In Love, Serenity

by LadyDracarys

Summary

Summoned by Leliana for her particular skills as an assassin, Abner appeared to the Inquisition shrouded in mystery. A quick-witted woman of determination, strength, and few words, she takes shit from no one, though she’ll dish it out in spades.

Aurora survived the Circle’s fall in Kinloch Hold ten years ago. Since, her greatest desire has been to protect herself from the scorn of Templars. Joining the Inquisition to this end, she’s managed anonymity for a time, but rumors of her notoriety are beginning to threaten the very
safety she's sworn to protect.

Izzalea Trevelyan is the self-assured, strong-willed black sheep of her prominent noble family. Finally given a chance to bring glory to her name, she commands the Inquisition in an effort to prove she is an able and fearsome leader. She’s never backed down from a challenge, and she certainly won't now.

Though all people see the same world, they see it through different eyes. This tale follows three women, each of whom joined the Inquisition with different agendas. As part of an organization striving to unite Thedas against a threat aimed at tearing it apart, these three women band together to fight for peace and stability for all.

Notes

The world state at this time:
Izzalea Trevelyan put together a band of misfits to help her stabilize Ferelden and close the breach in the sky. She enlisted the help of the Templars to drain the magical power holding of the breach and closed it.

When the Inquisition's small group of forces celebrated at their outpost in the small town of Haven, Corypheus appeared with an army of Venatroi mages. They learned that it was he who created the breach. A dark spawn magister who plans to tear through the veil that separates the physical world from the spirit world - the Fade - and ascend into Godhood.

His army of cultists attacked Haven, ultimately resulting in destroying the town. Those who survived, made their way to a strong hold in the mountains - Skyhold. It has been a couple months since they arrived. The keep is in the final stages of repairs.

Izzalea traveled to Crestwood to meet the Champion of Kirkwall and his warden friend Alistair. They learned from Alistair that the warden's are mixed up in something sinister that involves Corypheus, whether they are aware of it or not...
Loud and persistent squawking coupled with the rustling of feathers rouses Abner from her slumber. She had been blissfully asleep until the endless cackling finally made her breathe in deeply and stretch. She rubs her eyes and smacks her tongue against the roof of her mouth, shooing away the sleep. The bird dives down impatiently, fluttering its wings in her face.

“Yeah, yeah, alright! I hear you!” Abner scowls and swats the creature away. Baron Von Plucky. Inquisition spymaster Leliana’s favorite raven. The raven perches itself above her and squawks again. “I get it, Plucky. Go back to momma. I’m up.” she groans, lifting herself to a sitting position. The bird lets out a final squawk before flying away from its perch.

Abner takes a moment to survey the area around her. The raven had been sitting on wooden partition. She is lying on a bed of hay, and she seems to be missing her trousers. She smirks to herself proudly when her bleary mind realizes that she slept in the stables that night.

This is not a unique occurrence, waking to find that she had stumbled into a random spot to sleep. She is rarely satisfied with sleeping in a bed, let alone the same bed every night. Her spirit is too restless, too feral.

Anyone can notice this about Abner from first glance. She does not appear as other humans do. For one, her hair is gathered in large, thick, chestnut brown, dreaded coils. Her skin is a warm tan, sun-kissed from a life outdoors. Many dark black markings are tattooed on her skin. A black line drops from her hairline down the middle of her forehead, another starts at her bottom lip and cascades down her chin. Small round dots arch above her eyebrows, five circles over each of her rich, dark, and large brown eyes. A combination of thick and thin black bands stripe her biceps and calves. Her way of paying homage to a life that was long lost.
She thinks her nose is too wide and stubbed. In an attempt for her to ‘own it’ she pierced it with a small metal loop that now dangles from the middle. The piercing in her nose, her dark skin, dreaded hair, and general wild appearance, makes her feel like a druffalo. This is something she greatly enjoys. She knows people stare at her, but she would rather it be for the reasons she has chosen, than for the reasons she did not.

The woman has never fit in with her surroundings, no matter where she is. Even when she speaks to people, she puzzles them. Her accent is not one most are used to hearing. Not quite Ferelden, it is something deeper and thicker. When asked where she comes from, her usual blunt retort is, “Far.”

In her appearance and temperament, she pushes herself as far away from the people around her as she can. This makes her feel more comfortable in her skin. Who she is, is her decision, no one else’s. It took her far too long to realize that.

Looking to her left, Abner sees the perfectly rounded pale cheeks of a beautiful behind. She smiles proudly to herself again, “Looks like I had a great homecoming.” She reaches out and gives the bum a nice smack. A groan emits from beneath the hay, before the head of a lovely lady pops up. Loose blonde curls bounce as the woman shakes hay from her hair.

Abner may not remember last night, or how she got to the stables with this lovely creature. But she is sure that she enjoyed herself. She always does. Life is too short to waste it being bored, or proper, or miserable. She tries her best to live each day like it's her last, for it very well may be. Abner learned that the hard way, but now she revels in it.

“Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, doll. I believe I ruined you last night and look at you now… more beautiful than ever.” Abner gives the woman another playful smack on the ass before the lady flips over into a sitting position. Honestly, Abner has no idea who the girl is, but that won’t stop her from dishing out some compliments.

The unknown woman looks around with confusion and then to Abner, “Did-did we sleep in the stables, Abner?”

She hides a wince. It seems while she has no recollection of this woman or their evening together, the fair maiden does. She wishes that she could say this has never happened before, but that would be a lie. In an effort to not hurt the beauty’s feelings, she decides to keep the information private. Hopefully, she can do some digging and find out who the girl is by other means, rather than to embarrass them both now. Realistically, Abner doesn’t know if she will ever encounter this woman again. She spends much of her time scouting lower Thedas for the Inquisition. Their paths may never cross again, so she decides it best to not leave a bad taste in the unknown maiden’s mouth.

“Where is yer sense of adventure, gorgeous?” Abner winks flirtatiously and starts searching through the hay for her leather trousers. She figures, the faster she exits the stall gracefully, the more likely the pretty maiden won’t become keen to her secret.

“I believe that was the line you used on me to get me out here in the first place,” the girl says as she pulls hay out of her tussled blonde hair. Looking at it, she scrunches her face. She flicks the straw away and begins running her hands through her tresses looking for more.

Abner stares at the woman, finding that she looks quite tempting and beautiful when she is disheveled. The girl seems the sort who is more accustomed to being prim and proper, rather than rough and ragged. Perhaps that was why Abner lead her here…to roughen her up a bit. Looking at her now, Abner feels lustful desire begin to spring within her. She knows she needs to focus on finding her trousers before she loses herself in this woman again, only to later incur the wrath of the spymaster who awaits her in the rookery.
“Abner…” she begins tentatively, while the scout diligently digs through hay in search of black leather.

Abner looks back at the blonde, “Have you seen my breeches?” They really must be here somewhere. No matter how drunk she was, she highly doubts she was wandering around Skyhold with nothing on her lower half.

She thinks.

She hopes.

“Abner…” the girl says again. She stops her search momentarily to give her full attention, bestowing a pleasant and expectant smile on the girl. “I’ve… I’ve never done anything like that before,” the blonde woman’s voice is shaky as she cringes.

Abner smirks at her with a wink, “What’s that, love? Make it in the stables?”

“No... well, yes that too.” She looks nervous as she fidgets with her breast band. “What I mean is, I’ve never done that with a... a woman.”

Fucking adorable.

Abner feels a slight tinge of guilt for not remembering their encounter, but the confession also causes her lust to bloom. She isn’t sure that she cares anymore as to whether or not Leliana will be peeved at her continued tardiness. She lets her eyes drape over the woman’s form. Her pale and soft skin glows in the low light of the stables. Her curves are subtle and delicate. Abner feels a deep and primal yearning for the woman, and as her eyes wash over supple pale skin, she notices a glimpse of black leather stuck between the woman’s luscious body and the back wall of the stable stall.

Grinning wickedly, she slowly crawls up to her, “Well... I hope you enjoyed yourself.” Planting a tender kiss on her pouty lips, Abner reaches around her and pulls out the pinned leather trousers. She sits back on her knees, black leather prize in hand, and wicked thoughts in her mind. “You know,” she grins at her, “I could make the time for another round before I go…”

“Abner! You’re terrible!” She exclaims in shock that leans toward excitement. Pink quickly flashes on her pale cheeks, and Abner licks her lips at the sight. “It’s day light. Someone...” she hushes to a whisper, darting her eyes around as if they were not completely alone in this horse stall, “someone could hear us, or worse see us. I couldn’t…”

Giving her another wink, Abner hops up and slides the smooth, tight leather over her legs. While she would love a chance to remember what the lady feels, sounds, and tastes like, she would never try to manipulate her into something unwanted.

The blonde girl’s rosy face and big eyes pout at Abner as she readies herself to leave. The wild brunette gives her a friendly smile to ease her mind, “Too bad for them then. Having to miss witnessing such a beautiful creature being ravished.” The pink of the girl’s cheeks turns a deeper shade of crimson.

Abner finds what must be the lady’s frock in the corner of the stall and tosses it over to her. She adjusts her own sleeveless linen tunic, grabs her boots - flinging them over her shoulder by the laces - and flashes a parting smile. “Thanks, for a memorable night, doll. If you ever want to explore a woman again, you know where to find me.”

*Maybe she does... who knows really.*
She eases her way out of the stall in a way that still provides the unknown goddess privacy. Walking down the corridor of the stables, she sees a familiar stable boy standing at the end. He gives her a knowing smile and she mirrors his expression. Without words, they high-five and Abner continues on her merry way.

It looks to still be morning as she leaves the shelter of the stables. Surely, Leliana sent Plucky to bring her in for her report. Abner had just arrived back to Skyhold the night before. The spymaster had her scouting in the Hinterlands to ensure its continued stability. There were many unknowns after the Inquisitor closed the breach in the sky, and their original outpost of Haven was destroyed.

The Inquisition had only been at Skyhold for a couple of weeks before Leliana sent Abner on mission. Now that she is sober, and Skyhold is illuminated in the daylight, the scout finds it exciting to see the progress made in rebuilding the once abandoned keep while she was away. When they arrived, she thought Skyhold was ‘a shit hole.’ She was skeptical about the Inquisition making it livable. No one knew how long it had been left empty. Had signs that it had been in a battle, too. However, in the weeks Abner was gone, the builders have a majority of it patched up. Abner swings her body in a circle, looking at the massive stone walls and buildings surrounding her. She whispers to herself in awe, “Pretty fucking majestic.”

There are a lot more people running around than there were before she left. She doesn’t recognize half of them. Really, she doesn’t recognize most of them. She notices a bunch of nobles wandering about, too. Because of course, once the Inquisitor saves the world, the pompous flies circling her will want to have some kind of special status.

She continues to spin and wander around the courtyard in awe of the beauty and commotion surrounding her. Snapping her back to reality is that damned bird diving at her head again, squawking at her in effort to get her back on task.

“Maker’s balls! Alright, I’m coming!” She huffs and bats the bird away, following its flight path to the tower that holds Leliana’s rookery.

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“I only had to put down two small groups of rebel mages in the two months that I roamed the area,” Abner reports to Leliana when she reaches the rookery. “Most of the Venatori have moved on to other locations.” The scout hands the spymaster a final written report that had been folded into a pocket in her trousers.

Leliana takes the paper, her face obviously displeased with the report’s condition. “Good. I have other agents following the Venatori trails to see where they end up. How are the rifts?”

“Still closed and no new rifts have appeared. It seems the elven devices the apostate found are working in strengthening the veil.”

She nods and reaches to pull straw from the scout’s coiled and knotted hair. “Slept in the stables again, I see?”

“Nothin’ gets past you, Spymaster;” she snorts.

“Laugh all you like, but you should stay in the barracks when you are in the keep.” She frowns, “Not wherever is the closest hole for you to fall in when the mood strikes you.”

“You know I am not a fan of staying in one place too long. My adventures within these walls will help me from going stir crazy between missions.” Abner proudly smiles at her, but Leliana is not
impressed - she scoffs instead.

“Do not get in the way of other people’s duties because you desire to live without rules. It would be best if I didn’t need to send ravens to find you.”

Abner hates seeing Leliana so serious. The two had known each other long before the Inquisition. Abner knows how much fun the spymaster can be. Lightly ribbing her, Abner jests “Oh come on, Sister Leliana. Must I remind you of your days as a bard?” Leliana glowers at her.

The scout sees her error. Sometimes she forgets that she is supposed to act more professional around Leliana now. The state of the world no longer allows for friendships with subordinates - in Leliana’s eyes. The spymaster already lets Abner get away with breaking too many rules, due to their shared past. Speaking to her respectfully and being easily located, shouldn’t be too much to ask.

Abner clears her throat and stands straighter, forcing more professional respect into her tone, “I’m sorry, Spymaster. I promise I will try to use the barracks more often when present in the keep.”

“Good. The Inquisitor needs to go to the Western Approach soon. I will send Lieutenant Scout Harding out first with a team to scout the area. I want you to be part of that team.” Leliana states and the scout nods in compliance. “You are dismissed.”

She salutes Leliana and quietly enters the winding staircase that leads down to the bottom of the tower. Entering the rotunda at the base of the steps, she lightly tip-toes her way through the room. The elven apostate, Solas - who has taken up working in the space - is on his scaffolding painting one of his murals that stretch the curved walls. Abner does not deal with the man often, but she often finds it entertaining to irritate him.

He is a very serious elven mage. She has only witnessed him smile or softly chuckle a couple of times, and always at another’s expense. He is a tad arrogant, surrounding himself with his paintings, towers of tomes, and snooty discussions about his trips through the Fade. Because of this, she enjoys sneaking away little things that please him. Like his snacks, for instance. She noticed the elf has an affinity for treats that lean on the sweet side. It just so happens that Abner does as well. She spies an apple on his desk and swipes it before sneaking through the rotunda’s exit, and easing into the great hall.

As she slips through the door, she hears the elf call out in a dry tone, “You are welcome.” His tone brings her great satisfaction.

Upon entering the hall, she looks around at the grand sight surrounding her. The atrium is three stories high, with lavish draperies and tapestries hanging from the ceiling and walls. Gigantic stained glass windows flank either end of the hall. A large set of wooden doors on one end lead to the Inquisitor’s throne placed on the other. Everywhere in between is peppered with grand tables and chairs, stone statues, and groups of people.

Taking a bite out of her sweet and delicious stolen apple, she surveys the area. She grins when she spots her favorite dwarf and author. Varric Tethras sits at his usual table near the entrance to the hall and next to a grand hearth with a glorious fire burning within. He is working tirelessly on some type of writing with a very sour look on his face. Abner slides into a seat next to him and plops her bare feet on the table, crossing her legs at the ankles.

He lifts his eyes from his papers, annoyance written plainly across his face. Abner continues to sit proudly, grinning at the man and loudly biting into her apple. “Can I help you, Killer?” he asks flatly.

Dripping with insolence as she chews through her apple, she cocks an eyebrow at the dwarf. “I
heard somethin’ about you.”

Varric huffs in response, setting down his quill and rolling his eyes. “Please, enlighten me. What have I done now?”

“You got some kind of fancy friend here in Skyhold. Some ‘champion’ or whatever. Is he a warrior or something?” She speaks through chewing sounds of her apple, irritating the dwarf to no end.

“Mage. He was in Crestwood, but he should be back in Skyhold tomorrow.”

“Oh, so it’s a fancy title for a fancy man,” she says coyly, examining the remaining bites on her treat.

“Have you really not heard of the Champion of Kirkwall? Did you not read my book?” He looks at the scout in exasperation.

“Oh, that guy,” she responds nonchalantly, tossing her apple core into the raging fire across from her. “No, I didn’t read it. But I’ve heard of him.” She wipes her hands on her trousers and glances around the room as if bored.

“You are a really terrible spy, aren’t you?”

She snickers and winks at her irritated friend, “Eh, that may be. Leliana keeps me ‘round for my superior killing abilities, fearless nature, and winning personality… of course.” She tips her head to the side and smiles angelically. She pulls her feet off of the table and leans on her knee, towards the dwarf. “Okay, let’s see if I can deduce the situation here. You, you hid the champ from Seeker Pentaghast. She wanted him, you had him, you hid him. But now, after the Inquisitor has been named, and Coryphitits is roaming free, you bring him in. I bet the seeker has the mad reds ‘bout you now. Seeing as you lied to her.”

Oozing in self-satisfaction for her awareness of what happens Skyhold, even when she isn’t around, the scout leans back in her chair. She purses her lips and hums to herself, wrapping her arms behind her head. “And now,” she continues, “Now, you are pouting and sulking ‘round the keep because the man you were trying to protect is still in it. And you have the fiercest woman in Thedas pissin’ in yer ale.”

The dwarf sighs and rubs the side of his head. “So you do know.”

She chortles, leaning back to the dwarf and nudging his shoulder with her fist. “Don’t let the Seeker get you down, Tethras.” He huffs in response but flashes her a quick smile. He grabs his quill again, getting back to his task with less of a tortured appearance then before.

Abner sits quietly, gazing into the fire, thinking to herself. A few minutes drift by before she grabs the dwarf’s attention again. He is a story teller, so perhaps regaling his tales will help pull him from his funk. “Say, tomorrow night…let’s get some bottles, your champ, and a quiet spot with a view. Then, you two can tell me all your stories from your glory days.” She pinches his arm playfully, “That should help you feel better, yeah? Reminiscing with your old pal, and with an audience.” He smirks to himself, eyes still on his writing. She nudges him again, “A beautiful, attentive, and amazingly fun to be around audience…yeah? You in?”

“Alright.” He says feigning reluctance.

“Superb!” She lifts herself from her seat. As time went on the hall became more and more filled with people. Mainly Orlesian nobles clattering on with gossip, making Abner feel as if the huge space was losing air for her to breathe. She can’t take it in here any longer. Rising from her seat she squeezes Varric’s shoulder. “Alright Tethras, this hall is far too lively with nobles for my taste. I’m going to go
find some space. See you tomorrow.”

He nods as she weaves her way through the crowd and out into the courtyard.
Let Chaos Be Undone

Chapter Notes

All of Aurora's chapter titles are pulled from The Chant of Light, this one is from Victoria 1:3

Also if you would like to listen to a song that embodies Aurora and her determination to do whatever it take to be safe. I listened this this song on repeat for much of this chapter.

-Aurora-

Walking along Skyhold’s battlements, Aurora smiles as she gazes serenely at the beautiful and majestic Frostback Mountains. The snowy caps of the rocky goliaths have a severe and stoic beauty that she appreciates. A biting, brisk breeze sings through the air. She breathes it in with a long and relaxing inhale. The wind, and its bright crisp scent, makes the mage feel *alive*. She was rarely allowed to walk outside when she lived in the circle tower. She revels the moments where she can steal away and relish the vast expanse of her new home.

A Templar approaches her as she nears the end of her walk. He stops in front of her with his arms crossed and blocks her way. Aurora peers at him and tilts her head suspiciously. The man glowers back at her. He stands too close for comfort causing her body to tense and her quick temper to flair.
She is not sure why this man has made a point to stand in her way. She has a history of shooting her mouth off to the wrong people, but never to this particular man. The mage has not encountered this Templar before now. His stance is tall and hostile. It is obvious that he is trying to intimidate her, but Aurora does not intimidate easily.

“Please Ser, let me pass,” Aurora says annoyed. Gritting her teeth, she cuts her eyes at the man while he moves to block every attempt to go around his imposing body. She halts her efforts with a huff. Crossing her arms at her chest and cocking her head to the side, her temper rages hotter in her core. It threatens to boil over.

“How am I to know that you are not an abomination?” the Templar sneers at the mage.

“Excuse me?” Of all of the random accusations… Who does this man think he is? Now she is really feeling livid.

He spits at the ground between them and glares. Leaning forward, his body language continues its failed challenges to frighten her, “I heard where you came from, Aurora. You were at Kinloch Hold during the last blight! I know what happened there.”

Wonderful, she thinks. Rumors about her are apparently spreading through the Templar ranks. They are no doubt discussing the worst experience of her life. And now, Templars will be looking at her as if she is a liar harboring a demon with in her, an abomination. “Do you not think that in the ten years since the blight, that something would have shown me as corrupted?” she rolls her eyes and turns her head to the east. The sun has risen over the mountains to about mid-morning. She had been planning on attending a judgement in the great hall today. It will be starting soon, looks like she may miss it.

“Anders was at that circle. I don’t think I need remind you what became of him,” the Templar scorns.

Aurora snaps her gaze back to his, rage boils over. Her eyes feel like they could burn fire through the man. How dare he compare her to that thing that blew up Kirkwall’s Chantry. “Anders was an apostate. He had left the circle long before he became an abomination. Do you forget that Commander Cullen was also at the Circle Tower during the 5th blight? If he feels comfortable with my presence, who are you to question his authority? You are nothing but a peck.” Aurora’s words are soaked in venom. Her jaw is set firmly. Not intimidated by this jerk, she steps forward and balls her fists.

How much I’d love to punch him right in his ignorant mouth.

He notices her fists and laughs in low and foreboding mockery. “Look at you…”another spit on the ground at Aurora’s feet. “If nothing else, a brazen witch like you needs to be reminded of her place in this world.”

“You are not superior to me, you gnat,” she growls in response. That was his final straw. The Templar rears his armored hand back and strikes her across the face. His force so strong that it sends her reeling back; losing her balance, she falls onto the hard stone walkway of the battlements.

She grips her cheek, feeling wet sticky blood on her finger tips, tasting its metallic flavor in her mouth. She sneers at the man and hisses from both rage and pain. Aurora wishes she could use her fade given strength to hurl him off the battlements. But a mage fighting a Templar within the walls of Skyhold is less than wise, even after being assaulted. In fact a mage fighting a Templar anywhere, for any reason is a death sentence, unless you are sure you can get away.

He looms over the mage proudly, “That’s more like it, maybe next time you will remember not to
sass your betters.”

She steels herself and bites back the tears that threaten to come from the pain and shock of the hit. He laughs again while he turns to leave. He marches down the steps of the battlements, chuckling in wretched self-righteousness as he descends.

“Bastard.” She mutters, spitting out blood collecting in her cheek. Her fingers glow a soft green light as she manipulates the limited of healing magic she knows to stop the bleeding, and repair the skin on her cheek.

Another fine example of the wonderful dichotomy between mage and Templar. All of southern Thedas fears mage powers, but rarely does anyone question a knight. The order thinks they can push mages around all they like, because if they retaliate with their true strength they will be put down… or worse… made tranquil. Tranquility, an effect that permanently disconnects a mage from his or her connection with the fade - the source of a mage’s power. The tranquil become emotionless workaholics, no longer possessing any magical abilities. A tranquil’s personality and memories are completely gone… forever.

All mages regard it as a fate worse than death.

The relationship between Templars and mages is in turmoil from the mage war that sprouted after Anders blew up the Kirkwall Chantry – as if it was ever considered a copacetic relationship. Before the mess began, it was Aurora’s relationship with the Knight-Commander that kept her safe. Back in Kinloch Hold, Knight-Commander Greagoir shielded her from unwanted attention. Relations in her circle were tense after the blight, but she noticed the Knight-Commander had taken a shine to her. She perused him out of curiosity, at first. However, she soon discovered that none of his men would bother her, knowing it was she who kept their commander’s bed warm at night. But ever since the world went to shit… she found herself completely alone.

When she learned that one of Greagoir’s former knights, Cullen Rutherford, had resigned from the Templar order to lead the Inquisition’s army, she saw her opportunity. Cullen did not leave Kinloch Hold on the best of terms. A lot had happened to him during the fifth blight, many mages and Templars were killed. Cullen regarded the mages who survived with so much blind hatred and suspicion, that he was sent away to work at the Gallows in Kirkwall.

However before he left, Cullen had always be told that Aurora was a mage who could be a trusted, as far as his superiors were concerned. She hoped that he would remember that, even after everything, and all the years that passed. She prayed to the Maker and his bride that Cullen didn’t harbor any resentment towards her for what had happened.

Even though it was a risky move – and Aurora was terrified that she would be killed on sight – it was either that or die in the woods. It would have been a pointless death from fighting rogue Templars who hunted the mages desperately fleeing fallen circles across southern Thedas. As far as she was concerned, her choices were possible death, or certain death. The decision was clear, so she presented herself to the Inquisition.

When she arrived at Haven, the Left and Right Hands of the Divine questioned her suspiciously. When Cullen entered the room, his presence made Aurora brace herself for death. He looked much more imposing in that moment than he ever had in the circle. He cut his eyes at the mage and grabbed the hilt of his sword. She knew he was going to run her through then and there. Aurora could feel the Right Hand, Cassandra, suppressing her magic to keep her from fighting back.

She made a catastrophic mistake, she was going to die. Just as Aurora began praying to the Maker to bring her to his side, Cullen stunned her senseless by releasing the hilt and vouching for her.
Aurora could have been knocked over by a leaf.

The arrangement she had with Greagoir saved her one last time.

Even after they allowed Aurora to join the Inquisition, the former circle mage is not delusional. She knows that the Inquisition still keeps an eye on her. She has been protected by fact that she denounced the mage rebellion, and pledged servitude to the institution while it puts the world back together. But the ever growing presence of the Templar order is especially troubling, and with today’s display, she has good reason to be troubled. While the order has been away most of the time - fighting those who defected and are terrorizing the countryside - a permanent presence is becoming more established.

Today’s judgement is rumored to be a promotion for one of the Templars. The Inquisitor will be naming someone as the new Knight-Commander from the surviving members of the order. She has even dedicated a tower in Skyhold just for the knights. As a result the keep has been crawling with them, and will continue due to the new permanent base of operations.

If there are going to be so many Templars wandering the stronghold, she will need more protection. She needs to find a way to keep safe from their ire.

The woman wonders if she could use the same methods she did in the circle. Perhaps she can beguile the new Knight-Commander as she did with one of his predecessors. No matter who he is, she knows she can handle it. It is a means to an end. At the base of it all, he is just a man. All she must do is entrap him and she will be shielded from nasty men like the one today. *Whatever it takes.*

Aurora’s cheek healed, a calm yet wicked determination fills her soul. She won’t let this Templar abuse get out of hand, even if she has to use one of them to make it so.

One corner of her mouth slightly upturned, she picks herself up off the bitter cold stone beneath her. The stone battlements match the armor she has placed over her heart ever since she was a young woman. She wipes off the dust and dirt from her mage robes. Squaring her shoulders, she stands tall with intense, jaded confidence.

Aurora raises her chin high and heads to the great hall to witness the naming of the new Knight-Commander.

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Finding a place to stand within the crowd, Aurora waits for the proceedings. The great hall is as massive as it is crowded. Skyhold workers, nobles from Orlas and Ferelden, and Templars pack the space with huddles of bodies. Groups of people snicker and whisper to each other. Speculations run rampant through the air.

Aurora takes in a deep breath. She hardens herself, staring down the center walkway of the hall, waiting to cast her own judgment on the man.

The large entrance doors open. Murmurs and whispers grow louder as the crowd watches the knight approach the Inquisitor who sits waiting on her throne.

Aurora catches her first view of the man everyone has been buzzing about. Her first impression is that he is so very much younger than what she was expecting. With everything that has happened to the order, that shouldn’t be surprising. The more seasoned men are all monsters now… or dead.
A dull pain flicks in her chest at the thought. The mage squeezes her eyes shut, holds her breath, and clenches her hands together. She thrusts through the threat of pain with resolved strength, pushing away her memories and feelings of Greagoir.

Aurora snaps her eyes back open at the sound of the man’s voice. “You sent for me, Inquisitor?” the Templar speaks in soft respect while standing before the Inquisitor.

Commander Cullen, standing to the right of the throne, speaks first. He refers to the man as Ser Delrin Barris. He proclaims to the Knight-Templar, and everyone within the great hall, a list of examples for Ser Barris’ acts of excellence since uniting with the Inquisition.

“You showed exceptional valor defending the people of Val Colline from Venatori, and broke a siege of demons in Ansburg,” Commander Cullen projects his strong and confident voice through the hall, a hush fell as soon as he began.

He continues his praise, his voice bouncing off the stone in the atrium. “You stood against an entire town that wanted to kill a mage for imagined demonic possession without raising a sword.”

Aurora catches her breath. Her jaw drops ever so subtly. Not even Greagoir would spare her if an entire town claimed she was an abomination. How Ser Barris came to possess such restraint and trust with a mages is extremely curious to Aurora. She can barely believe the idea. If she had heard the tale from anyone but the leaders of the Inquisition, she would have called them a liar.

The Inquisitor announces her intentions for Ser Delrin’s promotion to Knight-Commander. The Templar promptly takes a knee and bows his head, “Your Worship. I… am not worthy.”

This Templar is like none Aurora has seen in over a decade. If any man’s presence could shield her from the unwanted gaze and suspicion of roaming Templars, this man could. A shiver washes over her skin. She feels hope that she will be protected. She will survive this mess as she did the last.

Aurora’s resolve grows hard. She will seduce this man, and no one will ever get in her way again.
Izzalea stares at the scar on and above Cullen’s lip as he speaks. She wonders what it would feel like under her tongue.

She is the Inquisitor and she knows she should be paying better attention to the proceedings surrounding her in the great hall. But the presence of Cullen to her left is too distracting. All she can do is watch her commander’s moving lips.

She shifts in her throne, heat coiling in her chest and between her thighs. She squeezes them together and adjusts in an effort to calm herself down. The sexual tension between her and the commander has been mounting since the moment she laid eyes on him.

It was the most stressful and confusing day of her life. She went from waking in a dungeon; to finding out she was connected to a devastating explosion; to the realization that a fresh, green, magical, gash on her hand was Thedas’ only hope for salvation. Demons where spilling into the earth from rifts only she could close. She was overwhelmed, terrified, and confused.

And in the middle of it all, there he was.

There was a magnetism between them immediately. The pandemonium arcing in Thedas and steady formation of the Inquisition has kept them apart. Too busy to even entertain the idea that these feelings could be explored, and yet Izzalea is finding that she can no longer ignore these thoughts. She can’t take it anymore. He is too distracting
The fact that she hates sitting in this uncomfortable seat, doesn’t help anything. She can hear her mother’s words in her head telling her to ‘sit up straight’ and ‘look more presentable.’ She has never been one to enjoy formal affairs, and now that she has to lead them…it churns her stomach. She would much rather be sparring with her soldiers in the ring outside, or necking with the delicious ex-Templar to her left.

He is stating some facts about what Ser Barris has accomplished since she allowed the Templars to ally with the Inquisition. Ser Barris was a major asset to her in securing Therinfal Redoubt, and he has continued his excellence ever since. Cullen and Izzalea previously discussed it and decided he was the right man to officially lead those remaining knights in the order.

Cullen’s words project with such confidence and strength, she could listen to his deep Ferelden accent all day. She is failing miserably at any attempt at paying attention.

He turns to look at her, those gorgeous gold eyes glinting at her. She realizes suddenly that he has stopped speaking, when gives her a quick and hidden smirk, that sexy scar of his twitching slightly. He gives her a minor nod, only enough for her to see, silently signaling that it is time for her to address the hall.

*Shit, here we go, time to be ‘Inquisitorial’.*

Izzalea clears her throat and turns her gaze to Barris. She says some words about how he ‘shall become Knight-Commander’…blah…blah…blah… it doesn’t really matter how she says it, he is going to humbly reject it, which he does. So now she formally insists. The golden lion to her left takes over the proceedings again, calling for the support from a group of Templars standing behind Barris.

Cheering erupts through the hall as the Templars hoist Ser Barris in the air. It is done.

She leans back in her throne and tents her fingers, smiling wickedly, and staring at her commander as if he is ‘big game’ and she is a hunter.

While gayety ensues for the newly presented Knight-Commander, she slyly gets her commander’s attention. “Cullen…to the war room?” Izzalea says in a low growl. He nods, she stands, and he follows her as she works her way through the crowd.

Nobles try to stop her, but she pretends not to notice. She has had enough with pomp-and-circumstance for the moment. She’d rather take a break and get into trouble. She uses her size and importance to propel her through the crowd, guilt free of any and all that lay in her wake. She believes should be able to exploit her status on rare occasions. And what she plans on doing with her commander right now, is just the rare occasion she needs to push her confidence and arrogance to lofty levels.

She was not raised this way, precisely. Izzalea was expected to join the chantry, or become a Templar. She was to be someone with honor and restraint. She does possess these qualities, but her spunk has a habit of breaking through. She is not a fan of formality or rules; the strict lifestyle of the chantry was never appealing.

While she believes in the Maker, she had no interest in being a quiet and reserved chantry sister for the rest of her life. And while she regards the Templars highly, something about the mage circles never sat right with her.

Her mother would groan at her and chide that she was too ‘progressive,’’ like it was a bad word. However, the fact that she is the youngest Trevelyan meant Izzalea was able to get away with a lot
more than her siblings ever could. By the time her mother got to her, she was so tired of fighting with
willful natures that she rolled her eyes and pretended not to notice Izzalea’s flair for the
unconventional.

Izzalea was always far more interested in sparring with her older brothers, and getting into trouble
running around Ostwick, than reading the Chant of Light. She and her brothers decided her
boisterous arrogance was best used in a fight. Her strong athletic build made her a perfect candidate
to be a warrior. Plus, she does not intimidate easily, and she is especially confident in her abilities.
She even came home one day with a rusty red colored tattoo on her face. Proclaimed it added to her
ferocity, told men ‘not to fuck with her.’ Her mother was fit to be tied. But Izzalea revels in a good
battle, especially when she can fight to protect those who are weaker.

She is also heavily attracted to those with similar qualities.

Leading the Commander through the maze of people, Izzalea enters the hallway that leads to their
destination. They pass Ambassador Josephine Montilyet’s office in the process. The ambassador sits
at her desk and writes fervently. As an assistant arrives by her side, she immediately sends them
away with a new task.

To Josie hear speak, it sounds as if she is constantly battling one scandal after another in attempts to
improve the Inquisition’s reputation.

Some call Izzalea a heretic that she claims to be touched by the bride of the Maker, Andraste. She
never claimed any of that, other people did. People will say whatever they want. She won’t be
bothered with any of it. All that matters to her is using this power that she has, and the mark on her
hand, to save Thedas. She is the only one who can.

Cullen follows her down through the next door into the final hallway leading to the war room. Once
they reach its grand doors he says tentatively, “Do we not need Lady Montilyet and Leliana for
this?”

“Doubtful,” she says with a grin he cannot see as she opens the door. She has been staring at this
man for the better part of a year. He is a ferocious leader to her army, yet has been too shy to pursue
her. Every attempt at flirtation on her end has left him flustered and bashful. This ends today. If her
lack of concentration in the hall today proved anything, it is that she cannot survive another minute
without his contact.

They enter the room. As she closes the large door behind her, Cullen makes his way around the war
table to the side with which he prefers to stand. Always in the middle and opposite of Izzalea, she
likes to think it is because he then has the best vantage point to admire her frame.

But today she does not wish to have the table between them. A table with a map of Thedas and their
plans stretched across it. No, today she will no longer allow the world lie between them.

As sly as a cat, she eases her way around the table to where he stands. He has a quizzical expression
as she approaches. He turns to her, with his back to the table and she stops just an inch from his
body.

Breathlessly he whispers, “Inquisitor…”

She answers in a low husk, “Cullen.” She brings her hand up to the large fur collar of his cloak, the
mane of the Thedas’ Golden Lion. She gazes into his bright and nervous eyes. His cheeks are
flushed. She finds him to be unbelievably charming. She takes a few moments to admire him in this
close proximity. His blond hair is curly, but combed back with precision. With Cullen, everything
must always be in place at all times.

His fair skin is a beautiful contrast to Izzalea’s dark and warm sable tones. His gold and amber eyes compliment her sage. Her scarlet hair matches the red of his cloak, reds that beautifully extenuate his golden and creamy features. He is large and muscular, made even larger by the armor his always wears. His red and black fur mane pronounces the broadness of his shoulders.

Izzalea has always been big for a woman, tall and broad with her own pronounced musculature. A great body for a warrior, but it is not easy to find a man who is not dwarfed by her appearance. Her commander however, is large enough to make her feel lithe and feminine, a sensation that feels good on her. Watching him through these past months, taking in how they complement each other, she has begun to think that he was made for her.

She smiles and looks up into his eyes. He has a good couple of inches on her, just enough to allow her to lean up on her toes in an effort to meet their lips.

“Maker’s breath…” he whispers. Just as she is about to make contact, the war room door opens. Cullen jumps, grabs Izzalea’s waist, and pivots her away - as if all of her muscle weighs nothing. She is both shocked and turned on by his ability to move her with such ease. Now, it would appear as if the pair are simply standing next to each other, casually talking.

Izzalea glowers at the intruders until she sees that they are Josie and Leliana. She changes her demeanor to one that is friendlier to welcome her advisors, “Hello, ladies.”

“Inquisitor, you did mean for a war meeting, did you not? I assumed the messengers just had yet to inform us, I sent for Leliana and came at once.” Josie says while still writing on a clipboard.

Izzalea awkwardly laughs and steals a glance at Cullen. He looks calm and professional, aside from one bead of sweat trailing down his forehead. “Ah yes, thank you Josie…Messengers…grrr!” She shakes her fist at an imaginary messenger and casually walks to her usual side of the war table.

Seamlessly, the Inquisitor comes up with an excuse to meet with all three of her advisors, “Leliana, I wanted to take the opportunity to get more information on this Warden Alistair before our trip to the Western Approach. You fought alongside him during the fifth blight, did you not? Can he be trusted?”

Leliana begins to prattle on about stories of her old friend. Josie and Izzalea giggle at all of the appropriate moments, but Izzalea’s focus is aimed directly across the table. Those golden eyes are staring into her. She feels her core heat with burning desire.

He didn’t back away or stop her, until their intruders arrived. Perhaps he is finally ready to admit to the attraction between them. His eyes are darkened as they look at hers. His lips twitch into a suggestive smirk, but only long enough for her to see and no one else. That’s just the signal she needs to know that he burns for her as well.

“Sounds good, thank you Leliana,” Izzalea nods when the spymaster finishes talking, although she is not completely sure what was said. It doesn’t really matter. Leliana would have explicitly warned her if there was anything to worry about considering the warden. “I think we should be ready to head to the Western Approach within a fortnight.”

“As you wish, Inquisitor.” Leliana answers. “I will send my scouts ahead of your party to ensure you have safe travels and that nothing surprises you. Scout Harding will meet with you at a forward camp. She will send a raven as soon as a safe operation is designated.”
“Thank you, Leliana.” Izzalea turns her gaze to her ambassador. “Josie, please ensure that I have all crucial diplomatic duties handled before our departure, I suspect I will be gone for a while. Depending on what we find there, I could easily be gone for a couple of months.” She looks to Leliana who nods in agreement.

“Yes, Inquisitor. I will gather all important details immediately,” Josie answers as she writes notes.

“Cullen, I would like a detail of at least five of your best men, along with a crew from my inner circle.”

“Of course, Inquisitor,” he responds with a formality that drives her wild.

She stands tall with her hands clasped behind her back. “Right, I think that is enough for the day, don’t you?” She nods at each of her advisors. “Please let me know if anything else comes up, otherwise I will focus on my champion training,” she slips a sly glance to Cullen and gives him a wink. They all nod in agreement. “Wonderful, have a great evening everyone. You are dismissed.”

Josie and Leliana leave first, gossiping and giggling about some noble’s attire in the great hall this afternoon. Izzalea hangs back and watches from the table. She grins as black leather trousers stride by behind the women. “Cullen?”

“Yes, Inquisitor?” He stops and looks to her with smoldering eyes that make her knees shake. Truly, nothing in this world affects her the way one look from him does.

“May I meet with you in your office during my next moment of freedom?” she smirks at him.

“Of course, Inquisitor.” He bows. Before he stands upright, he looks up and flashes her that sexy grin of his. “Anything for the Herald of Andraste.”

A shiver runs down her spine. She bites her lip in desire as he exits the room.
Before Aurora arrived in the Templar tower, she made sure her appearance was perfect.

She stands outside the door of the new knight-commander’s office, wearing her best mage robes – a gift from Greagoir long ago. Striking cerulean and indigo layers of velvets and silks, accented with gold trimming and fasteners. A large gold clasp with the symbol of the magi etched into it, keeps a lush mantle secured around her shoulders. The shades of blue and the glimmer of gold accent her features beautifully.

The blue plays off of her large and pale sky colored eyes, as well as her alabaster fair skin. The
gilded accents match her golden blond hair. Hair she expertly braided into a delicate crown around her head. Long soft curls lay loose, allowed to drape romantically over her shoulders and down her back, rather than tied into the bun that usually restrains them.

*You can do this. Just go in there. He is just a man after all, this should be easy.*

She smooths out her blue robes and takes a deep breath. She lightly pinches her cheeks to give them a soft rosy glow, and raises her chin high. Placing a smile upon her face, she raps her knuckles on the slightly opened office door.

“Enter,” she hears him say. His voice is deep and pleasant.

“Good afternoon, Knight-Commander Barris,” the mage says sweetly as she saunters through the doorway. She makes sure her hips sway with each step. She flits her eyes around the office, not looking at him at first, but instead allowing him to privately take in her form. As she does, Ser Barris rises and rounds his desk to receive her.

“Well, serah,” the knight-commander greets, “I am sorry, but I do not believe we have met?”

“No, we have not, Ser. My name is Aurora,” she says with a slight curtsy. When she raises her bowed head, she looks at him for the first time. She takes a shallow breath and holds it in place. A wave of shock washes over her, her body wavers slightly as she straightens.

“A pleasure to meet you, my lady Aurora,” he bows his head respectfully and gestures to the clasp adorned with the symbol of the magi, “You are a former circle mage, I presume?”

Aurora forgets herself for a moment. He is striking. His voice is rich and smooth like the velvet of her garment. She tells herself to *keep it together* and pushes onward. “Yes ser…” She is appalled by the shake in her voice, she clears her throat, “after the conclave I learned of the Inquisition and came to bring aid in any way I can. Restoring order while keeping a just and honest relationship between the mages and the Templars, is of the utmost priority for me,” she forces a smile. She couldn’t give two shits about Templars, she just wants them out of her way.

Her chest is heating. She is keenly aware of the existence of her ears, they are hot, and no doubt bright red. Something is off here. Why is she feeling so nervous?

“That is a refreshing point of view. Not a very popular one either, in my experience, but one I can most assuredly support,” his green eyes sparkle and smile at her from across the room. He stands straight and brings his hands to his back, “Is there anything that I can do for you, my lady?”

This is it. She shoos away the nerves as she turns away briefly. Collecting herself, she closes the door of his office and quietly flicks the lock with a smirk. She can do this. He is just a man — an incredibly handsome man, but a man just the same.

Twisting back toward his questioning brow, she lowers her chin and looks up at him through her long lashes. Smiling coyly, she twirls her fingers together and takes slow, calculated steps closing the distance between her sashaying hips and his strong figure.

She edges closer to his warm and rich brown skin, light stubble on his face, and Maker - those eyes. She could not see them in the great hall, they are bewitching. Shock from his appearance threatens to take hold, but she steels herself to press on. “It is not what you can do for me, my dear Knight-Commander,” she delicately places her hand on the breastplate of his armor. He smells of warm spices, elfroot, and armor polish. “But it is what I can do for you.”

Her heart races while she looks into his gaze. His eyes are such brilliant shades of green. Peridot
gemstones encapsulated in rings of emerald. She swallows hard feeling suddenly sick to her stomach but unsure why. His skin looks so soft. His full lips part slightly, calling her attention to rest upon them, making her shiver.

She feels dizzy.

His eyes grow wide and brows lift in shock, an audible swallow in his throat makes his adam’s apple bob. “I’m sorry?” he croaks. He backs away but bumps into his desk causing it to rattle and his body to stiffen.

Something about this man is so genuine, so kind. Somehow, with all he must have seen in his life, he still appears innocent. Sadness lies behind his eyes. A weight pulls at his shoulders. She wonders how she could possibly scheme to use him as if he means nothing. He doesn’t deserve this. Aurora has an overwhelming urge to protect him, not harm him.

She rests her hand firmer on his armor, if only to hide the tremors that have developed.

“I – I was – I was in the great hall during your promotion, Ser,” she stammers softly, her weakening resolve fails to find strength within her. She cannot take her eyes away from his face. She studies all of it, fixated on him and the strange feelings building inside her.

There is a change in her gut. Doubt. It grows and grows, guilty that she is planning to bed and use a man who does not deserve it. Something about him is urging her to stop. This man can’t fall victim to her. She must protect him from her wicked intentions.

The tremors spread through her body. It is alarming; she is used to feeling far more detached than this.

Stop it, get it together. You need the Templars to fear even thinking about questioning you, and to do that you need to seduce this man. Make him think you are his sun and his stars. Make him worship you, and trust you. He is just a man, just a Templar, do not feel sorry for him.

Ser Barris clears his throat and shifts in his stance. Aurora has been silently staring at him, touching him, trembling in front of him, for far too long.

“I’m sorry,” she drops her hand at once, shakes her head, and looks at the floor; at the wall; anywhere but at him. “I – I wanted to congratulate you,” she pauses and takes a deep breath.

You can do this, you can salvage this. You MUST press on. Persevere, Aurora.

“And I wanted to thank you for your honorable work with the mages,” she says it as suggestively as she can muster in her current faltered state.

He tenses ever so slightly. Raising his hands to the front of him, he shields himself from her advances, “You want to thank...me? I assure you, my lady, I am unworthy of you. Please, you need not do anything for me, serah.” He is humble but firm in his tone. His voice and his body language letting her know that he has absolutely no interest in any continued pursuit.

Aurora clenches her eyes shut, cursing herself inwardly for foiling everything. If she hadn’t fallen weak in front of him, she could have succeeded. But everything is ruined and he most likely thinks her a lunatic.

She has never been a woman easily brought down by the presence of a man. This is beyond bizarre. Greagoir had been so easy to manipulate.
Mind spinning; her heart beat races faster than a mabari war hound in battle.

Andraste’s tits, what is wrong with me right now?

Shut up. Get out of here before you make more of a mockery of yourself.

She tenses and backs away. Cheeks bright hot with burning ears to match. She feels bashful tears of shame press behind her eyes, threatening to spill. “I apologize, Knight-Commander,” the mage’s voice breaks into a hushed whisper, all of her confidence gone. She’s been rejected. She completely failed. Can she blame it on being out of practice? It has been a while… Yes, that is it. It must be.

“I will take my leave, Se—Knight-Commander, I am very sorry if I have offended you or caused you any grief.” Aurora deftly flicks the lock open without turning her back to the Templar, opens the door, and starts to bow while stepping backwards out into the hall. She stares at the floor in shame, only stealing one last glance at those beautiful sad eyes, before she turns to disappear from the tower.

I should just go jump off the battlements out of sheer embarrassment.

As she steals her glance however, the Knight-Commander outstretches his hand in her direction.

“My Lady, wait.”

--

Aurora flees the Templar tower in humiliation. She frantically questions everything that just occurred. How could she have lost control like that? And why?

He was so kind to her. Calling her back into the room before she left, trying to assure her that no harm was done. But she was shamed by her foolish presumptions that he could be seduced by some stranger fluttering her lashes at him. A treacherous woman trying to look innocent while a devious agenda lay beneath. She has never been so affected by a man, and she has never felt more ashamed of herself.

She managed to stammer out unintelligible babble, and even trip and fall into another Templar waiting in the hall. It was a complete disaster. She will have to come up with another way to protect myself from the suspicious gaze of the lesser men in his ranks. There is no way she ever wants to be in front of that particular man again. What he does to her is dangerous.

Aurora races to her quarters, ignoring the other women who reside there. She lies on her bed staring at the ceiling, replaying all of the events of her day.

It was like Barris was surrounded by an aura that she only sensed once she was close to him, with his attention on her.

An aura that turned my brain into a sticky gooey jam.

Not a feeling she has ever experienced before. And not a feeling of which she approves.

Greagoir had been good to her, but in the way one is good to a pet. He was decades her senior, and she is sure that he knew she was using him. She was aware he was using her as well. They cared for each other, but it was convenient. Protection. A means to an end. Mutual inveiglement. They both got what they wanted, so the arrangement worked well, for a time.

Ser Barris was different. Suddenly, her actions had felt beneath her. A man of his caliber will not and should not fall prey to the temptations from a seductress.
She groans and smashes her face into her pillow.

Her stomach growls as she remembers that she never ate dinner. She decides to find her usual evening company at the tavern, and push all of these thought about Ser Barris behind her. She will avoid him and figure out another way to escape the brutality of the Templars.

Aurora enters the tavern and glances around. Many patrons seem to have been enjoying themselves for some time already. She heads to the bar, “Good evening, Cabot!” she exclaims, smacking her palms down on the table. “Do you happen to have any of those delicious cheeses you pilfered from the cook last week?”

“Rory, hush!” Cabot sternly whispers a growl, “You know that was part of a ‘Sera prank’, and I don’t want to get caught with possession of those damn cheeses!” Cabot’s eye dart around and he leans in closer, “I heard the cook went nuts and poor Lady Montilyet had to scramble in order to successfully impress that damn noble they were for. So, you know…discretion…please!”

“You worry too much, dwarf. None of these people care, no one is listening to me, look at them. You’ve managed to get a majority of them sufficiently crocked.” She winks at the dwarf. “Please Cabot, I am so hungry! I missed dinner today; you don’t want me to waste away, now do you?” She bats her eyelashes at him, posing as if she is a delicate flower. A fact they both know is untrue.

“Far be it from me to let a pretty face go hungry,” Cabot grumbles, rolling his eyes. He looks around, checking for any attention on him, and then sneaks his hand into a hidden box under the bar. Soon there is a plate of delightful cheeses and bread before her. Aurora squeals with joy, “Thank you, thank you, thank you, my dear friend! How much for this and a glass of my usual mead?”

