all in Ghilan’nain’s black and gold. She’d even managed to make tassels out of the extra thread for his cheek pieces, and mounted them on the ivory fastenings. Fully decked out on the docks, he cut a fine figure that made the Orlesian merchants stare covetously, deterred only by Nehna’s clearly-displayed knives, arrows, and spear. None of those shems got to touch her halla.

She left Deva Stralchaka and Dovachay to rebuild the tree-town, and set out on Eirlin north, and east. She questioned the Chasind she came across about the Devas.

Halfway through autumn, after a long and wandering summer, she came to a Chasind village. It was clearly new, the wood not yet entirely weathered to dark complimentary tones of the swamp the village stood in, only half a day’s walk from the Brecilian. The Chasind stared at her, atop Eirlin, but no one stopped her.

Their Deva was an elf, after all. If another elf wanted to speak with her, why not?

Nehna rode through the town and to the Deva’s house, dismounted, and knocked on the door.

“How are you?” she asked, when her daughter opened the door.

They stood there a long few minutes in silence- Salladin re-composing herself from an initial expression of shock and settling into a familiar, half-there blank look, Nehna waiting for an answer to her question.

“You didn’t come here to make sure I was all right,” Salladin finally said. “You came here to make yourself feel better.”

Eirlin nudged the back of her head, and Nehna reached up to put a hand on his suede-soft nose. His fur here was stained some, simply by the quality of the swamp water and the reality of the fact that swamp muck would get everywhere. He’d enjoy a good bath, either by the sea when they returned, or in the Hinterlands, if she decided to stop there. When winter set in, she’d re-bleach everything to its former white state. She’d discovered she quite liked the look.

“Of course I came here to-”
“No,” Salladin cut her off. “I won’t be lied to. And you should stop lying to yourself. If you were here for me, you would have come when the Blight started, or last year- not now, two years after it started! You’re just here to make yourself feel better!”

“Of course I am,” Nehna told her. “Knowing you’re all right-”

“Has never mattered to you the way it should! So- fine, you don’t love me! I don’t love all the people I take care of and I do it anyway; but you- you never cared! You kept me alive but you stayed, and-”

She was crying. Nehna reached out but Salladin slammed her fists and forearms together in a guard position, and the shockwave forced Nehna back a step.

“If you’d cared about me you would have left years ago!” Salladin yelled at her. “You would have left me with the Dalish instead of dragging us across the countryside for a whole two seasons! You would have left me with the Devas and walked away! You wouldn’t be here! You left Damien, and he’s better off for it, I read your letters! He’s happy! He doesn’t care that you don’t love him! Because you left him and let him have a real mother instead of hanging around reminding him that it’s- Deva Anatzavoy was a better mother than you’ve ever been! I wish you’d left years ago!”

“I couldn’t! You’re my-”

“And why not?” Salladin screamed at her. “You barely told the story but you left Damien with less! I had a place to live! I had someone who could take care of me! I had a community who welcomed me! This was all about you, it’s always been about you! Have you ever loved anyone in your life?”

Adan, Satheraan-

“They’re dead!”

Oh. She’d said their names out loud.

“They’re dead! They’ve been dead since before I was born! They’re dead and I’m the one who’s here! Get over it!”

Get-

Get over-

What?

No!

“I am not going to ‘get over it’!” Nehna yelled back at her. “The things that happened- I can’t!”

“What ‘things’? There’s nothing that justifies this! It’s been thirty years!”

“They tortured him to death in front of me!”

“So?” Salladin screeched. “Do you know what I’ve seen? What the darkspawn did? The things that happened to the people they caught- to the other Devas? To the mothers? To the older girls? The things we can’t tell their men? Do you have any idea how many people I watched die! How many people were dragged under and drowned on swamp mud! What it was like to be scared to even just stand there! But I know better than to take it out on my own child.”

“What?” Nehna said, all her focus narrowing in on that. A child- a grandchild-
Salladin’s eyes flamed, behind the tears, and she dropped one hand protectively to her gut.

Nehna looked at her, really, now. Her brown hair was pulled back, falling out of its bun. Her hazel eyes, looking down at her, were going red from the crying, her cheeks already that color from the exertion of yelling. She could hear Salladin’s heavy breathing, and see the rise and fall of her chest under her coat and layers of shirts and tunics.

Even with all that cloth, she couldn’t be that far along in her pregnancy yet.

“You will stay away from him!” Salladin hissed at her. “I don’t trust you around me, and Void take you if you even think about trying to be around him! I won’t let you hurt him!”

“I wouldn’t-”

“I’ll believe that you didn’t want to hurt me,” Salladin cut her off. “But you did. If you can’t love me you won’t love him, and I don’t want you here. Go find that woman. Go find Damien. Or go back to Antiva. Anywhere but here. I won’t be second to a child who- who caught a fever and died or whatever it was! Just go, and don’t come back unless you can look at me and truly say you love me!”

She slammed the door in Nehna’s face.

Nehna put a hand on Eirlin’s shoulder, turned, and walked away.

She cut north, to avoid riding back through the thickest areas of the swamp during winter, and came to regret her decision very quickly. After two and a half weeks of travel, she was back in the area where Deva Anatzavoy’s town had been, but-

Nehna had known that there were old Tevene ruins on the edge of the Wilds. It had been too close to the witches the Chasind had always warned each other of, so she hadn’t seen them before, but these buildings were undoubtedly of Tevene construction.

Even with the founding of the Dales partially painted thirty feet high on the side of a tower.

Eirlin huffed and shifted, discomforted by her tenseness, and her grip on his reins. She’d stopped them, and they’d been standing here for she didn’t even know how long now, staring.

The breeze blew towards them and Eirlin’s nostrils flared to catch the scent of the thousands-strong halla herd milling about at the bottom of the-

Of the city.

This was a Dalish city. Their third city. She could see the banners flapping, even if she was too far away to see any details, and there were aravels, clustering down the sides of the slopes up to the old fortress fortifications. The fortress buildings themselves were being fixed up, patched with mismatched stones, and she could see where the biggest construction work had left off for the winter. There were distant flashes of magic as the Keepers and mages worked on projects, and there were Dalish tending the halla herd, setting out grass and grain bales they must have traded with someone for, and there was a new clan that was settling in, setting up temporary log walls around their encampment-


Speaking El’vhen.
“I am not saying that I am not enjoying myself, as much as that is possible given the situation. It is good practice in speaking for both of us and there are certainly worse places to spend the winter, as I am sure you can remember. But the longer we are here and not out there and looking for him, the more likely it is that Ther—”

She’d turned Eirlin and they were rushing down the other side of the rise, fleeing the voices and the threat of judging eyes, letting the wind of their passing snatch the too-familiar words away. They charged back into the swamps, Eirlin bounding from islet to islet with every bit of his inherent speed and grace, keeping his hooves clear of the swamp water.

They reached firmer ground, a stretch of land reasonable for settlement. Eirlin paused to catch his breath and Nehna found hers hitching, catching, shuddering and shallow. She tumbled out of the saddle, catching herself on her hands against the moist, springy ground when she stumbled, her entire body heaving in dry sobs, throat sore and aching from tears that wouldn’t come.

A city, a home- the People behind walls again and she was an exile.

She was unwelcome and denied.

She’d left her clan, failed her children-

Nehna caught up against a tree and pressed on her eyes with her fingertips, trying to force the tears to come. She’d seen a miracle not ten minutes ago, an impossible thing, centuries of prayers and hopes and dreams of the Dalish made real and she couldn’t even shed a tear, one tear for their happiness? For their victory? For their safety, for however long they could hold onto it this time?

The People had a home and would live as one family again and she had none. She was stripped of her name and had no clan. Satharaan and Adan were decades dead. Tanis and Damien had disappeared into the Free Marches, with no word in over two years. Salladin had banished her.

Nehna didn’t cry. She couldn’t cry. She screamed into her hands, and screamed and screamed until her throat was raw and every little noise, even breathing, burned.

What was this? What was this? She had somewhere she liked being, she knew she did; what did this matter? She’d lived away from the Dalish almost twice as long as she’d lived with them-

Eirlin nudged her between her shoulder blades, snuffling and lipping worriedly at her clothes. She reached up and pulled his head down over her shoulder, hugging him close.

She had one thing, still, one bit of validation. The halla would come to her.

It was something to hold on to. She’d given her Oath to Ghilan’nain- and maybe she’d betrayed it or maybe she hadn’t, maybe she deserved this exile or maybe she didn’t- and no matter what else, the goddess’s children would come to her.

She had that much, at least.

When she got back to Mont-de-glace, at the end of the season, after a slow slog through the swamps, there was a letter from Tanis waiting for her.

My dearest Nehna,

Curses and damnation upon all merchants! The next one I see I may strangle with one of Messere Arhuis’ sashes!
The letter continued on like that, describing as best she knew the fate of Nehna’s letters for the past few years- they’d made their way into the hands of a Marcher merchant who’d simply held onto them, presumably for purposes of future leverage, as these letters and a number of other papers had been recovered when the Duke of Wycome had seized the man’s possessions when he’d tried to blackmail one of the man’s bastards. The letter addresses to the Anhuis’ or the household had been handed over to their banking branch in Ansburg, a passel of them had been mistakenly forwarded to the young Dame Anhuis’ family in Antiva, and then they had finally made it to Starkhaven.

We are well, Nehna, and I am much better for finally hearing from you. Dame Anhuis has been surprisingly friendly- she is of the Mondomarzi family, out of Salle, and she is very young, about Damien’s age. When she found out that my worry over the news of the Blight was because I had someone I cared for in Ferelden she was very sympathetic and offered her help. Her older sister married into Ferelden nobility, the Teyrn of Highevers, and she was confident that someone would be able to find word of you. But her sister was lost in treachery. We grieved together, and she cried with me in joy when your letters arrived.

She is a good woman, if a bit more optimistic than sense would dictate. She has just had her first child, a son, named Niels, and it is a happy occasion all around.

Please, Nehna, your last letter was over a year ago and there was barely anything in it- how are you? Have you heard news of Salladin? We’ve heard in the Marches that the Queen of Ferelden gave the Dalish lands in the south, in the Wilds. Have you gone back to them?

Nehna sat frozen with indecision for a long while. Salladin, the city- it was too much.

She wrote to Tanis about her voyage south instead, drawing pictures of the whales from memory and describing the dragon, and the snow halla. She went outside and sketched Eirlin, who obligingly posed to show off his best features, and described about the tack she’d made for him. She talked about the long winter they’d spent, and the new tree-town, and the rebuilding she’d heard had been going on in Sulfur Point.

In the end, she did talk about Salladin and the Dalish.

I found her, she told Tanis. She knows I don’t love her and wants nothing to do with me. She’s pregnant with a son I’ll never meet. I saw the city. It wasn’t worth trying to talk to any of them. I’m an exile. They’ll never take me back. I’m not going back.

That was a sad way to end a letter. She could imagine Tanis sitting in some fancy apartment with her banker’s lady, coming to this point and crying.

Tanis shouldn’t cry. She could do that much.

The Chasind have had trade with the Dalish in Ferelden for generations. Small scale, mostly. But I know what the Crafters will need, and the Keepers. In the spring, it might be worth it to establish a trade route from Sulfur Point to the Dalish. I think the Avvar might agree to hook in, as well. Some of them stayed with the Chasind here, and made friends. The Dlanikik’s whale ivory could fetch a good price- I made some quality pieces and I don’t even have a real workshop. The Crafters of the clans could make things of real beauty, and if the Chasind can convince them to part with enchanted items, we could command a lot of bartering power with the Dlanikik and along the coast of the Sundered Sea.

Nehna didn’t mention the Feana, even though she thought about it. The Keepers and the Hahren would fall all over themselves rushing south to the Dlanikik if they heard even a whisper of what little Annika had told her, about the east.
The Dalish would love to hear it. There would certainly be those who would trade away everything they had to get even a look at a book from Annika’s people-

But right now this was something she had, that they didn’t. She’d keep it. For now.

Nehna sent a small carved ivory pendant she’d made with Tanis’s letter, and got a reply when the roads opened again. The letter came with two presents- a purse of money, and a gilt bronze pendant in a very familiar style, strung onto a length of blue and green glass beads.

_I got the pendant from one of the Antivan merchants Dame Anhuis shops from_, Tanis had written her. _It’s nothing special that way, just Antivans being less Andrastean than the rest of the world thinks they are. But I consecrated it properly in Iashtivar’s name, in blessed water._

_Stay safe, my love._

Nehna took a block of wood and carved a statue for Iashtivar, and set it up in her room with an offering dish- the same way she had in Rialto, once Tanis had become part of the family.

_Thank you for keeping her safe_, she told Tanis’s goddess, and kept the letters under the plate.

The money she used, as Tanis had instructed, to buy more raw materials to take to the Dalish. There were mining towns in the Gamordan Peaks, iron and copper and tin, good, solid metals. The Chasind and the koch boats went south without her, and by the time they returned to Mont-de-glace Nehna and the small group she’d led had returned from the mountains. She went with the main group over to Sulfur Point and directed the purchase of the mineral salts and alum and lime, in bigger quantities than before.

“Don’t let them undersell you,” she told Dovachay when they stopped over in Mont-de-glace to restock on food and water and let Nehna off. “A lot of them will, if they’re not ones who’ve already established good trade with the Chasind. Try to sell to those ones. The others will just try to cheat you because you’re human.”

“You could come,” Dovachay said.

Nehna looked out at the boats being loaded to go to the tree-town, and then onwards to the city.

“No. I can’t. Don’t- don’t mention me to them, Dovachay. Make sure the others don’t, either. That might hurt you worse than being human. Collaborating with an exile.”

She spent the time while they were gone with her crafts. She took her share of the Dlanikik ivory and carved one of the killer whales for Tanis, dyeing on the black areas so she could have a better picture of what one was like, as a thank-you gift for the money. When that was done, she used the rest of the piece of ivory to make Eirlin, in minute detail, down to taking scraps of fur and leather and reconstructing his tack. It was hard work on the eyes and the hands, but it had been a while since she’d done detail work like this, and it was good practice.

That, she packaged carefully and labeled with Damien’s name.

Dovachay and the traders returned laden with Dalish trade goods- crafted pieces, bows and knives and textiles, and a few enchanted items. Tanis’s next letter came just before the winter snows did, with nothing but praise for the carvings, an account of how pleased Damien was with the little Eirlin- and another purse of money, with a commission attached.

Dame Arhuis had seen the carvings, of course, and thought they were wonderful. Tanis had told her
what little she knew about Dalish crafting, and she wanted an example of her own, please?

It was- well. The Dalish were hardly likely to ever know, and since when did humans ask, much less pay?

She started off the winter with a handful of hair ribbons while she thought about what else to do. She made the ribbons all different colors, and picked or invented decorative designs in the Dalish style- halla horn knotwork, leaves, the strong geometry that had informed the buildings of the Dales- and came to a decision.

Around the solstice she started on the necklace. This was a harder thing, not in skill but in commitment. She’d had a good idea, one that wouldn’t leave her alone, but-

Nehna wrote a note to go with it, in the end.

_The dragon is a symbol of the goddess Mythal, who stands for motherhood, justice, and protection. Her colors are purple, white, and black, and she has a special type of tree, sacred to her, whose leaves I have carved on the beads. I ask that you treat this respectfully. Should it break, and it cannot be fixed, bury it in free ground, not dedicated to some other purpose. If anyone asks about it, please explain it with this:_

She wrote out the story of how Mythal had calmed Elgar’nan, highlighting her role as protector of the children of the earth, the living things, who had almost been destroyed, and placed it in the package with the necklace. It wasn’t a particularly complicated piece- a carved dragon pendant in ivory, stained dark purple, flanked by wooden and ivory beads. The string was mounted, at the far ends of the beads, to a thin copper chain she’d traded for. Hopefully it would stay anchored. She’d never tried something like that before.

Spring came again, and this time Nehna went south to the Dlanikik, leaving Dovachay to go trade most of the Dalish goods to the mining colonies in the Peaks to get their metals. In the Dlanikik town, she showed Annika the Dalish enchanted crafts. Annika looked them over critically and eventually said that there might be some things she could trade for with them, in Feana, if only for the sheer novelty value.

“But perhaps more people will want to come, when they see this,” she admitted. “I hadn’t thought you could do this, in this world.”

Nehna returned north with a promise from Annika that she’d send word home, and have things to add to the trade, eventually. As expected, there was a letter from Tanis waiting in Mont-de-glace when she got back. Dame Arhuis was pleased with her merchandise, and had sent a gratuity in appreciation.

The innkeeper was less pleased.

“You’ve been living here six years,” he told her. “Go get your own place, and stop running your business out of mine!”

The trade was her business, wasn’t it?

Nehna staked out a plot of land, hired some help, and built herself a house. It was ready before her traders had returned from the Dalish. She’d built it big, in two parts- one for living in, with a bedroom and kitchen, and one for work, with an office and storage rooms. They were connected by a workshop, which she’d set up to her specifications.

Dovachay insisted on blessing the house in the Chasind way, which meant building a bonfire and
getting loudly drunk before sloshing the last of the wildwine and sack mead across the threshold. Nehna let him do it, and used the charcoal left over to draw the house for Tanis, the next day.

She labeled the picture ‘home’.

‘9:35 Guardian’ Nehna wrote at the top of the first page of her ledger in the strange transition days between the end of that winter and the start of next spring, and then sat back in her chair to look at it.

9:35. She was fifty-five years old, this year. Fifty-five, and starting her own trade company!

‘13 gold coins, assorted’ was how she began the inventory; and then added under it ‘36 silver coins, assorted’ and ‘217 copper coins, assorted’.

As the year wore on, she added to the list the unliquidated wealth the trade group had in physical items.


From the Dlanikik: Whale meat, smoked and dried. Whale, seal, and fish fats and oils. Carving ivory, from assorted sources. Bone, also from assorted sources. Sealskins and whale leather. Halla milk, to be made into cheeses in the slightly warmer northern weather. Stones, assorted, for various uses. Flint.


I am almost afraid to bring it up, Nehna wrote to Tanis is the summer, after the company went off to the Dalish. But I think we might need to build bigger boats. Mont-de-glace is sure to make noise about it. No one’s forgotten when the Vicomtesse decided to bring a Waking Sea schooner down here. That gave us firewood for a long time. But we know about the rocks and the ice, and so long as it’s as fast as the koch boats- and I would hope that we could get a ship to go faster- it might be doable. Still, I’m imagining what people will have to say about iron-hulled ships. Assuming anyone agrees and we can figure out how to make one that sails properly. Maybe we’ll just make more small boats. We know how to do those.

Tanis sent her some more coin, for the expenses of new boats, and a long length of broad tapestry
ribbon, as wide as three of Nehna’s fingers together.

I’ve been working on this for a long time, Nehna. The Khagti use lap looms, but it’s been years since I was with them. It took some practice to get back into it. But I made this trim ribbon for you. I hear the south is very grey and dull. I thought you could use the color.

It was a weave of very bright blues, from light to dark, with cream and black and green to offset. Nehna thought about her white armor, and the tunic and wrap Annika had given to her. If she could get enough good, thick fur for a big ruffled cloak, and put this on the upper edges- and there might be enough left for decorating Eirlin’s tack some more-

Nehna was sourcing wolf fur from the Avvar and snow bear fur from the Dlanikik, as well as getting reassurances from Annika that yes, next year would be the year her company got goods from the Feana, when she got an unexpected letter from Tanis.

Kirkwall has collapsed. The Templars and the Circle destroyed each other and took the city with them, and there were Qunari, and all anyone has been hearing from the coast for years is how the Fereldan refugees are ruining everyone’s cities, and now all the Marches are getting up in arms about foreigners. Messere Arhuis’ family is from Starkhaven as far back as anyone can remember, but Dame Arhuis and I are Antivan. Damien is Orlesian. Messere Arhuis’ biggest clients for his banking are foreigners. Since the coup against the last Prince of Starkhaven the city has been slowly becoming more and more unrestful. Goran Vael is weak-minded, and there have long been rumors of him being controlled by a family in Kirkwall. But with Kirkwall gone, it is unclear what could happen. Messere Arhuis thinks that the nobles are already plotting behind closed doors, and Dame Arhuis may be young and optimistic but she is from an Antivan merchant house, and not a large one. She knows how to gauge an atmosphere. They are planning on moving to Antiva in the spring.

Antiva.

It will take them all winter to pack up and settle their affairs. Damien and I will stay with them until then. Currently they are planning to make a stop in Ferelden, to see Dame Arhuis’ sister’s widower, for conversation and hopefully some new custom. It will be harder to manage Marcher accounts if they are not in the Marches, but Antivan bankers have the Orlesian nobility, and some of the Antivan merchant houses and nobles, by their purse strings. Ferelden is what Messere and Dame Arhuis have happily called an ‘unclaimed market’. They do make money, after all, with the grain fields and the meat trade, or they did. The Arhuis are taking your descriptions of your activities in the south as well as the slow resurgence of Fereldan natural goods- there is granite and silverite coming out of Amaranthine now, and I swear that Gwaren has been doing nothing but fish fish fish with the amount of pickled and salted swimming things that you can import from Ostwick or Wycome- to mean that Ferelden’s problem is not one of things worth selling, but of resources. Money, particularly. It seems they’re hoping that the Teyrn of Highever will bank with them, and then convince his associates to do so as well.

Quite honestly, Nehna, I am not sure if they really believe that there may be a market, or if they are just clinging to it to have some hope. I bet they would go all the way down to the Wilds, right now, and try to talk the Dalish into banking- if the Dalish had any coin!

Yes, Tanis, very good, but Antiva-

I have no wish to return to Antiva. Dame Arhuis has said she will recommend us to the Teyrn. If he does not hire us, there is to be a great season at the court next year. The queen is looking for a new husband. Nobles will be setting up households for the spring and summer, all the minor lords will turn out, and the city rich and the embassies will undoubtedly do their best to compete with the local lords. I would be surprised if someone will not hire us, at least for the year.
But if we cannot, I will suffer Antiva. The Arhuis will be going to Salle, to stay with the Mondomarzis, at least for a time. When you write me in spring, send it to Denerim, to the Pilgrims’ Rest inn. It is of good repute with the Marcher merchants Messere Arhuis holds accounts for, and I will pick it up when we arrive in the city.

Be well this winter, my love.

Tanis and Damien in Ferelden. That was much closer than Starkhaven.

She could go see them, again.

And maybe they wouldn’t have to hide, if she went north. Not with the Fereldans giving the Dalish land, and honoring a Dalish Warden. This wasn’t Orlais.

Next year was going to be a good year. She could feel it.
“Hey, so,” Alistair said, as they crossed the bridge before Vigil’s Keep. “Nathaniel and I, but mostly me, it was my idea, we went behind your back on the, uh, ‘no going to Antiva’ thing.”

Theron pulled up and physically blocked the road with his horse.

“You did what?”

“It was strictly for information purposes. I gave very clear orders about a lack of dragging him back. Even though he should-”

“He doesn’t have to do anything he doesn’t want to!” Theron cut him off viciously, and he looked like he was going to cry.

“He’s got to consider your feelings, is what he’s got to do,” Alistair said. “And he didn’t, so we sent Andreas and a strongly-worded letter to Antiva. Andreas should be back by now, we’ve been gone pretty long-”

“He was not returned when we left,” Fenris put in.

“Well, damn-”

Theron turned his horse and nudged it on into a fast almost-trot up the road, leaving them behind and Alistair with a faceful of dust.

“I was trying to make you happy!” Alistair yelled after him.

They didn’t catch up to him on the road, but they ran into the tail end of his path through the Vigil. Captain Maverlies had people waiting for their horses, and there were a lot of Wardens around whom Alistair only sort-of recognized, but were looking somewhat cowed by Theron’s passage.

Alistair sighed, handed off his horse, and went to go find Theron. Unsurprisingly, he was in Nathaniel’s office.

"Did Andreas-”

Theron held up a finger to shush him.

“The Commander said we’re not talking about it until he knows how things have been going with the Chantry,” Nathaniel said.

Alistair looked at him, then Theron, and then the papers on Nathaniel’s desk that Theron was focusing intently on.

"So what’s new with the Chantry?’ he asked. “Summarize.”

Nathaniel looked very pained as he said: “…Nothing.”

“Not that I’ve heard—”

“Great, you’re briefed,” Alistair told Theron. “I know you know that you know the only thing you care about is news of Zevran, so stop trying to lose yourself in work and hear it.”

“There isn’t a lot to say,” Nathaniel said. “Andreas found him in Rialto about a week ago. He’s living with some people. He got a job. He’s really, er, well, he’s very upset about the Crows and he took in some children who ran away from them. There’s some letters and papers and things that he sent, one of which I am certain will affect our relations with the Chantry—”

Alistair held his hand out and wagged his fingers in the ‘give me’ gesture.

“There’s a letter for Theron, right?”

Nathaniel pulled open a desk drawer and retrieved it. Alistair smacked it against Theron’s chest and pushed him at the door.

“Go. Read. Let me handle the Chantry because I’m the one who knows it, and I’ll be by later to see how you’re doing.”

He had to actually shove Theron out into the hallway and shut Nathaniel’s door at his back, but Theron didn’t turn around and reopen it, so, good enough for now.

“Nate, how in Andraste’s name can some papers Zevran sent from Antiva have any bearing on us and the Chantry?”

“It’s Anders.”

Alistair sighed.

“Of course it’s Anders. Just—just tell me.”

Letters were simple things. Thin, delicate in their own way, nothing to be worried about. Just paper or parchment and ink, a bit of wax.

It was a letter from Zevran and it had been so long.

He couldn’t. He just couldn’t, right now. He put the letter on his armor chest and unpacked, instead. Clothes to go to the laundry in the basket. Things for mending in the linen bag and then in the basket. Sword and shield away; armor off and checked even though all he’d done for the last week was wear it-

Fen whined and pawed at the chest.

Theron stopped, dropped the rest of his armor on the bed, took the letter, and went to Fen’s room.

It was easy to nest in the piles of old rugs and blankets and pillows. Fen laid down on his lap, tail wagging furiously, and snuggled close. Theron wrapped his arms around him and opened the letter.

*My dear Warden,*

He hugged Fen tighter. All that had happened, and Zevran would still call him that-

*I truly do not know what to say, only that I must say something.*
I suppose I can begin with saying that Alistair’s very cheerfully-threatening letter contained a number of bits of interesting information. He is a very good friend and he loves us and I am hoping that you are treasuring him and listening to his advice, at least when it warrants.

For instance, he tells me that he has been telling you that you are “being an idiot” whenever you are sure that I blame you for not protecting me in Kirkwall. In this, he is absolutely right.

Relief wasn’t supposed to feel like being punched in the gut and unable to breathe, so he couldn’t be relieved- but what other emotion was there for this situation? Why else would he have to squeeze his eyes shut in the effort to not cry?

Theron, amora, you cannot think this of yourself. I have spent a significant portion of my time since returning from my first trip to Antiva thinking upon my life and learning where and how to apportion responsibility. It is perhaps an understandable feeling, guilt in a situation where you were present but were unable to help, but it is ultimately misplaced.

I was awake before the Magister bled you, Theron. You were the most terrified you had ever been in your life, I think. Certainly the most since I have known you. In the Crows we learned how to operate even when scared so, or we were killed. I would not wish the lesson on you. You are no more to blame for being captured and terrified than, say, any of the many, many refugees I know you remember from the Blight who had been beset by bandits.

There is nothing to forgive, but I believe that you would wish to hear this in any case, so: you are forgiven, Theron, for everything. I did not run because I was scared you would hurt me. While I can think of things you could do to me that would drive me from your side, you would have to be a man I could not love before you would do them. And I do love you, ma’len, vhenan, ma’sal’shiral, wholly and completely, with all my heart and soul, and I would never stop. We could, all gods forbid, never set eyes on each other again, and I would still love you for all my days. Never doubt this.

He loved him. He loved him. He loved him.

Zevran loved him…

Theron put the letter down and clung to his mabari, burying his face in his thick ruff of winter fur.

“Fen,” he whispered hoarsely through the thin sobs. “Fen- Fen he doesn’t hate me, he’s not mad at me-”

Fen whined imploringly and wiggled all over. Theron hugged him tight a long moment before letting go and Fen clambered around to lick at his tears.

Theron chuckled, weakly, and ruffled Fen’s winter fluff before wiping his face and picking the letter back up again.

Zevran loved him.

But! Let us not linger long on such sad possibilities, no? It is terribly depressing and shall not come to pass. We will not allow it. I will be home as soon as I have sorted things here in Antiva.

Home. Home, he’d said this was home and that he was coming back.

Zevran loved him and he was coming back. Coming home.

It is a more complicated endeavor than it sounds, and for this I would ask you to stay calm-
What had happened to him Theron would get up right now and get Alistair and Morrigan and Oghren and- and anyone and go to Antiva and-

-because through a set of events that were absolutely not my intention as well as being mostly not my fault, I have fallen in with Rosso Noche, who have taken over a major city since the time I have been gone- also, ironically, through the consequences of my own previous actions, which I can only assume means that some god somewhere is having a grand joke at my expense- and they are fiendishly difficult to shake without admitting to my true identity, which I would much rather not do. I already have enough friction with the Rosso Noche man who owns the house I am currently residing in about my former Crow status without letting him know that they would also have me dead. No reason to give them common cause.

Who was this man. He was not allowed to be near Zevran, not if that was how he thought.

I have generally managed to stay away from the Crows, though if you have heard of the sudden and mysterious deaths of two Grandmasters over Satinalia, I am unashamed to say that that was my doing. Good work, no? And just today I have killed another nine Crows, apprentice hunters, and rescued the apprentices they were chasing. It has… brought up many feelings I had not realized.

I am so very, very furious at what the Crows have done to me, and for the others they have hurt like me, and for the children they will buy and break and murder. It is a strangely freeing feeling. I am not sure I have ever reveled in anger before, or if it is a wise thing, but nonetheless it is what is. I am deciding what to do with it. I have… I have had a realization, that there is no one with quite my skillset and sheer variety of experience, who also has intimate knowledge of the Crows, who wants to see the entire House burn, as much as I.

No matter. For the moment, I have children to concern myself with. The younger is a human boy, Diego; the elder an elven girl, Tiar. Diego is intensely shy and Tiar’s reflex to everything appears to be anger, but I am hoping that it is something like my own experience and thus survival habits and defense rather than permanent damage.

I have word from Alistair that you have acquired a child, as well! I had truly not thought to see Morrigan again, and I am imagining your venture into fatherhood with some, how shall I say, misgivings. Not that I believe you will do anything but an excellent job! Even without Alistair’s description I would not have been able to imagine you such. It is just, that, well- I do not know what fatherhood looks like, nor in any particular sense the parenting it seems that most receive. I still remember my mother best from the year of her sickness before she died, which was a time understandably not rife with examples.

She wasn’t dead. Zevran had to be told. And Theron had to remember to draft a letter to this Tanis, possibly in Lydes, and send it off with someone. This wasn’t something he could leave undone.

Your own Ashalle is a wonderful woman and it has not escaped my notice that she seems to have assumed that I am now part of the family, which while gratifying, is very much like you picking me up out of the road and abscending with me. It is not a strictly parental thing, is what I am trying to say, and- ah, never mind. Suffice to say that I am thinking on Morrigan as a mother and wondering how many people she has already brutally torn apart to keep him safe.

Say hello to Kieran for me, yes?

Of course. And he’d tell Kieran all the good stories about him, so he’d be excited to finally meet Zevran, when he came home.

I am also thinking on you, of course. Only natural, yes? I am remembering your face and your eyes
and your smile and the way it feels to hold you and the way your hair runs through my fingers when I stroke it and the way you press against me in the morning when you stretch up to kiss me and your kisses and your voice and how I can see the muscles in your shoulders move on the many, many occasions I have been so lucky as to see you in less clothing many people have the privilege of, and how they feel when I have my hands splayed across them and you leaning over me-

Zevran, no. Now he was thinking about all of this, too; and Zevran wasn’t even here to do something about it. Unfair.

-and a good many other things which I am certain your memory and imagination can fill in, all them about how utterly magnificent you are, my dear.

Now I am concerned. Who reminds you of how wonderful you are when I am not around? Certainly not Morrigan, and Alistair is still not the right kind of close to fully extoll all of your virtues. It is a shame, and I have just had the thought of paying Nathaniel to do these things in my place, if only for the entertainment value. I do not know if you are smiling enough, or laughing enough, and it is absolutely something you should do daily and if you have not found a way to make this happen already, then I hope re-reading this letter will provide at least some marginal pleasure.

Marginal? “Marginal”? Zevran knew better than that, and this didn’t sound like his particular brand of comedic understatement.

Theron skipped back to the beginning of the letter and read through it again for subtext. He didn’t like what he found. Zevran had always been good at acting like nothing was wrong, but the places where he did give more detail and the ones where he simply mentioned something and moved right along, or spoke of something like it wasn’t important- he didn’t like that pattern.

He had “generally managed” to stay away from the Crows? There was “friction” between him and the man whose house he was staying in, a Rosso Noche man, when he hadn’t been trying to “fall in with” them? He had “misgivings” about parenting but had taken in two children? And “marginal” pleasure, and “which I can only assume means that some god somewhere is having a grand joke at my expense”?

Theron could find anger and sadness and nervousness and anxiety and resignation and self-doubt and loneliness in this letter; but what if he was reading too much into it? What if Zevran was actually doing fine? What if-

But if he wasn’t.

“Generally managed” to stay away from the Crows; what did that mean? It didn’t sound like he was talking about his own deliberate killings of Crows. Were they hunting him? Had they found him? Did they know he was in Antiva? Were they just watching and waiting for an opportunity? Andreas had only seen him a little more than a week ago, there was a lot that could happen in a week-

There was more of the letter. Maybe it would explain.

I do mean it, Theron. Perhaps time with Kieran? I have some vague conception that spending time with your children is supposed to make both of you happy, but what do I know of this. Am I correct in assuming that Kieran is a mage? Alistair said something that implied so. I would think that you would be able to assist in his lessons somehow, if only by telling educational anecdotes or some such thing.

Also, I feel that I must ask you not to fight the Chantry, please. It is another thing Alistair mentioned and while I am certain you would fight them on nothing less than a noble cause it would almost
certainly be ruinous to you. I have no wish to see you hung or beheaded or- it is too awful to think on. If you must fight the Chantry, please take Morrigan with you if you cannot wait for me and at the very least make them pay dearly for whatever they do. However I would prefer firstly that you do not and secondly that I be there so at least I know exactly how you are doing.

But what if they picked a fight with him?

As well, I hear you and Alistair have been ordered to court and that there will be, as Alistair so horrifically put it, “ORLESIANS”. I do not know how many of them there will be, but as soon as you have even one, the Great Game is afoot. I do not know of anyone in Ferelden who would have extensive experience of Orlesian politics, given that the nobility who survived the Blight are in the main old veterans of King Maric’s resistance who maintain their fierce disdain for Orlesian manners or those too young to remember the occupation who were fostering in the Free Marches during the Blight. Is there any possible way that you could hire a Bard? Perhaps Leliana could be convinced to come for an extended visit? Please look into it, at least. If nothing else it will soothe Alistair’s fear that you will both irrevocably embarrass yourselves at court- though I would like to point out that encouraging your ‘Dalefication’ of the Denerim estate, whatever that means, exactly, was perhaps not a good first step if you were hoping to stay firmly in the good graces of the court.

No, do not scowl like that.

Well what else was he supposed to do? He wasn’t going to stop being Dalish for a bunch of noble shems, and the Orlesians deserved to be confronted with what their people had ruined.

At this juncture I would advise that trying not to make a notice of yourself is not the correct move. If nothing else, I suspect that Anora has commanded you to be the main accompaniment for her potential husbands because she wishes to see how easy they are to intimidate- and how easily they deal with you. If they are to be King or Prince-Consort or whatever she decides is the proper title, they will have to live with having the bastard son of the last Theirin King hanging about in the friendship of the second- or third-most powerful person in the country, who is himself exceedingly eccentric by everyone else’s standards.

Yes, Theron, you are one of the most powerful people in the country, no matter how much you ignore that fact. Anora and Bryland are the only ones with more land than you, and while I cannot be entirely certain which of the Arls or Teyrns, excluding the queen, is the one with the most money, but Amaranthine sees the higher international trade volume and has the most expensive resources to export. Also you are Hero of Ferelden, generally popular with the human population and exceedingly popular with the elven population, vital to the relationship between Ferelden and Hallarenis’haminathe, have installed no less than three monarchs in the last five years or so, and so on and so on and so on, you are astounding in every way, etcetera. Also you command your own small army- or perhaps rather a middling army condensed into half a Tevene century, considering the sheer amount of damage a mere handful of Wardens can inflict. A man who cannot live with this cannot operate for long in Fereldan politics unless he is good at keeping his opinions to himself.

Which, sadly, I am sure the Orlesians will be practiced in. So, to return to the point, I would advise that you embrace your relative eccentricities and never for a moment let any of them forget what and who you are. You can get away with much when you are unapologetically audacious about what you are doing, or when you pick a characterization and play it to the hilt. Trust me on this. I have used it to good advantage before myself; and it has the additional benefit of being a strategy, if not a particularly popular one, of the Great Game. The Orlesians will recognize it without knowing what they have done, as I am very sure that they will have dismissed everyone in Anora’s court as beneath such courtly subtleties long before arriving. They will automatically assume that you are not playing them while you are, and this gives you much more room to work on other levels.
This was the part of human politics where he still got very lost. He could understand a hierarchy based on how much money you had or how much territory you controlled—clans only had as much power as their people and their resources could provide. That was just simple sense. That was how you survived.

And lying, sure. Stretching the truth, absolutely. Deceiving people who were trying to hurt you when you couldn’t fight them head-on was just what you did.

But as a basic part of politics it was just wrong, surely. A country shouldn’t be a lot of little constant wars between the people in charge of it. If you couldn’t trust anyone, then why would you try to work with anyone?

Levels of deception was Zevran’s job. Well, they’d just have to manage. They were only providing company, after all, not trying to negotiate with foreign powers or establish diplomatic relations.

Perhaps it is foolish, but I find myself compelled to write down every single thought and observation I have, to somehow make up for the time we have been apart. It is entirely unfeasible, I know, and additionally it would be an imposition upon Andreas, but still. I have missed you.

It was... cruel of me to leave the way I did. And unwise, perhaps, to leave at all, but I know how much you wish to help people you care for. What has happened to me cannot be fixed. I did not want to stay and be a constant reminder of that fact. I am sorry I have given you cause to worry, and for leaving you with the impression that I no longer wanted you. That is far from the truth. While I am not certain I wish you to be here in Antiva, I do wish we were around each other. Perhaps it would make this easier.

Despite this, you will have certainly realized that I myself did not accompany this letter. There is something I must do before I return—and no, I am not being coy about what. I truly do not know yet, only that there is something. As well, I would not bring danger down upon you. If I were to leave now, Rosso Noche would ask questions, and prying Antivans bring Crows. I will return when this danger can be avoided.

Until then—be well, stay safe, and know that I love you.

Tuelanen ama na, amora.

Theron folded the letter back up, pressed it to his chest, and quietly said: “I forgive you too, Satheraan. Just come home.”

Theron returned to Nathaniel’s office before he and Alistair had finished speaking, and Alistair gave him a sharp look.

“I told you not to—”

Theron hugged him and buried his face in his chest.

“He still loves me.”

“Of for—” Alistair muttered. “Of course he does!”

“He’s coming back.”

“Good. When?”
Theron lifted his face.

“When he’s done in Antiva.”

“Well that’s noncommittal.”

“In the letter he said he sent other papers.”

“On the desk,” Alistair told him. “We’ve been talking about them. They’re… interesting.”

He wasn’t totally sure what to do with them, himself. There were four things besides Theron’s letter-a note Zevran had written to him, saying essentially that he was very sorry and that he would gladly hold a spar with him once he returned; a folded piece of paper about Rosso Noche; a paper sheet of news, of all things, with a mention of dead Crows enthusiastically circled; and a very long essay in two columns, Trade and Antivan, called On the Rights of Mages. It had Anders’s name at the end.

Theron picked up the paper on Rosso Noche and examined it briefly, then looked at the news sheet and the essay.

“They got a really good scribe to do these,” he said. “It all looks the same.”

“That’s Tranquil for you,” Alistair said. “The Circle Scriptoriums can be really productive. Still, this is good even for that. And who’d they’d find to do the essay? You’d never get that in a Circle, and it must have taken months.”

Nathaniel was giving them an odd look.

“What?”

“These aren’t handwritten,” he told them. “They’re printed.”

Theron frowned at the papers.

“I don’t see any seals.”

“I think he means the letters,” Alistair said. “I guess that’s one way to get them to be all the same like that, but it seems like a lot more work than just writing it down. Or, you know-”

He brandished the news sheet.

“-just telling people. Do they not have market squares in Antiva? Chantries? Do people just not talk to each other?”

“No, it’s printed from a typeset press,” Nathaniel said. “It’s an Antivan thing. They’re very common there, and there are some in the big cities in the Free Marches. Starkhaven had a couple. One of the printing houses was owned by the Vaels. Ser Varley took me to see it, once. A typset press is a sort of big machine. There are stamps of each of the individual letters, hundreds of them, and you spell out a page of text with them in the bottom of the machine, put ink on them, and then press paper to it. You can make something simple, like the news broadsheets, very quickly in large amounts once you have the letters put in.”

That made a lot more sense than stamping each individually, Alistair had to admit. One big, changeable stamp made the whole process a lot faster. Clever Antivans.

"Can you do woodblock prints like that?” he asked Nathaniel. “Or only words?"
“I saw some of the court printings with woodblocks,” Nathaniel said. “I think you just arrange the type around it.”

‘Printing houses?’” Theron asked.

“Artisan’s shops. Three or four presses, at least in the one I saw, with masters and apprentices. They do broadsheets and pamphlets most often, and then cheap books—”

“Cheap books,” Alistair said dubiously.

“You can print books?” Theron demanded.


“But cheap books,” Alistair stressed, thinking of the possibilities. All those old literary works, the Alamarri myths, the histories, the theological and scholarly writings and commentaries of the Chantry- no more saving gold for books where you might not even be able to read the scribe’s handwriting well. Maybe he’d finally be able to read a book without a headache. These printed sheets were very clear, after all.

”Can you print on good paper, though?” Theron asked. “Parchment? Can you use good ink? What type does it need? Can you print with colored ones?”

“I don’t know about the parchment, Commander, but yes, the good books are of good paper, and I remember they had colors in them. Scribes illuminated around the printing, and the printers left deliberate space for the pictures to be drawn in.”

“I need some,” Theron declared. “Nathaniel, I need typeset presses and I need elves who know how to work them and would be willing to go to Hallarenis’haminathe.”

“I’ll tell Delilah,” Nathaniel promised.

“They’ll accept that?” Alistair asked, thinking of the scriptorium in the Tower of Ishal. “You’ve got so many books—”

“That’s why we need typeset presses,” Theron said. “The more copies there are, the harder it is to lose the information. We’re settled now. We don’t have to use all our resources just to keep our books legible and holding together. If we print copies of them, there can be enough for every clan to have a library, and the old books can be preserved easier, and we can actually have things written down. We can finally transcribe Samelana de da’melava and Enare vhen’an ide alas and the Catalogue and the clan histories and the songs and the prayers and the rituals and the genealogies and the instructions on how to craft things and the Keeper’s spells and everything we’ve managed to recover from Arlathan and the Dales and we can write manuals and poetry and preserve the eulogies and have real records of the din’adahlan and accounts of the Arlathvhen and the arguments of the Hahrens and the rulings of the Keepers and—”

“Breathe, Theron,” Alistair reminded him.

Theron took a shaky breath, watery on the edges, but his expression stayed set and determined even as his voice quavered on breaking.

“We’ll have our own written canon again,” he said fiercely. “You have to have people who remember everything, but when people die and the writings are burned or drowned or torn apart or left to rot, things are lost. We’ll print so many books that we will never, ever be able to lose all we
know again!"

“Then we’ll get the Dalish some presses,” Alistair said. “But for now you have to decide whether or not to confirm Nathaniel’s panicked creation of a Warden mage corps with Anders as it’s Captain.”

Theron turned to his Constable.

“You did what?”

Anders got to stay Captain of the Warden mage corps.

“It’s reasonable,” the Commander had pointed out. “He’s the longest-serving one and they need things the rest of us don’t. Better that they have someone who knows their problems to talk to about them.”

Nathaniel was of conflicted feelings about this. On one hand, it made him not a liar to the Chantry. On the other hand, he’d read Anders’s manifesto. It had been printed in Antiva, and news would spread. Eventually word would come to Ferelden, and to the Divine in Orlais, and the Commander would have painted a massive target straight on the Wardens here.

Not his problem. It was not his problem, it was the Commander who would have to live with handling his decisions-

Alistair had told him about the challenge in Hallarenis’haminathe. The Commander could get dragged to the foot of the throne of the Divine herself and he’d still refuse to recant his positions.

They were all going to die. They were going to die!

It took a lot to get a Warden drunk, but he knew where the good strong liquor was kept. A jar of apple preserves, a bit of crystallized honey, a jug of vodka, and the only thing separating him from any despairing farmer was his ability to trace his family tree back to a great chief of the Alamarri.

The next morning he woke up face-down on the long table in the main hall. His shoulders hurt. His head hurt. He needed water, with a little bit of salt in it-

“Nathaniel Howe, is this any way for a man of your station to behave?”

“’m a grown man, Del,” he mumbled into the wood. “Sod’ff.”

“It is not!” his sister exclaimed. “I have never seen a larger amount of alcohol consumed in one sitting than I did last night. It’s a wonder any Warden dies of fighting darkspawn!”

Nathaniel slowly raised his head from the table.

“Wha-?”

There were a lot more empty jugs and cups than he could have possibly consumed by himself.

“Who else-”

“Oh, most of the Vigil came through and had some,” Delilah told him. “You certainly made enough of a spectacle of yourselves! It was embarrassing! Captain Mac Maric and Hawke decided to ‘help’ by splitting the vodka with you, but then they got drunk, and made off with the jugs, and challenged each other to spar! They’re lucky Ser Tabris and Serrah Fenris were out there and stopped them before someone got killed! But that got everyone else’s attention, and things went completely out of
“control!”

“Who else-”

“ Anders,” Delilah said primly. “ Warden Kondrat. Merrill and Bethany. The blacksmith and his husband, the kennelmaster, that mad artificer, some of the servants. All of the Voshai, and they encouraged the bad behavior! If I ever have to deal with another drunken mage ever again-”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, you’re sorry! Go apologize to Captain Kondrat; he’s the one who kept the Vigil from melting down around our ears or imploding from the sheer indignity of it all!”

“We can’t have possibly-”

“You could have warned me that His Arlship gets… that he loses all conception of decent physical interaction!”

And there was a sobering thought. Nathaniel sat straight up, alarmed and in dread of hearing the details.

“Oh no,” he said, remembering that if both he and Alistair had gotten drunk, and Zevran wasn’t around, and Oghren hadn’t arrived until later, there would have been no one to make sure the Commander stayed away from the alcohol. “ Oh no- who did he kiss?”

“So he does this often, then?”

“No, he did it the once and we put a general ban on him and alcohol, it takes so little for him to get drunk- Delilah, please, how many people do I have to apologize to?”

“He kissed Captain Mac Maric,” she said, looking uncomfortable. “And- his sister. Lover’s kissing, not… family kissing.”

“Thank the Maker,” Nathaniel said under his breath. Not quietly enough, though.

“ Nathaniel!”

“The Commander always kisses Captain Mac Maric when he’s drunk!” he protested. “That’s how we know he’s had too much to drink. If he has any more, he starts crying and telling people how important they are and holding their hands very sincerely. Alistair just takes his drink away and makes him cuddle with Zevran.”

“Well he went to cuddle with Merrill and kissed her and then he got more drunk and started sobbing at people in elvish! Merrill! His own sister!”

“They’re not blood related,” Nathaniel said. “And they were supposed to get married for their clan. It’s a Dalish thing.”

“His own sister,” Delilah repeated before letting it drop. “Your liege lord is a handful, Nate.”

“I know. But he’s ours.”

Delilah sighed.

“Well. Just don’t blame me if you start hearing tall tales about last night. It’s entirely your fault.”
Theron got the introductory letter to Tanis—possibly in—Lydes written the morning after getting drunk, and then agonized over what to say in the letter to Zevran’s mother for the rest of the day. He paced around his rooms, coming up with ideas and discarding them. Morrigan came by and made him take a break to watch Kieran while she took time for herself, but it didn’t help any.

“You’ll find her, Babae,” Kieran told him. “You can find anyone.”

His son’s confidence was appreciated. But how was he supposed to introduce himself to Zevran’s mother? She’d had no contact with her son for decades. What was she even like? He had no idea what she would want from the person who loved her son—what were her expectations? Were there practices that Revasina had that were anathema to Sabrae, or the other way around? Would she be upset at his status? At his son? Was he the sort of person she’d even want as a son-in-law?

And that was when Theron had to sit down for a bit, because it was one thing to say that he didn’t mind the idea of marrying Zevran, but something completely else to be worrying about being good son-in-law material.

He went to Merrill. She was out at the sparring yard, watching Marian and Kallian and Fenris. The three of them had taken to practicing the longsword together—or rather Marian and Fenris taught Kallian how to be better with hers, while she happily accepted defeat at the hands of her more talented instructors.

Today Alistair and Lockhard were out in the yard as well, in their own corner. Alistair had replaced his shield with another sword and—well, interesting, he really had been serious about learning a new style. Lockhard was demonstrating dual-wielding forms.

Theron silently wished him luck as he hugged Merrill around the waist from behind, sticking his face in the crook of her neck.

“Hello! Have you finished your letter? Do you want me to read it?”

“Merrill,” he said. “Merrill. I want to marry Zevran.”

“Oh. Oh. Oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh! Theron!”

“Merrill,” he said into her shoulder, leaning forward slightly and holding her down to stop the excited bouncing. “My nose.”

“Sorry! I know, I do that all the time but still, Theron, that’s wonderful!”

“But he’s not here and how do I tell him and how do I tell his mother.”

“You should ask Marian, Marian helped one of our friends get together with her husband, it was very sweet—Marian! Marian Theron’s getting married and he needs help!”

“What,” Alistair yelled across the sparring yard.

“Merrill, I haven’t even asked him yet!”

“Well, is he going to say no?”

“He can if he wants to!”

“But is he going to, Theron, I don’t think he’s going to, so you’re getting married and you need help and Marian and I will help you.”
“Don’t just volunteer me, Merrill,” Marian complained, walking up.

“But he needs help and you help people,” Merrill told her. “You helped Aveline and Donnie!”

“I helped Aveline have a date with Donnic, I did not convince him to marry her.”

“That’s close enough. They like each other so much, they just had to talk to each other.”

“What do you mean, you’re getting married!” Alistair demanded, barreling over. “When did you get engaged?”

“I didn’t!” Theron exclaimed. “I haven’t yet! Merrill’s getting ahead of it all and Alistair I want to marry Zevran-”

“This is news?”

“But he’s not here and what do I say to his mother if I haven’t even asked him yet!”

“Well, tell her that you’re going to ask him.”

“But how do I ask him?”

“You go to Antiva-”

“I can’t just go to Antiva,” Theron said. “He said he was trying to keep attention from us, if I show up people will ask questions and he might be in danger and-”

“Then wait for him to come back and ask him then- or Andraste’s flames, Theron, write to him and we’ll have Andreas play courtier again!”

“I have to finish writing his mother,” Theron fretted.

Alistair gave him a look, and Theron retreated back to his room and hastily wrote the letter to Nehna in his best script and formal diction, then sealed it up and sent both letters off with Leonie and Nelle to drop off in Lydes on their way to speak with Commander Clarel before he could decide against it.

“You know, I had thought he was getting better,” Alistair groused. “But there’s still something wrong. He showed me that letter Zevran wrote him, there’s no sodding reason for him to be avoiding giving a straight answer again!”

“It ain’t easy, bein’ in love,” Oghren said. “He’ll sort it out himself or he won’t. Just let him handle it.”

“He helped you,” Alistair pointed out.

“Me’n’Felsi had a different problem. This ain’t about commitment with them, it’s somethin’ else.”

“’Twas you who had a commitment problem, was it not?”

Oghren grunted angrily at her and scowled at the packed dirt. There were five of them here- him, Alistair, Morrigan, Merrill, and Marian- all out by the sparring field. Marian, Oghren, and Merrill hadn’t technically been invited, at least as much as anyone was ever invited to Theron management meetings, but Oghren and Marian had both been out in the yard at the same time as Alistair had been, and Merrill was wherever Marian was, these days.
“I can’t believe we still have to do something,” Alistair complained.

“I am losing my patience,” Morrigan agreed. “As if he would not be outrageously pleased to be asked to marry him! As if we were not entirely capable of protecting ourselves against assassins! The only thing standing in their way is themselves. It grows tiresome.”

“He didn’t used to have these problems,” Merrill fretted.

“You’re not the same person you were the last time you knew him, either,” Marian pointed out. “People change. At least you found him again.”

“But he’s so upset and I can’t help! I can’t help him with Zevran and I can’t help him with what people are saying in Hallarenis’haminathe! I told him that he’ll always have me even if he does get exiled, and that it’s not his fault, but he just won’t listen.”

“Babae isn’t happy,” Kieran added sadly, and held out his arms for Morrigan to pick him up. She hoisted him into her lap.

“Well, we’re packing for Denerim,” Alistair said. “He’ll be distracted and we’ll just have to hope for the best, because if he doesn’t change his mi-”

“ALISTAIR!”

They all looked around, searching for Theron.

“ALISTAIR!” he yelled again, and Alistair looked up. Theron was leaning out a window and yelling down to him. “WE’RE GOING TO ANTIVA!”

“IT’S ABOUT TIME!” Alistair yelled back. “WHEN ARE WE LEAVING!”

“HE FOUND DARKSPAWN IN ANTIVA AND THE WARDEN-COMMANDER OF ANTIVA WROTE TO ME AND-”

“GET DOWN HERE SO WE CAN HAVE A NORMAL CONVERSATION!”

Theron disappeared from the window, and Alistair started counting on his fingers. Twenty-eight days until they had to be in Denerim, six or seven days from Amaranthine to Antiva, six or seven days back…

“Twould be best to leave immediately, before he changes his mind,” Morrigan said.

“And it’s the only way we’ll make it back in time,” Alistair said. “I mean, you’ve got to leave a whole week in Antiva for something going wrong because, oh, I don’t know, we’ll get there and find out that the darkspawn have started a blood magic Old God cult in an old forgotten thaig beneath the city and the whole area is about to sink into the Deep Roads. And then we’ll have to stop it.”

“Or the Carta will lure you into a darkspawn prison,” Marian muttered.

“What?”

“What?”

“It happened,” Merrill said. “Right before you came. We went all the way out to the Vimmarks and when we came back everyone started fighting! Aveline was very upset, we’d promised her it would
be a nice change from Kirkwall and then it wasn’t.”

“Heh,” Oghren said. “Nice to know we ain’t the only ones who get pulled into this sorta nugcrap.”

He’d ask about that later.

“Are you two coming?” Alistair asked.

“There are words I mean to have with our assassin about his behavior,” Morrigan said. “However…”

She looked at Kieran, still sitting in her lap.

“There are people you could trust here,” Alistair said.

Kieran tugged on her shirt. She leaned down to listen to him, and Alistair could hear his not-quite-whisper of: “I like Aunt Merrill.”

Merrill apparently heard it too, because she smiled excitedly and exclaimed that she liked him, too, they had such fun conversations!

“I’ll come if she’s goin’,” Oghren said. “Been awhile since we’ve all been together doin’ somethin’. Could be fun.”

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There hadn’t been a ship going to Rialto from Amaranthine, when the five of them got there-Theron, Alistair, Morrigan, Oghren, and Fen. Alistair had said that it was fine that they were going to Antiva City instead, the Antivan Wardens were based out of there, so Zevran had to have been in Antiva City anyway to speak with the Warden-Constable.

But the darkspawn were in Rialto, and Theron had worried the entire journey that Zevran had gone back to deal with them by himself. He’d had plenty of experience with darkspawn, in groups of five or seven or more- how many would it take him to go into the Crow’s center of power to report it to Wardens?

A lot, he was afraid. Too many. It didn’t even help that they were on the docks now, in Antiva City, he and Alistair and Oghren in their armor and asking for the Warden’s headquarters.

They got directions, made it out of the dock area, and promptly got lost again. The streets of Denerim could get narrow but they were largely short and straightforward; the streets of Amaranthine had the advantage of modern city planning; and Hallarenis’haminathe didn’t have roads so much as wide swathes of open space. The streets of Antiva City were narrow and twisting when they weren’t emptying into small market squares, and they quickly lost count of the turns.

They were standing in one of the squares and quietly arguing about it when a woman stopped and asked if they needed help.

“Down this road, left at the Chantry with the window of Andraste appearing to her Aegis, straight down a ways until the laundry, right there, you don’t want to take any of the turns, just keep following it…”

Some minutes later, another market square, and a woman doing laundry by the fountain.

“East y’go, ‘till the printshop board, en they right en they lef…”

They found the printshop. And then a different one?
“Left, right, right, left, straight ahead to the Chantry, left to the market, right…”

Yet another square, this one with the small local Chantry and a fountain, and nobody around.

“Better go ask inside,” Alistair sighed, and headed for the Chantry.

“A board with no Chanter,” Morrigan muttered to Theron, leaning over. “Watch yourself.”

Alistair opened the Chantry doors. Still nothing.

“Okay, this is-”

There were no real shadows here, and anyway Theron’s first thought wasn’t for his sword or shield but the familiar facial tattoos and Zevran?

But no, not Zevran. Wrong hair, wrong face, and Alistair yelled and backed away, shield coming up and around, the hilt of a dagger sticking out of a gap in his armor, down in his side.

One, two, three, four, five Crows. One-to-one odds and assassins who’d never seen what a Warden or a mabari or a Witch of the Wilds could do. One minute, maybe two, blood and corpses in the Chantry antechamber and on the Chantry threshold and-

“Must’ve been watchin’ us,” Oghren said suspiciously, and hefted his axe. “Meybbe since we left the docks.”

“‘Tis easier to set an ambush when you have accomplices to lead your prey into it,” Morrigan agreed sourly, and eyed the brazier of sacred fire at the front of the sanctuary. A quick ice spell and it was out, the copper bowl rimed with frost and Alistair protesting in the background. “And when you have fear enough instilled to intimidate people into abandoning their places.”

“We could be anywhere,” Alistair realized. “Theron-”

He’d started searching the bodies on automatic. Crows didn’t have much and there was no point in carrying extra armor and weapons around to sell, not at the moment, but a little coin and a bit of gold jewelry were light and easy.

His hands were shaking.

“Theron-”

“How did they know we were coming,” he whispered, and the sound carried in the architecturally-exact Chantry acoustics, loud and faintly echoing.

Silence.

“The sea lies to the east of the city,” Morrigan said. “On the docks ‘twas said that the Warden’s fortress stands in the old city, on the spur of land out into the water.”

“Follow the sun then, eh?”

“It’s noon.”

“Then mark the wind. ‘Twill be blowing landward, and carrying the sea.”

Fen leaned against his side and whined. Theron shuddered, all over, and followed them out.

No Zevran.

Where was Zevran.

“They found him,” he gasped, after the third group of Crows. Dead now, a human with some other humans and a lone elf. He’d faltered bringing his sword up, faced with him. The Crow had tried to stick a knife through his quilting and skittered off plate. Theron had run him through and stared at his tattoos as he died and thought slave, tortured, killing too young. “They found him he came to ask for help and they found him-”

“Theron, hey,” Alistair said, voice steady and even as he took a deliberate step forward. “Breathe-”

There had been another Crow, hiding. He stepped out of somewhere and Theron saw him coming and turned, grabbing him and shoving him up against the wall.

“Where is Zevran Arainai!”

“Wha- he’s dead.”

Dead Crow. Bloody gauntlets made it hard to hold his sword or shield but these were Crows, not darkspawn. He had years of fighting experience. The Taint made him strong and hardy and fast and Zevran was dead and he’d kill them, all of them, every last one of them, Zevran would be the last kill the Crows ever claimed-

“Theron! Theron!”

“He ain’t a trained berserker, we just gotta keep up with him. He’ll burn himself out-”

“He’s going to get killed,” Alistair said, horrified, and ran after him.

It was easy to see how bad a grip he had on his sword and shield. He’d block and they’d slip and he’d end up improperly defended; assuming he even fought reasonably and didn’t just start hacking away at the next person to confront him.

It turned out to be a pointless worry. The Blight had done far too much in the way of ingraining proper forms and proper fighting. He and Theron had fought darkspawn on no sleep before, or even barely awake, and this turned out to be no different. This attack of Crows was large and incautious, presumably liking their odds with one Warden, separated from the rest, too keyed up to even carry himself properly, with only a dog for company.

Alistair was still catching up when he saw the Crows descend, and put on speed. It was never fun to be broadsided by a warrior with the weight of shield and plate and momentum behind him, but by the time Alistair bashed into the fray they were already learning that lesson from Theron.

Alistair focused on just the Crows turning to deal with him, for the first moments of the fight, but after his final thrust there the crowd had thinned out. Theron had dropped his sword but still had his shield, using it offensively and following it up with a plate- armored fist or a stomp down as necessary; Fen sticking close to his side and dealing with the Crows Theron was too lost to notice.

He knew when Morrigan got in range because one of the Crows caught on fire, then screamed in terror and ran right into the remaining group of assassins.
“No fire!” Alistair roared at her as he turned to deal with this last group. “We are in a city!”

Oghren hit the Crows just after Alistair put the one Morrigan had targeted permanently out of his misery. He took a moment and observed—only a few Crows left, now, and between Oghren and Morrigan and Fen it wouldn’t be long.

He stepped out of the fight, wiped his sword, sheathed it, shouldered his shield, and grabbed Theron under the arms.

His own helmet was the only thing that kept him from getting Theron’s full in the face, when he snapped his head back defensively. As it was, it still hurt, it just didn’t break or bloody anything.

Then Theron tried the move Zevran had trained them both to do, if someone tried to grab them from behind—throw your weight back, crush them under your armor—except that Alistair was prepared, braced against it. He only had to take two steps back to make up for the force, still holding onto Theron.

Before he could try it again, Alistair quickly adjusted his grip and lifted.

“Put me down!” Theron yelled at him—good, words were good.

“Not if you’re going to run off and fight like a mountain barbarian!”

Theron started kicking him.

“Will you—sto—listen to me! Theron! Of course if you ask a Crow where Zevran is they’re going to say he’s dead! Did you forget the part where that’s what he wants them to think!”

“I shall hex you if you do not cease your misbehaving,” Morrigan told Theron, angling her staff threateningly. “And even should they have merely discovered he is not dead, what better way to bait you into a trap than telling you that he is? No more evidence of its efficacy is needed than your own ridiculous behavior!”

“I still say we kill ‘em all,” Oghren said.

Theron stopped kicking.

“Put me down, Alistair.”

Alistair let him go. Theron started pacing, back and forth, around the corpses. He kept clenching and unclenching his hands until he came across his sword. He retrieved it, and stood there holding it for a few long moments.

“We have to find him.”

“We’re going to.”

“We have to find him. He can’t be dead.”

“I know.”

“He can’t be dead,” Theron insisted, sounding like he was going to cry.

“He ain’t dead,” Oghren said. “He’s too good for that. Bet you he’s waitin’ for the soppiest soddin’ moment he can to hop off a roof and show off.”
“He *would* do that,” Alistair agreed, even though he privately thought that if that was going to happen, it already would have. The important thing here was reassuring Theron. “Just— stay calm, okay? There’s bound to be more Crows. *Yes,* we’re going to kill them; but we’re going to have to be careful about it to get to the Wardens in one piece.”

They moved on. One more group of Crows, two more groups of Crows, three more groups of Crows, and an answer, because he was mowing through Crows and there was blood in his gauntlets from punching when they got too close to run through and if they’d found Zevran, if they’d hurt him, if they’d killed him—

“It’s a competition, it’s a competition!” the Crow Theron grabbed and shoved against a wall told him frantically. “There’s no Grandmaster and the Talons can’t decide, it was Master Valisti’s idea! Whichever House kills the Wardens gets to be Grandmaster!”

She was an elf, tall and thick with muscle, rough and scarred and a fighter enough to be a threat, but she’d capitulated as soon as Theron had moved to grab her and was pressing into the wall, trying to stay away from him, not looking directly at him, facial tattoos angled towards him and *slave:* the Crows had hurt Zevran and they’d have hurt her too, she didn’t have his bluster and she wasn’t going to try to bargain her way out of this, she was waiting for him to kill her and Zevran, if only Zevran were here—

Theron spread his hands so that the metal plate on his fingers wouldn’t bite into her skin.

“Who are you?”

She still didn’t look at him, but her eyes flared briefly in surprise, swiftly hidden— if he hadn’t known to look he wouldn’t have seen it.

“Daganu Valisti,” she told him.

“Where is your House Master?”

She flinched under his hands.

“Waiting with the Wardens at Fort Palace,” she said quietly.

A trap— a final trap? Optimism that they’d get so far? How many of the Crows they’d already killed had been Valisti, too.

He knew that name, why did he know that name.

The Crows had hurt Zevran and even if they hadn’t gotten him *this* time they were going to pay. He was going to make them pay, make them think twice about coming for him, turn the Wardens into something untouchable and wrap Zevran in that protection, give him at least that much safety that he didn’t feel the need to hide— the Crows had bought him and hurt him and Theron wasn’t going to let them do it again and he was going to make them pay.

Not this one, though. He tried to dredge up the right memories, the right word. Zevran had told him, at least once.

“*Compradi*?” he asked, unsure of it, but the tiny changes of her expression said everything.

“Yes, *Domsignor.*”
He removed his hands.

“Go,” he told her. “You deserve better. The Crows have used you your whole life. Go make one for yourself.”

She stared at him. He made a short, aborted gesture, and she fled.

“I see we are still in the business of releasing those who wish us dead,” Morrigan said.

“‘Course we are,” Oghren said. “Nobody told you about Nathaniel? Kid said straight to his face he’d planned to kill him, and what does he do? Recruits him, right out of his cell!”

“‘Twill come back to haunt you, someday, this mercy,” Morrigan said to Theron. “‘Tis too exploitable a weakness, to leave your enemies alive.”

“They can stay alive,” Theron said, trying to steady himself. Zevran was fine, Zevran was fine, Zevran was fine. They’d go to the Wardens, they’d deal with Valisti, they’d find out where the darkspawn were, and then they’d find Zevran. “If I make them hurt enough they’ll be too scared to try again.”

Morrigan made a surprised noise, Alistair a worried one. He ignored them both.


Who’d known there were whole new levels of worried past what he’d already achieved?

Alistair sure hadn’t.

Theron wasn’t himself, at the moment, and any other time he would have taken his friend aside and gotten him to talk it out, talked him down- but now was what it was. The ambushes were coming closer and closer now, in bigger numbers. Likely there were Crows hiding, watching, scouting the fights and learning from them.

Morrigan could only heal so much, and only had so much magic to use. All of them were veteran fighters, but so were the Crows. Warden stamina only held out so long and there was only so much you could do against a mob of opponents. They all took cuts, bruises- as they finally found the oldest part of the city where the Circle complex and the Warden’s headquarters dominated the skyline they were met with a group of twenty or some Crows and had to actively retreat. Fen took a gash across the shoulders that left him growling around Morrigan’s feet to keep Crows at staff-length while she froze or paralyzed the quickest and hexed the rest, casting horrors and waking nightmares and misdirections about indiscriminately, trying to turn them on one another.

Oghren- Oghren was a berserker and had been a Roads veteran long before he’d ever met their group, and knew how to take and avoid hits. Alistair was fully in control of himself and knew how to duck behind his shield and let his massive silverite plate take the rest. Let a Crow try to hit a weak spot again when he knew what to look for and wouldn’t stand still!

He had a bit of a limp at the end of it, anyway, because one of the Crows had unbalanced him and sent him tumbling wrong over a corpse, but that was fine. He was fine.

He was nowhere near as badly off as Theron, with his slightly-lighter armor and current tendency to just hit and hit and hit with his shield, knocking Crows around and slamming them with the weight and edges of his armor, bruising and bloodying and breaking. Alistair wasn’t even sure he remembered he had a sword, or at least he didn’t until he had someone down and he hadn’t managed
to kill them through sheer pummeling yet. Crow armor was about flexibility and speed, not staying power, and it was what was carrying them through the Crows’ greater numbers.

He looked calmer, sure, if his blank polite face could be called ‘calm’. But he wasn’t acting like it.

“Is that your blood, or…?” he tried asking as they pulled themselves together, after.

Theron ignored him, and walked on. Morrigan’s enchanted frost on his sword was deep red now, and the residue left behind on his plate as blood had dripped trails down his silverite gave a strange sheen to the metal.

They were almost to the Wardens of Antiva, and a safe place to rest and get better healing. Just a few more minutes. Maybe. Hopefully.

It couldn’t be called an ambush when there was a Crow standing out in plain sight in front of the gates of the Warden’s headquarters, or when there were Crows on the surrounding roofs and walls and at the mouths of alleyways not bothering to hide their presence.

But a trap was still a trap even when you walked right into it, which was what Theron did even as the rest of them hung back. By the time Alistair realized that Theron wasn’t stopping he’d gone too far to call back.

He walked right up to the man in front of the gates, who held up his hands peaceably and gave him a friendly smile. It even looked real.

“Warden-Commander Mahariel, a pleasure to finally meet you!” he said. “I am Prince Claudio Fulgendez, Master Valisti of the House of Crows, and I was hoping we could come to an agreement.”


“Come now, surely we can speak, first?” Valisti asked. “As civilized men do. There has been too much bloodshed today.”

Alistair could have screamed when Theron shouldered his shield and reached up and took his helmet off what was he doing!

Valisti was taller than him, and he was standing close enough that he had to look up stare him in the eyes.

“You’re trying to kill us.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Valisti said. “It is true that there are contracts out on you. But you’ve proved that further attempts would be misguided, yes? I am ashamed to say that the Crows were not in the best state before this afternoon, and the problem will only be more pronounced now that we have lost yet more Talons to this operation.”

“Ten silvers he set us all up to get his competition killed,” Oghren muttered.

“Perhaps you’ve heard that we have no Grandmaster, currently?” Valisti continued. “This can be fixed. I have strong connections within the Archive of the Crows. I will sell you back the contracts on the Wardens of Ferelden and we can both walk away with our honor intact.”

“And the coin will finance your ascent to Grandmaster,” Morrigan said loudly enough to carry. Alistair tried to think of a discreet way to get her to shut up because why was she provoking them?
They should have retreated when they’d seen the trap, had her attack Valisti from a distance to get the Crows to abandon their positions and made them come to ground that disfavored them.

Instead Theron had done this.

Valisti smiled.

“Of course,” he said. “There would be contention about the validity of the contract sale, otherwise. Think of it—”

He turned back to Theron.

“—we will no longer have to suffer the indignity of unfulfilled contracts, and you get to be the only man who escaped the Crows. Perhaps you feel it pales in comparison to your other accomplishments, but it is still something impressive, yes?”

Theron didn’t answer. Valisti’s smile strained, just a touch.

“Perhaps you don’t trust me? Fair. It’s not what we’re known for. Free information, then? The letter from the Antivan Wardens that brought you here was part of a trap. One of the Crows who took your initial contract did not die in the Blight, as we had assumed, but continued trying to fulfill his contract. As per our long-standing arrangement with the Wardens of Antiva, they alerted the Crows when he tried to interfere in their business and turned him over.”

Oh shit. Shit, Theron was going to go off on him any second now, wasn’t he-

“It’s a very good system. We could make the same arrangement between ourselves. Non-interference by both parties. I could even give you the Crow to execute. It’d be a loss to us, he’s highly skilled and he’ll be a great asset to me now that he’s returned- but only the best for our friends.”

Any second now-

“Commander Mahariel?”

“I remembered why I know your name,” Theron said.

“Ah, you’ve heard of me before! How flattering—”

“You’re the one who set Rinna up.”

He was calm.

He wasn’t scared any longer. He wasn’t worried. He wasn’t even angry. He was purely, cleanly enraged, and perfectly clearheaded about it.

Alistair had asked him to be calm, so he was.

They’d made it to the Wardens.

They’d made it to the Wardens and the Crows had Zevran, just like he’d thought. The Crows were trying to steal him back.

The Crows were going to die.

The seconds of shock on Valisti’s face were very gratifying. The last few moments were probably
shock at being run through and not the knowledge that he had completely misread the situation, but still.

The Crows had Zevran.

The Crows were going to die.

The Crows had Zevran and the Crows were going to-

“Theron,” Alistair said. “He’s dead.”

He took a breath, a deeper one than he’d been expecting, and looked at Valisti’s corpse.

“Okay,” he said.

“Some of the Crows ran away instead of fighting.”

“Okay.”

“Are we going inside now?”

“Okay.”

It took him a couple seconds to realize that that wasn’t an answer. Alistair seemed concerned, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“We’re going to find him.”

“He said,” Theron said. “He said the Wardens-”

“Yeah. Yeah.”

“Open this Blighted soddin’ gate, you sun-struck nughumping excuses for bronto shit!”

“There might be a back entrance-” Alistair started to say.

“They do not deserve our courtesy in this matter. Move.”

Alistair led him away from the gate, down the road a ways. Morrigan stepped up to the old wood and examined it for a few moments, then pried up a cobblestone, broke it, and started tearing lengths of cloth off the dead Crows. By the time she’d walked back to them, the broken cobblestone was completely swathed in fabric.

She handed it to Alistair.

“Throw it,” she commanded, pointing at the gates.

“Uh-”

“‘Tis I who am the mage here, not you! It must hit the gates. Throw it!”

Alistair reared back and pitched the bundle of rock and cloth at the gates. Morrigan set the cloth on fire seconds after it had left his hand. She surrounded it in a forcefield halfway through it’s arc and began the motion to cast another spell.

“And how is any of this supposed to-”
Her third spell hit and everyone but Morrigan ducked as the gate of Fort Palace exploded in fire with a shockwave that sent tremors through the street. Firey foot-long splinters of wood clattered faintly down into the courtyard of the Warden’s fortress, and ruins of the gate still hung shattered, ablaze, on their hinges.

Morrigan entered first, striding ahead of the rest of them and sweeping through the destruction she’d engineered with no care for the flames.

“Hiding behind your walls, hm?” she called, voice echoing around the empty courtyard. “Mighty Wardens, brought low by the threats of mere mortals? You would leave your own brothers-in-arms to assassins for fear of their blades? Do you not fight darkspawn! Do you not know their Taint! Cowards! Mewling pups!”

“Commander Aminti!” Alistair yelled. “Commander Aminti, you have a lot to answer for!”

Silence still. Theron barely noticed. He’d been in enough castles and fortresses now to recognize what a dungeon entrance looked like.

And this one was open.

It wasn’t a very deep dungeon, or even particularly dark. It was twenty steps down, a straight stairway, cut out of the rock of the outcrop the old city sat on. The first room was the jailer’s rest- a heavy old table stood here, recently cleaned, with five chairs scattered about. Someone had left a card game in progress.

The cell block was off to the side. They looked entirely unused. Except for the one.

“Satheraan-”

He was sitting up, slumped forward, and didn’t respond.

“Satheraan. Satheraan!”

He was chained up and he wasn’t responding and the calm was gone now, and the rage, this was pure fear because they had been here before and-

“Morrigan! Morrigan! Alistair! Oghren!”

The cell bars were between him and Zevran and he had his whole arm through but he couldn’t reach Zevran was too far away.

“Stone, anybody learned how to pick locks?”

“There have to be keys somewhere.”

“Satheraan-!”

“Yelling will not help.”

“Morrigan what’s wrong with him you have to-”

“I must do nothing for the moment, for I have expended much power simply to get us here. ’Tis clear even from here that he has been ill-treated by the Crows, and that is the most I can say.”

“Do you think Valisti-?”
“Better go check.”

“Satheraan, Zevran, ma’sal’shiral irthad ma’am, dasern har, dasern haraan, nadas esathasin, dirthad ma’am-”

“‘Twill do no good pressing yourself into the bars so. Come away.”

“dasern tajdas dirthad ma’am- d’ar tajdar Mythal, tajdar Sylaise, dasern tajdas ithi’eth dasern tajdas geyla ithi’renara- anas re’da’mar man ha’vhaela’garaan, d’ar- ”

“He will live, Theron, there is no need to invoke your gods.”

“He’s not saying anything he’s not moving.”

“He will be fine.”

“Got them!”

He let Alistair unlock the cell because he’d found the keys and because he was the one with the steady hands. As soon as it opened he was on his knees next to Zevran, stripping off his gauntlets, reaching up to cup his face and lift his head so he could see-

“Zevran please-”

A blank stare. Nothing more.

He’d failed. He’d failed again and here they were again and he’d failed Zevran so much, he’d been hurt so much and he hadn’t stopped it.

Morrigan was checking him over, no glow of the minor healing magics she knew around her hands yet, just the herbalist’s knowledge she’d acquired over her long years in the Wilds and after, traveling. Alistair still had the keys and there was a soft clank as he drew one of the shackles off.

And- a reaction, finally, as he gently rubbed the chafed skin of Zevran’s wrist and bent his fingers to make sure they still worked.

Zevran stirred, swaying slightly, and blinked.

“Dre’ming,” he slurred.

“No,” Theron told him. “No; no, vhenan, you’re awake.”

“…‘tiva….”

“Yes, you’re still in Antiva- we got a letter from the Wardens we came to make sure you were all right-”

“W’rdens… Crows…”

“They’re dead, Satheraan, I promise they’re dead, they kept ambushing us but we’re fine, if any more come we’ll kill them too-”

The other shackle came off and Zevran tilted into him, head dropping to rest on his shoulder.

“Satheraan- no, no, keep your eyes open-”
“Let him sleep,” Morrigan cut him off. “There is nothing that cannot be healed better later should he rest now.”

“But-”

“His problem is not sleeping, Theron. ’Tis an easy enough way to break someone. I am surprised he manages to speak so much, and so clearly.”

“He’s-”

“Just listen to her, Theron,” Alistair urged. “We should get out of here. It’ll be harder carrying him, and even if he does stay awake we’d have to hold him up. We’ll move faster if someone can carry him-”

“I’ll carry him!”

“I know you will. Come on-”

The arm Zevran wasn’t leaning on moved. Barely- just enough to indicate direction and intent, nothing more.

“Satheraan?”

“…ou’the city.”

“Of course. Of course we’ll get you out of the city-”

“R’alto,” he insisted, pressing closer for emphasis. “Need… Joining.”

Panic shot through Theron’s already-racing heart. It took a week or so to sail to Antiva to Amaranthine and another week back- he’d been here two weeks at the least, two weeks was a long time to be Tainted but he’d survived longer than that between losing Tamlen to the Eluvian and getting his own Joining at Ostagar.

The only thing he could think as he ran his hands over Zevran’s hair, his exposed skin, searching for any sign of the Taint, was how much it had hurt. He’d felt like he was being burned from his heart outwards, the pain of it had burning in his blood and his flesh, until the Joining.

He’d frozen clean through, in those moments.

Theron knew Wardens ran hot. Zevran had commented happily on it more than once- but had been five years, and he still felt cold, at his core. Likely he would until his Calling, when the Taint finally burned through the ice keeping it back.

And the Crows had- the Crows had done what they did, on top of that, and yes Zevran was alive but-

“Hey,” Oghren said, and gently moved Theron’s roaming hand back to its former position cradling Zevran’s head. “Ain’t him that needs it. Can’t be. We’d feel it. You know we would.”

Theron took shuddering breath and tried to convince himself of that. He couldn’t feel any Taint that wasn’t locked in a Warden’s thinning ice here.

But.

“We’ll get what we need,” he promised Zevran. “We will. We’ll- the Antivan Wardens will have it,
I’ll—"

Alistair put a hand on his free shoulder and pushed down when he tried to lay Zevran on the floor and stand.

“Alistair—”

“Theron, I need you to look me in the eye and truthfully tell me you won’t kill Warden-Commander Aminti if you see him.”

“Alistair—”

“Your head’s been all over the place, Theron, and right now? I don’t trust you not to kill him.”