Cabot rolls his eyes again, “Keep your money for the blasted cheese. If I get caught, I won’t be getting into more trouble for capitalizing on it.” She smiles and slides over coin for her mead as he places a large mug of it on the counter.

“Now, go eat that shit elsewhere, and if anyone asks, you brought it in on your own or something,” he flicks his hand at her to shoo her away.

Aurora laughs and with a wink and takes her prize to find a free table, or companions for her to join. Her exchange with Cabot rapidly enhanced her mood. She has a soft spot for the moody barkeep, or perhaps she spends far too much time in the tavern. She leaves the counter and quickly spots few good men to sit with. She gracefully floats her body toward their table.

Varric, Iron Bull, and Krem are all sitting together with drinks in hand. Plopping herself down in an empty seat at their table, she smiles in satisfaction at her friends.

“Hey there, Brazen Blaze, you look like the cat that ate the canary!”

“I have not, in fact, eaten any canaries today, Master Tethras.” The fiery mage grins wickedly, “However, I will indeed partake in these glorious cheeses post haste!”

“Aw shit, what have I told you about that Master crap, just call me Varric! Even Dwarf is a better option,” he winks.

“I’m sorry, it’s just ever since I heard that apostate refer to you as such, I just feel it is too fitting to ignore.” She takes a few healthy gulps of mead in an effort to catch up with the spirit of the tavern. “Oh I’m sorry, I forgot.” She drops her tone comically low and dull, “All mages are apostates now.” Aurora rolls her eyes and returns to her normal voice, “I suppose I should not refer to Skyhold’s darling Solas with such disdain.”
“Oh please, that pisser has a stick wedged so far up his arse you can see it wag ‘round behind his teeth when he’s ‘fading’ tits and tats,” a voice behind Aurora spits. Sera takes the seat next to her. Smiling, the blond elf grabs a hunk of cheese with a wink, “Good shit, innit?”

The mage pops a cube of cheese in her mouth. Eyes rolling into the back of her head, she moans in sheer bliss. Her fingers spread and grip the table, she straightens in her chair, her toes curl. “It really hits the spot,” she moans with pleasure.

“I need to remember this for later, the way into a Fereldan woman’s desires: strange smelly cheese,” Iron Bull purrs seductively. Aurora squints over at the horned behemoth of a qunari grinning at her from the end of the table. She chooses to ignore his comment on the bouquet of her feast, and continues to enjoy each and every bite.

“Aw come on, chief. I’m sure it will take more than stinky cheese to win Rory’s heart. Give the lady some credit,” the words pour like honey from Cremisius Aclassi. The only Tevinter born man that Aurora could ever trust, and Lieutenant of Bull’s Chargers mercenary group.

“In all honesty Bull, I am sure that I get more pleasure from this prize than I ever could from yours,” Aurora taunts as Sera groans beside her, grabbing some of her bread. Aurora smacks her hand, “Hey now, get your own!”

The elf ignores her and slowly slides the bread in her mouth, not breaking eye contact with the mage. She is testing her, but Aurora concedes easily, it was Sera’s prank after all.

“You know, I have no problem testing that theory of yours, Rory. I am pretty sure I could make you live up to that name within mere moments,” Bull interjects during Sera’s and Aurora’s, albeit short lived, food stand-off.

The brazen mage glances over at the amorous qunari. He wants her to blush, she will not concede on this challenge so easily. “I always heard that The Iron Bull hunted for fiery redheads, not stinky blonds. Besides, I think I’d rather see if good ol’ Krem here could make me roar.” Her elbows are on the table, mead in one hand, bread in the other, she stares down Krem with a playful yet dangerous look as she tears a piece of bread off with her teeth.

“Hey now, don’t get me sucked into this!” Krem scoots his chair back, hands up in surrender.

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“Hey now, don’t get me sucked into this!” Krem scoots his chair back, hands up in surrender.

Varric points between the frisky mage and the large qunari, “I swear, sitting at a table with Blaze and Tiny makes me forget that I’m not at the Hanged Man with Isabela and Hawke. You people are filthy!” Varric shakes his head and tips back his tankard to finish his ale.

“Hey, eyes back to me, Rory,” Bull growls ardently, she looks at his one good eye. Eye patch, horns, greyish purple skin tattered in scars, all fine with her – great even – but the size of him. She’s not sure that she would survive a night ‘riding the Bull.’

“Don’t go picking on poor Krem here,” Bull continues, “you know that he is easy prey. If you want a challenge, you know which way that sass should point.”

“My sass?” she smirks devilishly. “Or my ass, Iron Bull?” Her eyes glint as she stares into his one piercer and finishes her mead. He growls in approval.

“Fuck the Maker, get a room filthy prats!” Sera rolls her eyes as Bull and Aurora laugh.
She needed this. Aurora is feeling immensely better after having a good flirt with some of Skyhold’s finest. Food and drink gone, and mead warming her blood, she slams her hands on the table and jumps to her feet. “Next round’s on me!”

After purchasing the next round for her companions, she delicately balances the five tankards of ale and mead – and whatever that shit is that Bull drinks – and turns back toward the table. Unexpectedly, the door to the tavern flies open. An alarming amount of Templars flood inside, singing, yelling, dancing, and clapping.

What the…? 

“Ohhhhhhh for he’s a jolly good fellow, for he’s a jolly good felloooow,” the Templars sing, as couple of them run around the room, encouraging the patrons to all join in. Soon the area in front of the hearth is filled with bodies of men and women clad in armor. Aurora can’t even get through the crowd to reach her table. She was already worried about spilling her precariously placed tankards without this obstacle.

She carefully works her way through the ruckus. The excitement only intensifies as the moments pass. Somehow a sea of bodies have enveloped her from all sides, as people push their way towards poor Cabot.

Just breathe and take it slow.

As if in slow motion, she sees him coming, but is powerless to stop him.

A large and overly exuberant Templar is backing up in her direction. Aurora wonders if he has already been drinking while his elbows fly around in celebration

When the slow motion and horror ends, Aurora is standing in the middle of the crowd of jovial Templars with ale and mead covering her robes. Every tankard falls with a crash to the floor, but not before dumping all of its contents upon her pitiful figure.

Why did I wear my only decent robes to a fucking TAVERN? Hold on, is that shit of Bull’s actually BURNING?!

Great, ruined robes; I look a maker damned mess; I’ve wasted good coin; and my flesh has a tingly burning sensation from that dragon piss Bull calls a drink.

“Oh shit! I am so sorry!” the buffoon erupts. Aurora seethes at the man while noticing the entire building is suddenly quiet. Even the minstrel Maryden awkwardly peters out the strumming of her lute as she catches a glimpse of the mess that is Aurora’s life.

Shaking her hands and arms to expel the excess alcohol from her limbs, she glares at the stupid Templar. She bends down to gather up the mess. Lifting one blasted tankard at a time, when a hand appears in her vision lending her aid. She freezes to stop and stares at the hand. Warm, brown, mahogany skin – smooth yet firm.

No, no, no, no, no, please no.

A rich and soft voice begins to speak, startlingly close to her face, “Please allow me to get this for you, my Lady.”

Her eyes grow wide. Panic floods through her veins. She tilts her face to find those bright emerald and peridot oceans inches from hers. “Knight-Commander Barris,” she stammers, voice shaking with so much vigor that she almost doesn’t form the words at all.
Well, shit.
Abner chortles and points to at the center of the tavern. “Are you seeing this?” she giggles while watching an altercation between a crowd of Templars and a blond woman drenched in ale. The snickering scout is sitting at a table near the back of the tavern, playing a game of diamondback with a group of fellow scouts and fighters. “Look at that poor wretch, she isn’t even moving. Who wears something like that to a tavern, anyway?”

“Oh yeah,” Scout Lieutenant Lace Harding stifles a laugh. Lace is a small and ruthless dwarf, but she has one of the kindest personalities in Skyhold; paradoxical to the way she works. She is as deadly as she is kind.

“Shit,” she shakes her head, trying not to laugh, as if it would offend. “That’s Aurora. I’m surprised she isn’t lighting that Templar on fire right now.” She watches the display with a worried crooked smile. The dwarf appears truly concerned for the well-being of Templar standing stunned in front of the mage; the woman’s glare is piercing.

“She is a little…” Lace searches for the right word, something diplomatic. The best she can come up with is, “Sanctimonious.”

“She’s a bitch,” Skinner, a mercenary from Bull’s Chargers says flatly, not even bothering to raise her eyes from her cards. The elven mercenary is always a woman of few – and blunt – words. A quality Abner regards highly.

“Are we going to gossip about some mage, or are we going to play diamondback,” Scout Ritts groans from across the table. Lace and Abner refocus their efforts to the game in silence. The women peer at each other over their cards, trying to judge their competition.
Not leaving her gaze from the cards in her hand nor in play, Lace inquires quietly, “How were the Hinterlands, Abner?”


“We think they are heading west, out in the direction of the wardens, maybe.” Lace nibbles at the inside of her cheek, squints at her cards, makes a decision and plays her pick. She lifts her gaze to Abner and smiles pleasantly, “You and I will find out soon enough, though.”

Abner places her card while prolonging the word “Yup,” with an overly annunciated pop to the ‘p.’ The two of them are to lead the expedition into Western Orlias, to scout the area before the Inquisitor’s arrival. Abner is pleased she won’t be stuck in Skyhold for too long before she is traveling again. Plus, she greatly enjoys the company of the beautiful redheaded, freckle faced, dwarf.

“Hello, Abner,” a sweet and coy voice calls from the side of the table. She looks to find the golden haired beauty from this morning strutting by, twinkling her fingers in Abner’s direction. Abner tilts her head and gives a slow sexy smile at the maiden as she passes.

“That the one you bedded last night?” Ritts jeers. Abner doesn’t respond beyond a confident wink in Ritts’ direction.

“Sure doesn’t take you long,” Lace jests.

“I had to find some company after weeks on my own. And you always turn me down, Lace,” Abner lets the dwarf’s name roll of her tongue like hot mulled wine. And then as if licking it up, glides her tongue along her lower lip.

Lace continues to focus on her cards, but a warm and flirtatious smile graces her lovely face.

The lieutenant sighs and frowns, pursing her lips together. “Speaking of which, it is about time I hit it for the night. I’ve got a lot of preparations before our trip.” Lace folds her hand and begins to stand.

“Me, too. I was losing anyway.” Dejected, Ritts tosses her cards in the center of the table.

“What? Just like that, right in the middle of a hand?” Abner stares at the two in confused disappointment.

“I need to go to bed. You should, too,” Lace says insistently.

“Is that an invitation?” Abner slyly arches a brow and the corner of her mouth. Skinner lets loose a palpable groan beside her.

“No. Not all of us can survive on debauchery alone, Abner.” Lace grins back at the scout with a hint of mischief before turning to exit the tavern, Ritts following on her heels.

Abner huffs and gathers the cards on the table, “Well, damn. I was winning, too.” Skinner simply grunts in response, watching Abner gather and shuffle the cards.

When Skinner groans again, she looks up to see what is irritating the elf now. Skinner is eyeing a figure up and down with disgust. Abner follows the rippling glare and finds a man standing at the end of their table, looking morose and pathetic.

“Oh, hi Jim,” Abner grumbles, “Rough day?” The man is one of Skyhold’s messengers. He usually
is sent ‘this way’ and ‘that’ by Commander Cullen. The commander is a force of nature, barking orders at all of his subordinates with ferocity. Jim, however, is a little flighty. Young and green, he joined up with no real skills but with an eagerness to help. So, he was made a messenger. He can be a bit clueless and easily distracted, causing him to be continuously at the wrong end of the commander’s ire. Abner has seen the commander lay into him like a wolf on a nug on more than one occasion.

Jim collapses in a chair across from her and sulks into his ale, “Every day is a rough day.”

Abner looks to Skinner for assistance, but she is gone. Fucking. Gone. Abandoning Abner to deal with the whiny boy alone. “Thanks, Skinner,” she mutters under her breath.

She stares at the boy and purses her lips to the side, sighing, wishing she had followed Lace after all. “Well, Jim… No time like the present to make the day go away. Drink up!” She raises her own mug of ale she has been nursing throughout the evening, and smacks it against his in soliderity.

Jim obliges and they sip their ale together. He unloads his work frustrations onto her as she sits silently, hiding eye rolls when he stares down into his mug. He complains about how intimidating the commander is for what feels like eons, while they trade turns buying rounds.

Abner lets the boy whine for as long as she can stand it without throwing a dagger in his face. Finally having heard enough - to the point where she fears for the boy’s safety - she slams her mug and fist on the table. “Jim!” She yowls, “That’s it!”

He stares at her in shock and horror, startled after her being so quiet for so long. “It’s time you become a man.” She nods with determination and grabs his hand. Yanking him to his feet, she drags him out of the pub – a light and hopeful smile on Jim’s face.

Much to the messenger’s surprise, Abner takes him to the training grounds and stands next to him in front of a line of straw training dummies. They are lightly illuminated by the moon and a few scant torches in the upper courtyard.

Abner pulls two daggers from a hidden brace under her tunic and holds them up to Jim. He stares at them in a puzzled haze. “You know what these are?” she asks and he nods silently. “Good, I want to throw them at the straw men over there.” She points one of the daggers at the training dummies. “A boy whines and moans about better men. A man fights and controls his destiny. A man should have strength, be able to kill. A man is never a wimp.”

Something in her wants to help this boy, as she was once helped. She knows what it is like to feel weak and helpless, and she knows the skills to end it. As long as Jim pays attention to what she wants to teach him, he could make something of himself. He could take control of his life.

“You think I should kill the commander?” he stammers at her.

This might be more difficult than she had hoped.

“You’re a daft fool, yeah?” she pinches her forehead between her thumb and forefinger, groaning in frustration. “No. I don’t want you to kill the commander, you twat. I want you to have confidence in yourself. I want you to know how to fight so that you won’t feel like a loser.”

He pouts at her and she grunts with disgust. “You feel like a loser, so you are a loser. If you feel like a fighter, you will command strength. You will be a fighter. Get it? The commander will respect you if you aren’t flitting around here like a twit.”

She shoves the daggers in his hands. He holds them and tries to aim at a dummy. Sticking his tongue
out as he does, he squints and tosses a dagger. It slaps against the ground unceremoniously. He slumps his shoulders in defeat.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Abner grabs a wrap from her wrist and ties her coiled and crimped locks away from her face into a messy sort of bun. Standing behind him, she grabs his body and forces it into position. “Look. It’s not that hard. You just have to stand properly and throw your arm in this motion.” She holds his body and slowly moves his arm to show him the technique. “And as you let go, snap your wrist like this, but do it fast.”

“You are so nice, Abner,” Jim coos. Abner just rolls her eyes and nudges him to move through the technique on his own. She stands, arms akimbo, judging his form. It’s not so bad for his first time.

He attempts again, and fails again. However, this time the dagger at least touches the dummy.

“See, yeah? That was better, you just need practice.” She pats him on the shoulder. He turns around and stares at her with a dumb smile on his face. She returns his expression with one of wary suspicion, wondering why he is looking so googly eyed at her.

“You have really fun hair, Abner,” he tuts and grins as she peers at him. “How do you get it to do that? It’s like long tendrils.” He reaches out to grab a lock from behind her head. Aber cuts her eyes at him and swats his hand away.

“It feels like felt,” he smiles. She groans at the boy and sighs quickly through her nose. She shoves him back a few feet away from her, a kind of warning. He stumbles and looks at her in surprise.

“Do you know how to throw a punch?” She asks, wanting to get his attention away from her physical features - and how they might make him feel - and instead bring him back to the concept of fighting. He nods in response to her question.

“Oh, punch me,” she says. He looks at her with hesitation. “I assure you, Jim, you won’t hurt me,” the assassin smirks.

She sees his wind up from a mile away. Before he knows what is happening, Abner grabs his arm, throws her back and shoulder into his chest, and drops him to the ground with a thud. He lies on the ground stunned and staring up at her, blinking wide-eyed.

She chuckles, “You’re going to need some hand-to-hand training too, Jim. That was pathetic.”

He smiles up at her, “Wow. You are so amazing, Abner.”

“Maker’s balls, kid. Get a hold of yourself. Do you understand the point I am trying to make, at all?” She lends out her arm to help him back to his feet. Unexpectedly, he tugs her down on top of him. He quickly flips them over and presses her to the ground.

“Knock it off!” she tries to push him off, but he holds her tighter. She struggles to get loose, beginning to think she might have to actually hurt this fool. They are obviously not on the same page.

“I think you’re beautiful, Abner,” he says eagerly. He presses his groin against her, and she feels a stiffness that throws her into rage.

Abner is generally a pretty easy-going person, but even she has lines that should not be crossed. Fury bubbles up and spills over, but she still manages to take care in order to not lose herself entirely. She could easily snap Jim’s neck at this very moment.
“Piss off, you tit!” With all of her strength she flips them around so that he is ultimately on his stomach. She leans against his back with his head trapped between her elbow and body. She squeezes his neck hard as he gurgles and flails futilely to free himself from the headlock.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing?” she hisses, giving him an extra hard squeeze before releasing the hold enough that he can speak.

“I thought… I mean… I heard… you like too… with anyone…” he pants.

“Oh I see, you thought just because I like to play as hard as I work, that you could force yourself on me and I would be in it?” She spits at the ground in front of his face. “You’re pathetic.” Abner releases him and shoves his face into the dirt.

He coughs and sputters, “You said you were going to make me a man.”

She seethes and gestures as if to attack him again, making him flinch. “You’re hopeless,” she growls before turning to march away.

She leaves Jim in the dirt. Letting him contemplate what went wrong on his own. She is done.

Heading toward the women’s bath house in the lower levels of Skyhold, Abner decides a soak will help calm the rage swirling in her core.

In the baths she strips from her leather breeches and linen sleeveless tunic. She takes extra care with the harness for her daggers, only to realize that she had left the knives in the training yard.

“Shit, I will have to go fetch those… that daft tit better be gone when I do,” she mutters to herself, then eases into a warm bath. A fire rune sits in the base, ensuring the water stays a nice balmy temperature. Abner sinks into the water and groans away the tension in her body. “Sweet release,” she smiles into her relaxation.

She floats in the deep communal tub alone. The hour is far later than most people grace the baths, which is just how she likes it. Peacefully, she floats on her back, holding the edges in order to keep her in place.

There are torches along the walls and braziers placed throughout the room between glowing pools of warm water. The atmosphere has a faint, steamy, and ethereal glow. Along one wall of the room is a lengthy mirror. She lifts herself up enough to see her reflection, resting her arms on the outer edge of the large pool.

She gazes at the woman staring back at her in the foggy mirror. She is wild. Her skin a rich tan, decorated with scars, dirt, tattoos, and sweat. Her eyes are dark as night yet glow with an untamed fire. She appears fierce. Dauntless. Feral.

Together they stand in the bath and face each other. She frees the wrap holding up her dreaded hair, and shakes the coils loose. She watches as they fall around her shoulders, down her chest, and down her back. Staring at the woman, her eyes travel her form. Her breasts are small and modest. She is a little too skinny, as her ribs slightly protrude below the small mounds.

Her frame is petite and lithe. But she knows she is much stronger than she looks. What she lacks in body fat she more than gains in extra tough muscle. She uses this to her advantage.

She is shorter and narrower than most humans, but no one has questioned her about it. This fact makes her happy. She prefers not to explain why she is so different from other humans…for as long as she can get away with it.
The women lean on the edge and rest their heads in their hands. She purses her lips at the reflection, and they look at each other in contemplation.

*Who is she?* She wonders to herself.

*She looks like knows. But I am not convinced.*

Chapter End Notes

She really tried to help that kid not be such a putz. She really did. Some people just cannot be helped.
Chapter Summary

Picking up where we left off with Aurora, she is in the Herald’s Rest drenched in alcohol and surrounded by Templars. Her fury directed at the lumbering fool who knocked into her is short lived when Ser Barris comes to her aid. She had sworn to avoid the Knight-Commander and yet here he is... what to do... what to do...

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Threnodies 5:1

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Knight-Commander warmly smiles at Aurora, yet concern lives in the creases above his eyes. He lifts the fallen tankards from the ground around her. She, however, is still stunned - frozen and unknowing how to react. She realizes she is hunched over in an awkward position, mouth agape, staring at the man in silent bewilderment.

She straightens but continues to stare at him with wide eyes. He speaks first, momentarily releasing her from his spell. “Lady Aurora, are you hurt?” he asks and tilts his head, inspecting her uneasily.
She barely finds her voice, a faint stammer responds, “J—ju—just Aurora.” She lowers her head and blinks at the mess of her robes and the floor. Feeling her face flush, the memories of that afternoon when she embarrassed herself in front of this man come flooding back. “I am no Lady,” she whispers in a low husk.

“Aw piss buckets!” Sera shouts, shoving and pushing her way through the Templars standing shoulder-to-shoulder around Aurora and the Knight-Commander.

Aurora flinches at the sound. Losing her balance, she tips backwards, just enough to alarm Ser Barris as he instinctively reaches out and catches her. He grabs her elbow to steady her body. She in turn, stares at the hand touching her with a blank expression. Emotionless blue eyes slowly follow the form of his hand up the length of his arm and to his face. Her heart palpitates when their eyes lock, the brilliant green of his eyes encapsulate her in a storm of unspoken emotion. The firm yet tender grip of his hand still holding her is not helping matters.

“Rory, shite!” Sera yells, now standing in front of the mage and shaking her head at the scene. Aurora breaks away from the green maelstroms bewitching her to blink at her elven friend.

Ser Barris releases his grasp. “My lady, I—”

“Aurora.”

“Aurora,” he corrects himself, “I apologize for my—”

“Ay! She gets it. You ass biscuits storm in here with yer ‘We’re big Templars an’we can do whatever we want’ an’shite, running anybody over in the process. And now you feel crud ‘bout it” Sera rolls her eyes and grabs the mage’s arm. “If you don’t mind, I’m takin’ her. Not fun standin’ ‘round in this, yeah?” She pulls Aurora towards the stairs leading to the floor where the elf keeps a room in the tavern. She pushes Templars out of the way in the process, glaring at them and yelling, “Move!”

Aurora stumbles behind her, wet silks and velvets sticking to her body. They reach the interior of her room and Sera closes the door behind them. “Right. Let me see what I can find in my chest. Don’t want you smellin’ like dirty mabari or something,” she pats Aurora on the shoulder and gives her a friendly wink before turning to an open and overflowing armoire in the corner. She begins rummaging through her hoard of things, digging through and throwing unwanted items to the side.

Sera’s room is quite small. It’s really not a room at all, but a large bay window with a long cushioned and curved bench along the outer wall. There is a small bit of floor space - only enough for two people to stand comfortably - a lot of stuff, and a door. How she manages to fit so many things in this space bewilders Aurora.

In silence, the mage watches her friend scavenge, looking down at the mess with one firm eyebrow and the other cocked. She purses her lips and thinks that Sera may have a hoarding problem as random items fly through the air past her.

_was that a lizard?_

“Yes!” excitement beaming on her face, Sera pops up in front of Aurora holding a pair of grey plaid leggings and some kind of tattered feather grey tunic. The top is pieced together with haphazard stitches and patches, no real hemline - not unlike the red one Sera wears. The sleeves hang off the shoulders and do not match. One is shorter and cuffed while the other is long and simple. Two straps are stitched onto the low neckline to hold the garment on. There are pulls, tears, andrips scattered all over in the old and delicate cotton fabric. Aurora stares at the garment with mistrust and wonders
how the jagged pieces stay together while worn. She has a hard time believing it will stay intact long enough to wear it.

She doesn’t hide her thoughts very well on her face, resulting in an offended glare from the elf, “Hey, it’s better than sloshing around that mess for the rest of the friggin’ night!”

Crestfallen, Aurora groans, “Maybe I should just go to my room and sleep.” She shrugs her shoulders and rolls her eyes. With a long sigh she says, “This day just needs to end.”

“Oh no you don’t! Yer not gonna let some daft bastards in tin dresses ruin our night! Just starting to get fun, this!” Sometimes Sera makes no sense at all, but she gives Aurora no time to object before stripping off the mage’s ruined robes. She wipes her down with a cloth found in a heap in the corner and shoves her offered clothing into the mage’s arms.

She turns to leave the room but pauses, smirking over her shoulder she winks, “I’ll be lookin’ for that ale you were promising.” Just before opening the door she scrunches her face and points at the mage accusatorily, “Oh, and don’t be gettin’ my stuff and weird and shite with yer magic thingy or whatever. I want those back without some kind of demon beacon on ‘em.”

“That’s not how it works, Sera,” Aurora sighs and shakes her head.

“Sure, whatever,” she snipes and slips out through the door, shutting it behind her.

Sighing for the ridiculousness that is apparently her life now, Aurora begins to dress in the borrowed clothing. Very carefully, for fear of ripping the stitches, she drapes the tunic over her head and shoulders, pulls the leggings over her legs, and slips her shoes on. Her hands feel the mess of hair around her head that was once a lovely braid as she looks around for a mirror to no avail. She grumbles under her breath, “Of course she doesn’t have a mirror; she cuts her own hair haphazardly into chunks with a knife.”

Aurora pulls apart the braid on her head and attempts to finger comb her tresses as best as she can before pinning the front portion to the back of her head. She uses the cloth to wipe her face clear of any possible smudges of kohl from around her eyes, smooths out the tunic, squares her shoulders, takes a deep breath, and marches out the door.

Upon reaching the foot of the stairs, it seems as though the mayhem brought on by the celebrating Templars has died down. Aurora closes her eyes, breathes a sigh of relief through her nose, and relaxes. She thanks the Maker for no immediate sign of Ser Barris before confidently approaching Cabot at the bar.

“Alright, Cabot. Let’s try this again, shall we?” A hint of embarrassment is visible in her eyes and lackluster grin as she digs through her coin purse. A Hand appears beside her, sliding coin across the wooden counter toward the dwarf.

“For the love of Andraste…” She turns to the Knight-Commander and bows her head. Don’t look at him. Do. Not. Look at him.

“That is very kind, Knight-Commander, but…”

“Delrin,” he interrupts.

“Excuse me?” Against her better judgement and inward commands, she raises her eyes to find his kind face smiling at her.
“If I am to call you Aurora and we are in respite from our daily duties - as well as the fact that I am currently purchasing your round of drinks - I should think it appropriate for you to use my first name.” He smiles a true smile. Not one formally forced and polite, but the kind of smile that makes his eyes shine like gems even in the low lighting of the tavern. Those eyes are shining at her.

Aurora’s heart is racing. She feels her stomach in her throat.

Before she can form a thought in response, Cabot takes the coin and places her original drink order on the counter.

“Thank you…um…very much…Delrin,” she inclines her head to him and begins to gather the tankards.

“Let me help with those, it is the least I can do for allowing the disorder that resulted in ruining your fine robes,” he says as he grabs three of her five tankards, along with one of his own. The mage says nothing, probably for the best, and turns to lead him toward her table of companions.

As they walk Delrin takes a sniff of Bull’s drink, “Wow, what is in this one?”

Aurora smiles to herself, “Who knows, it’s some Qunari swill that The Iron Bull insists on drinking.”

“Impressive that he can find such a drink here,” he remarks while looking at the liquid in bewilderment, “It burns just to smell it! I pray that it did not harm you during the spill, it appears to be rather dangerous.”

She snickers as they reach the table and pass out the libations. “Well, that was an event, Blaze!”

Varric snarks while taking his drink.

“Yes, well, thank the Knight-Commander for providing the replacements,” she chides the dwarf. “I should have been more careful, but it’s done now!” She slides into her seat and takes a long and desperately needed swig of her mead.

Delrin looks as if to protest her statement, but Bull cuts him off before he can speak, “Knight-Commander! Come and join us, we were just about to start a game of wicked grace!”

Aurora chokes on her mead. She coughs and sputters while struggling to speak, “What? No! He’s the Knight-Commander. I mean, I am sure that he has more important things to do… or people… I mean, people to see…not do… Maker’s breath,” she slouches over the table and covers her face with her hands.

Varric chuckles through his nose, his lips pressed in a thin tight grin, and shakes his head at the mage. Intrigued and amused because he has never before seen her fall apart like this. “Nonsense, Templar coin is as good as any other. In fact, taking coin from any type of Commander is deeply satisfying. Curly has been avoiding me since the last time I wiped him out, the Knight-Commander would serve as the perfect replacement!” Varric exclaims.

“I have seen how Cullen plays, one could win the trousers right out from under him,” Derlin laughs. “Count me in, but do not expect me to be an easy victory. Also, please call me Delrin while I take your coin,” with playfully competitive wink and grin, the Templar sits at the last remaining chair. The opposite end of the table from Bull, and next to Aurora.

Great. Just great.

She takes another long gulp of her mead.
“I think Rory might need another drink before we even get started,” Krem smiles at her as he begins to shuffle a deck of cards in his hands. Catching her eye, Krem darts a glance towards Delrin then back to her with bobbing eyebrows. She groans in response and slumps against the back in her chair, her cheeks flushing.

The group plays round after round of wicked grace. Aurora does her best to ignore the man sitting near her and the affect his presence has on her. The mead helps her relax a little, and as long as she doesn’t look at him, she almost forgets he is there. Making her able to freely joke and tease her friends as they play their game.

A couple of hours into the game, the bustle of the tavern has died down considerably. Only a few skeleton groups of people – mostly passed out Templars – pepper the tables in the tavern. The building is quiet, Maryden went to her quarters long ago. Cabot locked his stores and sternly told everyone left to ‘behave’ before he retired as well.

Aurora’s group is winding down on their last hand of the game, or what is left of their group anyway. Sera slipped under the table about an hour before and fell asleep while leaning against Aurora’s knee. She quit the game claiming that it was rigged and would no longer participate in their treachery. Or at least Aurora thinks that is what, “Ah fucktits, out I am, blasted thief nuggets. Beeez fer all o’you...breeches...gone,” means.

Krem drifted off and is slumped in his chair while still holding a bottle of some alcohol he pilfered from somewhere, some time ago. Every so often he snorts and mumbles in his sleep causing Aurora and Bull to gaze at him fondly, as if he is a precious child asleep in his crib.

Aurora notices and watches a wild and chasind looking woman pull a young drunk man through the tavern. The woman mutters something about ‘making a man out of him’ while dragging the grinning fool across the floor. Bull snickers to himself as he also observes the display, “Looks like Abner found a toy.”

Directing her attention back to the game, she looks at the table in defeat. Aurora has managed to win and lose enough that she has both no gains nor losses to show for her efforts. She fell into the same trap that she always does, making risky moves and thinking no one can tell what she is planning. Usually she fares a little better than this, but Delrin saw right through her every time.

Her eye lids are drooping and she thanks the Maker that this is the final hand. She looks around at the surviving members of their game. Bull has a decent amount of winnings piled in front of him, as does Varric, but it is Delrin who clearly has the most skill. His winnings heap high in comparison. He claimed it is his natural ability to calmly read people and situations, finding all of their tells and measuring whether or not they are bluffing.

“Looks like you win again, Del! Thanks for joining us, remind me never to ask you again,” Bull grunts. Delrin grins proudly in response, scooping up his winnings together.

Aurora yawns and stretches as she stands. Sera groans and mumbles about the loss of her knee and stretches along the floor beneath the table. Those who are awake gather their coin and start preparing to go their separate ways.

“May I escort you back to your quarters?”

Aurora freezes, her mouth hangs open from another yawn. She stares at Delrin and blinks. Slowly registering his request, she stammers and trips over her words, “Oh… uhh… I don’t… umm…”

“Sounds like a plan. You two kids have fun, I’m taking off,” Varric gives a short and single wave
over his head as he leaves the tavern. Bull directs an impish smile at Aurora, lifts Krem over his shoulder, and carries him outside, back to the barracks where his mercenary company dwells. Thusly leaving Aurora dumbfounded and alone with Delrin.

“Shall we?” Delrin bows and leads his arm toward the direction of the door into the courtyard. Aurora sighs but concedes, heading into the brisk night air.

The two walk in silence at first. Derlin, enjoying the company of the fair mage. Aurora, awkwardly searching her mind as to why she can’t seem to handle the Templar’s presence.

Delrin is the first to break the silence, “That was a lot of fun. Thank you for allowing me to join.”

Aurora only smiles politely, the less she says, the less chance she will stick her foot in her mouth.

Delrin sighs, “Listen, Aurora, I feel terrible about the way my men came bursting into the tavern. They came to my quarters and insisted we celebrate my promotion. I fear they may have already begun celebrating in their barracks…will…are your robes salvageable?”

“It is nothing Ser, do not trouble yourself with such thought,” she says firmly yet polite.

They continue in silence. Aurora focuses on every step to ensure she doesn’t trip and fall, or some other embarrassing display for the Knight-Commander to witness. They finally make it to the door of her quarters and she thanks the Maker nothing else unwanted happened during the journey.

“Well, this is me,” she says while looking down and fidgeting with the jagged edges of Sera’s tunic. “Thank you for escorting me, but it was not necessary.”

“Skyhold is a safe stronghold, but I would rather err on the side of caution than to risk a beautiful woman be accosted on her way to her quarters at this hour,” he says with gentle warmth in his voice and expression.

Hearing him call her beautiful while he looks into her eyes causes Aurora to panic like a shy, pathetic, and enamored young girl. Her heart races and she cannot stop her mouth. “I want to apologize again for this afternoon. When I went to you, it was beneath me to approach you in such a way. I don’t know what I was thinking. It’s clear you’re too good of a man to…well…thank you for being so kind to me this evening,” she blurts out in a fast ramble.

He chuckles in a low and throaty boom, there is a twinkle in his eye, “Not too kind, I do believe I ended the night by taking some of your coin.” He pauses and then grins while he says, “Please Aurora, trouble yourself with these thoughts no longer. It is nothing.”

*I see what you did there.*

He takes her hand in his and gently raises it, meeting his lips to her fingers. His lips are soft like satin pillows. She sucks air into her mouth, failing to bite back a quick and quiet gasp. He presses against her fingers tenderly and lingers for moments that feel like blissful years.

Without releasing her hand from his, he looks into her eyes. She loses herself in the beautiful swirling colors of peridot and emerald. How can he make her feel this way when she barely even knows him, she wonders.

“Sleep well, Aurora. I hope that I have the pleasure of meeting you again, very soon.” His voice is like warm melted chocolate, it cascades from his lips with a richness that makes Aurora ache.

She is certain her heart stopped beating. She can feel the pink spread on her cheeks.
These feelings are most unwise. She cannot trust herself around this man. Delrin is the most
dangerous man she has ever encountered. He is far too tempting. Far too kind. Far too lovely.
Anything more with him would only result in devastation.

He releases her hand and respectfully bows, “Good night, Aurora.”

“Good night.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed a little more Tavern/Rory/DelsBels action!

FYI:
I have a lot of real life work coming in the next months, post holiday winter is always a
busy time for my job. I will try my best to continue posting chapters every few days. If
there is a delay however, that would be why :-\ If you are enjoying this and want to
make sure you don't miss an update, I would suggest subscribing.

Comments, kudos, and the like are always appreciated and adored! Also, you can find
me on Tumblr @ladydracarysao3 if you want to chat about this or anything else fic/DA
related! Thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

Learn a little bit more about our Inquisitor. Tireless workaholic. Meddler (or matchmaker?). Lover of fine skills.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Izzalea-

“You are becoming a fearsome champion, your worship.” Lord Chancer de Lion praises Izzalea during their morning training session. Her skin glistens with sweat in the morning sun. Her sleeveless training tunic is soaked through and stuck to her body, showing the definition in her abdominals as she catches her breath.

Izzalea smiles proudly at her trainer, “Shall we suit up and work with real armor and steel?”

“You have already been training for four hours, Inquisitor. Do you not need a rest?”

“With the threat of Corypheus and his army of Venatori, I have no time for rest, Ser,” she huffs and wipes sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. She has begun her training every day before dawn ever since her return from Crestwood. The mystery with the Wardens, along with the need to leave Skyhold for a journey into the unknown, has caused her to intensify her training schedule.

At this point, the sun has risen to early morning. It peeks and shines over the white capped mountains surrounding Skyhold. Many people in the keep are now milling about, visiting the bath houses and
the mess hall in their morning routines. Soldiers have also begun to trickle into the area and spar, out of the way of the Inquisitor.

“Perhaps your trainer would like to rest, sister. Not everyone can be as intense as you at all times… even if he is a chavelier.” Izzalea’s brother Azzedine saunters up to the training ring and winks at the lord who glares back at him indignantly.

To save her trainer from having to prove himself to the likes of her pompous brother, she dismisses him. “Lord Chancer, on second thought, let us break for now. We can reconvene later in full armor.” The chavelier silently bows and leaves the ring. Chin raised high, he flashes Azzedine a look of disdain as he passes.

Crossing her arms and shaking her head at her brother, Izzalea grins in amusement upon seeing Azzedine’s smugly smirking face. He leans on the fence of the training ring, as proud of himself as ever. “Seriously Azzedine, must you be such an arrogant pest to the man who is ensuring my success in battle?” She leans her back and elbows against the inside of the fencing next to her brother.

“If it wasn’t so easy to get him riled up, I would consider it.” He shrugs and chuckles to himself, “but Orlesians are so easy to offend.”

“You are such a haughty ass. Remind me again why you feel you must be here in my stronghold, rather than in Ostwick to tend to our family’s household?” She glares at the man, albeit jokingly. He is the eldest Trevelyan child and therefore expected to inherit and run the estate.

“Mother and Father have it handled, for now,” he shrugs her off. “I really don’t need to be there, not when I can be here to see that the baby is running her house sufficiently.” He winks at her and rubs his knuckles into the top of her head.

She swats him away and groan, “I have very talented advisors to help me and you know it.” She shoves him fondly against his firm shoulder. His presence almost makes her miss home and her family. Almost.

Azzedine is very much a Trevelyan in appearance. They all have rich sable-toned skin with pale absinthe colored eyes. While Izzalea inherited their mother’s deep crimson locks, he inherited their father’s dark raven hair. He has classically clean good-looks, with a broad and muscular frame to accent his chiseled features. He is a strong and abled warrior, though these days he will be seen tending to the affairs of politics and nobles far more than sparring in a ring.

While the siblings rest on opposite sides of the fence, Cassandra comes into their view. She passes by without recognition, walking toward the straw dummies with a sword in hand. Izzalea catches her brother staring at the seeker, as if in a dream. The Inquisitor hums and cuts her eyes at him. “Besides, my dear brother, we both know what really holds your interest in Skyhold. And it has nothing to do with me or my Inquisitorialness.”

Azzedine scowls but does not look to his sister. “You know nothing of which you speak.”

Izzalea continues to hum in self-satisfaction as they watch Cassandra destroy the training dummy in front of her. She admires the interest her brother obviously has in the seeker. Cassandra is a very strong woman in both will and physical prowess. She is undoubtedly not easy to woo, if wooing her is even an option at all. However, any Trevelyan worth his salt loves a challenge, and Cassandra is nothing but.

Being a devoted member of the family and worthy of his surname, Azzedine is a fervent Andrastian. Like many men in his house, he was trained as a Templar, but his training was without vows or
lyrium, since his destiny is set for other things. Still, he has been able to recite verses from the Chant of Light with excellence since he was a young boy, and regularly visits chantries for prayer and conversation with revered mothers.

The seeker’s faith in the Maker is made of an unwavering strength that ties with Azzedine’s seamlessly.

Marrying the Right Hand of the late Divine Justinia would be a crowning achievement for the future head of House Trevelyan. Not to mention she is Nevarran royalty. Although Izzalea suspects none of those points are the motives for his attraction.

He always catches the eye of eligible noble women around him, but never met a woman who could capture his attention in the way Cassandra has. The way he looks at Cassandra is genuinely endearing. His strong features soften as soon she enters his view. But Izzalea suspects that any attempt he has made to charm Cassandra has been met with solid resistance. Since his tempestuous eyes ignite like veilfire upon first seeing the beautiful woman, only to then be swiftly snuffed out and replaced with a darkened melancholy shadow.

Perhaps the two warriors just need a little help. Far be it from Izzalea to deny them a nudge in the right direction.

“We need to get you tougher training dummies!” Izzalea shouts across the training area to Cassandra as she lays waste to the straw man. She pauses her assault momentarily and directs a smirk at the Inquisitor. “Or we could give you a live man to train with, I’m sure Azzedine would love to replace that training man.” Izzalea can barely contain herself as her words make both Cassandra and her brother lose the color in their faces. She tries and fails at suppressing her laughter through a loud choking snort.

“You are a terrible sister,” Azzedine huffs under his breath.

“No. You will thank me one day,” she murmurs and waves the seeker to approach. The woman obliges with a tentative walk into the training ring. “Cassandra, with all of the relaxation my brother has experienced since arriving at Skyhold, I am sure he could use the revitalization found in combat with a formidable opponent.”

“If Lord Trevelyan wishes, I will accommodate.” Cassandra appears concerned but tries to mask it with a serious and dour expression.

Izzalea looks at her brother and grins, “You best suit up, dear brother. I believe you are to spar with the Right Hand of the Divine this morning.”

Azzedine turns his head to hide the roll of his eyes from Cassandra, “I will not force the seeker to spar with the likes of me.” He lowers his voice to under his breath so that only his sister can hear, “You are truly the bane of my existence, Izzy.” He turns his head back to the seeker as she nears, he bows his head formally, “I am truly sorry my lady, but I am late for an appointment.”

Izzalea chortles, almost choking again, “Oh? Who do you need to see at this hour in Skyhold, Azzedine?”

He shoots a snarling glare at his sister, then smiles at Cassandra, “Good day, my ladies.” He bows again before retreating to sulk anywhere else but the training grounds.

Izzalea watches her brother’s escape, snickering, nibbling her lip, and bobbing her head impishly. Looking back at Cassandra, as if she just had the most delicious idea, she coos, “You know Cass,
my brother worships the ground you walk on.”

Cassandra grunts, “Surely you are mistaken. Lord Trevelyan has much higher prospects than a heretical seeker of the Inquisition.”

“Cass… are you serious? Not only do I know that Azzedine has no suitable prospects, but I know that for him, no one holds a candle to you. He is smitten, my friend.”

“You should really not joke so much, Izzy.” Cassandra says dryly.

“You should really not be so stoic,” she replies in kind. “You two would just work. You’d fit together like Varric and Bianca.”

Her body slumps against the fence next to Izzalea, facing the direction in which Azzedine evaded her, an exaggerated moan releases from her soul, “How do you see that, exactly? I am a seeker, the Right Hand, and it is my responsibility to rebuild what was lost after the conclave. Azzedine… your brother… is…” She shakes her head and stares down into the dirt. “Eventually, he will have to return to his duties in Ostwick.”

Cassandra pauses and pulls at her gloves, adjusting the fit and placement of the seams and forcing the leather to be more suitable. Diligently fixing the barrier she has so meticulously placed over herself. As far as Cassandra is concerned, her view is strong and realistic. “We cannot afford to play with trivial notions. This is not one of Varric’s tales. This is real life.” Her voice is heavy, full of feelings that Izzalea knows will not be shared.

Cassandra clasps her hands and leans against the fencing on her elbows. She stares out into the courtyard at nothing in particular.

After giving her friend a few moments to stew in her dismal resolve, Izzalea decides to break the bubble. “Fuck that,” she says frankly.

Cassandra’s eyes shoot wide. She looks at the Inquisitor in shock. “Excuse me?”

“Fuck that, Cass. Corypheus could end the world tomorrow. Why deny yourself a chance at love, now?”

Cassandra coughs, “What?”

“There is something there, I can see it. Everyone sees it. The way you two look at each other when you think no one is watching. You’re torturing yourselves. You need to give it a chance. You are my two favorite people in the Thedas. Maker knows we were brought together for a reason.”

“Oh, more than to stop Corypheus? Now the Herald of Andraste claims that her brother and I are destined by the Maker?” Cassandra says in amused disbelief.

Izzalea shrugs and grins smugly, “Sure.”

“Stop it,” Cassandra grunts in disgust and kicks at the dirt. She considers their conversation for a few silent moments, and then allows herself a short laugh under her breath. “You speak of hidden glances, Inquisitor, but what of you and Cullen? You two have been ogling each other for months now.”

“Don’t worry, my romance addicted friend. I’m working on it. I will be sure to tell you everything as if it was one of Varric’s steamy stories, eventually.” Izzalea teases her friend, knocking their shoulders together.
Cassandra shakes her head and rolls her eyes. “You’re impossible. I am going back to my training.” She playfully kicks dirt at Izzalea before she turns away to lay waste on another straw man.

“Your Worship,” a messenger calls from behind the Inquisitor. She turns to receive him. “Master Harritt, your worship. He sent me to inform you that your new armor is ready.”

“That’s wonderful! Thank you.” Izzalea has been waiting patiently for a new set of armor made from materials she brought back from Crestwood and the Hinterlands. Her team managed to vanquish two high dragons while there, and Harritt promised her that he could use the bones to make extra strong armor. This is perfect timing. She can break in the armor now, before they leave for the Approach.

After avoiding as many nobles as possible in the great hall, she skips down the steps to the undercroft. Some women are excited over fine shoes and gowns, or perhaps fancy hair styles and jewelry. Izzalea however, cannot contain herself over a new armor set, shield, and sword. She loves the power she feels when she is wearing and holding strong materials. It makes her want to immediately hit the field and find an unfortunate enemy to taunt. She dares them to attempt to conquer her, they will never succeed.

“Inquisitor, you’re here. I have the new…” Harritt begins, but Izzalea blows past him as soon as she arrives.

“Oh Harritt…This is amazing!” she runs her hands along the armor that is draping over a stand. Copper colored details and strong great bear leathers, all reinforced with dragon bone. “Can I try it on?” she looks at him as if it is Andraste’s name day.

“Well it is here for you to wear, Inquisitor.” Harritt retorts gruffly.

Unabashed, Izzalea quickly begins placing all of the components in the appropriate places. It all fits and feels amazing.

“I had some other materials around to make these as well,” Harritt says as he produces a shield and sword to Izzalea’s astonishment.

Overwhelmed with excitement, she squeals like a young girl being given a pony, “Harritt! Thank you, these are stunning.”

The shield is a brightly shining copper color - Harritt always painstakingly plates all of her metals with drakestone, because he knows how much she loves the copper tones. The shield has the menacing shape that darkspawn wield. The sharp pointed edges combined with the blinding drakestone shine, this will do well to distract, bash, and rip at her foes. The sword feels balanced in her grip and has a razor sharp edge. It is all perfect.

“Inquisitor!” Izzalea hears a sweet and excited voice cry. Her arcanist, Dagna is barreling toward her with a huge grin. She gets as excited about armor crafting as Izzalea does. Albeit, she gets excited about giving the armor enchantments, she is the most talented arcanist Izzalea has met. Also, extraordinary as Dagna is a dwarf. Dwarves are not known to have any connection to magic, since they have no connection with the fade. Dagna however, spent years studying magic anyway. She wishes to combat social norms, a trait that Izzalea cannot help but adore.

Dagna runs up with a massive grin and waves as she comes to a stop. “First of all…hi!” she giggles. Izzalea laughs in response, “Hi, Dagna.” She twirls around, “What do you think?”

“I think it’s great, Inquisitor, but also… I wanted to tell you that I enchanted your armor for fighting demons…because you now…why not, right?” Izzalea nods her head with enthusiasm. “Also, since I
know you love to try on your new armor sets soooo much, but you always have to depend us to tell you how it looks… I insisted we install a big mirror down here!” She points at the corner of the smithy where a large mirror leans against the stone walls.

“Yes! I cannot wait to see!” Izzalea rushes over to the mirror, admiring her ease of movement as she does. She inspects her visage and twists around in an attempt to see all vantage points.

“What do you think?” Dagna jumps up and down clapping her hands. Harritt stands beside the with his arms crossed, and a disapproving scowl on his face.

“Maker’s breath… you two have out done yourselves.” Izzalea holds her shield and readies her stance. She thinks she looks positively menacing… and ravishing if she is being honest.

“But how do you feel?” Dagna urges.

“I look heavy metal and reflective.” She stands tall and proud, raising her chin high and squaring her shoulders. “I feel like the leader of the Inquisition.”

“Yes!” Dagna jumps toward Harritt and punches him in the hip. He startles and rubs the accosted hip with a frown.

“I am glad you are pleased, Inquisitor,” he says with a scowl. Izzalea pays his attitude no mind. She knows that he is proud of his accomplishments, he is merely too stoic to partake in the excitement.

“Thank you both for you excellent work. I am very lucky to have you two here to make the armor not only for me, but also for my team,” she says as she bows respectfully to her master craftsmen.

She decides to keep the armor on in and head straight to the training grounds to begin working it in. She thanks her craftsmen again, giving them one last joyful nod before she exits the undercroft.

She makes her way through the great hall with craftsmanship of her armor on her mind. Wondering how quickly she can find her trainer to begin more exercises. On her way however, she notices Varric. He is sitting at his usual table, writing by the fire. How interesting it is to have a famous author within her closest allies. He has written stories of his past adventures, like those with the Champion of Kirkwall Rhaegar Hawke. Izzalea wonders if he will write about his time with the Inquisition.

“Hey there, Rusty! You look pleased with yourself.” Varric has an affinity for bestowing nicknames upon his friends. He quickly noted her affinity for red and orange tones, therefore Izzalea shall always be known as ‘Rusty’ to the dwarf.

“Harritt and Dagna just finished this new armor set,” she beams at him, presenting herself as if on display, showing off her multifaceted drakestone plated scales and rich brown leather.

“Aha, I should have known. Nothing gets the Herald of Andraste as excited as new armor.”

“Hey, no judgement Varric. Think of it like you received an upgrade for Bianca,” she winks at the dwarf. The man loves nothing more than his treasured crossbow.

He raises his hands in surrender, “No judgement here, Rusty, just observations.”

“Mmmhmmm… and I suppose I won’t read about how the Inquisitor had an armor fetish when this is all over?”

“What… no way… I’m not writing about the Inquisition,” he lies.
“Right…” she says in a low skeptical tone and the dwarf smiles. “Well, Varric, you just keep *not* writing about the inquisition, and I will go work-in this gorgeous new armor,” she flexes her arms as she winks. “Just make sure you capture how damn *good* I look in it.”

Izzalea chuckles under her breath as she heads back out to the training grounds. Practice makes proficient, and she will be unstoppable.

Chapter End Notes

If you are interested (and rap doesn’t offend you) the name of this chapter, as well as Izzalea’s brazen attitude toward her foes, is inspired by this song: [Heavy Metal and Reflective by Azealia Banks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzWlE2NfZSo). I especially enjoy the line "I'm in every city, they say "hello" to the head bitch"

I've been asked a couple of times about Azzedine's name and where it came from. I actually used to know a man by the name when I was in college. I always remembered the name because I liked it so much *cough*Ihadacrushonhim*cough* and I thought it worked well with Izzalea!
Abner meets with Varric to hang out with him and this Champion she's heard some stories about.

NSFW. Notice rating change. I decided to include to smut within the chapters. The beginning and end of the scene is noted with ***** so that you can easily scroll through and skip it if you want/need to.

This is one of my favorite chapters in this story -- I hope you enjoy!

Oh and the smut scene switches perspectives, weeeeee!

Abner leans against Varric’s table in the great hall, fire roaring in the hearth behind her. A few guards patrol the dark keep, but mostly the castle is quiet.

She stares down at the Inquisitor’s throne. Crimson and gold. Red plush, firm cushions with the symbol of the inquisition in gold, graces the backrest. The eye is large and proud in the center while large, gilded spikes shoot from the sides and top of the chair. Severe yet beautiful, much like the
Inquisitor.

But she is just a person. A noble person, sure… but still just a person. She didn’t ask for any of this. Abner cannot help but think that Izzalea Trevelyan is the most unlucky person in Thedas. She wouldn’t trade places with the Inquisitor for anything, never been envious of those with power. The entire realm is looking to Izzalea to save them, guide them…rule them.

And if she fails? Shit…

F—ck, even if she doesn’t fail. How long will it take for the other people in power to forget what they put her through?

No. Abner doesn’t envy her at all. All she can do is thank whoever, be it the Maker, the Creators, the Mountains, the Stone, whoever is listening, whoever is pulling the strings, that Izzalea isn’t as daft as most of the nobles Abner has met. She actually seems to care and genuinely wants to save the world. Jokes on her, Abner suspects.

The door to the garden and guest rooms opens across from her. Abner looks to find Varric’s smiling face. Grinning proudly at her, he says, “Heya, Killer. May I introduce, Rhaegar Hawke.” He bends and steps to the side in jovial presentation for the man following behind through the doorway.

He emerges from the shadows of the dark and quiet gardens and in an instant Abner feels the air leave the hall. He looks like a specter from the fade, a wicked smirk on his lips and an impish twinkle in his eyes. The fire behind her illuminates the creature in a glowing orange, yellow soft light. Abner’s eyes are transfixed. She can’t move. She can’t breathe.

He is beauty.

Time slows to a crawl as she watches him approach her.

Right away she notices a kindred spirit in him. Unbridled mystique flows around him like a beacon just for her. He smiles at her as if he has seen her before. As if they were long lost friends.

Dark, deep auburn hair in long, loose curls that drape just over his shoulders, moves like fluttering feathers in the air as he walks up to her. The tussled strands look soft, unrestricted, and unkempt. A disheveled beard furs his face, the hair just long enough that she could twine her fingers through it to pull his high chin to her level. She has the sudden urge to do so, and find what other treasures the obvious maverick has for her to find.

For as dark and wild his hair is, his skin is bright and clear. A glow almost emanates from his olive toned skin. His eyes shine while also harboring tumultuous grey-blue maelstroms. They look like the sky, if it was thundering and threatening to wreak havoc over all of civilization. There is so much danger and trouble behind them. Abner has a difficult time concentrating on much else.

He has red tattoos around his left eye, and red markings down his strong and muscular arms, like war paint. He must be a mage do to the robes he wears, but they are unlike any robes she has seen before. They are menacing and manly, black and brown leather accented with iron armor pieces and a fur collared red mantle.

He is uninhibited beauty.

Abner cannot resist beauty, especially when it involves a carefree and unabashed nature. Like wild horses galloping through the plains. Powerful, free, and stunning. He appears as if he could have been on a ship as a leader of an armada, pillaging, and rejoicing in the spontaneity of life on the sea. Or perhaps a nomadic mountain man, traveling, hunting, worshiping nature and the rejuvenation it
brings.

“I am certain that your name is not actually Killer, but first impressions… I can see that you look deliciously dangerous,” his voice is that of the finest Ferelden silk. If there is such a thing. He may actually be the only Ferelden silk, but he is decadent, smooth, and luxurious silk nonetheless.

He closed the distance between them quickly, even though it felt as if time stood still. His hand is outstretched and waiting for hers.

“Oh, c’mon… seriously? That’s what you say to her?” Varric rolls his eyes as he struts up beside them.

Hawke sighs, side eye’s Varric, and then returns the grey thunderous gaze to Abner. “How about this, you look as if time with you would make me die a happy man.”

Varric slams his palm on his forehead and groans. Abner grins with one corner of her mouth while pursing her lips and places her hand in his. “Name’s Abner,” she says in a low and sensual rasp.

“What an interesting name… Abner.” He considers the name before he places a light kiss on her knuckles. “As intriguing as the woman who bares it.” Their eyes look at each other in hunger. Mere moments enough to size each other up, knowing that they want more.

“Andraste’s ass, is this what you are going to be like all night?” Varric huffs, pacing in a circle, arms rise to then fall again in frustration.

Abner makes a show of admiring the entirety of Hawke’s form before she grabs two hidden bottles on the table behind her, one in each hand. She holds them on either side of her and shrugs, “Shall we?”

She leads the three of them up to a quiet end section of the battlements. She previously bribed the guard patrolling the zone to keep his distance so they could enjoy themselves away from prying eyes and ears. It took some convincing, but Abner promised to sit on the outside wall to keep a look out at the same time.

The old friends from Kirkwall regale her in stories about their adventures together. The more Abner learns about Hawke, the more intrigued she is about him. She enjoys hearing about all of the mischief he was up to during his time in the city. She has no doubts as to why he became so famous and revered, as well as scorned. He loved to meddle in the affairs of the wicked and did so with a snarky grin.

Hawke’s expressions, mannerisms, and voice drip lusciously with sarcasm, wit, and passion. He is clever and confident. Vivacious and resilient. Tenacious and ardent. She is drawn to him like a moth to flame.

The flame of that attraction sears them both with desire every time their eyes meet. An undeniable magnetism works to link their untamed souls. Like ancient lover’s souls, long lost, only to now be found again. They steal glances at each other as their friend spins tales, alluring gazes that speak words of seduction they both know, but are left unsaid. For now anyway, in their mixed company.

“And then Hawke looks up and says… Looks like the Duke, has fallen from grace,” Varric exclaims as Abner clutches her stomach while laughing.

“That was all a bit exaggerated, Varric,” Hawke chides the dwarf. As Varric shrugs him off, Hawke steals one of his sexy glances at the scout. He smirks at Abner more with his eyes than with his lips.
She bites at the inside of her cheek as she lifts the last bottle of wine to her lips. “Oh no, it looks like we are out of sauce,” she pouts and holds the bottle upside down.

“I have access to more…and better…” Varric coos.

“You’re not suggesting…” Abner leans in, a wicked smile curls the corners of her lips.

“Am I? I don’t think so…” he winks as he straightens, standing from leaning against the wall next to her.

“I’m sorry, what is it that we are excited about?” Hawke asks with an adorable puzzled expression.

“Just between us…” Abner looks around at the ‘no-one’ around them, “Our dwarf friend here is going to raid the Inquisitor’s stash.”

“Oh, that sounds about right, carry on,” Hawke chuckles, shooing Varric on with his hand.

“Alright, keep an eye out…as if that would do any good,” Varric says as he disappears into the darkness.

Hawke and Abner are left to sit silently in the obscurity of the dark battlements. She can see his face lightly illuminated by the moon. He smiles at her, light dancing in his eyes. “So you have endeared yourself to the hardened dwarf rather quickly,” he quips. Abner quickly shifts her stare up to the stars, they flicker much like his eyes.

“It’s easy to get on with Varric.” She grins and leans her head on the wall, sitting in a battlement crenel across from him.

“That may be true, but he has always had discerning tastes. You should wear it as a badge of honor. You are the first friend he wanted me to meet.”

“Eh… well, I suggested this yesterday,” she says, tapping her fingers on her knees. “So… yeah.”

“Then, I am glad you did,” he says. She tries to see his face as he leans back into the shadows from the crenel he sits in, but it’s near impossible. All she can go on is the tone of his voice, which is dripping with flirtation, causing her to draw in her lower lip.

“Sweet talker, eh?” she finally replies and tosses a pebble toward his shadowed figure. He laughs low in his chest.

They sit in silence again until he adds, “Varric told me that you are an assassin, an expert with daggers.”

“Truth.”

“I knew a woman of similar preference in Kirkwall, as did Varric. Isabela. She was a very special breed of woman.”

“It takes a special breed of woman to slit a man’s throat before he even knows she’s there,” a wicked grin, she leans forward as she speaks.

He leans as well. “You know just how to talk to a man,” his voice sounds deeper and hungrier with each passing syllable.

“That ain’t all I know…” her voice trails off and he radiates his deep flirtatious laughter, as Varric arrives with more wine.
“I think I may have missed out on something…” Varric grunts.

“Oh, I was just admiring your wildly stunning friend’s many fine attributes.” Hawke taunts as the dwarf releases a groan and shakes his head.

Hawke leans forward. Seizing one of the new bottles of wine from Varric’s hands, he takes a drink. Wiping his mouth with the back of his free hand, he expertly tosses Abner the bottle with the other. “Let’s hear more about Abner, shall we? You are unlike the other women I have observed in Skyhold.”

“Uh-huh… I’m not like other women,” she states frankly.

“Yes,” he chuckles, “we’ve established that. What’s your story?”

She sighs and takes a long swig of wine. “Born a misfit. I usually roam the countryside alone. I lived different, so I became different.” She shrugs and hands the bottle to Varric.

“Alright, you need more specific questions. How about that name, how was it bestowed upon you?”

“I’ve actually wondered the same thing,” Varric chimes in.

She sighs and looks back at the stars. “My father gave it to me.” The men stay silent, waiting for more of an explanation. She kicks at imaginary dirt and grunts, refusing to delve deeper.

Hawke sighs in frustration. “Your accent is rather unique. I don’t think I’ve heard it before. Where are you from?”

“Far,” she answers simply. Not interested in a game of questions with a man she barely knows, no matter how alluring he is. Abner swipes the bottle back from Varric and chugs down a third of it all at once. She tosses the bottle at the Champion who catches it with a smirk.

“Enough of that,” she says, “I’m sure you guys have more war stories to share.”

She manages to get the men talking more about their adventures, taking the focus back off of her and her past. She does find a few stories of her own espionage to entertain them, but when the curious and handsome mage tries to ask prying questions into the details of who, where, and how she was in her tales, she evades each one as if she is dodging fireballs. He keeps trying to crack her, each attempt craftier than the last, but to no avail. She only smiles and gives him just enough to keep her privacy while intriguing him even more.

Eventually, the bottles run dry and Varric decides to retire, leaving Hawke and Abner alone to wander Skyhold in the dead of night.

Finding it little more difficult to walk in a straight line than it should be, she stops to lean against the wall of the rookery tower. Hawke follows her and leans one arm against the stone above her. He takes his thumb on his free hand and traces the markings on her arm. His touch sends a shiver through her body.

“Are you not cold in the night air, Bear?” He started using the nickname as ‘Abner’ became harder for his drunken lips to pronounce.

“I like the cold.” The night’s chill set in around her, she is still in her sleeveless tunic, but the brisk breeze feels comforting on her warm, wine soaked skin. “I’m very hot blooded,” she grins up at him, looking into his eyes, the light of the moon allows for his impish spark to shine.
He brushes loose locks of hair back behind her neck, leans in, and ghosts his lips over her sensitive ear. “You are a truly unique creature, Bear.” He rests his forehead on hers and their eyes lock. “I cannot help but be drawn to you. I’ve never seen anyone like you.” His voice is a low rumble, not quite a whisper, instead an easy, soft, deep purr. “You are quite tough. As if nothing can pierce your skin,” he backs up and lightly flicks the metal hanging from her nose, “unless you let it.”

“Good, then it’s working.”

He smiles and thrums his seemingly signature deep and flirtatious laugh in his chest. “But there is something graceful in the way you move and in your eyes,” he leans in closer to her. An amorous tension swells between their bodies. Their chests brush together as they expand from exaggerated breathing. It builds upon the energy that has been collecting between them all night. “You are fascinating. Your stories of living in the wilderness, your appearance, you’re like the incarnation of the legends I heard as a child.”

“Legends?”

“The Lady of the Forest.”

“Is that so?” she muses, letting her hips bump forward against his. An invitation.

He receives it willingly, “Yes.” Taking her waist in his hand, he leans in. His lips ghost on hers, heat pools in her core. “My Lady.”

She breathes out a fraction of a second before she lunges her lips onto his. She brings her hands to the back on his head and grabs at his hair. He groans and pushes his body against hers, shoving her firmly against the wall. They furiously kiss each other. Taking short pauses to breathe deeply and stare into the other’s eyes, before bringing their lips together again. Growls and moans rumble deep in their chests.

He grabs her thighs, and she uses the wall as leverage to jump onto him, locking her legs around his waist. She grips his hair harder and pulls his head back, exposing his strong neck. Kisses trail hot pools of lust up his throat to his ear where she bites its lobe.

He pulls his head back forward. Chests heaving. Fingers gripping. Breathless whispers. “Can I take you somewhere?” He looks at her with the intensity of a hawk swooping in for its prey.

Abner points to the stables behind him, he turns their bodies to see. “The stables?” He grunts in disapproval. “No way, my beautiful Lady. You deserve better treatment than horse shit.” He sets her down and turns with a gesture for her to hop on his back.

“Lookie here, my own Ferelden Forder,” she snickers and hops on. He holds up her thighs in his arms, she wraps hers around his shoulders. She licks his ear and gives it a nip. “Where to now, Ser?” she whispers.

“Point me to the kitchens, first. We will need sustenance for after what I have in store for you, my little Bear.” She laughs, a beautiful sound, and points up the stairs ahead of them, leading to the back door of the kitchens.

*****
Carefree laughter fills the air as Abner rides Hawke’s back through the halls. Her voice echoes against the stone walls, surely waking the slumbering souls behind doors that scatter the keep. Despite the bluster of his gait, she perfectly balances a stolen tray of Orlesian pastries over her head with one hand. The other is wrapped around his shoulders, gripping the fur of his collar.

Hawke swiftly and securely carries her down the last hall. Upon reaching his guest room, he deftly opens the old wooden door while still supporting the treasure that clings to him. Once they cross the threshold, she hops down onto the cold stone floor. Elegantly, she struts past him and places the tray on his bedside table.

He watches her with hungry eyes as she sashays around his room. He can barely contain himself. From the moment he laid eyes on her, he has felt like she’s been missing in his life. Now that he’s found her, he doesn’t know how he survived without her. He feels like he will only live after he has her. Everything before seems empty. He is now woken. He needs every piece of her. The temptation of her is powerful. Primal. Visceral.

She inspects his accommodations, nodding in approval with crossed arms. A few wild, dreaded wisps of hair have freed themselves from the messy knot at the crown of her head. They dance and brush against the soft curve of her neck and shoulders as she moves. He is envious of those threads.

“This ain’t bad at all,” she remarks. His eyes float over every inch of her. The fire light from his small hearth gives the room and his vixen a soft warm glow, like a sunset flickering over her skin. His mouth waters.

She is wild like the turbulent sea. Untamed and dangerous. He is intoxicated by her. He wants to drink in every morsel of her. To worship her. He knows he doesn’t deserve her, but he pushes that aside, he will appreciate every moment she allows.

She crosses that room to peer through his window, investigating the view. The deep stone walls and height of the opening causes her to strain as she looks out through the glass. Her nimble and petite frame perches on her tip-toes as she leans up over the ledge, pronouncing the shape of her exquisite backside and lithe legs.

He can stand it no longer, he needs her. Now.

He rushes to her. Grabbing her hips from behind, he crashes into her. The impact springs her feet from the ground, her smaller, toned body pinned between his larger, firm frame and the rocky ledge.

A breathy gasp escapes her. “Hawke…” she sighs, a small cry of pleasure escaping her parted, lustful lips as his face buries itself into the crook of her neck. His bristly beard tickles her supple skin, she giggles. He adores the sound. His lips, teeth, tongue, and hands worship her skin in a symphony of senses. She smells of wine and delicious freedom. She feels like ethereal, soft mist and radiant strength. She tastes like sweet, glorious ecstasy. His hands roam over her body, wanting to feel everything at once. Needing all of her at once.

A rough, hardened hand reaches up to her compliant, fragile throat, responding to his coarse touch willingly. He grips and lifts her chin to open the slope of her tender neck to his ravenous, greedy mouth. The heat of his want inflames her as she cries out. His hips ruck against her firm ass, indulging his rapidly hardening, throbbing length. Another calloused hand travels up her tunic, reveling in the feel of subtle curves on her taut, feminine body. When it discovers her unbound breasts, he growls and dashes fingers over the pert nipples he finds with ease.

Hot open-mouth kisses travel up her neck to her ear. Teeth pull at the soft flesh. While the hand beneath her tunic kneads her soft mounds, the hand on her throat slides up to her open, panting
mouth. Two strong fingers enter, pulling down a pliable jaw. His kisses slowly, tracing up her tempting jawline and back to her ear. His lips linger there. Rumbling words whisper into the beautiful contours, “I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you.” His ardent rutting against her quickens. Her soft cries hasten. His moistened fingers leave her mouth, painting a fiery slick trail down her slender throat.

“So take me,” she rasps, voice harsh. Strained.

Immediately, he spins her petite body around, propping her on the window’s edge. In one fluid motion, he pulls her tunic over her head. He gently brushes fingers down her torso, drawing in his lower lip. His beautiful seductress is even more stunning that he could have dreamed. He lovingly cups each breast in each hand, smiling at them before kissing and nipping at both nipples. Sensual strokes of his tongue slip up her heaving chest, carrying him through a wet-hot trail, to appreciate the soft lines of her elegant collar and shoulders.

He looks up at her. Her eyes are at once both dark and lustrous. Her seductive lips, parted. His eyes focus on the wet shimmer on her lips as he licks his own. Overcome with a desperate need to taste her, he rises to cup her delicate jaw. His thumb traces her bottom lip. Enticed, it dips into her inviting mouth. She sighs into his touch, the wet heat of her breath thrills him. He crashes his mouth over hers. Their flesh melding together. Tongues darting and sliding in a savage dance.

Her hands glide up his chest and tug at his armor. A silent, urgent request. He obeys, rapidly stripping from his suddenly unwanted, unneeded, cumbersome gear. She watches him, smiling, a sly finger playfully bitten between her teeth. As he sheds his final pieces of clothing, aside from his trousers, she kicks off her boots. He begins on the buckles holding on his tight leathers around his hips as she hops down from her perch. Her bare feet land with a hallow thud on the rough, timeworn, wooden floor.

He pauses to watch her agile fingers mingle with the laces of her leggings. This will not do. She is a gift that he alone should unwrap. He wants, no, he demands to savor each and every moment of discovery, to memorize and worship her body. He grabs her wrists, shaking his head. Clicking his tongue behind kiss-swollen lips, he gently pulls her hands away from their forbidden work. A light kiss on her temple, he murmurs into her hair, “That’s my job.”

He releases his grasp, dropping to his knees. Seizing her hips in his brawny, rough hands, he draws her closer. Her luscious legs straddle either side of his taut, sheathed thighs. He cascades fanatical, reckless kisses down her athletic, ridged stomach. Gasping, she leans into his intense adoration, a loud moan sails from her torrid soul. Her muscles tremor and tighten, and she bucks against his mouth when his rushing stream of passion flows down her body, over the soft mound between her thighs.

Pressing his mouth there, massaging the black leather barrier with slick lips and nipping teeth. He teases, unrelenting, against the pearl sheltered beneath. Every push against it causes her breath to hitch in sweet agony. Deep within her, whispered words thunder a language he’s never heard but somehow understands. He hums in satisfaction, her frantic reaction enchanting him. He is causing her pleasure. She must have more.

His hands flow around her hips to finish the work on her laces. He tenderly peels the thin, flexible leather down her legs. She helps him remove the confines, as he tosses them away. He takes a moment to hold her bewitching, naked body in his gaze. Raking his eyes over every detail of her. Every curve. Every dimple. Every scar. Every piece of her magnificent being.

She is beauty.
He drags his fingers luridly over her flesh, gliding up her calves, tracing the tattooed markings he finds there. Feather-light, he graces the backs of her knees, winning a squeal as she buckles from the sensation and falls onto his lap. He catches her, supporting the small of her back as her powerful thighs settle over his, on the bedroom floor.

Their lips meet again, tangling while humid, panting groans answer to every touch. She grips at his back, scratching nails against his muscular shoulder blades as they flex from his own movements. His continued devoted exploration of her body maps every precious detail. A hand strokes down to her soft curls, a curious thumb finding its way to the pearl. He rubs it as she cries a high-pitched call into his mouth, her hips rocking against him furiously.

Lightly biting her quivering lower lip, he grins at her. Supporting her against him, he lifts them from the floor while they kiss and grind against each other. Carrying her to the bed, he drops her on the edge. She yelps with a delighted laugh, bouncing, effervescent, against the bed. Her back falls against the soft, silken sheets, legs draped over the edge. He returns to his knees before her, urging her legs apart. She opens for him.

Grabbing her hips, he slides her along the cool, slick sheets, bringing her glistening core to the edge. His fingers massage her hips as he leans in. He lingers there, lustful mouth hovering over her. His heavy, panting breath cools her slick quim, teasing her. Soft whimpers beg for him to act, her hips trying to rut closer, to close the distance between her and his mouth, but his frim hands hold her steadily in place. He is in no rush.

“Rhaegar,” the beautiful sound of his name in her desperate voice makes his heart ache with need and excitement. “Rhaegar, please,” she whines, a hand gliding between her legs to touch herself, to end the impatient anguish with which he has her trapped. He licks at her delicate fingers, bringing them into his mouth, lightly sucking the tips. She moans, pulling her hand out to travel across his coarse beard and into his hair. A soft, begging push of his head, insisting and guiding his mouth to her waiting core.

He obeys, running his tongue up the slit and groaning at the sweet taste of her. His patience disappears. She is so wet and ready for him. He eagerly glides his moist lips along her honeyed flesh, lapping up her heat, delving his tongue inside her. All the while, the tip of his nose nuzzles her sensitive clt.

She arches her back, hands fisted in his hair. Guttural moans choke, her tense body shivers and shakes as she climbs her way to the abyss. Her breathing all but stops, his name rippling from her swollen lips. Her body stills, her hands pushing his face firmly against her. A loud cry erupts, reverberating against the cold, stone walls of the room as she falls over the edge into a blissful, shattering crescendo. He basks in her climax, tasting every bright, intoxicated tremor.

He leans back on his knees. Wiping off his soaked mouth and beard, he watches proudly as her chest rises and falls with shattered breaths, her legs shaking on either side of him. She is gorgeous lying there, skin prickled from aftershocks, glistening with a mist of sweat.

“Fuck me,” she says between breathless quivers

He rises to his feet. Finishing the work of his buckles, he strips from his tough, leather trousers and cotton smalls. She adjusts herself on the silk sheets, to lay the length of the bed as he crawls over her. His lips stroke every inch of soft flesh that they can as the two move to the center of the bed.

His eyes are dark and dangerous as he crawls over her. As if he is prowling above his prey. “Open your legs for me, my lady,” he orders.
Seductively, she parts her knees as he hovers over her. Slowly, he sinks into her, groaning at the feeling of her tight heat around his cock. She arches her back, white knuckles gripping the bed, she moans his name. As he sheaths himself inside her, a hushed ‘fuck’ tumbles from his lips. Drawing himself out and back in slowly at first, his eyes clench as he focuses on the sensations. He starts to pick up speed and force, lifting her legs over his shoulders to find his way deeper inside of her. He repeatedly slams roughly into her, pressing her into the creaking bed. 

She grips at his tense, muscled arms that support him on either side of her. Her lightly calloused fingers dig into his flesh every time he buries his cock within her. She grunts beautiful sounds with his increasingly erratic thrusts. The headboard crashes against the wall, colliding against the stone with so much force that the painting hanging above clatters wildly.

He leans down over her on his elbows, pinning her legs against her heaving, sweaty chest. His lips crash over hers. He calls to her and the Maker as he falls into the abyss. He feels her join him when her walls constrict and tremor around him, as he is plunged and spilling inside her.

They lie there on the cool sheets, now damp from sweaty writhing bodies, tangled together. Their glistening skin shimmers in the warm firelight. Speechless, breathing heavily, they smile and hum with satisfaction.

He gently pulls out, rolling over to lie next to her. He interlaces his thankful fingers with her closest hand. They stare at the ceiling, snickering, as they slowly regain composure, steadying their breathing.

Once calmed, he smirks, grabbing one of the pastries piled on the stolen tray beside him. Turning his head to hers, he smiles warmly and brings the cake to her lips. “Hungry?” he purrs.

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“I’m bettin’ some Orlesian twat will be missing these frilly cakes,” Abner smiles at Hawke before he delicately places the final tiny pastry in her mouth.

“Fuck ‘em,” he winks. “You are far more important than some flouncy who-cares-who-their-daddy-is noble ass.” He places the now empty tray on a small table beside his bed. “Besides, I’m The Champion of Kirkwall, should I not be able to treat my lady with frilly cakes?” He leans into her and kisses her lips lightly, “Especially after all of those dirty little things I just did to her.”

She smiles and rolls onto her back. Their sweaty and tired bodies lounge in his soft silk sheets. His guestroom bed is levels above the ones provided for the people who actually work for the Inquisition. “How am I supposed to go back to the barracks after spending a night in here.” She trails her fingertips down the silk resting on her otherwise naked body.

“You are always welcome in any bed of mine, as long as I am breathing,” he purrs into her ear as he nuzzles up to her side. He supports his head with one hand and wraps his other arm around her waist.

The trails of Abner’s fingertips leave the silk and wind up his arm instead. Running through the hair and feeling the large muscles beneath. “Honestly, I have a hard time sleeping anywhere for long. But this is nice.” She looks up to his face. It is softer and sweeter now. The afterglow has calmed his wild spirit, however temporarily.

He looks into her eyes and speaks softly, “You’ve been running from something for a long time.”
She does not respond but holds his gaze, undaunted. He smiles and kisses her forehead. “It’s okay, Bear. You don’t have to tell me…yet.”

Rolling her eyes and smirking, she shifts and pushes his face away playfully. “You’re awfully presumptuous.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. We just shared a bed together. I thought maybe we had a connection… but I guess that was just me?” He teasingly attacks and wrestles with her, sliding her around in the sheets as she laughs. Stopping to lean over her and study her face with his eyes, he grins and pleasantly glides his fingers down her side. “Or do you do unspeakable things with every man Varric brings around?”

“Just the good-lookin’ ones,” she teases.

“Oh good, you at least noticed how ruggedly handsome I am. I guess in order for you to catch up to the rest, I need to keep working on you.”

Swiftly, she rolls out from his grasp. He flips on his back and contently watches her graceful body move as she climbs on top of him. Her muscles flex and soften under her warm silky skin. Hypnotized, he cannot help but brush his hands over her while she moves. His eyebrows rise with an amused smile on his face as she grabs and pins his wrists to the bed above his head.

She leans over him and grins like a bear with a freshly caught salmon, “You talk too much.”

“I get that a lot,” he smirks, the impish shine in his eyes returns with excitement.

“Maybe I should put you to work again,” she leans in and ghosts her lips against his ear, he sighs and bucks his hips up against her. “To shut you up,” she glides her slick tongue along to rim of his ear as her hips rut against his waking length.

He groans and presses up to her again. “You would think that would work. However, I could show you how wrong you are,” the wicked spark dances in his eyes as she looks down at him, arms pinned but nothing near helpless. She presses her lips to his, kissing him with passion. As soon as she releases his wrists, he immediately grabs her hips that rhythmically grind against him.

He pants between kisses, “Or…I suppose…I could just…do as my lady pleases.”
Aches & Pains

Chapter Summary

Urgent meeting with the war council is summoned before day even has a chance to break.

Chapter Notes

This is just a quick chapter, there should be another one later today (Monday night, EST) to make up for it!

“Inquisitor! I’ve been searching for you!” A messenger races up to the training ring before dawn has broken. She doubles over, panting, having trouble catching her breath. Izzalea instantly drops her sword and shield and bolts to her side.

“What is it? What’s happened?” Worry overtaking her thoughts, she immediately feels panic. *Has Corypheus made his next move?*

“Sister…” she pants, “Sister Leliana needs to see you… in the war room… immediately.” She slumps on to the ground.
“I will go at once.” She looks to her trainer. “I’m sorry Ser, we will have to train another time.”

“Of course, please,” he gestures for her to proceed.

Flinging her body over the fencing of the training ring, Izzalea runs up the stairs to the entrance of the great hall. She breaks through the series of doors leading to the war room. When she arrives, her advisors are already waiting for her. Haphazardly and casually dressed due to being roused from their sleep, they all have concern stretching across their faces. Josie is furiously writing on her clipboard. Leliana paces with her hands clasped tightly behind her back and a deep furrow in her brow. And Cullen scowls over the map, fists slammed into the surface of the table.

“What happened, is it Corypheus?” Izzalea storms up to the table, searching the map for new markers.

Leliana shakes her head and joins the Inquisitor’s side by the base of the map. “No. But I am afraid it is still not good. I just received word that a group of our soldiers are being held captive in the Fallow Mire.” She points to a southern marshy area of Ferelden on the map. “An Avvar clan has captured them. They refuse to release them safely, unless you meet with their leader.”

“What?” Izzalea rubs her forehead, pinching her temples between thumb and forefinger. Already, she feels the pangs of a stress headache accumulating.

“Thereir leader is claiming that if we want to see our men alive, the Herald of Andraste must come to claim them herself.” Cullen growls and slams his fist onto the table, making the markers clang and vibrate on its surface.

“Maker preserve me… are you serious?” Izzalea groans. “Are the Avvar also working for the fucking darkspawn Magister?”

Leliana walks back to her usual station around the table, hands clasped behind her back. “I’m not sure, but I do not think so. I am afraid you will have to go to the marsh to find out.”

Izzalea sighs and pensively paces back and forth along the table. “Okay, we prepare today, and I will leave at first light tomorrow. I won’t let our people suffer at the hands of this ignoramus any longer than I have to.” She looks to Leliana, “How will this affect our trip to the Western Approach?”

“Most likely you will be delayed, but I will send Scout Harding with a team today. She can scout as much of the area as possible. Then, we will have maximum information before your own departure.” Leliana responds.

“Okay, thank you.” Izzalea looks to Cullen who is still glaring at the map in anger. “Cullen, I want to bring Solas for magical support. There is no way I will bring Dorian or Vivienne into a marsh for an indeterminate amount of time. I’d also like to bring Cole, maybe he will be able to sense our men and help us get them out safely. Finally, inform Iron Bull. From what I’ve learned, the Avvar are fairly large, I think an enormous qunari swinging an equally, obscenely large axe is in order.”

“All right.” Cullen straightens his posture but keeps the intensity in his voice and face. As a fierce, devoted leader of the Inquisition’s army, he regards all of his soldiers as his responsibility. Knowing that a group of his soldiers are being held captive, and not knowing why or how they are being treated, must be eating him alive.

“May I suggest another member for your party?” Leliana asks, her expression and tone rife with her usual impassivity. Izzalea nods and peers at her quizzically. “Abner,” as the name glides from her lips, Josie stops writing for the first time since Izzalea entered the room. “She is a truly gifted agent
and a--” she pauses and glances at Josie whose face is like stone and staring back at Leliana. “Assassin.”

“Okay, I suppose the operation may need one, but Cole is trained in such tactics, Leliana.” Izzalea says hesitantly.

“Yes, well…” as Leliana continues, Josie clears her throat and glares at the spymaster. Something is going on between these two that is being left unsaid. “Abner has a special set of skills that I think must be exploited in this case.”

“Is that really necessary, Leliana?” Josie pipes up, a slight waver to her voice. “There is no telling what they will do to her if…”

“Okay, what in the void is going on here? Who is this woman?” Izzalea crosses her arms and sternly looks back and forth between the two women.

“She has a history with the Avvar, Inquisitor. She is an expert on their customs,” Leliana answers, looking intensely at Josie, “I think it would be best that she goes, Josie. She will be invaluable to the Inquisitor. She will understand. I will tell her, myself.”

Josie reluctantly concedes, shaking her head and returning to her attention to her clipboard.

“Alright then, let’s get moving into action. Inform everyone involved and prepare for departure in the morning. Thank you all. We will get our men back.” Her advisors all leave the room, but she stays behind, staring at the map on the table.

Thumbing the marker placed on the Fallow Mire, she thinks about what could be happening to her soldiers trapped there. What would this Avvar clan want with her? She’s never heard of clans being particularly hostile to outsiders before. Then again, she has limited knowledge of their customs. There aren’t any clans in the Free Marches. The Avvar keep to the mountains and highlands of southern Thedas, usually.

Descendants of the Alamaari, they are a people that Andraste once called her kin centuries ago. Made up of numerous independent tribes, the Avvar have minimal trade and inclusions from the other cultures in Thedas. Why would this tribe be concerned with her? Could they actually be working with Corypheus? That doesn’t make much sense. What they would have to gain from such a connection.

She pinches her forehead, attempting to will her now piercing headache to end. Sighing, she ventures to appear confident by squaring her shoulders and hiding the worry she feels from her face. She turns away from the table, leaving the war room through the large, ornate, wooden doors to begin preparations for her impromptu trip.
A blissful morning after? We wake up with Abner and Hawke for some tender moments... obviously.

Chapter Notes

Another shorty, but two chapters in one day!

Thank you to everyone who has been commenting and sharing their thoughts. They are so fun to read. I really appreciate all of them!

The feel of his touch wakes her. Hawke’s hand strolls down her arm, causing a deep inhale to fill her lungs. She flutters her eyes open, discovering two stunning, grey-blue tempests gazing back at her. She and Hawke lay on their sides, facing each other, draped underneath the silk sheets of his bed.

Hawke gently brushes coils of her hair from her face and smiles. “Good morning, Bear,” he rumbles softly. She returns his smile, paralleling his hand after he reaches out to cup her cheek. He leans in for a tender kiss when loud, insistent pounding slams on his guestroom door. It is not frantic, but strong enough to make them both sit up-right, sharing a look of concern.
Hawke mumbles about who could be coming to see him at this hour as he jumps out of bed. Scrambling with his trousers, he hops one-footed while pulling the leather over his legs. Vexed, he yells at the persistent knocker that he is coming. Abner pulls the sheets over her chest as he opens the door.

Leliana stands, irritated, on the other side. She crosses her arms and cocks her hip to the side. Looking past Hawke, the Spymaster stares straight through to the scout sitting on the bed. Abner doesn’t question how Leliana knew where she was, but she is rather alarmed and wondering what this could be about.

Leliana begins to speak. Her voice is as icy calm as her severe expression. Abner’s mind starts spinning, the orders the woman gives are repulsive. What she says makes no sense. She can’t be serious. Abner must be dreaming -- is this a dream? How could Leliana possibly being saying these words.

Abner’s heart races, but she keeps her body still, her face unresponsive. The spymaster waits silently for an answer from her agent. Instead, she looks over to the low, flickering fire in the hearth, and the beginning light of day streaming through the window. She suppresses a quake of rage that ripples through her body.

Leliana came and found her personally. She knew how Abner would react.

Hawke scratches his head, looking back and forth between the women in confusion. Leliana continues to stand firm. A steely gaze directed at the assassin.

“I don’t understand,” Hawke breaks the cold silence. “Why is traveling to the Fallow Mire such a big deal?” His question hangs in the air, as the quiet permeates the room once again. Hawke lifts his hands in submission. Pacing to a chair by the hearth, he sits and watches the women.

“How dare you ask me to do this,” Abner growls in a low, threatening voice.

Leliana holds her steely attitude, “I am not asking.”

Rage quickly boils over inside of the assassin. She grabs the tray that once held frilly cakes and memories of a carefree night. Memories of feeling wild and treasured. She throws the metal violently at the woman in the doorway, screaming in fury as she does.

As if she had expected it, always two steps ahead, Leliana deflects the tray. It clammers, clashes, and rings on the stone floor, the loud echoes resounding against the walls. However, all three bodies in the room are frozen, one in alarm, the other two in animosity.

Releasing the silk sheets from around her naked body, Abner rises to her knees on the bed. She inches her way to the edge, never dropping a furious glare from Leliana’s stone-cold eyes. When she reaches the edge, she slowly dismounts, one steady, flexing leg at a time. With slow and deliberate steps, Abner strides toward the former bard, the former friend, who stands in the doorway. Leliana remains perfectly still, never even a blink as their bodies become mere inches apart.

Her height towers over Abner. She wears her usual chainmail armor. The assassin is as naked as a nug and without any weapons, but she has killed with worse odds than this. Perhaps out of habit, or perhaps out of wrath, her periphery takes inventory of anything she could use as a weapon. Should the need arise.

“You will survive this, Abner.”

“Get. Out.”
“Be ready at first light,” the woman who was once the only woman Abner trusted, leaves the room.

Abner calmly shuts the door behind the spymaster after she disappears. Her hands linger on its rough, ancient wood as she tries to breathe her temper away. It threatens to spin her violently into madness. She rests her forehead on the door, attempting to void her thoughts and find her center.

“Are you alright?” she distantly hears Hawke ask. His voice sounds miles away as she concentrates, fighting the pandemonium battling within. “Do you have a history with the Avvar?”

Avvar.

A loud thud slams against the wood near her head. It is as though she watches herself from a distance. Abner slams her fists repeatedly into the door. Murderous screams rip from her throat. Powerless to stop herself, she turns to the small, nearby writing desk beside the room’s entrance. She sweeps her arms across its surface. Everything once sitting upon it crashes to the floor. Reaching for the desk’s chair, she clutches the brittle, wooden rods and slats it is made of, and raises it above her head. She thrusts it against the stone wall over, and over, and over again. Her hands bloody as the chair shatters apart, its wooden shrapnel splinters and flies around her. Voice howling in ragged, throat-torn screams, Abner destroys everything within reach.

Hawke runs up behind the mayhem. Struggling to grab her, he eventually is able to pin her arms to her sides. He lifts the petite, furious woman against his chest. All of his strength pulses in order to hold her violent form in place. Her feet furiously kick him. Her nails grip and dig into his flesh behind her. Her head thrashes as he squeezes her tighter. He attempts to soothe her with words, but she hears none of it.

“Abner, Abner, Abner. Be still, Abner,” Hawke struggles to say as the woman tears apart. “Be still, my Bear. It’s okay.”

He continues his hold on her, and his attempts at consoling her fit, until she finally loses the energy to continue. She becomes limp in his arms, panting raspy, damaged breaths. He adjusts his grip on her, cradling her body in his arms. Her head rests against his chest, her hair drapes over her face, her fingers clutch at his chest hair.

Gently, Hawke takes her to the bed. His back leaning against the headboard, he continues to cradle Abner’s spent body in his arms. He lightly rocks her, pressing his cheek against the top of her head, he hums and hushes calming sounds. Her body shudders in exhaustion and residual rage.

The pair lay like that until they both fall asleep, the exhaustion of the night and morning finally catching up to them. When Aber wakes again, Hawke still has her in his arms, though they are laying on their sides. He breathes steadily in a deep sleep. So as not to wake him, Abner gingerly slithers out from under his grasp, and slips off of the bed. She stealths around the room, finding and dressing in her scattered clothing.

Once dressed, before she sneaks out the door, Abner looks back at the man sleeping behind her. Her chest fills with regret. He should have never been a witness to that scene. Inwardly, she curses Leliana for her chosen tactics. Why couldn’t she have sent a messenger to fetch her if she knew where Abner was to begin with? Now, Hawke will have even more questions than he did already.

She enjoyed her time with him, but now she will have to avoid him. It’s a damn shame. She felt a kinship with the man.

*That wicked spark in his eyes...*
She squeezes her eyes shut in frustration. Slipping through the door, she leaves the room and its carefree memories splayed out and splintered behind her.
Chapter Summary

Aurora has been avoiding anything and everything pertaining to the day of Knight-Commander Barris' promotion. She's tried to consume herself with work, to hide from her shame and the feelings she refuses to acknowledge. But life rarely gives us what we think we want.

Chapter Notes

Title is from Trials 1:3

So, I edited this on my phone while sitting in the passenger seat on a road trip!! Wooooo!

Hubs and I are visiting his family over the next week. I'd like to put out another chapter while I'm gone, either here or for Skyhold Abbey, but I can never be sure what the days will be like when I'm in Georgia. If you don't hear from me in a while, that is why!

Also, I know Rory is in her ruined blue robes, but.... I just didn't have the time to make a new version of her, or a fancier cover, so please forgive that ;)

I will miss you <3
In a groggy state, Aurora travels across Skyhold from her barracks to the library. Today will be much like the previous day. A day of reading and searching for answers from sun up to sun down. As the Inquisitor’s trip to the Approach nears, Aurora’s task of finding everything she can about blood rituals or the wardens grows more intense. She doesn’t mind the work, it helps her keep her mind off of the handsome Knight-Commander, the ridiculous display of her covered in ale, and that kiss he laid on her hand.

Upon entering the great hall, she passes by Varric sitting with his writings by the fire. He notices her and furrows his brow. “Hey, Blaze, have a sit, would ya?” He gestures his hand in a way to signal for her to sit at the adjacent chair.

She hesitates, glancing that the door ahead that would take her safely up the stairs to the library. A risk-free, secure place where she could continue to pretend the other night never happened. She looks at the dwarf, when he raises his brows, spreads a slight and hopeful smile, and points at the chair again, she concedes. She quietly sits, shamefully staring at the table as to not make eye contact. She thinks she knows what this will be about.

Varric speaks, his voice pitched low, with an undertone of friendly concern, “What was going on with you the other night? As long as I’ve known you, you’ve never backed down to anyone. I was surprised when you didn’t give that Templar a new asshole for spilling the drinks. And you were so tense all night. Every time Barris spoke, you flinched. What’s up?”

“It’s a long and embarrassing story, Varric,” she responds to the table.

“I’ve got the time.” He stacks his writings neatly, sets them aside, crosses his arms, and leans back in his chair. She flits her blue eyes up to his, sighing when he returns an expectant look.

She drums her fingers on the table, taking a few moments to collect her thoughts. Where does she begin? “Do you know about what happened in Kinloch Hold during the last blight?” she asks.

“Not really.”

“Okay well, you know how Knight-Commander Meredith wanted to evoke the right of annulment due to a suspicion of blood magic in the Kirkwall circle? And then you, Hawke, and Cullen stopped her?”

“And a few other people, but yes?”

“Well… the right of annulment was almost used on me…and everyone I knew…those who were still alive anyway…” Aurora stares into the fire burning at the hearth. “But the Knight-Commander at my circle had cause. We were overrun with blood magic, abominations, possessed Templars, and demons.”

“Shit.” Varric shakes his head and rubs the back of his neck.

“A group of blood mages decided to take over the tower. When the demons started to take over the circle, the Knight-Commander locked us in. The corrupt mages tried to convert the rest of us, those who refused were killed. They corrupted some of the Templars that were trapped inside with us. They tortured and killed most the others…” she trails off into her thoughts as she remembers how much Cullen had been tortured. It’s amazing how he functions due to what he went through.
“I was lucky. There was a powerful mage, Wynn, she put up a barrier near the entrance protecting some of us and the children. Somehow the Hero of Ferelden arrived at the circle in time. She managed to convince the Knight-Commander to spare us. She and Wynn stopped the blood mages, saving our First Enchanter. Together they convinced the Knight-Commander that the survivors were not corrupted.” Aurora looks over at Varric, a very serious and thoughtful expression on his face.

She takes a deep and steady breath. Aurora has never talked about what happened at the circle before. There is something about Varric that makes me feel she can open up to him. Maybe it is because she’s known him well from bonding over drinks in the tavern for months, or maybe it’s his mesmerizing chest hair, but it feels good to tell him about her past. Her eyes travel down to the always displayed coif of hair on his chest. She quirks a soft, distant smile.

“So, all’s well that ends well, right?” she continues, “Wrong. While the order formally acknowledged a trust that we were not blood mages or abominations, the reality was that many Templars didn’t believe it.” She holds back tears wanting to escape. Pressing her smile firmer to hide the tremble developing in her hands she clasps them in her lap.

“It was terrible,” she hurries through her words, “that’s all you really need to know about that part,” she shakes off her emotions and wipes her eyes. She directs a larger, forced smile at the dwarf who is looking at her uneasily. This is enough emotion for one day. “So, I found a way to stop it.”

“How?”

“The Knight-Commander…Greagoir… I noticed that he fancied me. I indulged him. No more harassment from his ranks,” she says frankly, sitting straighter and looking back into the fire.

“Ah, I see… you must have been very young.”

“I was about twenty, he was much older, but he was kind.”

“Did you care for him?”

“I cared for the protection his affections gave me. That’s all that mattered. I’ve never allowed myself to actually feel for someone,” she says unemotionally.

“Really?” he asks. “Why?”

I wish he would stop looking at me that way.

Sighing in annoyance, perhaps she responds a little too harshly, “What’s the point, Varric? A mage can’t fall in love. A mage can’t have a family. A mage can’t have a Happy Ending.” Aurora softens her tone when she notices shock flash over his face. “Why would I tempt myself to want a normal life when I can never have one? Truly loving someone would only make the hurt worse.”

“Shit kid, I’m sorry.” They sit in silence a few moments until he says, “But why did this affect you the other night?”

She fidgets with her finger nails and looks down. “Because it is starting again. Somehow, the Templars know where I came from. I see some of them sneer at me and whisper to each other. I try to ignore it, but yesterday one of them…” she pauses, voice choked from the memory. Varric says nothing, patiently waiting for her to regain her strength.

She crosses her arms, a serious and dour expression overtakes her face, and crinkle forms between her brows. “I thought I could save myself in the same way. But I can’t. I made a terrible mistake. I went to Ser Barris after his promotion, and… I made a terrible mistake.”
They sit in silence again, both watching logs burn in the hearth, listening to the cracking of the wood.

“You know, you could tell Cullen that Templars are harassing you,” Varric says cautiously.

“No.”

“But…”

“No, Varric. Leave it. This is my problem.” The last person Aurora wants to trouble with this is the former Kinloch Hold Templar.

She plasters a pleasant smile on her face again. Reaching over to Varric’s hand, she gives it a friendly squeeze. “I should go, I actually have a lot of work to do,” she says, giving Varric a quick wave as she lifts from her seat. “I will see you around, Varric.”

Just as she is about to walk away, she spins around, pointing at him while winking, “Don’t go putting me in any of your stories, Dwarf.”

Varric raises his hands in surrender, “Who me? I wouldn’t dream of it…”

She chortles, “HA! Of course not.” She resigns herself with the notion that she will probably see her likeness in a story of his someday. *A day when this is all over and he is too far away to feel my wrath.*

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Reading through a dry tome in the dimly lit library, searching for any information she can find on wardens or blood rituals, she yawns. The near constant reading of the last two days has tired her eyes. She never fully caught up on the rest she lost from her late night in the tavern, either.

Memories she's been trying to avoid flash in her mind, freshly woken after her conversation with Varric. Thinking of the events sends a shiver down her spine. Envisioning the Knight-Commander’s kind eyes on her makes her heart clench.

*Ser Barris. Gorgeous, kind, bewildering Knight-Commander Delrin Barris.*

She can almost feel his touch on her fingers, skin tingling as she remembers his lips pressed upon them. He said he wanted to see her again. How could he want to see her again? He could have been being polite. He didn’t make an actual plan to see her. But he kissed her hand in a manner that she’s never witnessed unless the man is…

*No he can’t be. Stop being silly. That man is not interested in you.*

She shouldn’t even toy with the idea, anyway. She can't trust herself around him. He shows up and Aurora goes to mush. She has never reacted in such a way before. He brings out a version of her that she doesn’t like, a version that she has no control over.

*You can’t let yourself feel for him.*

Her heart feels heavy. It aches with a longing she has never allowed herself to feel. She senses a deep burning inside her, like there is a part of her that has been released from prison. She wants it to just go back into its cage. She needs to stop thinking about him and never see him again. Maybe then her life will go back to normal. Yes. That’s it.

*Put that gorgeous man out of your mind…*
“I know that look, you’re thinking of a man,” the Tevinter Altus Dorian Pavus quips, seemingly appearing out of nowhere.

Aurora glares at him and crinkles her nose, “I am doing no such thing, Vint.”

“Oh, come now, we’ve been working alongside each other long enough, when are you going to realize that you like me? I like me, you should really give it a try,” he smirks and sits at the small table she occupies. He looks so proud of himself, with that ridiculous black, curled mustache of his twitching as he smiles.

Aurora finds the man is absurd. He always struts around the keep like a peacock with his wild and flashy clothing. He must spend an hour or more every day preening and perfecting his hair, and the curl of his mustache. He always wears garments that expose only one arm, to show off his tan and muscles no doubt. The rest of him draped in a garment made of high quality leathers and cloths, covered in glinting metals of straps, clasps, and buckles. Really, so much is going on, Aurora isn’t sure there could be a purpose for any of it beyond him saying ‘Hey look at me!’