“I’m not—”

“Think about it before you tell me that,” Alistair demanded. “He’ll keep it in his office, like you do, or maybe in his Constable’s. Maybe he’ll keep hiding from us but more likely we’ll run into him. Maybe we’ll even have to fight him for the Joining. Can you really fight him, or even just see him, and not kill him?”

Theron had never met the Warden-Commander of Antiva. He had no idea what he looked like or how old he was, how tall or short or how strong.

But he could still feel, very clearly, what it would be like to hold him down and choke him to death; to take the small mercy knife he’d been gifted when he’d begun his apprenticeship to Hahren Paival and carve the wounds into his face and chest that any Dalish would know said killer, clan-kin-slayer, traitor; to drag his corpse to the top of the fortress walls and string him up for display in the ruined gates.

“Yeah,” Alistair said. “You stay here with Zevran. Oghren and I will get it. If we see him, I’ll punch him for you, all right?”

“Oh,” Morrigan told him as they left. “They will not be long. Stay with your dog. He will be better defense than you attempting to exchange our assassin for your sword, should we encounter more Crows.”

Theron just stood there silently, cradling Zevran close and listening to his sleeping breaths.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who’s interested - Theron’s long bit of El’vhen in the dungeon translates to: “Satheraan, Zevran, ma’sal’shiral answer me, I’m scared, I’m so scared, you have to be okay talk to me, I really need you to talk to me– I beg Mythal, I beg Sylaise, I need him to be safe I need to hold him again, I prostrate myself before you, I-"
Chapter 25

He woke up warm, with a comfortable, heavy weight atop him.

This could not be-

He opened his eyes and looked down.

“There is a mabari on the bed.”

“I will not apologize for it not being Theron. 'Tis… unnerving, the way he is now so emotional about things. He was much more pleasant company during the Blight.”

“He was uncertain and cautious and grieving during the Blight,” Zevran corrected her. “What has he done?”

“Oh, a great many things, these past months,” Morrigan said. “I shall make him tell you of them. Most recently we have left a swathe of carnage of Crows through Antiva City to retrieve you.”

It must have happened- it had to have happened. The last thing he remembered was Valisti telling him that Theron had arrived in the city, and then trying so hard to stay awake, desperate to know what had become of him.

"That, however, was unavoidable. When did you last eat?”

He didn’t remember, and Morrigan shoved a platter of bread at him.

“Eat. Drink. And you shall have a bath, you are filthy and you smell.”

He hadn’t noticed before, but now that she’d told him, he was acutely aware of how lank his hair was and the build-up of grime and oils and flecks of dried blood on his skin. He shoved bread in his mouth and tried to not exist as Morrigan imperiously demanded a bath from the inn servants and then ordered them and Fen’harel out of the room once they were done.

“Soak,” she commanded, before sweeping out herself. “Should you hurt still after, I shall heal you again.”

Hot water was wonderful, and stripping the filth off with soap made it even better.

He had soap lather in his hands and was about to clean his face when the silence of the room struck him, suddenly. It oppressively empty, with only him here, and everything seemed very far away, exposing but somehow still suffocating.

This… it was entirely possible that none of this was real.

It would make more sense for it not to be. He had no memory of leaving the dungeon Valisti had held him in, after all.

Zevran looked around the room, marking small details that the Fade might forget to keep, then closed his eyes to soap his face. He held his breath once he was done and dunked his face into the water, meaning to stay there until he ran out of air.

Or maybe after, if this was the Fade. Likely that would break the dream-
“Satheraan?”

It sounded like Theron, and it looked like Theron when he lifted his face from the water. The right eyes, the right set of his mouth, the right breadth of shoulders and the right way his hair wisped out of its proper place when he had braided it up and back to keep it out of the way.

If this was a dream, the only thing he had to wake up to was Crows. Crows; and yet another person he loved dead from Claudio Valisti’s scheming. He’d be taken into House Valisti. Unless they left him unattended with knives or poisons immediately-unlikely-it would be some time before he could come up with a way to die. He couldn’t go back to Amaranthine, not if Theron was dead and not without endangering yet more Wardens.

He would rather have this lie than that reality. This was a dream he would be content dying in. He could die loved and happy, not enslaved and grieving.

Still, his smile was weak and shaky, he knew.

“I do not know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Theron told him, coming closer and kneeling by the tub. “You don’t- you’re here. That’s enough.”

“But-”

“You don’t. You never owe me anything, Satheraan.”

“Of course I do.”

“No. There are things I want, but you never have to give them to me.”

“I owe you my life.”

“Satheraan-”

“Theron,” he said. “You did not kill me when you had every reason to-”

“Of course I didn’t, you said they were hurting you and you wanted to get out-”

“You gave me a home and safety enough to learn better than the Crows taught me. You crossed a line you had always refused before to save me in Kirkwall.”

“I didn’t-”

“I am alive,” Zevran said. “You saved me. I owe you acknowledgement for these things, if nothing else.”

Theron wasn’t looking at him.

“A-”

“Please,” he said suddenly. “Let me take care of you?”

Zevran found himself surprised at the question, and slightly worried.

“You have nothing to make up for-”
“Please,” Theron begged, and— it had been almost four months.

It would make Theron feel better.

Zevran handed him the soap.

The first touch of Theron’s soaped fingers in his hair choked him up.

"Satheraan?"

“Satheraan?”

“It is fine. I am fine.”

This was the hard part of this thing they did, and it had been years since it had been this hard from the beginning to let himself just feel Theron caring about him. He wasn’t supposed to listen to the Crow-trained anxiety that his proper role was always giving, never receiving.

Theron was working soap into the roots of his hair and it was so difficult not to turn around and convince him into bed for a less vulnerable intimacy. Every scrape of Theron’s short nails against his scalp made him tenser around the shoulders and tightened the pressure in his chest and throat.

Ridiculous— it hadn’t been like this since they’d first gotten together and so many of the simplest affections and kindnesses had wound his nerves up tighter than a crossbow. Four months shouldn’t have put him back so far.

Cry. Just cry, it will feel better afterwards.

But he wasn’t able to make himself lose his composure until Theron bent him over to rinse his hair. The rush of water poured from the jug, running down his cheeks, brought the silent tears out. His throat loosened immediately, and he could breathe fully again.

What he really wanted to do was grab Theron’s hands and pull him down across his shoulders, to be weighted down and held, but he was being prompted to get him out of the tub and stand on the old rug placed next to it to be dried off.

“Too much?” Theron asked quietly, stroking the lines of his face, when he turned from pulling the drying cloths closer and saw him crying. It was a familiar set of motions— thumbs across his cheekbones and fingers along his jaw.

Zevran shook his head and focused on the tiny movements of the thick muscles in Theron’s forearms as his hands moved instead, revealed by his rolled-up sleeves. That was a silly decision, long sleeves of Fereldan wool this far north, even in the winter.

“It has just… been a long time. Since you have touched me.”

Theron inched up and kissed him, tenderly enough to get Zevran lean into it.

“Tell me what you want,” Theron said, pulling back.

It took him a moment to think.

“Finish here. Then- pin me down?”

“Yes.”

Theron dried him off slowly, lingering everywhere, the slide of soft cloth followed by the trail of a bare hand. The tension he was still carrying started to melt away slowly, but he was still carrying
most of it by the time Theron was kneeling at his feet, wiping away the last of the water and having him step into pants.

“Am I stealing your clothes?” Zevran asked, amused. He knew they were Theron’s- the pants weren’t quite big enough, and the shirt that had just been tugged over his head was far too wide across the shoulders and not long enough in the torso.

“The only ones you have are dirty.”

“Untrue. You have given me these; they are mine now and they are clean.”

Theron smiled a little and got him a chair to sit in, then put socks on him. It was really too much in this weather, especially the woolen socks, but the heavy materials were keeping the warmth of the bath in his bones. And he did love the feel of worn-in socks.

He closed his eyes and smiled, sighing happily when Theron moved around behind the chair and started combing his hair out with his fingers, working out the water and the tangles.

“No,” he said, and grabbed Theron’s hands to stop him when he started to separate sections to braid into his usual style. “Bed.”

He flopped down on the mattress a moment later. Theron curled up on top of him and Zevran melted all at once, every scrap of remaining tension fleeing and leaving him boneless and warm and happily muzzy-headed, as though he’d reached the perfect stage of drunk.

“Feeling better?” Theron asked quietly.

“Mm.”

“Good. Me too.”

He must have dozed off, because he woke up, likely only an hour or so later by the level of light. Theron had shifted to press an ear against his heart to hear it beat, and had a hand resting lighting against his neck, feeling his pulse.

“You’re really all right,” Theron whispered, voice breaking when Zevran wrapped his arms around him and kissed the top of his head.

“Yes, I am,” he said, and unbidden his words were followed up by the thought: And this is real.

This… this was real, yes it was; Theron was really here and Zevran really had him in his arms again; he’d really gotten away from the Crows and so had Theron, safely-

Zevran flipped them over and kissed him fiercely. Theron’s immediate response wasn’t unexpected-their physical boundaries with each other were well-known and comfortable now- but the interplay of thighs and hips as he tangled their legs was very, very compelling.

“Are we doing this now?” Theron asked, breathlessly, nudging him away so he could speak.

“Do you want to?” Zevran asked, nuzzling into his jawline.

“I want to. But I have things to tell you.”

“Are they perhaps about how I am-”
“Revasina made it to Hallarenis’haminathe.”

He stopped, and rested his forehead, not his lips, against Theron’s neck. Theron wrapped his arms around him.

“Oh,” Zevran said, uncomfortable with the anxious fluttery feeling in his ribs. “Are they… pleasant people?”

“I’m sure they’re fine as a whole.”

“Theron-”

“It was hard not to fight your grandparents,” he said. “They were very judgmental about your mother and our relationship, and they’ve never even seen you before.”

“I’ve met someone who knew my mother,” Zevran said. It was a diversion and he knew it- he’d known the name of his mother’s clan for some years now, but he’d never really thought of going looking for them, much less considered the fact that he could have still-living family there. “She was very informative. My father-”

He still wasn’t entirely comfortable with this fact. Theron waited quietly, squeezing him reassuringly, until he was ready to finish the sentence.

“My father was a Crow,” Zevran told him. “Apparently I have his looks.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Adan. House Escipo. They killed him, for daring to have a kept woman and a- a son he loved.”

“Satheraan…”

“I knew my mother had to work in the brothel to pay off a debt, but I had no idea it as a debt to the Crows. Ashera didn’t say, but I know-”

He bit back a sob.

“I knew how it works, it was a debt the price of training a Crow, too much for her to ever pay off; and the House Master for Escipo, he told my mother that he would accept me as payment, and she said no, but I still.”

He pounded the mattress with a fist. It was unsatisfactorily yielding.

“You’re out of it now,” Theron reminded him quietly.

“It is stupid and I know that it is but if- if she had just given me to him and gone back to her clan-”

“She wouldn’t have been a good mother. And they would have just had more opportunity to hurt you.”

“As though I was better off in the brothel!” Zevran said viciously, without thinking, and immediately regretted it when Theron asked: “What? Satheraan, what-”

He rolled off Theron onto his side, facing away.

“Satheraan-”
“No.”

He reached out, Zevran shoved his hand away.

“I want to help—”

“There are things that cannot be helped! You cannot fix everything, Theron! And there are some things that you should not try to!”

“If it’s hurting you—”

“*Of course* it is hurting me! I have been hurt, but that does not mean I wish you to *do* something about it! I am capable of handling my own problems!”

“I want you to be happy.”

“Well I am *angry!* I will— I am no longer willing to be merely *grateful* that things were not worse for me, I will not try to be *happy*—I am *furious* and they were *wrong*!”

He wanted to get up and hit something. He wanted to break something. But that was wasteful, and they’d have to pay the inn for anything he broke.

“You shouldn’t be happy they hurt you,” Theron said. “But I don’t want you to be hurting all the time—”

“So you will dictate my feelings to me now? Wonderful! How do you want me, ser, I live to please; my apologies that I have not kept you suitably *entertained,* Commander, shall I relate some amusing—”

“Zevran.”

He looked over his shoulder, sighed, and rolled onto his back. He was still irritated, but Theron was crying, and he couldn’t just leave that be. He tugged Theron over and Theron clung to him, head buried in his chest.

“I want you to be your own person,” Theron said, words muffled. “You *should* be and I’m glad you’re upset about it now, because I know you’ve been hurt a lot, but if I can help and I *don’t*—”

“I do not *want* you to help, Theron,” Zevran told him, staring at the ceiling. “Five years ago, four years ago— even three, even after I toppled Arainai spent my time trying to take apart what the Crows taught me— I needed you to help then. Not now.”

“Oh,” Theron said, quietly enough that the word was almost lost. “Do, um. Should I leave, then?”

“And when did I imply *that*?”

“You don’t need me,” Theron said.

“I do not need your *help,* which does not mean that I do not need you,” Zevran told him, irritation rising again. He was not *listening,* today. “I love you. I need you— I need you for *that,* to love me, and listen to me, and *care.*”

“I *do* that’s why I want to help—”

“That may be what you are *saying* but it is not what you are *doing,*” he snapped at him. “Stop. Stop trying to explain. I *know* why you are doing it but that does not make it better!”
“I don’t want to fail you.”

“You are failing me right now.”

They lay there in silence for a few minutes before Theron made a small noise- he was trying to hide his sobbing.

“What?”

“I don’t know,” Theron said miserably. “I don’t know I want to do what you want me to but it feels wrong like I’m not doing it right and- and I wish that you’d never been hurt at all and that you’d never hurt again and I want to make that happen!”

“That is entirely unreasonable.”

“I know!”

“Well,” Zevran said after a moment. “I suppose I appreciate the thought. It is a nice thing to think about. But I am always going to hurt, Theron. That cannot be changed.”

“I want to protect you.”

“You cannot protect me from my past. And there are things that I must do without you, and I will get hurt and you will not be there, and that is all right. I am not- I am not delicate, and I am not fragile, and I do not need to be coddled. It is nice to be taken care of sometimes. But I do not want or need you standing between the world and I.”

“Okay,” Theron said, and moved so that he was tucked up under Zevran’s chin. “Okay. Do you want to talk about it?”

He didn’t, really. He hadn’t even meant to bring it up, however obliquely.

But he’d have to tell Theron sometime, he realized. He’d managed to avoid it for five years, but he’d have to explain Tiar and Diego…

“Not now,” Zevran told him. “Tell me more about Revasina.”

“Your grandparents’ names are Sora and Myathis,” Theron said. “Your mother was a crafter for the clan, and after she left her parents had another child. Your uncle Rajrad is First to his Keeper. He’s married to a woman from Clan Lavellan, who were in the Marches before coming to the city, and they have two daughters, both mages, Adhlea and Nion. His wife’s name is Ellana. I like her, but her brother is a piece of shit and his opinions are even worse-”

Zevran stroked his hair to calm him down.

“I sense a story,” he said, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

“I fought him,” Theron said.

“I’m sure you did, to know what his opinions are-”

“No. I fought him. I went out to the challenge field and I issued an open one and he was one of the people who answered.”

“You- wait, Theron, you dueled all comers?”
“There was *politics* and people were *wrong* and it was- it was personal.”

“Really,” Zevran said flatly, and waited for an explanation.

Theron sat up and looked down at him, expression hard to read.

“It was all about who’s allowed to be Dalish, and who *should* be Dalish, and what it all means, now that we have a city again, and- we’ve always been asking those questions and disagreeing about them but it got a lot bigger and there was actually something that *started* it this time, and there are clans that aren’t speaking to each other right now because of it—”

“The *point*, Theron.”

“You were lied to, your mother didn’t die in that brothel, she got sold to Orlais.”

That was- no. No, it couldn’t be, his mother was *dead*.

“Maybe she is *now*, I don’t know, but she wasn’t then- she turned up two years later at a clan in Orlais and they took her in for a bit but when she told the Keeper what her life had been like he kicked her out—”

*His mother.*

“You have *siblings*, Satheraan, she- she ended up with a son by the man she was sold to, Damien, she gave him to this friend she had, Tanis, she was supposed to be in Lydes and I wrote a letter and sent it off with Nelle and Leonie to see if they can find her and ask what happened to your mother; but she turned up *again* after that four years later in the Dales, looking for a clan who’d take her and her daughter in and train her- Salladin- she was a mage. No one took her and no one’s heard about her since, but I’m trying to find out—”

“I have- I have *siblings*?”

“Yes.”

What was- what was he supposed to think about that? His mother had been *dead*, he’d never had any other family; but now there were grandparents and an uncle and cousins in Hallarenis’haminathe, and a *brother* somewhere in Orlais, and a mage *sister* out there somewhere, with- with his *mother*-

He sat up as well, and Theron held his hands when he pitched forward and leaned up against him.

“I was thirteen,” Zevran realized, counting the years. “I was *thirteen* and Arainai had already claimed me, the last anyone saw her. She was *alive*.”

“Yes.”

“This is an *awful* hope, you realize this—”

“I’m trying to find her,” Theron said again. “If I can’t find her I’m going to try to find out what happened to her, and Salladin, and Damien. And you can come to Hallarenis’haminathe, your grandparents weren’t nice at all but your uncle wants to meet you, and so does Ellana. And your cousins are young still- *really* young, since you and Rajrad are about the same age. You might actually be a little older than him—”

Zevran laughed weakly.
“Imagine that. Older than my own uncle.”

“There have been stranger families.”

“Hm,” he said. “Thank you. For going to see them. And for looking.”

“I couldn’t have done anything else.”

Zevran took a deep breath. Family. He had so much family. And- a chance, to get some of it back.

“It is amusing, actually,” he said after some time, when he felt more settled. This was turning into a harrowing conversation, and he could feel himself approaching the edge of exhaustion.

“I really don’t see how,” Theron said.

Zevran sat up and tried to keep a smile off his face as he thought about how Theron would react to the news he had, about family.

“Well, you see, I have something to tell you as well. In Rialto-”

“There are darkspawn, is everyone all right? You said, when we got you, that we needed a Joining, and-”

“Yes, everyone involved is fine, I know about these things,” Zevran said. “And all the darkspawn are dead. But it was an incident with an Eluvian and I met your brother.”

Theron’s expression did some interesting things as he processed what he’d just been told.

“Tamlen-”

“Do you have another brother? He seemed to be doing well, he has been killing darkspawn these last five years. I saw him tear a hurlock’s throat out with his teeth. It was terrifying. I appreciate his style.”

“He- you’re sure it was him?” Theron asked helplessly. “It’s been five years and if he needs the Joining-”

“He said it was him,” Zevran said, shrugging. “I was inclined to believe him. As for the Taint, apparently it is something about the Eluvians? I do not know, but he seemed to be saying that they… talk to him. You shall have to ask him.”

“I should have brought Merrill.”

“Merrill is in Kirkwall?”

“She and the Amells came to Vigil’s Keep,” Theron told him. “After everything in Kirkwall happened. Nathaniel panicked, a lot, because Alistair and I were in Hallarenis’haminathe and Merrill came with Sabrae and they’d cleaned out the Circle there.”

“Cleaned out’- you mean they took in the mages?” Zevran asked, hoping it would be the correct answer, because the other option was-

“No, they took the books. And the artifacts. And the lyrium.”

“Theron, amora, my dear- are you trying to antagonize the Chantry?”
“They did it first,” he said huffily. “The Grand Cleric of Amaranthine threatened to have every mage in Vigil’s Keep and the Wardens Tranquilized for taking Anders back if we didn’t let the Templars have oversight on the Wardens!”

“And?”

“And Nathaniel told her no and accidentally promoted Anders and I don’t think he’s been calm since. He’s even gloomier than usual. He’s convinced the Chantry is going to kill us all, even though nothing happened.”

“Just because nothing has happened yet does not mean that nothing will happen,” Zevran told him. “You will be the death me, the things you get up to. Do try not to die, yes? I am certain I would make tragically-romantic widower-”

“We’re not married.”

“Yes, I know, but given past experience I am terrible at dealing with loss, and it would actually be an improvement if I were to imitate a ballad and lie about distraught in a bower for weeks, crying my eyes out and refusing to eat, or swooning dramatically at the merest hint of my dead love. Or perhaps I will haunt the Vigil in grief-induced madness-”

“I want to get married,” Theron said.

Zevran was still working on a way to incorporate ‘throwing one’s self dramatically across the site of your lover’s pyre’ and ‘wallowing in melancholy and sighing out windows at the remembrances of love lost’, so it took a moment to realize what Theron had just said to him, and refocus.

“Pardon?”

“I want to get married,” Theron repeated.

“…to me, or… generally?”

Theron’s face fell.

“To you,” he said, sad and sincere, and Zevran had to suppress the urge to look away from the depth of the feeling, there. “Who else would there be?”

“You have a whole city of Dalish possibilities, and there are city elves enough, and certainly humans who do not find being an elf or Dalish a detriment. Alistair and Morrigan are-”

“Why would I want ‘possibilities’ when I have you?” Theron asked, and Zevran couldn’t keep his eyes from sliding away, this time. “I love you. I want you. I’m not leaving you.”

“You can love more than one person at once,” Zevran said, looking at the bedsheets. They were decent cotton, off-white from natural coloring and not stains. The coverlet was woven into strong, warm geometrical blocks, a little more Rivaini in style than Antivan. “Certainly while you are married to only one. Being married to someone else is not exclusive of still having me.”

“Why would I marry anyone but you?”

He shrugged.

“You fall in love again. You are an arl- there are politics to be had. Convenience, even. It may not be legal for elves and humans to marry, but Morrigan is the mother of your child, and such informal
marriages are often ignored in the lower classes and occasionally tolerated in the very high. It would
give Kieran opportunities he might not otherwise have, if he were to remain an unacknowledged
bastard—"

“Do you want to marry me?” Theron asked.

“I,” Zevran said, and froze up.

“Don’t say yes if you don’t want to,” Theron told him. He was doing a terrible job at pretending he
wouldn’t be hurt if ‘no’ was the answer. The middle-distance stare gave him away. Zevran had seen
the same expression on people waiting for a hit they were resigned to taking.

*Did* he want to?

“Zevran?”

“I- if you wish to marry me, I will marry you.”

“It’s not an *obligation*!”

“I did not say it was?” Zevran said. “Married or no, I am content so long as you care for me.”

“Don’t you have any *feelings* about it!” Theron exclaimed. “What have you imagined it like!”

“I haven’t, really,” Zevran told him, taken aback.

“You *never*—”

“Why would I? Crows do not marry.”

“You’ve been free of them for *five years,*” Theron reminded him. It was just a touch accusing.

“And?”

“And you’ve said you weren’t one any longer for most of that time, and you had *me,* and we’re
*sal’shiral* and you just *didn’t*- you never even *idly considered it*?”

“Is not the commitment rather built into being *sal’shiral*?” Zevran asked. “It certainly seems implied.
A touch destined, yes, when you take it literally as ‘*my soul’s journey*’; but the aspects of the journey
being both *to* said person as well as *with* said person—”

*Banal’n ha’gestla!*”

Oh no.

“Theron! Theron, how did I offend you—”

Theron had shoved himself off the bed in his anger and starting storming towards the door. He
stopped now, paused, turned.

“Five years,” he said, back on the verge of tears. “*Five years,* and you asked me for a ‘*possibility of
some future for us*’, and I *gave* it to you, and you never even *thought* about us, in it?”

Zevran moved to the side if the bed, closer to him, but uncertain if he was welcome any further than
hanging his legs off the mattress.
“Of course I think about us in it,” he told Theron. “I imagine our future much as our- well, it is our present no longer, I suppose. Living in the Vigil, you being Arl-Commander and I whatever you need me to be, and we are always in love. I am happy, to live such. Why would I imagine it changed?”

“Because we could be-”

Theron made an angry sweep with his hands, frustrated enough to start losing his grip on his words.

“We could be *more!* We could be- people would have to respect it! Us!”

Zevran almost opened his mouth to say ‘*whores don’t get respect*’. They withered away as he realized what he was about to say about himself, tongue curling in disgust behind his teeth.

Oh. *That* was it.

_Stupid,* he berated himself. _He will not care. He will cry and hug you and say he loves you and become even more determined to marry you._

…he really was going to have to tell Theron. Soon. It shouldn’t have felt like such an insurmountable task, like something fraught with danger, but it did.

Theron continued speaking, oblivious to Zevran’s realization.

“They’d know we meant it! And y-”

He bit back on the word he had begun to say, going stiff and wide-eyed, like he’d been spooked.

They’d both had an unpleasant thought, apparently.

“I think,” Theron said after a moment, so quietly Zevran almost couldn’t hear him. “I think, I should-”

He fidgeted uncomfortably and glanced towards the door.

“I believe we both have things to think about,” Zevran agreed, carefully keeping his voice even and neutral.

Theron stood there for a few moments more, then stepped forward and leaned down so swiftly that Zevran wondered, during the kiss, just how scared the other man was of being turned away.

“I love you,” Theron told him, after he broke the kiss. “I didn’t- it wasn’t supposed to go like this. Later?”

“Tonight,” Zevran told him. That seemed like time enough. He had questions to ask. “After dinner.”

Of course, the problem with ‘*later*’ was that they shared the same friends. When Zevran emerged from his room to look for Morrigan, his bath water cleared away and his clothes taken for the laundry, his armor and swords that the others had recovered from Fort Palace somewhere along the way strapped on over the clothes Theron had given to him to borrow, she was down in the back coach yard with the others, leaning against the wall in a patch of shade. Alistair was sitting on the ground next to her, shirt off and leaning over his knees.

Theron and Oghren were still out in the yard, practicing fighting around each other rather than sparring. They’d apparently decided that it was too hot to practice with their armor on, so this was
the safer option.

Theron faltered partway through his move as Zevran arrived, attention torn. Oghren elbowed him in the hip, and he turned away.

Zevran looked away, too.

“Overheated?” he asked Alistair.

“Yeah,” his friend told him. “Are you going to talk about whatever happened between you and him?”

“I was here for Morrigan, actually,” he told Alistair, feeling his false smile slip on without really having meant to use it.

“Right,” Alistair said. “If you two don’t do it yourselves, we’re going to make you do it. Fair warning.”

“I am sure that we will be capable of handling our own problems.”

Alistair snorted.

“Shall we walk?” Zevran asked Morrigan, ready to be gone.

“Hm.”

They were staying in one of the large way-towns between Rialto and Antiva City, Zevran discovered. Nassura, he thought, but it hard to tell. Way-towns all tended to look the same, with their preponderances of inns and plethora of merchants and peddlers and caravans.

Every single one of those merchants and peddlers and caravan guards stayed far away from them. It was more than the usual distance afforded to a Crow- that was perhaps arm-length. This was room enough to have a close-quarters fight.

Surely Morrigan wasn’t that intimidating. Yes, there was no mistaking her for anything but a barbarian apostate, with her stitched-together outfit and her staff, and from experience he knew that there were people who found her golden eyes deeply unsettling; but still.

“Did you threaten someone?” he asked.

“Not directly,” she said. “But we were not quiet about our passing. Undoubtedly the story of the bloody Dalish and the Wilds Witch with her wolf familiar carrying in a Crow has not gone unrepeated.”

“And what of Alistair and Oghren?”

“A foreign human and a dwarf are not half so interesting. Why remember them?”

True enough.

What a mess this would be, though. With the way Antivans spread news and rumor, the story had certainly gotten to Llomerryn by now. Within the week, official spy networks across Thedas would be reporting it back.

“Anora will not be pleased.”
“The queen may keep her opinions to herself,” Morrigan sneered. “I have no care for them.”

“It is not wise to antagonize royalty so unless you have a plan to replace them, or control them. Theron has neither, and he would never develop them. You all must be cautious.”

“And you must not?”

“Her Majesty likes me,” Zevran said. “And that may be what saves this situation.”

“So you are returning with us, then.”

They were passing a printer’s apprentice out with the news. Someone had broken out the massive type- people could probably read ‘CHAOS IN THE CITY’ from three buildings down the street.

Zevran took one, and was shocked to find that ‘Dozens of Crows Dead in the Streets’ was not the subtitle of the news sheet, but was sharing equal billing alongside ‘Maker’s Hand Moves in the Circle’.

“And what do the rumors say?” Morrigan asked. “Theron is the only among us who can speak any Antivan, and he claims an inability to read it. I am not sure I believe him.”

“He was supposed to work on that,” Zevran said absently, scanning the sheet for the general points. “It is not that he cannot read Antivan. He can only read in the Justinian script, not in the common one.”

“Unexpected of him.”

“Dalish books are only in Justinian, and posted notices on Chanter’s boards are taken down in both, and the business of the nobility and the Chantry and literature is in Justinian. He has never had to learn.”

He stopped, then reread the last sentence he’d seen again, just to make sure he hadn’t mistaken a word. Or a phrase. Or all of it.

“Trouble?” Morrigan asked. “Or outrageous falsehood?”

“‘Last week Commander Isalesio of the Templar Order and First Enchanter Illermo of the Circle of Magi were seen slipping into the Grand Cathedral in the City, and later in the day the Grand Cleric herself was escorted to the Circle’,” Zevran read out to her. “‘The City waited with baited breath as rumors of blood magic and demons began to circulate. Five days ago the Grand Cleric called for a country-wide conclave to pray for Andraste’s guidance to the Maker’s Will. All across Antiva the monasteries and abbeys have been filled with song; in the country the lesser Chantries made do with their laity as their Mothers and Sisters locked themselves in their cells; in the cities have all in orders gathered themselves in conclave in the greatest of the Chantries. Antiva has been answered!’.”

Morrigan snorted.

And here, now, was the sentence that made him stop.

“‘That the Tranquil of the Circle have been restored to their former states is no less than a miracle, a manifestation of the Maker’s Will in our own time!’.”

“…Impossible,” Morrigan said, after a moment. “‘Tis ridiculous rumors and blind faith.”
The next paragraph was about the Grand Cleric’s speech the day before on the matter. It was very florid, in the way news was, and while it was not out of range of possibility that the anecdote of the Tranquil weeping ‘Justice! Justice!’ as ‘the hand of the Maker acted upon them’ was entirely invented and meant as a rhetorical device to bolster the Grand Cleric’s declarations about the decay and corruption of the Orlesian Chantry…

He had his suspicions, was all. Very strong suspicions.

“I would suggest returning to Ferelden with all reasonable haste,” he told Morrigan. “The Grand Cleric of Antiva has declared a full break with the Orlesian Chantry. There will be Templars and far worse things sent here, soon. And I doubt that this will be an easy transition, if it occurs at all.”

“You still have not answered me,” Morrigan said. “Shall you be returning with us?”

Zevran folded the news sheet up into quarters and stowed it in his armor. He could see the way things could fall out, in his head- the next step for the Grand Cleric would be to officially endorse Rosso Noche’s dedication to breaking from the Orlesian Chantry. ‘Staunch defenders of Antiva’, ‘seeking the light when all others had been complacent in darkness’, that sort of thing. Chantry endorsement and continued disorder in the Crows would secure the middle class small merchants, artisans, and intellectuals Rosso Noche had always drawn from, gathering those to them who hadn’t yet committed. It would sway the lower class more towards Rosso Noche as well- perhaps not enough for Rosso Noche to take in all of them, but enough to encourage those who had quietly agreed to be louder about it. Some of the smaller and less-powerful merchant houses might try to align themselves with Rosso Noche in hopes of being left alone, or revenge on the larger houses, or simply a greater share in things once everything was done and settled. The greater merchant houses, though-

Or not, now. The greater merchant houses and the princely families had kept power and influence using the Crows for their internal backstabbing, and if the Crows were too disorganized to be hired, or couldn’t be trusted enough, perhaps the merchants and princes could be kept down.

It all depended on the Crows.

“Zevran?”

“I must speak with Theron,” he told her. “And… I meant to speak to you, about that.”

“And you believe that I am the appropriate one to turn to for advice on your relationship?”

“On broaching difficult topics,” he said. “Ones that went long unspoken. How did you ask him, that night, in Redcliffé?”

Morrigan stopped in the middle of the street to look at him. The crowds drew back even further.

“We shall not speak of this here,” she told him.

It had to wait until they returned to the inn. Morrigan took him to her room.

“You did not ask of that night before,” she said, once she’d shut the door. “I waited for you to. I half-expected to discover that you had been lurking in the hallway, listening to us.”

“I would never. That was your business.”

“‘Tis hard to believe, when ‘twas you who all but threw him at me!”
“And what was I supposed to do, when he told me what he and Alistair had learned about the Archdemon? If he had not agreed to your proposal, I am not ashamed to say that I do not know what I might have done. Drugged him and run off with him to keep him from Denerim, likely. I had just gained him. I could not lose him. I cannot lose him.”

“Your words do not match your actions.”

“I am aware of how it looks,” Zevran said. “It has been discussed. Regardless. How did you ask him?”

“I lay in wait in his room and pounced upon the first opportunity,” Morrigan told him, sarcasm putting a sharp edge on it. “He was far too forgiving, and at least willing to save his own life.”

“You would rather he had denied you and driven you away?”

“‘Twas not exactly my wish, to conceive Kieran,” Morrigan admitted. “But I do not regret it. And it was not an unpleasant experience. His kindness made it… comfortable. It could have easily been otherwise.”

“Whose idea was it, then?” Zevran asked, sensing some point of common ground.

“My mother’s. Who else? Though she wished Kieran’s father to be Alistair. Theron was the one thing I could stand to change.”

“I remember some comments about a woman’s power lying in her beauty,” Zevran said. “I take it this was also your mother.”

“My mother said many things,” Morrigan told him. “Yes. One was that men think with their blood and not their minds, when it comes to a pretty woman. I was to know that power. And use it.”

“You do not have to tell me,” Zevran said. “But have you?”

“I have lain with a man but once in my life. I have always been more comfortable in my magic than in my mother’s idea of a woman’s power. Perhaps she enjoyed using herself such. I can think of no other reason for her to have taken company so often, and to have been so insistent in speaking of it, and telling me that I must do the same, once I was grown. I had no taste for it then, and I have no taste for it now. If I am to kill a man, I use magic on him, not my ‘feminine wiles’.”

“The Crows did not give me a choice in the matter,” Zevran told her. “And they did not wait for me to be grown.”

Why was this easy to say, here? Why could he seem to tell this to everyone but Theron?

Morrigan’s lips thinned into a hard line. She’d frozen where she stood. Zevran waited, fighting the feeling that he was being judged.

“You survived,” she said stiffly, after a few moments. “And are getting your revenge.”

“If I were to kill everyone who had hurt me such, I would be at it for the rest of my life.”

“Did I mention killing?” Morrigan asked. “Living in defiance can be it’s own revenge. This is what you must tell Theron? I am surprised you have not already.”

“It is not an easy thing to speak of, and it will hurt him to know, and I had thought I had left it behind me-”
“You have no need to justify yourself. ‘Tis your business. Should you wish to tell Theron, do it simply. Clearly. Do not speak around it as you are wont to do. If you are so worried about hurting him, ‘twill be best to have it over with faster.”

Dinner came. They ate together in the back of the inn’s common floor, Zevran sitting with Morrigan on one side of the table and Theron with Alistair on the other. Oghren took the head of the table, and Fen lay down behind his chair, watching the room.

Morrigan related the news of Antiva. Zevran elaborated shortly during the summary, where it was necessary. Alistair asked questions. Oghren made comments.

Theron didn’t speak at all. He ate, eyes downcast, and silently got up to follow Zevran when he went to go back to his room.

“I should go first,” Zevran said, after a few moments of silence in the quiet room, the sounds of the patrons eating downstairs muffled by walls and floor. “I am not sure that I will be able to speak, otherwise.”

He motioned for Theron to sit. He took the bed, watching him, and- no, Zevran’s throat closed up.

_It will be fine, it will be fine, it will be fine_, he told himself, and started to pace. He’d told Azieri, he’d told Zelda and Antonu, he’d told Morrigan. He knew none of them as well as he knew Theron, and none of them knew him as well as Theron did. He still wasn’t convinced that Azieri wouldn’t try to get him killed, given the chance.

So why was it so hard to say?

“I need you,” he said. “I need you to remember what I said earlier. I need you to not try to fix things, or to- I need you to just sit there, and listen to me.”

Theron almost said something in reply, but stopped himself, and nodded instead.

Zevran kept pacing. The anxious shaking feeling was rising in his chest, the one that made him want to hide or run or lie and pretend he’d meant to talk about something else.

He wasn’t sure he was going to be able to follow Morrigan’s advice.

“What I said earlier, about the brothel. I did not mean to bring it up. I had no intention of speaking about this, but it has been- we have known each other for a long time, and when you asked me to-“

_Marry you_ tangled on his tongue, as well, in a strange mix of terror and awe, because Theron had asked him. He could- he could have this, he could have a bond not meant to be broken, never meant to be put aside. He could have a good thing, a holy thing, he could call Theron his husband. Theron wanted that.

_He_ wanted that. Maybe it wouldn’t last- couldn’t last. Wardens only had so many years, and with the way they both seemed to fall into trouble more often than not, who knew if the quarter-century Theron was meant to have left would be cut short or not?

They wouldn’t grow old together. He knew he’d have to live most of his life without Theron. He wasn’t ready to face it yet, what that thirty-year-deadline would mean for them both, but he knew.

But until then. He could have this.
“Yes,” Zevran said. “Yes, absolutely yes, Theron, I want to marry you. I want you, like that, for as long as I can have you-”

Theron was practically vibrating in place on the edge of the bed with the effort of staying seated and silent. Zevran stopped pacing to walk over, and tugged him up into a hug.

“Tell me.”

“I love you I love you I love you I love you you said yes thank you thank you-thank you!”

Zevran smiled and squeezed him back, more gently than the rib-crushing hug Theron had him in.

“You are very welcome.”

“I’m so happy, Satheraan!”

This was good- but-

“I find myself reluctant to continue speaking,” Zevran muttered to him. “I do not want to ruin your mood.”

“No,” Theron said. “No. You’ve been working up to it, and whatever it is, it hurts. You should talk about it.”

Simple, Morrigan had said. Plain and direct.

“Remember what I said?” Zevran asked, not letting go of him. This was easier, somehow- he didn’t like the feeling of being held in place, but the tradeoff of not being able to see Theron’s expression helped.

Theron nodded into his shoulder and adjusted the hug, turning it from something crushing to something grounding- and yes, this was much better.

Zevran put one hand on Theron’s hair to keep his head down, and finally told him: “I took my mother’s job in the brothel when I was seven, when she fell ill. I worked for a year, until the Crows bought me. They saw no reason to waste experience. I was trained as a courtesan. It is a track considered not much better than a fancy whore, and in actuality I was even less than that. Of all the people I have been—”

No. No nice euphemisms here. Truth.

“The vast majority of my sexual experience has been forced upon me, because the option was that or death; or more likely—”

“-more rape-”

There. Done. Theron had heard it, now.

“-and then death, when the Crows were done with me. It could be training and job and punishment, all at once. There have been very, very few people with whom it was my choice- not something assigned to me, or something I did under threat or fear of threat, if I did not do it and subsequently failed a contract.”

Theron kept to what he’d been told, and didn’t speak. Zevran heard him ask anyway, in the little
changes in his breathing, in the ways he tensed and his muscles shifted, and the undefinable sense of how emotions just were, in a space, between people.


He could feel- his fiancé!- droop just a fraction, in clear relief. Theron had been worried that he’d-

“There. Now you know,” Zevran told him. “Have I ruined the moment enough?”

“I love you,” Theron said.

“I know.”

“I don’t-”

Theron’s voice broke, on that word.

“You do not need to say anything,” Zevran said; and stood there, holding him and being held, for long enough that he wasn’t sure how much time had actually passed before Theron took a deep breath and shuddered all down his back from the sudden release of tension.

“I love you,” he said again, and Zevran could hear what Theron meant by it: That shouldn’t have happened to you. I wish it hadn’t happened to you. None of it was your fault. I don’t blame you. I promise I won’t hurt you like that. I promise I never want to hurt you. I love you.

“You had something to say,” Zevran reminded him.

“It feels really stupid to bring up now,” Theron muttered into his shoulder.

“Nevertheless.”

“The thought I didn’t finish,” Theron told him, turning his head to make the words clearer. “Before we decided to stop the conversation. I almost said ‘And you couldn’t have left’ and it’s not true, you’re free to go whenever you like, but I still thought it and I’m sorry-”

“You do not need to be sorry for your thoughts,” Zevran cut him off. “Amora, you worry about this too much. You would not try to force me to stay if I wished to leave. But you are always allowed to want me to stay. You are allowed to be hurt.”