Varric calls him ‘Sparkler’ for a reason…

“Why would I trust a Vint that appears out of nowhere the day Corypheus destroys Haven… who is also a Vint… with his army of Venatori…who are a bunch of crazy cultist VINTS?” she asks, crossing her arms and returning a smug look in his direction.

“The Inquisitor trusts me. You need to get over this hang-up, my dear. Not all people from Tevinter are ‘blood magic’ and ‘Let’s tear down the world.’ I came to help put a stop to all of this, and so I am.” He leans in, “One mage to another, I’d think you would understand.” He gestures his hand in a swirl, “Bad reputations of your brethren preceding you and all that.”

She lets out a long sigh through her nose, continuing her glare into his eyes. He has a point, but Aurora doesn’t have to like him for it. He chuckles, “Come now, I know you were daydreaming about a man. We could bond over mutual appreciation.”

“Maker, preserve me,” she says as she glances above.

“You know, you and Cullen have a lot in common. You’re both prudes with gruff exteriors. Is that because you were both at the same circle for a time? Was your circle full of angry little Andrastians?”

“I am no prude, Vint.”

His eyes light up and he claps his hands together. “Well now we’re getting somewhere. Do tell me it’s Cullen you pine for. Oh, that would be wonderful. I bet you two groan with disapproval while you--”

Aurora slams her book, rises from her seat, and walks toward the stairs down to the lower rotunda as he speaks. “Wait, where are you going?” When she doesn’t respond, he calls out, “As you wish. I do rather like watching you leave.”

Aurora enters the rotunda with her tome in hand, surveying the surroundings for the apostate who usually lurks in the area. She finds him atop some scaffolding, painting one of his murals. Ever since their arrival at Skyhold, the elf has been covering the curved walls with murals depicting major events of the Inquisition. The subject matter of this one seems to be centered on the Templars joining the cause.

Politely, she clears her throat to get his attention and silently waits for recognition. After a few long, silent moments, he finally turns a glance over his shoulder in her direction. “Aurora,” he says curtly.
“Solas.” She nods while approaching the scaffolding. “Will it bother you if I read in here? I need to escape a Tevinter invasion.”

“I heard that!” an indignant Dorian bellows from the library balcony above.

Silently, Solas gestures the long handle of his brush toward the large couch in the room. She takes a seat on the plush sofa, opening her book across her lap. Solas returned to his project quickly, ignoring her once again. She takes the opportunity of his distraction to observe him, watching him as he gracefully adds pigment to wet plaster.

Aurora doesn’t know him well, but what she does know, she thinks is strange. She heard that he had appeared to Seeker Pentaghast after the destruction of the conclave. He also was the one who realized that the mark on the Inquisitor’s hand could close the rifts in the veil. But no one knows much about him, including where he came from. He claims to have always been an apostate. Unlike Aurora, who was bound to a circle for her entire life, he roamed free. She has trouble understanding how he kept himself hidden from Templars for so long, as he looks to be her senior by at least ten years.

He is taller than most elves she’s seen, with a long and lithe frame, quite muscular considering how thin he is. He has long ears that are more pronounced by his pale bald head. Foot wraps expose his toes, which make her wonder how he can safely or comfortably travel as much as he claims.

“He is lost. In darkness. Looking. Searching.” Aurora jumps with a start as a ghostly, young man appears in front of her, “She thinks she is unworthy. Hides in the shadows.”

Solas stops his work, turning to view the boy. “Hello, Cole,” he smiles.

“This is Cole?” Aurora asks. She thinks she recalls hearing that name before, perhaps she has even met him before, she cannot be sure. He seems both familiar and foreign. “What is he talking about, how did he just appear like that?” She peers at the young man with deep furrow in her brow, “How did you appear like that, Cole?”

“Cole is a spirit,” Solas answers. Aurora tenses immediately, darting her eyes between the two men. “Calm yourself,” Solas continues, “he is a spirit of compassion. He appears to you because he is trying to help you. You must be in pain in some way.”

“What? No I’m not. Why is there a spirit in Skyhold? Does the Inquisitor know? Is he a demon?” She glares at Cole, “Are you a demon, boy?” She can feel herself start to panic, remembering the demons she had ‘met’ over a decade ago.

“He will not harm you, please relax.” Solas urges calmly as he descends from his scaffolding and approaches.

“I want to help,” Cole says softly, sweetly. He looks into Aurora’s eyes with concern and sadness.

“What? Why? Are you trying to trick me?” She closes her book, firmly holding it against her chest behind tightly crossed, gripping arms, as if shielding herself.

“This is no trick, Aurora. Cole came to the Inquisitor while she fought through Therinfal Redoubt.”

“I helped,” Cole smiles.

“He has been here with the Inquisition ever since, most people have trouble remembering they have seen him, or even see him at all. It is remarkable that he is coming to you in this way.” Solas actually seems excited about this. It is no wonder, the elf spends so much time in the fade conversing with
spirits, she supposes it would be exciting for him to safely interact with one in the physical world. If anyone should know if the spirit can be trusted, it would be Solas.

“Alright,” she says tentatively, trying to relax. She keeps a keen eye on the boy as he approaches closer.

“You don’t need to hide from him. He will heal you,” Cole urges, but Aurora has no idea what he is talking about.

“I’m not hiding from anyone,” she says as she desperately backs her body tighter against the couch in an attempt to repair the ever shrinking space between her and the spirit. Common sense is screaming within her to not let the young man nearer... Or what she has always regarded as common sense, in any case. With the way Solas is looking at her, it feels as if Aurora is being inane. But it is difficult to ignore the decades of training to fear or distrust spirits.

Cole looks to Solas, “She needs let him find light. He needs the dawn.” He looks back at the mage, “Aurora.”

“What is going on!” she yells in panic. “How do you know my name?” The spirit isn’t making any sense, and now he is throwing her name into his strange speech. This is extremely unsettling. She desperately looks at Solas, but he is still calm. A neutral expression on his face.

“Not a name… a light.” Cole furrows his brow as if to concentrate. “This isn’t working I need to try again,” he reaches toward her causing her to scream.

“Don’t touch me, demon!” Aurora propels herself from the sofa and darts away across the room.

“Aurora! Be still, it is against his nature to harm you. You are in no danger.” Solas comes to her side, holding her shoulder in reassurance, “Cole, I do not think it is wise to make her forget. She needs to know you,” he says calmly to the spirit.

Aurora’s confusion grows. Make me forget? She begins to feel that running was exactly the right decision, if this creature could alter her mind from a touch, or just the will to do it. How can it be safe for this demon to be roaming the halls of the castle? Could he not do whatever he pleases and just make everyone forget? Maybe this explains why he seemed somewhat familiar.

She stands there in a cold sweat. Has he made me forget him before?

Cole keeps his distance and thinks silently. All eyes on him. Even curious sets from the library balcony joined the scene, due to her outburst. Dorian’s voice calls down from above, “I know it is unsettling, Aurora, but in the months he has been here, I have yet to witness any malicious activity. He is truly a wondrous creature.” Dorian has gotten carried away with himself again and starts to ramble, “You know, back in Tevinter, we keep spirits as servants. The things they can be made to be are quite marvelous. You should see them... Do you use spirits as servants, Solas? You’d have no trouble capturing them.”

“No. They are intelligent, living creatures. Binding them against their will is reprehensible.” Solas glares toward the Tevinter on the balcony. Aurora silently questions the rationality of discussing the binding of spirits in front of a spirit who seems determined to mess with her mind.

Before Dorian can issue a rebuttal, Cole speaks again, “Screaming. Crying. So much blood. How can they do this to us? We have never done harm.” Aurora’s attention snaps back to the spirit. It is as if he is reading her thoughts from a time long since passed, “You do not have to fear them any longer. They are gone. Dead,” he says to her. Aurora trembles, prompting Solas to move behind her,
bracing both of her shoulders.

“You can be happy,” Cole continues. “The world is different now. You are not there any longer. He will never let harm come to you.”

Tears begin to well in her eyes. She blinks them away and quickly wipes off the wetness with the backs of her hands. She struggles to determine what he is talking about, but also she is powerless to stop a flood of emotions hatching from somewhere in the pit of her stomach.

*He couldn’t know about… He can’t be referring to…*

“I think that is enough for now, Cole.” Solas softly urges.

As quickly as he appeared, Cole vanished.
Chapter Summary

Izzy begins her quest to the Fallow Mire with her rag-tag team.

Chapter Notes

A special moment with the commander, and some indirect focus on our favorite, pissed off scout.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The entire day was spent preparing for the mire. Izzalea marched throughout the keep ensuring everyone was on task. The kitchen prepared stores of assorted jerkies and chewy bars made of grains, fruits, and nuts for the mid-day meals. They packed dried fruits and vegetables, along with everything the crew may need, save fresh meat, to cook stews and porridges at camp.

Izzalea consulted the members of her inner circle, ensuring they knew what was at stake, and that
they would meet her at the gates come first light. She prepped her armor, horse, and packed her essentials. She met with Josephine and Leliana separately to tie up any business needing her attention. The last step of preparation needing her attention is speaking with her other advisor, the commander.

The sky is a painted with navy, purple, and orange as the sun fades behind the mountains. Izzalea blearily walks the battlements to the tower that houses Cullen. She is exhausted. The constant running around of the day and the stress of the morning’s trip weighs on her. Her shoulders are slumped, and her pace is sluggish. She takes a deep breath upon reaching the door of his office. Trying to feign a smile, she pushes her eyes to open wider, willing them to be brighter than they want to be.

As she opens the door, the metal hinges creaking, she peers into the room. Her forced expression falls immediately. She finds Cullen standing, no, pacing slowly beside the bookshelves in the room. He has one hand fisted on his hip, the other clutches his temples between thumb and forefinger. From what she can see of his face, it appears to be in a pained grimace. She barely hears a soft groan rumbling under his breath as he slowly strides back and forth.

“Cullen,” she begins tentatively, fully entering the room and softly shutting the door behind her. “Cullen, are you alright?”

Cullen startles, “Inquisitor!” His hand flies from his head and his eyes spark wide, only to immediately wince, as if the movement and shock caused him pain. He staggers backward a step and clutches his temples again. He groans louder this time before saying, “I’m sorry I didn’t hear you enter.” He wobbles in his footing again. Sighing, he steadies himself by leaning his right shoulder against the bookcase. He pinches the bridge of his nose with his left hand and squeezing his eyes shut.

Izzalea cautiously approaches him. Gently cupping her hand on the forearm that stretches up to his head, she squeezes it reassuringly. “Is it another headache?” She leans her head to see past the hand covering his face. “How bad is it?”

She watches as he fakes a smile. He opens his eyes, golden, pained orbs gazing back at her. His right hand takes hers from his arm, placing it between his gloved palms. He squeezes her hand before releasing it to turn and walk toward the chair behind his desk. “It is nothing I cannot endure, Inquisitor,” he says with a strained edge to his voice as he eases into his chair. Crossing her arms, she sighs and shakes her head. He is still too proud to be vulnerable around her. The proud golden lion.

She struts up to his desk. One arm drapes down, absent mindedly running two fingers along the edge of the wood. She looks across the desk at the man sitting behind it, the man who pretends to be impervious. She can respect that, deciding not to pester him about his recurring migraines.

Plucking an object from atop a stack of papers, she idly inspects it. A small, heavy mabari paper weight. She smiles to herself, running her thumb over the top of its head, as if to pet the dog, before placing the weight back on the papers. Returning the hound to its task.

“I was hoping you’d stop by,” he says to her. She smiles coyly. A soft push of air darts through her nose, a suppressed, shy laugh.

She ducks her head, looking through and lightly fluttering her lashes. “Does that mean you aren’t adverse to those advances I made toward you the other day, Commander?”

He chuckles and bashfully rubs that point on the back of his neck, where it meets his head. The place where the commander holds his tension. Izzalea sways her hips as she sashays around the desk to
lean on it, in a half-sit, next to Cullen. He looks up at her, a soft pink blushing across his cheeks. He opens his mouth, takes a swift breath as if to speak, but presses his lips firmly together again instead. Darting his eyes away from hers, he looks at the work on his desk and sighs through his nose.

“Something on your mind?” she asks as she tips her head toward him.

“I—uh—well, it’s not as if I haven’t thought of what to say to you in this situation,” he stammers, the pink in his cheeks darkens into a soft red. “I’m sorry, Maker’s breath, I’m not very good at this sort of thing.” Shaking his head, he leans forward. Bracing his elbows on the desk, he covers his face with his hands and groans.

Perched beside him, Izzalea patiently waits for him to compose his thoughts. A muffled, frustrated voice speaks behind Cullen’s leather gloves. “You’re the Inquisitor, how could I possibly… You have too much to focus your attention on, I couldn’t possibly… It is too much to ask.”

Izzalea twists at the waist, leaning her weight on the desk through her left arm. She runs her free hand through the soft blond curls on his head. “But I want you to,” she says.

Cullen lifts his head from his hands to look at her. Izzalea’s fingers still twining through the loosening ringlets of golden hair, she smiles down at him with all the grace and beauty of Andraste herself.

Overcome with the sight of her, he whispers, “Maker, you’re beautiful.” He bites his lower lip in contemplation, then smiles at her mischievously. Swiftly, he swipes her hips off the desk and swings her body effortlessly onto his lap. She squeals and laughs as she lands on him, wrapping an arm around his shoulder, and draping her legs over the arm of the chair. Cradled in his arms, the pair grins at each other.

Izzalea’s heart races, excitement flooding through her. Cullen is finally acting on his feelings, she has been waiting for this confidence for months. His leather, gloved hand reaches for her face, tenderly pulling her chin up and over to him as he leans his lips toward hers.

“Are you sure about this, Izzalea?” he asks, his voice low and concerned. His eyes dance back and forth between hers as a small crinkle forms between them.

She brings her free hand to the back of his head, lightly pushing it forward. Encouragement for him to close the distance. Their lips graze against each other, one last hesitation from the commander, lingering his skin on hers with a feather light touch. Izzalea meets him the rest of the way, pressing her lips against his. They kiss sweetly at first, but it soon grows in passion and fervency. The attraction the two have felt for months spills and rushes into this moment. She feels his body relax as he fully gives into temptation. Their hands roam and caress anything they can find even though he is in armor and she is in layers of thick constricting leathers.

Cullen leaves her swollen, panting lips to trail hot kisses down and up her neck before looking at her again. His amber eyes have grown dark, a different kind of flush glows on his face. Breathlessly he says, “That was… really nice.”

Smiling at him, Izzalea traces his strong jaw with her fingertips. “That was exactly what I wanted…”

“Good,” he purrs. Izzalea dashes against his kiss-swollen lips with her thumb, and he playfully pulls it into his mouth. She feels him nibble and glide his tongue along her soft flesh. A shiver rockets its way down her spine.

He pulls her in tightly against his armored chest. He runs his tongue along the delicate shell of her ear
causing Izzalea to whimper and softly sigh with desire. “I will miss you these next few months,” she says.

He groans with disappointment, pressing his forehead to the side of hers. “Maker preserve me. Now that I have you, I never want to let you go.”

Izzalea chuckles softly, “How long had you wanted to kiss me, Commander?”

Pulling her up, he drops his mouth back down to the soft nape of her neck. He kisses and nips at the skin. Smiling, he buries his muffled response against her, “Longer than I’d care to admit.”

“Well, then I suppose we are both fools. All that matters is that we are here, now… together.”

He moves his head back to her level, pressing a kiss to her cheek. Breathing deeply, he closes his eyes. “Please be careful. The Avvar are fierce warriors.” He brings his hand up to cup her cheek while he kisses her temple. “Come back to me,” he whispers into her hair.

She cups her hand over his, “I promise.”

He breathes out in relief and pulls her even tighter into him. Her head rests on the large fur mantle that covers his shoulders. “You need all the rest you can get before your departure. As much as it pains me to say it, you should return to your quarters,” he says.

Groaning in disappointment, Izzalea squeezes him tightly. “Can you not come with me… to my room?”

A low and wicked laugh bellows in his chest. “No, Izzy. I don’t think that’s wise. I’m sure that I couldn’t control myself if I did, and you deserve far better than that.”

“Such a gentleman,” she sighs into the fur. She breathes in his scent deeply, wishing she could keep it with her always.

He laughs again, “Trust me, it is not easy.” He loosens his grip in order to pull her chin back up to him, delicately placing another soft kiss on her lips. “Goodnight, Izzalea.”

Reluctantly, he releases her from his arms and she rises from his lap. “Goodnight,” she purrs, before rustling his hair, letting soft curls fall from their usual precise positioning. She turns slightly as she walks away, giving him a wink before opening the door back to the castle. He flashes her that sexy smirk of his, before she disappears behind a door.

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The next morning, before the sun has even crested in the horizon, Izzalea strides hazily toward a small company of horses, her companions, and a handful of workers near the courtyard gates. She yawns and stretches, then pulls her long, auburn hair back into a loose knot at the crown of her head.

“Ebony is packed and ready for your departure, your Worship,” a stable boy reports as Izzalea approaches her steed. She adjusts her riding gloves and glances a quick inspection of Ebony’s riggings. Nodding with approval, she thanks the boy.

Izzalea surveys the scene to ensure everyone is accounted for in the group surrounding her. Solas is already mounted and waiting, staring stoically toward the bridge and gateway to the mountain pass. Cole softly pets his horse’s mane and whispers into her ear. Iron bull ribs his mercenary lieutenant, sounding as if he is giving his final orders for what he expects from the Chargers while he is away.
Near Iron Bull, Izzalea notices a small woman with wild, dreaded hair, fidgeting with her horse’s gear. She assumes the woman is Abner, the scout Leliana insisted accompany her. The mystery wears a deep scowl on her face, Izzalea senses she is very displeased with her assignment. The Inquisitor approaches the scout to introduce herself, but she acts as if Izzalea is not even there. Clearing her throat to get her attention, Izzalea addresses her, “Good morning, you must be Abner.”

She turns to look at Izzalea, still scowling, she grunts, “Yeah.”

Abner displays absolutely no intimidation from Izzalea’s size nor position. No care to address her with respect, in fact Abner’s eyes are glowering with the opposite. Izzalea cannot help but feel impressed that this scout of small stature is unaffected by what many others tremble and bow to. It’s actually rather refreshing, as well as pleasing to know that Leliana keeps a house full of strong-willed, confident agents to send on the Inquisition’s secretive missions.

Izzalea smirks at the woman, “Great. Well…carry on then.” Abner rolls her eyes and weightlessly jumps onto her mount. She steers the horse away, toward the gate, where she stops near Solas, waiting with her arms crossed. Izzalea barks a laugh at Abner’s brazen display of contempt. Catching the eye of Bull, she tips her head toward Abner and snorts, “I think I like this one…”

The qunari laughs and mounts the massive horse that supports his equally massive size. “Say Boss, I told Krem and the Chargers to trail behind your scout team that headed to the west. Just in case they find something that needs addressing before we can get out there,” the qunari informs her.

“Good idea, thanks Bull.” She turns to mount Ebony when she catches the sight of another mounted horse trotting up to the party from the distance. Rhaegar Hawke rides toward the group from the direction of the stables, with what looks to be a fully packed steed.

Puzzled, Izzalea calls out to him, “Going somewhere, Hawke?”

He steers his horse alongside her and smiles, “Yes.” He winks down at her, “With you.”

Izzalea peers at him quizzically and furrows her brow. “What? Why?”

“I just thought the more help you have retrieving your men, the faster you can return.” He winks at her, “I’m not sure how long those pesky wardens can wait for our prying and meddling.” She then catches him steal a quick glace toward the angry and impish scout by the gate. She follows his glance and notices Abner glaring at Hawke as if fire shoots from her eyes.

Confused, but moving on, Izzalea nods at the Champion, “That is really not necessary, but I appreciate the assistance.”

Taking a deep breath, Izzalea mounts Ebony and guides her through the courtyard gate, over the bridge, and out into the mountain pass.

The ride down the mountain into the low lands of Ferelden is fairly uneventful. Her sleepy companions keep quiet until about midmorning. Then, some low chattering of conversations rouse. By the time they reach the foot hills, Iron Bull is loud and boisterous. The rowdy qunari jokes with Hawke, subjecting the group to their particular brand of raunchy humor. Poor, sweet Cole finds himself with more questions than amusement from their antics. Solas adds a few clever quips here and there, which is quite entertaining, considering he usually keeps to himself.

Abner however, never says a word. Izzalea senses Hawke repeatedly trying to get a reaction from the agent, but she abstains vehemently, avoiding all recognition of the mage. Instead, her eyes constantly survey the land, keeping a look out for trouble. Her face is like cold steel. Not as much as
a glance toward anyone in the party.

The journey continues this way until they stop to rest and feed their horses… and their own growling bellies.

Finding a comfortable spot against the base of a tree, Izzalea sits and unwraps the packaging surrounding her afternoon rations. She has a view of everyone in the little, cleared forest enclave by the road that they found. She watches her companions as they all find spots to sit and snack, or brush and coo at their horses. Izzalea takes a bite from a thick bar of grains and fruits. It is tough and chewy, but small enough to carry many for their expedition. Not an exciting meal, to say the least, but they provide enough energy midday, without having to make a fire to cook a stew.

As she chews on her meal, Izzalea watches Abner finish tending to her horse before she grabs her own bar from her knapsack. She sits on a fallen log and quietly partakes in her lunch, until Hawke approaches her from behind. He walks up to her softly, cautiously. His face covered with worry, quite the juxtaposition from his behavior with Iron Bull earlier. In a low and hesitant tone, he addresses her, “Abner… Can we talk?”

She scowls intensely, but does not look at him. “You should not be here,” she growls.

He shakes his head, lifts a hand in frustration, then uses it to scratch the top his head. “How could I not? I was worried about you. After what happened…” he sighs and crouches next to her, “You gave me no answers, and then when I woke…you were just…gone.”

She still refuses to look at him, the cold of her shoulder is so icy even Izzalea can feel it. While Abner says nothing, Hawke stays and sits on the ground. He stares at her with concern and patience. They sit this way for minutes. Abner doesn’t move, not even to eat her meal-bar. Finally, he reaches out to her shoulder. An unsure, crooked smile on his lips, he says “Bear?”

She shrugs him off, but turns her stare to his eyes. Her strange, thick accent is dark and angry. “What do you care? You don’t even know me,” she sneers.

He is unharmed by her words. Instead of pain, anger, or indifference, hope springs to his face. As if the fact that she is finally looking at him is all he needs. “I’m sorry. Maybe I’m an idiot, but I think I got to know you enough to care about what happens to you. I know that something in that bog has shaken you. I couldn’t let you do it alone.”

She rolls her eyes and groans, pointing to the rest of the camp of people around them. “I ain’t all that alone now, am I?” She sighs and takes a bite of her meal bar. Through her chewing, she rolls her eyes, slumps forward, resting her elbows on her knees, and says, “I’d be better off if I was alone.”

Izzalea is very intrigued. She knows she should allow them their privacy, but the scene is all unfolding right in front of her. She can’t help but watch… and silently root for Hawke. It is nice to see him so serious, when all of her encounters with him so far have been full of sarcasm and perversion.

It seems Izzalea isn’t the only one eaves dropping on the quarrel. Iron Bull bellows out to them, “Oh c’mon Abner! Give him a chance!” In response, Abner shoots the qunari an evil glare.

Hawke grins smugly, a display much closer to the personality Izzalea has grown accustomed. He turns his body so that his back leans against the log, and stretches out his legs, crossing them at the ankles. “Whatever it is that has you so upset. I will be there to help get you through it.” He stretches out his arms and brings them to the back of his head, looking ever so proud of himself. “You just have to deal with it. My little bear.”
“Andraste on a cracker, man. You’ve barely known me a day,” she groans.

“That didn’t stop you the other night,” he grins to himself before he registers the fact that her fist has flown into his face, knuckles connecting sharply against his nose. Hawke grips at it as blood pools from his nostrils and into his mustache and beard. He howls in pain. “Shit Abner! It was a fucking joke!” he screams. “Holy Fuck! I think you broke it!”

Abner sits proudly, chuckling to herself as Solas rushes to Hawke’s aid. Izzalea can’t help but snicker softly under her breath as she watches the melee. She thought she was rooting for Hawke, but that punch was amazing.

Cole appears next to the Inquisitor. It would have startled her, if it wasn’t such a common occurrence. She briefly turns her attention to the spirit while continuing to note the sounds of excitement. Solas speaks to Hawke in an irritated tone while healing the grumbling, wounded man, Iron Bull is howling in laughter, and Izzalea still can’t help but find the entire display amusing.

“He wants to help her.” Cole smiles at Izzalea, “You should, too.”

“Help with what, Cole?” she asks.

“They were wrong to her. She thought she had healed, but the Nightingale brought the hurt back.” Cole’s light blond eyebrows pinch at the middle, the corners of his mouth drop, his eyes lose focus as he channels thoughts. His voice is soft, hoarse, and frantic, “Gushing wounds. Broken heart as well as bones. Living under thumb. Isolated. Terrified. No one can know. Hide it away.” He looks at Izzalea again, urgently, “We have to protect her. Her worst nightmare is waiting in that mire.”

“Okay Cole, we will protect her.” She knows better than to try to get anything more specific from the spirit. He is great at helping, but not so great at being direct in his speech. He only gives enough information to make her curious. And with all of the secrecy around this woman, Izzalea is certainly curious about what her secret is.

She points at the scene in front of them, “Although Cole, I have a feeling she can take care of herself.”

“She was powerless before. She worries it will be the same. She needs our strength to fight it.”

Izzalea nods. She and the spirit sit and watch as Solas cleans and mends Hawke’s nose and ego. Bull is practically doubled over with his guttural laughter. Abner still smiles with self-satisfaction, perched on her log. When Izzalea catches her eye, she raises her meal bar in solidarity. Abner’s grin broadens while replicating the gesture.

Yes, I like her.

Cole leans his head on Izzalea’s shoulder, he pleasantly hums. “I’m glad you helped the lion. He is so much brighter now.”

She chuckles, he must be referring to her time with Cullen the previous evening. “I can’t help but feel bright about it, too.”

“Yes!” He lifts his head and looks her in the eye with a joyous smile. “You were always bright, too bright for me to see, but now you are even brighter! Warmer, too.” He places his head back on her shoulder, “It is like sitting next to a warm fire. Are you happy?”

“Yes, Cole. I am very happy.”
“He thinks you are perfect. Never had the courage. But you pushed him, patiently. He needed that,” he hums.

“I think he is perfect, too.”

Chapter End Notes

An Abner chapter is next! Some answers to your questions will be given.

Also, I wanted to shout-out to all of you reading this. It really means a lot that you are part of the journey.

Special thanks to everyone who kudos, comments, and talks to me about this fic here and on tumblr. You guys keep me going... thank you <3
Relics

Chapter Summary

Follow Abner through the Fallow Mire. What will happen when her crew stumbles on an old relic of her past?

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Violence.
Battles happen in this chapter. Descriptions of death and carnage ahead.

-In Love, Serenity-

"I swear, if the guts of the undead tarnish my new armor..." Izzalea complains, fitfully brushing rotten entrails from her body with irritated disgust. As if armor was only made to be seen, rather than actually used.

-Abner-
Abner remembers why she prefers to work alone.

But let’s face it, she never forgot.

Ever since they arrived in the bog it has been nothing but misery. Rain, mud, the undead, demons, and constant griping. However, the bog and its contents don’t bother Abner. She’s known worse. But it is the incessant whining from the people around her that has her hackles up. It’s bad enough that Leliana sent her here to deal with an Avvar clan at all, but really, she could have accomplished this mission on her own. It would certainly be less of a head ache.

This clan may be calling for Izzalea personally, but Abner is confident she could quietly and efficiently take care of all Avvar involved in this mess. They would deserve every death, and she would be happy to give each one, personally.

Interrupting her thoughts, Abner spots alarming movement in her periphery. She finds Hawke about to make another stupid mistake. She darts over to him, yanking him violently from the water’s edge and back onto the pathway. She glares at him as he looks at her, wounded and astonished. She scolds him as if he is a child, because that is how he acts. “You nob, you almost stepped in the water…again…” She grits her teeth at the man. When is he going to get it through his thick skull that disturbing the waters in this bog wakes the undead lying within? He has continually stepped in when it was unnecessary, rousing the undead, and causing the group to fight more than they already have to.

...Seriously….These people...

He huffs and brushes off his robes indignantly. “Maybe if I hadn’t suffered a blow to the head yesterday, I wouldn’t feel so disoriented today.” Abner rolls her eyes and shoves him forward down the trail. How is this buffoon supposed to be a champion? He certainly doesn’t act like one.

“Maybe if you hadn’t been so mouthy, Abner wouldn’t have needed to put you in your place,” Iron Bull chuckles. Inwardly, Abner appreciates Bull’s retort, but she is trying to be emotionless toward anything concerning Hawke. She doesn’t understand why he came. He has seen too much of her already. He needs to just fade into the background, like all of the others before him. When she saw him stride up to the group back at Skyhold, she decided she would try to ignore him as best she could, maybe then his crush on her would be squashed.

“It was a joke!” he sneers back at the qunari. She knew he didn’t mean any real harm by what he said, but it is easier to push him away… as roughly as she needs to.

“I do believe our assassin friend did not find your poor attempt at levity to be very amusing,” Solas quips with a smug grin.

Irritated with the ribbing everyone has given him since she punched his arrogant, little nose, Hawke growls at Solas, “You think?!”

Abner considers her options for a moment. She crosses her arms and cocks her head at the brooding mage. Being rough with him isn’t working. It has only clouded his judgement, thus far. Perhaps she should try another approach.

“All right how ’bout this… everyone will all stop teasing you,” he lifts his head and looks at her with hopeful eyes. “IF you stop stepping in the damn water every five minutes. I mean seriously,” she points along the trail below their feet. “There is a path right here… follow it…”

He scratches his head, “I kept thinking I saw something in the water. Treasures. I love shiny things,”
he pouts.

See? A child. What a dolt...a cute dolt...but a dolt nonetheless.

Groaning with disapproval, Abner points her finger in Hawke’s face. “Well, stop. No touching,” she says sternly. She follows her scold with a quick smile, hoping a little lightheartedness from her will help him focus.

“A smile!” He cheers and points as she rolls her eyes playfully, “A smile! Did you see that, Bull? I think she is coming around.”

“Or she is using the tactics one exploits when speaking to a simpleton... with you.” Solas interjects causing Abner to snort. Hawke glares at the elven apostate. She allows herself to display her amusement at the situation. For all of the reasons she has to be irritated with everyone, this group is oddly endearing as well. Also, she can’t help but think that the elf just gets her, with all of his clever witticisms aimed at knocking Hawke down from his smug pedestal. His adorable, smug pedestal.

“Alright kids. Let’s calm it down,” Izzalea orders, annoyed. Her mood has been sour ever since they discovered that the bog is teaming with undead, just waiting to rip their heads off. Abner can’t blame her. Being a noble, Izzalea is most likely accustomed to much finer things than rotten bogs the smell of death and decay.

She points down the trail. The darkness and rain are so thick that it’s difficult to see even ten paces ahead. “I think I see another one of those beacons. Maker, I hope we are almost done with all of this druffalo shit. Prepare yourself for demons, everyone.” The team cautiously approaches. “Solas, on our ready, light the beacon.”

Cole and Abner crouch on opposite sides of the group. Daggers drawn, ready to strike. With every previous beacon, lighting it not only pulled the undead from the waters, but also summoned terror demons. It has been rough, but Izzalea insists that they void the area from as much evil as they can. Between the beacons, a few fade rifts, and the easily disturbed, hidden undead, they have been fighting nearly nonstop since they arrived.

Solas places a magical barrier over everyone before he lights the beacon with veilfire. Immediately after, a horrifying screech erupts from the ground as a terror demon rips through the veil. Tall, sinewy, and disgusting, it shrieks with an ear-piercing magnitude that makes Abner see stars. While ripping outwardly with long, razor-sharp claws, the demon swipes a lengthy and boney tail behind it to trip-up anyone trying to flank it.

The Inquisitor doesn’t flinch; she immediately throws her grappling chain forward and entangles the creature within its metal links. Yanking it to her with a powerful war cry, she fearlessly bashes into it with her piercingly sharp-edged shield, stunning the monstrous creature. Iron Bull runs to her side and begins swinging his enormous axe into the demon with bloody rage. Blood and bone begin spraying everywhere as the demon shrieks and tries to free itself from their grasp.

Abner detects the undead rising from the surrounding waters. They slowly skulk forward, flanking the melee. She nods at Cole and he nods in return. On opposite sides of the fray, they stealth through the brush and weeds. Flanking their rotting, unaware enemies as they attack.

One by one, Abner sneaks up from behind and jabs a dagger forcefully through skulls. More difficult kills require her to jab and swing as they attack her, slicing their throats hard enough to rip off their heads. Others still, she assaults and forces to stumble to the ground, where she jumps on their brittle, disgusting bodies to ram her blades in into their brains. Putrid bodies stack and fall limp at her feet. Decaying flesh and thick, congealed blood covers her body. With each fresh kill, layer after layer of
blood and guts paints over her skin and armor.

The undead Cole and Abner cannot reach in time, are sucked into a vortex by Solas. He manipulates the energies in fade so that a large group can no longer move. They are helplessly gathered into a rancid pile of crunching, shattering bones and slimy, gelatinous flesh. The rift mage then raises their bodies high in the air, only to quickly smash them back to the ground with immense force. Hawke follows up by unleashing a fire storm on top of the corpses. The smell of scorching, foul flesh releases into the air. Abner coughs and attempts to block the smoke from infiltrating her nose with a blood-wet forearm.

“Abner, watch out!” the Inquisitor frantically calls out to her. In that moment, Abner notices the ground beneath her shakes. Before she can roll, or jump, or run out of the way, a terror demon erupts from the earth. The power with which it springs through the veil, forces her to slam to the ground on her back. Her head smacks against a rock hard enough to cause her vision to blur. She lays there stunned for too long, as every moment in battle is open to life-threatening consequences.

“No!” Solas screams. He freezes the demon in place. Immediately, he doubles over, panting from exhaustion. The freeze holds just long enough for Hawke to run to Abner’s stunned, motionless body. He scoops her into his arms, bolting away from the demon as it breaks free from the freeze. With another ear-deafening screech, the demon madly swipes its claws outward.

The rest of group descends on the demon, attacking with all of their might. Izzalea screams and bashes it with her shield, demanding its attention to focus on her. As she blocks frenzied attacks, Cole and Iron Bull stab and slash with their weapons. They rip through the flesh of its screaming, ghastly body until finally, the demon falls into a wet pile of slime, skin, and bone.

Hawke and Abner lie on the ground, panting from pain, away from the battle. He had brought her there, laying her carefully on the dirt before collapsing beside her. Now, he strains to lean over her, brushing her coiled hair from her face. “Are you alright?” he pants, breathless, and stressed. His eyes dart back and forth between hers, sick with worry, searching for recognition. Needing to see the cloudy daze lift from her eyes, to know that she is alright.

Abner squeezes her eyes shut. “Yeah, I’m fine,” answering with a groan, she reaches to rub the back of her head. Her fingers become slick with blood. She curses under her breath and blinks her eyes quickly, trying desperately to find the focus that is taking too long to return. As the shapes in her vision find alignment, she notices that Hawke is wincing. The pain carried in his face is greater than it would be from just falling to the ground. Concerned that he was hit, Abner jumps to her knees, pushing through the intense dizzy spell the movement conjures, and frantically looks over his body.

“What about her head,” Hawke groans as he slowly lies flat on his back. He lifts his hand and points to the scout kneeling beside him, “She hit her head pretty hard.”
Solas looks at Abner, before he can speak she shrugs him off. “I’m fine, go check on everyone else.”

Solas sighs and stands, walking away to inspect the others. As he does Hawke grumbles, “No you’re not. You’re bleeding.” He weakly grabs the hand stained with her blood on the fingers.

“That’s undead blood.”

“No it’s not.”

Abner rolls her eyes, grabbing another small healing potion from her belt. She flashes the bottle in his face with a perturbed glare, before downing its bitter, thick liquid. “There. You can shut up about it now,” she says as she tosses the empty bottle to the ground.

With the threat of Hawke’s life now subsided, anger bubbles up inside her. “What do you think you were doing?” She shouts, roughly punching Hawke in the shoulder.

Labored, he sits up enough to rest on his elbows. He sharply barks back a retort, “Saving your sorry ass.”

“You’re a daft fool!” She stares daggers into him. Shoving him harshly back down on the ground, she rises to her feet. She disguises a dizzy wobble with the act of brushing dirt from her knees. “You could have been killed.”

“And what about you?” He sneers up at her indignantly.

“I would have been fine. I was just about to… to….” Abner searches for words, but her ire, or more likely her banged-up skull, is causing a hazy mind. “To throw a dagger in its face and leap away.” She crosses her arms and taps her foot, infuriated. But is she mad at him for putting himself in harm’s way? Or is she mad at herself for being vulnerable enough that he felt compelled to save her?

“Sure you were,” he scoffs. “You were dazed on the ground! You would be dead right now if I hadn’t…” He shakes his head, infuriated. “I think the words you are searching for, my dear, are thank you.”

“Okay, can we quit with this pissing contest?” Izzalea shouts from a short distance away. She and the others stand at the trail, waiting to continue their trek. “You’re both pretty. So, if you’re quite done with the bickering, we have a purpose here.” She signals her hands in a twirl that ends with her pointing into the misty, rainy beyond. “Let’s move out. I want to get the fuck out of this Maker forsaken pit they call the Fallow Mire before I grow old.”

Grunting, Abner stomps to the body of the demon. She grabs her daggers from ground where she dropped them when she fell. Cursing to herself in a language no one can hear, but couldn’t understand if they did, she wipes blood and guts from her blades onto her leather covered legs. She sheathes her blades while connecting a mutual glare with the champion. Both stubborn and haughty, they don’t speak to each other as they bring up the rear to their bog-trudging party.

The vexed group continues on their journey, walking through the miserable atmosphere in silence. All members of the little group are either angry with each other, or simply refraining from speaking - in hopes to not make the tension worse. They continue trekking through the mire this way, until they hear fighting ahead. Abner steels herself. A sick feeling forms in her gut from wondering who they will find.

They cautiously approach the sounds of a small skirmish… and then Abner sees him… a very large Avvar man battling a group of undead. He towers over them and swats them away as if they are merely flies. He is gigantic, far larger than even Iron Bull. I almost forgot how huge they are, she
thinks as the sickness intensifies in her gut.

The Avvar giant finishes snapping the neck and crushing the head of his last undead victim as Izzalea reaches him. She stands at the ready in front of and shielding her crew, hesitant of what the man might do. He casually holds his mace on his shoulder, as if he doesn’t have a care in the world. He looks her up and down with indifference. “So, you must be Herald of Andraste.”

The Avvar wear paint and furs on their skin, with large face-covering helmets of varying metals, leathers, horns, bones, and dreaded hair. Abner did not recognize him at first, but as he spoke, the realization hits her like an axe to the gut. She’d recognize that thick, booming accent anywhere. A relic of her past. She always hoped she’d never see the day…

The Inquisitor peers at him, “I am…Why are you not attacking?”

“My kin want you dead, low lander. But it’s not my job. I’m called in when the dead pile up. Right’s for the Gods, mending for the bleeding, a dagger for the dying. That’s what I do. You’ll need no fear from me. Our Chieftain’s son wants to fight you, but I don’t pick up a blade for a whelp’s trophy hunt.” The Avvar man states matter-of-factly.

He exudes undeniable, unwavering confidence. Being surrounded by a group of possible combatants, covered in blood, doesn’t even register with him. He has nothing to fear, he is Avvar. He surely thinks he could squash the entire group like bugs if given a reason to. But in actuality, he is Sky Watcher. A shaman to the Avvar. He has a close relationship with spirits and the Gods. As an augur, he provides the last bits of comfort to dying members of his clan. He will only fight in self-defense, or if given just cause.

The fact that he is not aligned with the mission his leader is on is very good news. Perhaps there are others in the clan who think as he.

Abner takes a deep breath. Pushing through the fear born in her belly, she silently approaches him from behind the Inquisitor. Low yet strong in confidence, she addresses the colossal man, “Amund.”

He turns his head down to the petite woman. Grinning through his mask and beard he declares, “Well lookie here.” Chuckling, he swings his mace off of his shoulder and down to the ground. All muscles of the surrounding people tense as he does, but Amund simply leans on the hilt. Seemingly pleased, he looks the woman up and down. “Abner… hmph. Never thought I’d see you again.” Abner takes the fact that he did not immediately attack her as a good sign.

“You know this goliath?” Hawke calls out from the back of the group, but she ignores him.

“Abner used to be my kin,” Amund states, much to her distaste. As if it would not be a shock to those around her. Not that he cares.

There is a stunned silence surrounding her, save but the sounds of the rain smacking water-logged ground and distant rolling thunder. She glowers at the man and continues, ignoring the shock around her, “Which son, Amund?”

“You know already. Ofred Movransen, but he calls himself ‘Hand of Korth’ now,” Amund responds.

Abner chokes a sharp laugh, “Of course he does. Ofred always thought himself important. Now he thinks he is the hand of the Mountain-Father.” She shakes her head and crosses her arms. “Daft tit. What’s he want the Herald for?”

“He thinks it will win him favor with the Gods to kill her. Thinks that since she claims divinity, she
needs destroying.”

Confidence rises steadily within her, as Amund has yet to show her any animosity. She rolls her eyes, annoyed and slightly amused. “Oh there will be destroying… How are the men he took?”

“A couple were wounded, but alive, last I saw them. They killed far more of us than I thought they would. Someone’s trained them well.” He grins at her. An approval. Abner feels a sense of pride within her, however brief. For as Amund finished his statement, the veil rips and crackles behind them.

Solas calls out in alarm, “Inquisitor! A rift!”

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After they finished attacking the demons that poured from the rift, Izzalea closed it with the green mark on her hand. The act stabilized the veil between the physical world and the fade once again. Amund had aided in fight, and amazingly, no one was hurt. After the veil was restored, Amund admitted that he was impressed with the Inquisitor’s ability. He stated, “Maybe you do have a God’s favor,” before he disappeared, chuckling assumedly, into the darkness.

Although it was dark and dreary the entire day, their exhaustion proved that it was time to rest. They secured a camp under the overhang of a large rock formation. Solas sat alone, crafting more health potions for the next day. Iron Bull and Cole worked together, cooking a stew with some frog meat Aber caught, over a fire Hawke conjured. Hawke ensured the horses were properly tended and tethered. Izzalea sat and stared into the fire, her face weighted in thought. Everyone was quiet, but Abner felt their eyes often glancing over her while she set up the tents.

She knows they have questions after the information-bomb Amund dropped. Nevertheless, the interaction with him unfolded much smoother than Abner had feared. Discovering who it is that has the Inquisition’s soldiers though, left her with a dreadful pit in her stomach. Her worst fear realized. Part of her knew it had to be him when Leliana first told her about this mission. Ofred is sole reason she reacted the way she did.

However, Abner knows much more now than she did years ago. She can take care of herself far better than she was able to before. As a young woman, she was never taught how to successfully fight a person the size of the Avvar. Never shown how to utilize her smaller, lighter frame to her advantage. How to take out men ten times her size with ease.

But she knows now.

She can do this.

Finished pitching the tents, Abner sits on a rock beside the fire. She quietly cleans and sharpens her blades while watching as Bull stirs frog and carrot stew. The tension in the air is heavy. Palpable. She knows they all have questions. But she strongly avoids indulging them. She never wanted anyone to know in the first place. Yet, here she is.

Time passes slowly, when no one speaks. Once ready, they all eat their stew in silence. A few murmured comments about the flavor of their meal and the ever persistent rain, but not much more than that. Afterwards, they all help clean up and retire to their tents.

Abner lies in her bedroll, unable to sleep. She listens to the soft snore coming from the Inquisitor across from her in their shared tent, the sounds of thunder clapping violently through the sky as the storm intensifies, and the endless downpour of rain slapping against the wet, marshy ground. Her
eyes finally grow heavy as exhaustion wins the battle of her worried, racing mind. A mind focused on what could happen when they find the rest of the Avvar.

Sitting on a mountain side, Abner grins into the sunrays warming her soul. The cool, dry mountain air races across her prickled skin. She loves this spot. She always comes here to get away from him. The one place where he never found her. Here Abner can be happy. Brief periods of time where she feels safe, where she can pretend she lives a different life. A life that is filled with laughter and excitement, rather than screaming and pain.

She carefully stands and tries to balance herself on a narrow, rocky ridge. She thinks about how easy it would be to make the hurt stop, forever. But as she balances her bare feet on the edge of the ridge, she realizes that somehow, she is preforming better than she thought she could. Strange, she doesn’t remember having good balance…

“Were you always so graceful and composed?” A voice purrs from behind her. She startles, waverung in her balance. Amazingly, she manages to spin around without falling down the mountain.

“No… I wasn’t?” Abner furrows her face, trying to concentrate, but it is difficult. “Or… I’m not? I’m not sure.” She looks at the man, confused. “Who are you? How did you find me?”

“I live here, of course,” he says with an impish grin. The stranger strides effortlessly along the ridge and sits beside her dusty, bare feet.

She is sitting next to him now, but doesn’t remember how she made the delicate maneuver. She squints her eyes as she peers quizzically at him, “You live on the mountain?”


She frowns suspiciously at the stranger. “You’re mental. You can’t live everywhere.”

“I can, and I do,” he proudly responds.

What an odd thing to say. This is so weird. Everything feels weird. Wrong. He seems familiar, but she doesn’t know him. His hair is long, dark, and dreaded, like hers. His skin is a warm, rich, and sun-kissed like hers. But his features are angular and strong. He has the long slender ears and body of an elf, yet he is larger and more muscular than any elf Abner has ever seen. She admires the small skull he wears at the crown of his head. Tiny teeth and beads drape down from the skull, woven into his dreaded hair. He looks wild and feral.

Like me.

“What’s your name, stranger?” she asks.

“I go by many names, da’len,” he responds with a smirk.

She glowers and spits her words at him, “I am no child of yours, hahren.”

“Intriguing. Do you know more of the Elvhen language?” He peers at her as if she a subject on a table, awaiting dissection.

She radiates a noise of disgust and rolls her eyes. But suddenly, she feels her heart racing, panic setting in. This is all wrong. Everything is wrong. She doesn’t know him. Why is she here? She hasn’t been on this mountain in years and she would never risk coming back.
Wait.

She knows what’s happening.

“Shit!” she squeaks. Glaring, Abner side-eyes the stranger beside her. “I know what you are…”

“Oh?” he appears delightfully entertained by her declaration.

“Fadewalker. I am asleep.” She is dreaming and therefore in the fade, revisiting a place that once made her feel comfortable when she was weak. And this man… this fadewalker… is a mage traveling the fade, looking for people to pester. *I won’t let him pester me.*

He smiles smugly, “Ah, so you have realized that you are in the fade. Very good, da’len.”

“What are you doing here, Fadewalker? What do you want from me? Why have you possessed my dreams?” She crosses her arms and glares at the man with contempt.

He raises his long, lithe body effortlessly and begins to blithely walk back down the mountain ridge. Away from Abner. “I found you… curious, Abner. Thought I would come to see what makes you, you.” His voice is oddly familiar, but she cannot place it.

He spins his body on his toes.  Toes that are open to the dirt and rock, while the rest of his feet are wrapped in an elvhen fashion Abner is familiar with and jealously admires. The swift spin of his elegant body has him facing her again. He has an untamed, savage look in his eye. An impish, insolent grin to his curled lips.

Abner grunts and throws a small rock at the figure. “Get lost Fadewalker, go riddle someone else’s dreams.”

He laughs, amused and unaffected by her disrespect. “Perhaps another time, Abner.” With that he steps off the edge of the ridge, disappearing, as if he was never there.

Abner is left sitting on the mountain side, contemplating how she was able to figure any of that out. Perhaps, the mage had aided her somehow. Perhaps, the ability had been within her all along.
In That Void Shall They Wander

Chapter Summary

Aurora is having a hard time dealing with the past days’ events. Unable to stop the surfaced memories and feelings, she sits in the tavern and lonely, wanders into the void - with the aid of copious amounts of cheap wine.

Chapter Notes

Title is from Threnodies 12:5

If you would like some mood music to go with this chapter, give this a listen: Click here for Spotify -or- Click here for Youtube

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-ChAPAER FOURTEEN
In That Void Shall They Wander

-Aurora-
Alone, Aurora sits in the dark corner of an enclave in the tavern, slowly sipping a glass of the awful, cheap wine available for her purchase. She usually has higher standards when it comes to the consumption of wine, but Aurora felt she needed something stronger than mead to calm her mind. The fact that she is working on her second bottle, only mildly enhances the perceived flavor to her palate. She mainly finds she just cares less and less that it stinks.

Staring silently across the table, not looking at anything in particular, her attention is solely in her mind. The events of the past few days weigh on her. She has spent close to a year with the Inquisition, and until recently, she has managed a fairly uneventful experience. Aside from the day that Corypheus attacked Haven, of course. Since reaching the keep, Aurora has felt relatively safe. She researched and helped where she could, she managed to make a few friends, and she was happy… she thought… as happy as she has ever been capable of being.

Content.

Aurora had surely been content. Satisfied with quietly doing her small part to bring change to Thedas, while keeping herself safe.

But now, everything has been turned upside down. Memories Aurora had long since repressed are bubbling to the surface. She refuses to believe that spirit could have found them, when her subconscious had worked so hard in locking them away. Where had he found the key? Could he truly be a benevolent spirit trying to help, if all that he accomplished was unraveling so much hurt. Hurt Aurora has ignored… or rather, no… hurt that she refused to even acknowledge at all. Ignoring would imply she knew it was there.

Aurora had become so skilled at locking it away that she did it automatically, without thought. Anything else would give it too much power… but it certainly has power now. The pain feels like a storm raging through her body, ripping apart everything it comes in contact with, and refusing to leave or subside.

“I know you will do well. The mages will respect you, but please be careful, my darling.” Aurora reaches out, pulling him into a worried embrace.

“Always, kitten.” He smiles lovingly, cups her cheek in his hand, kisses her forehead, and leaves.

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“My lady…”

“No. No, recruit. You’re wrong. He can’t be. Where is he?”

“So many were lost. Thousands…”

“No. This isn’t right. We were supposed to find peace! He was going to negotiate peace!”

“I’m sorry my lady.”

“No. Get out… get out of my sight, Templar.”

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“Aurora, where are we going? I’m scared.”
“I don’t know, but we have to hide.”

“Can’t we find a town?”

“No. We are apostates now. They will kill us.”

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“I’ve found some! They are in the cave!”

“Leave us. We have done nothing to you.”

“Your wicked ways destroyed the conclave, mage!”

“No, we want peace. Please, we just want to live.”

...Screaming ...

“Hey there, Blaze. You okay?”

...Fire ... so much fire...

“Rory… hello? Can you hear us?”

...Blood… Everywhere… Boiling Blood…

“She doesn’t look good…”

...Deafening Silence… the smell of burnt flesh...

A hand touches Aurora’s. She gazes at it, emotionless, and then slowly lifts her eyes to the faces looking at her from across the table. A young elven woman with pale, freckled skin, grey eyes, and blonde hair, fringe cut into haphazard chunks. Sera. That is her friend Sera. She turns her gaze to the figure touching her hand. Short, stout… dwarf. Strawberry blonde hair pulled back, hazel eyes, shirt open, chest hair. Varric. Varric Tethras and Sera. Worry stretched and shared across their faces.

“Oh, hey,” Aurora says flatly. She lifts her wine to her lips and drinks.

“Oh, hey? Seriously? Are you okay? You look… weird,” Sera scrunches her face, distorting it into a grimace.

“I know that look… if you ever want to get whatever it is off your chest, all you need to do is talk.” Varric pats the hand not busy bringing her goblet to her face.

“Oh, right. If she wants all her shite in some filthy book later,” Sera says dryly.

“You know, some things are sacred, Sera. Like friendships, for example.”

Sera snorts in disgust, “Yeah, just tell that to the twats in Kirkwall…”

“Just stop. I’m fine. I was just remembering…” Aurora pauses to take another drink, “remembering why I am here.” She reaches for the bottle sitting at the table and refills her goblet. “I’m fine.”

They sit in silence for a moment, when Aurora asks, “Say, you guys ever meet a kid named Cole?”

Sera immediately makes a noise and gesture as if something thoroughly repulsed her. Like an intense
shiver invaded her body, she convulses, creates retching sounds, and sticks out her tongue. “Ugh, yeah. Right creeper, that is. Ain’t right. Just wrong.”

Varric knocks his elbow into Sera and shakes his head. “Don’t listen to her, the kid is harmless. Rusty brings him out with us on missions sometimes. He is really skilled in a fight, can get a little… poetic at times when he talks to people, though.” Sera groans and rolls her eyes, disagreeing with Varric’s assessment.

“He said some weird shit,” Aurora sighs – another drink.

“Ah, yeah well, it is important to know that his heart is in the right place. If he talks to you enough, you start to understand him.” Varric dips his head and smiles with friendly, raised brows, hopeful that his words will calm his friend from whatever is on her mind.

Aurora slumps over the table, elbows propping her up. “I don’t want him to talk to me,” she says. Another drink.

“Good luck with that. That thing’s got its sights on you, gonna keep poppin’ up now,” Sera says, unhelpfully.

Another – longer – drink, and then a refill.

“Ah, there you are! Oh good, you’re a wine drinker. Well, I won’t comment on your poor taste, but I will delight you with mine. I bring my own, you see, Cabot never has anything decent,” A smug, lofty voice rings to her left.

Great, Dorian has found her, this is all she needs. Aurora begins to rise from her seat only to realize just how inebriated she actually is. She wobbles trying to keep her balance, but ultimately gives up and plops back down.

“Oh, having a bit of a party, I see. Wonderful.” Dorian slides into the seat next to her, effectively pinning her into the corner. There will be no escape, now.

“Did you fellows know that our dear Aurora is pining for someone? I had my suspicions, but our little spirit friend confirmed it. There is just the matter of for whom she is pining. I think it could be our dear Commander, but I’m unsure. She certainly had quite the reaction when I brought up his name.” Dorian fills his goblet. The Tevinter Altus leans back in a three-quarter turn towards Aurora. Draping an arm over the back of his chair, he brings his wine to his lips while looking down at her as if she is a puzzle to be solved.

“Nah, Cullywully is in it bad for Izzy,” Sera smirks mischievously.

Dorian grins ear to ear at the elf, “Oh really? Izzy and the commander? That’s marvelous!” He looks back at Aurora and frowns, “That would explain why Aurora is so down about the whole thing. A case of unrequited love, my dear?”

“I’m not pining for the commander, Dorian,” Aurora snarls into her goblet, the shape of which is starting to blur in her vision.

“Not that commander… anyway,” Sera giggles. Aurora darts a glaring look across the table at her, all two of her. Varric noticeably suppresses a laugh. Appearing as if he is biting his tongue, he looks down at his ale.

“Oh you two know something don’t you?” the Tevinter mage coos.
Dorian continues to pry for a while - as he generally tends to do - but her friends give him nothing more. Which Aurora appreciates, or she would, if she were to pay them any attention. She is far more interested in the numbness within her body. The violent storm inside her squelched by the toxicity of her blood. She feels more at peace than she has in days, the fact that she cannot focus on anything is a gratifying side effect.

After some time has passed, Aurora has trouble keeping her eyes open, yet the rest of the table is lively. Sera and Dorian play a game of insults to each other. Aurora has to hand it to the man. Even though most people are rude to him, he takes it all in stride. Maybe he isn’t so bad after all. Maybe he truly is different from his famed countrymen. Aurora grins, deciding to enjoy herself, instead of wallowing in numb misery, and join in their fun.

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Aurora opens her eyes and flinches at the pain the light brings. Her mouth feels like a desert. A foul tasting desert. She starts to lift her head and immediately regrets it, nausea threatening to take over. She groans in discomfort, slowly raising herself to an elbow.

“Yer awake!” Sera yells gleefully, grinning wickedly at Aurora. The mage takes in her surroundings. It appears she spent the night on the cushioned bench in Sera’s room.

Voice soft and hoarse, Aurora asks, “What am I doing here?”

“You don’t remember? Of course you don’t.” She starts giggling and grabs her belly, “You were lit!”

“Shit… what did I do?” Aurora asks, but Sera just keeps laughing and doesn’t answer.

Aurora peeps out the window. Seeing that it is still morning, she notices a low grumble in her stomach. “I’m going to go to the mess for water and some food. Thanks for letting me sleep here, I guess,” she says, but Sera continues to giggle maniacally.

“Right, well… see you later.” Aurora slowly lifts herself up, scowling at the sharp pain in her head, and gently walks to the mess hall.

She acquires a bowl of gruel, a tankard of water, and sits in the quietest area of the mess that she can find. Aurora notices that a few Templars eating together smile cruelly while looking at her. They mumble things to each other as they snicker.

Great. I wonder what that is all about.

Gradually, she eats and drinks with her head hanging in pain. Varric silently approaches and slides in across from her, “Hey, Blaze. How ya feelin’?”

“Varric. Did something happen last night? All I remember is sitting in the corner and drinking. Why is everyone laughing?” She strains to lift her gaze to his.

“You don’t remember. I guess that makes sense.” He scratches the back of his head and hands her a foul smelling tankard. “Here, I figured you would have a nasty hangover, so I brought you this. It tastes awful, but it will do the trick.”

“What… what is it?” Aurora smells the contents and almost loses her gruel.

“Kirkwall secret, something we created at the Hanging Man.” Varric chuckles bashfully, “When you live in a rowdy tavern, it’s good to have a strong hangover remedy.” He pushes the tankard closer to
her mouth, urging Aurora to drink it. “Trust me, you don’t want to know what’s in it. Just drink,” he says.

She holds her breath and gulps it down. Awful is an understatement, but as she finishes the last few drops she can already feel the curtain of pain being lifted from her head. “Why is no one telling me what happened last night?” she asks as she places the tankard on the table.

“I think you should feel better before you hear,” he says.

“Well, that’s troubling,” Aurora says flatly. “Out with it.”

Varric scratches the back of his head again, “You had a great time.” He hesitates with a worried look on his face, “Everyone had a great time, remember that, okay?”

“Varric,” she frowns at him, “tell me.”

Varric exhales slowly before answering her. “Ser Barris was there.”

“Ohhhshit.”

“No, no, it was fine. You were having fun!” Varric’s raspy, friendly voice desperately tries to sound hopeful.

“What did I do, Varric?”

“You… danced.”

“I… what?” Aurora doesn’t dance, she never dances.

He laughs quietly, “Barris came to our table and you were… I could barely believe you could stand, honestly. But you crawled over the top of the table to get to him, and you told him… no, you ordered him to dance with you.”

“Oh Maker…” Aurora hangs her head in shame. This explains why Templars are laughing at her today.

“You told him, albeit jokingly, that if he did not dance with you, you would throw him from the battlements with your force,” Varric continues. Aurora feels her face turn green. She might really lose her gruel.

“No don’t freak out! He just laughed and agreed.” Of course he did, was there no line she could cross with this man before he finally demands her branded?

“What else, Varric?”

“Ha, well… you just kind of draped your body on him. I don’t think you could really stand on your own. He twirled you around for a bit. It was cute, all things considered,” Varric grins.

“Cute?” she glares at him, “I highly doubt it was cute. This is mortifying!” Aurora tries to imagine the scene, but all it does is make her want to dig a pit under the table and hide there. Forever.

“Then you’re probably not going to like what you said to him.” Her frown intensifies at his words. “You told him that he makes you feel things, and that the spirit says you can love again.”

This is too much, what the fuck does that even mean? She didn’t understand what the spirit was saying to her, and what does Varric mean, ‘again’?
You know exactly what that means. Stop being stubborn and stop lying. You loved him and you could love this one.

Shut. Up. Don’t make me drown you in wine, again.

“I need to go,” she says to Varric. Aurora’s eyes search of the fastest path to the door. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Aurora, it’s okay. He might have been a little shocked, but he knew you were drunk. He took care of you, when you…”

“What? When I what?” She snaps her eyes back to the dwarf.

“You were ill… but it’s okay! He cared for you. Sera helped. They took you to her room to sleep it off.”

“Maker’s breath, it just gets better and better.” She shakes her head and rises from her seat. “Thank you for telling me… and for the hangover remedy,” she says with a forlorn sigh.

Aurora makes her way to the exit. Walking past snickering voices, she contemplates flinging herself from the battlements, but perhaps just a long nap will help this all go away.

Unlikely.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Aurora... depressive binge drinking is never a good idea.

The next chapter is scheduled for tomorrow. Here's a hint, it's Barris' POV!
There was a vote on Tumblr as to whether I should post them together or space them out a day.
Good news is, I think I might be able to post even another on Tuesday (major Abner story line chapter, too).

I've found a bit of a groove in writing lately. I have about 8 more chapters to rewrite before I am caught up with where the original writing stopped. I think I can get it done before I go to play DAO with my mom for a week. I will try catch up by then (just over two weeks away). Then there might be a short break before we get into the brand new stuff. We'll see how it all goes. I'll keep you posted :)

Thanks for sticking with me, you all are amazing.
Chapter Summary

Ser Barris confides in a friend about a certain woman infiltrating his thoughts. Then, he stumbles into an interesting scene at the tavern.

Chapter Notes

Title from Threnodies 12:5

If you'd like some background music for this chapter, may I suggest this song:

Click here for Spotify -or- Click here for Youtube

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“You are far better at chess than you are at wicked grace, Cullen.” Delrin says with a smile as he contemplates his next move. It seems that the man has him in a few turns no matter what Delrin does. However, it won’t have been an easy victory. They have been battling in this single game for nearly the entirety of the evening.

Cullen chuckles through his breath, “Yes well, I am far better practiced in this realm than the realm of wicked grace. The dwarf always manages to wipe me out…” his thought trails off in pensive frustration.

“He cheats,” Delrin says plainly. He smiles into the fist that props up his head as he considers the options before him.

Shocked, Cullen’s mouth drops open, “What? He cheats?”

Low and quiet laughter rumbles in Delrin’s chest and he raises his eyes from the game to Cullen’s, “Yes. And terribly, I might add.”

Cullen’s mouth shuts, clenching tightly as he scowls. “That scheming little… he has taken more of my coin than I care to say.”

“Perhaps I will teach you his tactics, or at least what to watch for so he does not succeed again.” Delrin grins at his opponent. He decides to surrender in their current match as he makes one final move. Opening the game now for Cullen to have his victory. “Might as well get this over with,” he sighs and leans back in his chair.

Cullen’s face brightens again, “Ah yes, I believe this game is mine. Well played, Delrin.”

“Good game,” he smiles as he looks around the gardens of Skyhold and Cullen resets the board for a future match. There are Chantry sisters scattered around the grounds reciting the Chant of Light. The daylight dims, displaying beautiful purples, blues, and oranges while the night sky moves in. Scattered braziers burn a golden hue across the darkening space. The array of colors reminds him of the gilded beauty dressed in blue.

“Say Cullen…” Delrin begins musingly, “Are you acquainted with a mage named Aurora?”

Cullen pauses, directing his eyes from the chess board to Delrin’s. Tentatively he responds, “Yes… well, I know her from long ago.” He shrugs leaning back in his chair placing his elbows on the armrests, tenting his fingers. “A lifetime ago, really. How do you know Aurora?”

“I met her the other day, after my promotion. She is a curious woman.” He leans his elbow on an armrest of his chair, placing his chin on his fist again.

“I met her the other day, after my promotion. She is a curious woman.” He leans his elbow on an armrest of his chair, placing his chin on his fist again.

Cullen smirks a moment, “Ah… yes… after your promotion.”

“Yes?” Delrin lifts questioning brows.

Cullen runs his hands through his hair and smiles, “Don’t be surprised if women like Aurora start appearing more often. You have a position of rank now.” He sighs and rolls his eyes, “It is a highly effective aphrodisiac for some.”

What Cullen says is true, ever since rumor began that Delrin would be made Knight-Commander, women have been practically tripping over themselves to seek his attention. He politely staved them all off, but something about this particular woman was different.
Delrin hums with a nod, “Yes… and if that was all this was, I would have to agree to what you are alluding. But this was different.” He shifts his weight to the back of the chair and tent his own fingers. “Well, our first meeting was not,” he continues. Cullen grins a knowing smirk, his eyebrows swiftly rise. “But I saw her again. Actually, I played wicked grace with her and her companions. I watched how she interacted with her friends. She is quite fiery.”

Cullen chuckles, “I see. Yes, Aurora was never one to be timid.”

“That’s the thing,” Delrin leans forward, eyes glinting with a crinkle pinched between his brows. “She is timid with me - flinches when I speak to her. But when she first approached me, she was so brazen.” He rubs his hand over his head and continues, bewildered and fascinated, “I find her alluring, but she seems to have lost all interest… seems to prefer I keep my distance.”

Cullen shrugs, “Far be it from me to know anything about what lies within a woman’s mind, Delrin. I’m afraid I cannot aid you.”

Delrin says thoughtfully, “Perhaps I should let it go.”

“May not be a bad idea, if she has expressed a desire for distance. I’ve seen her eat lesser men alive… figuratively of course.” Cullen chuckles softly, “She is not a woman you want to annoy, that is for certain.”

Delrin stares into the ever darkening sky. The gardens have all but cleared. There is a peaceful, warm glow cascading through the air from its lit torches.

It is the way with which she carries herself with such purpose that draws Delrin to her. She seems fearless, when there is so much in this world to fear. Especially for a mage.

And yet, she loses her defenses when he speaks to her. A fact that appears to bother her a great deal.

“Yes, I should let her be.” Delrin smiles and bows his head to Cullen as he rises from his seat. “Good game, Cullen. I look forward to a rematch.”

Delrin enters the Herald’s Rest. It is a lively scene, though he’s come to expect that in this tavern. Those in Skyhold work tirelessly day in and day out, but they enjoy themselves with just as much vigor. As well they should. No one knows what tomorrow will bring.

He purchases ale and surveys the room. He smiles at the joviality surrounding him. He hears a particularly blissful sound from across the room. Guttural booming laughter from group of familiar faces sitting at a table in a small enclave. A few of the folks he had spent the evening with other night, plus another man Delrin believes is the mage, Dorian Pavus. Attracted to the exuberance of the table, Delrin approaches.

As he advances, he notices that in the corner of the table’s enclave sits Aurora. He had not seen her there before. Delrin instantly reconsiders his decision, but Sera spots him before he can alter his course. “Oi! Look who it is!” Her eyes light up as she ribs Varric, who sits beside her.

Varric smirks at Delrin, stealing a quick glance across the table at Aurora before saying, “How’s it goin’ Knight-Commander?”

Aurora slams her hands flat on the table in front of her. Blurry eyed, she looks at Delrin. “Wut er you dune here?” she slurs. It appears she has imbibed quite a lot this evening.

“Oh, I was just passing by, don’t mind me. Glad to see you all are having a good time.” He smiles,
raising his tankard, and bows his head before he turns to retreat.

“Ooooh no you dunt,” Aurora yells.

Varric hesitates, “Aurora what are you…” Delrin looks back over his shoulder to the table, seeing that she has hoisted her body upon it and is slithering to the end.

“Go get’im!” Sera cheers. Across from the elf and next to where Aurora once sat, Dorian grins at Delrin wickedly as he claps his hands.

Quickly, Delrin spins around. He shoves his tankard into Sera’s hands so that he is able to catch Aurora as she spills off of the table. The cotton of her simple, blue robes snag in the wood, causing her to trip-up, tumbling ungracefully into Delrin’s arms. He attempts to stand her straight and stabilize her shaky frame. He holds her bent elbows securely in his hands. He tries to look into her eyes, but they have the unfocused glaze of intoxication.

“Aurora, be careful,” he says. “You don’t want another ruined set of robes.”

Aurora flings her fingers around dismissively. “Ah piss, these er nuthin.” She smiles and stares back at him, eyes bleary and hooded. The corners of her mouth slide into a lazy curl. “Hi,” she says and slumps into his arms.

“Aurora, I think maybe you should sit.” He smiles at her, so not to upset her, but he worries for her current state. “Or perhaps I should take you to your bed.” As soon as the phrase spills from his lips, he regrets it. Delrin feels heat rise in his cheeks at his unfortunate choice in words.

“Uh-uh. You ain’t beddin’ me that easy…” she shoves a finger into Delrin’s breastplate, following it with a look of concern. “Ouch… yer chest bit me,” her frown spins back into a snickering grin, delightfully amused with herself.

Delrin attempts to place her in the nearest chair, but she quickly drapes her arms around his neck refusing to sit. “No! I wanna dance.” Her eyes light up, as if someone else suggested the idea. “Yis! Dance with me Ser Ber…bliss.” She hiccups.

“I don’t think that’s a…”

“Nonsenst!” She stands on her own for a moment and smooths out her robes. She squares her shoulders and tries to look down her nose at the Knight, even though she stands a bit shorter than him. It’s too endearing for Delrin not to smirk at her attempt to look so lofty, her body lightly swaying as she postures. “I order you to dance with…with me.”

Delrin smiles broadly at seeing her fiery nature brimming in his direction.

“If you dunt, I will force push you off the battle…mints!” Another hiccup interrupts her speech. Delrin laughs and raises his hands in surrender. Only to quickly bring them back to catch her as her body threatens to fall. She points at the minstrel behind him and beckons, “Play sum’in pretty!”

Does this woman truly want me to keep my distance? Delrin wonders as she nuzzles her head onto his shoulder. He can feel her breath on his neck as he slowly spins her around the room to the music. He feels tremendously guilty for enjoying her embrace considering her condition. He feels even guiltier for wishing he was not still in his armor, so that he could better feel her soft, curvy body pressed against his.

Delrin shakes those thoughts out of his head. He should be ashamed, the *indecency.*
Heat blooms and rises in his core however, as he feels her lips ghost on his neck. She is whispering something. It is barely audible, but he believes he catches, “I will always miss you, my darling.” Delrin has a strong feeling that she is not actually referring to him. At this point, the guilt festering within him knows no bounds.

A little louder, but still into the skin of his neck, she addresses him, “Barris…”

“Yes, my lady?”

She holds on to him with a tighter grip. “You make me…feel.”

Delrin pushes her away just enough to see her face. She has the most beautiful blue eyes, but they are glassy with unspent tears. She smiles at him briefly, then furrows her blonde brow, parting her full, pink lips. “The spirit, Barris…”

“What spirit?” He asks, holding her softly, but with support. Worry stretches in his gut. Knowing all too well the struggles mages have with spirits and demons across the veil.

"He said, I can love.” She smiles and rests her head upon his shoulder again. She whispers, “He told me not to hide from you.” The sudden clarity of her words is jarring, but Delrin cannot help himself from embracing the warmth that her words conjure within him. She continues her murmurs, “He meant for us to heal each other.”

Delrin indulges an impulse, turning to rest his mouth softly on the top of her head. “Who was this spirit, Aurora?” he whispers a smile into her blonde hair. He breathes her in, she smells warm, like spice, and comforting, like old books.

She picks her head up and smiles into his eyes again. The sincerity of her smile is overwhelming. Delrin should be far more concerned about her intoxication, however he cannot help but enjoy these moments of intimacy.

She stops their slow dancing and furrows her brow. A look of concern crosses her face, quickly replaced with surprise, followed speedily by a mad dash for an empty tankard on a nearby table. Followed by the sounds of retching.

Reality sets in as he is reminded just how inebriated Aurora is. Delrin rushes to her side, pulling her long, softly curled hair out of the way as she voids her stomach into the tankard. Sera screeches behind them and runs to help.

“Ay, you ninny. Looks like you’ve had ‘nough, eh?” Sera coos into her friend’s ear and rubs her back.

“I’m so sorry,” Aurora coughs, hunched over and groaning.

When it seems she is spent, Sera looks up at Delrin and motions her head toward the stairs. “Help me get her upstairs, yeah?” she says. “She can sleep it off in my room.”

Effortlessly, Delrin lifts Aurora in his arms. He cradles her body snuggly against his while following Sera up to her room. Aurora peers up at him, cupping his cheek in her hand. “You’re such a good man, Delrin,” her strained throat whispers. “I don’t deserve you.” Her thumb gingerly traces his lips, down to his chin. “But I could love you.”

A slight upturn to his lips, he whispers back to her, “I estimate you will feel pretty dreadful tomorrow, my lady. I will bring you water after you are secured.”
Entering Sera’s small room in the tavern, he gently lays Aurora on a long, cushioned bench. Aurora grabs his hand, whimpering softly, as he pulls away. He squeezes it and smiles at her. “Rest now, Aurora,” he says softly.

Turning to the elf he declares, “Right. I will find her some water and a bucket, just in case any more sickness threatens to expel itself.” With Sera’s nod, Delrin jogs back down to the lower level of the tavern. A little spring in his step. A faint smile on his lips. A soft glow in his heart.

He thinks to himself about what she said. However drunk she may be, he can’t help but feel excitement. Nothing has been the same since Aurora came into his world. His stressful, torn asunder, dismal world.

He wasn’t sure if commanding the reconstruction of the Templar order was a blessing or a curse. But he was bound to it. Unwavering. The issues the Red Templars bring to the order weigh heavy on his mind, darkening his days. He began losing hope that the world would ever be safe and just. No matter what, something sinister always lurks in the shadows, waiting to weaken his spirit further. And the world is full of shadows.

And then Aurora.

Aurora.

He could say her name a thousand times and it would still bring him a blissful smile.

She has so much fire, so much spirit. Her light is making him feel things he never thought possible. He had reserved his life to one shrouded in death and decay. He dared not dream of anything better, until Aurora.

Her words tonight are a small, glimmering beacon. He wishes to race to it, even though it hides from him. While her confession is encouraging, she will likely not remember dropping her guard, and speaking to him so plainly. But however faint, he will follow the hope she gives him, little by little.

Delrin can sense that she is wounded. Scared. Trepidatious. But he is patient. In time, he will heal her as she is healing him.

Chapter End Notes

Really trying to have the next chapter ready to post tomorrow, and then another by Thursday! Weeeeeeee!

You guys are really making me squeal with your comments. It means so much to me. My Husband says I'm just a roller coaster of emotion. Last week I was threatening to quit because I lost 2 bookmarks and a subscription, but last night I was reading to him the lovely things you guys are saying. I think I was literally walking on clouds and he laughed at me for being so polar.

But really, you all have inspired this new groove and determination. I'm excited to work on this again. I can't wait to work on this everyday :D
Chapter Summary

Izzalea questions her silent, insolent scout, before finally making it to the stronghold that contains her enemies and stolen soldiers.

Chapter Notes

For the Abner fans out there, this one is a biggie. Enjoy!

- Izzalea -

She hates this place.
Izzalea truly hates this Maker forsaken bog. Ever since she arrived, it’s been days of rotting corpse after rotting, fucking corpse. They seem to attack at every turn. Merely touching the waters surrounding her crew, wakes the undead that are lying in wait within. They’ve tried to avoid the water as best as they can, but at times it has been impossible not to walk through it, in order to get across channels, or washed out and flooded areas.

And the smell… Maker… the smell. Izzalea fears that the disgusting scent of death and decay will never leave her skin. She is obviously cursed to forever permeate her surroundings with a gut wretching, reeking stink, and causing all in her path to wretch as she passes. She groans to herself at the thought, her stomach tightens and flips. She knows it is irrational, but the horrendous smell of rotting death is driving her insane. She is desperate to leave this marsh behind. Leave this muck and filth forever. Her desperation in turn has made Izzalea more determined than ever to find the abducted soldiers and get them home.

Izzalea rolls her neck in an attempt to release the tension building within it. She stretches and pinches at her shoulders, secretly wishing they could be massaged by a big, strong, pair of hands. Like Cullen’s hands. A smile spreads on her lips as Izzalea leaves the wretchedness of the bog, however momentarily, to envision the beautiful and handsome face of her commander. She blissfully imagines how firm and calming his touch would be on her aching shoulders. Like magical medicine, his presence would ease all of her tension. All of her worry. All of her stress.

Izzalea is snapped back to reality due to a particularly loud clap of thunder. The sound makes her jump, a quick, sudden cold sweat shimmers on her skin. She is never this jumpy, her frayed mental state is obviously taking its toll on her. She inhales deeply to calm her nerves, missing those brief thoughts of tranquility.

There has been one continuous storm roaring over the Fallow Mire ever since they arrived. Everything is waterlogged, everything is awful. But she must bring her attention back to the mission. She needs to focus. Izzalea must successfully complete this task, and she needs the assassin’s secrets to do so.

They learned that Abner was somehow kin to the clan that has their men. However, she has been tight lipped and unapproachable since her secret was discovered. What little of it was discovered, anyway. Izzalea can’t even tell what the woman is thinking. Is she scared? Is she angry? Is she forming a plan? Is she thinking anything? How is Izzalea to know what-in-the-void is going on when Abner, her Avvar expert, refuses speak? She is growing increasingly annoyed, impatient with the scout’s insolent behavior. Izzalea is the Inquisitor, after all, why is she not more forthcoming?

Izzalea watches as Abner moves about camp. Silently, the assassin helps pack everything for the day’s journey. She watches her act as if nothing’s happened. Acting as if a bomb of ’What the fuck’ didn’t just go off in front of everyone. They all have questions. Izzalea sees it in everyone’s eyes. Hawke currently sits on a boulder on the edge of camp, paying far more attention following Abner with a discerning stare, than he is to mending his robes that lie in his lap. Everyone has been watching her, wondering what her story really is. What does she know? How is she related to these people?

Izzalea’s perplexed curiosity on the subject of Abner’s origins has been eating away at her. Observing Abner incessantly, she notes her movements, scans her features, looks for clues, but alas, she has come up empty. Abner looks nothing like the Avvar. For one, they are enormous, if the shaman they met is any indication. Abner is so petite by comparison. Izzalea cannot see how the women of these people could possibly be so small and still produce men of that size. It is baffling. Impossible.
Another loud, jarring, crack of thunder makes Izzalea tense her shoulders again. She’s got to get out of this pit, soon. Abner was sent here for a reason, she needs her to talk. Izzalea feels herself glare at the woman, her thoughts turning fiery. She will not have the reason for her being stuck in the misery wasted, just because Abner has specially guarded secrets.

The group is almost finished packing away camp, for hopefully the last time before they find the stronghold holding their enemy and their soldiers. Determined to know what she knows, Izzalea decides she has been kind to her scout for long enough. It is time for her to share everything she knows about the ‘Hand of Korth.’

Taking a deep breath Izzalea stands straighter and squares her shoulders. Marching over to Abner, she affixes her best *Inquisitor* face. Izzalea exudes seriousness and above all, authority. There is no time for sugar coating. “Alright, Abner. Tell me everything about Hand of Korth,” she says sternly as she stares into the young woman’s dark, impertinent eyes.

Abner is unmoved. Her eyes, mouth, and voice are all flat, unimpressed. “He’s an ass,” she says simply.

In no mood for the ‘run around’ from this woman, irritation seeps from Izzalea’s voice as she speaks through clenched teeth. “Would you mind expanding upon that, scout?” She sighs and crosses her arms. Acting as if she is annoyed that Izzalea is pulling rank on her. Why does she think she’s here?

Abner looks to be searching for the right words, or the information she will choose to share. “Okay…” she begins, her voice only moderately lifted, “He is one of the sons of Movran the Under. I doubt Movran has anything to do with this. He isn’t a bad guy, but his son is.”

She pauses a moment as she thinks of what to say. Scrunching her face, her eyes move rapidly in the distance, searching her mind. She sighs as if she is surrendering an inner struggle and looks at Izzalea with a saddened gaze. Izzalea’s chest drops Abner appears to have suffered a miserable loss. She softens her posture and waits for Abner to speak.

“Allright,” she begins with a sigh, slumping her shoulders forward slightly, defeated. “So… Ofred.”

“You mean, Hand of Korth?”

Narrowing her eyes, glaring with an intense frown, she clenches her fists. “No,” she corrects, “I will never call him that. His name is Ofred.” Abner loosens her fingers. Huffing a sigh of tension loose, she shakes a thought from her head. “So, here’s what you need to know. He is waiting for you, yeah? He won’t be waiting alone. He won’t fight with honor, either. That’s not his way. He will probably have archers posted all over the hold ready to make you a pin cushion.”

Izzalea nods and thoughtfully rubs her chin, gliding her gloved fingers over her mouth. Speaking through the leather with a concerned expression, she asks, “But why does he want me? Could he be working with Corypheus?”

“No,” she says plainly. The petite and willful scout takes a deep breath and stares up at Izzalea seriously. “Alright look… You believe that the Maker is the one true God, yeah? And Andraste is his bride? She fought for him and he rules everything?” Izzalea nods with a shrug as Abner continues, “Well, the Avvar don’t believe any of that. They believe that there are Gods in everything. The sky has a God, the forests have a God, the mountains have a God. That last one is who he named himself for, Korth - The Mountain-Father. Avvar regard the mountains highest in all things, so this twat is trying to say he is all high and mighty, too.

Where you come in, Inquisitor, is you have the title ‘Herald of Andraste’. That is very similar to his,
but of the wrong beliefs. The wrong God. He scoffs at you and thinks he can prove to you, his Gods, his people, and your people, that you’re full of it… by killing you. He will then be reaffirmed as the Hand of Korth, and you will be nothing.” As she finishes she drops her gaze from Izalea and looks at the ground, kicking at it uncomfortably.

Izzalea chews on her lower lip. Squinting at nothing, she falls deep in thought, processing this new information. A crazy person wants to use her death as a message, and it has nothing to do with the real problems Thedas is in enthralled with currently. She should be focusing on Corypheus and his ever growing army. She should be focused on saving Thedas from a monster who wants to be a God, and burn her world to the ground. Instead, she is here. In a bog. Because some idiot wants to puff out his chest to his people. Izzalea quickly becomes consumed with irritation. He has disrupted the Inquisition for nothing more than his ego.

Placing her hands on her hips, Izzalea stares at Abner vehemently, “Alright, how do we stop him?”

Her eyes sparkle in the faintest way, and a smirk flashes across her face. “Let me handle him,” she says with a soft purr. “Have the mages control the archers, send Cole to dispatch as many of them as he can. I want to go in ahead of you. Keep Bull at your side and keep your shield up… and no matter what happens,” she glares a bloodthirsty glare, but not directed toward the Inquisitor. Instead, she stares off into the distance. “I want to be the one that gives that bastard his killing blow,” she says with all seriousness of a scorned woman.

Izzalea peers at the assassin, taken aback by her ferocious body language. Her jaw is set, she seems as if to be picturing the man, imagining herself killing him. Her breathing is heavy but slow. Her fists are clenched again, the leather on her open fingered gloves creak, the knuckles of exposed flesh glow white.

“Abner… How do you know this man? Are you Avvar?” Izzalea asks her hesitantly. She reaches out to the woman, to touch her shoulder in an attempt to retrieve her from her murderous thoughts. Abner snaps her eyes to Izzalea’s hand and backs away, returning her attention to packing camp.

Silently, she grabs her knapsack and readies her horse. Refusing to look at the Izzalea any longer. With cold, steely confidence, she says, “You have the information you need, Inquisitor. If it’s all the same to you, I’d like to keep that bit to myself.”

“Alright, Abner. Thank you for the information,” Izzalea responds, deciding to allow the woman some privacy, for now. She leaves Abner’s side to ready her own horse.

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“There are too many of them!” Solas calls out from the fray. He shoots a bolt of ice from is staff. It flies through the dark, wet air, sharply piercing into the skull of an undead horror. “We must make a run for the gates!”

Izzalea and her team explored and fought through the day, long into the night. It seems they have finally found the hold harboring the Avvar. However, the road to the gates is teeming with a never-ending mob of rotting, walking corpses. For every ten they kill, another fifteen seemingly spawn in their place. It is exhausting. At this rate, they will never make it to the captured soldiers. Izzalea cannot be so close to succeeding and fail now.

As loudly as her tired body can muster, which is just enough that they hear her over the roaring thunder and fighting, Izzalea cries out, “Everyone, run to the gates!”

Hawke flings a wall of fire behind them as they all race forward. They slam and shove past undead,
only killing those they absolutely have to in order to advance. To Izzalea’s astonishment, as they make their mad dash, the gates of the keep’s battlements rise.

The Avvar have been watching them. They are ready.

They are waiting.

As soon as they arrive, stumbling, through the gates they begin to shut. The group kills a handful of undead that managed to follow them through, and then turn to face new enemies.

But no one is there.

Cautiously, Izzalea steps through the entry archway under the battlements, into the courtyard of the old, and until recently, long abandoned keep. She scans her eyes everywhere, looking for bodies or movement during flashes of lightning. The only constant light comes from the soft glow of the moon, softly illuminating the run-down keep through wild, whipping storm clouds. Izzalea detects no one, nothing seems to move. She feels an eerie chill spark down her spine as she wonders where the Avvar are hiding.

“Where are they? The cowards!” Bull hollers and grunts in frustration, slamming his axe into a rotten wood crate. He howls a booming, growling sound into the thunder, “Cowards!”

“They wait. Inside. *Come to us*,” Cole mumbles ominously next to her. Izzalea silently calls upon the strength of the Maker, calls Andraste to her side.

She can do this.

Izzalea glares in the direction of the doors that lead inside of the keep, feeling a proud smirk bloom on her face. With all of the pent-up rage within her for having to be in the blasted keep in the first place, she cannot help but be pleased that she’s finally arrived. Bloodthirsty rage bubbles within her, excited to sink its teeth into her enemy. “Let’s not keep them waiting,” she grins wickedly. Gesturing toward the door, Izzalea looks confidently into the eyes of everyone in her party. With determination, she says, “Shall we?”

She leads the group to the door assertively, but cautiously. Her shield raised, her eyes scan every inch of their surroundings as she sees them. Solas refreshes a barrier over everyone as much as he is able, without greatly depleting his energy. They enter the keep and creep through its halls. It is damp, dark, and smells of rot and mold. The only light comes from the glow of the moon and the thundering lightning. As flashes flicker through windows, crumbled walls, and portions of missing roof slats, the white light gives them a glimpse of what surrounds them.

Izzalea’s guard on high alert, she waits for something to strike from hidden in the shadows. They turn down a large hallway where she can begin to see the glow of torches or braziers in the distance. This must be the way. The Hand of Korth must be waiting for her down this hallway.

Waiting in that room.

Abner creeps up beside her and murmurs softly, “Remember to keep your guard up, the mages will control the archers, Cole will silently take down who he can. Stand firmly and confidently. I will sneak my way behind him, through the shadows.” Izzalea nods in agreement. She wonders how Abner can be sure as to how their enemy will trap them. She hopes Abner is right.

Almost to the end of the hall, they stand in front of what looks to be a throne room of some kind. That’s when Izzalea hears a man bellow from within, “Is that you, Herald of Andraste? Come to prove your worth?” He sounds menacing and large, voice deep and booming. But Izzalea is not
afraid. Hand of Korth will not intimidate her.

“I am here,” she growls as she takes slow, calculated steps to the room’s entrance. Abner silently slips into the shadows and sneaks into the room. Feeling the soft static of a refreshed barrier Solas placed over around her, she steps past the threshold. They enter a large mezzanine, with steps reaching balconies of either side of the room. Balconies holding groups of archers, whose arrows are drawn… and pointed at her.

Straight ahead of her are a few grand stairs leading up to a dais. Large, broken and tattered windows line the wall behind it. They flash and rattle with every roll of thunder and lightning. Standing on the stage is a behemoth of a man. His body covered in red and white paint, animal furs, and torn leathers. His face partially covered by a red hood, small cut-outs for his eyes, a larger opening draped, exposing his nose down to his chin. Large, threatening, ram’s horns loom from either side of his head. He holds an equally menacing mace, the metal head of which is reminiscent of a two-headed beast.

Izzalea glares at the man confidently, priming her stance for attack. He may think he is intimidating, but she has faced dragons. He is nothing.

The man roars in foreboding laughter, “Good of you to come, Herald of Andraste. I’ve been expecting you.”

Izzalea wants to keep him talking, giving Abner enough time to sneak up behind him. She will try her best to allow Abner the honor of killing the man… if she can. She is ready for the alternative, if the need calls. “Where are my men, Hand of Korth. Have you injured them?” she asks, hatred dripping from her hardened, set jaw.

He chuckles and swings his mace indifferently, “They are safe… for now. But I am afraid upon your defeat, all will die.”

Izzalea snarls at the titan, “Perhaps we should fight with honor. One on one.” She gestures to the archers lining the balconies, “Call off your dogs and fight me like a man.” However, this monster deserves no honor.

Suddenly, an archer yells from the balcony, “Behind you!”

Korth swings his massive mace around violently, but misses Abner as she leaps backwards. He stands there, stunned momentarily upon seeing the woman, but then begins laughing. He holds his chest in great amusement, body shaking as each sound roars through him. He calls back to Izzalea over his shoulder, “Perhaps I should be thanking you, Herald of Andraste. It seems you have brought home my insolent and treacherous little wife.”

Stunned in silence, Izzalea is unsure of what to think. Did he just call her his wife?

Movement in her peripheral catches Izzalea’s attention, pulling a glance to the balcony on her left. With everyone’s eyes now on Korth and Abner, Cole is able to begin backstabbing, snapping necks, and slicing throats of archers lining the left side of the room. With deadly accuracy, he silences each one, lightly eases their limp bodies to the floor without a sound. Izzalea snaps a look to the balcony on her right. Hawke and Solas have silenced the remaining archers, freezing them in place. Frozen still, waiting for Cole to send them to eternity as well.

No more warnings will be given to the distracted miscreant on the stage.

“I am not home to you, you foul bastard,” Abner growls between her teeth, a maelstrom of hatred
swirls in her smoldering eyes. Body crouched in bloodlust, her blades drawn, ready to pounce on the man when given the opportunity. “I am here to kill you.”

The malevolent goliath of a man continues his looming laughter, “Oh, Abner, you always had such a mouth on you, my little half-ling princess. You never did respect the favor I bestowed on your tainted blood. You should have been pleased to have married a chieftain’s son.” Methodical, threatening, and malicious, he slowly paces towards her. Iron Bull and Izzalea gradually advance on him, approaching the dais, taking precautions to not make a sound in doing so.

“So because my love for you runs so deep, dear wife, I think I will keep you alive today. I will make you mine once again. And I promise you, my little half-breed bitch... the marriage will not be as amiable the second time, as it was the first.” He is growling at her, hunched forward, holding his mace as if he considers breaking her body first.

Abner screams in a bloodcurdling, murderous rage as she lunges at the man. Her action is far less calculated than Izzalea has come to expect from the assassin. She can only imagine that the fury within her has clouded all judgement. Izzalea panics for Abner’s safety and runs down the mezzanine toward the two, no longer concerned with the silence of her advance.

Izzalea is too late. Before she reaches the steps, Abner has leapt at him. He quickly responds with a colossal swing of his mace, connecting the head of his metal beast to her ribs. Upon contact her body is flung into the air, she soars backwards and lands limp on a pile of rubble with a broken thud. Izzalea is unsure if Abner is alive or dead. Her rage boils, surging through her. All she sees is red. Iron Bull booms with mountainous vigor, charging alongside Izzalea with the fury of a fiend.

Roaring with all of her might, Izzalea storms toward the monster. She slams her shield into the tough, large muscles of his back, the sharp, metal edges rip at his exposed flesh. These Avvar may be large, but they need more armor than paint, bones, and skins to protect their bodies from her.

The battle ensues with the speed of the lightning striking outside. An onslaught of screaming, bashing, striking, and parrying fills the cold, damp air. The Avvar spins while arcing his mace. Izzalea braces for the impact against her shield, calling upon all of her strength and training in becoming an impenetrable force. As his blow crashes into the strong metal between them, it sends shockwaves down her arm and into her shoulder. The pain is substantial, excruciating, but Izzalea is unmoved. A prideful, determined snarl spreads on Izzalea’s face.

Korth parries an attack from Bull’s axe at his flank, a distraction lasting just long enough for Izzalea to strike. She bares her teeth, screaming a guttural, primal sound as she lunges her sword forward. Piercing through his ribs, slicing through his flesh, the giant warrior’s blood sprays onto the front of her shield.

He howls in pain as he and Bull slam their weapons into each other again. The pain of his wound slows his skills, and he staggers back a few steps. Bull connects a blunt blow to the Avvar hard into the thick furs armoring his legs. Izzalea slices another deep swipe through his flesh, this time the cut spreads along his stomach. Their enemy stumble's rapidly backward, dazed and unable to breathe.

Bull and Izzalea creep in menacing pursuit, closing in on the bloodied, coughing, stunned form in front of them. Movement to her left captures Izzalea’s attention, as Abner is staggering toward the man as well. Izzalea motions to Iron Bull to halt his advance, allowing Abner her wish.

The Hand of Korth sputters and coughs thick blood. He sees Abner limping toward him, her long daggers in each hand. Blood drips from his lips as they curl into a sneering smile. He drops to his knees in front of her, spitting and gurgling. As he lands, Abner crosses her blades in front of her, slicing each one against his throat simultaneously.
Izzalea steals a glance behind them, to ensure the rest of her team is okay. She finds that there are no more archers, living, anyway. Solas, Cole, and Hawke stand in the middle of the mezzanine, watching Abner in astounded silence. Izzalea shivers with a sense of relief seeing that they are unharmed, and that the fight is over. They have won. Resuming her attention back to Abner, Izzalea witnesses the Avvar man slumped on the floor, dead, his blood quickly coating the stone below his body. Red and white pigments of his war paint mix with the deep, dark red of his blood, swirling together in a pool of death.

No one speaks in the hall, the only sounds echoing against the cold, wet stone are that of the ever-roaring storm. Abner stands completely and perfectly still, silently staring at the corpse lying at her feet. Izzalea worries about how badly Abner had been hurt. She had been limping and the blow she took was substantial. Nervous for her wellbeing, she softly calls out to her, “Abner…”

Slowly, Abner turns to face her. She is covered in the blood of her… husband. Her entire face, neck, and chest are glistening, soaked in gore. Her face is flat and emotionless. Her eyes are black and empty. She treads slow, jagged footfalls up the stage, walking past Izzalea to descend the steps, down to the mezzanine. Izzalea reaches out to her, but is ignored. She grows more and more concerned with not only Abner’s physical wellbeing, but her mental wellbeing, as well.

She staggers and trips on the stairs, toppling limply down to the base. Solas and Hawke surge toward her. “Lay her flat on her back,” Solas orders Hawke as he grabs healing potions from his pack.

Izzalea slowly approaches the scene. Overcome with worry about the woman she barely knows, her chest feels tight and heavy. Will she be okay? Even if she lives through this, did the Inquisition push her too far? Will her mind heal? Izzalea watches sullenly, while trying to also allow space for the mages to work.

Solas tips her head and aids her in drinking a potion. Hawke lightly touches her ribs, through her light armor, where the mace impacted her body. She screams a heart breaking, reverberating cry and recoils at his touch.

“Will she be alright, Solas?” Izzalea asks in a hushed tone. Her shoulders slump, she slowly eases into a crouched, sitting position on the steps. Her eyes never leave the young woman sprawled out on the stone floor. Abner’s breaths are heavy and labored. Her face cringes with each inhale.

“Yes. But she will need to take care for a few days.” He looks at Izzalea earnestly, but she stares blankly at the scout. “Inquisitor… do not forget why we came.”

Izzalea slowly lifts her gaze to Solas, eyes blinking. What is he talking about? Abner needs help. He scowls when she doesn’t speak or move, “The soldiers, Inquisitor. You must find the soldiers. I will heal Abner’s injuries, but you must go.”

Right. The soldiers. Solas is right. Izzalea shakes the daze from her mind and looks for Cole. He is beside her, because… of course he is… “Cole,” she says softly, voice croaking, “Do you know where they are?”

“Yes, they are close. Follow.” Cole says and rises to his feet. Izzalea mimics his movements, trailing behind the spirit as they exit the throne room. Bull rests a hand on Izzalea’s shoulder, striding beside her. She looks up at him as he gives her a sad, but encouraging, smile.

They follow Cole through the hallways as he senses the presence of their trapped people. Izzalea’s mind is buzzing with worry and exhaustion, a writhing dervish of emotion. What happened in there? What happened in Abner’s life? Are the soldiers okay? Will Izzalea be able to safely get everyone back to Skyhold? She is so very tired. Her senses fried from this entire experience.
She rolls her neck and stretches her shoulders again, an attempt to relax at least a small amount before the discovery of her men. They need to see her as a strong force, not a nervous and fatigued fool. Finally, they reach a locked door. Cole kneels in front of the lock while producing a small set of picks from his belt. He works the lock deftly until Izzalea hears a click.

The most beautiful and wonderful sounding click Izzalea has ever heard. She exhales a sigh of relief as she hears the voices of her people murmur through the door. Izzalea stands firmly, smiling while Cole opens the door and she sees their lost soldiers inside.

“Inquisitor!” one man exclaims upon seeing her face. Izzalea steps into the room, scanning over everyone to check on their wellbeing. At first look, they seem little rough, but very much alive. And that is lovely sight to see. She inhales deeply, releasing the days of worry she had accumulated within her muscles. Izzalea beams warmly at the Inquisition forces in the room.

“See, I told you she would come,” a woman announces proudly to the others.

If only for a fleeting moment, Izzalea shares in her pride.
In The Hearts and Minds of Men

Chapter Summary

Aurora battles a war threatening to consume her. A war between her mind and heart. Which will prevail? Decades of experience keeping feelings at bay? Or the yearning to accept the love from a gentle man?

Chapter Notes

I decided to create Aurora in DAI CC so that her banners were not so different from everyone else's.

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This song is recommended as background music during this chapter:

[Spotify Link Here](#) -or- [Youtube Link Here](#)

I also suggest snuggling with a pet, or a loved one, or a blanket.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Aurora walks through the gardens of Skyhold, listening to the chantry sisters recite verses from the Chant of Light. The quiet chanting helps her calm her mind and reflect. The midday warmth of the sun warms her skin from the cool mountain air. Aurora has come here because she feels the walls around her cracking, walls that her life has worked tirelessly to create. In the course of just a handful of days, she’s begun to question everything she thought was true about herself, her life, and the world she lives in.

She works her way through the garden to the small Chantry in Skyhold that holds a shrine to Andraste. Hoping that prayer will help her find peace amongst all of the confusion and doubt swirling in her mind, she seeks the Maker and his Bride for guidance. As she enters the Chantry, she stumbles on Lord Azzedine Trevelyan and Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast standing in front Andraste’s stone statue.

“I do not swoon,” Cassandra says curtly.

“That much is evident,” Azzedine responds in similar tone, then he notices Aurora hesitating at the door way. He sighs, shaking his head and throwing his hands in the air, frustrated.

“I apologize for intruding, I can return later.” Aurora turns to leave, but Azzedine stops her.

“No, no,” he says. “You stay.” He looks at Cassandra, she turns to the statue, ignoring him. “I was just leaving.” He nods his head at Aurora as he exits.

Cassandra turns her head to look back over her shoulder. “Aurora,” she nods.

“I’m so sorry, Seeker. I didn’t know anyone was in here until…” Aurora’s voice trails off awkwardly.

“No, it is fine. Come.” Cassandra gestures for the mage to join her in front of the tall, magnificent statue of Andraste. It glows with the flickering light of the surrounding candles. “What troubles you?” she asks as Aurora steps beside her.

“I’ve spent all of this time since the conclave, just trying to stay alive, and helping to bring an end the turmoil. I never took the time to grieve.” Aurora looks at the Seeker, searching her for answers, “How could the Maker let all of this happen? Has he left us?”