Theron was quiet for a few moments.

“It hurt that you left,” he said quietly. “It hurt so much. But-”

“No. I will not be mad at you for simply wanting me.”

“I don’t ever want you to feel like you’re trapped.”

Zevran sighed.

“I am not going to fall apart at the merest hint of adversity, Theron. I do not want to be treated that way, and I wish for you to tell me what you want, not simply always ask me. The conscientiousness is appreciated in the spirit that you mean it in, but it can be excessive, and you deserve just as much opportunity to have what you want as you give me.”

Theron didn’t say anything for long enough that Zevran started to assume that they’d dropped the subject and would have to revisit it later, but then he leaned up and kissed him at the hinge of his
jaw, lips brushing upwards to his ear.

“Mine?”

It was such a quiet, hesitant thing.

“Yours,” Zevran confirmed, warmth curling low in his gut. “Say it again.”

Theron kissed him on the lips, hands keeping Zevran’s head close.

“Mine.”

He kissed him again, deeper, and the warmth heated.

“Mine-”
Chapter 26

Everything was quiet in the early morning stillness. The sounds of the merchants coming and going, leaving the inn for a day on the road, were distant and almost inaudible behind the walls and the closed window. He’d left it open the first night they’d stayed here, but Zevran had closed it last night, against the possibility of following Crows, and now the room was very warm. The light streaming in made the glass shine and specks of dust sparkle in the sunbeams. The woods of the floor and furniture were deeper, darker; the folding screens near the walls glowed brightly where the light shone through them, making the painted paper patterns look like the stained glass windows of the big Chantries. The fragments of colored light scattered across the floor and on the pile of their armor and clothes, where they’d left them the night before.

Zevran was still sleeping, breathing softly, curled up next to him, his head pillowed on one of Theron’s arms. He’d shifted to his side, to see him better, gently playing with Zevran’s hair with his free hand. He’d let it grow out while he’d been in Antiva, and it fell easily past his shoulders now, brushing his collarbone.

It was still just as soft as Theron remembered it, and it shone pure gold in the sun, in stark contrast to the black lines of the Crow tattoos it fell over.

Zevran was here, and safe, and better in mind than he had been when he’d run from Amaranthine, if not better in body-

And they were betrothed. Next winter, at Nir’saota, they’d be married.

He could imagine it- the heat and crackle of the fire, scented with cinnamon. The warmed honey-wine, spiced with the same. Slow-cooked meat, sweet bread, and mild citrus fruit carefully forced out of season and out of region, just for the occasion. The long red sashes for the binding at the fire; red to match the berries in the holly crowns they’d wear.

Zevran would look magnificent, in red. He could have everything embroidered in gold, and it would be the perfect opportunity to get him a really nice coat, or cloak, all done up in fur. He’d love that.

Theron stared at his hand, still in Zevran’s hair, and imagined the partial glove of marriage tattoos he could do, for both hands. It was an old tradition, not much used in a life where death was too easy and a nomad’s life meant that the best way to keep everyone together was to live together- but he and Zevran were settled, and if somehow Zevran died before him-

Creators please no.

-he wasn’t going to remarry. He only had a Warden’s years, and all of them were Zevran’s, no matter if they were together or apart.

Zevran stirred. Theron smiled, and leaned in.

He kissed him awake, in tiny increments, Zevran shifting slowly closer to him as he began to kiss back, until he was near enough for Theron to bend his still-trapped arm around Zevran’s head and shoulders, the other curling around his hips to hold him warm and close for a long, steady kiss.

“Good morning,” he whispered, at the end of it.

“Mm,” Zevran replied, eyes barely open. “Early. You’re happy.”
“You’re here. You’re safe. You’re beautiful, and we’re getting married, and you’ll be even more beautiful at our wedding, and I’m going to have the best husband in all of Thedas.”

Zevran smiled, even though he said: “Surely not the best.”

“The best,” Theron disagreed. “You’re beautiful, and wonderful, and ridiculous, and dramatic, and charming, and kind, and considerate, and compassionate, and talented, and determined, and loyal, and very, very sweet—”


“All of you,” Theron said, kissing him again. “Your personality, your voice, your words, your body. I love you, and I love making love to you—”

“Romantic,” Zevran muttered, hiding in face in Theron’s shoulder. He could feel him blushing.


“And who is being ridiculous and dramatic now, amor—”

“-mi paiha, mi canza, mi isadolcha—”

“Who has been teaching you these things? No, you have been reading fanciful cheap books about young Antivan merchants’ sons shipwrecked and left for dead by pirates only to be rescued by some fair fishing village maiden. Otherwise you would know that ‘isadolcha’ is a very sexy word, terribly naughty—”

“-you are beloved and adored and very, very good.”

Zevran’s breath hitched, at that, and Theron held him more firmly, feeling a bit a dampness on his neck, where Zevran had hidden his face to hide his blush.

“You are good, Satheraan,” Theron told him. “You are so very good, and I love you.”

“…and I love you,” Zevran said, a few moments later, voice thick and low with more of the dampness, and hesitant with the prospect of returning such open directness. “You are kind, and, ah—steadfast, and devoted, and— you mean very much. To me. The world. Everything.”

He sighed.

“I am sorry I am like this,” he said. “Yesterday should have had happier occasions.”

“You agreed to marry me,” Theron reminded him, stroking down his back, trying to soothe away Zevran’s self-blaming tension at not being able to admit to more feelings. “That’s a lot of happiness for one day. It’s going to last me for the rest of my life.”

“I will do my best to be worthy of it.”

“You always have been.”

“Hm,” Zevran said, but didn’t actually argue it. They lay there together in silence for a few minutes more before he spoke again.

“I am afraid that you have made a fool of me, my Warden.”
“Oh?”

“Yes. You see, in Antiva, it is customary that proposals of marriage are not, hm, so spontaneous? The romance is in the planning of the perfect day and the anticipation of the moment. Everyone goes into it knowing it will happen. I will admit that I quite botched my opportunity on the matter of appropriately and timely heartfelt responses- but you have still robbed me of the opportunity to properly present you with your wedding ring.”

“How rude of me.”

“Yes, very.”

“But we’re getting married next year. There’s a lot of time until then.”

“Yes,” Zevran said. “But it is meant to be given with the agreement to marry.”

“But it’s the wedding ring,” Theron pointed out. “Shouldn’t you get it at the ceremony?”

“Not in Antiva,” Zevran told him. “Many people get married without ever having a ceremony or any celebratory party at all, but with immediate family and friends. All you must do is register your union with the Chantry, not involve them. It is a good and holy thing, to be married, but it is personal. Or at least it is meant to be. It is no mystery that the biggest and most extravagant weddings among the nobles and the merchants are the ones that were arranged for coin and not for love or care or the personal satisfaction of the parties involved. They cannot buy the benefits of marriage, try though they might.”

“Merrill told me humans need three goat and a sheaf of wheat delivered to their mother to get married,” Theron told him, remembering his sister’s happy enthusiasm about his decision to propose. “It makes sense, but I figured I could leave it be, since we aren’t human and I haven’t found your mother yet. But I guess I should have asked someone.”

“What do goats have to do with marriage?” Zevran asked, tone disgusted. “Goats. Goats are not lovable. This must be a Fereldan thing. I suppose I should be grateful that it does not involve dogs.”

Fen whuffed from his place by the door, and Theron loosened his grip as Zevran shifted to prop himself up on one arm to look over at the mabari.

“Yes, yes, we know you’re there. And yes, I am sure you will be involved in the proceedings. Someone must guard against unexpected calamity, no?”

Theron rolled over on his back and Zevran settled on top of him, still propping himself up on his arms so they could see each other. Theron blew Zevran’s hair off his face and settled his hands on the small of his back.

“It doesn’t sound that much different than what we did, in the Dales,” he said. “You give presents, because it shows how much you care about someone, and how committed you are to getting married, and proves that you can provide a household. You give presents to each other, and the other person’s family, and your families give each other presents, too. We still do that, when it’s a marriage between two clans.”

“That sounds as though it requires a lot of work,” Zevran said, and leaned down to kiss him. Theron slid his hands up, following the length of his spine, just to feel him shiver delicately all down his body at the sensation. When Zevran pulled away again, it was only as far as he could get leaning his head in one hand, so he could ghost only the very tips of his free fingers across Theron’s chest, in revenge. “We should elope. Much easier.”
“No,” Theron told him, catching his hand and pressing it flat, against his heart. “We have to do it properly. My mother’s family came from Lanasten and do you have any idea how much trouble it was? They’d lived with Sabrae since she was a child, but so many people were upset that they had a clan wedding and not a nine-month wedding, because they still thought of the family as from Lanasten. Which I guess they were, since her parents went back to Lanasten when she died.”

“They did not take you?”

“I like to think that they were worried I’d be seen as Sabrae by Lanasten if they took me,” Theron told him. “But I don’t know. They died before the next Arlath’vhen. I never met them.”

Zevran kissed him, open-mouthed, right where his ear met his jaw.

“No surprise uncles for you?” he asked.

“I have distant cousins in Lanasten,” Theron told him. “I don’t really know them, though. And Ashalle is the last one left in Sabrae of my father’s family. They shared grandparents.”

“I am almost afraid to ask,” Zevran said. “But a nine-month wedding?”

“It’s nine months of preparation and then a wedding,” Theron explained. “One month for each Creator, with appropriately-themed gifts. The clans meet, if they can, and the families spend a day together and everyone has a big meal, and they talk, and the Keepers and Firsts and Seconds talk, because it’s people getting married but also clans, too. There are lots of arrangements to make, especially if one of the families is moving with them.”

“And we will have to do this.”

“Well, no,” Theron said, and found himself reluctant to continue.

“Theron?”

What if he didn’t want to do it like that?

“Clan marriage,” he told Zevran. “We could do that. We’ve sort of already done it. You start living together, and so long as it’s six months before Nir’saota, once that passes, you can say you’re married. You can do a ceremony or not. It depends on how long you’re expecting the arrangement to last. You’re not in my clan, but there are plenty of the People who would say that you’re a city elf, and that’s how it’s done when you’re marrying an outsider without a clan. At this point, we just… say that we’re married. And then we are.”

“Much simpler,” Zevran said.

“Yes.”

“Theron?” he prompted, gently, after a moment. “Amora, look at me?”

He did, lifting his eyes from where they’d been focused on Zevran’s hand, still held to his heart.

“You want the big fancy complicated one.”

“Yes,” Theron told him. “You deserve it. And you’re sort-of Dalish, with your mother and running away to a clan for a little bit and me. You’re Dalish enough for it to work, so long as I can find your mother on time. Or if you want to get closer to Revasina. Ashalle could have the meetings with your grandparents. Or your uncle, more likely.”
“If it is what you want-”

“Satheraan-”

Zevran tugged his hand free and placed it over Theron’s mouth.

“Sh. You are always offering me whatever I want. Let me give you what you want.”

Theron hesitated before nodding. He still felt like he should be guilty, to not do it Zevran’s way, but-

“So,” Zevran said, removing his hand. “What sort of presents are we talking about here?”

“They’re supposed to be proportional to your resources,” Theron told him. “You’ll be High Lord of Amaranthine once we’re married according to Ferelden law, I checked, but I have four bannorns I’m Bann of. I can give you Amaranthine.”

“Please do not,” Zevran said plaintively. “I quite like ‘High Lord of Amaranthine’. It sounds like a job that consists solely of lounging indolently and wallowing in the pleasurable fruits of others’ hard labor.”

Theron smiled at him, comfortable and reassured in the exaggeration.

"Furs and silks and good wine and gold enough to just stand around looking pretty?" he suggested.

“Oh, you see!” Zevran said, and winked at him. “It is the perfect job for me. Banns have responsibilities. I would be ruined, utterly ruined.”

Theron schooled his expression into mild naïveté.

“But if you were Bann of Amaranthine,” he said, making himself sound innocently earnest. “You could import as much Antivan brandy as you liked.”

“Bah!” Zevran told him, and flopped dramatically, one arm flung over Theron and the rest of him spread out over the remaining bed. “Foul tempter! No, I said. Make me your husband so I may stand at your side being decorative and deadly, and then I will use your money to entice merchants into bringing me the very height of Antivan luxuries.”

“You do all of that anyway,” Theron pointed out, even though he was very distracted by the curl of hungry heat that hearing Zevran say ‘make me your husband’ had coiled in his stomach.

“Untrue,” Zevran declared. “Right now I use my own money. I must find opportunities to introduce you to all the best Antiva had to offer while you are here, and then perhaps you will happily buy enough for both of us-”

Theron cut him off with a kiss, rolling over on top of him. He kept at it long enough that Zevran gasped for air once he pulled away- or maybe that was because he’d moved his mouth to the sensitive areas underneath his jaw.

“What did I- ha!” Zevran tried to ask, and raised his legs to hook around Theron’s waist. “There was nothing even somewhat seductive-”

“We’re getting married,” Theron said against his skin. “You’re going to be my husband, and you’re going to be home, with me, and I’ll be able to give you everything you deserve, and you’re mine.”

“I- hn. Yes. Always-”
“They’re either still sleeping, or they’re making up for yesterday,” Alistair said. “And I don’t want to find out which.”

“Coward,” Morrigan told him.

“I don’t see you going up there to find out which it is.”

“They’ll turn up eventually,” Oghren said. “Can’t stay up there forever. Only got the rooms until they start cookin’ lunch.”

“We’ll be here until then, the rate they’re going,” Alistair grumbled.

“And who is the one who has not yet finished breakfast?” Morrigan asked. “‘Tis not I.”

“Well you’re not a Warden.”

“And I have no desire to be, with the way you eat.”

“What, scared you’ll actually fill out your clothes?”

“You-!”

“They’re comin’,” Oghren said.

Alistair looked up from his breakfast in time to see Theron and Zevran at the top of the stairs, and sent a quick prayer of thanks to the Maker because things were going to be all right. Whatever had happened between them yesterday that had had them distant and uneasy was cleared away. Theron was back to filling up Zevran’s personal space, always close enough to press against his side or brush against him; and Zevran was smiling and constantly keeping Theron in sight.

“You’re late,” Oghren informed them. “We ate everythin’. Even drank the fussy wine they gave us instead of small beer.”

“There’s a whole platter of rolls,” Theron said.

“They’re mine,” Alistair declared, pulling it to him and putting an arm protectively around it. Somehow, Zevran managed to grab two of them anyway. He handed one whole to Theron, tore the other in half, and handed that to him too.

“You’re paying for this,” Alistair told him.

“Am I?” Zevran asked.

“You stole our money and ran off in the middle of the night,” Alistair reminded him. “You’re paying for all of our food. And you’re taking Nathaniel out for drinks for forcing him to deal with Theron without you.”

“And for leaving you alone and bereft of assistance?”

“You and me have a spar date,” he said, trying to foil Zevran’s attempts to take more rolls. He failed. “And after that I expect drinks.”

“Done,” Zevran said, and looked at Theron. “I will pay you back.”

“You don’t need to pay me back.”
“Have we finally ceased with your dithering?” Morrigan demanded.

“Theron or Zevran?” Alistair asked, as Theron ordered more food.

“Either,” she said. “Both. I wish to return home.”

That earned her a smile from Theron and a heartfelt: “I’m glad you think of it like that, too.”

“When are we goin’?” Oghren asked as Morrigan huffed. “We could go back to Antiva City and get a ship, but I ain’t that interested in fightin’ more Crows.”

He looked at Zevran.

“Unless you’ve got some who really need to die.”

“That depends entirely on who you have already killed,” Zevran said. “Do you know if you happened to run into Claudio Valisti?”

“Yeah. Talker. Tried to trade the privilege of killin’ you for makin’ us go away. Theron got him good.”

“I remembered what he did,” Theron told Zevran, and now Alistair was interested. What had he done? “And he said he was going to take you back. I know you probably wanted to kill him yourself-”

“Dead is dead,” Zevran said. “So long as he is gone, I am happy.”

Theron leaned against his side when they sat down, and twined their arms, holding his hand under the table. It hampered their ability to eat, when the food came, and Morrigan complained about leaving until Theron said: “We’re going to Riallo.”

“Darkspawn,” Alistair said. “Right. And how long is that going to take? Because it’s a week back to Ferelden and three weeks until spring court and ‘I expect you back the week before Wintersend’ is exactly what Anora said. If it’s, you know, an emergency, I’ll live with pissing her off. But maybe we should send a letter-?”

“One day,” Zevran assured him. “Perhaps two, depending on how long it takes us to get there today.”

“Great, five days,” Alistair said. “Eat faster and maybe we can make it four.”

“All we are doing is retrieving Theron’s brother.”

“Like fighting darkspawn ever takes- wait, the dead brother?”

“He is not dead,” Zevran said mildly, extracting his other arm from Theron so that he could, in fact, eat faster. “Or at least I sincerely hope that it is him and not a demon who lied to me, but I was not dreaming, merely in an eluvian.”

“Zevran what in the Maker’s name have you been getting up to?”

“Nothing much, I assure you. Most of my time has been spent sitting around and improperly confronting my feelings.”

“So exactly the way you have always spent your time,” Morrigan said.
“But the parts that were not that have been far too exciting,” Zevran finished, ignoring her. “I came back from work and what did I find? Darkspawn! In the house!”

“You got a job?” Alistair asked. “Not like, Chanter’s board work? A real job?”

“Yes. I have been working nights in a brothel.”

Zevran had said it exactly like that to make him cough on his watered-down wine, Alistair knew it.

“Zevran!” he wheezed, as Oghren chuckled and clapped him on the back.

“I have been providing security for the one I grew up in,” Zevran explained, the very picture of innocence. “It has been interesting. Satisfying, to keep people protected. Though I am afraid that I accidentally put myself in the position of patron for that entire area of the city.”

“That is not something that simply walks into,” Morrigan said. “Unless we are speaking of Theron, who would have had the entire city by now.”

“I didn’t walk into it. Anora gave it to me.”

“And I’m pretty sure she’s been regretting it every day since,” Alistair told him. “But, Zevran-you’ve been all right? I mean, besides, you know.”

“I have had food and a place to sleep, and have been able to sleep,” Zevran said. “And it has been mostly free of Crows.”

That wasn’t really a full answer, but fine.

“Have you finished your business?” he asked.

It was only a moment’s hesitation, but Alistair noticed it. And Theron had glanced over at him, briefly, before focusing back on his food. A little of the unrest from the day before was back.

“Oh no,” he said. “We’re not doing this again. Zevran, have you finished your business?”

“It was never very well defined business-”

“Zevran.”

He looked down at his plate. He fiddled with his food. He ate a little.

Alistair folded his arms and leaned back in his chair.

“Oh, I can wait,” he threatened.

“There are always more Crows to kill,” Zevran eventually said.

“And there’re always more darkspawn,” Oghren said. “But that don’t mean we spend our whole lives in the Deep Roads.”

Their table sat in silence for a few minutes, until Theron suddenly said: “We’re betrothed,” which was absolutely a distraction, but also-

“You shoulda said that first!”

“Finally.”
“I refuse to refer to you as ‘Lord’.”

“My dear Morrigan, I would never.”

“Congratulations,” Oghren told them, toasting them with the last mouthful of his breakfast wine. “When’s the party?”

“At the end of next winter,” Theron said. “We’re getting married in Hallarenis’haminathe, but we’ll have to do another one with the Chantry, to make it legal for Ferelden, and I’ll have to have another party in Vigil’s Keep, won’t I?”

“Denerim, more like,” Zevran said.

“But there’s no one I want to celebrate with in Denerim.”

“Theron, you are an arl. The queen must be invited, and you cannot simply put her down in the hall in the Vigil amidst the Wardens and the guards and the servants.”

“But it’s our wedding.”

“Yes, and I should like not to have to pay penalty taxes as our present from the crown for the occasion.”

Theron sighed, and ate more bread. Alistair sympathized. He wouldn’t want his marriage to turn into some sort of noble party, either.

They’d left Antiva City and walked towards Rialto as far as they could before they’d absolutely had to stop, for Morrigan to heal Zevran when he’d started to wake again. The distance they’d covered, at a Warden’s pace with Morrigan flying or perching on shoulders to keep up, made the walk that day much shorter than it could have been. It was still approaching late afternoon by the time they made it through the gates, but it had been a nice day. The weather had been pleasant enough, if really too warm for plate armor, but there hadn’t been anything to be done about it but to cajole Morrigan into casting very mild frost spells every so often.

He’d held Zevran’s hand almost the whole walk, savoring the feel of having him back by his side.

He was still holding his hand, but right now it seemed less like an intimacy and more like a tether. Zevran was drifting away, his steps veering him sideways until the tug of their held hands pulled him back. He was walking differently, and it took Theron a bit of thought to realize that he was holding his weight in preparation for an attack. He kept scanning the surroundings, glances over at their friends as they spoke used as cover to check rooftops and alleyways and the road around them. He was quiet, and his smile was gone, and-

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing is wrong,” Zevran replied. “I am fine. We should turn here.”

Theron stopped, forcing Zevran to either let go or face him.

“You’re not fine,” he said. “You keep checking the roofs, and you’re holding yourself like you’re going to have to fight, and-”

Theron reached up to cup his cheek.

“I know you’re happy to see me, vhenan,” he said quietly. “So where did it go?”
“I am still happy to see you.”

Zevran wasn’t looking at him, focused somewhere just past his ear.

“I’d never be able to tell by looking at you,” Theron told him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Something is.”

“There is not.”

There was a flash of movement in the corner of his vision- when he looked up he saw that it had been Morrigan, who’d darted forward suddenly with frost glinting on her staff.

“Yes, surely there is ‘nothing’ wrong,” she drawled, looking straight at Zevran’s hand, where he’d palmed the small knife he’d drawn from somewhere and was trying to slip it back into its hiding place.

Theron took it and tucked it away in its spot for him.

“Satheraan- you’re safe here. We’re here.”

His answering smile was shallow and false, all flash and deflection.

There was an alley just a couple feet away. Theron pulled him into it, noting the way Zevran went even more tense with walls on either side of him, his actions not deliberate but utterly controlled. His eyes were just a touch too wide; his breath unnaturally silent.

There was some shopkeeper’s apprentice or hired hand with a basketful of vegetables here, slicing off mold into a pile of trash. He took one look at the influx of fighters and fled back inside. Theron grabbed the crate he’d been sitting on and pushed it over to one wall, and sat Zevran down on it.

“You trust me,” Theron reminded him quietly, when his hand on the back of Zevran’s neck made the muscles there twitch violently, even as the rest of him stayed rock-still.

“I do,” Zevran agreed, his toneless voice matching his blank expression.

“Satheraan-”

“It was fine,” he cut him off. “Until you brought me into the alley.”

“It wasn’t fine-”

“It was normal. I am. I am going to panic. Very soon. Please. Go away. Go to the Summer Lily. I will meet you there. Later.”

This wasn’t the first time Theron had seen this happen, but all the other times, Zevran had grabbed him and made him stay, or at least accepted it when Theron pulled him close and held him through it, reminding him that he was safe. And this looked like it was going to last for a while.

“Satheraan-”

“I will be fine,” he insisted, and flinched when Theron moved, with actual fear in his eyes.

Theron stepped away, dropping his hands. Seconds later Zevran was up the wall, on the roof, and
gone.

“I will follow him,” Morrigan said, and then: “‘Tis a useless exhortation, I know - but do make an attempt not to get lost?”

She flew off in raven form, leaving the four of them alone in the alley.

They didn’t get lost. They just got unavoidably waylaid and sidetracked because Theron was far too consumed with worry to keep instructions in his head. What if Zevran hurt himself? What if he fell off a roof? What if someone caught him where he wasn’t supposed to be and caught him by surprise and hurt him? What if-

Oghren having to catch the door to the Summer Lily when the woman who answered it tried to slam it shut in their faces, and force it open to give them entry, had not been one of the ‘what if’s.

The woman was human, made up to look younger than she was, and backing up across the lobby as they entered. Everyone else, in the midst of setting up tables and chairs and setting out food, briefly froze, or started to edge away. All around the room, everyone’s gaze had dropped immediately to the floor.

The woman reached the middle of a clear space in the tables and stopped, drawing herself up slightly, and smiled pleasantly.

“Signori, there is no need for this! As long as I have it, I will give you however much you want.”

However much of wha- oh.

“We don’t want your money,” Alistair told her.

“Ah, of course not. Pardon, Signori.”

The prostitutes moved surprisingly fast. One second, they had a clear space all around them; the next second, a group had gently descended, pleasant and smiling and showing off. Alistair had the most, as the only one to talk. Oghren had a couple.

There were two women trying to get his attention- one human, one elven. The human woman wasn’t very interesting, round-faced and fluttering her eyelashes from a short distance away, but the elven woman shied away from Fen when he rumbled in response to the sudden invasion of his personal space, pressing against Theron.

It was reflex to put a protective arm around her. She took the opportunity to tip her head back and ghost her lips against his jaw, breathlessly whispering about-

Theron let go, stepped away, grabbed Alistair and Oghren, and pulled them back to the door. Oghren didn’t seem much affected by the brief interlude, but Alistair was turning a furious red.

“What do we do?” he asked, voice small and strained, pitching higher to the point of almost breaking on the last syllable.

Theron glanced back over his shoulder at the lobby. The woman who’d been complimenting him on his virility had produced a folding fan and was hiding coyly behind it, her hips angled so that the skirt of her dress hugged her leg, hanging in smooth folds.

Theron looked back to his friends.
“I’ll… go talk to people,” he said. “I’m nice. People like talking to me.”

He took a steadying breath and turned to walk back, Fen sticking close to his side, alert, his winter coat fluffing just a little in quiet warning.

The elven woman tried to approach him again. Fen got in the way, hovering protectively in front of his legs. Theron thought back to the letter Zevran had sent them.

“I want to speak with Ashera,” he said.

The whole room went quiet.

“I’m Ashera,” the woman who had answered the door said.

“Somewhere else?” Theron asked.

She led him to a back room. It was- oh no there was a bed.

“We don’t want your money,” he said quickly. “And we’re not interested in hiring anyone’s services. Zevran said to meet him here.”

Her entire demeanor changed in an instant. There was defensiveness there now, and a sort of bitter, resigned pain.

“You’re weeks too late,” she told him curtly. “He went to the City and never came back.”

“He’s coming.”

It was getting dark. He could see the sun setting out over the ocean from here, in his usual spot atop the Chantry.

Theron and the others would be able to handle themselves in the night, here in Rialto, but the Maker only knew if they’d managed to get to the Summer Lily or not. It was almost *more* likely that they’d asked for directions and gotten caught up in someone else’s problems.

He was steady on his feet and his breathing was even, though he still felt a bit unbalanced emotionally. But night was coming, and he had to find the others, and a place to stay.

He was trotting across the roofs of the poorer quarter, most of the way to the Summer Lily, when a raven touched down in front of him and turned into Morrigan.

So he’d been followed. And there was less chance the others had made it where they were supposed to be.

“Give me your arm.”

“Excuse me?”

Morrigan grabbed it instead of asking again, and pulled his bracer off to look at the skin underneath.

“You were reckless and unaware and ‘tis a miracle that you did not kill yourself falling off a wall,” she told him, looking put out that there were no obvious injuries for her to heal. Zevran had a vague memory of hitting a wall with that side of his body, but it had hardly been anything serious. “I have not seen such pointless disregard for personal safety since we broke into Fort Drakon.”
“That is merely because you have been so far away from us, my dear Morrigan. You should ask Alistair about the state in which we found Theron, when he returned from Amgarrak. Five months in the Deep Roads, with barely any company or supplies!”

Morrigan made a noise of utter disgust.

“If Kieran grows up to be like him, I shall have to take steps.”

“I am certain that it will be possible to influence him into more responsible ways,” Zevran told her. “I advise leaving him with Nathaniel for extended periods.”

“I am certain I could find a better way.”

“As you wish,” Zevran said. “May I have my arm?”

She gave him his arm and his bracer back. He strapped it back on.

“Unless you wish to try roof-running…”

Morrigan turned back into a raven, and hopped up on his shoulder.

“You will not wish to stay there long.”

She pecked his skull, and then hit him in the face with one of her wings when she took off, as he started to run.

“Yes, very graceful of you!” he called to her, as she flew to the next roof. She ruffled her feathers and cawed derogatorily at him.

It didn’t take long, from there, to reach the Summer Lily. And he made a spectacular entrance to the street, right in front of some familiar men loitering around outside, waiting for opening. He hit the street and Morrigan landed on his shoulder, wings spread as he straightened, and flowed smoothly in a smear of purple and black back into human form. He offered her his arm, smiled winningly at the men who were sure to have business elsewhere very quickly, and walked inside.

“Signor Desoto!”

Zevran graciously stole the attention of everyone come to greet him, letting Morrigan stalk away from the crowd. He dispensed hugs and cheek kisses and reassured everyone that yes, he was quite all right, how had they been?

Mercenaries-

Theron tugged him around and kissed him. Someone nearby gasped.

“Theron, did you scare these nice people?”

“I didn’t think they’d take us like that.”

“Theron, this is Antiva. People do not simply walk around armed like this.”

“But you’ve said—”

“Yes, a number of people do walk about armed. But they are princely sons and rich merchants and manservant guards, with city swords. Dueling weapons, not war swords. If you are going to kill someone, it would be highly unseemly to do it yourself. You are a very frightening man here, amora,
with your big armor and your sword and your shield and your wonderful Dalish face.”

“So you do know him.”

“Ashera!” he greeted her, drawing away from Theron. “Apologies for my-”

She hugged him, fiercely, unexpectedly. After a moment, he hugged her back.

“I am all right,” he told her quietly. “Truly.”

“Don’t you do that to me again, boy,” she told him, voice rough. “When I had to sit those kids of yours down.”

“Are they all right? Are they-”

“I sent them off with your note. Ferelden, Zev?”

“Well, few people who have anything to do with the Crows go there,” he told her, gently pushing her off. “And, well-”

He smiled lopsidedly at Theron.

Ashera looked between them.

“Wasn’t what I was expecting when you said you had people you were protecting, boy,” she said. “These look like mercenaries who can take care of themselves.”

“We’re not mercenaries,” Theron told her. “We’re Wardens.”

“You are only just telling her now?” Zevran asked, exasperated. “You have not even introduced yourself, have you? Unacceptable. Signora Ashera, this is Theron, my fiancé, the Warden-Commander of Ferelden.”

Her expression did a very strange thing, some fleeting hint of shock that she shoved straight into annoyed disbelief, as the rest of the room, hearing his announcement, started murmuring excitedly.

“The shit are you slumming around in Antiva for then, boy!” she exclaimed, and tried to slap him upside the head.

He knew it was coming- he saw it coming, she didn’t mean it, she’d done it before and he’d always ducked it with a smile and quip- but Theron didn’t catch any of that and yanked him away as soon as he saw her hand come up, an arm curled protectively around his shoulders.

“Calm down,” he scolded Theron.

“She’s not treating you well,” he muttered, in El’vhen.

“It is all in good fun. If you were Fen your hackles would be up. Stop bristling and start paying attention. I like these people, Theron. They haven’t hurt me.”

“So who has?”

And Zevran had forgotten about Theron’s cursed insightfulness, when it came to people he knew and cared about it.

“Oh, many people-”
“Who here?” Theron pushed. “Since you came to Antiva? Earlier you said you felt normal but that wasn’t normal for you, Satheraan, you’re not like that in Denerim, you’re not like that in Amaranthine, you’ve never been like that just- out and walking around! Even during the Blight! Even after Kirk- even the morning you came back, you were just quiet, and tired, and hid. You’re not all right.”

“I am fine now.”

“You’re better in here, not fine. You’re still watchful and-”

“Still got a bag of your stuff in my office,” Ashera interrupted.

Thank you, Ashera.

Zevran went to fetch it. Naturally, Theron followed. Once they were in, with the door closed, Theron started pushing again.

“You said the man you were living with didn’t like you. Was it him?”

“Azieri is a bitter old man with an old limp. He was a Red Jenny but if he was to kill me himself he would have to do it while I slept, and he is the type to want me to know I was about to die.”

In the bag were his journal, his Amaranthine armor, and most of the bag of money. So a little hope, there, a wish from the children that he would come back and he would need it.

They had better have arrived in Amaranthine safely.

He pulled out the money and his journal, flipping it open to the page where he’d noted how much he’d taken from everyone.

“Something happened, Satheraan, or it’s just that this is Antiva, or-”

“Yes, I was hurt!” Zevran exclaimed, reaching the end of his patience. Why couldn’t Theron just leave it alone! Because two days ago he’d carried him out of a dungeon after being subject to days of torture; but it wasn’t like that was a new experience for Zevran. Well, someone carrying him as carefully and gently as Theron presumably had, yes- but Theron didn’t need to be so touchy about it.

“I am distrusted and disbelieved purely because of how the Crows have marked me!” he snapped at Theron, because if he wanted to hear it, fine, Zevran could tell him! “I can spend weeks behaving well, I can do nothing but precisely what I have said I came here to do, to kill Crows, but as soon as I do anything even a little out of whatever bounds they have put on my behavior in their heads, I am right back to being an evil Crow assassin who cannot possibly have any redeeming qualities whatsoever.”

There was a spark of anger in Theron’s eyes, deep and terrible and-

“Theron, no.”

“They hurt you,” he said, and Zevran was taken aback by the sheer rage lurking underneath his words. “They- the way you talk about them- you’re not some thing to be-”

“I know that.”

“Well why don’t they!”
“Because they hate Crows, so I do not matter; and other people are not them, so they are only an afterthought.”

“I’m—”

“You are going to do nothing!” Zevran snapped at him, slamming Ashera’s office door shut as Theron tried to open it, leaning against it so Theron would have to push him to leave the room. “You are going to stay in here until you have calmed down so that you do not scare those people out there any worse than you already have!”

“They—”

“You do not even know who ‘they’ are! It was one thing to go sweeping through Antiva City leaving a bloody wake of Crows, but it will be something else entirely if you simply go about terrorizing the populace! These people are not fighters, Theron, not here in Rialto! The leaders are printers, an innkeeper, an armorer, an old apostate, a Reverend Mother, a bitter old man, an elf with more education than sense and a merchant’s son who has problems with his father! There are other groups in other cities, and Rosso Noche has the Grand Cleric of Antiva and a Knight-Captain of the Templars and they, at least, may actually accomplish something! I have already killed the only one worth killing, so you will stay here.”

Theron folded his arms.

“Who was worth killing?”

Of course he’d ask, he couldn’t just leave anything alone today.

“The new leadership in Antiva City sold out to a Crow Talon, to give you an idea of how effective any of this is,” Zevran told him, only barely trying to be flippant. Theron hardly ever let that stand, and he himself wasn’t in the mood for it. “He was protecting’ them from the Crows. You think they would have been pleased to get their hands on another Crow, and one who so often said that he only wanted to kill other Crows, but apparently that thought required a level of common sense that is beyond their faculties—Theron I will toss you and force you into one of those chairs!”

“A Crow Talon. A Crow Talon. They threatened you with him.”

“He threatened me with him himself.”

“When.”

“Theron—”

“When.”

“Soon after I arrived—”

Theron took a deep, strained breath and sat down.

“Satheraan,” he said after a moment, voice tight. “How long did he have you? Don’t try to make it sound like it wasn’t as bad as I know it was, he’s a Talon, you’ve told me what they do to people who run.”

“He only ever knew the false name I gave—”

“How long did he have you.”
He wasn’t going to let this go.

“Less than one night,” Zevran told him. “I am still here only because the printers have two apprentices, young mages run from Kirkwall, who could not stomach the thought of sleeping while someone was tortured to death two floors below them, and convinced the apostate to talk the Talon into healing me and letting me go. Well, ’go’ after a fashion.”

“Who?”

“I am not giving you names with this,” he said sharply. “You do not need to know. Must we talk about how you should not try to fix everything again? It was only yesterday that we did the first time.”

Theron was silent, and only buried his face in his hands.

“Come here?” he asked quietly, after a few moments.

Zevran walked over. Theron didn’t lift his head, only reaching out to take Zevran’s hands and put them where his had been, a moment before.

“You are crying again.”

“Alistair said,” Theron told him. “In the morning, when we- he said I shouldn’t listen to your note and that I should go after you. And I told him I wasn’t going to, and I told him he wasn’t allowed to either, and then we were late leaving for Vigil’s Keep because I had hysterics because I was terrified you were never coming back and I wasn’t going to see you again and- we should have come. I’m sorry; I should have-”

“It is not your fault.”

“I know, but-”

“Stop,” Zevran told him.

Theron went silent again.

“Please come home,” he said quietly, after a span of moments. “I have noticed. You haven’t said you’re coming back to Ferelden with us.”

“You found a temper somewhere while I was gone,” Zevran said. “If I do not I am afraid that news of your inevitable murder of some noble lord would reach even here. Though, if you insist on talking about me, I feel it is only fair that I get the same opportunity. What happened to you, Theron? This is not like you.”

“You were gone-”

“For almost three and a half months. That is plenty of time for things to happen. So what did?”

No answer.

“Silence will not get you out of this. I will ask Alistair and Morrigan if you do not tell me.”

Still nothing.

Zevran pulled his hands away. Theron snatched them back as he moved to turn, to go back out to where he’d seen Morrigan join Alistair and Oghren in loitering uncomfortably in a corner of the
Theron still hadn’t looked up, and no, no he was not supposed to-

“With the magister,” he continued. “It’s the Oath of the Dales, I gave mine, we’re never supposed to submit and I did, I didn’t fight her, not ever. I just froze up, and you’re not supposed to come back from that, after she died what I was supposed to do was kill myself and I didn’t because I’ve got the Wardens to worry about and I’m the arl but I broke my Oath and I told Ashalle and I told Merrill and they both said it’s not my fault but even if it isn’t I can’t tell anyone else, if anyone else knew they’d exile me and I can’t, I cannot be an exile, I- and I didn’t tell anyone else but some people came to see me from the Clans out of the Anderfels and Dalish Wardens are supposed to renounce their names and their clans and their families because they’re serving all the Dalish otherwise they’re exiles and I didn’t know but I can’t, I can’t give up you and Alistair and Morrigan and Kieran and Ashalle and Merrill and Tamlen but I can’t be an exile and they said that no one would try to because I’m the reason we have land again but in the challenge, Mahanon Adahllin Lavellan, he wasn’t quiet about calling me banal’vhen and I bet he’d exile me given half a chance and if I’m an exile I can’t have Ashalle and Merrill and Tamlen without making them exiles, I can’t have Sabrae, I can’t go back to Hallarenis’haminathe, I can’t, I-”

“Theron,” Zevran cut him off, squeezing his hands tightly, fighting the chill that had shot down his spine and curled in his gut as nausea and cold, quiet fear. “Theron. Look at me.”

He hunched his shoulders instead. Zevran reached down and grabbed his chin, forcing his head up.

“Promise me you will not.”

“I already said I’m not going to-”

“Even if they do exile you,” Zevran insisted. “It is not worth it, not for you. It will hurt if they do, I am not going to tell you it will not, and it may hurt more than anything else that has happened to you. But it is not worth it. That exile will be on them, not you. You will still have a people. You will have me, and Alistair, and Morrigan, and Kieran; and Amaranthine and your Wardens and Ferelden. It will not be the end of your world, and you cannot let it be. If I can live past the Crows, you can live past the Dalish.”

Theron reached up and wrapped his arms around Zevran’s waist, pulling him forward and burying his face in Zevran’s stomach. Zevran hugged him around his shoulders, as best he could.

“I’m scared,” Theron said, words muffled and almost lost.

“Reasonable,” Zevran told him. “But stop this. You cannot change what happened by trying to fix things now. Kirkwall happened. It was not your fault, but the things you are doing now are. I personally am getting quite tired with this arguing we keep falling into. Can we agree to- try better?”

Theron nodded. Zevran sighed silently, relieved, and kept holding him until Theron felt ready to pull away.

Theron wasn’t really going to argue the decision not to stay in the brothel overnight, even if Zevran seemed to know everyone there and get along with the employees and probably could have gotten them put up for a night; but it was dark and late and they kept passing inns and not going into them. Was down here by the docks more convenient somehow? Cheaper?
Not that money was that much of an issue. Zevran had paid Alistair back for what he’d taken the night he’d run out of a money pouch in the things he’d picked up at the brothel. Between what Theron had seen in that pouch and what they’d brought with them to Antiva, they were definitely carrying enough coin to get a nice inn for the night and still afford passage back to Amaranthine.

So what was it? Was he expecting trouble?

The inn Zevran finally took them to wasn’t bad, but it clearly required a lot of upkeep to keep it functioning. It was an old building.

There was a woman seated on a tall stool behind a counter that took up most of the inn’s- well, not a common room, there was no seating. She jumped violently and then froze, a mouse suddenly confronted with a cat, when Zevran slammed the front door open and called: “Loshca!”

Loshca turned out to be the woman, who didn’t even unfreeze to give them keys to free rooms. Zevran had to go around the counter and pluck them off the wall himself, all the while keeping up his conversational talk about how he’d finally found Wardens for Antonu’s darkspawn problem, would she be so good as to send a runner in the morning to inform them he was back, of course she would be, they’d only need these rooms for the night, how had things been for the two weeks he’d been gone, lovely and pleasant, I’m sure, how nice for you.

Theron hung back, away from the light of the candle lamp on the counter, and remembered that Zevran had said that one of the Rosso Noche people in Rialto was an innkeeper.

“What was that about?” Alistair asked, as they mounted the stairs to their rooms.

“A way to get attention,” Zevran told him.

“That was personal,” Theron said, once they were in their room and getting ready for bed.

“Hm,” Zevran said, but didn’t deny it. “We will have company in the morning.”

They did. Theron awoke to yelling from downstairs. Someone was loudly demanding that...

Theron sat up and listened harder.

“Mahar Desoto?” he asked Zevran, who smiled and tried to deflect, slightly embarrassed at being caught. Theron kissed him, quickly, and made him stay in bed two minutes longer so he could savor the experience of cuddling him.

But, unfortunately, they did have to get up. Zevran sent him off to wake the others and get them up.

“They should look very Warden-like,” he was told. “Well. Morrigan can be as witchy as she pleases.”

“Are we trying to make an impression?” Theron asked, as Zevran frowned at the state of the linen shirt he’d pulled out of his bag and tried to tug the wrinkles out.

“Well,” he said. “I am. I will be listened to this time. I expect that this conversation will go poorly, but I am not a Crow, and I refuse to let anyone look at me and have that be the first thing that comes to mind.”

When Theron got back from waking the others, Zevran was fully dressed in his silverite and leather armor from Amaranthine. He looked far too well-off for their surroundings.
“A hug?” he asked, amused, when the first thing Theron did was give him one.

“I’m really glad I get to see you in this again.”

“Well, we are to be married. What better time to walk about wearing your colors?”

Zevran helped him with his armor, even though lacing and strapping on Warden quilting and plate was expected to be a one-person job. It was an easy, simple way to be in each other’s space for a few more minutes.

“A shame that it would be far too much for you to come down the stairs with your shield on your arm,” Zevran murmured as he handed his arms over. “It is a very impressive shield.”

“Most people don’t actually know dragonbone when they see it.”

“Thankfully you are around to teach them.”

They all met up in the hallway.

“What’s all this blighted yellin’ about?” Oghren demanded grumpily. He didn’t seem totally awake yet.

“That is a man who presumably still has darkspawn corpses rotting in his house,” Zevran said. “And also I killed his brother. I believe that likely upsets him more.”

Alistair sighed.

“And he knows that you-?”

“It is not a difficult conclusion to come to. And I will not deny having done it- his brother was a Crow Talon.”

The one who’d had Rosso Noche, no doubt. Shouldn’t he be pleased his group had gotten away from the Crows’ control?

Theron had yet to meet any of Rosso Noche, but he already disliked them all. He wanted to-

No, they’d talked about this. He’d agreed to try better.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked Zevran. It was an effort of will.

“Simply stand there impassively,” Zevran told him, flashing a smile. “As you do at court when you are not sure what to do, yes? Just watch him. They will have heard enough stories about the wild, savage Dalish of the border country to come to all sorts of conclusions.”

“I guess I could act like I was from Dadhase’lin if I tried.”

“*Ma’len,* you have already proven you can. Antiva City and the Crows will not be forgetting you anytime soon.”

Time to go face whoever had been doing all that yelling. He’d quieted down, but Zevran was acting like he was still there, so he surely was. He watched as Zevran turned towards the stairs, taking a deep breath. It was a move Theron had come to expect from him, facing a situation that would require uncomfortable emotional work or vulnerability.

But instead of relaxing at the end of it, instead of the breath leaving him more settled-
His shoulders fell square, his back painfully straight, his expression shallow, eyes guarded. Every line of him was tense and he moved like he was expecting attack, again, and Theron so desperately wanted to reach out and run his hand down Zevran’s spine, to bleed it all out of him, to remind him that he was free and loved and safe.

He’d seen Zevran go up against people he wanted to make an impression on. He should have been swaggering. He should have been posturing, overblowing his ego and vanity, running his mouth with inanity and letting the other person talk themselves into a corner. He shouldn’t be closed off and quiet and cold, he should be laughing and confident and reveling in himself because he knew he was better than the people he was up against-

Zevran had asked him to put his polite listening face on and watch, but it was much easier to glare as the lobby came into sight. There were four men waiting there for him, and Theron was going to remember them, these people who made his heart, his sal’shiral, his husband walk like a Crow, act like a Crow, look like he hadn’t since facing down Taliesin in a back alley.

Two elves. Two humans. Two older, two younger.

The old ones first. The human was a bit tall, lean, grey-haired over thick, dark eyebrows. Muddy eyes, color indistinct. Skin roughened and reddened from an unsafe life. He dressed plainly, belted shirt and pants, low leather shoes, tattoo cuff around one wrist. He looked just like any day laborer but for the mage’s staff he carried. An open apostate.

‘An old apostate’, Zevran had said. A healer who’d saved his life. Fine.

The old elf was bitter-eyed, scowling, with deep lines around his eyes made deeper by glaring right back at Theron as he and Zevran and the others reached the bottom of the stairs. Dirty blond, going grey. Brown eyes. Thinning eyebrows, thinning face, thinning everything. He supported his weight on a cane. His clothes were nicer than Theron had come to expect from city elves.

A bitter old man with an old limp. The Red Jenny. Azieri, whose house Zevran had lived in. He and the apostate still stood together in awareness of each other, old fighting habits never given up.

The younger elf was a clear relative. More blond than the elder one, with grey eyes. Human-tastes pretty. Enough muscle for living but not for much physical work. A mostly sedentary lifestyle. Didn’t act like a fighter, didn’t have the alertness of a pickpocket. Also relatively well-dressed. Hung back behind the other human, quiet, observing, vague air of disquiet until Theron started looking at him. He fidgeted, nervous, glanced away, tried to fade into the wall behind him.

An elf with more education than sense.

The younger human would have been called Rivaini in the south, by people who didn’t know better. Black hair, black eyes, warm brown skin, at the moment absolutely outraged but being swiftly joined by confusion at their appearance. Good clothes only old and comfortably worn, didn’t fit with the others. Self-assured, only getting more angry about having his expectations thrown. In Ferelden Theron would have labeled him a younger son of a noble, entitled with money and social position but no responsibility, and pulled rank and reputation if he’d strode up to Zevran like he was doing now-

“What is this?” the man demanded.

He was in Zevran’s space. Zevran was leaning back away from him, slightly, subtly, but Theron was paying attention to Zevran even if this shem wasn’t. He’d been here almost an entire season they should know that Zevran expressionless was Zevran uncomfortable.
“I found you Wardens for your darkspawn problem, Antonu.”

“And you had to take a detour to kill Lauro on your way?”

“I did not have to-”

“But you did!”

“I know you wished to have a brotherly relationship with him again, but he was a Talon. He was a threat to the children and based on his power-grabbing in Antiva City he was using Rosso Noche as a specter in an attempt to scare other Crows to aligning behind him—”

“He was my brother!”

“I know he was.”

The man glared at him, furious, and smacked the silverite plate over Zevran’s chest and he did not-

“And it’s not enough you had to kill him, is it! You had to steal from him too!”

“It was a gift.”

Zevran would probably be mad at him, later, for speaking, but he had no tolerance for this!

“If you were paying attention,” Theron continued. “You would have noticed it was made for him. Scavenged armor never fits that well.”

“And you’d know?” Antonu demanded

“He came when a Crow called,” the old elf said venomously. “Who even knows how many people he’s robbed that way.”

‘That way?’” Alistair repeated, beating Theron to sheer outrage.

The old elf lifted his chin at the challenge.

“You don’t steal armor off living people.”

It was true- they’d stripped a lot of people they’d killed during the Blight of their armor, to use for themselves or to sell, and that was how he knew about scavenged armor.

But nobody would have said it like that to him, if he’d been Alistair. If he hadn’t been Dalish.

Theron stepped up next to Zevran and put an arm around his waist. These people didn’t deserve the consideration Zevran had been showing them.

“I know it was a gift,” he told Antonu. “Because it was my gift to him.”

“That’s silverite, good Antivan City leather, quality Fereldan linen, and amaranth dye,” Antonu scoffed. “It takes princes to afford that.”

A merchant’s son who has problems with his father, Theron remembered. Zevran was trying not to obviously lean into his side, and he squeezed him a little, reassuringly, before speaking up again.

“Not only princes,” Theron told Antonu, staring him down. “I’m the Arl of Amaranthine. It’s silverite from my mines, linen from the fields and looms of my towns, and dye from my city. I
imported the leather because my fiancé is still attached to this country.”

He left the ‘somehow’ hanging loud and unspoken in the space at the end of his sentence, as Antonu’s expression went from enraged to merely furious and confused to dawning realization.

“We fought the Blight together,” Theron continued, ignoring the fact that no one had asked the question. “I burned my own city when it was infested with darkspawn. A horde marching across fields can ruin a harvest, but just one loose in a city can create that horde. You’re lucky that Zevran was there and knew what he was doing, or we’d have come to burn Rialto, too.”

Antonu had lost his enraged righteousness and replaced it with uneasy nervousness. The apostate was losing his eyebrows in his hair, leaning on his staff. The young elf had fallen right into pure anxiety, and Theron would stare him down, as well, except it was even odds that he’d faint or lose control of impolite functions rather than retreat.

The old elf seemed unmoved by everything.

“Zevran?” he said pointedly.

Zevran sighed, and finally the tension dropped out of him, and he leaned openly into Theron’s side.

“Are you so surprised, Azieri?” he asked. He sounded tired, resigned. “The Crows would have heard if I used my true name, and hunted me down on purpose rather than stumbling across me. Mahar Desoto does not exist. It was only Lauro’s arrogance that kept him from checking in the Archives of the Crows and determining this simple fact.”

“So who are you really?”

“Zevran Revasina.”

“That’s not a Crow House.”

Theron could glare like this all day. Azieri wanted to act like he could, too? Fine.

“I have told you many times. I am not a Crow. My mother—”

They wouldn’t know to catch the tiny hitch, the almost-not pause, as Zevran remembered not to say ‘was’.

“-is Dalish. That is the name of her clan. It is what she used as her surname when she came to Rialto.”

“You grew up here?” Antonu asked, not hiding his shock.

“There is a reason I came here after leaving Ferelden. If you really must know the story, go ask Ashera at the Summer Lily. She has a nice story about how Dalish Nina slit the throat of the Crow Master who murdered her husband and kept trying to make her turn over her son. That would have been the Master Escipo, oh, two before your brother.”

He was sounding like himself again, and-

“So you see, killing Crows is the family business.”

That was almost a smile on Zevran’s face, small and sharp. Good. Good.

“It’s your house?” Theron said to Antonu, before the human could steel his nerve for another round
of accusations about his brother.

“What?”

“With the darkspawn. We need to get rid of them. And I need your name.”

“Why.”

Fen growled at him, from down by their feet.

“It’s not because I really care about you,” Theron told him. “It’s so I can write the Warden-Commander of Antiva and prove to him that he should have done his fucking job when Zevran came to tell him about the darkspawn, instead of calling in the Crows.”

If Antonu could have gone sheet-white, he would have, in that moment.

“That was you,” he said, tone full of dread. “In the City. With—”

“That was us,” Theron corrected him icily. “You did notice Lord-Captain Mac Maric there? Warden-Captain Oghren of House Kondrat of Orzammar? And Morrigan, a Witch of the Wilds? We’re all veterans of the Blight. We don’t take darkspawn lightly, or threats to one of our own. Much less actual torture.”

*I know what your brother did to him*, he said with his stare. *I know what Rosso Noche let your brother do to him. And the only thing keeping this interaction even a little civil is because Zevran would be upset with me if I did do something about it.*

To say Antonu looked away first implied that Theron ever stopped staring him down.

“Anton—” he almost said, but stopped himself. He sounded almost *pained* when he changed it to: “Antoine Montilyet.”

Zevran made a little noise of comprehension.

“Suddenly things become clear,” he said. “I had wondered which merchant house would possibly back a revolutionary group with a stated aim of tearing down that class. I should have guessed that only one that was perpetually broke and in debt would.”

“It’s for the good of Antiva!” Antonu said hotly.

“Oh I am sure that that is why *you* are here,” Zevran told him. “But your father? Hardly. He gave his eldest son to the *Crows*. He is in this for his accounts, and the debts that will be forgotten and uncollectible if the houses who back the banks he has taken loans from are torn down. One son in the Crows and ruthless in power, the other who could cause *social* ruin rather than economic with the company he keeps. Your sister Iveta— or rather Yvette I suppose it would be in Orlesian, is ‘Antonu’ more of a rebellion against your family or true nationalist sentiment?— you said during Satinalia that he was trying to marry her off? What sort of men was he trying to lure, Antonu? Your other sister is in the Nunciature, is she not, in Orlais, making a name for herself? I am seeing the two eldest in positions of reasonable if not considerate power, the youngest a bargaining chip for a social and economic alliance to prop up your failing house- and I suspect that he wanted the same for you.”

“There was a woman,” Antonu admitted after a moment.

“There so often is,” Zevran said. “You have good ideals, Antonu, you and Zelda. But Rosso Noche cannot strike out at *everyone* in power in Antiva if you wish to get anywhere! You need *alliances*. It
should never be the Crows. You already have the Chantry, and if the Grand Cleric can make her miracle stand and turn the country behind her, you may have a leg to stand on. But you must pick one - the merchants or the monarchy? The merchants have the trade, true, but they are constantly divided and the monarchy owns the land. Their money is more stable, if harder to move, and they are already a centralized power.”

Azieri snorted.

“They’re always getting Crows to kill the others off!”

“It only takes one strong one to change everything,” Zevran rebuked him. He shifted, no longer leaning, and Theron loosened his hold so he could stand straight. This was Zevran as he should be, sharp-minded, owning his knowledge and opinions and his head for politics. “Look what Asha Campana did. And if there is to be an Antiva without the Crows, you will need that land and power to build an army. The monarchy can order it and force it funded. The Chantry can provide the mentality, the faith, the propaganda that you have so far printed much of but accomplished little with.”

“I won’t have another Crow just swagger right in and-”

“I have no intention of taking Rosso Noche, Azieri,” Zevran said coolly. “And, I will say it one final time, I am not a Crow. I am a free man, who is getting married next year, who is going home once the darkspawn are cleaned up. There is a fighting chance for change in Antiva. I was the one who killed Eoman Arainai. I killed Runn and Availa over Satinalia. I killed Lauro. I saw the broadsheets posted this morning in Nassura-Valisti, Lanos, and d’Evaliste committed against my fiancé and lost their House Masters. Someone killed Masters Ibarra and Desoto. The only Talons left are Martell and Rioz. Brynnlaw and Afsama are barely cities. They do not have the resources to claim the entirety of the House of Crows. But someone will, eventually, if no one steps in.”

“And you won’t?”

“You do not listen, Azieri,” Zevran told him. “You never have. I said I was going home. That is Ferelden- Amaranthine, with my Warden. There is nothing left for me here in Antiva.”

None of Zevran’s… people he knew? Even acquaintances seemed too friendly a word.

Anyway. They didn’t come along to the darkspawn house, which was good, because something probably would have happened to them.

Alistair wasn’t going to call it an ‘accident’ because even in his head it came out in Rendon Howe’s voice, but, well-

“I won’t try to stop you if you do anything,” he told Morrigan as they left the inn.

“I do not require your permission.”

Yeah, yeah, they knew. He trotted to catch up with Zevran and Theron at the front of the group.

“So,” he said. “Nice people, great attitude, I see why you stayed with them rather than coming home.”

“I excel at running from my problems,” was the only answer Zevran gave.

“You do,” Alistair agreed. “Maybe work on that. But- you did a good job back there.”
Zevran smiled fleetingly at him. He and Theron were holding hands again. Alistair hoped it worked out better this morning than it had yesterday afternoon.

“Thank you.”

“If you listened really carefully,” Alistair said. “You could hear that younger elf- what’s his name?”

“Zelda.”

“You could hear Zelda whispering: ‘We pissed off the Blight Wardens of Ferelden!’ to himself, over and over. I don’t think I’ve ever been around someone that scared of me before.”

“There was a bandit group that kidnapped a lord’s daughter for ransom right after I first came to Amaranthine,” Theron said. “One of them jumped off a cliff to his death rather than fight me. I hadn’t even drawn my sword yet.”

“That is a level of terror many men can only dream of aspiring to, amora.”

“But I don’t want people to be that scared of me,” Theron said, and then paused, and qualified it with: “Most people.”

“It was really… validating,” Alistair said. “But I don’t think I like it.”

Zevran made a little noise of amusement and slung his free arm around Alistair.

“And this is because you are both good and honorable people.”

Wait for it-

“You are too,” Theron insisted.

There it was.

“I will always remember it because you will never forget to remind me.”

This was much better than their foreign mis-matching of the last two days, and this wasn’t like their early relationship where he’d just had no idea how to handle the idea of Theron and Zevran, in love- but there were still moments that really felt private and could they stop having them in the street, please?

He looked at Fen instead, because mabari were great. Mabari didn’t make him feel- things. Like that. Like what looking at Theron and Zevran’s moments did to him.

Alistair knew Theron inside and out. He’d even go so far as to say that he probably knew him as well as Zevran did- sure, there were probably things Zevran knew about Theron that Alistair didn’t, but Zevran wasn’t a Warden.

He certainly knew Zevran pretty well, or at least he thought he did. There was a lot about him from before, here in Antiva, that he didn’t really know; but he could see the holes, created by the things Zevran did and didn’t say and the way Theron treated him. That was something like knowing it for real, wasn’t it? Especially if he knew enough to know he didn’t know?

They were all good friends, was the point, but Theron and Zevran’s moments always made him acutely aware that he felt like he was missing something. And there were things you just couldn’t ask.
But there was one topic that surely had different boundaries now.

“So we’re going to rescue your brother,” he said. “Thoughts?”

Theron broke out in a massive smile. This sort of beaming, genuine thing wasn’t as rare for him as it was for Zevran, but the way it lit up everything was something special, and it’s own answer to the question.

“I’m glad you’ve found him too,” Alistair said. “What’s he like? He’s going to be a Warden and my brother too, I want to know!”

“I don’t know how he’ll feel about this,” Theron admitted. “He’s always liked humans less than me. And he gets annoyed more easily. He’ll probably be in a bad mood once he finds out I’m living with humans now.”

“A Dalish in a bad mood! Wow, that’s so unexpected, how will we survive, you’d better give us tips for how to deal with that.”

“Yes, I know I haven’t been great company the last couple of months. I’m sorry.”

Alistair waved it off. He knew Theron knew, and they’d only need to talk about it now if things didn’t improve.

“What else about him?”

“Tamlen was going to be Sabrae’s second- leader of the hunters and scouts, in charge of protecting the clan. From humans, mostly. Just like Keepers and Firsts have mythal’adalan staves and Hahrens keep the clan fire, Seconds bear swords.”

Alistair looked at Theron’s, hanging at his hip.

“Really.”

“Not like this,” he said, expression softening- darkening, with memory. “They carry dar’misaan- I’m sure you saw some in the city, they’re just slightly curved inwards, no crossguard, edge on the curved side. They’re supposed to know how to use them, too. Tamlen despised it. He’d always complain about the impracticality of a sword in the woods, and I’d always remind him of the long history the design has, and he’d retort with something about glory days and if I liked history so much I should use it.”

Alistair saw where this was going.

“So you did.”

“He wasn’t Second yet when we started,” Theron said. “He was still training in basics, but he taught me when we had free time, and later when it was time for our archery practice.”

“Get yelled at a lot?”

“Sort of. Tamlen was always very good at it, but I was going to be Hahren, not a hunter, so as soon as I was good enough to probably survive if I had to hunt meat for myself, no one pushed. I like swords better anyway, and Tamlen was a good teacher. I only knew what I did when I came to Ostagar because he passed on what he’d learned.”

“I am imagining you in the forest somewhere,” Zevran said. “Hiding in the underbrush, bow strung,
arrow nocked, following human intruders silently through the cover. It is a weird image.”

“Just because I can use a bow doesn’t mean that I will use a bow. And that’s… sort of how we ended up where we did.”

He hadn’t told this story before. Zevran was paying more attention, too.

“It was my turn to patrol,” Theron said. “Tamlen was supposed to be helping our Crafter but he knew I was awful with archery so he got someone to switch with him. We came across some humans who said they’d found a cave with monsters. He was carrying a dar’misaan and traded me my bow and quiver for it.”

A moment’s pause.

“He’s probably still got them,” Theron realized, and just… stopped, in the road, and stared at his hands, and down his body, taking in his armor and boots and sword like he’d never seen them before.

“Oh Creators,” he whispered, and covered his face with his hands.


“It’s been five years,” Theron said into his hands. “I’m such a different person. Are we still going to be- is he still going to be-”

Alistair put a hand on his shoulder.

“You’ll both be fine.”

“I have to give him the Joining,” Theron realized. “What if it-”

“He’ll be fine. He’s lived this long without it; he’ll live as long as he gets with it.”

“But-”

“Hush, amora.”

“News finally sinkin’ in?” Oghren asked. They’d been stopped long enough for him and Morrigan to catch up.

“It appears so.”

“I was wonderin’ when it’d happen,” he said. “Hey. It’s good. Let’s go.”

The darkspawn house was pretty nice for merchants with no money. The floors were probably ruined, though. They clustered around the first corpse, looking down at it.

“I should have put down lye,” Zevran said regretfully, lifting the sheet he’d covered the darkspawn with and wincing at the revealed mess, covering his mouth and nose at the smell.

“We’d have to start the fire with something,” Theron pointed out.

“Please do not burn the house down.”

“We don’t need to go that far. Oghren, I know it’s not a wood axe-”
“I can do it.”

“Make it clean, will you?” Zevran asked. “These are nice floors. There is no need to leave gaping splintering holes in them.”

There wasn’t a lot that could be burned in this house, or at least not a lot that anyone was willing to sacrifice.

“We’re not burning the tree and we’re not burning any of the books,” Theron said firmly.

“You want me to empty the linen closets?” Alistair asked, looking at the pile of floor and darkspawn and blood-soaked sheets they’d carried out to the courtyard from the first and second floors.

“Those will burn too fast.”

“Lots of spindly fiddly chairs around,” Oghren reminded them. “Great big clothes cabinets and chests too.”

“Burning the furniture,” Zevran complained, even as he helped Alistair and Theron steady a side of the massive armoire from the master bedroom to carry down the stairs and add to the soon-to-be pyre. “Do you have any idea how much this must have cost? This will be a very expensive bonfire.”

In the end, they still needed more wood. Morrigan had break the heavy kitchen table with a slew of spells before it looked like they’d have enough wood.

“There is one more,” Zevran announced, just before Morrigan went to light the pile.

He couldn’t have said something before?

It made more sense when he led them to the basement. The floors were packed dirt, for one, so they’d have to dig out the areas where the blood had soaked it and add it to the bonfire in handfuls to burn the Taint out.

Also, the room with the eluvian made Theron tear up. They never would have gotten anything done if they’d come down here first.

“Theron, it’s just a trunk.”

“No it’s not,” he said, voice muffled by the wood of the one he’d sat down to hug. “It’s a magical El’vhen trunk.”

“Just let him be happy with his old stuff,” Oghren said. “Get this ugly blighter’s feet.”

Theron did not help move the shriek emissary to the courtyard, or dig up the floors. At least Zevran helped them find shovels and buckets, even if he then perched atop a crate, smiling fondly as he watched Theron break the others open and get more and more excited about what he was finding.

Morrigan didn’t help either, absorbed in the books, but she hadn’t helped with anything involving actual muscles yet, so big surprise.

“I need them,” Theron was saying as he and Oghren came back from taking the last of the dirt up to the courtyard. “But there’s so much, we’d need a cart, and to buy hold space on a ship, and-”

“Ridiculous,” Morrigan cut in, snapping the book she’d been looking over shut. “Theron, there is an active eluvian not five feet from you. Carry them to the Dragonbone Wastes through there.”
“Wait.

“Are you… planning on *stealing* all of this?” Alistair asked.

“It’s not *his* and he doesn’t *deserve* it,” Theron said. “I’m taking the El’vhen things, I don’t care about the ones that are actually from Old Antiva.”

“This plan requires that someone actually *know* what the eluvian in the Dragonbone Wastes looks like from the other side,” Zevran pointed out.

“I have extensive knowledge of this.”

“You may, but do you know how to get there from here?”

“I will *find it.*”

“Well, there is one thing that you can have regardless of finding the way or not,” Zevran said, and shrugged off one of his swords. Alistair had noticed that he’d gotten a new one, but hey, sometimes you had to replace one, or you found a better one.

He drew it to show Theron. It was a long straight sword, with a very strong symmetry and a short, thick crossguard, heavily decorated and matching the pommel, which had a fastening on it that suggested it had had trailing cords or a sash as decoration, once. The blade itself was more practical, simple darkened silverite with a strange blue sheen to it.

“‘Tis magical,” Morrigan said.

“It’s an old El’vhen thing somebody probably looted from some temple ruin somewhere,” Alistair said, noticing the way Theron was lingering over the owl design on the pommel and crossguard. “Of *course* it’s magical.”

“It ain’t going to kill us, is it?”

“‘Tis a *sword,* ‘twill kill you if it stabs you.”

“Then if we’re going to shift this stuff, let’s get shiftin’.”

Theron unbuckled his own sword and traded Zevran for the old El’vhen blade, then started marking what could and couldn’t be taken. It was mostly books, it seemed like, and some trunks that rippled gold and green when either he or Zevran touched them.

Ancient elf magic was weird.

Then they’d finished, finally, and-

“Hey,” Alistair told Theron, putting a hand on his back. “Breathe. It’s going to be okay.”

“I know, I *know,*” he said, but still eyed the eluvian nervously.

Morrigan grabbed him and pulled him towards the mirror.

“You are *dithering.*”

The two of them stepped through the mirror together, and yeah, okay, that did look pretty unsettling.

Fen whined, a high sound that got steadily louder as Theron failed to immediately reappear. He
dashed up to the eluvian and stopped with his nose inches from the bright magic, the whine now interspersed with panicked yips as he wavered in front of the mirror, ears flat back and tail tucked down.

“He’ll be back in a minute,” Alistair called to the mabari, and left Zevran to coax him away from the eluvian while he got the Joining ready. It felt strange to do one with a Joining chalice, but that was just ceremony. He’d taken a ceramic cup from the kitchen they could smash and dump into the bonfire later.

Eight-ninths part regular darkspawn blood. One-twelfth part Archdemon blood. Make up the difference of twelfth and ninth with exactly seven drops of processed lyrium. Gently swirl to mix. Zevran had gotten Fen away from the mirror and the mabari was pressed against the floor near his feet, staring at the eluvian, whining piteously.

“I get why he said his brother got eaten by one of these things,” Oghren said thoughtfully, and wow, was this really the time? “It did sort of look like that.”

“Please keep your observations on the matter to yourself,” Zevran told him.

One minute, two minutes- there. The magic rippled and Morrigan stepped through, Theron on her heels with arm around his brother. Alistair started to stand, cup in hand, and Tamlen dropped, Theron catching him in panic as the Taint surged in their senses.

Tamlen was losing his fight to stay conscious when Alistair tipped the Joining down his throat. They were all on the floor, Theron cradling his brother, and he keened when Tamlen swallowed and went limp.

“I said goodbye just in case, I said goodbye but-”

Alistair tuned him out for the moment, a hand lightly on Tamlen’s throat to monitor for continued breathing and heartbeat, extending his senses and feeling.

The surging Taint had been a sudden roar of flame. Darkspawn and Blighted creatures felt like far-off torches that got clearer the closer you came. Tainted land and corpses were like coals after the fire had died, looking harmless but radiating heat once you stuck your hand over them. Wardens were just bright, no heat, the Taint locked behind ice.

There was a sudden cooling in his sixth sense as that ice came down, rushing in. Theron’s shoulders dropped in relief and he started whispering prayers of thanks for his brother’s life.

Alistair removed his hand and stood, catching Morrigan’s eye and tilting his head towards the door. They had a bonfire to start.

“My mouth tastes like rot,” Tamlen mumbled, words thick and groggy with consciousness not quite yet regained.

Theron smiled, tears threatening, and dipped his head to kiss his brother on the lips, then the forehead.

“I love you,” he whispered against Tamlen’s vallas’lin.

Tamlen reached up and squeezed his shoulder, a silent agreement and request to be let up. Theron helped him sit, arms still around him.
“I can sit up by myself.”

“I want to hold you,” Theron told him.

Tamlen huffed, and reached over to mess up his hair.

“Clingy.”

“We used to hug all the time.”

“Did I say I didn’t want it?”

Theron hugged him tighter.

“It’s so good to see you again.”

“You feel strange.”

“It’s the Taint, that’s how Wardens feel—”

“No,” Tamlen said. “I mean— I can feel the other ones, too, and whatever you’re burning in that fire, but you feel different than that. Like— that woman, I’ve seen her in the eluvians before. I followed her around because they didn’t like that boy she traveled with—”

“That’s your nephew, Tamlen.”

“Elgar’nann’s wrath, Theron, you fuc—”

“Don’t talk about her like that.”

“She’s a shem!”

“And so are most of the people I know,” Theron said sharply. “I live in a human world now, Tamlen, and so does Merrill. I fought the Blight with humans. I command humans. I’m part of the nobility of a human country. Morrigan and Alistair are human, and friends, and family, and you’re going to be polite to them and you’re going to be polite to Merrill’s wife, who is also human.”

“Tell him we know what he’s saying!” Alistair called, in El’vhen, from across the courtyard.

“They know our language?”

“Alistair spent a winter in Hallarenis’haminathe—”

“Where?”

He hadn’t—?

“What did Satheraan tell you?”

“That you were alive,” Tamlen said, and grabbed his nearest hand. “I hadn’t known you were, until then. I’d hoped. But I didn’t know.”

Five years and he’d still hoped, when—

“Everyone said you were dead,” Theron told him. “I- I gave up. I always wished but I stopped believing. I’m sorry.”
Tamlen bumped him.

“You came and got me. I forgive you.”

“Thank you.”

“He said you were a Warden, and that the Wardens could get me out. And that Marethari kicked you out and handed you off to some human.”

“I had to go.”

“Oh yeah?” Tamlen challenged. “Did you ask to go or did she make you?”

“...I wanted to stay. But she knew better, I would have died if I hadn’t.”

Tamlen grabbed him on the top of his backplate and hauled him out of the hug, to where he could see him.

“And would you have rather died with the clan or lived without them?” he demanded. “Not now. What did you want then?”

Theron looked away, down at Tamlen’s boots. They were almost worn through. He was surprised they were still holding together. Dalish crafting was meant to last, but there was only so long it could last, especially without someone around who knew how to repair things.

“Marethari and Duncan both said you were dead, and that I’d die if I didn’t go. I might even die before I made it to the Wardens. I wanted to stay with the clan.”

Tamlen pulled him back into a hug.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’d do it again,” Theron told him. “I love what I have, and I wouldn’t trade it.”

“I know that too. Heard you’re sal’shiral now.”

“I love him so much, Tamlen,” Theron said. “He’s been hurt so much and I want to make him really smile, every day, forever; and I want him to be safe and I want him to be happy and I love him so much, I love him more than anything else and I’ll never love anyone else like this. He has my life and my heart and my soul and my body, my last breath at my dying and my first thought in the morning, the blood on my blade and—”

“Cool it with the literary allusions!” his brother stopped him. “You’re so dramatic. Creators only know why you needed to be so intense about things.”

“It makes me good at telling stories.”

“You’re shit at telling stories, you’re good at heartfelt recitation. Where on this benighted earth is Hallarenis’haminathe?”

“I am not shit at telling stories, that’s Merrill,” Theron disagreed. “And I’ve got better ones to tell now, anyway. Lots more adventure. I’ve been in the Beyond.”

“You’ve been where!”

“Three whole times at least. I’d say four, but that one counts as either one really long trip or a bunch
of shorter trips right after one another, and I’m never sure how to count those. And I killed some ancient Tevene blood magic monster while doing it too. I’ve also killed a Tevene dragon god, discovered the most holy relic of Andrasteanism, met and fought for a dwarven hero of legend, and installed three monarchs.”

“Theron what the fuck!”

“Hallarenis’haminathe used to be Ostagar, after I saved the world from succumbing to another Blight and installed the current Queen of Ferelden she asked what I wanted. I got her to give the People land, Hallarenis’haminathe is our third city, almost all the clans have made it there now.”

Tamlen shoved him over.

“This is why you’re shit at telling stories!”

Theron smiled up at the midday sun from his position on his back, arms thrown out over the cobblestones as he told him: “I’ve killed some Tevene mages, too.”

“It’s been five years!”

“Two of those years were very busy.”

“You’re awful.”

Theron boosted himself up on his elbows, gaining a view of the bonfire on the other side of the courtyard, past Tamlen. Zevran was coming over.

“I only told it like that to see how you’d react.”

“You’re a little shit, brother.”

“Morrigan is Asha’bellanar’s daughter and I tried to kill her mother for her, because her mother is a terrible person who should not be allowed around children.”

“How are you not dead.”

“I’ve still got things to do.”

“And people?” Zevran suggested, all innocent helpfulness as he came over with the pot of water that had been heating by the bonfire, and towels.

“Just you.”

“I don’t know you well enough for you to get to flirt with my brother in front of me,” Tamlen informed Zevran.

“Well, I am marrying him, so we will have plenty of opportunity to get to know each other.”

“Since when are you getting married!”

“Since two nights ago,” Theron told his brother. “It’s a nine-month wedding, so you get to sit in the meetings.”

“Clothes off,” Zevran ordered Tamlen.

“Fuck off.”
“I see that Theron was right about your combative attitude,” Zevran said. “Your clothes are a disaster. They are caked in darkspawn filth. It should be a crime to subject anyone to them, even disregarding their general state of disrepair and, hm, aroma. Take them off, we have water and soap and those are being burned. You will get nicer things.”

“These are mine.”

“Nevertheless.”

“Satheraan’s been cleaning your armor and gear, Tamlen,” Theron said. “We found clothes that should fit. And boots. I can get you replacements once we’re home.”

Tamlen grumbled, but started stripping of his clothes.

“You too,” Zevran told Theron, tossing a towel at him. “You have been hugging him. It has left traces.”

They used up all the hot water, mostly on Tamlen. It took a couple of sluicings to get all the filth off him, and not a little scrubbing. Zevran offered to get lye soap for the really difficult parts, but Theron and Tamlen turned him down and simply applied more force. By the end, they were using cold water, and Tamlen was shivering with the evaporating water.

He refused the clothes Zevran had hunted down from what had been in the armoires they’d taken apart for the bonfire, though, instead lying down in the sun, on top of the linens they hadn’t used. Theron sat next to him while he sunbathed, holding Fen in his lap to keep the mabari from jumping all over his brother in enthusiasm about a new friend.

The fire started to die down and Alistair turned, squeaked, and covered his eyes.

“Theron!”

“Clothes and then more sun,” he told Tamlen.

“I don’t see why I have to move.”

“Because we’re the only two who grew up in a camp. City people have different standards.”

“I haven’t been in the sun in five years.”

“If you put your clothes on I’ll get you food.”

Tamlen cracked an eye open to look at him.

“I’m not that hungry.”

“Yes you are,” Theron said. “You’re a Warden. We’re always hungry.”

Tamlen was that hungry. He put clothes on, and Zevran took him out to go buy enough food to make lunch for four Wardens and their associates- or at least as much as enough as they could carry.

“Satheraan,” Theron said, stopping in the middle of the market as they went to get cuts of slow-cooked meat. “That woman is selling cinnamon in pots.”

“They’re rather small pots,” Zevran told him.

“They’re the size of my fist, they’re not small.”
“Yes they are. You forget that these things are grown relatively nearby. Those will be cheap quality, as these things are counted.”

“I’m buying some—”

Zevran held out a hand and stopped him.

“Let me bargain, hm?”

He came back with cinnamon, ginger, cloves, nutmeg, and black pepper, in bigger pots than the ones that had caught Theron’s eye. He’d bargained for a bag to carry it all in, as well, which was very good. There was also—

“What are those?” Theron asked, looking in the bag and finding a tin box, and a wooden frame protecting some glass bottles.

“Treats for later,” Zevran told him. “Now, I have used all my money, and if we are taking spices home I demand teas.”

“We already have teas at home.”

“There are tisanes. That is not the same, no matter what anyone in Ferelden says. There are red teas, and green teas, and black teas, and white teas, and Ferelden has none of them.”

“I’ll get you some of each.”

It turned out that there were a lot of choices, depending on who’d grown the tea, and where it was grown, and how it was dried. They came in oilcloth sachets, sealed with wax to keep out water. Theron paid for six different varieties.

It was a lot to carry back. Zevran looked thoughtful as they left the market.

“Has Anora commanded you to host any events for court?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then what do you have planned?”

“I’m supposed to keep the marriage candidates company.”

“Amora, I am afraid to ask, but: And?”

“And nothing? That’s all she told me to do.”

“So you are redoing the Denerim estate but you do not have anything to do in it?”

“We’re going to be living in it. And I know that I’ll probably have to have them for dinner.”

“‘Have them for dinner!’” Zevran quoted back at him exasperatedly. “As though you can simply invite them over and serve them whatever is at hand! Please tell me that you have someone who is handling these things for you?”

“Fergus told me that I had to have a hostess for parties,” Theron said. “He gave me a list of appropriate people to ask, but he also said that anyone I picked would be thought of as my mistress, so I didn’t pick anyone. I’ll just go to other people’s parties if there have to be parties.”
“Theron.”

“I wasn’t going to have people thinking you could be replaced,” Theron told him. “There was already a rumor going around when Morrigan came back so soon after you left that I’d left you in favor of her. I won’t have—”

“It is a good thing that we have a possible way back that does not involve a ship,” Zevran said. “We will need all the time we can get. We are going back to the Vigil, we are making sure the children arrived, getting everyone’s things, and going immediately to Denerim, where I will find a merchant agent who knows things about Antiva and I will salvage your household events before you manage to destroy your own reputation. There is not time to plan anything large for the beginning of the season but that will be all right. I will make it all right. Small events will grant the illusion of exclusivity, particularly if they are small enough to serve everyone with expensive imported things.”

Theron smiled at him as they arranged getting the door open between them.

“Are you going to manage my household?”

“You are not doing so.”

Theron grabbed him and kissed him as soon as they’d gotten all the food put down or handed off. Morrigan made an offended noise at being forced to witness it.

“What’s this?” Zevran asked against his lips, amused, when Theron pulled him closer.

“We’re getting married,” Theron reminded him, just happy, full of quiet warm brightness. He had his sal’shiral, they were getting married—“And you’re coming home, and I’ve got Tamlen, and you’re going to be my husband and run my household and you’re going to be so good at it and it’s going to be wonderful—”

“You find the strangest things alluring, my dear.”

“Is he always like this now?” Tamlen asked.

“Not for the last couple of years, they haven’t been,” Alistair answered. “Theron, are you eating or what? Your brother knows how to get to the Wastes. We can be back in Amaranthine in time to camp out by Old Soldiers’ Road if we get moving fast enough.”

“I want the eluvian too though,” Theron told him, shifting so he could rest his chin on Zevran’s shoulder.

“I don’t think we can take that through itself. And I’m not going to help you with any more theft—”

“I’ll take it,” Oghren volunteered. “Give me the money for it and I’ll get it back. You got the Merchant’s Guild here?”

“Is there anywhere that the Merchant’s Guild has not gotten?” Zevran asked in return. “Down by the docks, Oghren. I would caution you against being caught—”

“I’ll go down while you’re shiftin’ the stuff. By the time you’re done they’ll have a cart up here and we’ll be gone!”