She contemplates the question. Seeker Pentaghast is a beautiful and strong woman. She has all of the abilities of a Templar without the crutch of lyrium. Before the conclave, she was the Right Hand to the Divine. She is part of the Chantry, yet stronger than it. She defied it when she began the Inquisition with the Divine’s Left Hand, Leliana. She is a woman of fearless power and strength. She always exudes a very serious yet thoughtful demeanor. “The Maker tests us in mysterious ways,” she says finally.

“He took the man I loved,” Aurora says sullenly, finally admitting the truth to herself.

She lets out a sigh and looks to the shrine, “You are not alone in that.”

“I am aware, Seeker, but that does not help the pain… not in the least.” Aurora says tersely.
Cassandra turns to her and grunts. “No, that is not my meaning.” Her eyes search for words, “Yes, many were lost that day, but I too, lost the man I loved.” Aurora stares at her in disbelief. “A mage,” she continues, “The only man I have ever cared for.” She looks back to the shrine with stanch strength.

Aurora is in shock. Next to her stands a woman who is in the highest of the hierarchy of a system designed to suppress and control mages… yet she had loved one. Perhaps the Divine’s reasoning for the conclave was even more benevolent than Aurora had hoped. Perhaps the women of power in the Chantry actually cared about the lives of mages.

“You… you were in love with a mage? But you are a Seeker.”

She snorts, “And that means I cannot love a man of my choosing?”

“No… I… I’m just surprised, I guess. I am sorry.” Aurora drops her eyes to the ground shamefully.

“How about you? Was this man also among the mages in the conclave?” she asks and Aurora shakes her head.

“No…” rising her eyes back to the Seeker’s, “He was the Knight-Commander of the Ferelden Circle Tower.”

Cassandra gapes at Aurora incredulously. “Oh, I see…” she pauses, “It seems we have some commonality.”

Two women, from opposing worlds, mourning the loss of two opposing men. “Yes it seems so,” Aurora whispers. Her heart feels as if it is shattering apart. Regret threatens to consume her, but she refuses to allow a tear to swell. “He taught me to be strong, to detach and protect myself. I’m beginning to realize that I never let myself think that I loved him, not fully. I was always so concerned with the conflict between our people, that I kept myself guarded, even from him.” Aurora laughs a soft, breathy sound. “He taught me well.”

She nods, as if knowing, “What has brought on these revelations?”

It feels like a cliché and she hates herself for even saying it, “A man.”

“Ah, it seems we may have more commonality,” she sighs. Aurora peers at her, searching, realizing that the Seeker is pained by a similar struggle. Aurora would have never pictured the Seeker to be a woman who would be troubled by such matters, but then she wouldn’t have expected that from herself either…

“It seems so,” Aurora lifts one corner of her mouth into a sullen smirk. The two women then stand gazing at the shrine in silence, lost in thoughts or prayers, but also in the knowing warmth that they are not alone.

Aurora never allowed herself to openly feel love. Attachment was only to be used as tool, to keep her safe. She learned to keep everyone away from her heart. She was ripped from home at such a tender age, that she doesn’t even know who bore her. The circle life was always in such turmoil, that growing too fond of anyone would only mean more pain if… or when… they would either try to escape, were made tranquil, or… murdered.

Mages have never had the right to have families. Those that tried had to run away, become apostates. A life that is even more dangerous than staying in the circle. The less attached Aurora felt to people, the easier it was to ignore their loss. Friends who never come, can never leave.
“Hello, Kitten. How are you, my dear?” He approaches, bringing his hands to her arms, giving them a loving rub.

Aurora’s eyes well up, but she quickly blinks the tears away, casting her eyes downward. “The harrowing today...” she chokes on the words, desperately trying not to cry.

He pulls her into an embrace, “I know.” He whispers into her hair, “I am so sorry that she failed.”

“She was my apprentice. She didn’t fail, I failed her. She was not ready.” Aurora softly cries into his shoulder.

He pulls her back and levels his eyes with hers, hands firmly gripping her shoulders. “No. You failed no one. Not everyone is as strong as you. Do not let this bring doubt into your mind. You are strong. It is unfortunate, but she was weak. Therefore, she could not be trusted.”

“I understand.”

But she did love. Aurora loved them all, deeply. She loved Greagoir deeply. She told herself she didn’t, wouldn’t allow herself to feel it. The pain she feels now, almost unbearable. She can’t stop protecting herself. Not now. The agony of loss is too great. She needs to go back to pretending it is not there. But a terrifying seed of hope has been sown deep within her, and at a rapid pace, it is growing, becoming harder and harder to ignore.

“Do you think the world will be different for mages when this is over? Or do you think all of the same rules will apply, as they did for centuries?” Aurora quietly asks the Seeker, breaking the silence in a low and tired tone.

Cassandra inhales a steady breath and considers the question. “I don’t see how it could possibly go back to the way it was. I know not what the future will bring, however reform is inevitable, to say the least.”

“Do you think someone like me could ever have a normal life?” Aurora turns to look into her dark brown eyes.

Earnestly, she returns her gaze, “I sincerely hope so.”

“I believe I have grossly misjudged you, Seeker.” Aurora flashes a bashful, quick smile.

Cassandra mirrors the expression, “And I as well, Aurora.”

Nodding with respect to the Seeker, Aurora says, “I pray you find the answers you are looking for, Seeker.”

“And you as well, Aurora. And let us pray that the light of the Maker will guide us to a better future.”

“Thank you for your council and company, Seeker.”

“Good day, Aurora.”

The mage leaves the Chantry to return to her work in the library. She sits and skims through tomes looking for information to help the Inquisition, but her mind often wanders. Her chest, mind, and
eyes feel equally heavy. Downtrodden. As day moves into night, her mind pacing back and forth between her task and her worries, a yawn erupts from her mental and physical exhaustion. She stretches and groans as she stands. Deciding to skip the tavern tonight - she certainly doesn’t need another drunken display to trouble her further - she resolves to head directly to bed, instead. An early night’s rest is greatly needed.

Aurora descends the steps of the tower, emerging into the quiet darkness of the great hall. The soft sound of low laughter draws her attention. Varric is sitting with someone at his table by the hearth. Aurora approaches the men, Varric nodding in her direction as she does. “Heya, Brazen Blaze.”

“Hello, Master Tethras.” He groans at the name, Aurora teasingly smirks in reply, “You know that as long as you call me ‘Brazen Blaze’ that I must retaliate.”

“Turnabout is fair play, Varric,” his friend chuckles next to him.

Taking a closer look at the man, Aurora realizes she has seen him before. “Have we met? You look familiar…” Aurora wavers, peering at his face, searching her memories.

“Oh forgive me,” he says and rises from his seat to shake her hand. “My name is Alistair.”

“Alistair…” Aurora turns white, the shock of recognition hitting her. “The warden Alistair?”

“That would be me…” he peers at her, taken aback by her reaction.

“I apologize, we have met before. During the blight,” she says, crinkling her face, pursing her lips. He squints his eyes at her, visibly searching his own memories for her sour face. She aids him by continuing, “At the Ferelden Circle Tower. My name is Aurora.”

“Aurora?” He thinks for a minute and then his eyes brighten as he remembers, “Oh yes! I remember you. You were with Wynne! And you were particularly close with the Knight-Commander, if I remember correctly.”

“Heh, yes… that would be me…” She stands awkwardly, tugging at her robes, embarrassed that he would remember that detail, of all things.

“Why don’t you join us?” Varric chimes in, releasing Aurora from her discomfort. Alistair backs up and motions for her to take a seat, pulling out a chair for her place.

“Sure, why not,” she says as she sits. Alistair moves around the table to sit across from her, his back to the fire, and Varric between them at the head. Varric pours her a glass of the wine they are sipping. She nods in thanks, taking a sip. Setting her cup down, holding it snuggly between her palms, she looks between the two men. “How do you two know each other?”

“We met back during the chaos in Kirkwall,” Varric responds, “When the Qunari attacked the city.” A spark ignites in his eyes as if he has discovered something entertaining, “You know what else we all have in common, besides each other…” He pauses for effect, “Blondie.”

Alistair and Aurora share a puzzled look at the dwarf. He groans and lifts his hands in frustration, like they should have any idea of whom he is referring, “Anders!”

Alistair and Aurora groan in unison at the realization.

“You knew Anders?” she asks the warden.

“Briefly, but my wife knew him very well. She even was there when he met… Justice.” Alistair
shakes his head and takes a drink of his wine. “She blames herself for what happened to him.”

“That’s ridiculous… that would mean she feels responsible for what he did…” Aurora says softly. Alistair looks at her with sullen eyes. “Oh…” she says in understanding. “But it isn’t her fault, none of it is. She had no control over what that mage and his spirit would do together.”

“She had suspicions about Justice before she left. She felt he was turning into too much like Vengeance. But she knew the body he was possessing only had so long to hold him. She isn’t a mage. She didn’t realize what was at stake. She was destroyed when she heard about what happened in Kirkwall.” Alistair appears wounded, a far off stare in his eyes as he thinks of his wife. The Hero of Ferelden.

“All of the responsibility is on Blondie. Trust me, Hawke and I have our own issues with what happened. He did it right under our noses.” Varric fiddles with his cup. Everyone’s eyes down cast, studying their wine and the grains in the wooden table top. Each person despondent over their personal connection with the abomination that ignited the war between the mages and Templars.

“If you want to go all of the way back to the beginning…” Aurora bites her lip and spins her cup in a circle. “I could have kept better watch on him in the tower.” The men look up at her quizzically. Aurora sighs and takes a sip of wine to squelch the uneasiness in her stomach. “I knew he was a problem. Greagoir complained to me about his constant escapes… I could have – no, I should have – done something to stop him before it ever began.” The truth was, she saved him time and time again from being made tranquil. It was her interventions that lead Greagoir to ultimately send him to the warden’s, a fact that Aurora now has to live with.

“You couldn’t possibly have known,” Alistair shakes his head.

She reaches out to touch Alistair’s hand. Her voice is solemn and firm, “And neither could she.” She turns her gaze to Varric, “or you, or Hawke. The man was going to do what he was going to do. He was so blinded by his cause, he could never be reasoned with. No one could have stopped him.” Her hand leaves Alistair’s to hold Varric’s, giving it a strong, friendly squeeze. “That’s why he kept it all a secret from you.”

“You’re a mage,” Varric says cautiously. “What are your thoughts on his cause.”

Her hand quickly snaps to her chest as she snorts, “That’s a loaded question.”

“I would really like to know. You’re safe here.” Varric looks to Alistair who nods in agreement.

Aurora thumbs the rim of her cup, sniffing back emotions brought on by what they are asking. “I know how he feels. I get it. I want what he wants… We just want to live.” She pinches the bridge of her nose and sighs in frustration. Slamming her fist suddenly on the table with a sudden rage, she startles her companions. “But Maker be damned, he did it wrong! He made everything worse,” Aurora’s voice is terse, a scowl on my face, fire burning in her eyes. “How are we supposed to be trusted now? Every time a mage tries to make a difference, they resort to the wrong things. Merely instilling the fears the world has about us.” She swiftly wipes away a tear threatening to glide down her cheek. “We just want to live normal lives,” she says hoarsely. “But we aren’t allowed normal lives.”

They sit in silence, sipping their wine. The sound of the crackling wood in the hearth echoes through the dimly lit hall. Aurora fidgets with the stitching of her Inquisition robes before speaking to the warden. “Where is Lymeria, now?”

“She is searching for a cure… for the taint in our blood,” Alistair responds, forlorn.
“He takes a deep breath, “Wardens make a lot of sacrifices in order to stop the blights. You know our motto, ‘In War, Victory; In Peace, Vigilance; In Death, Sacrifice.’” He rings his hands together and smirks solemnly. “That last bit is a guarantee. A warden does not have the luxury of a long and happy life. Mira and I would like to change that. If it wasn’t for this business with Warden Commander Clarel in the west… I would be with her now… helping her search. She thinks she can save us.” He chuckles to himself, a deep rumble in his chest. “She and I have an addition to the warden motto, you know. Something we say to give us hope. Keep us optimistic, she always wants to stay optimistic.” His eyes smile, cheeks reddening as he thinks of his wife. “We say to each other, ‘In Love, Serenity.’”

Aurora smiles warmly, even though his confession tugs at her heart. “That’s beautiful,” she whispers. “If only it was obtainable,” he snorts and shrugs. “Wishful thinking, I suppose.”

“A goal a lot of people wish to achieve. A noble goal, however impossible to obtain it may be. I suppose we are doomed to try.” Aurora has her own far off stare as she speaks, thoughts drifting to the Greagoir… and to Ser Barris.

“Some of us kicking and screaming the entire way,” Varric winks at Aurora. She isn’t sure if he is referring to her, or perhaps himself. There must be some reason he named his crossbow for a woman, yet refuses to discuss her.

Imbibing the last of the wine in her cup, Aurora stands from her seat. “Thank you, gentlemen. It’s been… well… it’s been rather depressing,” she giggles softly. “But thank you for the company nevertheless. However, I am afraid I need to retire for the evening. I hope happier thoughts will carry the two of you through the night.” She bows her head to the men and they reciprocate. Aurora exits the great hall through the large main doors, past Varric’s table.

As she walks across the courtyard, all is still aside from the excitement permeating from inside the tavern. Aurora smiles to herself, glad that there is still joy when there is so much to weigh the world down. She walks somberly into the building that houses her quarters, thinking of how her heart aches.

‘Serenity.’

She supposes that’s what anyone would want, but she has reserved herself to the idea that she just… cannot obtain it. It was never meant for her.

Aurora turns the final corner, entering the hallway containing her room. To her surprise, Ser Barris is standing outside her door. It is as if the Maker simply enjoys playing games with her emotions, just for His amusement.

Barris smiles warmly as she approaches. She does not smile in return, instead her expression remains flat. She’s not sure how to feel, seeing him there. He bends and takes her hand, kissing it softly.

“Good evening, Aurora. I was hoping I would find you.”

“You are standing in front of my room, Knight-Commander.” She shocks herself with how hot her words release. She’s never braved to flash him her ill temper before.

He chuckles, undazed by her attitude. “Indeed I am. I suppose it gave me the best chance to find you, did it not?”
“What do you wish of me, Ser?” Aurora represses the nervousness threatening to erupt and keeps her head leveled. It’s about time I don’t fall apart just because he is looking at me. She stands straight and firm, using a formal, distant tone. She tries her hardest to not let his visage, and the questions she has for why he wants to see her, overtake her ever wavering strength.

“I don’t know if you noticed, but it is a lovely evening. I fear the nights will only be getting colder from here on.” He smiles with his eyes and clasps his hands behind his back. Aurora suddenly realizes that he is not dressed in his Templar armor. Instead he is far more casual, a thick wool tunic and woolen trousers. She questions why he is standing before her, even more.

“Alright,” she says suspiciously, cutting her eyes at him. “But what does that have to do with me?” Aurora curses inwardly for having the slightest shake to her voice.

Continuing his warm and friendly gaze, he walks to her side and offers the crook of his elbow for her hand. “I was hoping you would do me the honor of keeping my company. It is a lovely night for a walk the gardens.”

What a dreadful idea. Why would he suggest such a stupid thing? Aurora is unsure of what to do. However, every fiber of her body wants to touch him. She feels her energy gravitate to him, pulling her, wanting to be held in his arms. But if she does this, there may be no turning back. She has been trying so hard to suppress her feelings for the man, why must he torture her so?

He winks, elbow still propped for her, waiting. “Aurora, it’s just a walk. It’s not a proposal in marriage.”

Aurora chortles and without thinking – as if possessed – she places her hand in the crook of his arm. He pulls his arm in to hold her hand there against his body. She can feel an essence of the hard definition in his musculature. This causes her to take a shaky, uneven breaths, feeling pink rise in her face. He even smells different without his armor - herbs and warm cinnamon.

They walk while her anxiety both calms and screams within her, the maelstrom of emotion whipping around again. What is she doing? Whatever this is, she is powerless to stop it.

Aurora stares wide-eyed at his profile as they walk out of the building in silence. He continues his smile, glancing at her with the side of his eye. He laughs, “You can relax, Aurora.”

She takes a deep breath and looks ahead as they enter the gardens. The area is void of people, but she spots a small scene that looks out of place. He brings her closer to the display. A brazier is flickering in front of a bench. There is a small table to the side with fruits and drink placed on a tray. Aurora cocks her head to the side in confusion. “What is this?” she whispers.

“I put together a little something, in case you were hungry,” he says proudly as he seats them down upon the bench.

Aurora squints her eyes at the man as he pours two cups of the drink from the tray, he hands one cup to her. She sips the red liquid, a sweet, fruity wine. “What are we doing here, Knight-“

“Delrin.”

Aurora sighs with a hint of irritation. Why does he insist on being so informal with her? “Delrin, what are we doing here?” she says, teeth slightly gritting.

“We are getting to know each other better.” He rifles with the items on the tray next to him, as if this entire scene is natural. As if nothing is odd. But everything about this is odd.
“But… why?” Aurora furrows her brow.

“Because we want to know each other,” he says with a smirk, handing her a small plate of strawberries. She stares at the plate and then at him. He urges her to take it, so she places it in her lap and sips the fruity wine. “You probably don’t remember the other night…”

“Oh Maker! I’m so sorry, Delrin,” Aurora shakes her head, darting her eyes down in shame. How badly she wishes he had not seen her so intoxicated.

He gently takes her chin in his hand and pulls her gaze to his. His touch sends electrifying sparks down her body. She feels scared and alive. He smiles and simply says, “Stop.” He releases her chin from his grasp. Her body immediately misses the feeling of his skin on hers.

She looks into his gorgeous green eyes, silently, biting her lip in a nervous tick. What could he possibly want with her? Nothing good has come from knowing her thus far, why does he bother? Reluctantly, she senses the seed of hope growing larger within her belly. She is so drawn to him, as much as she wants to fight it, because her instinct is to protect herself. There is so much uncertainty in the world. She can’t risk free falling into an abyss for him, because he makes her want things she never thought possible. For they are impossible.

He searches for words and then grins. “I know that we didn’t meet in a way that makes you feel comfortable. But there is something here that I cannot ignore, Aurora.” He takes her hand in both of his, speaking earnestly, “Let us start over. Forget everything that shook you.” Aurora narrows her eyes at him quizzically. “My name is Delrin. I’ve noticed you around Skyhold, and I am entranced by your bold approach to life. I would love to get to know you better, if you will allow it.”

Instantly, her face softens, seriousness replaced with sweet surprise. She feels a smile stretch upon her lips. “Pleased to meet you, Delrin, my name is Aurora.”

“That is a fitting name for such a beautiful ray of light.”

She snickers, “What if I had refused you tonight?”

He releases her hands and sits back against the bench with a grin, grabbing a strawberry from his plate. “I suppose Commander Cullen and I would be eating strawberries, drinking fruity wine, and wallowing in how the women we want are not with us.” He takes a bite of the berry. Aurora’s eyes are drawn to the image of his lips caressing the fruit. They are so big, soft, and full. She remembers the way they felt on the flesh of her hand. Kissable. Tempting.

She feels her cheeks redden. Her brain tries to fight her feelings once again. “I don’t think this is a good idea, Delrin,” she says softly.

“Aurora, are you familiar with the Chantry song, ‘Keep to the Stars, the Dawn will Come’?”

“Of course, in fact, everyone who survived Haven sang it together after the Inquisitor was found alive.” She peers at the man. “Why do you ask?”

“Because Aurora. I have been in one void of a night, searching for stars to lead me out.” He places his hand on her knee. She stares at his hand, then into his sad, hopeful, green eyes. “I cannot help myself but look at you and feel that the dawn has come.”

Aurora gasps as the wind is knocked out of her. “What?” her voice is breathless. Her heart thunders in her chest, hammering so fast, she fears she may faint.

His brow is furrowed, as though lost in an internal debate. A moment later, his eyes light up, and he's
jumped to his feet. His face is lit with excitement, pacing before her, his gaze never leaving hers. "But... Maker give me strength... Aurora. My sweet Aurora... I cannot," she stops to stand directly in front of her. "I cannot seem to purge you from my thoughts." His eyes, molten with emotion, leave her stunned. She knows she needs to break this silence, respond with something, but his confession has taken all thoughts from her mind.

He hasn't moved, his face still lit with that exuberance, his emotions declared and laid bare. She knows her lips are curving upwards into a smile, unbidden, but this man, he makes her want to smile. Makes her want to hope... to dream. For one crazy moment, she wishes she could. She wants to confess to him, tell him how she feels. Tell him that she has dreamt about meeting a man like him, oh, too many times to count. A man she could run away with. Start a family with. In Delrin's eyes... she sees that possibility. She sees a dream that does not need to be a dream... and this, this terrifies her. Those dreams were just that, the dreams of a foolish, innocent girl. She is no longer that girl, no longer innocent. The world has taught Aurora cruelty, and it has taught her well.

She had resigned herself, for so long, to serving Greagoir. He protected her from his men, and she lived a peaceful life, albeit a bitter, resentful life. What more could a Circle mage ask for, if not to live in safely till she died? She accepted her fate, long ago. But now... but now, with this handsome, beautiful man who looked at her as though she is his equal, as though she is a person... this was dangerous. Delrin's crystal, green eyes with delicate, feathered creases fanning from the corners, eyes of a man who knows what strife is, but still knows optimism. Eyes of a man who conjures a need within her ask for more out of life. But how can she? When the future is so uncertain? She is loath to share in his optimism.

The truth is bitter enough to choke her. There can be no future with him, can there?

Her gaze falls to the ground. It's safer there. "But Delrin..."

He sinks to his knees before her, startling her once again. With a soft, pleasant grin, he pulls the cup-gingerly, as is his habit, she's noticed - from her hand, placing it carefully on the side. He captures her hands between his, and the warmth, the contact, is so soothing. But she can't admit it. "But what, Aurora?" His tone is gentle. Is there nothing about this man that is not gentle? "I know you feel something."

"It's not wise." Aurora forces her tone into curtness. It is better to be cruel now, than have her heart shattered later. "We are... we are from two different worlds."

His jaw clenches at her words, and she wants to run her fingers down the shape of it. Impossible, of course, but the thought is there. "Blast that, Aurora" his tone is harsh, but not unpleasantly so. "We would not be the first - nor the last - mage and Templar to fall in love!"

Aurora's heart stops. She can't breathe. Has she heard him correctly? "Love?" she can't seem to make her voice better than a squeak.

"Why not?" he demands.

"Delrin... this isn't a fairytale. This is reality. This world fears those like me. There is no such thing as a happy ending for a mage." She releases the breath that's been in her throat for too long. "I can't... I can't trust myself with you. This will only end in disaster."

She thought her answer would have frustrated him, but it has not. Instead, he tugs at her hands, bringing them closer to his face. "And why is that, my sweet ray of sun?" His voice is teasing, and she desperately wants to laugh. But that idea is driven away when he touches his lips to my fingers softly, kisses so light they feel like the touch of flower petals.
Why doesn’t he understand? Why does he have to make this so difficult? He is asking for so much. He is asking for her hope, her faith, her trust. Trust not only in him, but in Thedas as a whole. For even if he were not to break her, Thedas surely will break them both. How can she give that trust?

"We are not in a circle, Delrin," her voice is sharper than it probably needs to be. "We cannot simply sneak around and pretend to be happy! We cannot pretend to have a normal life!"

His eyes are earnest. "I'm glad we are not in a circle," he confesses, and once again Aurora is stunned but the Knight-Commander. His hands squeeze hers with gentle pressure. "Aurora, don't you see? You are free."

For such a wise man, he sees so little. How does he not see this? She shakes her head, “I am not free, Delrin. I am a mage. It is only a matter of time before I am ripped from here and thrown into captivity again. I can’t let myself be destroyed when they take me away…” Her words choke in her throat, the pressure of tears builds behind her eyes. “When they take me away from you.”

“If you give me a chance… no… if you give us a chance, Aurora, I swear to you, you will never be taken from me. You will always be free.” His voice holds a plea, and she dangerously wishes to grant him what he desires. It would be easy, when his eyes look so earnest, like he believes every word he says. But there is no way he can promise such a thing. It is ridiculous to even fathom.

“I can’t Delrin.”

“But you want to.”

Yes, she wants to, and that is what is so dangerous. It is dangerous to want. Dangerous to believe that something like normal can be achieved by a mage. She holds firm, steadfast in her decision. It is better for the both of them if she does. “I can’t.”

Aurora can’t forget everything thirty years of life has taught her. She was taught to be stronger than the rest, no matter what, that her walls will always keep her safe. She cannot so easily abandon all rationality and logic, just to ride off into the sunset with this man. Even if she did, what if they are wrong? What if it doesn’t work? Or what if after everything, she is still torn away from him, thrown back into a tower, to wait for a quiet, desperate, lonely death. Aurora cannot bear the thought of how that would destroy her.

He sighs and returns to his seat, looking defeated. “I thought…” He shakes his head. “The other night, you said things that made me think…” He takes a drink of the wine. “I suppose I am a fool.”

The shattered hope in his tone smashes her heart into a million pieces. From the moment she saw him up close in the Templar tower, all she’s wanted to do is protect him. Protect him from her, the woman who had singled him out in order to use him. Beguile him, exploit him for his power. As if his heart is meaningless. As if Templars are not… people.

And now here they are.

He wants her and she is not worthy of him. A temptress. A whore for protection. A power-hungry wretch. She’s caught him in her web after all. Aurora could not despise herself any more than she does in this moment.

Agony radiates throughout her body. She doubles over and grips at her chest. The mental anguish of wanting him so desperately, yet being too afraid to leap off of the edge with him, has become too great. She has no control anymore. She can no longer hold back the tears that spill from her eyes.

He looks at her in alarm as Aurora’s soft sobs turn into loud squalls. He reaches out to her. She
thinks he is trying to sooth her with words, but she cannot hear them. All she can focus on is the aching in her heart. It is wrenching her insides in a thousand different directions.

She looks at him with blurry vision. Between gasps for air and sobs she choke the words, “I’m… so… sorry…” shaking her head repeatedly, “I-I am… so… scared.” It is the truth. This man scares her, by bringing color into her world.

Delrin immediately takes Aurora’s quaking form into his arms. “Aurora, hush.” He kisses the top of her head, his voice kinder than she deserves. “I will slow down. I’m sorry, I pushed you too hard.” Her cries are muffled into his wool tunic. “Do you want me to leave you alone, completely, Aurora? Be honest…please.”

A large intake of breath, the feeling of his embrace is slowly calming her. The touch of him. The scent of him. The heat radiating from his body. His presence mixing with hers. It all makes her feel like…home.

Aoura’s yearnings and her rationality are in an epic battle for control within her. But perseverance and rationality prevails. “Yes,” she says warily. She can’t risk this any longer, he needs to stay away.

“Okay.” He is strong and gentle and everything she wants, but she doesn’t deserve him. She has to be strong enough to protect herself.

To protect them both.

Chapter End Notes

*hides from potential rotten fruits and vegetables* please don't hate me. If you'd like to cry with me over our tortured mage in the comments, I'd be happy to oblige.

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Next update will be Sunday. Then Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Sunday, Monday - if I can keep up with this schedule, the story will be caught up to the original on Feb 20th. Just in time for me to take another trip..... *hides from potential pitch forks and fiery torches*
Addicted*

Chapter Summary

Rhaegar Hawke is a notorious, sarcastic playboy, but he finds himself bewitched by a woman who appears to despise him. He had one taste of her and like a drug addict, he has to score another hit.

Chapter Notes

That, and I think Hawke doesn't like being told, No.

So this chapter does not have background music, but I do have a lyrical (?) song to share if you're interested. It is major inspiration for Hawke's obsession with Abner.

Take Me To Church - Hozier (However, I prefer the Elli Goulding Cover but Rhaegar Hawke My husband insists on the original.)

Listen, this chapter has smut at the end, but you can totally skip it if that's not your bag, it will not affect the story for you at all. So, if you are one who prefers to refrain from such dirty things, when you see the ***** and a break, the chapter is done! For those of you who continue on, much like the first smutty chapter, this one switches perspective, because... it just does... I don't know why I do it, but apparently it's a thing I do now.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“So then Krem says, ‘I bet you can’t get all three of those red heads to bed you tonight.’ Let’s just say, he was buying all of my rounds for a week!” Iron Bull laughs with such a booming vigor that he has to clutch his stomach, head arched back, teeth glinting in the flickering fire light. Bull has been swapping stories and telling jokes with Abner ever since the fire was set. She laughs with him, but Hawke notices – though she clearly tries to hide it – that she favors her left side. Favoring the ribs that had been smashed not two days before by a brut… her husband.

She really shouldn’t try to be so tough. Granted, Hawke would act the same way if it was he who had taken the crippling blow. He stretches his shoulders back at the thought, the fresh scars on his back are still painfully sore from when the demon ripped through his armor as if he was made of butter. While he can appreciate her obstinacy, she needs to take the proper time for rest that Solas had instructed. With everything she just went through, it is amazing she can even walk. Instead, she insists on pretending that she feels great and that nothing catastrophic just happened to her.

Ever since Solas fixed her broken bones, however, she has been different. Lighter. Though, she has yet to address the fact that they all just watched her bathe in the blood of her husband. In fact, she still has some of his blood on her… How can they act like she is okay? How can she make jokes with Bull at a time like this? How can they go along with it? He’s not sure why, but they do. They all do.

“Mmmm,” Abner smiles into the stars as if she is picturing something beautiful hanging in front of her. “I am a sucker for a red head. Can be a man, a woman, a dwarf, human, elf…shit, I’d even give
you a go if you had crimson hair flowing from that head, Bull.”

Smiling to himself, Hawke feels his self-assured arrogance flourish with her words. He has never felt so appreciative of his auburn hair as he does in this moment. Hawke was unaware of her fetish before, perhaps he can use it to his advantage.

“You know, Bers… I bet there is a spell for that. Damn, I’d even wear a wig.” Iron Bull purrs as he leans in toward Abner with want and desire radiating from his one good eye.

Inwardly, Hawke blazes with jealousy. The nerve of the qunari, Hawke is sitting right here. Sure, he doesn’t have any official claim on Abner, but he wants to. It is pretty fucking obvious that he is attracted to her, and that they have an intense, albeit limited, history.

He can’t help himself, he has to attempt to claim her. No matter how much he does not deserve it, and shouldn’t try, he wants to. Hawke has never been one to abstain from his wants, no matter how dangerous they are.

Clearing his throat as challenging and superior as he can muster, Hawke springs a look of perturbed irritation on his face. Interrupting their ardent banter, they both turn their gaze to him, brows cocked, Abner’s eyes annoyed and expectant. Suddenly, with her gaze on him, all of the air within his body… leaves.

Momentarily, he loses his train of thought. Instead of a witty retort, he babbles like an incoherent moron. “I… uh… well…That is to say… I don’t think Abner needs anymore redheads… in this camp, anyway,” he awkwardly utters. As soon as his mouth shuts, he rolls his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose, annoyed with his own incompetence.

Smooth. Real smooth… Jackass…

Now she is looking at him with both pity and a half crooked smile. Like Hawke is nothing but a child throwing a tantrum, threatening to take his toys and go home. Well, he does want to take her and go. She is a wonderful, enticing, and feral creature that Hawke wants to play with, and those desires do not involve the qunari sitting to her right. Hawke can feel the pout sulking on his face, and he tries to correct it with a more flirtatious look in her direction. He raises a single eyebrow, places a fist on his hip, and thinks to himself a mantra of, Look dashing. Look dashing. Look dashing.

She is not impressed. Rather, she slowly closes her eyes, obviously rolling them behind her lids. As she opens them again, they stay narrowed, cutting through him with an apathetic precision that slices his heart. Has she lost all interest? Will she ever again look at him the way she did that first night? She must have felt the raw, primal connection they shared, why push him away? Perhaps it was her Avvar secret… her secret marriage… and something about being half-blooded? Maybe? He doesn’t know, but the crazy, mabari war hound is out of the bag now, so why is she still so cold?

She is such a mystery. He barely knows anything about her…yet… he can’t get her out of his head. This never happens to him. He doesn’t obsess and fall over himself for the attention of a woman. He looks like a Maker damned fool. This is ridiculous, he has known many women. Droves of women. He’s unsure what Abner has done to him… but that feral, wild, and wicked look behind her eyes drives him crazy with want. He feels a kinship with her, like no other. Her presence makes him want to do things… bad things… naughty things… despicable things… Not that a woman has never made him feel lustful, honestly, they all have. The other feelings he has for her, however, are quite unique. Abner instills a need in him to be tender… loving.

She is a Goddess. He would worship at her feet like a dog. The Lady of the Forest. As she calms the
rabid mind of a wolf, she accentuates both his ferocity and his compassion.

Hawke needs to know everything about her. He needs her to look at him, smile, and share all of her secrets. Allow him to share the load of her burdens. Crack jokes with her, fight beside her, share stories, hold her, stare at the beautiful wildfire that lives in her eyes, and make love to her every night before she sleeps. He has never been so quickly transfixed by a woman, but she has bewitched him - mind, body, and soul.

He would gladly move mountains for her, if it meant she would look at him the way she did when they first met. What he would not give to go back to that night, when she was carefree and comfortable. That must return. She is like drug and he is happily addicted. He needs another fix, to rapture in her glow. He had that one precious taste of her spirit, and like a fiend, he is desperate for more.

She gets up from her spot at the fire, “I’m goin’ to bed.” She cuts her eyes at Hawke, razor sharp daggers searing into the depths his soul. He wants to follow her, but with all the seriousness of a mage going into a harrowing, she says, “Alone.” Begrudgingly, he watches her as she heads to her tent, wishing he could follow, annoyed that he cannot.

Izzalea walks in front of him in that moment, obstructing his view of Abner’s tent. Stretching and groaning, Izzy is oblivious to his desperate yearning to recapture her scout. “Maker’s balls, I am so sick of this swamp. At least the rain finally stopped. Though, I wonder for how long.” She sighs and plops down on a log beside him. “How amazing would it be to have our gear actually dry out?” She gently ribs him with her elbow.

“I’m not sure what good it would do. We all stink and are covered in blood and guts anyway,” Bull grunts.

No one has been able to bathe since they arrived. Not really, anyway. The marsh is full of the undead, and the water is disgusting. There is nothing around to clean themselves with, so they wipe off as best as they can and persevere. Everyone could do well with a warm bath, a dry bed, and a decent meal.

That gives him an idea. “I think we need to let everyone have a well-deserved break from the bullshit,” Hawke winks at Iron Bull who takes obvious offence to his well-directed snark. “And we all deserve respite from having to smell the especially noxious qunari.”

Bull’s nostrils flare as he begins to glare and, possibly unknowingly, tilt his horns in Hawke’s direction. This just fuels his fire, “Say Bull, you’re part beast or something, aren’t you? I mean that’s why you have horns and all of that, right? Should you not be able to lick yourself clean?” Hawke feels wickedly proud of himself, retaliation for hitting on Abner.

“RRRRRAH! ENOUGH!” Bull growls and bellows at Hawke as he sharply rises to his feet.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Izzalea raises her hand to stop Bull from a charge. She punches Hawke roughly in the shoulder as he continues to taunt the horned goat-man with a malicious smirk. “Knock it off, Hawke.” As Bull sits back down, glowering, Izzy sighs in irritation, “What was your point, Hawke? Without any additional of insults, preferably.” She cuts her eyes at him. With all of this love and adoration, he feels as if he’s back in Kirkwall.

He sits up straight, tugging at his tunic proudly and winks at Bull again, who in turn rolls his eye. Pivoting to Izzy, he unfolds his plan, “There was a town, Sothmere, not far from the bog. I bet they have an inn there. What do you say we stop there, rest, wash ourselves, and have a decent meal?”
“Oh that sounds wonderful!” Izzy squeals, Hawke didn’t even know this woman could emit a sound so high-pitched. However, her disposition immediately plummets, “But Josie didn’t give me the funds for that sort of thing,” she says as she drops her head down, resting it in her palm with her elbow leaned on her knee. She looks like Hawke had promised her a ride on a griffon only to laugh in her face and tell her they’re extinct.

“Aha, well… fear not your Inquisitorialness! It will be my treat. My gift to the Inquisition and all of that,” he says as he smiles at her, mockingly putting-on-airs and twirling his fingers about.

She sits up straight again, grinning ear to ear, “Thank you, Hawke! Are you sure you want to spend your coin on that? Once we get out of the bog it will only be a few nights before we reach Skyhold.”

Honestly, or obviously, Hawke has his own agenda. He seeks privacy with Abner before they return to the keep. With all of the bustle that goes on there, it would be easy for her to slip away, disappearing from his grasp forever. Plus, he will be leaving again, this time for the Western Approach, almost immediately upon return. He cannot risk losing the chance to talk to her. Perhaps he should attempt to apologize… or something… He still doesn’t know what he did, but apologies tend to do wonders with the fairer sex. Really, he’s willing to do anything if it means he has the chance to experience her charms again.

Hawke winks at Izzalea and bumps his shoulder into hers, “Really Izzy? Do you really want to arrive in Skyhold to face your dapper and handsome Commander, while smelling like a death bog?”

Izzalea grimaces at the thought and shakes her head. “No.”

“They it is! We deserve it,” he smiles at her and rises to his feet. He flashes a brief, smug nod to Iron Bull before turning on his heel to head to his tent for the night. As he strides away, he calls back to his companions over his shoulder, “It will be something for us to look forward to as we fight our way out of this revolting marsh.”

The next day is slow going. Even though they finally leave the bog behind, the steady pace needed to keep it easy on the wounded, tired soldiers seems to make their travel drag on forever. There were not enough horses for everyone, so the worst of the lot were propped on steeds and lead by the rest at a slow, even march. They still manage to arrive in Sothmere by the next evening, however. Like the Maker shining his light down upon them, they see the inn from a distance, and everyone’s mood revitalizes.

As members of their entourage clean themselves, they slip into the cleanest, most comfortable clothes they can find in their gear, and trickle into the inn’s tavern for drink, food, and relaxation. Hawke practically skips down the steps from the inn rooms to the tavern floor. His light, linen tunic and slacks feel fresh and easy on his newly washed skin. He walks up to the bar to order himself a much needed drink.

A beautiful barmaid walks up to Hawke, smiling a lovely, toothy grin and crinkling the freckles spread across her nose as she winks at him in hello. She has a light, sunny, red hue to her wavy hair that cascades over her shoulders. Her breasts are hoisted quite high due to some kind of brown, leather, corset contraption underneath that Hawke doesn’t understand, but greatly appreciates. While a linen chemise is below, barely keeping her breasts from being displayed bare, in all of their glory. She catches him staring and laughs while shaking her head, “Ello there, handsome stranger, what can I do yis for?” She has a rich, friendly Starkhaven brogue that almost makes Hawke long for the Free Marches, and the other lovely lady there with a similar accent.

He smirks coyly at the maiden. He drops his voice to a low, playful rumble, “How about a glass of your finest red, my lady?”
“Oh, yous a cheeky one, eh?” she flirts, “Not sure how fine it is foryis, but I might have a bottle of sumptin in the back.” He watches as she walks through a door into the tavern’s store room. A pale green skirt flits around as she walks, but Hawke still enjoys the view of her bum swaying before she disappears into the room.

When she returns, she displays a proud smile on her glowing, pale, freckled face. “This’ll have to do, big spender,” she winks at him as she pours a glass into a goblet. “Best we got.”

“I’m sure it’s wonderful,” he coos back to her, all the while he obviously drinks her in with his eyes. She giggles at him while handing his goblet over, he slides his coin across the wooden counter. As he drinks, the wine hits that very particular and unfortunate spot at the back of his throat, causing him to cough uncontrollably. While he was trying to appear suave for the barmaid, instead he hacks and dribbles red wine down the front of his pale linen shirt.

She covers her mouth with her hands but laughs hysterically at his discomfort. Hawke sighs, taking his wine and his shame to find the rest of his cleaned companions in the tavern. It does not take long, as he sees a table with Izzy, Bull, Cole, Solas, and a couple of the rescued Inquisition soldiers sitting at a long table not very far from the bar. He joins them and enjoys some light banter, however, Hawke notices a far off stare in Izzalea’s sage colored eyes.

“Something weighing on your mind, Izzy?” Hawke asks just before taking a swig of his wine.

“I just…” her voice trails off as quickly as it begins.

“What is it boss?” Iron Bull asks, looking concerned from the end of the table.

“I just don’t understand how that… Thing, could have been married to Abner,” Izzalea speaks slowly and cautiously, keeping her stare on the table, eyes searching the woodgrain for answers.

“It’s possible that it wasn’t her choice,” Bull says gravely. Izeala turns her head to look at the Qunari. “The thing is, well as far as I’ve heard, it’s how they get their brides to the wedding ceremony…” Bull says plainly. “They abduct her.”

Hawke feels the color rush from his face and feels sick to his stomach, followed quickly by outrage. He growls inwardly, “They what?” The thought of a young Abner being abducted and forced to marry that man sickens him.

“Well, to my understanding it’s just a custom. The groom has to prove himself to her family by successfully taking her from them. The marriage is supposed to be worked out and agreed upon before, and the bride can even help him if she wants. The ritual was explained to me once when the Chargers where working near an Avvar strong hold. They talked about it like it was fun, a test of valor.” Bull drops his eyes from the table and takes a drink from his tankard. Shuddering to himself he continues, “But I get the feeling that our friend may not have been so keen on the idea…”

Cole quietly murmurs while his face is tipped downward and a frown shapes his lips, “Not a game to her…”

“I do not think it prudent to speculate how she was married or how she felt about it, The Iron Bull. Imparting Avvar customs to our friends here is one thing, speculations of Abner’s private affairs is quite another,” Solas calmly and coolly scolds Bull, who in turn shoots a glare and releases a low grunt at the elf.

Izzalea groans with guilt written plainly on her face, she runs her fingers through her wet hair, shaking it out as she does. “Solas is right…we should change the subject. I am sorry for bringing it
Iron Bull watches Izzalea idly play with her auburn tresses, a twinkle shines in his eyes as he looks past her and to the lovely barmaid beyond. “How about we take bets as to whether I can seduce that gorgeous redhead serving drinks at the bar?” He looks at the woman with a hunger in his eye and a smirk on his face.

The two soldiers at the table look at the woman and then eye the enormous Iron Bull up and down. “I will take that bet,” one says.

The other chuckles, “Yeah, me too. I think she will take one look at you and turn the other direction.”

Bull laughs proudly to himself, “You men of little faith. Prepare to lose your coin…” He starts to rise from his chair only to freeze in place because of something he sees. His jaw slacks, surprise shining in his eye. He slowly eases back down without dropping his gaze from what has shocked him.

“What’s wrong Bull, lost your nerve?” Hawke chuckles as he turns his head to follow Bull’s line of sight.

And then he sees her. Abner is slowly slinking down the steps from the inn’s rooms and into the tavern.

She is a vision.

Her thick and dreaded hair is pulled back into a large messy knot, or bun, or whatever you call it with hair like hers. She has fresh kohl marked around her eyes, matching her black tattoos, and her skin tight, black leather breeches. A look that is seductively dangerous.

And her tunic… it is scandalous.

Obviously, they did not have the means to bring a wardrobe on this mission, but she is wearing a mere sheath of a top. Sleeveless and thin, it drapes and flows loosely from her shoulders. The color is lighter than her skin… and maker is that material thin. Painfully thin. Hawke begins to doubt if she even knows what a breast band is…

Hawke’s loins tighten and quiver at the sight of her. He licks his lips as he suddenly feels parched, but he cannot avert his stare. Barefooted, she lightly and gracefully pads up to the bar. He finds it hard to contain himself as he hopes she comes to their table soon. He cunningly pushes back the chair next to him, hoping she will grace it with her exquisite behind.

She leans on the counter and smiles seductively at the light, crimson haired barmaid. Hawke’s heart starts to plummet into the abyss as she stays there, standing with the maid. She receives her ale, but she stays. The maid giggles and blushes at something Abner says. She looks as sly as a cat flirting with a fish in a bowl.

“Looks like you will be paying us coin, Iron Bull,” Hawke hears one of the soldiers snort from behind him.

He turns to look at Bull as he grunts disapprovingly at the soldier. “How could I to get in the way of that.” He sighs in capitulation, “She deserves some fun…”

The conversations ebb and flow at the table, all the while, Abner never joins them. Hawke tries his hardest not to stare at her, but it is difficult. Ultimately, he ends up sullenly pouting and studying the
wood pattern on his goblet in front of him. He surrenders his attempt to not watch her and looks back toward the bar, only to feel a shot of anxiety in his chest. She is gone.

Searching the room with panicked eyes, Hawke looks for her figure, but finds nothing. She must have gone up to bed. How is he to make amends with her if he never gets a chance to talk to her? He must find her. He must speak with her.

Excusing himself from the table, he decides to search her out. He nods to his companions, wishing them a pleasant evening and a good sleep. He jokingly advises Bull to not poke any holes in his pillows with his horns, as he doesn’t want to spend the extra coin to clean the feathers and replace the linens. Before Bull can retort with an equally damning insult, Hawke smugly makes his way up the stairs.

Thankfully, since he purchased the rooms, he also handed out the keys. Hawke quickly finds her door and raps his knuckles on the wood in the most charming way he can possibly muster.

Hearing muffled voices from the other side, he wonders if she is not alone. There is a pit in his stomach, but then the door begins to open. The beautiful, yet sour, face of Hawke’s Avvar Goddess is staring up at him. He has displeased her, yet again, with his presence.

She cocks her head to the side, folds her arms at her chest, and taps her foot. “What do you want, Hawke… I’m a little busy…” she spits her words like venom.

Looking past her, he sees that the redheaded barmaid is in the bed, holding a sheet against her chest and between her bare shoulders. Interestingly enough her look is not of disdain, the maid is actually tracing her eyes over Hawke’s body with a delicious smirk on her lips, and lustful bedroom eyes.

“Oh Abi, are ya havin’ that? Just look at’im. He’s right fit innit he?” the maiden hums as she locks eyes with him and they both raise an eyebrow at each other. Oh, this is very interesting, indeed. Hawke can work with this. He had wanted to make amends with Abner, but he could easily be persuaded as to how he should accomplish the task.

Hawke winks slyly at the maiden in the sheets before looking down to his raven haired beauty. Leaning against the doorframe, crossing his arms, and cocking his brow, Hawke rumbles in the most suggestive and sarcastic way possible, “Abi?”

“Not a word, Hawke,” she says curtly, but he detects the slightest hint of amusement in her eyes. The wall she has put between them is starting to chip. She sighs, “Why are you here?”

He smiles at her. “Well, I wanted to kiss and make up… But I see now that perhaps we can do much more than just that.” There is slightest twitch of a smile on the corner of her mouth, hope springs within him. She is not as discontent with him as she tries to appear.

The crimson maid on the bed squeals with delight and pleads with ‘Abi’ to let him in. He continues to lean on the doorframe as smug as the Nug King himself. Abner’s eyes never leave his. He watches as the fire burning within them slowly morphs from contempt into desire. She is internally weighing her options, and her decision seems to be leaning in Hawke’s favor.

She licks and bites at her lip. His breath intensifies. She takes one step toward him with a smile on her wicked, gorgeous face.

Barely audible, except to her, he asks, “How are your ribs?”

“Much better, don’t worry about them,” her voice is in that low sexy tone he has been yearning to hear.
Hawke seizes that moment. Without diverting their lustful gaze, he swiftly scoops her up into his arms. She hooks her legs around his waist like they belong there, and he carries her into the room. Pivoting, Hawke uses his boot to knock the door closed and roughly presses her against it.

She is raised above him just enough to give Hawke easy access to her neck. He ghosts his lips over tan flesh, lightly breathing hot breath on her skin as she squeezes him tightly between her thighs. He looks up at her as thunderous desire rumbles in his chest. She peers down into his burning soul, her fingers entwine in his hair and tug lightly at his beard.

She is looking at Hawke as she did the first time she was in his arms. He is overcome with bliss and hunger. She is his again, but he needs to ensure it stays this way.

The maiden behind him calls out, “Ay, what about me?”

Hawke eyes flow ravenously over the enticing, warm, tanned skin of the goddess in his arms and wrapped around his body. In a low husk he responds, “Just a moment, love…”

Hawke leans in to tenderly whisper a kiss onto the nape Abner’s neck. “I just need to…”

As soft as a dropping flower petal, he presses a kiss upon her left shoulder. “Tell our beautiful friend…”

Her chest begins to heave… a kiss for her right shoulder. “How sorry…”

She shudders beneath his lips as he places a kiss on the other side of her neck. Looking back into her gorgeous dark eyes, he knows he burns for her as much as her eyes convey she burns for him. “I am.”

Abner’s teeth tug at her lower lip as she smiles at Hawke, before meeting her lips with his. Fire roars within his body. Electricity sparks as the touching of their skin ignites an insatiable thirst within him.

Hawke quivers in her presence, as he tastes her drug again.

*****

She tried to push him away, but he is a persistent little fucker.

Fine. If Hawke really wants to keep, whatever this is, going… Abner will play along. For now.

After his finishes tenderly kissing her, and apologizing for… something? She’s not sure what for, but right now she doesn’t care. He loses control and begins to ravage her in his arms.

He is like a rabid animal. His long, messy, red tresses are still damp to her touch. His untamed beard tickles her skin as he glides wet, passionate kisses along her neck, chest, and shoulders. Leaving her slick, reddened, and dotted with small love bites. He comes up for air and looks at her while panting. His lips parted, his stormy, blue eyes, dark and animalistic.

He may be the sexiest man alive.

Abner shudders under his touch. He holds her above him, legs wrapped tightly around his waist, the
heat between them pressed firmly against his wash-board stomach. He has her pressed roughly against the door to her room. With a ragged moan he forces her hips down past his and presses his hard length against her heat. Excitement shoots through Abner’s body, a shiver dancing down her spine at the feel of him between her legs. Panting and rutting against each other in rhythm, she can’t wait too feel him inside her again.