“You’re way too cheerful about this,” Alistair said.

“Sigrun’s got some good stories about the Carta! Been wonderin’ if I’d ever get the chance to try this
“stuff out for myself.”

“Maker preserve us.”

“‘Tis hardly the first time you have been privy to criminal action, Alistair Mac Maric-”

“Don’t call me that.”

“-and ‘twill not be the last. Be grateful that we are not covering up a murder or some such.”

“Like you’d ever pretend you didn’t kill someone.”

Zevran tilted his head to whisper in Theron’s ear.

“I will be glad to be home,” he said. “I had not realized, how much I missed this.”

A night camping near the side of the road, just like old times; and then in the morning borrowing a cart and going to Amaranthine, and from there to the Vigil, a few more days before he had to be official and responsible again, in the company of his best friends and his brother and his fiancé-

Yes, going home sounded perfect.
“They’ve gone where?”

“Antiva.”

“But they’ve only been here two weeks! They’re supposed to be leaving for Denerim!”

“I know.”

“They haven’t had their clothes fittings! He hasn’t said who’s hosting for him! He hasn’t told me if he wants to take servants from here for his household! He hasn’t gone to see the work he’s had commissioned on the estate! We don’t even know if he has a functioning household there!”

“I know,” Nathaniel said sympathetically, and poured his sister another two fingers of vodka out of the bottle they were sharing. She downed it.

“How did you do this job, Nate?”

“I got it after he’d had his grand adventures disappearing places.”

“They’re not ready to go to Denerim and they haven’t got time for this!” Delilah moaned.

The Commander and Alistair really didn’t, but they’d gone off with Oghren and Morrigan to Antiva anyway.

At least they hadn’t taken Kieran. But Nathaniel wasn’t sure that leaving her with Marian Amell-Hawke, whatever- and the Commander’s sister was much better.

“Look, this isn’t the worst thing he’s ever done,” he tried to reassure her. “We can still save this situation. Somehow.”

They managed it by locking Delilah’s office door and finishing off the bottle between them while they made a list of the things that could be done to make things as ready as possible in the face of the Commander’s sudden departure.

Select the guard for the estate. Finish getting everyone’s effects packed and sent. Keep the Vigil running like there was nothing amiss.

…There wasn’t a whole lot they could do to keep the situation under control.

Finishing the packing was the easy part- it was almost done. Keeping the Vigil running- well, that was just what they always did, even if everyone was still straining a bit under the weight of all of the Wardens in Ferelden concentrated under one roof. Nathaniel had resorted to a tactic from the times of Caron and sent the Voshai with a mixed group of Wardens, those used to outdoor living from their previous lives and those who needed much more practice field camping, out to the arl’s woods about a mile away, across the river, to hunt for themselves and ease the burden on the Vigil.

The Wardens and the Chantry were another thing the Commander hadn’t addressed before running off again.

Nathaniel had tried to be understanding. Kirkwall and Zevran’s absence had hurt the Commander in ways that he didn’t really understand. Alistair had also been clearly frustrated by his lack of ability to help. And he’d suddenly acquired a son, that was also distracting.
But surely there came a point where you put that all aside and did your job.

The question of the estate guard still remained.

“Militia or Wardens or a mix?” Delilah asked him.

He hadn’t thought about sending Wardens. He wasn’t sure if it was quite appropriate, but it would be a way to get more Wardens out of the Vigil for a little bit- but no if the Chantry came they’d need fighters, they’d need-

Nathaniel put ‘Leontius Amell’ and ‘Neria Surana’ down at the top of the list. Hopefully they’d be harder to catch in Denerim. After a moment’s thought he also added ‘Lockhard Brant’ and ‘Andreas Kasteros’. There had been talk in the Vigil about the times Lockhard had been seen instructing Alistair on how to dual-wield swords, and he was as close to an Ander as they were going to get. The prince of the Anderfels was coming- might as well give him a fellow countryman.

“Good,” Delilah said. “Warden Kasteros should get some more use out of that fancy disguise you and Fenris put together.”

True, there was that.

His sister added ‘Ser Tabris’ and ‘Fenris’ to that list.

“Do we even employ him?”

“If he doesn’t want the job he doesn’t have to take the job. But what I know of the estate household is that the Arl specifically wanted to recruit out of the Denerim alienage, and we could do worse than to have elven warriors.”

And Ser Tabris’s cousin was Chamberlain there. That would be a good arrangement. Nathaniel wondered about people to add to the list, but then realized that it would be a good balance if any of them ever really had to fight their way out of somewhere, or defend the estate- with the Commander, Alistair, and the witch that made four warriors, three mages, and two rogues, all but two of them Wardens. A group like that could do a lot of damage.

They’d need more than that to guard the entire estate, of course, but neither Nathaniel nor Delilah wanted to strip the Vigil’s militia to send guards to Denerim. There would be mercenary guards and veterans of the army from the Blight aplenty for hire in the city. They wouldn’t be starved for choices.

Delilah summoned servants to deliver the orders and offers Nathaniel was drawing up, and started to put together a pouch of pay money for Ser Tabris to take with her when she left, in a couple day’s time, to hire the rest of her guard.

She drummed her fingers on her desk once they were done, eyeing their now completed list of tasks.

“Think of anything else?” Nathaniel asked.

“The Arl still needs a manservant,” she said. “I had been thinking to ask Fenris, but he’s better with the guard. There just isn’t anyone here who’s properly trained, and manservants don’t just appear.”

That was a sad truth.

“I sent a letter to Mistress Tabris in Denerim,” he told his sister. “I asked her to look out for a manservant. And a governess. Not a Chantry one- that wouldn’t go well. If she finds anyone she’s
supposed to send them here for evaluation.”

“I hope someone turns up in the next couple of days, then.”

She’d seen the slow appearance of many cities over the horizon in her life. Denerim was only notable because of what it represented. The tall black tower of Fort Drakon looming over everything, even the roof of the palace, meant Ferelden.

Ferelden, with its frozen swamp Wilds in the south and the Frostback Mountains in the west, and beyond both of them the Sundered Sea and Mont-de-glace and Nehna.

They were so close, now. Not as close as they’d been in Lydes, but letters would travel so much faster now.

Their ship put into port, rocking with the waves even as the anchor was dropped, and Tanis turned away from stone city walls and the freezing mouth of the River Drakon to check on her son.

“We’re here, gahil,” she said, almost not believing it. She’d been waiting all winter for this, and now they were so close.

Damien was still looking at the city, the bridge of his nose crinkled between his eyebrows.

“It looks exactly like everyone always said, Maman,” he told her, in Orlesian.

“No here,” she cautioned him. “Marcher or Trade.”

“Of course, Màdair.”

It sounded wrong in his mouth, though his Starkhaven accent was flawless. His language had always been Orlesian, but they didn’t need that being held against them on top of anything else.

“Tanis!” Dame Arhuis called, and the two of them fell in line behind their employers, Tanis sticking close to ten-year-old Niels to prevent him from becoming separated from the group, and Damien schooling his expression to the blank politeness of Orlesian standards, one step behind Messere Arhuis and carrying his satchel of papers, writs, and introductions that were meant to smooth the business of the family and the bank here in Ferelden’s capital.

At the end of the dock port official who recorded all comings and goings of significant import, or amongst the people of a certain status or higher. He sat in his sheltered wooden stall on a tall stool, draped in a heavy cloak and wearing the thinnest woolen knit gloves Tanis had ever seen. They were faintly stained with ink from his record book, open in front of him, and smudged with charcoal from the heating brazier at his side.

“Your household, Messere?” he asked Messere Anhuis politely.

“Rens Anhuis of Starkhaven, and my wife Rehina, and my son Niels.”

“And your business, Messere?”

Damien had the appropriate letter ready in hand before the sentence had even been finished. Dame Anhuis took it and presented it to the port official.

“We are visiting my brother-in-law Teyrn Cousland of Highever,” she pronounced. “And we shall be conducting business of behalf of our family.”
“Very well, your Ladyship,” the man said, ducking his head as he made the notation in his book. “And the servants, your Ladyship?”

“Are registering their visit separately,” she told him, placing his one sovereign fee and tip onto the counter. Damien slipped the letter back into the satchel, and Tanis stepped up, pulling an old, often-folded document from her muff, where she had been storing it in preparation for this moment.

“Tanis Daganiri of Antiva,” she told him. “And my son Damien. We will be searching for alternate employment.”

She handed over the document silently. The man ignored it for a moment, even after he got her name recorded, but then he deigned to notice the paper. They both knew what it was.

He flipped it open with the blunt end of his metal stylus.

“Damien Daganiri, born 9:10 in Lydes in Orlais,” he read off, sneering the last word. “Elf-blooded.”

There were only three countries in Thedas that didn’t require this writ of it’s elf-blooded citizens—Rivain, Antiva, and Ferelden. If you traveled outside those countries, though, everyone but sailors were required to announce their heritage to the port authorities before entering a foreign land, and they were issued with their own writ. Failure to produce such a writ, sealed by the issuing country, was punishable by imprisonment of various lengths. Failure to procure one at the appropriate time had even harsher punishments.

Tanis had never gotten one for Damien in Orlais, where she’d tried to hide his parentage. She hadn’t gotten one for him when they’d traveled through the Marches looking for work, either, but after the Arhuis had hired them it had come out that Damien didn’t have his writ.

She’d had to go to town hall in Starkhaven and pay fifteen sovereigns to have it produced and filed without anyone locking her up in a prison cell and then mysteriously losing her for the deception. It had used up all their savings and she’d been in debt to the Arhuis’s bank for until last summer. Her and Damien’s finances still hadn’t recovered, and were likely never to. Falling into the Duchess of Lydes’s household, and into such favored and well-paid positions, was enough luck for a lifetime.

“Your curfew is two hours after last Chantry bells, same as the alienage,” the man told Damien, because Ferelden might not catalogue its own citizens with these writs but it was still familiar with them. “You can work shops, service, and shifts. Scribing if you’re literate. You are required by law to show this writ to any potential employer, to innkeepers and landlords, and to any member of the Chantry or gentry or properly-appointed official of the Crown Law if so ordered. Failure to produce is a fine, and jail stint when you can’t pay.”

And a beating either way, but that was unofficial.

“Yes, Messere,” Damien said, eyes down and averted. “I will remember.”

Tanis gave the port official the few silvers their presence in Ferelden cost, and took the writ back.

“Thank you, Serah. Andrasate bless your day.”

The Teyrn of Highever’s estate was up the steep rise of what had been an old seaside cliff on the edge of the Dragon Peaks of Ferelden’s northeast, blasted down into a slope by Tevene Magisters in the days before Andrasate. To facilitate the transfer of goods up from the ships to the tower Fort Drakon was built around. The rubble, Damien had told her—because he had been the one sitting in on Sévère Ophélie de Lydes’s lessons—had used to fill the River Drakon’s old delta, constricting the flow until it was the strong, harsh current that it had in the modern times. No ships could sail directly
against that current, so the Denerim docks were offset from the main city, in two parts- official business on the east side of the river, the Fort side; and mere trade on the west, with the markets. The Magisters had meant to make it difficult to bring a navy to bear against the tower, and impossible to sail warships down into the farming heartlands of the south, and they had succeeded- at the cost of Ferelden having to rely on the less-centralized but better harbored port cities of Jainen, Highever, and Amaranthine for the bulk of their trade.

Messere Arhuis called for a carriage on the short strip of land between the east docks and the city curtain wall. One arrived promptly once Dame Arhuis, annoyed with the speed of service, announced where she intended to go. Tanis took Messere Anhuis’s satchel from her son and slipped into the body of the carriage with her employers, coming up the steps just behind Niels as precedence dictated. Damien closed the door behind them and a moment later the carriage dipped as he mounted the rear footboard.

It probably would have been a short journey, on a map, but in reality it was mostly uphill to the Teyrn of Highever’s estate, and that meant it took a while. There were a few times, when the carriage jerked sharply on the steeper inclines, that Tanis had to discretely clench her hands in her lap and restrain herself from sticking her head out the carriage window to check that Damien hadn’t fallen off and tumbled down the street. He’d been tall enough to ride a carriage footboard since he’d turned fifteen. It would be unseemly to check on his safety. Servants did their jobs and that was that.

When the carriage passed under the wall of the estate and stopped in the courtyard, Damien opened the door for the Anhuis, unhurt and unruffled by his travel on the footboard, as always.

Tanis had just handed Niels over to his mother when the main door of the estate opened. The man who emerged looked disconcertingly northern for a moment, his hair neat and of reasonable length rather than the long shoulder styles she’d seen so much of already today, and the combination of thin mustache and short, clean-cut beard kept close around the mouth was pure Antivan.

But the fur and the leather was far too Fereldan for anything else, and Tanis knew the Cousland laurel leaves by now. They were stamped across the leather strap of his cloak, and she sank into a deep curtsey, Damien bowing at her side, as Dame Anhuis joyfully called: “Fergus!” and dashed to embrace him.

Cheek kisses as hello, by way of greeting, just like Antiva- but the servant who’d followed the Teyrn out looked somewhat shocked. Not standard for Ferelden, then. Avoid it.

Dame Anhuis made a round of introductions of her husband and son. The Teyrn held out his hand for Messere Anhuis to take but instead of a shake it was a clasp, elbows to wrist. Messere Anhuis had been expecting it and went along- appropriate Fereldan greeting. She’d need to watch the servants and around the city to find out if that was just between men or men who were equals or if anyone could use it.

They were taken into the estate. The servants livery was in the expected green and blue, but the style was very different. Blue skirts or pants, depending, nothing untoward there except for the distinct lack of hose, but perhaps Ferelden was too cold for that, even here almost at the beginning of spring. The green tunics were sleeveless and appeared to be the same for men and women. Odd. The Cousland laurels were embroidered around the collars, and the higher-level servants wore white gathered-sleeve shirts underneath their tunics with the laurels on the cuffs in green.

The other servants seemed to just wear their tunics over whatever shirt they wished. It was not very harmonizing. Didn’t this defeat the point of a uniform.

She and Damien stood out horribly. Starkhaven fashion and standards required that personal servants
to a wealthy family of semi-noble status fell into line with the higher end of the middle class, and they were dressed appropriately for it. Based on what Tanis was seeing Damien would be able to keep his close-cut pants, but the low leather shoes would need to be traded for proper boots. The Orlesian part of her shrieked that one did not wear boots inside, but even the Teyrn was. But close unskirted doublets were not the way servants dressed here, not when only the Teyrn was wearing one, and Damien’s house jackets would have to go entirely. And the charcoal grey that Starkhaven and the Marches considered appropriately sombre attire for all servants would have to be dyed over.

Tanis suspected she would have to replace all her skirts, but that was a decision to be made once she’d seen a market. The women here had very straight skirts, not full like the ones she was wearing, and there was no way to tell what the necklines and waistlines of the dresses were like in this country.

And they would both need heavier winter clothing. How much did good cloth and tailors cost in Ferelden? Their wardrobes would have to be entirely changed if they were going to fit here, and you had to be presentable and discrete to get a good household position.

The Teyrn was speaking to Dame Arhuis in halting Antivan, about nothing much at all. This was the first visit, an introduction, and there would be no talk of banking or money here. She and Damien had no orders and Dame Arhuis still had Niels, so they simply waited off to the side. The Teyrn’s servant, who’d followed him outside, returned with hot drinks, saying something quietly to the Teyrn as he bent over to place the tray on the sitting room table.

“Do you want your servants shown to the rooms, Rehina?” he asked his sister-in-law, once his servant had withdrawn.

“Oh, I need to speak to you about them, Fergus,” Dame Arhuis told them. “Tanis has been a wonderful governess for Niels and a lady’s maid and friend for me, but they might have a terrible time if they came to Antiva with us. I was hoping you could find a place for her and her son in your household, Damien is very accomplished, he knows how to do a number of jobs, he fits anywhere, he’s elf-blooded, I hope that’s not a problem.”

“I’d like to help you, Rehina, but I’m sorry, I don’t have any need for more staff,” the Teyrn told her. “We’re full. If you’d come at the beginning of the winter we’d still be looking for more people to serve for the court season, but…”

“Can you recommend anyone, Fergus? Please?”

“Well…”

He sat back in his chair and looked at them.

“Most people have full households,” he said to Damien, directly. “Some of the Banns might have an interest in your experience, but I don’t know what most of them are like. You might try Bann Kelaig or Bann Harper. I don’t know how they feel about elf-blooded servants, though I wouldn’t have guessed by looking at you.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Damien said, because he was very good at his job and could keep his composure through almost anything and was this how things were done in Ferelden, did nobility speak to other people’s servants.

“You could try the palace, but I don’t know what your credentials are like or what they’d want. If you’re-”
He paused.

“Ryman.”

“Yes, Your Grace?” his servant asked.

“Do you know if the Arl of Amaranthine is still hiring?”

“He might be, Your Grace, since he still hasn’t arrived. But the news is that there isn’t a decent elven servant to be had in the whole city.”

“Get them directions.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Tanis, we won’t need you until tomorrow,” Dame Arhuis told her. “We’re going to have a nice family time today. You and Damien can go.”

“Thank you, Dame Arhuis.”

Damien left Messere Arhuis’ satchel by his chair, and he and Tanis followed Ryman out.

“The estate of the Arl of Amaranthine is on the east side of the district,” he told Tanis, not quite looking directly at her. “Follow the road you arrived on until it crosses another that is paved. It is the largest estate on the corner. Doubtless you will find it to your taste.”

Damien was her son, which meant that she got all the respect afforded to a human woman who’d chosen to lie with an elven man. Assumptions, all of it, but easier than ever telling the truth about Nehna and her past. Better to be thought a respectable woman who’d made an unfortunate choice in where to place her heart than be known as a former prostitute and escaped sex slave.

“I am certain I will,” she said. “Thank you for your consideration.”

She and Damien paused just inside the wall of the Teyrn’s estate, next to the gate, to quickly check over each other’s clothes. There wasn’t much to be done about their unfortunate adherence to the fashion standards of a different country, but Tanis had to balance the possibility of a position in Ferelden against taking the time to buy new clothes. If they waited until they’d gotten ones that didn’t mark them as foreigners, it could be four or five days until they were presentable.

The jobs could be gone by then. They would have to risk this. Damien adjusted her winter bonnet, Tanis arranged her quilted muff so that the wind wouldn’t leave her ungloved fingers numb and frozen, and they stepped out into the street.

East down the road- that would the opposite direction than the one the carriage had come in on. They passed manor houses dark and silent and looming, shoes crunching in the slush. They avoided the ice, but oh, their feet were going to freeze before they’d even reached the estate. By three manors down Tanis couldn’t feel her toes any longer.

She hurried the pace.

They reached the crossing of the paved roads ten minutes later. There were only two manors here, diagonal from each other. Immediately to their right were the open, fallow flowerbeds of a small public garden; diagonal from that a high wall.

Someone had shoveled the snow and slush clear from the road, against that wall. They followed the
cleared road and passed one gate, barred, and then reached another, standing half open.

Tanis hoped that this was the right place and stepped inside. It was a servant’s courtyard, tiny and backing up against the kitchens. There were servants here, in undyed off-white linen and warm yellow wool. The livery was generally in the same style as at the Teyrn’s estate, but-

They were all elves.

This had to be the place, then.

“Need something, Mistress?” one of them asked. She had her sleeves pushed up past her elbows despite the chill- not the house linen, worn wool of indeterminate color- and wore a heavy leather smock over everything. She’d been cutting wood.

She didn’t really… look the sort to be employed in a household. And she wasn’t wearing the uniform. But there was a cloth badge on an armband just below her shoulder in the right colors.

“We were told there may be employment?”

The axe woman waved somebody down.

“Aklina, take ’em to see Shianni.”

Aklina was clearly one of the kitchen servants, in her linen shirt and sleeveless wool dress. Her hair was bound up in a scarf out of her eyes and her hands were rough from a life of scrubbing dishes and floors, but she led them through the kitchen and into the main estate, straight to the chamberlain’s office, without anyone stopping her and demanding that a higher-ranking servant show them where to go.

Shianni was also an elf.

An elf as chamberlain, in linen bleached true white and a pattern of brown bears and white flowers stitched around her seams, with a warm office and both the chain garter of keys proclaiming her position and a thin golden-

No, no, that couldn’t be a real gold chain, not on an elf, not even on an elf in the improbable position of chamberlain to greater nobility.

The pendant on it was metal, bronze and bright copper and it really could not be gold, a twisting flame.

Tanis reached up to undo her bonnet, now that they were in the presence of an agent of nobility, and resisted touching her chest on the way there, over her heart, where that same design of flame in wood, hung on a cord beneath her layers of underdresses and shifts.

It had been eleven years, too long, since she’d seen Nehna, and received that flame, carved and given by her own hands.

The chamberlain looked them over as they sat silently in the chairs on the other side of her desk.

“You don’t look like chamber servants.”

“No, Mistress-”

She couldn’t say Shianni.
“Tabris,” Mistress Tabris provided for her.

“We’re looking to leave the employ of Messere and Dame Anhuis, bankers of Starkhaven, whom we’ve worked for for almost a decade, myself as governess and lady’s maid, my son as footman. I have a writ—”

She only managed to get it partway to the desk before Mistress Tabris said: “I know what that is and I don’t want to see it.”

It wavered in Tanis’s hand a moment, but she tucked it away, almost sure that the chamberlain was going to demand to see it anyway.

“Names?”

“Tanis and Damien Daganiri.”

Mistress Tabris gave them a look.

Not undone by the writ of elf-blood, not here. No, it would be Damien’s Orlesian name-

“You’re from Starkhaven?”

“I am from Antiva originally,” Tanis told her. Maybe if she could get everything in right now, before she stopped really listening- “My son was born in Orlais in Lydes, where we lived before leaving the country. I also served the Duchess of Lydes as a governess for her grandniece and a personal maid for both of them; my son grew up in the household as her official companion—”

The chamberlain stopped her with an upraised hand.

“How many languages do you speak?”

“I know Antivan, Trade, Orlesian, Marcher, and some Nevarran,” Tanis said. “My son knows only Orlesian, Trade, and Marcher, but he is learning—”

“Can you read?”

“Both of us in Common and Justinian.”

“Write?”

“In the same.”

“You—”

Mistress Tabris looked at Damien.

“—did you learn anything while… companioning?”

“I can do sums, Mistress Tabris,” Damien said. “I have some schooling in history, literature, and geography, mostly focused on Orlais. I am fully trained in servant’s court manners in the Orlesian style, and I know the appropriate terms of address for and manner of deference to nobility and commoners of sufficient class in Orlais, the Marches, Nevarra, Antiva, Tevinter—”

Mistress Tabris got up from her desk and pulled the door open.

“Iro!” she yelled down the hall.
“The plaster is setting!” a man yelled back.

“Then you’ve got time, get in here!”

She turned back to them, leaving the door open.

“Can you get to Vigil’s Keep?” she asked. “It’s off the Pilgrims’ Path on the way to Amaranthine, six days’ walk.”

“I-” Tanis said, thrown. “We will manage it if we must.”

Iro arrived.

He was Dalish.

So that’s where Mistress Tabris’s flame came from, Tanis thought, staring up at the tall man with his hair pulled back. His vallas’lin were a pattern of dark rising swirls, thickest around his eyes, with a haloed flame seated right between his brows.

He wasn’t wearing any shoes and he was wiping paint and plaster off his hands with a limp rag.

“I need a letter,” Mistress Tabris told him. “And don’t you say one thing about my writing lessons, this one has to go to Lady Stockard so it has to be perfect.”

“I bet you could do it if you really tried, da’ise,” he told her, voice surprisingly soft and gentle for such a tall man, now that he wasn’t shouting to be heard.

“Letter,” she said, holding out her quill. He tucked the dry corner of his rag into his belt and took it from her, dipping the tip into the inkwell and standing ready over the parchment.

“To Lady Stockard, Seneschal of Amaranthine’,” the chamberlain dictated to him. “‘Here are Tanis and Damien Daganiri, Orlesian-trained personal servants. They are educated and literate and overqualified for housework. There’s elf blood in the family. You should interview them for the positions you asked me to fill. Shianni Tabris, Chamberlain of the Arl’s Estate in Denerim’.”

Iro passed a hand over the parchment and the air between his skin and the ink shimmered, like a mirage in the deserts.

Mage.

Mistress Tabris took the sheet with it’s now-dry ink, folded it up, and sealed it with a stick of pink-tinted white wax and the stamp of a brass seal. The design was a striding bear surrounded by a wreath of flowers.

“Show this at the gates and say you’re there to interview with Lady Stockard for the positions as governess for the Arl’s son and manservant for His Arlship,” she instructed them. “When you’re hired you’ll be coming back here for the court season.”

When they were hired. That was… hopeful, and hopefully not wishful.

“You’re staring,” Iro said. She wasn’t-

Damien looked down at his hands. At least the Dalish man seemed amused, and not offended.

“You are not what I was expecting,” Tanis answered for him.
“Not expecting a Dalish in the house of the Hero of Ferelden?”

Oh. Oh. She did remember the news that the Queen of Ferelden had given the Dalish Warden who had put her on her throne a title, but she hadn’t known which-

His attention sharpened, expression going from open and amused to focused suddenly, and he said something to her in El’vhen.

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak your language.”

He tapped his head.

“You have halla in your hair,” he said.

She was wearing Nehna’s embroidered hair ribbons. She’d forgotten. She’d forgotten; if this had been any other household and someone had asked-

But it was this one.

Tanis opened the collar of her travelling jacket, hoping she wasn’t making a grave misstep, and pulled out Nehna’s carved flame.

Mistress Tabris’s eyebrows shot up. Iro’s expression opened again, and he smiled genially at Damien.

“Greetings, cousin,” he told her son, and he couldn’t possibly tell who his mother really was based on just that, could he- “An unexpected gift, to meet one with the blood of clans.”

Iashtivar protect them, he was going to ask after Damien’s presumed Dalish father, wasn’t he, she couldn’t bring up Nehna, not when she’d said in her letters that she was avoiding the Dalish city in the south and didn’t want her presence revealed to them, could she even say ‘Revasina’ without arousing his suspicion-

Mistress Tabris poked him in the side.

“Go finish your thing,” she told him. “The Arl’s coming next week and the front hall needs to be done.”

Iro smiled at her, nodded at them, and left.

They had avoided utter disaster.

The chamberlain handed the letter over.

“If you start walking soon you should reach the first inns on the Pilgrims’ Path by nightfall,” she told them.

That was a dismissal, but-

“Mistress Tabris?”

“Yes?”

“Do you know how to get to the Pilgrims’ Inn from here? It’s on one of the market squares.”

Mistress Tabris did know that inn, which was fortunate. Tanis mentally reviewed their money
situation as she and Damien walked out of the Palace District to the East Market and the inn. Lodging for six day’s walk could add up. And they’d need to bring at least one change of clothes to be presentable for the interview. They would need to find some way to carry those. Bags could do, but only if they found somewhere near this Vigil’s Keep to stay a night and leave their clothes to hang out the wrinkles. And they would need to buy boots, and cloaks with hoods, and gloves or scarves would not be amiss-

*Maybe* they had enough, and that was accounting for what they had to save to replace their wardrobes and the worse-case assumption that they did not get hired for the Arl’s household and would have to pay their way back to Denerim.

“*Maman,* why did you ask about an inn?”

“Watch your language, Damien,” she reminded him. “Because it is on a market and we will need boots and cloaks, and because I want my letter from Nehna.”

It was early yet to truly expect that a letter had arrived from Mont-de-glace, but she could hope. Maybe Nehna had found someone to travel north in late winter and deliver it. She hadn’t been expecting to be reminded of Dalish today, but now that she had, she *had* to know if there was any news from her love.

It took a bit of purposeful drifting between stalls and shops to get the best price for the best quality of boots and cloaks, and Tanis was happy for the warmth of the inn once they stepped inside with their purchases. Warm wine, a little hot lunch, and changing out of their soak shoes would do them a world of-

“*Tanis.*”

She managed to keep her hands from flying to her mouth.

“I,” she said, holding back tears. They were in public. Too much affection was dangerous. “I was only expecting a letter.”

“I can write you wherever you go,” Nehna said. “But if you were here and couldn’t stay but I only wrote, I would regret missing this chance.”

Because Nehna loved her, but she would not return to Antiva for her.

“Did you have a good trip?” Tanis asked, trying to come up with a topic for conversation that wouldn’t be too compromising.

Nehna had a table- she’d been coming here regularly for two weeks, hoping to catch her. She’d used her free time to wander the markets and listen to the merchants to find out what people were buying and what they were trying to sell. The south of the country was still struggling to rebuild, she told them, but if there was trade to be had, or even just a more consistent market for the Dlanikik ivory…

“You’ve been staying in the city?” Tanis asked once the topic of trade had been exhausted, for the moment. Nehna was a merchant now, and perhaps she could afford a room in an inn- and maybe Denerim was a place that let that happen, because Nehna would *never* stay in an alienage.

“I’m camped outside the city,” Nehna told her. “There were-”

Her hands flexed on the table. Her expression hardened.

“*-Dalish,* in the city. Most of them left a few days ago, but I still see one in the market in the
afternoons.”

“He’s working for the Arl of Amaranthine, I think,” Tanis said.

“The Dalish one.”

“Yes- we were just there looking for jobs. We have to go to Vigil’s Keep, Nehna, and ask there.”

Nehna looked at the new boots they’d bought and not changed into yet.

“Walking?”

“We need to save our money.”

“When are you going?”

“Today, after we go pack some of our things.”

Nehna stood up from the table, slipping some of the food she hadn’t eaten yet into a secondhand cloth headscarf.

“I’ll meet you outside the walls.”

It took an hour, perhaps, to join her- they put the boots on before they ventured out into the city, and once they’d returned to the Teyrn’s estate they had to change into old clothes that could be sacrificed to rougher travel, carefully pick what they’d wear for the interview, gather their coin, notify Dame Arhuis-

Nehna was loitering by the road, some ways from the uncomfortable human guards on the gate, and put their bags on top of her halla. Once they were out of sight of the city, she pulled Tanis in and kissed her, finally.

Too long- eleven years was too long-

“How long will you be staying?” she asked, ignoring her tears.

“At least until you get an answer about the job,” Nehna told her. “I can’t be known to any Dalish, Tanis.”

Maybe a week, if they got the job. Two, if they didn’t, and had to walk back.

They never had enough time.

________________________________________________________

“Merrill, dear-”

“Hmmmm?”

“Do you know your brother’s lineage?”

“Only parts of it. I know his parents’ names, and their parents’, and their parents’; but Theron knows the rest.”

“That’s all right then, thank you.”

Leandra made a note on her paper.
“Why do you want to know?” Merrill asked. “Do you want to know more about Sabrae? Theron still knows more than me but I know things, I can tell you all about when-”

“I was speaking with Delilah,” Leandra said, before Merrill could run off her mouth. Maker knew that she wasn’t going to say a thing about where Marian’s heart had fallen, not when she herself had run off with an apostate, and Merrill was a sweet girl- but no conversation with Malcom had never been as trying as Merrill’s chatter often was. “Your brother received a letter with the official seal of the crown rather than the queen’s own sign, and she opened it in his absence. When I went to see her this morning she showed it to me.”

The click of knitting needles over by the fire stopped.

“Is she allowed to do that?” Bethany asked, looking up worriedly from her yarn.

“Delilah is his seneschal. If it was simply from the queen, then no; but with the crown’s seal it becomes business of the arling.”

“Why did the queen want to know about Theron’s ancestors? If she made it that sort of business I can write her-”

“No, Merrill,” Leandra told her. “It isn’t just your brother. The crown is collecting the lineages of all the current nobility and lords with inheritable titles, and a listing of the knights.”

“Oh,” Merrill said. “She’s going to need a lot of paper.”

“But the nobility keeps those records themselves, don’t they?” Bethany asked. “Why would the queen want them? I thought she wasn’t looking for husbands from within the country.”

“She is compiling the records so that the current families can prove their status,” Leandra explained. “I have to say the letter was surprising for me in another way. I hadn’t heard that Bann Alfstanna Eremon is now the Arl of Edgehall, and I have no idea how I haven’t heard before now.”

“There hasn’t been an Arl of Edgehall since Mad King Arland stripped the Drydens of the title for the last Warden-Commander’s uprising.”

“It’s good to hear that you do remember some things from your father’s lessons, Marian.”

Her eldest daughter crossed her arms and sulked a little by the fire, next to Merrill on the rug, who was managing Bethany’s yarn for her.

“So I looked up some history about Wardens after the Carta and Merrill’s brother,” she muttered.

“It was good!” Merrill reassured her. “We learned a lot, remember, and there was that part, where you said that for a group that’s not supposed to be political they’ve gotten into an awful lot of politics in Ferelden and the Anderfels, and isn’t it funny how no one even knows who killed half of the Archdemons-”

“Warden unknown, Warden Corin, Warden unknown, Warden Garahel!” Kieran recited brightly from his position flopped across Rabbit, who wuffed tiredly at his enthusiasm. The boy had tired Carver’s mabari right out playing with her today. It had been good to see Rabbit engaged like that again. She’d gotten close with young Sandal, but he wasn’t one much inclined to go dashing about in fetch or tag.

“See, Hathen remembers!” Merrill said. Leandra went back to writing her letter. It was almost finished. “Very good, da’len, but who’s the fifth?”
“Babae!”

“Yes he is!”

“But Mother,” Bethany spoke up again. “Why would the noble families have to prove their status?”

Her younger daughter was truly a blessing. Marian had borne the brunt of providing for and protecting the family once they’d arrived in Kirkwall, but it was Bethany who had the temperament and head for high society living. From what little she’d said of the Gallows, that had been what had saved her from most of depredations of the Templars there, and Leandra gladly thanked Andraste and praised the Maker every morning for the fact that she took after her father in that manner as well as in her powers.

But if only her daughters could have evened out the protective aggressiveness and quiet diplomatic maneuvering between them…

“But the nobility of Ferelden was devastated by the Blight and the attempt to usurp the throne,” Leandra said. “So many of the families are simply gone. Many of the bannorns have no one to run them, and have been sitting unattended for years.”

For a moment, the only sounds in the room were Rabbit’s breathing, the crackle of the fire, and the tip of Leandra’s quill, finishing her letter.

“I knew it had to be bad,” Marian said quietly. “With Darktown and Lowtown- but even in the nobility?”

“The Fereldan nobility is still a fighting nobility, Marian,” Bethany said. “Did you really forget?”

“I’ve been surrounded by Marcher and Orlesian nobility for the last couple of years, okay? The closest they get to military action is slapping someone else over party invitations.”

“It’s part of what makes Ferelden Ferelden,” her sister chided. ‘Dog lords’, Marian. Fereldans fight, and the nobility does it in the field right alongside the common foot soldiers. It’s why Kirkwall looked at your sword and decided you were uncivilized.”

“I know, I remember seeing them at Ostagar! But I figured they’d all- gotten out! Fucked off to stay with Marcher cousins or something, and left the refugees to fend for themselves!”

“The nobility has always been centered in the farmlands,” Leandra reminded her eldest. “South Reach. The Bannorn. And where did the horde go through?”

“Through the farmlands,” Marian said.

“Hadn’t you noticed we’ve been eating potatoes since we got here?”

“It’s winter in Ferelden, of course we were eating potatoes!”

“With nothing else but winter meat and the dregs of fruit preserves every so often?”

“Fine! All right! I’m dense! Excuse me for being worried that the Chantry is probably still looking for us!”

“They can’t care about you that much, Marian,” Merrill said. “You haven’t done anything.”

“We’re the ones who found that red lyrium,” Marian reminded her. “I’m the one who went around saving half the city! I’m the one who killed the Arishok, and we’re the ones who stole everything out
of the Gallows- and oh yes! You and Bethany are apostates!"

“Marian!” Leandra said sharply.

“If I ever see Varric again I’m going to punch him right in his beardless sodding face!”

“But it’s Varric!” Merrill exclaimed. “Don’t punch Varric, Marian, please! He’s nice!”

“You know what I saw in the market when I went to Amaranthine earlier this week?” Marian demanded.

Rabbit was whining, and Kieran was staring at her, wide-eyed.

“Templars?” Merrill suggested.

“One of those stupid little- those Marcher twocoppers, those serial stories Varric was always writing for! And you know what, he’s got a new one going, and you want to guess what it’s called! It’s ‘The Tale of the Champion’.”

“Oh, but that sounds exciting-”

“He’s writing about me!” Marian yelled. “He’s writing about us! About what we did! How am I supposed to keep all of you safe when he’s telling the world that you’re free mages!”

“Oh, Marian,” Merrill said, slipping Bethany’s yarn off her fingers to reach for her. “It’s all right. We’ll kill them. And we can always go to the Brecilian, I know good places there to live, and the Templars never get very far in. I won’t let them.”

“I can leave-”

“You’re not leaving, Bethany! We’re not losing you!”

“We will stay together,” Leandra ruled, firmly interrupting the argument. “We’re going to Denerim.”

“That’s not going to be any better!”

“Yes, it will be,” she said. “Leontius is going. Delilah told me that she and Nathaniel are sending him and Neria specifically to get them away from the Grand Cleric. And Kieran is going, and Kieran’s mother. We will stay under the protection of the Arl-Commander. A squad of Grey Wardens and four grown and trained mages should be enough for any Templars who may come. Once you are safe I will apply to the queen’s court for one of the empty bannorns.”

“Mother,” Marian said. “The queen isn’t just going to give you a bannorn.”

“Of course she won’t,” Leandra said. “I’m going to buy one. Queen Anora is making an official record of the current nobility because, once the Landsmeet convenes after Wintersend, the titles without claimants will be granted to those with enough money and political favor.”

“You don’t just do that.”

“The farmlands lie fallow. Those who didn’t flee across the Waking Sea and survived the horde grow as much as elders and children and those with old wounds can, and feed themselves first. But only the teyrnirs and the arlings are running properly, largely because the arls and the teyrns have taken up the jobs of their banns- there are seven bannorns in the Arling of Amaranthine and the Arl-Commander holds six of them. Food is grown and taxes are collected and there is trade in the large cities, but the Bannorn has no leadership. Ferelden is bleeding money. Delilah said that Amaranthine
is the only part of the country that is actively prospering, and it isn’t by much. Better than what she was expecting, I’m sure, I can’t imagine handing Amaranthine over was anything more than a desperate move to keep the land controlled. And now she’s desperate enough to sell the empty bannorns to pay off reconstruction debts.”

“I don’t see how it will help,” Marian said. “Nobility gets attention.”

“With land we will have our own measure of power, no matter how small,” Leandra told her. “We will be able to make alliances. A small rural bannorn will keep us far away from the Chantry.”

If they could find one small enough and rural enough, it could take weeks for Templars to arrive, once they’d been called. She’d long ago learned the necessity of always having an escape plan.

“But there’s no one to inherit it,” Bethany said. “I can’t. Marian has Merrill, and elf-blooded children-”

“Your children might not be mages,” Leandra pointed out, because that was nothing that needed to be discussed in front of her elf-blooded grandnephew. “And if nothing else, Ferelden still holds with mature adoption. Someone will inherit.”

“Aunt Merrill?”

Kieran had clambered off Rabbit and into Merrill’s lap, between her and Marian. Merrill hugged him and stood.

“Bed for you, da’len,” she said.

“But I’m not tired-”

Her daughters must have seen something in her expression that Leandra couldn’t, because Bethany’s eyes went sad and Marian was trying to hide alarm as she began to stand as well.

“Merrill-”

“It doesn’t matter how desperate anyone is or what they wrote in the human laws,” Merrill said, and it took Leandra a moment to realize that she was talking to Kieran, and not to any of them. “Your Babae and I love you, Hathen, and you’re going to grow up wonderfully and you’re not going to have to worry about your parents or your magic or anything.”

“Marian, leave her be,” Leandra called when her eldest tried to follow her out of the room. “Give her time to calm down. Tomorrow I need you to take this letter to Amaranthine and have it sent to Kirkwall- I’m having Bodahn close up the estate and bring the household.”

“Neria?”

She sighed in the dark of the emptied storeroom they shared- her on a floor pallet, because it was more comfortable for her back, him up on a folding cot. It was tight fit, but all the Wardens were crammed into little corners like this, and they actually had one of the better spots. Just beyond their door was the main room of the outbuilding Anders had received for his new clinic. The whole building was starting to smell of elfroot from the potions he’d been ordered to brew. He’d been complaining about his new orders off and on for a few days. This wasn’t healing, he’d been saying, he wasn’t out in the town helping anyone with the winter sicknesses! Wasn’t he allowed to delegate this, he was a Captain now-
That was maybe the strangest thing, of all of this, of the entire running-away-to-join-the-Wardens situation. Not the truth of the Joining, not their easy acceptance into the ranks, not the Arl-Commander’s apparent willingness, if not outright eagerness, to defy Chantry rule.

Anders was alive and in a position of authority. Only in the Wardens.

“What, Leontius?”

“This what just like the Circle dormitories when they’d been apprentices together, really.

“She knows.”

“Who?”

“Cousin Leandra, she knows; she came to see me this afternoon and she said that Revka only ever had five children and none of them had my name.”

Well, that was actually a problem.

“Did she guess?”

“No, I don’t think so, I don’t know what she was thinking- that I’m an imposter I guess but what if she says something, what if she tells Constable Howe- what if she tells the Arl-Commander.”

“Then we get Anders and have him explain it.”

“I don’t want Anders to explain this! He’ll just yell it at everyone!”

“Then tell them yourself before it comes up when they have to file paperwork or talk with the Chantry or something.”

“We’re leaving tomorrow for Denerim!”

“And is that where the Arl-Commander will turn up eventually or not?” Neria asked. “Leontius, come on, you know better, it’s the middle of the night and you’re always like this in the middle of the night. Go back to sleep.”

“I can’t.”

Of course he couldn’t. He never could, once he’d woken himself up worrying like this.

“Then take that manual you stole and go read in the clinic.”

“The cats will see the light and Anders will wake up and then he’ll ask me what’s wrong and then I’ll have to-”

Leontius was a good friend but he was also a trial.

Neria pushed herself up off the pallet, holding her blanket and cloak in place around her shoulders, and whacked him in the face with her pillow.

“Neria!”

“I’m going to Eadric’s,” she told him. “Read in here. And go take some embrium if you’re still not
asleep in an hour!"

She stepped into her boots and left the building. It was the second week of Wintermarch and far too cold to be wearing nothing but a nightdress and boots, but she was only going across the courtyard. The unfortunate Warden who’d been stuck with dungeon guard duty for the dead shift waved hello and she waved back.

Eadric’s assigned room was on an odd floor of the Vigil that had been created when the kitchen cellar had been sunk. It was small, and tiny, and formerly used for storing old glass, rag baskets, and laundry tubs, because it backed right up against the big roasting fireplace and was far too hot to store food in. Someone would have already grabbed it up for living quarters but for the fact that it was almost too hot to stand.

Neria found it stifling too, but it had a redeeming quality.

Namely- an elf who saw no reason not to start shedding items of clothing as soon as he entered the room, all the better to enjoy the heat. Eadric loved the room.

The rush of cooler air when she opened his door woke him.

“Eh?” he asked groggily at the sound of it closing. Neria shucked her boots and slipped into his bed, pressing up against his bare back.

“Why, Eadric Telaren, fancy meeting you here.”

“Neria Surana,” he answered, and she could hear the fond, amused smile in his tone, under the huskiness of just waking up. “What a pleasant surprise. Do you come here often?”

“Oh, as often as I can. Care to raise the count?”

He did, by a couple. She was still soft-boned and relaxed when she woke up in the morning, now with his chest against her back.

“I’m going to miss you,” he said into the back of her neck. His breath tickled the ends of her short-shorn hair.

“I’m only going to be in Denerim. I bet you could come visit.”

“Oh, I’m going to try,” he promised. “Don’t want to miss the baby.”

“Come in Cloudreach sometime, then. I’ll send a letter when it might be getting close.”

“Three whole months. I may die from lack of having you.”

She grabbed his nearest hand and playfully bit at the side of it.

“You lived almost three years without me, Eadric.”

“And I hated every second of it.”

“You did not.”

“Every second I wasn’t memorizing new glyphs I did.”

“So maybe five or ten minutes of your waking hours,” she teased. “Budge over, I’ve got to go get dressed and make sure that Leontius packed embrium so he can sleep.”
Eadric rolled out of bed and fished a shirt out of a pile of clothes.

“How’s he doing?”

“Nervous wreck, same as always,” she told him, and stretched. “He’s scared of going to talk to the Constable or the Arl-Commander.”

“They’re going to have to be told,” Eadric said, sitting down on the edge of the bed to wiggle into his uniform surcoat. “Someone’s going to have to requisition your paperwork from Kinloch, and they won’t get anything if they ask for ‘Leontius Amell’.”

“We know.” Neria said, rolling over onto her other side and tapping her fingers up the small, thin plates of silverite fastened into the quilting of his surcoat. She liked the looks of the Warden’s mage uniforms- but it would be a few months before she got one of her own. She had to have her baby first, and recover from that, and then they’d have to find a wet nurse for it. Just in case she didn’t survive the Joining.

She’d survived her Harrowing. She could survive that.

“But you know how the Templars would have been about it. And the Chantry. ‘Tevene perversions’ and all that crap.”

“Arl-Commander’s not Andrastean,” Eadric pointed out. “It’s not really a secret, but nobody talks about it.”

Neria scooted over to the edge of the mattress and sat herself up. Eadric handed her her boots.

“Who knows what the Dalish think about it, though. And most of the Wardens are Andrastean. Anders was okay, but that’s Anders, you can’t take him as an example for anyone else’s beha-oooh!”

She’d started to stand, now that her boots were on, but Eadric had scooped her up and kicked his door open. She reached up to hug him around his neck.

“Are you going to carry me all the way back to the clinic?”

“Any reason I shouldn’t?”

She swung her feet.

“Not really, no.”

Anders opened the door for them and tried to rib Eadric about their night. Neria stuck her foot against his chest and pushed once he got close enough to reach.

“If you’re so interested in intimate attachments,” she told him. “Go make eyes at tall dark and pessimistic.”


“Maybe you two will finally get somewhere!” Neria called to him over Eadric’s shoulder.

“Surana! Who?”

“You know who!”
“No I don’t!”

Leontius was awake, but not really lucid.

Neria sighed, and poked Eadric so he’d put her down.

“How much embrium did you take last night?” she asked, hands on her hips.

He mumbled something indistinct.

“Louder, Amell!”

“…teacup…”

Eadric found the kettle out on Anders’ fire, and rescued the empty teacup from having its dregs eaten by one of the cats Anders had taken in. Anders scooped the orange tabby up from the table and cradled it to his chest.

“He took that much?” he exclaimed. “And he’s awake!”

“I’m not sure I’d call that ‘awake’,” Eadric said, scraping the dregs out into the fire.

Anders bopped his nose against the cat’s.

“No, Ser Pounce, bad kitty,” he cooed at it. “Teacups are not for cats! Overstewed embrium is very much not for cats! Neria, give him licorice root to chew on, and dandelion and peppermint tisane for after.”

She pulled a face. She remembered how those tastes came together.

“Come on, it’s not that bad,” Eadric said, seeing her expression.

“Just because you take licorice and dandelion tisane straight-”

“You’re still doing that, Eadric?” Anders asked, letting his cat go. “Just go to sleep.”

“Some of us study.”

“Lcorice root is in the glass jar in the big cabinet,” Anders told Neria. “Actually, I’ll make the tisane, you bully him into getting dressed and making sure you’re both ready to leave. And I’ll make Leontius steeping sachets so this doesn’t happen in Denerim.”

It was a job and a half to get Leontius into slumping upright and even partially cooperating with her efforts at getting him into his uniform. Once she’d gotten his shirt on, she gave up and switched jobs with Anders. Getting Leontius into Warden armor was going to take more physical strength than she had. Steeping sachets were easier, and she made as many as she could. Eadric helped, once he came back with a tray of breakfast and some things that would keep wrapped up for Leontius for once they were out on the road, because he was a treasure and a blessing.

He even helped stitch up the sachets. He was better at it than she was.

“Rise and shine!” they heard Anders bellow some ten minutes later. “Up, up, up! Leontius Amell, you are supposed to be riding a horse this morning!”

“You think he takes being a Captain too seriously?” Neria asked.
“You haven’t heard Captain Alistair yell across Soldiers’ Peak yet. Or Captain Kondrat when he’s trying to get units to work together. That’s yelling.”

Anders just about dragged Leontius out of the room. He seemed marginally more lucid. Eadric stitched up the last few sachets and stuck them into free corners of Leontius’ s pack, Neria quickly stuffed the rest of breakfast into her face, they poured the dandelion and peppermint tisane down Leontius’ s throat, and somehow managed to get him and her to the congregating group of Wardens and servants heading out to Denerim.

“Anders, what’s going on here?” Constable Howe asked, when he saw them. He sounded harried, but he always sounded harried.

“Nerves, took too much sleeping aid.”

“And this morning was going so well,” Constable Howe said, rubbing at his face with his hands. He didn’t look like he’d slept properly.

“Just stick him in a cart, he should be really awake in an hour,” Anders told him. “But I don’t trust him on a horse right now.”

“Fine. Just- just find some place to stick him and make sure someone’s got his horse!”

They wedged Leontius and his bag between the side of a cart and a trunk of bedsheets. Neria mounted her horse awkwardly, feeling too tall and sort of bloated. She’d expected Leontius’s horse to end up as her responsibility, somehow, but Anders led it over to Ser Tabris, whom she overheard assure him that she’d ridden all over Ferelden this winter, she could handle another horse tied behind hers. Eadric poked her leg.

“Go up with Lockhard and Andreas,” he told her. “Wardens and warriors ride together at the front. I love you, stay safe.”

“You too,” she told him, and nudged her horse with her foot. That was what you were supposed to do, right?

It moved, and in the right direction, so good enough. She could ride to Denerim on this thing if it stayed this simple.

She’d never been to Denerim. She hoped it would be nice.

The Orlesians were right. Ferelden was muddy and smelled like animals.

Specifically, in this instance, the settlement outside the walls of Vigil’s Keep was full of slushy mud and smelled like goats. Tanis had forgotten that she knew so well what goats smelled like. The Khagti had kept them. Her father had owned some.

“Why are there no paved roads?” she asked Iashtivar under her breath.

“Maman?”

She’d given up on correcting him while they were on the road.

“This the seat of the arl,” she said, louder. “But it is all dirt tracks. And these houses are…”

‘Ramshackle’ was perhaps too denigrating. The houses and buildings here were functional. They seemed sturdy. But they were new, and very… plain, yes, that was it. They were merely utilitarian,
mainly boxy wooden constructions with thatch roofs. There were only three buildings here with any stone in them at all- the Chantry, the blacksmith’s, and what appeared to be an outpost or clearing house of some guild or another. Everything else was wood wood wood, staining with mud near the foundations and slowly weathering near the roofs. In the farming villages they’d passed on the road people had at least occasionally had a mural of some sort on the longer walls.

“The houses are simply Ferelden?” Damien suggested.

“That they are.”

The walls of Vigil’s Keep were new as well, done in a style that was not entirely familiar. There were two portcullises on the main gate, for one, and the gate itself was- metal? Surely not, surely it had to be plated wood.

Either way, it must have been massively expensive. Perhaps what hadn’t gone to properly building the settlement outside had gone into the fortress.

Vigil’s Keep was thankfully less surprising than the estate in Denerim had been. They were properly handed over to a properly uniformed servant of appropriate rank and brought into the presence of Lady Seneschal Stockard of Amaranthine with appropriate introductions and decorum.

Lady Stockard asked to see the writ of blood. She asked to see their references from the Anhuis, and pressed for details about their service in Lydes. She quizzed them backwards and forwards on decorum, etiquette, standards of dress and bearing, levels of discretion, and details of duty. She set scenarios and asked what they would do in them. She fired off questions to see if they would misstep. She had them hold an entire conversation about what they had seen on the Pilgrims’ Path in Orlesian to test their claimed competency, and then about Denerim in Marcher.

Tanis prudently left out the mud and the goats.

There was only one odd question, at the end.

“How loyal are you to the theological demands of the Chant of Light?”

This had to be a trick question. It had to be. How could they- Damien had grown up in Orlais with the Chantry in public and knowledge of her continued worship of Iashtivar in private. She’d gone to Chantry with the Duchess of Lydes and her grandniece, but it wasn’t what she believed.

“How do you mean, Lady Stockard?”

“How I mean, Mistress Daganiri,” she said. “Is that the Arl of Amaranthine is not Andrastean. His sister is not Andrastean. The mother of his son is not Andrastean. Within the Wardens we have dwarves from Orzammar who are not Andrastean, and mages who are not in the Circles. Doubtless you will encounter, should you come to serve him, any number of Dalish, who are emphatically not Andrasteans. You must be polite about these differences and even accommodating of them. If your faith tells you that you cannot in good conscious withstand from commenting or proselytizing…”

“It will not be an issue for either of this.”

Finally, they were at the end of the interview. Lady Stockard raised her voice.

“Galen!” she called. A servant stepped smartly into the room. “I need my brother. Tell him that I have someone who may fit the requirements for manservant to the Arl.”

‘May fit’. Tanis tried not to be too hopeful that it would turn into a ‘didn’t fit’, because she couldn’t
stop the thought but it was an awful catch- if they didn’t get jobs in Ferelden they would have to go to Antiva and odds were, with their ages, that this would be the last time that she saw Nehna again; but if they did get jobs, if they got these jobs, Nehna would be gone, soon.

Lady Stockard’s brother was a Warden, introduced as Warden-Constable Howe, the Arl’s second-in-command. He took Damien off with him, somewhere, and Lady Stockard bid Tanis to follow her.

She was taken up to a guest suite, with a parlor, major bedroom, and a servant’s room. Someone had recently moved out- there were still baskets of bedsheets to be washed and put away- but there were already people moving in. There were three Wardens in here, setting up a pallet near the fire and forcing every inch of useable space they could out of the servant’s room. There was a Dalish woman, and a child, a young boy, who were moving things to the major room.

A little elf-blooded boy, she saw. He had the long, straight nose and the slightly large eyes that were the classic markers of such heritage, the ones that Damien had had the fortune to not inherit.

“Kieran,” Lady Stockard called, and the boy stopped in the middle of carrying a pillow between rooms.

“Go on, da’len,” the Dalish woman told him, taking the pillow.

“Kieran, this is Mistress Daganiri,” Lady Stockard told him. “Mistress Daganiri- Kieran Mac Theron, the Arl’s son. She will be your governess.”

Wait. Wait a moment. She had been hired? But Damien was still-

Tanis hadn’t considered, right up until this moment, that they would ever end up in a situation where one of them would be hired while the other was not. What if Damien had to go to Antiva with the Arhuis without her-

No. Absolutely not. In that instance she would simply have to decline, and suffer Antiva with him. She would not be separated from him by such a distance.

But what if he wasn’t hired into the service of the Arl, but was able to find employment somewhere else in Ferelden? What if he was offered a position on the other side of the country?

The boy was- hugging her leg.

“You’re worried,” he said, looking up at her with his big eyes. They were an odd color, gold, an elf thing? But it was strangely endearing. “You’ll be okay.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, Hathen, you made a friend!”

It was the Dalish woman.

“Lady Alerion-”

“Oh no, Mistress Del, I told you that’s not how it works, didn’t I- did I not, I’m sorry, I forget these things sometimes. That’s not how it works, Alerion was the clan I was born into.”

“Lady Sabrae-”

“Oh no, no no no, absolutely not! I’ll never be Keeper for the clan and I don’t have even a tiny blood claim to House Sabrae, you really shouldn’t say that, people will be offended-”
“Lady Merrill- Hawke, this is Mistress Daganiri and she is your nephew’s new governess.”

“But I promised his mother and Theron that Marian and I would watch him! You didn’t have to hire someone, I’m sure they’ll be back soon.”

“That has nothing to do with this. Governesses are for the rearing and teaching of children.”

“He has parents! Parents who love him and don’t need strangers to make certain he’s cared for-”

“And where else will he learn to read and write and-”

“He can already read!” Lady Merrill cut her off. She was angry and offended and one never intervened in family disputes. She lifted Kieran’s hands away from her skirts and led him off to the side of the room, out of everyone’s way.

“I can write too,” Kieran told her, while his aunt and Lady Stockard argued about the quality of education his parents and their circle of friends and family could give him, and the amount of time any of them would actually have to teach him.

“That’s good,” she told him. “How well?”

He frowned at the wall.

“I can’t make the letters pretty.”

“Well there’s plenty of time to fix that,” Tanis said. “What languages do you know?”

“Trade and El’vhen and Tevene loquor and Mother taught me Chasind!”

“Maisma decous inte bil-Ciriennais?”

“No?”

“Then we shall have to teach you Orlesian. Can you reckon?”

“What?”

“Do your sums, child.”

“What’s that mean?”

“No, then.”

He knew Tevene though, young as he was. That was interesting.

“Hathen!” Lady Merrill called, and he went back to her.

“We are done here for the day,” Lady Stockard told Tanis, and herded her out. “I will have the lady’s maid’s room in the arlessa’s suite made up for you.”

“And my son?” she asked, because now was the time to ask.

“If I decide to hire him, he’ll be in the arl’s suite, in the manservant’s room.”

Please let him be hired, please let him be hired…

Lady Stockard sent her out to get her things while she had the chambermaids get the lady’s maid’s
room ready. Tanis waited outside the gates of Vigil’s Keep for Damien instead.

He emerged some time later slightly out of sorts. His hair needed rebrushing, and he could do with a short rest to recompose himself.

“Fori pehi! What happened-”

“I’m all right, Maman,” he said. “The Warden-Constable had me… running. He says I must be able to keep up with the arl.”

“I am sure you can,” Tanis reassured him. “He can’t be so difficult. Did you get the job?”

“Yes. Did-”

She hugged him, relieved beyond words. No Antiva for them.

“We’ll have to make do with the clothes we’re wearing until the Arl returns and we go to Denerim,” she said. “Go get our things from the inn, fori pehi.”

She had to hurry out of town if she was going to be back at Vigil’s Keep within a reasonable and non-suspicious timeframe. But Nehna was camped out in the hills outside the settlement, avoiding attention, and needed to be told their good news.

And convinced to stay a little longer. A week. Just a week. That was all Tanis wanted. Seven more opportunities to see her, before she left for the south. They would have to be short, with the duties she was about to take on- but the two of them had always been stealing moments on the edges, times away from everything where they could be themselves.

One more week.

________________________

Diego had cried over Zevran Arainai not coming back.

Not right away. Not when Ashera had sat them down in her office and told them that it was time. Not when they’d opened his note and seen how far they’d have to go. Not when they’d packed up their things; or even when he’d carefully split the money in the pouch Zevran Arainai had left, taking most of it for themselves but leaving plenty for travel and food and whatever else.

Diego had only cried once they were on the ship to Amaranthine, in their little granted area in the hold, made as private as it could be by Tiar’s efforts to block it off with crates. He’d cried almost silently, into her shirt, and she’d held him and been bitterly grateful that he hadn’t forgotten this, in the weeks they’d spent with Zevran Arainai and his-

His dogshit stupid-

No one escaped the Crows and Zevran Arainai had just been a compradi courtesan who’d used up all the luck he never should have gotten. He should have run when he’d had the chance. He should have just let them go in Rialto after he’d killed the apprentice hunters, not dragged them back and tried to take care of them, he’d gotten attached and made a stupid decision and it had gotten him-

‘Everyone dies’. That was what the Crows promised in their contracts and how they taught their trade. Zevran Arainai had forgotten because he’d gotten too tied up in, in emotions and you couldn’t do that! You didn’t just go off and try to help people and get- get-

He was dead and he was gone and he wasn’t coming back and people died all the time in Antiva
and it was stupid to feel like crying about it! Diego was younger, he was sensitive, it was just how he was and he could cry; but she was fifteen and had been an apprentice for four years and she knew better.

Zevran Arainai had been a fluke, a weird exception, and it wasn’t going to happen again. No one cared about Crow kids and no one was going to help them. The note had said to travel to Vigil’s Keep in Amaranthine and ‘be seen’, but no, no they weren’t. Being seen meant being found and no. Diego had to be protected.

It was six days’ ship journey from Rialto to Amaranthine. Zevran Arainai had said, when he’d been getting things for them, that for a disguise she could pretend to be a privateer marine. She didn’t know anything about that, but Diego helped her cover up the Crow tattoos on her face every morning and she spent those six days watching the sailors, trying to pick up ship words and their way of moving.

They arrived in Amaranthine and quit the ship as soon as they could, with their footlockers, the bag of their extra clothes they hadn’t been able to fit into the little trunks, and their money split between them, hidden under clothes and in shoes.

But sweet Andraste it was cold in Ferelden! There was- ice! In the roads! Hidden under the slush and the snow!

Tiar found this out the hard way, her foot suddenly shooting out from under her in the upper market.

“Careful, sailor girl!” someone called gleefully as she sat frozen in the mucky slush, heart racing and unable to move. She’d been noticed, they’d been seen-

The alleyways in Amaranthine weren’t like the ones in Rialto. This city wasn’t so cramped. They were as wide as some Antivan streets and offered very little protection and no cover. The roofs were all slanted at a steep angle, either with snow on them or mostly bare, thatched or shingled, and who knew what sort of traps lay lurking there, for someone who didn’t know the roofs and didn’t know how to look for ice.

She was cold and wet and couldn’t understand half of what anyone around her was saying and Amaranthine’s construction offered none of the protections of an Antivan city.

Rooms in inns were expensive, but inn taverns had benches near the fire and warm food and things to drink. They’d had only just gotten to the city, so the food should be safe enough even if they didn’t see it being made, no one would be trying to poison them yet. And the warmth was important. There was rye bread and-


Tiar bought the two of them rye bread and vodka because they were the cheapest things the inn offered, and they sat down at a small table crammed into the smoky unpleasant area next to the fireplace. She spied on everyone else’s orders while her clothes dried out and Diego warmed up enough to stop shaking.

Kashka was a boiled grain mush. Ryblaite was some kind of fishy soup. Shalleck was a thick stew, with seeds and green planty things and chunks of whiteish things. Pechen cake was not cake, it was some sort of animal organ thing, why.

Tiar got back up and bought them more rye bread, vodka, and a bowl of shalleck each. They’d take
the bread with them for later.

The chunks of whiteish things were surprisingly soft and pleasant. Shalleck was pretty sticky for a stew, though.

They finished their food and she felt- she felt good! She was warm, and they’d made it to Amaranthine, and there was ice but oh well, now they knew what the food they made here was! The cold wasn’t so bad now that they’d eaten! Must have just been the shock of a new place! They’d buy coats and find a real alley to sleep in and they’d be great!

Tiar woke up in the middle of the night in the real alley they’d finally found shaking and sweating and unable to feel most of her body. She was sore and thirsty and lightheaded and she vomited when she tried to wake Diego to tell him that he needed to go, he needed to run, she’d been poisoned and she was dying-

She was still alive when the sun rose, weak and feeling sick and hungry. Diego vomited when he tried to get up, and they were both stiff and shaking.

They’d both been poisoned. Someone had found them, followed them, seen them someone knew-

It was morning. The city gates would be open. She bought their breakfast and food for the day in the lower market- two large bowls of shalleck from a different tavern, clogged with merchants and busy, hopefully too busy for anyone to notice the two of them, got them a seat by the fire. That helped, some, with the effects of the poisoning. Once they were done there, she bought a fresh loaf of rye bread and a bottle of vodka, because just like at the inns, those were the cheapest. There were no fruits or winter vegetables, otherwise she would have gotten some of those, too.

They walked all day. By noon Tiar felt recovered, and she and Diego stopped to have most of the bread and the vodka. Things were good after that, warmer, and absolutely no one was following them, she’d been checking! They’d escaped!

By the time dark was falling and they’d begun passing travelers’ inns, she was feeling nauseous and shivery, and Diego said he wasn’t feeling well either and he was almost asleep on his feet and Tiar was trying very hard to come up with a poison that had variable symptoms like this but she was a sneak-assassin, Diego was the one who knew about poisons and he couldn’t walk steadily at the moment much less think-

Tiar broke them into a barn, or something. It was large and it had animals in it and was pretty warm because of that, even though it smelled and full of poking dried plant stuff. There was a balcony sort of thing full of packages of it, and it would have been a good place to hide except for that you had to climb a ladder up to it and when Tiar tried, she couldn’t judge the distances properly and fell off. They ate snow from outside that night, saving the rest of the bread and vodka for the morning, and Tiar kept watch as best she could all night. She couldn’t sleep for the pounding of her heat and the shakes, anyway.

Country people got up and out for the day very early. She had to suffocate a big farmer man into unconsciousness before the sun was even up so they could escape. They ate the rest of the bread and drank the rest of the vodka on the road and didn’t stop for lunch, because what if, just what if-

They arrived at Vigil’s Keep in time for the very earliest dinner meals. She hadn’t slept all day and they’d barely eaten and they’d been without for longer in Crow training but it was surprisingly hard to go without when you didn’t have to and the cold was far more draining than weather had any right to be.
Rye bread, shalleck, and vodka, in large portions, was their dinner. They sat in the inn as long as they could manage, and yes, this time they’d avoided it! They’d lost whoever was after them on the road for sure this time! The barn had worked!

She woke up in that night’s alley with hands on her and she tried to attack but the shaking and the vomiting and Crows Crows Crows they were going to die-

Tiar woke for a second time in a bed, in a warm room, under blankets.

Diego-!

“Oh no, you are not getting up yet-”

He was a tall human man but he wasn’t big. It was easy enough to grab him and get him off his feet, but when she reached for a knife because where was Diego she didn’t have any-

The third time she woke up she was back in the bed, and Diego was with her, but there was an elf in good blue and silver armor with a mage’s staff standing over them.

“If you try to attack Anders again, or me,” he said. “I’m going to paralyze you. Choose wisely.”

They had to run.

“Soldiers from Vigil’s Keep found us in the alley, Tiar,” Diego whispered urgently to her. “They thought we were sick and delirious so they brought us to the Grey Warden healer and you attacked him-”

Wardens. She’d been going to threaten a Warden.

“No?” the elf Warden asked. “Good. Anders!”

“She’s awa- Andraste’s flaming knickers, Eadric, don’t threaten my patients!”

“She threatened you first.”

“Out!”

The elf Warden left. The man from the last time she’d been awake came over to the bed.

“You and I need to have a talk about alcohol,” he said. “You’re far too young to be a drunk.”

“Haven’t had any alcohol.”

“Don’t lie to me,” he said sharply, and she hadn’t. She hadn’t had any wine since Antiva. “You stank of vodka when the soldiers brought you in-”

That was alcohol?

“But it’s clear and it doesn’t taste like anything!” Diego protested.

This brought the healer Warden up short.

“You didn’t- well does that explain a lot.”

They hadn’t been poisoned, they’d been hungover.

“So what are you running from, then?”
They had to leave, they had to get away-

“An elf girl and a human boy don’t just run away together, not when they’re not the same age. You don’t know what vodka is, and your clothes are too thin for Ferelden. You don’t have to tell me where you ran from- but I know you did.”

Tiar shifted just a bit, so that it would be easier to flip herself over and keep her body between the healer Warden and Diego.

“You’ve got decent armor, even if it’s only a couple pieces and its only leather, and you were both carrying hidden knives. Is it the Carta, or some local street operation? You moved on me too fast to not be practiced. I bet you’re a really good thief.”

She’d stolen money from one of Availa’s Maestra to use when they ran. Tiar was a good thief; but she didn’t need to tell this man that.

“Fine, have it your way. Don’t say anything. But there’s kashka on the table for you.”

“It’s okay,” Diego whispered to her once the healer Warden had walked away. “He has chemist’s equipment, he left after he brought the food for a little bit and I tested it and it wasn’t poisoned and I’ve been watching it since.”

“You aren’t watching it right now!”

“I looked through all his cabinets and chests and drawers too, he has things that can be poisonous but he doesn’t have any poison- just antidotes and I now I know where they are.”

“He could still.”

“He’s a healer mage.”

A healer mage wouldn’t need poison to kill them. A mage didn’t even need a knife. They could kill just by existing.

And this one was already in a bad mood.

Tiar moved to get out of the bed and Diego tugged her down on the far side of it. He’d recovered their knives and they put them back on in silence. Diego applied more covering over her face tattoos and they went to eat the kashka.

The healer mage Warden wasn’t there. He came back while they were eating.

“You’re right, they really are jumpy.”

He’d come back with two other humans, a woman with a big sword and another Warden, who carried himself like he gave orders and they were obeyed.

“See, Nate, I can’t just leave them,” the healer said to the other man.

“Anders, picking up strays is my job!” the woman said. “You’re stealing my thing.”

“What a tragedy, Hawke.”

“We don’t have any need for thieves, Anders,” the Nate man told the healer.

“They can be trained for something else-"
No, no training!

“I know how to make potions,” Diego said quickly, because of course he’d had the same thought.

“Uh-huh,” the healer said, doubt obvious, and a moment later Diego had left her side and was at the worktable with the cabinets of bottles and jars of material, scanning quickly over labels and pulling things out, getting the mortar and pestle and an empty glass bottle, lighting the little fire bowl that was part of the chemical equipment-

“Hey- hey! Okay! Stop!” the healer protested, and Tiar clenched all her muscles up so she wouldn’t move as Diego instantly froze, stretched over the table, eyes locked on the wood sliver he’d used to lit the fire bowl from a nearby candle burning down to his fingers.

“You’re going to-!”

The fire was licking Diego’s fingers and he didn’t make a sound. He only flinched away when the woman grabbed his arm and pried his hand open.

“Hawke let go of him,” the healer said.

The Nate man was watching her, scrutinizing her-

“They’re your responsibility, Anders,” he said. “I don’t want to hear about anything going missing. I’d say wait for the Commander to come back and see what he says…”

“But the Commander would have already hugged them and found them somewhere to stay and gone off to fight whoever did this to them.”

Done what to them, all their tattoos were covered up. And this Commander shouldn’t go after the Crows, he’d just end up dead like-

…

And no hugging.

The Nate man and the woman with the sword left. The healer mage fixed the burned part of Diego’s hand with a little glow of magic.

“You don’t have to talk about where you’re from,” he told them, and his tone was much gentler now. Why. He hadn’t cared before. “But it’s better here, I promise. We’ll find you something to do and you’ll get fed. You can stay here.”

He looked at Diego.

“And you don’t have to do that,” he said. “If you’re going to get hurt, don’t do it.”

Everything could hurt you. Anything could hurt you.

This wouldn’t last. It hadn’t lasted in Rialto and it wouldn’t last here. There was no one who understood about the Crows, here. They’d be turned out eventually so they couldn’t stay.

Diego retreated to her side, away from the healer mage Warden, and looked up at her.

No. No she knew that look- that had been the look he’d starting giving Zevran Arainai, when he’d started settling in with him, when he’d started believing that maybe things were going to be okay.
Once you trusted once you trusted easier every time after that. Tiar had learned that somewhere, maybe one of the Crow trainers had told her, and here was the truth of it. They hadn’t even been here a whole day and he wanted to stay now that they’d been shown even a little bit of kindness.

Kind people died. Even Zevran Arainai.

…but he’d told them to come here, hadn’t he, and he’d managed to stay away from the Crows for five whole years.

They could stay until she learned enough not to let either of them make stupid mistakes again, like the vodka. No more of that.

They’d crossed the Hafer River, which meant that they didn’t have much time before they were back at the Vigil.

Theron stopped the cart.

“You can go on,” he told the drover he’d hired to carry the boxes and chests they’d brought through the eluvian. “I’m walking from here.”

“Finally,” Tamlen groused, and slipped out the back.

“Theron, get back on this cart!”

“No, Alistair, I’m walking.”

“You’re avoiding your responsibilities, is what you’re doing!”

“Goodbye.”

“Oh no you don’t!” he said, and jumped off the cart after him. “You’re not going off by yourself, we won’t see you until Satinalia!”

“Well, it is a nice day for a stroll,” Zevran said, joining them, and Theron took his hand. “By Fereldan standards, is what I mean.”

“Coming?” Theron asked Morrigan.

She sighed, making her irritation plain.

“If I did not, doubtless the three of you would become distracted by some improbable opportunity for heroics.”

“No heroics here,” Theron promised, swinging his and Zevran’s hands as the cart drove off down the road.

Zevran was right. It was a nice day. The sky was clear, and the road wasn’t as muddy as it could have been, and it was pleasantly cold. Fen trotted back and forth, sniffing everything and wagging his tail, pleased to be finding scents he recognized.

Theron reached out with his free hand and grabbed Tamlen’s.

“I have to show you the statue grove,” he told him. “I put it up in the hills above the Vigil. It’s a little spring hollow, it has willows, it’s very nice-”
He kept up a running discussion of the surrounding land— the hills, the farms, things they reminded him of, things he’d done with the Wardens here, and information about the Wardens who lived at the Vigil whom Tamlen was going to meet.

“-Nathaniel’s nice, he’s a bit gloomy and he tends to worry but that’s just how he is. He’s bery good at his job, his father was arl before me, Howe, he wasn’t a good man, but if I didn’t have Nathaniel I really don’t know how I’d manage-”

“Well you would have had to learn about how to run an arling,” Alistair cut in.

“I know things about farming now,” Theron told him.

“Which doesn’t have a lot to do with how to run an arling.”

“Amaranthine’s farms are the foundation of our reputation.”

“He is speaking about keeping accounts and record books and knowing the laws, amora.”

“I’m good at keeping records! I remember things very well.”

“My dear Warden you still have not learned the appropriate and reasonable prices for even the most common goods.”

“That’s because money doesn’t make any sense. I don’t know how much work people put into making something- I don’t know them. Maybe they need that much money.”

“This is why you’re not allowed to do our shopping,” Alistair said. “You can’t bargain.”

“I have a lot of money, anyway,” Theron continued, ignoring him. “I can afford to spend more than other people.”

“And there comes a point where you spend more than you make,” Zevran told him. “And saving money is good.”

“And I asked people what the laws are,” Theron complained. “No one could tell me. Garavel just told me that I was arl; the law was whatever I said it was.”

Zevran tutted.

“Well that is not effective at all. It should be written down so the lawyers may reference it.”

“And what sort of contrivance is a ‘lawyer’?”

Zevran actually stopped, right in the road.

“Alistair, my friend, please tell me that you have-”

“Look, I don’t know what a lawyer is, either.”

“Maker and Creators I am surrounded by barbarians,” he said. “Five years and only now I learn that you have no lawyers? No lawyers!”

“Well if you’d tell us what one was-”

“Surely you must have people who interpret the law? Who are called when a case is presented in the courts? Who have studied the law and know it’s specifics?”
"I think you mean judges," Alistair told him. "But we don’t even have those all the time. They’re just appointed when the banns don’t want to handle cases brought before them, or if they have too much else to do. Otherwise the villages just manage it."

"Andraste protect your countrymen," Theron heard Zevran mutter. "And what do you do if rulings are disputed?"

"I don’t think you get the right circumstances for it often-"

"But what do you do?"

"Then the next person in the hierarchy judges it."

"And when it reaches the queen?"

"Well, then it’s politics."

"Theron, this is going on the list," Zevran declared. "At least one lawyer, with clerical staff."

"Lawyers have Chantry sisters?"

"No, they have clerks. Scribes."

"Just how long has this list of things he wishes to procure from Antiva become?" Morrigan asked, as Zevran and Alistair continued to bicker about the Fereldan legal system.

"'More tea, red and black for late night fêtes, white for afternoon garden parties and important social calls'," Theron began to recite. "'As many bottles of Viejez Dulche Alegria Rosado as can be reasonably bought and shipped. And we will need a red wine- Treviso Sangrade Drago. Nievecoraza for the white. Ah, we will need more cinnamon and I will have to make you rosacanella. Sugar cane! We must have sugar cane! And third-black molasses, that is very good for when you are sick. There is only so much that court clothes can hide. If had known I was going to be returning for the season I would have gone to a tailor in Antiva- I wonder if I can entice one to come south. Now there are people who know how to make a shirt cut to hide knives! Theron I am shocked you have not worked poor Nathaniel to death you are giving him a raise and a vacation and you are hiring a staff for Delilah. I am finding an accountant and you will have a bureaucracy even if it must be small and Antivan. I did not buy enough spices, when I hire the merchant factor that must be the first thing I tell them to buy. And we will need someone who knows how to cook with spices, and also knows how to make fish chowder, there is nothing quite like fish chowder on a cool evening. Pomegranate seeds! Jars of them! Candied citrus, and if you have bits of the peel dried properly you may add them to tea. It will be the envy of the entire city. But silks, Theron, Neremenian silks! Ah, you will be convinced someday, when I show you what one can do with a silk robe. Yes you may have cherry preserves in Ferelden but figs, I must introduce you to figs. Peach rachia! And plum pallene! The brandies of Brynmlaw are decadent, I will prove it to you.'"

Tamlen shoved him lightly on the side of the head.

"Got any room left in that skull of yours for Hahren things?"

"'-and Lady Haurnatha of House Sabrae, who was dark of hair and eye and the greatest beauty of all the Dales, swore revenge upon all who had done such violence that day and took into herself the vengeance of Elgar’nan. Hands that had known only books and a voice that sung only songs were joined to daggers sharp as her pen and poison as potent as that of her namesake-'"
“Okay, all right, will you learn to respond to a joke like a normal person.”

Theron snuck his arm around his brother’s waist and pulled him close for a kiss to the temple.

“You enjoy it.”

“You’re terrible.”

“One time you punched a bear.”

“Will you let that go?”

“Never.”

“I want to hear about the time Tamlen punched a bear,” Alistair said.

“Oh, don’t you dare-”

“We were out in the forest a couple of days after Tamlen had gotten his vallas’lin-”

His brother tackled him.

“Tell them a Hahren story!” he demanded, his wide grin taking any possible anger out of his words. “Tell them about how Merrill refused to go outside the whole summer that one year because she was convinced that elders got white hair and wrinkly skin from being out in the sun their whole lives! Or when you fell down a waterfall chasing salmon!”

“It was a little waterfall!”

“You still fell down it! The whole way! Or when we went out into the hills to pick blueberries and-”

“I won’t tell the bear story if you don’t tell the blueberry story,” Theron offered.

“You’re damn right you won’t,” Tamlen said smugly. Theron had pinned him to the road, but his brother had won anyway.

“You are going to be all dirty by the time we get to the Vigil,” Zevran informed him as he and Tamlen got up off the road.

“And there will be clean clothes and baths there,” Theron reminded him.

They came upon the edge of the settlement around the Vigil’s walls five or ten minutes later. Nathaniel was waiting for them by the first buildings, his armor gleaming and looking even more wound up than usual.

“You’re back very early, Commander,” he greeted them. “Alistair, Lady Morrigan- and it’s good to have you back, Zevran. Oghren?”

“He’s coming back the long way with the last present for Hallarenis’haminathe,” Theron told him. “He should be in Amaranthine soon. Where did you put what was on the cart?”

“Your sister took it to her room. Is this a new recruit, Commander?”

“Yes, sort of. Nathaniel, this is brother Tamlen, I thought he died during the Blight but Zevran found him in Antiva, he’s been fighting darkspawn ever since he disappeared, he’s a Warden now, I promise he’s nice but he’s got an attitude.”
“Oh, I’m the one with an attitude!”

“Welcome to Vigil’s Keep,” Nathaniel said.

“Where’s Merrill, I have to tell her.”

“I believe she is in the arlessa’s suite with Kieran.”

“I’ll be—”

Zevran grabbed him by the back of his armor, and Theron let himself be tugged back.

“Theron, you are forgetting something.”

“I a- oh! Nathaniel! Zevran and I are getting married!”

An expression of acute pain was not the appropriate response to news like that.

“Congratulations, Commander,” he said, but he didn’t sound very happy. If he was going to object—

“And ah- when is the ceremony?”

“We have to do the Dalish one in Hallarenis’haminathe at the end of winter. I’ll need to do the moon calculations to find out when it falls on the Chantry calendar but we can do a Fereldan one after that, so next spring?”

“I promise I will not allow it to conflict with any other events or allow him to leave all the planning and preparation until it is really too late to effectively do anything,” Zevran told Nathaniel, and that was the problem? His Constable looked much more relaxed now.

“Well, we’ve got a lot of time for that. Tamlen—”

Zevran still hadn’t let go of him.

“Nathaniel, what does he need to do?”