Grinding and rutting against her, he bites at her shoulder. She tips her head back against the door and moans from deep within her, biting her lip in the process. She is drunk on him. Abner almost loses herself completely, almost forgets the other crimson haired minx in the room.

Her body slightly rises and falls, with Hawke repetitively pressing his cock against her. She sees stars as he tugs and licks at her ear. Her nails dig into his chiseled, scarred back and her jaw slacks, lips parted as she lowers her gaze to the beautiful treasure waiting for them on the bed.

She has a pleasure-filled, pained look on her sweet face. Her green eyes, doe-like. Her brows, pinched. Her pretty, pink lips, open. Her body is writhing slowly on the bed as Abner’s eyes follow the curves of her freckled, pale skin all the way to her activity.

Before Hawke came to the door, Abner had helped the maiden lose her garments. But she has now shed the sheet that was once modestly draped over her when Abner answered his knock. Patiently she waits, watching them rut and moan against the door. The maiden’s knees bent, her legs spread, one hand lightly rubbing her clit, the other delicately tracing her fingertips along her lips.

She looks delicious.

“Hawke…” A ragged whisper grips from Abner’s throat into his ear, “Don’t forget our friend.” She gently places his chin between thumb and forefinger, turning his head to see the vixen on the bed.

“Perish the thought,” he growls, voice rich with desire. Easing Abner down, he allows her to leave their position and slowly pad up to the temptress who lies open on the bed.

How lucky is she to have not one, but two seductive crimson haired lovers this evening?

“Rhaegar Hawke, I’d like you to meet Eliza,” Abner says and smiles at her. Eyes dark and hooded, she crawls between Eliza’s legs, over her body. She is a vision. Her pale, alabaster skin is as soft as powder. Light freckles dot her rosy cheeks, and across her nose in a dazzling array of sweetness.

“A pleasure,” Hawke hums. He stands at the door waiting, watching Eliza and Abner on the bed.

Leaning over her, Abner kisses her pouty lips. Eliza’s eyes close, but her mouth opens. Abner glides the tip of her tongue along the soft, pink lips before she dips in, caressing Eliza’s tongue with hers. She moans into Abner’s mouth and presses her hips up against her. The maid shudders with desire as Abner runs her tongue-caressing kisses on her lips, cheeks, and chin. She travels wet, adoring kisses down her neck, and arches her back, kneeling over Eliza’s writhing form.

Hawke apparently is overcome with temptation at the sight of Abner’s bum propped in the air. He comes to stand next to the bed. His hands traveling the curve of Abner’s ass, down the firm, muscled outside of her thighs, and back up the softer, delicate inside. He cups her hot center through her leather breeches, before tugging at the laces. Slowly, she feels him peel back the leather from her skin. As he pulls them down her legs, she aids him, lifting to remove her pants, one leg at a time.

He cups and grabs Abner’s ass, giving her a tongue-stroking kiss on each cheek. He glides his hand between her thighs, causing her to gasp and shudder into Eliza’s mouth. As he paces up the side of the bed, Abner leaves her kisses with Eliza to lean up on her knees, welcoming Hawke with passion
between their slick lips.

Hawke’s works one hand between her legs, while the other travels to her neck. She gasps as he grabs it firmly, pressing his thumb against her throat, and pulling her into a deeper kiss. Eliza’s fingers dance and glide on Abner’s stomach causing her skin to prickle and sing. Hawke’s hand travels down to her breast. He cups it and thumbs her nipple as they continue to sinfully glide their tongues together.

Pulling away from their kiss, he eyes the crimson beauty lying beneath them. With his hooded stormy eyes, he smiles at Eliza as he bends down to seductively kiss her luscious lips, and brush his fingers along her breasts.

Abner uses the opportunity to slip off her sheer tunic, tossing it to the side. Delicately, she moves Eliza’s legs downward, and straddles over one of her thighs. Pressing her firm thigh against Eliza’s slick cunt, the barmaid coos into Hawke’s mouth with excitement. The ragged panting sounds they make turns Abner on further, as she glides and rocks herself against Eliza’s soft, smooth thigh.

Hawke stands and begins to remove his clothing while Eliza sits up enough to grab at Abner’s waist and pull her down. Their skin silkily slides against each other. Abner lies next to Eliza, yet slightly overlapped and entangled with her. They kiss as Abner trails her hand down Eliza’s stomach to her dripping core. She moans and bucks against Abner’s hand while she rubs the sweet pearl with her thumb and dips the tips of her fingers into her.

Abner hums lowly into her ear, “Do you like that, Eliza?”

“Fuck, yes…” she gasps breathlessly.

Hawke joins them on the bed, on the opposite side of their tantalizing barmaid. He kneels next to her, his cock proudly hanging before them. Eliza and Abner smirk at each other before they sit up and guide Hawke to a lying position between them. Eliza licks her hand and glides her slippery palm along Hawke’s length, from tip to base and back again, causing it to twitch in appreciation.

He hisses a sharp intake of breath and closes his eyes. Each of his hands lightly rubbing the women’s waists. Leaning down over his cock, as Eliza slowly strokes it, Abner eases her mouth over the tip. Swirling her tongue against the shaft, she glides down, encasing as much as she can while allowing room for Eliza. With added pressure of suction, Abner glides her mouth back up. She watches Hawke’s face as Eliza strokes, and she sucks. His eyes open, watching them, the blue of them turning even darker and more thunderous. His lightly furred chest rises and falls steadily, his slow breath gradually gaining speed.

Hawke wraps his fingers through Abner’s hair and guides his cock deeper in her mouth and down her throat, until her nose presses firmly against his stomach. He holds her there as she moans, the feeling of him filling her throat makes her cunt drip down her leg. Eliza reaches around and glides her fingers over Abner’s ass before pressing them inside her, fingers playing with slippery wet. Hawke releases his hold, and she springs her head up, gasping for air, grinning wickedly. He grabs Abner’s face roughly, sinking his thumb into her open, panting mouth, pulling her jaw down. He licks and bites at his lips as he watches her moan, mouth wet and red, and Eliza plays with her cunt, finger gliding and dancing between her thighs. He pulls his thumb from her mouth and pushes her head back down over his cock.

His eyes quickly flicker wide, then squeeze shut as his breathing speeds up considerably, with the added vibrations of her moaning. He pumps her head faster and harder. Pulling his lower lip into his mouth and biting it firmly, he looks down at her, their eyes meeting intensely.
Abner pulls him out of her mouth, gasping for air, overcome with lust. Eliza gives her a break, placing her mouth over him. He replaces Eliza’s fingers inside Abner with his own. His stormy eyes still locked on hers. They may have a companion in the room, but he looks at Abner as if she is the only person in Thedas. She can’t look away, transfixed, aroused by his reddened face and ragged breath. His fingers slide in and out of her as she lightly grinds her hips to help him go deeper. They repeatedly hook and rub against the special bundle of nerves deep inside her, giving Abner the feeling that she will soon unravel. The combination of his fingers, the atmosphere, and the gale raging in his eyes brings her closer to the edge.

Hawke senses this, pulling his fingers away. Abner whimpers, instantly feeling empty, longing for his touch to return. She begs him with her eyes, to bring his touch back to her.

“Get on,” a deep, seductive command erupts from his chest.

Eliza ceases her attentions. Bringing her head back up, she smiles and wipes saliva from her swollen, dark-pink lips. Hawke winks at her, motioning for her to crawl to him and straddle his face while Abner straddles his hips. In unison the women ease down to him. Abner watches his tongue reach out, gliding along Eliza while she cries out to the Maker.

As his cock fills her, Abner loses all consciousness. He feels amazing. She rocks her hips so that he continually stays inside, rubbing against her favorite spot. It feels as if fire is burning and dancing on every inch of her skin.

Eliza reaches out for her, bringing Abner back from her haze. She pulls their lips together. She tastes Hawke on Eliza’s lips and on her tongue, making Abner burn even brighter. They cry into each other as they kiss and ride Hawke. Their breathing uneven, their hips buck and twitch as he brings them both close to the edge.

Hawke’s hands grip Abner’s hips hard, pressing her roughly on him. The women’s hands tangle in each other’s hair and they press their foreheads together, swiftly approaching ecstasy. They both loudly plead for release, and find it, together.

Abner and Eliza shudder. Heads falling to the other’s shoulder, hips twitching as ripples of explosions release in their bodies. They pant and moan into each other’s skin as the last shockwaves of their orgasms dissipate. Abner feels as if her skin glows, Eliza’s most certainly does.

In a low, husky tone, Abner chuckles. Wiping sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, she smiles, exhaling a single word, “Damn…”

Eliza giggles as she dismounts Hawke’s now glistening face. He grins quite proudly at them, his hands still driving Abner’s hips on him, slowly rocking her back and forth on him.

“If my ladies are finished?” he asks politely, smirking.

“Please, go right ahead,” Eliza giggles.

The dark, stormy, blue eyes lock on Abner’s, making her shiver and feel as if she could come again. She hadn’t realized how much she missed his eyes on her while their lovely friend obstructed her view. He flashes a wicked grin moments before swooping and flinging them into opposite positions, pinning Abner down against the bed. Hawke fervently thrusts in and out of her in long, fluid strokes, never breaking eye contact.

Placing her legs over each shoulder he drives into her. A feeling so intense, that her legs shake and tremble against him. Abner screams his name, and grunts loudly with each thrust, consumed by
pleasure. His red hair cascades down the side of his face as he leans down to kiss her. Abner’s knees pinned against her chest, he stays there, slamming into her fast and hard. The bed shakes and creaks, rutting against the floorboards.

Pressing his forehead on hers, they stare into each other eyes, and she senses Hawke start to lose control. In this moment, he is the only man in the world, and she, the only woman. She feels euphoric as she reaches a second climax, dissolving into star dust as rapture radiates throughout her body.

He rumbles her name before connecting their lips one last time as he slams eagerly inside of her. Holding that position, she feels him release and tremble against her.

Abner tucks his hair behind his ear and caresses his cheek. They gaze softly at each other. He smiles and kisses her forehead before leaning up, gently helping her stretch out her unsteady legs.

He grins at Eliza, winks, and exclaims, “Good job!” He smacks her playfully on the ass, causing her to giggle. He looks down at Abner lovingly, gently rubbing her thighs in his strong hands, “You too, my love.”

Abner allows herself to flush at his words, just this once, feeling her own affinity for the man grow in her chest. She feels warm, tingly all over as they each pick a side of her to lie next to and cuddle.

She really shouldn’t make a habit out of this. But just for this night, Abner will allow herself to feel loved.

Chapter End Notes

Another update tomorrow! Not as long as this one (holy cow was that a long one, eh?), but definitely important for all the Abner fans out there.

Comments, Kudos, and Shares are love <3
The door handle to her room gently rattles, stirring her awake.

Confused, Abner sits up in her bed and rubs the sleep from her eyes, while trying to bring the room into focus. The darkness is only illuminated by a low, almost spent, fire in the hearth.

Her sensitive ears listen as light, sporadic tremors intensify on the handle. The metal of the lock jiggles and clangs. Before she has the wherewithal to call out to the intruder, the sounds stop. The air is deathly quiet, she peers curiously at the door handle, wondering if someone in the inn tried the wrong room, or perhaps she was just hearing things.
But she wasn’t hearing things.

Violently, the door starts crashing and booming. Someone on the other side is slamming into it again, and again, and again. Abner’s heart bangs in her chest so fiercely that she can hear it in her ears. She needs to get her blades, but she cannot move. Paralyzed, she feels cold sweat drip down her back, and terror rip through her chest. She is stuck watching the wood of the door bend and snap with every thrust made against it. She desperately tries to scream for help, but her breath hitches. The door finally bursts open, lock snapped, and wood shrapnel flying everywhere. At that moment, Abner finds her voice.

“No…” a hushed, croaked whisper in disbelief. “It can’t be.”

“Did you think you could get away, again?” His voice is dark, arrogant, and petrifying.

Abner begins to shake so thoroughly, that even her voice tremors, “I... I…k-killed you…”

His laughter has so much force that it shakes the room. The window panes rattle, picture frames on the walls threaten to crash to the floor. He stands there in the doorway, staring at her, fresh scars on his neck from where she cut him. His body is spotted with blood and worn off paint. His leathers and furs are stained a deep red-brown, and his face is uncovered. There looms the face of her worst nightmare. Ofred, here to take her back. His eyes gleam wicked malice and seemingly glow red, as if possessed by a demon.

Her heart beats so fast that she can’t breathe or think straight. Nothing but sharp, shallow gulps of haphazard air that fails to fill her lungs. It feels as if he is reaching across the room and choking the life out of her with just his glare.

He roars maniacally, “Are you so sure it was me you killed?”

Abner is suffocating. She grips at her throat trying to will it to open, but her hands are wet and slippery as they slide over her skin. Panicked, she looks down to find that they are covered in blood. She is covered in blood. The barmaid and Hawke are lying on either side of her, motionless. The sheets over them are drenched in blood and covered in rips and tears. Abner stares at a bloody dagger in her hand and immediately drops it, recoiling from the implication.

“No,” she croaks, still gasping for air, “I didn’t… I didn’t do this!” She vigorously shakes Hawke’s body. Voice, a coarse squeak, she pleads with his motionless form, “Hawke… Hawke, wake up… please wake up…” His body lays limp, quiet. His eyes lie open, but nothing’s in them… blank… empty… dead.

Tears roll down her cheeks as her husband howls in the doorway. “You always knew I’d find you,” he snarls at her, the glow of his red eyes intensifies. Every scar on his massive body glows as well, as if evil power grows within him, searching for its way to pour out. “The Hand of the Mountain Father owns you, cunt.”

Venomous, Abner chokes out the inherit defiance she has never been able to quell, even when she should. “That isn’t your name, Ofred. You are nothing to Him. You are a disgrace.”

He takes slow menacing steps toward her as she rips at the sheets to get away. The immensity of the blood pooled around her is too viscous. She slips and sticks to the bed. She tries to scream but her throat scratches and splits.

“You are nothing. You never will be. You have disgraced your clan and our people. You fucking piece of shit!” It takes all of her energy to force out her weak, suffocating voice, as she braces for his
attack.

He grabs her by the neck, his flaming eyes burning into her with murderous rage. He slowly crushes her throat with his hand, holding her naked body in the air like a rag doll. Abner coughs and sputters, clawing at his hand and kicking her feet in the air. Hysterical, she fears that he will actually kill her this time. “Please,” she chokes a whisper, “Not again… please… I’ll be good… I swear…” pleading as she strains for air.

“Too late for that now, whore. It’s time you know once and for all who owned you and your pathetic little life.” He growls before throwing her violently against the stone fireplace. Her head cracks against the mantle before she lands in a heap on the floor, certain she has broken bones.

He lunges toward her as she grabs the fire iron and points at him. The metal trembles from her shaking, weak arm. He laughs at her attempt at defense and lets the iron slowly enter his flesh, while continuing his advance.

Horror overwhelms her, how can this be happening? “No… no…” she squeezes her eyes shut as his hands reach out to break her. She readies herself for the pain as best she can, screaming in terror.

Two hands grab Abner’s shoulders.

They are smaller than they should be.

The hands shake her forcefully, but not with cruelty. “Abner… you are alright. It was just a nightmare. Open your eyes. He is gone.” A voice gently hums to her, but she is too afraid to open her eyes. He is going to kill her this time, she’s sure of it. Tears squeeze through as she shivers and trembles.

“Calm yourself. Open your eyes, da’len,” the voice thrums.

_Elvhen_.

Opening her eyes in a flash, Abner wheezes and gasps for air as if she had been drowning. Finally able to breathe again, she looks around frantically. She is sitting in a clearing, surrounded by trees, and wearing a light, cotton chemise. The moonlight gives the grasses around her a soft luminous glow. A cool breeze sings through the reeds, they whisper to her in the deep blue.

Abner concentrates on slowing her breathing as her heart rate calms. The figure holding her shoulders is silhouetted and kneeling in front of her. She strains to see him in the darkness, her eyes gradually adjusting to the low, midnight light. He releases his grasp while she squints.

_The fadewalker._

“How?” Abner quietly stammers, tremors still vibrating through her body.

“You are dreaming, da’len. I sensed your distress,” He says simply.

As Abner slowly regains composure, the tremors stop. _It was a dream. He wasn’t there. He didn’t break me. I am okay._

_I am okay._

She puffs steady breaths, releasing tensed pressure in her body, she eyes the fadewalker suspiciously. “You… sensed… me?”
His large elven eyes shimmer in the soft light, but she cannot quite make out the details of his face. He silently stands to his feet and offers her his hand. She takes it. With steady, yet gentle strength, he pulls Abner to her feet. His long thin fingers are agile, but firm. His skin… soft like velvet.

His hand lingers on hers. She stares at him curiously, causing him to remember himself, and snap his hand away.

Standing in the moonlight, she can better see his face, and she studies it quietly. Searching for answers in how he carries himself. Abner has always been very observant, with an ability to easily read people’s expressions. But while this dark mage with a mane of dreaded hair, dressed in furs, bones, and scraps of cloth, appears as untamed as the wind, he in fact, carries himself in a perfected stoicism. His stare is impassive, blocking her from trying to read his thoughts or his intent.

They stand there silently for what feels like an eternity, but the silence helps her mind continue to soothe until she has fully relaxed. Confident that Ofred is still dead, her curiosity about the stolid fadewalker only grows. Abner’s inherent impish guiles cause her to smirk at the elven mage. What is his game? Will he make a habit of intervening in her dreams? Why he even bothered to intervene in the first place, she wonders.

Noticing her smirking at him in spirited contemplation, he flattens his eyes and frowns. “You should be wearier of the human,” he states dryly, breaking the silence.

“What… Who?” she is briefly taken aback. That was ever the random statement… What more does he know about her? And how?

Contempt drips from his lips, “Your juvenile little mage boy.”

She snorts, “Hawke?”

“Yes.”

“Why would you give two shits ‘bout who I let hang around?” She is both mildly amused and annoyed by this fadewalker’s interest in her company.

He groans with displeasure.

With willful eagerness and defiance, she continues to question him. “What? What is it, Fadewalker? Why have you set your sights on me?”

Dead pan he ignores her and questions her instead, “Did your mother teach you Elvhen?”

Oh, does he think that will shock her? Trip her up? No. No, it will not. “You got a real body somewhere, Fadewalker?”

“Why do you cling to your human blood, when your elvhen blood is far more tenacious?”

“Do you lurk in the shadows and watch me during waking hours?” Abner crosses her arms, continuing to smirk playfully at him. He grows more annoyed with her questioning, as if he is not doing the same.

“Have you forsaken your legacy? Your culture?”

“Is this even what you look like? Or do you change your appearance? Do you shapeshift for everyone you stalk, Fadey?”
“What have the humans ever done for you?”

“Are you plannin’ on making a habit of this dream meddling, Fadey?”

“Enough.”

“Answer me.”

He grabs Abner’s shoulders sharply, startling her. He is pleased with himself for catching her off guard. A twinkle shines in his eyes as he lowers his face to hers and hums in satisfaction. Their eyes inches apart, noses almost touching, she feels his breath on her lips.

He whispers, “Wake up.”

Abner’s eyes fly open and her chest heaves in shock. She blinks and glances around her before moving. She is back in the inn. The sun has begun to rise, allowing for a cool, blueish ray of light to trickle in from the window. The hearth has not but soft glowing embers. The barmaid is missing, but there is not a drop of blood, and Hawke breathes deeply with heavy sleep to her right. The linens are damp around her, but this time from sweat, not blood, while she was fitfully asleep.

*It was all a dream.*

She breathes and rubs her chest just above her heart to ease the pressure knotted there. Her other hand reaches to wipe sweat from her forehead and pinch between her eyes. What a fucking nightmare. She sits up on the bed, half expecting it to be sore from strangulation. But she is fine.

Hawke’s hand caresses her, lightly feathering his fingers against the bare, clammy skin on her back. She turns her head and looks down and sees he is blearily smiling up at her. His gaze smoky with desire, his hair is adorably plumed and messy on the pillow. Strong, chiseled, bare chest calmly rises and falls with his soft breaths. She wants to reach out and run her fingers through his patch of chest hair, but she doesn’t. She wants to tug on his auburn beard, and kiss him passionately, stay with him like this – in bed – all day, or forever. But she won’t.

“Good morning, love.” He hums up at her, “How did you sleep?”

Groaning, she flops back down to her pillow. Turning on her side to face him, she sighs, “Nightmares.”

He brings his brows together in worry, stroking her cheek delicately with his thumb. “Ofred?” he asks and she dips her eyes down. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

Abner reaches up and holds his hand to her face, reveling in a fleeting moment of feeling safe. If she told him her dream, he would only have more questions. As much as the fadewalker may think she trusts Hawke, she doesn’t. She can’t. Holding his hand, she twists her face to kiss his palm. “No,” she says.

“You can trust me, Abner. You should talk to someone.” His usual stormy eyes are clear and sober. He softly encourages her, “Tell me what happened to you.”

How could she tell him? She can’t tell him. He would never look at her the same. He would harbor feelings about things he has no control over. She won’t be made to relive her secrets in order for him to think that they are ‘closer,’ or that it ‘helps’ her. She won’t lay out all of the reasons why she is different, for him to play hero to her heart. She won’t share why she never to truly fits in anywhere.
Why she prefers to live life alone, than to put trust in another.

She can’t tell him how her mother and father were never supposed to love, never supposed to meet at all. But that they did and they bore her because of it. How her mother’s clan abandoned her for loving a human, an Avvar human of all things. Her father’s clan in turn, reluctantly housed them, because of how valuable they were in the hunt, however, Abner was never fully accepted. And when the blight killed her family, along with many others in the clan, it was she who was blamed for the Gods’ disfavor. She was the reason her clan was not protected.

She can’t tell Hawke that she was given to Ofred, without her consent, just to get rid of her and her curse. That at too young of an age, that disgusting man came into her hold, took her from her bed, and she never saw her clan again.

She can’t tell him that the man she was given to had an affinity for the small and the helpless. Or that his affinity came at a price.

She can’t share the tales of how she would limp to the healer regularly, explaining how she ‘slipped while hunting again.’ Or that the beast she attacked was ‘too strong’ for her. He cannot hear the fact that no one believed her tales, yet no one did anything about it. That to her new clan, Abner was secretly untrusted, unprotected, unwanted. Her blood, spoiled. Her womb, barren. Her purpose, unclear.

He can’t hear that one day, she couldn’t reach the healer. Her broken leg would not support her. Her battered arms, too weak pull her. How she laid broken and bruised for too long before she was found. That it was Ofred’s father who finally decided it was enough. He wanted her to leave, for good this time. And while he was distracting his son, his wife was giving her a small pack of supplies and sneaking her into the wilderness.

Hawke will never know that she was wretched and terrified. How she was haunted by the threat of being discovered and dragged back home, again. Or that Leliana was the one who found her, and it was she who helped Abner find her strength. She and the only man Abner thought she could ever love.

Hawke need not know that Abner vowed to never be weak again. That she revels in her learned agility, and however secretive, she now takes pride in her mother’s lithe and nimble frame.

He doesn’t have to know why she can’t trust.

She sighs after remaining silent for too long. He is looking at her, hoping she will divulge her secrets. “Hawke,” her heart sinks and she knows he can hear it in her voice. “This is why I was trying to push you away. You have too many questions. You already know too much. It is easier for me to shut you out… be angry with you, than to answer your questions. My past is my own. I don’t want to relive it. I want it left forgotten.”

She takes his hand in hers, rubbing her thumb over callouses and scars. He looks at her with melancholy disappointment in his grey-blue eyes.

He tries so hard to seem impervious, clever, and confident with the world, but Abner can see that he hides behind his sarcasm and nasty remarks. His willful insolence is a barrier to keep people from getting too close. Like her, he prefers to be wild and unpredictable, to vulnerable.

He thinks has chosen her to share in vulnerability, he is begging her to join him. But she won’t.

Smiling at her prescient admirer, she gently chides him, “I have lived a hard life. My time with him…
was the worst. But killing him… killing him was the best. He is dead now, and that’s all that matters.”

She winks and gives him a soft shove in the shoulder to cut the seriousness of the atmosphere, “Now, unless you want me to tell you to ‘fuck off’ again… do not ask about it anymore.”

Hawke huffs a reluctant sigh, “Alright… I will let it be. If that is what you truly wish.” His face brims with fleeting hope that she will retract her decision and spill her secrets.

Bringing his hand to her lips, she kisses his knuckles. “Thank you,” she breathes the words into his skin.
Join Me in Heaven and Sorrow No More

Chapter Summary

Aurora deals with the aftermath of rejecting Ser Barris.

Chapter Notes

I highly recommend you listen to this music. It could almost be considered required listening - that's how much I hope you play it while you read. <3

"The Living Sculptures Of Pemberly" Spotify Link Here -or- Youtube Link Here

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-Aurora-

He is so beautiful...
Aurora feels the pressure of unspent tears behind her eyes, but she refuses to let the pressure out. She will not let any more salty tears stream down her face. A dehydration headache pounds between her eyes from her already spent tears. She needs a break from crying, if only for a few hours.

Aurora’s roommate Helisma, thankfully, has not given her a second look in the past few days. No acknowledgement for when she sees Aurora quietly sobbing on her bed. Clutching at a pillow so tightly that her knuckles turn stark white. Clutching it against her chest, as she tries to comfort the inner turmoil within her core. Rocking herself gently back and forth, feeling as though her heart has been ripped from her chest, for it is now a raw…excruciating…searing void within her.

However, Pippa, her other roommate, has tried to approach her in these moments. Moments that have encompassed Aurora’s evenings since she last saw Delrin. Pippa has tried to console her, unknowing of the cause for her affliction. Aurora ignores her. She has not spoken a word since Delrin was holding her in his arms.

During her days, Aurora stares blankly into tomes, her bloodshot, swollen eyes pretending to read. She is most likely failing miserably with her farce, given the looks her coworkers give her. She tries her best to save face, but it has been impossible. How can she save face when her chest has been ripped open? Her ribs broken. Her lungs battered and bruised from screaming into her pillow. Her heart torn out and ripped into a thousand, tiny shreds of what was once so guarded… so protected. Her chest is just an empty cavity now. The walls once expertly constructed to defend it, demolished. The person who once fearlessly shielded it, abandoned.

No. Aurora cannot save face, as much as she may want to. She cannot hide the fact that she is a husk of what she once was.

The pain in her head from her lack of fluids… lack of sleep… lack of food… is beginning to feel second nature. However, Pippa had gently urged Aurora to take one evening to care of herself. “Please, Aurora, go put some food in your stomach, maybe visit the bath house. Try to tend to yourself for one evening,” she said to her, looking at Aurora as if she was dying in front of her. If that is how she looks, it is because that is how she feels. Aurora silently rose from her bed and exited their quarters.

Naturally, she went to the tavern. Here, she can at least try to drown the screaming inside her. She can give her tear ducts respite for one evening, and make herself numb.

Probably not what Pippa had in mind, but it is what Aurora is doing nonetheless.

Slumped in a seat, over a small wooden table, she sits alone in the upper level of the tavern. Her body too exhausted to support her head, her chin rests on her folded arm. Her other is occupied by holding and rocking a tankard. Slowly, she rolls the tankard on its bottom edges back and forth on the old wood table. Roll…clunk…roll…clunk…

She sits in the darkness of the upper level, staring down into the atrium, watching Delrin fraternize below.

He has not approached her since the evening in the gardens. The evening where he poured his heart to her… and she did nothing. Aurora let his heart sit there, exposed, and untouched. He had tried to gift it to her and she refused him. He was so sure of himself, so sure that she was someone he could trust to treasure his bared heart. And she just let it sit there, too afraid to pick it up. Too weak to stand with him and proclaim her feelings, to dare to find happiness. Allow herself a chance.

He now sits with a small gathering of Templars, listening as they regale in their stories. His smile is
not as bright as it once was. Often he looks downcast and fidgets with his mug. Perhaps he is attempting to save face, as well. If that is the case, it is because of her. Aurora is to blame for the despair in his eyes, his sullen movements, his despondent smile. Because of this, she feels even more the failure, even more the wretch. She caused that beautiful, kind man pain.

*You are worthless.*

*I know.*

“I see you also prefer the company of no one… here in the darkness,” she hears a voice say. Aurora slowly rolls her head to bring her gaze to the person now standing beside her. Alistair. The warden stands there looking at her with saddened compassion. “Mind if I join your solitude?” His eyes are heavy, but the corner of his mouth slightly twitches as he shrugs, “I have cheese...” He presents a small plate in his hand with and equally small pile of cheese upon it.

Aurora’s eyes travel along his body, up and down, judging for anything unwanted in his presence. She comes up empty. He seems as though he is also a lost soul in desolation. Who is she to tell him he cannot sit quietly in the dark? Aurora rocks the crown of her head toward a chair to her right, a small gesture for him to sit. He does and they sit in silence, watching the other patron’s jubilee below.

It is akin to watching another world. She is so detached from the emotions that run through the rest of the tavern. Most of its inhabitants smile with ease. Most of them. Her eyes are drawn back to the handsome Knight-Commander. If only she would just let herself… let herself take the risk…perhaps she could be down there with him right now, and they could both be smiling and enjoying the company of jovial people around them. Enjoying the company of each other.

How can she take that risk when the future is so uncertain? She lifts her head long enough to swipe a cube of cheese from Alistair’s plate. She rests head head down again with a sigh, staring longingly at Barris. Her mind wanders to her compatriot beside her. He met Lymeria during the 5th blight. How was it that they dealt with uncertainty, she wonders.

Her voice is soft and ragged. She’s not spoken to anyone in days, the only sounds to leave her throat where that of frustration and grief. She manages, however, to croak his name, “Alistair?”

“Hmm?” He responds softly, the sound of which seems as if she was calling him back from somewhere distant.

“How did you do it?” Aurora asks as she watches Delrin rise and slowly pace across the room to Cabot. His face drops when his companions are no longer in view, an appearance that causes her gut to pinch and ache.

Alistair sighs. She sees his boots appear on the top of the railing in front of her, as he stretches out. “How did I do what, Aurora?”

“How did you and Lymeria find happiness in each other, when you didn’t know if there would even be a tomorrow?” Delrin has ordered a drink. He leans on his hands at the counter, head hanging down, while Cabot has his back turned to retrieve the Templar’s ale. He covertly raises his head again before Cabot turns back. She thinks she can see a faint smile on his face as he thanks the dwarf.

*If my heart was still intact, it would ache.*

Calloused fingers appear in her view as Alistair takes a piece of cheese from the plate between them.
He speaks through the sounds of chewing, “I’ll be honest… After the battle at Ostagar, I was feeling pretty low. In one night, Ferelden lost its King, most of its army, and all of its grey wardens – save for Mira and me. Mira had only just finished the joining ritual, and I had only been a grey warden for six months. And then suddenly, the dark spawn killed all of it. We had no support, we didn’t know anything. Mira had to rely entirely on my knowledge of what it meant to be a grey warden, and that was basically nothing.

We didn’t even have families to turn to. I was a bastard who grew up living in the stables. Mira had recently witnessed her entire family murdered… yeah… it was pretty dismal.” He takes another piece of cheese and silently chews it.

Aurora turns her head on its side, against her arm, and looks up at the man beside her. His eyes have a thousand-yard stare. The corners of his lips are turned down. He wears years of hardship in the small wrinkles on his skin and the silver strands in his otherwise strawberry blonde hair. So far he is only reaffirming her decision to distance herself from Delrin. He certainly doesn’t sound or appear to be happy.

He catches her eyes as she stares him, and he gives Aurora a soft smile. The low and flickering light from the room below gives his eyes a delicate shine. “But then everything changed…” he whispers. “We went to Lothering after we escaped Ostagar. I was in such a state. But then I noticed a rose… one single rose in a town over run with misery. The darkspawn were coming, people were fleeing their homes, lives were lost, families shattered. I saw that rose and I thought, ‘How could something so beautiful exist in a place with so much despair and ugliness?’ I should have left it alone, but I couldn’t. I knew that if I did, the dark spawn would come and just destroy it.”

Aurora smiles at the warden. She hadn’t realized how sentimental he was. His voice warmed as he spoke, and his cheeks spread a soft pink. “There was something else I noticed in Lothering…” He continues, looking far away and smiling. “Mira. In a lot of ways, I thought the same way when I looked at her. As we continued on our quest, I only became more crazed by her. We had only known each other for a short time, but when around her I couldn’t think straight. I cared for her a great deal. I couldn’t imagine myself without her…not ever.

We sort of… stumbled into each other, and despite it being the least opportune time, I fell for her. Eventually, after setting up camp for an evening, I gave her that rose. And I told her what a rare and beautiful thing she was.”

“That is really sweet, Alistair.” She lifts her head from the table and rests her chin in her hand. His story making her feel lighter, she almost forgets the storm raging in her chest.

He lets out a low chuckle. “We had so much uncertainty ahead of us. We didn’t know what the next day would bring, let alone if we had a chance to stop the blight. But I know that I could have never done it alone. I thank the Maker every day, if He listens, for bringing Mira into my life. She changed everything.” He drops his eyes with a sigh, “I just wish I could be with her right now. But I will tell you this much, when I do see her again… I am never letting go.”

A tear falls down Aurora’s cheek. She turns to look at Delrin. He is sitting with his men… but he is looking up at her. Her breath hitches in her throat, a tingle of panic races down her spine. He sees her… how long has he known that she is up here? No matter how long, their eyes are locked now. Her chest rises and falls rapidly, she cannot move. Fear drips inside her, but she cannot look away. Aurora wants to look into those eyes for eternity.

“You should go to him,” Alistair delicately suggests. “Life is too short… too ugly… to go through it alone. Whatever is stopping you, that is what you should ignore. Not him. You two will be able to get through this, if you do it together.”
Aurora turns to peer at Alistair with concern furrowed in her brow, “But I am a mage…what if…” her voice breaks and she cannot find the strength to make it work again.

“He is the Knight-Commander of the new Templar order in all of southern Thedas. No matter what happens when this is all over, I am confident that he will do whatever he can to protect you and all other mages in his charge.” Alistair states plainly, but not apathetic. He looks at Aurora with encouragement and she can’t help but feel empowered by his story and his reassurance.

Is Alistair right? Has she been acting a fool? Her mind is racing. A few tears stream down Aurora’s face, but they are not the tears of anguish, they are tears born of courage. Honestly, what is she protecting herself from when she has been a wretched, miserable wreck ever since she left Delrin’s side? She had wanted to protect herself from the possibility of being hurt in the future, but she has slowly been losing her will to even survive since that night in the garden. At this rate there will be nothing left of her to even consider protecting.

Maybe the warden is right. It was his love of Lymeria that gave him the strength to fight for Thedas, and they prevailed together. Perhaps she has been thinking about this all wrong. Perhaps together, Delrin and Aurora can ensure change and peace between mages and the rest of the world. Together they can be strong. Divided… divided they fail. Their hope and passion individually slaughtered because of Aurora’s senselessness. But the union of their hearts and their minds, they could bring the change Thedas desperately needs, and the serenity they desperately seek.

Alistair smiles at her and nods his head toward Delrin, “Go to him…” he urges.

Yes.

Yes, she will go to him. A smile blossoms across her face as she sniffs and wipes away the tears on her cheeks. Her eyes are wide with fear and hope. She darts her head back to look down in the atrium. Delrin is still there, looking up at them. He is peering with bewilderment. She smiles warmly at him and rises from her seat.

Nodding with a curtsey, Aurora thanks the warden for his story and his words of encouragement. She will no longer be a shameful fool. She will go to him. She quickly descends the staircases that take her to the lower level of the Tavern, watching the steps carefully as to not trip and stumble in her hurried pace. When she nears the bottom of the final staircase, she looks up from the steps and stops in her tracks.

Delrin is standing at the base, staring up at Aurora. Still a look of confusion, marked with worry, displayed across his beautiful face.

As she comes to a halt, her breath catches. “Delrin,” a breathless whisper, her voice is swallowed up by the intensely loud gayety of tavern. She stands there astonished, for he is stunning. There is nothing in this world right now, beyond Derlin and Aurora. A large and blissful smile consumes her face and joyful tears flow freely from her eyes. Aurora’s body floats down the last few steps as she pours her arms around his shoulders. He catches her, shocked at first, but then she feels the tenderness of his embrace as he relaxes.

Pulling back from him, just enough to see his lovely face, Aurora looks into his peridot eyes. Tears continue to trickle from her as she shamefully smiles, she had been so stupid. “Delrin, I am so sorry…I was…I was…”

“Shhh,” he hushes her tenderly. His eyes are bright and gleaming, his face is warm and loving. He looks at Aurora in a way no man has ever looked at her before. She feels precious… treasured… special. She feels as if nothing could ever be wrong again.
Aurora rests her head on his shoulder and smiles to herself. Her heart is beating with such strength and vigor, that she is sure he can feel it through his breastplate. Aurora no longer feels as empty as the void. She feels warm… complete.

Home.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Valentines day everyone <3 I think it worked out perfectly that this chapter fell on this day.

This is one of my favorite, favorite chapters. I really hope you liked it. And I hope you gave a listen to the music, because.... it melts my heart with this chapter.

Only 3 more to go and then the rewrite will be complete! Everyone will be at the same place in the story, how exciting!
Chapter Summary

Back from the bog, but a leader's work is never... fucking... done.

As they approach the gates and bridge to Skyhold, Izzalea is overcome with relief. She silently thanks the Maker and Andraste for bringing them home, relatively unscathed. She has her troops, they put an end to a tyrant, and they all survived that blasted bog.

As they trot their horses across the bridge toward Skyhold’s gates, a bell rings in announcement that they have arrived. Izzalea’s heart jumps as she hopes her commander’s handsome face will be waiting for her on the other side.

She tried to not dwell on how much she missed him while she was away. It took nearly two weeks to rescue her men and come home. They were far slower in the journey back to Skyhold due to the condition of some of the more frail soldiers. Izzalea wanted to ensure their safe return however, so everyone traveled slowly in one large group. She was desperate to not let her impatience show to the men, but all she wanted to do was get back to the keep and run into Cullen’s arms.
Izzalea’s nerves are shot. With all of the death and decay, the horrendous weather, the near constant fighting, and all of the emotion that affected them on this trip… she wishes she could take a break and sleep for days. But she knows that she cannot. There is too much that needs to be done.

When she found Warden Alistair in Crestwood weeks ago, he had shared such an unnerving tale. When Corypheus became active, all of the grey wardens in Orlais began to hear ‘the calling.’ It turns out, that when the darkspawn taint in the warden’s blood becomes too much, they have fitful nightmares and hear voices. Like a kind of unspeakable song. It tells the wardens that the blight will soon claim their lives. It urges the afflicted underground, to the deep roads. Once there, they will never be seen again. They leave to die by combat with the never ending numbers of darkspawn that reside far beneath the surface. Choosing a glorious death, rather than become darkspawn themselves.

Because of this, Warden Commander Clarel spoke of a blood ritual that she claimed would end future blights. Desperate to fulfill the purpose of the grey wardens before all would succumb to the calling. Alistair protested her plan, and instead of heeding his advice, the wardens turned on him. Claiming that he would have blight consume the world, rather than do whatever it takes to stop them. He was able to get away from their grasp in order to find Hawke and then Izzalea… warning them that the wardens are gathering in the Western Approach.

Alistair believes that it is Corypheus who is causing the unexplained calling, tricking the wardens, for a purpose that is yet clear. Does he want them all dead in the deep roads? Or is it something else?

Izzalea clutches onto faint hope that she will have at least one night in her own bed before she leaves for the desert. However, she will do whatever it takes to get to the bottom of this warden mystery, and find out how and why Corypheus is involved.

The gates open and there is a large gathering on the other side. Healers and maids rush to the arms of the recovered soldiers, quickly taking them to the healer’s tower for rest and inspection. A group of stable hands stand at the ready to take the horses to the stables for the same. Izzalea hops off her horse and nods her thanks to the stable boy who takes Ebony’s reigns. She pats the steed lightly on the hip as she is escorted away, thankful for the fearless aid Ebony brought.

“I am pleased to see you returned,” a delicious Ferelden accent thrums from behind her.

Cullen.

Without a care for who sees her blatant display of affection for the Inquisition’s Commander, Izzalea swings her body around, and wraps herself around him in jubilation and relief. He catches her in his arms and hums satisfaction in her ear as she buries her face in the mane of his cloak. She inhales a deep breath of his scent. Her chest warms, she could almost cry from the feeling of alleviation. The abundant stress that her body accumulated on the journey melts away in Cullen’s arms.

“Maker, bless…” Izzalea sighs into his collar. “I am so happy to see you.”

Cullen squeezes her tighter and kisses the side of her head lovingly. “I read the report you sent in, it sounds as if you had a miserable trip.”

She pulls away from him just enough to catch his eyes in hers. “Dreadful, yes. But Successful.” She smiles and reaches her lips to his cheek for a feather soft kiss. “I will tell you all about it later? Over wine? Please let there be wine.” Izzalea looks into his golden eyes with eager happiness.

He returns a smile, breaking their embrace so that he can take her hand and place a delicate kiss upon her glove. “It would be a pleasure, Inquisitor.” He smirks at her in that way that he does, his scar twitching, his eyes sparkling coyly.
“Inquisitor…” Leliana clears her throat to grab Izzalea’s attention.

She drops her hand from her Commander’s touch and feels a light flush spread in her cheeks. She had almost forgotten that they were not alone. Izzalea stretches her shoulders back and stands taller, firmer… more professional. She clears her throat to shoo away any lingering desire from her voice, calling upon her deeper, more serious tone. “Yes, Leliana?”

The spymaster begins deadpan and dark, “We need to see you in the war room… immediately, I’m afraid.” Izzalea senses a twinge of worry at the end of Leliana’s sentence, her eyes and lips fall, her brow crinkles. Something is wrong. Terribly wrong.

“Of course, lead the way.”

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“My scouts rushed tirelessly to the Western Approach, Inquisitor, and what they have found is not good. Along with the wardens, there seems to be great deal of demon activity in the region, though we are not sure why.” Leliana is icily sober, arms crossed, standing at the end of the war table.

Rolling her eyes, Izzalea grunts, “Great… blood rituals and demons. Just… Flippin’ fantastic.”

“The scouts found an old warden hold, Griffon Wing Keep. With the help of Bull’s Chargers, they managed to secure the hold from the Venatori that inhabited it.” Cullen adds without reserve. He stands across from Izzalea on the other side of the table, hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

Groaning, she rolls her neck, pinching and tugging at its stiff muscles. “Venatori, too. This is just peachy. So, there definitely is a correlation between the strange warden behavior and our favorite darkspawn magister,” she grumbles.

Cullen continues, “I sent Knight-Captain Rylen yesterday, with a squad of troops, to occupy the keep for your arrival. We can use it as a base of operations in the area while you get to the bottom of whatever is happening out there.” He hushes his tone with concern, touched by tender worry, “At least then, perhaps you will be safer… with strong walls surrounding you.”

A sheepish smile spreads on Izzalea’s face. It does not matter how much danger she faces, it seems Cullen will always worry for her. And with their newly affirmed feelings for one another, he is allowing himself to be more forthcoming with his affections. His caring nature makes her heart feel as though it is blossoming within her.

She tries to think of who would be the best team to bring on their mission, given the new information. “I think we should bring Dorian. With the Tevinter presence in the region, he will be of great use. Cassandra’s Seeker abilities should help against both Venatori mages and the abundance of demons. Warden Blackwall should accompany us as well…” Izzalea taps her fingers on her chin in contemplation. Most of her inner circle would be beneficial to have on hand. With so much uncertainty as to what lies in wait out there, along with the sheer distance from Skyhold to the desert, she wants to ensure she has the right team at her disposal.

Leliana thumbs the marker representing Griffon Wing Keep on the map. “Perhaps you should bring your entire inner circle. Since there is a large strong hold waiting for you… If the relations with the wardens turns undesirable, it would be best for you to have as much force with you as possible. There is a very large fortress, Adamant Keep, nearby where my scouts have seen a majority of the warden activity. There is no telling how many are in there, or what they will do.”

Nodding in agreement, Izzalea claps her hands once to symbolize the end of their planning. “Alright,
let’s inform everyone and get to work preparing for departure. With such a large group, I want to make sure we bring enough supplies. Let’s use the rest of today and tomorrow for preparation, and I will leave with my team at dawn the following day.”

All are in agreement, so Izzalea dismisses the meeting before setting off to see Dagna and Harritt in the undercroft. She needs to ensure that they can make all necessary repairs the inner circle’s armor before they set out. They will have a lot of work to do in a very short period of time.

*Harritt is going to be so, very cross with me…*

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Leaving the undercroft, with a twinge of shame after being scolded mercilessly by her blacksmith, Izzalea emerges back into the great hall only to find Dorian walking hurriedly towards in her direction.

“Dorian! Make sure you get any repairs needed for our trip to Harritt *now*, or else…” Izzalea shivers and bites her lip, “Or else, he might skin me…”

The mage scoffs and grins, holding his hand to his chest in feigned offense, “Oh Izzy, all of my gear is in tip-top shape. Fear not, my ravishing fire-haired beauty.” As she sighs in relief, the mage continues, “I do need a minute of your precious time, my dear Inquisitor. I want to suggest an additional member for our entourage.”

“Seems like everyone is pretty much going already…” Izzalea tilts her head and stares quizzically at the raven haired mage.

“Ah yes, well… this person is not *usually* a fighter.” Dorian leans against the wall beside them, crossing his arms with nonchalance, as he tends to do. “Her name is Aurora. She is a mage who works in the library. I would like to bring her along. She has some life experience with both demons and wardens. I think she can help me… and you of course… with research and information at the new keep.” He musingly strokes the curl of his mustache and peers into the distance, “I also get the sense that she is a deeply powerful mage, though she tries to hide it.”

“Interesting. I don’t want anyone coming along who cannot take care of themselves. Are you sure she can fight, if needed?”

“Oh yes, I believe so. I think she can fight with a *vengeance*.” He wickedly smirks at her.

“Alright… Well… As long as she is not a burden. I put her in your charge, Dorian.”

“Understood my dear, I shall not let you down.” He mockingly assumes a military posture and salutes, grinning at her before turning back toward the doors to the library. He slowly slinks and sashes’ down the hall, as if giving everyone within its walls a chance to appreciate his visage.

Movement of two soldiers marching down the center of the hall grabs her attention away from musingly watching Dorian leave. Josie hurries down between the men, her shoes click-clacking on the stone in an amusing flurry. She diverts to Izzalea’s direction as the two soldiers take flanking positions to her throne.

Izzalea gets the sudden feeling that something has happened that needs her immediate and official response, a feeling that brings her a lot of dread and irritation. Her expression flattens as her ambassador draws near. “What is it, Josie?”

“I am afraid we require your judgement, Inquisitor.” Her thick Antivan accent harbors aspects of
doubt and bewilderment.

Izzalea quietly groans and rolls her head, neck, and shoulders to attempt at relieve the tenacious intensity of stress in her muscles. She truly cannot wait to relax with a bottle of wine and her golden lion. She needs a few hours of stress free companionship. Until then, duty calls…

Stoically, Izzalea approaches her throne and sits. Placing her elbow on the arm rest, she rests her chin on her knuckles. She gazes down the hall, waiting to see what new order of chaos will be brought forth. Her expression remains cool and flat, as the guards walk what appears to be an Avvar man to her throne.

He is in chains as if a prisoner and is dressed similarly to the Hand of Korth. However, where Korth wore red, this man wears blue. She cannot see much of his face, but what she can make out is an insolent glint in his eyes to match the twisted upturn of his lips. He softly chuckles to himself while looking around to see Izzalea’s throne, the hall, and the patrons within gawking at his presence.

Josie stands to her right with her clip board in hand. She gives her notes a quick once over before addressing the court. “Chief Movran the Under, your worship. After your return from the bog, we discovered this man attacking the… building… with a… goat.” Josie speaks slowly and in a way that is as if she doesn’t believe the words coming from her mouth as she says them. “He feels slighted by the killing of his son, the Hand of Korth, and his Avvar tribesmen. Who all attacked you first… What should we do with him? Where should he go?”

Izzalea adjusts herself in her seat, leaning forward to peer at the chieftain. Remembering that Abner had mentioned he was ‘not a bad guy,’ Izzalea tries to quell her temper as best as she can. “To answer the death of you clan, you attacked Skyhold… with a goat?”

Movran chuckles deeply and paces around in the small space the guards allow for him to move. “A trial? Unnecessary.” His voice is deep and calm, but rife with spirited arrogance. It actually reminds Izzalea a lot of her small Avvar scout. “You killed my idiot son. So I answered, as is my custom, by smacking your holdings with goat’s blood. But no foul! He was meant to murder Tevinters, but got feisty with your Inquisition. A redheaded mother guarantees a brat.”

He nods in compliance and softens the arrogance in his tone. “Do as you’ve earned, Inquisitor. My clan yields. My remaining boys have brains still in their heads.” He chuckles to himself and it occurs to her he really does not seem to care that his son is dead.

With a flick of her fingers, Izzalea calls Josie closer. She leans in to lend her ear. Izzalea speaks low whisper, “Who was that arrogant lord I met at Therinfal Redoubt? The really uppity one who got us into that keep?”

She smiles secretively and whispers, “Lord Abernache, Inquisitor,” before backing up to her position beside the throne.

Izzalea looks back at the large Avvar man in front of her, “It seems as though we have an opportunity to expand our knowledge and diplomacy. I would like to connect you with one of our Lords. His name is Abernache. Educate him in your ways and customs. He will be a very difficult pupil. It will not be easy.”

Movran laughs loudly, “I will rename my youngest son Herald. He is another redhead.” He continues to chuckle to himself as the guards undo his chains and escort him out of the hall.

Izzalea slowly shakes her head and blinks her eyes at the man as he leaves. What a bizarre encounter.
Josie steps to her side again and leans in, in a hushed tone she whispers, “One other matter, while I have you Inquisitor? There was another Avvar man. His name is Amund the Sky Watcher. He claims to be an augur who met you while in the marsh. He would like to join the Inquisition as well. Claimed to be impressed with you and wants to lend aid however he can.”