“Ah—”

“I know he has left things undone, I have had plenty of time to hear what he has been doing to know that he cannot have possibly been here for long enough to accomplish the arling’s business. What must he do before he goes to Denerim?”

“Delilah and I took care of all of it. But we’ve had a letter from the queen about political developments that you need to read, Commander; and since you’ve been gone Delilah hired a governess for Kieran and a manservant for you—”

“I don’t need—”

“Hush. Yes you do.”

“And Anders has taken in some stray children. He thinks they probably got caught up in the Carta somewhere, they’ve got thieves’ reflexes—”

Theron looked over his shoulder at Zevran.

“Ah,” his fiancé interrupted Nathaniel. “And their names?”
“I don’t know. They don’t really talk. Anders told me it’s like trying to lure in feral alleycats.”

“But have you seen them? There are children I was looking after in Antiva, and they were sent here-”

“An older elf girl and a younger human boy?”

The relief in Zevran’s expression was answer enough. Theron turned and hugged him.

“Introduce me to your children?” he asked.

“Only if you introduce me to your son.”

“We’re getting married. He’s yours too.”

“Perhaps we should speak to Morrigan about that-”

Theron had kissed him a lot, since they’d reunited in Rialto six days ago- but somehow the sweetest one was this, out in the road, with the Vigil high and strong over the town.
He had been trying not to let himself worry about the children. Running to Amaranthine had been the worst-case scenario, after all, and he’d been expecting Theron to be here when they did, not to be in Antiva City killing Crows. A Vigil’s Keep with Theron in it would inevitably be a Vigil’s Keep where Theron found the children and made himself responsible for their care. A Vigil’s Keep without Theron in it could have been a Vigil’s Keep where the children left, eventually, undiscovered and distrustful and alone.

But Theron’s Wardens were too much like him to let that stand, thankfully. Though he was concerned about how it had been Anders who’d found them. Had they been hurt? Or perhaps one of them had gotten sick, with the change in climate. Or if they’d been attacked-

They would be fine, because Anders had them.

“He has a clinic now,” Theron said, gently redirecting him when he headed for the main body of the Vigil, once they’d arrived at the inner bailey.

Anders had been given the stone-and-wood building right by the Vigil’s gates. Zevran couldn’t remember, at the moment, what it had been before. A storehouse, maybe?

There was a lantern hanging outside it now, and it was lit despite the afternoon hour. That must have been the sign that it was open, because as they passed, a woman hurried past them, coming up from the settlement. A few steps past them she whirled and dropped into a curtesy to Theron.

“Good afternoon, Your Arlship,” she said quickly, out of breath. “Pardon, Your Arlship.”

“Hello, Mistress Atila,” Zevran greeted her, the sight of the settlement’s perpetually-rushing apothecary as as welcome as ever. “How have you been?”

“Oh, well enough, Messere Revasina, how was Antiva?”

“Unfortunately not much better than when I last left it.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I really must go, Anders has- well he’s picked up some poor children in need of charity but they are a trial, which is understandable, nothing good makes children that jumpy, but just getting them to eat should not be such a fight-”

“We were going to see them, actually,” Theron said.

“Oh! Well, Your Arlship, so was I, and you’ll have to forgive them, Your Arlship, but the message Anders sent said that they heard from someone bringing things up from the basement that there were undead and darkspawn down there, and those are no sort of things to be saying to people, and you see, they’ve gone up on the roof-”

The roof of the clinic had nothing but wet thatch on it.

“-oh no, Your Arlship, the roof.”

She pointed to the main bulk of the keep. There were soldiers posted on the walls and towers, as usual, but there were a group of people clustered on the top of one of the wall towers of the original keep. There was one figure standing on a crenellation, legs held in place by another as he brandished a staff at the tall freestanding tower surrounded by the walls- the Vigil, twice as tall as the walls of
the original keep and visible even from the other side of the River Hafter.

“Is that Anders?” Alistair asked, as the others caught up to them. “That’s Anders, only Anders would do that. He’s going to fall off.”

Zevran heard Nathaniel mutter a prayer under his breath before asking what was going on. He didn’t seem surprised to hear that the children had fled to the roof, only-

“How did they get there?” he asked. “Voldrik Glavonak had us take the smaller tower down when he was giving us new walls because he said it was about to fall down on our heads, and that we should stay out of the Vigil tower because it needed major repairs to be stable. We haven’t fixed it yet, and I’ve kept the tower doors and the keep doors to the tower courtyard locked for years!”

“Why haven’t we fixed it yet?” Theron asked.

“Because you haven’t said to, Arl-Commander.”

“If it’s a safety danger then shouldn’t it just have been fixed as a matter of course?”

“That is not how things work, Theron,” Zevran said, so Nathaniel wouldn’t have to come up with a way to tell him off while still being polite. “They have to be addressed, specifically, by you, because you are the Arl.”

“But it’s a danger to everyone!”

This was not the place to sort this out.

“Nathaniel,” he said. “Please get Delilah, and will the two of you bring everything that has been put off in the name of managing Theron, or that simply needs attention, to his office? I do mean everything. And all the necessary items for an-”

The memories of his recent frustrations with Alistair over Ferelden’s so-called judicial and legal system prompted a suspicion.

“Nathaniel, do you know what an ‘instrument of agency’ is?”

“It sounds familiar.”

How. Simply- how.

“Theron, we’re getting a notary.”

“Okay.”

“You do not even know what that is.”

“You just said we’re getting one, so we must need it. I trust you.”

Why, why did Fereldans not know the meaning or point of bureaucracy.

“We will need the cream vellum for official declarations, the ribbon and good wax for the same, and the seals for the arling and the arl,” Zevran told Nathaniel. “I will meet you all in his office once I have settled the children.”

“I want to say hello to Kieran, too,” Theron said.
“We will meet you in his office once the children have been settled.”

Nathaniel left to get his sister, and Morrigan to see Kieran, but Alistair and Tamlen came with them to the tower Anders and the guards were on.

It was amazing how one could miss Fereldan architecture. Square and blunt in their stonework, practical but with decoration in the woodwork, even on the support beams, and wool tapestries and rugs and furs.

He didn’t know it as well as Antiva. But after five and a half months away, it was comfortable. Zevran might even go so far as to call it ‘charmingly rustic’, except that implied a distance from it all that he didn’t have, not anymore.

Theron bumped his shoulder, in one of the last back hallways that would take them from the newer parts of the keep to the elder, and the old keep walls. They were still holding hands.

“Thinking?”

“Do you know,” he told Theron. “That in four and half months of Antiva, and nights in the building I spent the early years of my life, and even a stop in the City at the old House Arainai, I never learned that ‘familiar’ did not mean ‘home’?”

“Oh?”

“Which is not to say that those things cannot be one and the same. For instance, here is quite familiar.”

It took Theron a moment to put it together, but when he did, he beamed.

“Clearly the reason you never get anything done is because you’re always kissing him,” Tamlen complained.

“I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“We’ve been on the road four days together.”

“And I need more days with all of you.”

“He’s taking all your time, with the paperwork and the doing things and going places-”

Theron reached back and tugged him up next to them, and kissed his cheek.

“I love you and I’m so glad you’re back and we’ll find something to do together, promise.”

“Yeah, fine.”

Theron bent his head in close to his brother’s and whispered something to him in El’vhen, too quiet for Zevran to be able to do more than pick out the language. It soothed things for now, whatever it had been, because Tamlen bumped their foreheads together for a moment before letting them walk on.

They got up to the top of the tower and, oh yes, a reason not to be enthused about Ferelden. Cold late-winter wind. Wonderful.

“Get off of there,” Alistair said crossly, loud enough to be heard from across the tower. “Anders!”
“Alistair, they are going to freeze up there, or fall off- oh, hello Commander.”

The soldiers all saluted Theron as Alistair hauled Anders off the wall.

“Where are they?” Zevran asked him.

“Up on the tower roof,” Anders sighed. “They moved to the other side once I started yelling at them to come down. How did they even get up-”

“A similar way to the one I will take up, I imagine.”

“Wha-” Anders started to say as Zevran slung a leg over the wall.

“Go ask Theron to introduce you to his brother.”

“He’s got a brother?” he heard Anders say, confused, as he started to climb down. And then: “Wait wait wait- not reason-for-Merrill’s-bad-decisions brother-”

The walls were cold. Stone did not hold heat well and it was still winter. His hands were going to be stiff and numb by the time he was done-

But undoubtedly Theron would be willing to kiss them better and warm him up, and that was the cheerful thought that carried him down the old keep walls, across the abandoned, overgrown grassy courtyard, and up the side of the Vigil tower, past the top of the guard tower- he waved at Theron, who waved back, and Anders turned to Alistair, likely to complain about who was in danger of falling now?- and to the Vigil roof.

The shingling was slate. Some had fallen off and the wood underneath had dry rot, in some places. Wonderful.

Zevran got a firm hold on two sound pieces of the roof, feet resting on the lip of the low wall that encircled the Vigil tower platform, but didn’t go any further. He didn’t want to test the weight tolerance of the roof’s support beams any further than they already had been.

“Tiar, Diego,” he called. “This is not a safe place to be sitting. Come down please.”

He heard slate shift and his breath caught in his throat as images of one of them falling-

A shingle tumbled down to shatter in the courtyard below but Tiar didn’t follow it, swinging off the roof onto the watch platform beneath it. Diego followed, and once they were safely off the roof Zevran joined them on the platform.

He had to brace himself again, then, when Diego threw himself at him, to keep them from tumbling over the low wall. Zevran had expected words, when Diego’s silent crying hitched and his mouth opened, but what came out was sobbing that was almost screaming.

Zevran sat down on the platform. The wood creaked and he nearly grabbed the wall at his back, just in case, but he needed both arms to hold Diego, to keep him from completely falling apart.

The platform held. Zevran hugged Diego tighter with one arm and stroked down his back with the other, until the sobbing quieted back to hoarse crying and sniffles.

“You’re late,” Tiar said, finally speaking. It wasn’t an accusation, but only just.

“I know,” Zevran said. “My apologies. I trusted where I should not have, in the City, and Claudio Valisti found me.”
“You’re not dead.”

“Fortune brought my friends to the City and in a position to save me, so here I am.”

“Friends?”

“The Wardens. You will meet them. And my fiancé.”

“Crows don’t get married.”

“I am not a Crow. I never will be again.”

He had never expected that she would sit down next to him, just barely not touching.

“What about Master Escipo?” she asked, and Diego quieted further, to listen.

“I killed him,” Zevran told then. “Theron- he is my fiancé, the Warden-Commander and the Arl- he and my other friends from the Blight killed Masters Lanos, Valisti, and d’Evaliste, and the Crows that came on their orders. It was very bloody, and very public. And before we left Antiva, there was news that Master Ibarra was dead, as well.”

Tiar sucked in a sharp breath. She could count as well as he could. Two Talons left, the weakest ones. The Crows had no Grandmaster, and no viable candidates for the position. Eight whole Crow Houses had collapsed or were in shambles, the oldest and most powerful and most feared.

The Crows were broken, as broken as they could be without falling entirely apart. But even if-when- they rebuilt, it wouldn’t matter.

Not here, not in Ferelden. The Wardens would them cost too much. Zevran would cost them more.

There would be no Crows, not here. This bit of Thedas was safe.

Tiar leaned into him, curling against his side, her head on his shoulder. Zevran kissed her hair, and it only made her press closer, not pull away.

“They can’t say it anymore,” she said. “They can’t say ‘no one escapes the Crows’ any longer. We did. You did.”

Tanis had gotten her week. Nehna had left the day before, to go south again.

And it was good timing, she told herself as she sat in the arlessa’s receiving room and stitched to keep her hands busy and her eyes off Lady Merrill, who was still displeased with her presence and insisted on being around young Kieran whenever she was. The Arl was back, and Nehna didn’t want to be seen by any Dalish, and with the Arl here she wouldn’t have been able to effectively steal time to go out past the settlement to see her, anyway.

Nehna was gone, again.

Tanis picked out her last nine, uneven stitches to redo them. She could do better. Next to her, Damien leafed through the latest of the books that had been taken from the Vigil’s collection, ascertaining if this one would be of any use in the instruction of the Arl’s son.

The door opened and they were both half-standing before they even knew who it was. They were expecting the Arl, but it was a woman, dressed very… distinctly.
Kieran dashed to her with an exclamation of “Mother!”

So this was the Arl’s… lady.

Tanis curtsied, Damien bowed, and the woman, in a scathing, icy tone that would have been the envy of many an Orlesian noblewoman, asked: “And who are you?”

“Morrigan, Delilah hired a governess and a manservant,” Lady Merrill said, before Tanis could properly introduce them.

Lady Morrigan had Kieran on one hip, and her eyes—those same odd gold eyes as her son—said everything.

“Well,” she said. “’Tis time for a talk with Lady Stockard.”

Lady Merrill went with her when she swept out of the room, which Tanis hadn’t know was possible to do while wearing pants.

She and Damien sat back down. Damien picked up his book. She picked up her stitching. They didn’t look at each other.

They had only been here a week, and they were about to get fired. There was nothing you could do against a lady of the house, and there were two of them, here, working in concord.

Nehna could have stayed. Nehna could have stayed.

Tanis had taken out and redone twelve more stitches twice over when the door opened again. They were back on their feet because it was the Arl, this time, with children and—

Her eyes were on the floor and she’d broken out in cold sweat all down her spine and there was a Crow, a Crow here, Ferelden was supposed to be safe how had they known and it was a good thing that Nehna had left yesterday—

“Signora.”

The Crow was talking to her. What should she—she shouldn’t talk, she shouldn’t—

“Signora, please.”

Her throat was dry. She couldn’t speak.

“The free rooms are here. Go pick ones you like.”

That was him dismissing the children. He was going to—

She was going to faint.

The Crow out his hands on her and sat her back down on the settee she’d been stitching on and she was going to faint.

“Signora. I promise you are safe here.”

What a nice promise.

Tanis found she could speak, just enough for a few words.
"Maestra Crow."

Would he let Damien go. Would they let Damien go. There had been elves in Orlais who would have spit on her son for not being pure-blooded elven, and there had been elves in Starkhaven who had. Surely the Dalish were no different. Nehna hadn’t wanted him taken to the clans, after all-

"Iashitvar protect him, Ghilan’nain guide him, all the other gods of the Dalish, let the Arl be a tolerant enough man to leave him be-!

“No. There are no Crows here, Signora. They are a foul organization and I refuse to be a part of it. You know the Arl, yes? I have no terrible business here- we are betrothed. I am Zevran Revasina.”

An impossible name, a dead boy’s name, and one the Crows would have known to use but she looked up anyway-

“You have your mother’s eyes,” Tanis blurted, and her hand shot up to cover her mouth immediately because it felt like a breach of propriety, somehow, to look upon the face of a dead boy grown into a living man and have the first remark she made be on the mother he hadn’t seen in decades.

He reared back on his heels, eyes wide, and the Arl steadied him.

“I didn’t get your name,” the Arl said. He wasn’t what she’d been expecting, with vallas’lin more extensive than Nehna’s were and a chevalier’s shoulders and a melancholy air.

“I- I am Tanis Daganiri, Your Arlship-”

“Tanis in Lydes,” the Arl said, a friendly smile breaking across his face. He took her hand- he took her hand, in both of his! “I sent you a letter about a month ago, but I guess you never got it?”

“We haven’t lived in Lydes in a decade, Your Arlship.”

He turned to her son.

“Damien?”

“Yes, Your Arl-”

The Arl of Amaranthine, Hero of Ferelden, was hugging her son.

“Tanis,” Zevran said, pulling her attention back. There was longing there, and disbelief, and fear and- “Tanis, my mother, is she-”

“She was here,” she told him. “Nehna came with us from Denerim, she’s been camping up in the hills, so no one would see her or her halla, you just missed her she left yesterday-"

She should have stayed!

The Arl rested one hand, briefly, on Zevran’s hair. It was still the same wheat blond, richly toned, shading dark.

“I’ll handle this,” he promised.

“Thank you- thank you,” Zevran said, and Tanis wasn’t sure if it was for her or the man striding out the door- his fiancé, he’d said; he was alive and a Crow who refused to be and he was getting married to nobility.

Tanis was going to collapse from the improbability of it all, this sheer and utter miracle; at least until
she had some moments, until tomorrow, until this was simply a new, wonderful part of life.

“Your mother,” she told him, reaching out to cup his face- how old was he now, Damien was twenty-five so he was in his thirties, he’d been seven the last they’d seen him and he’d survived, all three of them had survived Antiva. “Your mother, Satheraan, she is going to be so happy.”

Nehna was going to smile- really, truly smile, and that was far too much a thought. It had been years and they’d missed each other by one day and she was crying and it felt like she might never stop.

“So happy-”

The stables were below the gates of Vigil’s Keep, inside the boundaries of what had been the outer defenses, a wooden palisade, before the darkspawn had burned it. The shallow stone foundations had been pulled up for use in the settlement, but no one had ever built beyond the dip in the ground the marked that barrier. On that side- their place. On this side- his.

No one in the stable questioned him taking ‘his’ horse, even though he’d just arrived. People didn’t do that, question what he did, when they didn’t know him and they weren’t other nobility.

Up in the hills. Vigil’s Keep was nestled in a short valley. There were hills on three sides, but camping to the northwest, behind the Vigil, wouldn’t have been convenient.

He rode out past the boundaries of the settlement clustered around the road leading up to the Vigil and took a guess. There was forest to the west, and no farms until you turned north, some miles further, around the edge of the biggest hills.

“Fen,” Theron ordered. “Find the halla.”

The mabari trotted off, snuffling at the ground and scenting the air. Theron had the horse follow slowly, saving its energy, for now. They wound around the edges of the hills but soon enough they found a faint trail up into them, little more than worn-down grass and some places where the ground had been rubbed raw, exposing the dirt.

Fen halted here, and whined a little, head swinging back and forth along it’s path- to the right, up into the hills, to the left, towards the forest and farmlands.

Theron dismounted and went to look at the trail- it was a deer trail, with a few light impressions of hooves.

There were heavier ones, bigger ones, overlaying them, when he ventured a few yards in either direction. They were going up into the hills, and coming out.

He got back on the horse.

“The trail that leads that way, Fen,” he said, pointing left. Fen snuffled at the ground again for a few moments, searching for scent, and then trotted off confidently along the trail.

It led into the woods, as Theron had been expecting, but only briefly. They were less than an hour under the trees, and most of that was taken up avoiding parts of the route a halla could manage but a horse couldn’t, and fording the river.

The deer trail didn’t lead outside the woods, but the scent trail did. They emerged onto the edge of the grazing fields beyond to find the sun sinking low.
Theron mentally reviewed the map of his arling. If Nehna kept going west, it would be the Coastlands Mountains, and into Highever. South, and through the Knotwood Hills into the Bannorn.

He didn’t know the relative speeds of a halla and a horse. But Nehna had almost two day’s head start on him. But from what Tanis had said she didn’t want to be noticed, so she wouldn’t take roads and she’d be constantly detouring to avoid farms and flocks. And she’d have to stop to hunt or gather her own food.

Even odds, perhaps. This horse had been resting all day and night rides could be dangerous- but he knew dangerous.

“Fen, we have to go fast.”

The mabari barked and sped up, into long, loping strides- war pace, what let mabari keep up with fast infantry and mounted knights alike.

Theron nudged the horse into a canter and set off across the farmlands.

The question of how appropriate it was to hug a woman you hadn’t seen in decades and didn’t really remember was solved when Tanis hugged him first. She had to fish out a handkerchief afterwards and dab at her eyes. Zevran kept an arm around her shoulders.

“You’re so big,” she said, sniffing.

“But not too old, I hope?” he asked.

“You would never be too old for this,” Tanis said. “Never. It is- we knew Antiva was not kind and we were sure it had killed you. Seeing you is such a miracle, Satheraan.”

“How flattering,” he said. “I do not believe anyone has said that about me before.”

Though with Theron, it was probably only a matter of time before he heard it again.

“You seem to have done well for yourself, as well,” he told her. Her dress was proof enough- the dropped shoulders and full skirts required fabric, and tailoring, which meant money.

“Oh- oh, we’ve managed,” Tanis said. “We worked for the Duchess of Lydes for thirteen years, and Rens Anhuis for the last ten, he’s a banker from Starkhaven and his wife is Antivan, and her sister was the Teyrn of Highever’s wife-”

“What a pleasant coincidence.”

“Yes. Yes- we’re here because the Anhuis thought it would be better to leave Starkhaven, the Marches are becoming much less friendly to foreigners and Messere Anhuis wanted to learn money things from Antiva, they’re going to Salle to Dame Anhuis’s family and they allowed us to look for new employment while they stay in Denerim to visit the Teyrn and make business connections. I was scared to go back to Antiva, you see.”

“ Entirely reasonable,” Zevran said. “It is just as well as you came here. Antiva is experiencing difficulties, at the moment.”

“Is it?”

“Quite large ones. The Grand Cleric is claiming an act of the Maker in the Circle of Magi in Antiva City and is using it as proof to support a faction wishing to break from Val Royeaux; and also the
Crows are attempting to operate with only two Talons and no Grandmaster. I imagine that they are finding it very difficult.”

The look Tanis was giving him- he smiled, unease lurking at the bottom of his stomach, because what if- she’d looked at him and seen ‘Crow’ first. He didn’t want her to go back to that.

“I killed the last three Grandmasters,” he told her. “And in a wonderful bit of irony, I think you may appreciate this, also the latest Master of House Escipo.”

“Oh,” Tanis said, and covered her mouth with the handkerchief. He thought she was smiling, though. “Oh my. And the rest of the Talon Houses?”

“I was sadly relegated to the role of distressed captive, but I do believe that the news broadsheets of Antiva had great fun with the descriptions of Theron and the others as they heroically fought their way through Antiva City to rescue me from the Crows. Not that they knew why the Warden-Commander of Ferelden was cutting a bloody swathe through assassins. I do hope they have fun inventing reasons for it.”

“Are you-”

“I am well, Tanis,” he reassured her. “They take good care of me.”

The door opened again. Zevran looked up, expecting Theron, but it was Morrigan, and-

“Down,” Kieran demanded, wriggling, and Morrigan put him down on the floor. He immediately headed towards them.

“Alistair and Nathaniel and his sister are standing about in Theron’s office feeding one another’s hysteria and anxious screeching,” Morrigan informed him. “Explain why Theron was seen riding out of the Vigil with no company but the dog less than an hour after we have returned?”

Oh no.

But of course he had.

“Because I was too distracted by good news to think that when he said ‘I’ll handle it’, he meant anything but that he would take personal responsibility.”

Kieran reached them, but, instead of getting Tanis’s attention like Zevran had assumed he would, grabbed Zevran’s pants and tried to haul himself into his lap. Zevran picked him up and sat him down on his knees.

“Hello,” he told Kieran.

“Is Babae coming back soon?”

“He had better,” Zevran said. “Or he is going to be in a lot of trouble with a lot of people.”

Kieran fell forward abruptly and planted his face into Zevran’s chest.

“I want Babae,” he complained.

“He will be back.”

“Now.”
“This is an opportunity to learn about patience.”

Kieran made a sound very reminiscent of his mother.

“No.”

“Yes,” Zevran told him.

“Come, Kieran,” Morrigan said. “We have found old El’vhen things. Let us see what we can learn from them.”

“Nooo,” Kieran told her. “Can’t have Babae want Papà!”

There was, reasonably, only one person he could be referring to like that, but-

“Am I your Papà?” Zevran asked.

“Of course.”

‘Papà’.

…he liked that. He liked that. It was good in the same way that hearing Theron call him ‘ma vhenan ma’len and ‘ma’sal’shiral for the first time had been good, a warm ache in his chest that made him want to smile and not stop.

“You can have me as long as you wish,” Zevran promised.

After four days’ travel, they’d come to a small forest and landscape that Nehna was vaguely familiar with, in that she’d come back from seeing Tanis in Orlais the long way and had spent much of that time wandering the Bannorn. She knew she wasn’t there yet, but it was close.

They followed the edge of the forest south, Nehna thinking the whole time what a shame it was that the forest wasn’t in their way. The hills were too open for comfort. It was easier to lose people in forests.

After midday they stopped at a stream so Eirlin could drink and chew on some bushes and trees. Nehna ate the rest of the meat from her dinner, the night before. Traveling south after lunch made the forest fall away behind them, until it was a low, dark mass on the horizon.

Nehna stopped glancing back at it after a while, which was why she was caught by surprise when Eirlin froze, ears up and quivering.

Distantly, there was the sound of a large dog barking.

Nehna turned in the saddle. There was a man, on a horse, the shine of sun on his armor faint at this distance but still visible.

She seated herself properly in the saddle, leaned forward across Eirlin’s neck, and they ran.

The ground here was mostly flat. They had the advantage of distance, and being lighter than an armored man on a horse.

But the man chasing them had the advantage of his dog, who sped ahead and caught up to them, barking and making a tremendous display of teeth and noise. Eirlin balked, dark eyes showing white, and tried to twist, to turn direction- but the dog was already there, hackles up and fur puffed at being
confronted with hooves coming his way. Eirlin tried to twist back the opposite direction and faltered in his footing.

They both fell. Nehna rolled away from Eirlin’s scrabbling hooves and tossing antlers, meaning to get up and face the man chasing her with her knife, as little good as that would do against plate armor, but a heavy weight settled on her when she tried. The dog had lain down on her. It started sniffing all over her face, and rumbled threateningly at her, teeth right next to her eye, when she reached for her knife.

This was- the was not going to ruin her, she was going to survive this and she was going to make it back south, back home-

Eirlin had found his footing and was bleating in distress. She couldn’t see him, but she could hear him, and feel the impact his dancing hooves made on the hard ground.

More hooves joined. She couldn’t see anything because the dog was blocking everything, but there was a jingle of tack and armor and whump of boots hitting the ground.

“Brother, brother, peace.”

That was El’vhen, and that was the deep-in-the-ribs open hum to calm spooked halla.

Only Dalish did that. And there was only one Dalish who’d chase her on a horse, accompanied by a Fereldan dog.

“Fen, leave be,” the Arl of Amaranthine said, and the dog got off her. Nehna came to her feet with one hand on her belt knife only to find that he was seated, with Eirlin’s head in his lap. He was stroking along his skull, long open-handed sweeps between and around the bases of Eirlin’s antlers and ears. The halla jolted when the dog moved, and the Arl let him stand once Nehna had gotten on her feet.

Eirlin took half a step towards her and froze, quivering, eyes fixed on the panting dog.

The Arl stroked down Eirlin’s neck and told the dog to move away. It walked off some distance, dejection written into its every movement, and Eirlin dashed to her side.

“No, I’m all right, I’m not mad,” she told him as he nuzzled in her hair and whuffed around her shoulders. “Not at you.”

She the last loudly enough for the Arl to hear.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to get Fen to scare you. Just keep you long enough for me to catch up.”

“We have nothing to speak about,” she told him, quickly checking the straps and ties on Eirlin’s tack. Everything seemed to be holding.

“I-”

She mounted Eirlin.

“I am an exile,” she cut him off, picking up Eirlin’s reins. “Keep your own reputation and go home.”

“Nehna-”

So he knew her name. Her next letter to Tanis was going to be long.
The barest nudge of her foot was enough to set Eirlin off.

“Nehna Sora Revasina, I came about your son!”

“He’s Tanis’s son!” she yelled back at him. Eirlin sped up. They’d be out of range soon.

“About Satheraan!”

That was-

She yanked Eirlin around, rougher than she should have, and bounded back to him. She dismounted and turned on him all her fury.

“Don’t you dare talk about him,” she spat. “You- you leave him alone, I tried, I know I failed him and it killed him so you leave him alone!”

“I’m not-”

“You leave me alone! I’m an exile just- just go away and leave me be!”

She didn’t need this. She absolutely didn’t need this, she didn’t need the Dalish hero riding out after her to, to lecture her about her family.

Tanis was getting such a letter, how dare she-

“I know how I failed and I know I’m a bad mother and I don’t need you chasing me out here to tell me about it!”

“Satheraan is ma’sal’shiral and we’re getting married next winter.”

Liar.

“He’s not dead, Nehna.”

Liar.

“He-”

He was wearing plate but it didn’t cover his lying face. Nehna punched him right in the mouth. He jerked back and she had her opening. She jumped back on Eirlin-

Teeth closed around her leg and the dog slammed her into the ground, dragging her across the ground away from her halla. Eirlin was bleating again, and dancing, wanting to come to her rescue but scared of the dog and reluctant to fight an elf.

The Arl stormed up to her. His mouth was bloody, and this time he didn’t tell his dog to let her up.

“Why?” he demanded.

“My son is dead.”

“Your son is alive. The Crows took him and he-”

Crows.

Nehna knew what Crows did. What they did to the children they took and what those children grew
“My son is dead.”

“He is **alive**!”

“My son was a seven-year-old **boy** and he’s **dead**.”

“Why won’t you-”

“You might be marrying a man claiming his name but he is **not** my son!”

Satheraan was dead. The Crows had killed Adan and they’d killed him, too. She should have thought of that- of course the Crows would pick him up, the abandoned son of a debtor and one of their own.

“I *know* what Crows do to the children they take and that means that my son is **dead**. The man you have-”

“The man **I love** is a **good person**!” the Arl snarled at her. “Your son has grown up into a **caring** and **compassionate** and **loving** man, who stayed alive through **slavery** and **torture** and **betrayal** and his own **grief** and **self-hatred** and became a **hero**! He is **loyal** and determined and intelligent and I will **not** have you dismiss him out of hand- you **hypocrite**! Your **husband** was a Crow!”

“And I know that he wasn’t the same person he was before the Crows got him!”

“But you loved him anyway!”

“So?”

“You **know** what!”

“It’s different,” Nehna said.

“Dread Wolf’s **tail** it is!”

“He’s not my son, and I **won’t** see what the Crows turned him into.”

The Arl’s hand flexed- fingers curling but held out from the palm, preventing them from clenching.

“Fen,” he said. “Let her up.”

The dog dropped her leg. Nehna stood, carefully, testing to make sure she could still hold the weight. Her leg was sore and would bruise deeply, but she didn’t think she was bleeding.

She’d punched the Arl in the face. He returned the favor by ramming his armored fist into her gut and driving her back to the dirt. The pain flared out from the point of impact, aching all through her soft tissue and making it hurt to draw a breath. On instinct she curled up around the pain and rolled over, to protect herself.

“I would chase you out of this arling right now,” the Arl said, above and behind her. “Except that I told Satheraan, when we heard that you’d left the day before we came back, that I’d take care of this. If I come back without you, he’s going to be sad. But I **won’t** let you say anything like what you’ve said to me to him. He doesn’t deserve any more hurt than what he’s already been through.”

The pain in her gut was- a lot. Somehow, focusing on it made the words easier to say. The **right**
words, she realized, to make him leave her alone; because while she hadn’t been lying and she’d never wanted to know what had surely happened to hurt Satheraan after she’d been sold to Orlais and the Crows…

But. Yes. He wasn’t dead.

And that was the problem.

“Then you should chase me out,” she told him. “Because I never loved Damien or Salladin. Damien has Tanis, he’s all right, but the last time I talked to Salladin she would have hexed me out of the Wilds forever if she’d had that much power to draw on. I love the boy who got left behind in Rialto. I don’t know this man, and I don’t love him.”

“So come meet him.”

“Does he remember me fondly?” she asked. “Does he love the mother he had?""

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll just break his heart,” Nehna said, and felt her own clench sharply, her mind conjuring up an image of what Satheraan’s face would have looked like, if she’d one day turned to her son and told him she didn’t love him-

No.

“If you really care about him like you say you do, run me off. We’ll remember each other as we were and be happier for it.”

There was silence for a moment. She thought that maybe he was listening to her, but-

“No,” the Arl said. “You’re going to get up and you’re going to ride back to Vigil’s Keep with me and you’re going to see him, and you are going to try better than you did with Damien and Salladin because he deserves to have the mother he’s been missing all these years.”

“I’m not her.”

“Yes you are. And he’s still the son who got left behind. Get up.”

Kieran lifted his head from where it had been resting on Zevran’s shoulder and announced: “Babae’s coming.”

Zevran handed him to Morrigan. Not holding him felt odd, now. He’d spent so much of the last days carrying Kieran everywhere- to Theron’s office to calm down Alistair, Nathaniel, and Delilah; to speak with Diego and Tiar; to simply go about life around the Vigil.

But this was the fifth day Theron had been gone. He would have been back before this if he hadn’t been able to catch up.

He’d go wait by the gate- no, that was too public. Here, in Morrigan’s rooms? In his and Theron’s? Or would that be awkward, should he choose an office? There were sitting rooms, maybe-

Tanis got him settled in the Arlessa’s salon, situated between Morrigan’s rooms and his and Theron’s, and sent Damien for refreshments.

It was odd, between the three of them. He didn’t remember Tanis, but she remembered him, and in
five days they hadn’t yet quite exhausted the topics of his mother and Tanis’s life and the years they’d had without him. He’d been able to feel the places in the stories where she’d left holes, and she hadn’t yet really asked for details about his life— but soon it would turn into a silent unacknowledged thing, the years of the Crows he was keeping back.

He and Damien were new to each other, and where Tanis had slipped out of the more formal aspects of the role of governess into something more familial, Damien was holding onto his propriety with both hands and deflecting anything resembling personal conversations. Zevran could allow that it was more complicated here, with Damien unwittingly hired as the personal servant to his to-be brother-in-law, and their very different life experiences, and Damien being thoroughly Orlesian and elven-blooded where he had no human heritage and was still piecing together his Antivan-Crow-Dalish-Fereldan cultural patchwork.

But he wanted to know. He hadn’t had a sibling before, but Theron had two. Maybe he and Damien couldn’t be like Theron and Merrill and Tamlen, but he wanted to be able to have a meaningful conversation, and hug his younger brother and feel like it was a connection.

Time. Time and talking. That was what it would take. Patience.

His mother was coming.

Should he— he didn’t have time to take a bath, but should he brush his hair again? Change into something nicer?

“You’re fretting, Satheraan.”

He smiled at Tanis, trying to reassure her. It worked, and she smiled back and said she was going to wait by the gates.

After she was gone Zevran got up and paced, because how should he speak to her? Antivan? El’vhen? Trade?

Tanis had been saying his mother would be happy. But who would be happy to know their child had been taken by the Crows?

Damien came in with refreshments and paused, instead of leaving immediately. Zevran stopped pacing, because this was not an action in line with his brother’s usual discreet servitude.

“You’ve always been the one she’s loved,” Damien told him abruptly. “Not me. Or Salladin. She’s always wanted you.”

He was gone again before Zevran had finishing thinking of something to say. He resolved, again, to come up with something he and Damien could connect over.

She loves me, he told himself, as he resumed pacing. She wants me. She loves me—

The confidence he’d been able to build up wavered in the face of her arrival.

Theron came into the room first, hiding distrust and anger, and he almost let his composure slip, except that Tanis and his mother came right after, side-by-side, close enough to be brushing up against each other.

He’d known his mother would be older, but this was seeing it. Her hair was much shorter than he remembered, dark brown chopped off at ear-length. Her vallas’lin peeked through her bangs, but if he hadn’t known to look, he wouldn’t have noticed them. Her clothing wasn’t rough, exactly, but
there was leather and fur and wool enough to make the staunchest Ferelden backwoodsman happy.

It took a moment, but then he recognized a number of the leather pieces as Crow armor, altered to fit and repaired in a different style from the original make, bleached of its original coloring and redecorated.

The Crow armor threw him off, and instead of saying anything he just stood there, staring.

It was a good thing. If he hadn’t stopped, he was sure he would have been too caught up in himself to notice the body language.

Crow training was good for something. He acted like nothing was wrong, kissed Theron hello, told him that he was going to be in a lot of trouble, running off until the very day they should have left Vigil’s Keep to arrive in Denerim on time for Anora’s deadline, he had to go to speak with Nathaniel and Delilah and Alistair right now, and he would still be dealing with all the neglected work he hadn’t stayed to see five days ago-

Tanis left on her own, without needing any prompting, and finally he and his mother were alone in the salon.

He steeled himself. He had lived through worse than this.

“You do not have to be here if you do not want to be,” he told her.

She didn’t say anything for a moment. When she did, it was curt, attempting neutrality but strained.

“The Arl had a different opinion.”

“I will speak to him about it,” Zevran promised. “If you wish-”

He could live with this. He would live with this. There were worse things.

“I will walk you back out. Theron will be distracted with people being upset at him, and no one will question me. Tanis said you have a halla? I can take you to him, and I will keep anyone from following you, this time.”

“He assumed I was staying,” she said. “He had someone take my packs.”

“And I can have someone find them.”

“He wouldn’t be happy about it.”

“There are a number of things that Theron is not happy about, but he will live with them. This was not his choice to make. He should have known better.”

“He was trying to make you happy.”

“Forcing you to come here against your will is not something that will make me happy. I will not be happy over someone else’s discomfort when it is not deserved.”

She was already tense and wasn’t looking at him, but that made her stiffen.

“You do not deserve to hurt,” Zevran told her, softly.

Every line of her body screamed denial. Her face stayed set, guarded and as expressionless as she could make it, and Zevran caught himself mirroring her. No. This was not the impression that he
wanted to give.

His trained instincts whispered ‘danger’, growing steadily louder as he forced himself to relax and set aside his defensive distance, as much as he could.

“I told him I shouldn’t come,” she told him, as he was working on it.

“And why not?”

“Because I knew this wouldn’t go well,” she said. “I knew I’d hurt you.”

If she hurts you, he told himself. You have somewhere to go. Theron will drop everything to make you feel better. Morrigan’s mother hurt her, Alistair’s sister rejected him. They will empathize. Kieran and the children will not leave you.

“It happens,” Zevran told his mother. “Even when people love each other. It is simply part of living. But that does not mean you should not be with other people. It means that you forgive and try again, so long as they are worthy of it.”

Listen to me, please-

“And when they’re not?”

“Then you cut them out of your life and find people who are better,” Zevran said. “But-”

Please do not let this be the wrong thing to say-

“-Mamae, I have had to do this, in my life, and you are nowhere near that line. You have done nothing but care for me.”

And that was what made her look at him, with a wild expression that left him suddenly winded and with the heavy, sour taste of old grief in the back of his mouth.

Rinna, he realized, looking past the surface anger to the fear and pain it came from.

His mother looked like how he’d felt, about Rinna.

“I left you,” she spat, furious, and Zevran took a breath and asked himself what Theron would do- what he’d want Theron to do- if it had been the two of them in this room instead. “I told myself I would go back to Antiva once I got away and I never did, and the Crows took you! And I took you into that place, instead of giving you to someone else- I could have left you with the clan, I could have left you with the Chantry-”

“And Chantry orphans in Antiva go to the Crows, the Templars, or the Tevene slave markets,” Zevran told her. “I am not human- they would not have kept me, and no one would have adopted me. If the Crows had not taken me I would be some Magister’s slave, instead of a free man in a good place. We both escaped, Mamae, and here we are again. It has not been a particularly nice journey. But we are here.”

“I should have-”

“If you had come back to Antiva to look for me and tried to take me from the Crows, they would have killed you,” he cut her off. “They might even have done it in front of me, trying to break m-”

She was breathing too fast.
“Mamae?”

She was trembling.

“Mamae,” he said, stepping towards her. “Come sit-”

He touched her, lightly, to lead her to one of the chairs. She didn’t move- but she did grab one of his hands, holding hard enough to hurt.

Zevran slid his free arm around her.

“Breathe,” he said. “Let it pass. It feels terrifying, I know. But it will hurt you more to fight it.”

“No.”

“Yes. This will not break you- and do you know why? It is because I will not hate you simply because you hate yourself for everything that has been. I lived this once, as well, and I will not leave you to it. Someone cared for me and I will do the same.”

She squeezed his hand tighter, though there was surely no more give in his bones.

“I love you, Mamae,” Zevran told her. “And I am so glad that you are alive, and I wish that our meeting had resulted from a more favorable circumstance-”

“No,” she said again, voice slowly breaking, and Zevran drew her closer. He was tall enough, now, that she could tuck her head beneath his chin without having to duck or bend. “No. I never would have- Satheraan-!”

“I love you,” Zevran said, holding her firmly as she fell apart. “I love you and this will be all right. You will be all right. You are safe, and what has been does not have to be how you continue. We have found each other again; and we will be well together, again.”

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