Izzalea smiles. It seems her relationship with the Avvar may not be as tenuous as she once thought. “Oh, yes. I’ve met him. That’s great Josie, thank you. Send him to the healer’s tower. I am sure there is much they can learn from each other.” Josie nods before quickly walking away, down the hall, and back to her office.

The rest of the afternoon and evening Izzalea spends searching out and speaking with her inner circle. Ensuring that they assess their gear thoroughly and get any repairs to Harritt and Dagna post haste. Including, personally escorting Sera to the undecroft in order to facilitate the upgrades Sera’s bow desperately needed, and putting out more than one fire of flaring tempers between her elven archer and her blacksmith (As well as witness adorable awkward flirting between Sera and Dagna between the elf’s outbursts with Harritt). By the time she finishes, the dark night sky has consumed the daylight. Izzalea hears ten bells before she finally makes her way to the main building of the keep so that she can shrug up the stairs to her quarters.

As she climbs the steps in her tower, she hears a soft click and shut of her door behind her. Izzalea rolls her eyes and wonders who needs her now, at this hour. With a frown, she turns and look over her shoulder to finds the beautiful and bashful face of her commander. He smiles up at her, silently displaying a bottle of wine and two glasses for her inspection.

“Oh Cullen… I believe Andraste herself has sent you to me. You undeniable treasure.” Izzalea smiles and immediately relaxes her shoulders, feeling ten times lighter having seen his lovely face. They climb the stairs and move the couch in her room so that it sits directly in front of her fireplace. The maids had already been in and started a glorious fire in the hearth. The room is warm and glows beautiful, relaxing, orange, red, and amber hues.

Cullen pours them each a glass of wine before sitting at the end of the couch. Izzalea takes her wine from his hand as she snuggles up beside him. He thankfully left his armor in his office, and instead, he wears an under tunic and his leather trousers. Izzalea easily leans herself into his chest and tucks her legs to the side, beneath her. He stretches his free arm around her shoulders and softly rubs her arm. She is content. Relaxed.

Staring into the fire, she says, “I know I said I would talk about the trip, but I’m just so fucking tired. I really don’t want to talk or even think anymore for today…”

He laughs a low breathy rumble, “Of course, Izzalea. Let’s just be, for tonight.”

“I knew you’d understand,” she grins. If anyone can fathom the importance of the precious few moments of peace people in their position have, it is Cullen.

They sit silently sipping their wine and gazing into the fire. She is so happy to just be in his arms. The simple act of breathing is coming easier now. She knew that she was tense, but Izzalea did not understand quite the magnitude until she was finally at peace.

Cullen’s lips press into her hair and she closes her eyes. He takes the now empty goblet from her fingers and sets it to the side. He wraps her in his large, muscular arms, and she feels the buzz of comfortable satisfaction tingle through her body. She revels in the peace that she feels within her.

“I am pleased that we have at least two evenings together before I leave you again,” she says.
Cullen brings his lips down to ghost them on her ear, causing shivers to tingle through her body. “I will miss you a great deal, Izzalea.” A low husk. Velvet desire. Her heart rate jumps from the way he says her name.

She tries to speak, but her breath hitches. Her voice comes out in not but a whisper, “I will miss you too, Cullen.” She wonders about all of the words they are not saying. It seems too soon. Yet, she cannot help but to feel resounding love when she thinks about him. Sees him. Touches him. Everything him.

Izzalea arches her neck to bring her lips to his. He leans down and kisses her tenderly, supporting her chin with a gentle touch of his fingers. She feels as if she is soaring through the clouds when his lips touch hers. She is blissful. Happy.

He gives her a light kiss on her forehead. Gingerly, they readjust so that her head is comfortably tucked under his shoulder and on his chest, both of them wrapping their arms around the other. The pair of fearsome warriors sit in quiet tranquility from their stressful lives. Listening to the cracking of the wood in the fire, they savor the warm glow. Here they aren’t the Inquisitor and Commander of the Inquisition. Here, they are not two highly-skilled, deadly fighters who carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. Here, in this quiet room, for this moment, they are simply two people.

Here, they are just Izzy and Cullen.
What do you mean Aurora is going to the Western Approach? That's a preposterous notion, there's no reason for her to go there - Aurora does not fight.
glowing from dripping, low candles on the table that surround Aurora and her work.

He impatiently waits for her to fully divert her attention from the tome in her hands. Aurora’s frequent glances from the words in front of her - switching to him briefly, and then back down to the tome - does not seem to be the quality of focus he wishes to have. He strums and drums his fingers on the wooden surface of the table, shifting in his seat with agitation.

Aurora has been sitting at this table for hours. She rose before dawn to frantically read a tome on the history of the Grey Wardens. Fiercely attempting to finish a report of any and all information she can find that could potentially aid the Inquisitor in the Western Approach. They need to know if the wardens have ever been desperate enough to try blood rituals before, or possibly work with demons. However, the order is so tight lipped with its secrets, that she cannot find anything pertaining to magical rituals… in any capacity. She knows they preform rituals, she’s heard this from Alistair himself, but she is coming up completely empty. The frustration this fact mounts within her knows no bounds. She wonders how Thedas has allowed this order to operate virtually unchecked for centuries. Especially since as a circle mage, Aurora’s entire life was built on nothing but restrictions and suspicions. How is it okay for an entire order to be shrouded in so much mystery?

The mage across from her lets out a pained huff, begging for her attention. “Dorian, I’m a bit busy,” she says flatly. Dorian insisted on endearing himself to her. Aurora resists much less as the days pass. She even finds herself, at times, amused by his ostentatious demeanor. She smirks to herself as her eyes scan the words in the tome, listening to him whine and grunt with exasperation.

He finally abandons all hope for her unhindered attention, and begins to speak. His words singing in a higher tone than usual, as he bounces in his seat and grips the table, “Yes, well… you can bring it along, I suppose, but now you need to pack!” He halts his bouncing and grins proudly, beaming in self-satisfaction as he crosses his arms and raises an eyebrow.

Aurora looks up from her work, just long enough to sneer. Has he gone mad? Well, madder than normal? “Excuse me?” she says, staring at him through her lashes as she hunches over her work. “You’re coming to the Western Approach, of course. We leave in the morning,” he purrs with nonchalance, haughtily inspecting his fingernails in the warm candlelight.

Aurora gasps incredulously, “What?” He certainly has her full attention now, bringing Aurora to an upright position in her chair. What he said can’t be right. “I am not going there. I am not a fighter!”

“Oh please, do drop the act, Aurora. You do know I can sense your power.” He leans forward with his elbows on the table, an impertinent stare and a mischievous grin directed at her. Aurora feels tendrils of his aura pulse through her, probing for her energy. Indignantly, she pushes him out of her with a thrust of her magic.

“It is rude to go snooping around inside another mage, Vint,” Aurora sneers.

“Oh back to that now, are we? And we made such progress.” He rolls his eyes with a sigh and leans back in his chair. “Fine, my dear. If you insist on being stubborn about this, go ahead. But the fact remains that the Inquisitor is expecting you, and has placed you under my charge. You are going, like it or not.” He wears a serious, smug expression that Aurora would like to slap right off his face.

She balls her fists and glares at the obnoxious, audacious ass sitting across from her. Dorian oozes pretention into the library, amused by Aurora’s flare-up. He rises dismissively from his seat. “You will need to go see a requisition officer right away about obtaining proper mage armor for battle… and an appropriate staff.” His eyes rake over her, so very proud of himself. Winking and twiddling his fingers at her, he turns to leave.
Damn it. Damn it all to the void.

Aurora does what is expected of her, however unhappily. She works her way through the keep, securing herself with proper gear through the requisition officer, and packing a ruck sack of essentials. All the while, dread mounts in her belly as she fears what could happen in the field. She tries her best not to think of it. Perhaps she will be able to stay inside Griffon Wing Keep the entire time. Perhaps the trip there and back will be uneventful. Perhaps she will never have to use her power. Yes, Aurora should hope for that, and try her best not to think of the alternative.

Then there is the issue of Delrin.

A pit in her stomach forms as she approaches the Templar tower. She climbs the stairs of the tower toward the room she knows holds her Knight. Upon reaching Delrin’s office, she knocks on its closed door with a soft, shy rap of her knuckles. She waits patiently until she hears him call out for her to enter.

Bashfully, Aurora slowly creaks the door open and pokes her head inside. Delrin is sitting at his desk, surrounded by stacks of paperwork. He holds some kind of report below his shrewd stare. A sternly lined brow creases his forehead, lips pursed in a straight line. His shoulders look heavy, his eyes, labored. He brings a hand to his temple and rubs it with his thumb, implying he must have a headache from all of the stress and endless work he has been doing lately.

He looks up from his paper work to find Aurora’s sheepish half smile and hopeful eyes peering at him from around the heavy, thick wood of his office door. He beams immediately upon seeing her, grinning ear-to-ear, eyes growing large with enthusiasm. “Aurora, what a pleasant surprise,” he rises from his chair and gestures for her to enter the room fully.

Softly, she steps into the room. “Am I intruding? You look busy…” She fidgets with her fingernails, bites at the inside of her lip, and darts her eyes shyly to the floor, “Should I return later?”

“Nonsense, I always have time for you. You are a welcomed diversion, in fact.” He briskly walks around his desk and takes her hand. Locking his beautiful, sparkling-green eyes with hers, he bows before her and presses a kiss to her knuckles. The pillowy softness of his lips shoots a spark of excitement from her hand to her gut, her heart bursts into a shower of confetti.

It has been a few days since the night in the tavern, when Aurora dared to dream for a future with Delrin. She is still nervous about his affections, but they discussed it and decided to take this budding relationship slowly. The chaste pace is helping Aurora ease into the newness of it all. Her anxiety has been gradually relaxing, and Delrin has been so very respectful of her reservations. While she can no longer deny the attraction she has towards the man, the magic between them, they still barely know each other. And so, they agreed to take their courtship slow - they have yet to even fully kiss.

As business with restoring the order grows deeper and more involved, Delrin finds himself more and more swamped with work. Often he can be found staying in his office late into the night, only to return early the next morning. He practices a diligence to his work that could only be matched by Commander Cullen’s.

When Delrin and Aurora are able to spend time together, it is mostly in stolen moments like this, allowing for the temperance of this newly budding relationship to remain pure. Likewise, his undisputable sweetness is too lovely for Aurora to want to rush. Instead, she wishes to revel in the innocence of their affinity for as long as she can. The only real relationship she’s ever been in was not only a decade long, but began under such darker, seedier circumstances. It is comforting to be treated so preciously by this man. Delrin inspires benevolence. He is a true gentleman. She cannot deny how much she enjoys the feeling of butterflies soaring inside her whenever he looks in her
direction. Everything is so new. So charming. So pure.

“How are you today, my fair-haired beauty?” He rises from his bow and lightly squeezes her hand before releasing it. The wrinkles in his forehead that were earlier deep and tense, are now barely visible. The slightest of upturns graces his lips. His eyes sparkle like bright gemstones.

Aurora wants to reach out and touch his full lips, to coax them apart. Run her fingers adoringly down the side of his face, trace and map his features. She wants to soothe the crow’s feet developing by his eyes, stretching toward his temples. Repair the tired sag below the emerald rifts into his soul, where his exhaustion is visibly displayed. She wants to kiss each spot, lightly, to ease his stress. But her heart rate quickens and she feels the onset of panic. She’s not ready to be so free. Even with him. But she is confident she will get there.

Gazing at his face, she wants to keep the memory of it with her always. She then remembers what brought her to his office in the first place. The realization causes her to fidget with her nails again. Drooping her head, she stares at the floor, frowning. “I… I have some news… It seems… I am being taken from Skyhold. I don’t know how long.”

Just as she was beginning to chase the dream of happiness, the Inquisition decides to rip her from its walls, only to throw her into the chaos of the outside world. This is not what Aurora signed up for.

With empathy, he hushes his tone and lightly clutches her shoulders, effectively raising Aurora’s eyes back to his. “Ah, I see. Has the Inquisitor requested your presence in Griffon Wing Keep?” With a subtle, silent nod from the mage, he brings her into an embrace. Wrapping her in his arms, he lets out a sigh into her hair before giving the top of her head a soft kiss.

“I’m not sure why I am being dragged along. I’m no fighter, Delrin.” She sighs into his breastplate, the humid heat of her breath causes the metal to fog. She smirks and draws a fast little heart in the mist with her fingertip, and just as quickly smears it away.

“I am sure the Herald has her reasons. I will pray to Andraste every night while you are gone.” He sighs into the top her head again. “At least I know you will be kept safe. The best fighters in Skyhold will be in your company.”

“I…” her words hitch as heat spreads across her cheeks and to her ears. Closing her eyes, Aurora takes a deep breath and clutches his armor, “I will miss you.”

He squeezes her gently, places another kiss on the top on her head. “As will I, Aurora.” A soft and low chuckle rumbles on the other side of his breastplate. “I will be here, impatiently awaiting your safe return.”

They stand there in a warm embrace, silent, for minutes. Aurora listens to his steady breathing, almost feeling as if she could drift asleep. Reluctantly, she pulls away. He needs to get back to work, as does she. Aurora still needs to ensure she has a horse secured for her travels.

With the shyness of a girl decades younger, Aurora says her goodbyes to her Knight, and tip-toes out of the room. She slinks out of the tower into the brisk night air. The entire day flew by in what felt like in instant. Hopefully, Horsemaster Dennet or a stable hand still works with the horses. Otherwise, Aurora will have to wake extra early in order to secure her horse before departure.

As she softly pads up to the stables, she tries not to think about what could happen on her journey. Instead, she focuses on day dreaming about the lovely man who has captured her heart. She smiles to herself as she sways and twirls toward the stables, as if a song carries her footsteps. Blissful, she pays no attention to the fact that she is being followed. Or that the lurker is malicious and waiting for the
opportunity to catch her off guard, without a soul around to see them.

Approaching the back entrance of the stables, a gauntleted hand grabs her arm roughly. Another covers her mouth as she starts to scream in surprise. The lurker throws her against the walls of the battlements that lie directly behind the stables. Aurora’s head smacks into the stone making her dazed, and blurring her vision. Rubbing her head, she focuses her eyes on the form looming in front of her.

“I know what you’re doing, spellbind,” a man’s voice sneers. She knows that voice. That is the lout that assaulted her the day Delrin was made Knight-Commander.

“Excuse me?” Aurora glares at his dark, silhouetted figure. He managed to shove them into the shadows. The late evening hour is sparse of people, most are in bed, or in the tavern far across the castle grounds.

He looms closer to her, trapping Aurora against the wall. “You are bewitching our Knight-Commander. I am on to you, you slag.” He is close enough that she smells the brewery he has apparently been bathing in this evening. Aurora turns her nose up and to the side, he smells disgusting.

“You think you’re somethin’ special, don’t you, whore?” He spits at their feet. If she had any doubts before about who this is, she certainly doesn’t now. He is just as revolting as ever.

In a low growl, Aurora warns the man, “Get. Away. From me.” She has no patience for this thug and his assumptions, but tries to still her temper. She cannot chance someone seeing her if she were to unleash upon him. She can’t deal with the consequences of hurting him, he just needs to leave.

He takes another step closer, the literal opposite of her command. He leans down to get in her face. The pungent aroma of his person makes her want to gag. He speaks slow and menacingly, “Or what?”

Aurora can’t take this anymore. Maybe just a little push? Nothing too forceful, nothing too painful. Just enough to get him away…

She breathes deeply to steady her heart and calls upon the vitality in the fade to form a fist in the air. The invisible ball of energy forms easily. She focuses her strength so that she doesn’t push too hard, just enough to warn him again. She glares up at his stinking form and shouts, “Go away!” Aurora forces the fist violently into his gut, effectively flinging him a good ten meters back. He stumbles and falls to the muddy ground.

As he stands to his feet he growls and grunts. Reaching a hand out toward her, she suddenly feels pain coursing through her body. Trembling, choked screams tear from her throat, and Aurora falls to her knees. She had hoped that with his level of intoxication, he would perhaps not be able to effectively use his Templar abilities.

She was wrong.

He shakes rage and glares, taking slow, methodical steps back to her. As he purges and suppresses her energy, the pain is undeniable. It feels as if the essence of her is being ripped down and out of her body. The energy tries to cling to her, gripping at her with claws, raking those claws throughout her insides. She has never gone through a purge so long and excruciating. She chokes on pained and hoarse screams as he slowly approaches.

Aurora may have to kill this man to save herself. If she does, she will have to leave Skyhold
immediately. She will have to run. There is no way they will not kill her, or not make her tranquil if she kills this man. But the agony is almost too much to bear, and if she doesn’t kill this Templar, he’s going kill her. Tears streaming down her cheeks, Aurora focuses on what power remains, calling upon it to save her. She will never see Delrin again. She was a fool to believe she could have a future in this world.

She concentrates through the pain, her will to survive stronger than this Templar could know. A sudden gust of wind surges back into her, her energy overpowering his purge and returning home. The surge dazes her slightly as she is made whole again. The burst sends her backwards, she teeters back from her knees and she knocks into the stone wall behind her.

Unexpectedly, Templar stops his purge and he yowls in pain. Aurora stiffens, greatly confused, as she has yet cast a spell - and if she had, he would be dead. Not yelling in pain as he drops to his knees.

A glint of stray light catches her eye. There is a dagger sticking out of his arm. The arm that had been stretched out to her while he was advancing, purging her body of energy. That arm is still outstretched, but with a long thin dagger pierced through the leather covering the man’s elbow. It was thrown so expertly, with such force, that it pierced completely through his arm, the point of it sticking out the other side. Aurora stares with sick satisfaction, fascinated as his blood flows out of his arm, drips across the dagger, and falls to the ground.

A woman jumps the wooden gate of the stables. As swift as lightning, she runs up to the Templar, placing another dagger at his neck. “The fuck you think you’re doing?” she growls at him. Aurora’s attacker only grunts and cries out in pain. He clutches his arm, keeping it straight, unable to bend it due to the position of the blade.

Another figure exits the stables, this time by opening the gate, rather than jumping it. Aurora squints at him, he looks familiar. She recognizes the tall, broad man with shoulder-length, auburn hair and matching beard, as the Champion of Kirkwall, Rhaegar Hawke. The Champion saunters up to the woman and Aurora’s attacker. His arms crossed, a pleased grin on his face… and… hay in his hair? He looks at the display with a crooked brow and matching crooked smile. He hums a low, amused laugh, circling the scene so that he and the woman are flanking the Templar.

The woman does not move, poised like a stone statue, pressing her dagger firmly against the Templar’s throat. Aurora cannot see her face, as the woman’s back is to her - only a partial profile visible as she glares down at the man. She looks wild. Her hair is coiled, chasind looking, and pulled back into some kind of knot. A few stray tendrils have fallen from the knot and swing at the side of her face - the only movement over her entire figure.

She is petite and slender, but surprisingly large muscles bulge from the tensed arm holding the dagger. Black bands are tattooed across her skin. A simple, light colored tunic hangs from her shoulders above her tight, black leather leggings. She has no boots - her feet, bare - toes gripping the earth. Why was she in the stables barefoot?

She peers over her shoulder at Aurora just enough for a glance and to say, “You alright?”

Expression wide-eyed, still in shock and unsure of what any of this means, Aurora stammers in response, “Yes… I… I think so…”

Chapter End Notes
Geez... I knew that Templar was trouble. Thankfully, Abner and Hawke were....
tending to the horses?? That's what it means when they come out with bare feet and hay
in their hair, right?
Skyhold is as active as ever.

People from all corners are hurrying around trying to prepare for the large team leaving the keep tomorrow. Abner hasn’t been in Orlas since Leliana sent for her to come to Haven. There is a large part of her that wishes to go. Weeks on the road sound exciting, but she has yet to receive her next directive from the spymaster.

As of now, she has nothing to do. So, she wanders about inside the castle, and out on the grounds, watching the servants and underlings rush about in a scurrying array of organized chaos. They grab this-and-that, all the while shrieking at each other. Worker ants, racing around in frantic pace, packing, preparing, and filling wagons with supplies for the journey. Members of the inner circle can be seen here and there, serious expressions on their faces, marching to and fro, beckoning their ants for assistance.
It is all a little too much for Abner, after a while, which leads her to the rotunda. Even her beloved stables are in chaos today, and she needs a quiet place to still herself, to be at peace. Most people fear or just avoid the apostate who lurks there, making the rotunda a very quiet space.

Abner wanders inside, reveling in the silence. She glances around the room and doesn’t see the elf anywhere, which is even better. She does notice, however, a tasty looking pastry sitting on his desk in the center of the large, round room. She eyes the treat, looking side to side as she sneaks toward it. The elf won’t miss it, surely. He is too busy getting ready for his trip. He probably forgot it was even there. It looks so enticing, and she loves does love pastry. A shrug, a devilish grin, a quick swipe across the desk, and the dessert is hers.

With a low, relaxing exhale, Abner sinks into the large plush sofa in the room. Leaning back, she kicks off the boots she had been wandering around in, unlaced, and stretches her toes. She props her feet up and over the armrest of the sofa and lays her head down on the comfy seat. Kicking and swinging her feet off the edge of the armrest, Abner delves into the pastry with a moan of pleasure. It is so good. Light and flaky, crisp on the outside, golden like the sun, and coated in a delectable thin layer of sugared icing. Also, it’s still warm. Must not have been on the desk long, perhaps it was delivered to Solas soon after baking.

“You seem to have created a habit of pilfering my snacks,” Solas says dryly – most unlike this moist, sweet dessert. Abner turns her head to find him standing at his desk with his arms crossed and expression flat. His lips are pressed in a thin line, eyebrows and eyes to match. In this moment, everything about him is straight and annoyed. Like a thin line of irritated punctuation.

As if pulled by one piece of insolent twine, she raises an eyebrow and the corner of her mouth. Taking another bite, she chews - a taunting action - before she answers, “You snooze, you lose, elf.” A single short, disgruntled grunt thumps inside Solas’ throat. He turns to the piles of books and papers on his desk and begins sorting through the stacks. The elf thumbs through pages, organizing and creating two distinct piles.

She watches his diligent process in silence, as she finishes enjoying his sweet treat. “Yer takin’ all those books across Orlias?”

Monotone and clearly over her presence, Solas mutters, “One should not cease one’s studies and enjoyments, just because one is traveling.”

She chortles and drops her voice to a low, mocking imitation, “No, I suppose one should not.”

“Have you spoken with your clan?” He asks, she detects a pinch of smugness twitch at the corner of his mouth. She annoyed him, in retaliation, he’s brought up a known, detested topic to shoo her from his rotunda.

Abner sighs in response, swings her legs around, and rises from the sofa. Solas can win this one. She has no desire to talk about the Avvar with him. She squints her eyes at him, making a ‘piss off’ expression before leaving his precious space.

Abner had heard that Movran’s tribe came to Skyhold. She rolled her eyes when she heard about the goats.

What was once a type of anonymous sanctuary, is now infested with memories. Ghosts from her past now float about. Whispers pry and gossip as she passes, chittering about who she is, where she came from. Thankfully, most of the Avvar are shacking up in the small town that has steadily begun to form down the mountain, by the lake below the keep. Hopefully, she won’t have to run into too many familiar faces, day-to-day. But she can’t say she’s pleased that Izzalea didn’t just banish the
entire lot of them. It certainly would have made life easier for her.

Abner seriously considered avoiding the chieftain. He may be piddling about Skyhold, following some noble around – the thought gives her immense satisfaction, and perhaps that’s why Izzalea did it – but it’s a large enough place. She should be able to avoid one man. However, lucky her, she has had a nagging sensation that she should speak to him. After all, she did just murder that garbage he called a son. If nothing else, seeing him could give an end to the whole fucked-up story.

Wonderful cosmic luck strikes again.

Abner doesn’t have far to go in search of Movran the Under. As she exits the rotunda, she spots him immediately, standing in the great hall. He towers over a small group of Orelsian who-gives-a-shit-who-they-are nobles. They have apparently dressed him in civilized clothing. The sight is almost too perfect. Movran tugs at his trousers and fusses with his tunic, his expression flat and annoyed.

Abner pads across the cold stone floor. Her bare feet make that hollow little smacking sound against the rock, but it is swallowed up from the echoing murmurs of conversation that fill between the hall’s walls. She positions herself next to him, standing perpendicular to his hip. She stares up at his big head in silent confidence. He sees her from the corner of his eye and turns from the group to face her. They stand there in silence, evaluating each other.

He speaks first, “Abner.” The sound is like the first crack of thunder rolling across the sky, announcing an incoming storm.

“Movran.” Her attitude is emotionless, steadfast. She may be nearly half his height, but now, she is as strong as a mountain.

They continue their silent, unwavering stares. The Orlesians beside them grow unsettled, awkwardly backing away. Most likely, they fear the thunder and the mountain will break out into a brawling maelstrom of anger and resentment at any moment. But the pair stand there, arms crossed, confident… stoic. After long, tense minutes, Movran nods his head to Abner with respect.

“I’m glad it was you.”

Abner’s breath hitches, she covers the waver by remaining impassively still. She wasn’t sure what to expect from him, but she still feels a cool sense of relief wash over her. Her skin prickles, emotion hides behind her eyes.

“Have you met with Lagna? I know she would like to see you. She will be glad to see what you’ve become.”

They both are too proud to speak plainly, unable or unwilling to openly discuss the past. He allowed his son to take her, to rip her apart for too long, but he also got her out. He speaks of his wife who took Abner into the wilderness, but Abner knows that it was Movran who made it happen. And she knows it is he who is glad to see Abner strong and well. He doesn’t have to say it, she knows it.

“Is she in the town below?” she asks, he nods. “Then, maybe I’ll visit her, but for now, just tell her that I’ve found my strength.”

“You have always been strong, little one, the strongest woman to grace our clan. I never doubted you would find a life deserving of you.”

The largest compliment Abner can ever expect from the man. She swallows, emotion tingling through her, but she remains resolute. She doesn’t anticipate more, and she doesn’t wish for it either. Everything needed to be shared is left unsaid, but it is felt. He regrets what happened, and he is glad
to know it was her that corrected it. Strength of will as well as body are important to the Avvar, and Abner has proven both.

She tips the crown of her head toward the nobles gawking a safe distance away. “Good luck with this lot.”

Movran erupts into booming laughter. The nobles jump, startled by the sudden sound and movement from the great Avvar warrior. His body quakes, his face cracked into a giant smile. The sounds of his amusement fill and echo across the hall. “I think it is they who need the luck, little one.”

She smirks up at the man before nodding with respect and walking away. She almost desires to hug that elf for pushing her out of his rotunda. She feels so much lighter. She steps out of the main doors to the great hall and breathes in deeply. Smiling at the setting sun, Abner takes in the crisp, mountain air. The chaos of the grounds has calmed from the day’s long frantic pace. The worker ants finished in time to enjoy their evening, free to rest.

She swings by the barracks and grabs her daggers, polish, rags, and a sharpening stone. She then finds a place on the inside wall of the battlements, above the barn and stables. Sitting in the crenellation, swinging her bare feet over the side of the wall, Abner watches the sun creep sleepily behind the mountains while she sharpens and cleans her blades.

“There you are!” Hawke shouts from the ground in front of the stables. She lifts her chin to him in recognition, and he raises a finger, “Wait there, I’m coming up!”

She actually allows herself to feel excited to see him. The events of late may have actually given her the closest thing to closure that she will ever get with the Avvar people. She certainly can’t hope for better, and she is pleased with what she got. She killed Ofred and his scum followers. Those with brains are of no threat to her anymore.

She’s kept the affair with Hawke at arm’s length, as best as she could. However, with this weight lifted off her shoulders, never again having to fear an Avvar nightmare would find her and drag her back to him, perhaps she can toy with the idea off letting someone close. Maybe she can allow for more than just a wild tryst.

There’s been an undeniable connection between Hawke and Abner since he walked into the hall that first night. Maybe she should consider letting him in. Whatever they are, it has been better ever since he stopped trying to pry into her past and ‘fix her.’ They are at ease now, and she feels happy to be around him.

If nothing else, she thinks she can at least enjoy his company when she has it.

She smiles warmly down at the blade in her hand, pleased that she will be able to see her wild, naughty champion before he leaves for an undetermined amount of time. She notices his approach from the corner of her eye. He strides up with a shit-eating-grin and leans against the wall where she sits.

“Guess what I did,” he purrs proudly. His eyes twinkle with mischief, just the way she likes. She looks at him silently, expectantly, waiting for the answer. “I convinced Leliana to release you to the Western Approach.”

“How and why’d you manage that?”

“Well first, I couldn’t bear the thought of not being around you for a day, let alone weeks.” He brushes hair that swung in her face away, tucking it behind her shoulder. His hand snakes behind her
“hair, and lightly rubs the back of her neck, then whispers a kiss on her shoulder. “And I may have bribed her... a little.”

“What did you do?” she side eyes the man, amusement twitching her lips.

“I may, or may not, have given her the contact information for a new, better, nug supplier in Orzammar. Did you know she wants to breed the little beasts when this is all over?”

“I did. How would you know about a nug guy in Orzammar?” This man never ceases to confound her.

“I know lots of things, my little bear.” He comes up behind her, wrapping his arms around her middle and resting his chin on her shoulder. “And there was a time where I may, or may not, have needed to procure some of the little creatures to use in a prank on my brother.” He brushes coils of hair away in order to nuzzle his beard into the crook of her neck. “The important part is, she agreed.”

He kisses long, adoring kisses across the curves of her skin.

She closes her eyes as the last thread of sun disappears in the horizon, soaking in the feeling of his affection. “I’m glad.”

He gently reaches to pull the dagger and polishing rag from her hands, setting them to the side with the others. He then grabs her middle and pulls her back off of the wall. He swings Abner’s body around and holds her face in his hands. His stormy, blue eyes look into hers, searching her with a soft smile on his lips. “Are you? Truly? You aren’t mad at me for meddling in your affairs?”

“I guess that’s just somethin’ I’ve got to expect from you, if I want you around.”

He grins wildly and takes her lips in his. They stand there kissing on the ramparts, as the indigo deepens in the sky above, stars shimmering down upon them. The keep now only illuminated by the many torches and braziers set aflame for the night.

She pulls away and smirks at her lover, “You want to do something fun?”

“Always,” he purrs, his eyes and voice dark with desire. He leans in to kiss her again, but she ducks away to grab her blades and supplies. She holsters her daggers, tucks her rags into her waistband, and tosses her stone and cleaning polish down onto the ground past the stables. She pulls a tie from her arm and gathers her dreaded hair into a large messy bun. Hopping up onto the wall, she smiles over her shoulder at Hawke. “Follow me.”

“Hey, where are your boots?” He asks, looking at her bare feet quizzically.

“Left them with the apostate. C’mon!” She drops down to scale the wall down to the roof of the stables. Her toes and fingers grip the uneven stone until she is close enough to jump off and land on the wooden, roof planks.

Hawke stares hesitantly down from the top of the wall. “I’m not sure I can do that... Why does the elf have your boots?”

“I was in his rotunda earlier. Come on, you can do it. Just grip those larger uneven parts.”

Hawke gets on the wall and slowly works his way down to each jutting stone. Abner calls out directions to help his feet and hands find the best places to grip. She should have told him to remove his boots, but he manages to scale the wall anyway, and jumps down onto the roof.

“Why were your boots off in the rotunda?” he asks, wiping his hands together to rid them of old,
Precious creature, he is worried and jealous of Solas. “I was relaxin’ on his couch and eating his treats.”

“He gave you treats?”

Abner laughs and shoves him playfully, “I don’t think he’d say that. Now, c’mon!” She darts to the edge of the roof near where the back gate is located. With a leap and a twist, she grabs the edge of the roof with her hands and swings inside, landing on a pile of hay. Hawke’s slower more cautious footsteps reverberate above her as he follows. He eases himself down by gripping at one of the wooden posts holding up the roof. Balancing on the wooden partition that makes the outer edge of the stables, he jumps in.

While he descended, she removed her harnesses and blades, setting them safely down inside the empty horse stall. They are in the last stall of the stables, where the fresh hay is kept. The piles are large, billowy, and clean. Well, clean enough for hay.

Now that he is standing in front of her, Hawke looks at Abner nervously. She can tell that he is worried - for no reason - that there is something between her and the elf. She laughs at his expression and shoves him backwards into a hay pile. Hopping on top of him, she straddles the mage and smothers him in playful kisses. She attacks him with spirited affection until he laughs and his mind eases.

“Are you sure you want to do this here?” he asks.

“Why not?” she shrugs and presses her hips firmly against his.

He pulls her shoulders down to kiss them. She ducks her head down to capture his lips in hers, and they kiss as if they had been parted for years. As if she is the desert, and he is the long missed rain. Hawke murmurs sweet and desirable words to her, while trailing his lips to her ears and back down her neck, when she hears something of a struggle outside the stable wall. Abner sits up, alert and listening, hushing her lover’s objections with a single finger placed over his mouth. Her ears keen to the sounds of an aggressive exchange on the other side of the wooden partition.

A man and a woman seem to be having an argument. The male voice is particularly vile. The sounds then quickly turn to wrenched, hoarse screaming from a female voice. Abner quickly crawls across the stall to grab her blades. The cedar slats that makeup the outside wall travel too high for her to see over, but she can peer between cracks in the wood planking.

Some Templar prick looks to be torturing a mage. She looks terrified, and he has a murderous a glare that Abner knows all too well. She jumps out of the stall to the main walkway through the stables. Past the short, wide gate, she can see the Templar holding out his hand toward the mage. He purges and suppresses magic as he takes slow steps in the direction of the mage’s cries. Abner steadies her breath and aims her dagger for the weak point in his armor - the elbow.

Before the idiot knows what is happening, her dagger is sticking through him and he falls to his knees. He screams in agony while Abner races and jumps over the gate. She draws her other dagger and presses it firmly to his neck. She growls at the bastard, “The fuck you think you’re doing?” She notices the distinct aroma of stale, reeking alcohol permeating from the wretched figure. Hawke follows out from the stable gate, slower, and amusedly flanks the Templar.

She glances back to the assaulted mage, “Are you alright?” The woman stutters a response, telling Abner that she is at least functional.
“What was happening here?” Hawke looks back and forth between the two people. “The Mage-Templar war is not supposed to commence within Skyhold.”

Through gritted teeth the lyrium-addicted rat speaks, “The bitch needed to be taught.”

“Oh is that so? And you were just the twat to teach her?” Abner sneers, pressing her dagger even firmer against his neck, small drops of blood smear on her dagger’s edge. “Hawke, get this thing out of my sight. Take him to the healers, and alert the commander that this prick should be locked up til this matter’s settled.”

“What about her!” the Templar yells.

“Well, considering we saw you torturing her, I’m pretty sure we can trust she’s not the threat,” Hawke kneels down and growls at the man. He pulls the reeking shit to his feet, and marches him in the direction of the healer’s tower.

Abner grabs a rag from her waistband and wipes the small amount blood off her remaining blade. Turning to the blonde mage she says, “You’re goin’ to have to explain to the commanders. Both the Inquisition and the Templars will want to know what happened here. If you need, Hawke and I can weigh in as well.” She paces toward her and stretches out a hand to help pull the mage to her feet. “Name’s Abner.”

“Thank you, for… saving me,” she says as she stands. She looks familiar. Pale skin, blue eyes, blond hair pulled back into a bun. She is very pretty, but she is chewing on her lip in nervousness. Her eyes dart around, her brows furrow and pinch. “My name is Aurora,” she finally says.

Now Abner remembers her, she was the mage who had all of the ale spilled on her by the… oh… The Templars. Damn. This girl has some bad luck with those guys.

She brushes dirt off the backside of her tan and green mage robes. “This is not the first time that man has harassed me, but I was worried this time he was going to kill me. If you hadn’t been here…” her voice trails off and she stares at the ground. “Well, I am very glad that you were.”

Sensing that she is distressed and holds a story that the Commander should definitely hear, Abner gently grabs her shoulder. “C’mon, Aurora, let’s go talk to the commander together, yeah?”

Slowly and patiently she takes the mage to the commander’s battlement tower. The look in Aurora’s eyes is a familiar one, to which Abner unfortunately relates. She wonders how many times Aurora has been abused with no one to aid her, whether they knew of her pain, or not.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!! The rewrite is officially complete, everything from here on out will be new to everyone!

I am however, going to take a short break, figure out my final decisions on how to handle Adamant, visit my mom and burn through DAO and maybe DA2 with her, and maybe pop out a Skyhold Abbey chapter or two.

I’m really happy to have you here, I love chatting with you in the comments and Tumblr, and I’m excited to finally progress in this story!
Thank you!
Aaaaaand we're back! My travel is complete, life is settling back to normal (for now), and I had time this week to write the next chapter - the first original chapter since I don't know, sometime in November/December when I decided to do a rewrite? I'm not gonna lie, I was a little nervous.

This chapter was heavily influenced by music and I really think these songs help set the mood while reading. So, if you are into that, may I suggest listening to "Wandering Jane" and "An Insuperable Impediment" from the 2011 Jane Eyre movie soundtrack.

Song one on Spotify and here on Youtube.

Song two on Spotify and here on Youtube.

OH, and if you didn't catch it before, the previous chapter was only partially uploaded, if the last thing you read was "he gave you treats?" then you are missing half of the chapter. I fixed the error and I created a temporary chapter 24 explaining this fact, and have now deleted it (that's why you may have been either emailed about a second chapter 24, or a chapter 25 even though this is actually 24) yeah.. okay... happy reading!

<3
Aurora is beside herself.

She walks in a daze and in the hands of a courageous stranger.

Slowly, she begins regaining some of her faculties, though she still feels like she is walking through a dream. In shock, she went from a resolution to murder and flee, to being saved and safe in an instant.

Her strange savior, Abner, had stepped in… she actually stepped in before Aurora could do that which she could never undo. The murder of a Templar – to kill and run, hide and run, always run, never not running.

This woman thinks she saved Aurora from a crooked knight, but she did so much more.

As they slowly walk to the battlement tower and the shock of the event drips away, it leaves behind cold, dreamy, and naked bewilderment. Aurora darts gaping glances at the small woman beside her. Abner’s reassuring hand rests on her shoulder as she guides Aurora forward. The mage finds the courage, or rather, she fails to stop the words that bounce in her mind from tumbling out of her clumsy lips. “Thank you for doing that… and for believing me.”

Her response is simple, “I saw enough to know.”

“Most side with the Templars, no matter what.” Aurora fiddles with her fingernails and stares at the ground as they walk. “You… you are not… you do not fear me? Fear magic?” She lifts only her eyes to look over at the shorter woman.

A turn and tilt of her dreaded head, eyes so kind and devoid of judgement, and a smile that can only be described as warmth. “No,” Abner says, as if Aurora is adorably silly for even presuming she would be. When Aurora continues to stare with a crinkled, gaping look, the woman smiles again and squeezes the mage’s shoulder. “I was not raised to fear magic like those who follow your chantry law. Where I come from, no one fears it. They respect and cherish it.”

“Where are you from? Tevinter?” Aurora tenses at the sound and feeling of the country’s name.

“No.” She looks ahead as they approach the stairs to the battlements. With a sigh, she elaborates, “I s’pose it’s gettin’ out now anyway,” she says more to herself than to Aurora. “I’m Avvar and… well… and Dalish, neither of which fear magic. It is a talent, a connection to the Gods. Whether or not I believe which Gods… or any of that… I know that mages are not naturally evil.” She rubs Aurora’s back before stepping ahead to lead her up the stone stairs to the Commander’s office. “Besides, like I said, I heard some of what happened back there. A tit’s and tit, am I right?” she says over her shoulder and marches up the steps.

Aurora silently follows.

At the top, Abner doesn’t knock. Who would need to knock when they walk around with as much confidence as this unique woman? But as she swings open the door, Aurora hears startled noises. The sounds of a chair skidding across the floor, rustling papers, quick footsteps, and clearing throats echo in the room. A wicked grin glides along Abner’s lips before Aurora hears the distinctive, deep female voice of the Inquisitor.

“Abner,” a cough, “what... what are you doing here?” Abner simply points past the doorway out to
Aurora. The mage dips her head and follows her feet as they walk into the room. It almost feels like another force is moving her and she just watches from afar, like a spirit pressing against the veil.

Inside the dimly lit room, she peaks her eyes toward the Inquisition’s leaders. The Commander is standing between his chair and his large oak desk. He has a bright flush on his cheeks and a tussled look to his hair that Aurora is not accustomed to seeing. The Inquisitor stands a few paces away, leaning on a bookshelf, trying a little too hard to look at ease. The young Avvar woman and the frightened mage had definitely interrupted something.

“She’s got somethin’ to tell the Commander. We probably need the other one too… Barris. Hawke’s got one of his men down with the healers.” She grins again, proudly. “Caught him. Stopped him from nearly killing her.”

A hasty, booming knock at one of the other doors to the office makes Aurora jump. The person on the other side doesn’t wait for an answer but instead bangs and swings the door open. Delrin rushes in, panic in his eyes as he searches the room. Hawke must have sent for him. Delrin sees Aurora standing there stunned and races toward her.

“Aurora! Are you alright?” he asks while placing her slumped shoulders in his large, yet tender hands.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine,” Aurora says.

“What happened?” Commander Cullen’s voice rips her attention away from the Knight-Commander and his hands leave her shoulders. She immediately misses his touch, but he walks away to stand nearer Izzalea and Cullen, crossing his arms, waiting.

Slowly and with shaky breathes, Aurora tells everyone in the room her story. Beginning with the day of Delrin’s promotion, interrupted by a brief - or as brief as possible - explanation of Kinloch Hold and why the Templar mistrusts her in the first place. At the mention of the events at the Ferelden circle, Cullen’s eyes drop to the floor and he stiffens, hands fisting. Aurora catches a worried expression on Inquisitor Izzalea’s face as her eyes move through the room, reading everyone else as she listens.

Aurora doesn’t look at Delrin while she speaks. She can’t. She cannot stomach the idea that his opinion of her is most likely changing as every word is spoken. Aurora trembles under the gaze of the important people surrounding her, the people who have all the authority to kill her or evoke the rite of tranquility. Her voice cracks and then stops completely when she feels the familiar, encouraging hand on her shoulder again. She looks and sees Abner standing confidently beside her, somehow transferring a minute amount of her inner strength to Aurora through her touch. Aurora inhales, drawing in Abner’s strength and perseveres through the rest of her tale. She explains every relevant detail up to the point of Abner’s dagger’s appearance and Hawke taking the Templar away.

“Thank you, Aurora,” Izzalea says, her voice reserved and distant. Aurora can’t help but feel as if a barrier now surrounds her, constructed by those in the room and their undoubted distrust.

Izzalea looks to Abner, still standing beside Aurora with a hand upon her shoulder. “And thank you, Abner for stepping in.” She nods at the woman before addressing the mage again, “Aurora, are you the mage accompanying Dorian to the Western Approach in the morning?”

“Yes, your worship,” she responds, her voice but a whisper.

“Alright, go get some rest, Abner would you accompany her to her quarters, please? Rest assured, Aurora, your attacker will be questioned and dealt with.” The mage dips her head in a half bow to
the Inquisitor. “Barris, Cullen, stay here so we can discuss this further.”

Abner leads Aurora to the door, but not before the mage steals a sullen glance at Delrin. Her last image of him is heart breaking, the one to burn in her brain and carry with her all the way to the dessert. His face turned away, looking off and to the floor, his shoulders dropped as far as the corners of his mouth. Abner tugs gently at the mage’s arm. Aurora reluctantly turns and follows her into the darkness.

Abner walks her to her room without incident. She thanks the woman again for her timely intervention, before slipping into her darkened quarters and into bed with the stealth and quiet of a mouse, so as not to disturb her slumbering roommates. She lies in bed, the low indigo light of the moon shimmers on the ceiling from the small window behind her. She stares at the light, motionless. 

_Thinking._

A soft knock at the door. She races to it, as if floating on air. Peering through the crack as she opens the heavy wooden door, allowing light from torches in the hallway to flood in, she see him. Delrin. She slips through and he immediately takes her into his arms.

“I couldn’t let you leave Skyhold without letting you know that everything is okay. He’s been jailed and I still trust you, my love,” Delrin professes with a desperation she is unaccustomed to, but eagerly welcomes. They embrace again and she knows nothing could ever be wrong as long as she is in his arms.

_But that doesn’t happen._

_He doesn’t come._

There is no knock on the door. No loving embrace and no soothing proclamation of devotion. No matter how many times she imagines it, staring at the ceiling and the way shadows of branches and leaves dance on it within the moon’s light, no matter how often she changes his words, his touch, the look on his face… it doesn’t happen.

He doesn’t come.

Eventually, the moonlight is replaced with a pinkish blue tint. The sun is rising. It is time to go. The entourage of fighters, horses, and wagons are surely setting up and waiting for her, but she finds it hard move. Having lain still for so long, she is rigid with a broken, aching heart.

But then she hears it, for real this time, a light knock on the door. She almost doesn’t even realize it, she had wished for it for so long, so ardently. And then it happens again. She springs to a sit. She races to the door, but not as if floating on air, instead it is like she’s part of a stampede of shaky, newborn druffalo. Her legs insecure and stiff, moving like walking is itself a new idea. Her heart is in her throat when she slams her hands against the door. She takes a deep breath and opens it to reveal the hallway.

“Ah, I see… you aren’t even dressed yet,” Dorian’s judgmental voice drones. Aurora’s heart plummets, dropped unceremoniously from the edge of the ramparts.

“Oh, it’s you.” Aurora turns, leaving the door open, and walks back to her bed.

Dorian glances at the other women in the room trying to sleep, noticeably disturbed and shifting in their beds. He whispers out to the fellow mage in a harsh, scolding tone. “Yes, it’s me. You aren’t starting this trip on the right foot if you don’t get your lily-white ass dressed and come with me this instant. Everyone is almost ready. Plus, the Inquisitor has been asking about you!”
“One minute. Everything is packed. I just need to dress,” Aurora groans over her shoulder. She shuffles her feet along the floor in long, languid strokes. Dorian glares and pulls the door mostly shut as to give her privacy, but still be able to hear or speak to her if she takes too long in her sluggish, unhurried pace.

She does dress, however, in basic travel garb given to her by requisitions. Tight, brown riding pants, a loose, natural cotton tunic, a firm and supportive hunter-green riding jacket, and one set of brown boots to get her through the entire trip. Her hair’s pulled back into a haphazard bun which she covers with the hood of a midnight blue cloak that she drapes over her shoulders and ties at her neck. It is the one item that is fully hers, no one else’s, owned from a past life.

She slings a few bags of gear over her shoulders. Gear for fighting – gear she hopes she never has to use. Along with gear for researching - the only thing she hopes she has to do. She pulls on brown leather riding gloves and trudges back through the door, flexing her fingers to help the material find its snug placement around her hands.

“Is my lady ready?” Dorian asks with his arms crossed, an eyebrow cocked, and lips pressed in a thin line. Aurora says nothing, simply walks past him in the direction of the front gates.

When they arrive, there is a large crowd of people bustling around. Many of the travelers are on their horses, blearily waiting to move out. All except Cassandra, who sits tall and alert, her shrewd stare combing the commotion below her horse, evaluating the progress.

“Oh good, they’re here,” the Inquisitor says as she claps her gloved hands together with a sharp-edged thud. She walks up to Aurora, causing the mage to stop dead in her tracks so abruptly that Dorian slams into her from behind. He curses under his breath in tevene and diverts his path around her, skulking up to his readied steed.

“I hope you got some rest after last night,” Izzalea says and squeezes Aurora’s arm lightly. “Your horse is just over there, hand anything you don’t need at the ready to the man standing by that wagon.” She points at the two locations with a smile and then drops her face into a much more serious expression. She levels her much taller, imposing figure with Aurora. The words that follow are spoken in a hushed, serious manner. “We took care of it. He won’t ever bother you again.”

Aurora looks past the Inquisitor as the Commander approaches them. He stops a few paces away and clears his throat. Izzalea glances over her shoulder and smiles. Looking back to Aurora, she smirks with a wink before patting her arm. The kind of pat one might give a child after a pep talk, as if to say ‘chin up, sport.’ Aurora feels nothing, though. She just watches as the Inquisitor turns and walks over the Commander. They hug in a way that spurs a pit in Aurora’s stomach, a pit of jealousy. She quickly turns her gaze to the man at the wagon and moves to drop off her supplies.

Once atop her horse, a solid mare that is off-white with grey speckles and a muted grey mane, her eyes constantly scan the people walking below her. She wishes for Delrin’s beautiful face to find its way to her, but it doesn’t. She shifts on her saddle, and it is about this time when she remembers that she has rarely ridden on horseback.

This trip is sure to be a disaster on many miserable levels.

Finally, the large party of travelers begins to move in a long, thick line through the inner gates and across the bridge, leaving Skyhold behind. Aurora hangs toward the back of the group by the wagons. She glances over her shoulder often, hoping to see a gorgeous Templar with mahogany skin and crystal green eyes chasing after her, but he never appears. Eventually, when she can no longer see the gates and the group of people standing there waving goodbye, she stops looking for him.
He never came.

She trains her eyes to focus on the horn of her saddle. Memorizing the curves, comparing the leather to that of her gloves, and losing herself in the tiny canyon textures. A map. A landscape of lost life.

She doesn’t talk to anyone. Not even Sera. The elf road her mare to the back of the line next to Aurora, but got nothing out of her despite many attempts at conversation. She doesn’t feel much like talking. She doesn’t feel much of anything. The past twenty four hours were whirlwind of ups and downs and have left her empty. She’s not sure what to think about any of it. So she just rides. Silent. Empty. Like a physical void.

After a long day of riding through mountain passes, she is sore, barely even able to walk straight. She aids as best she can with setting up camp. The arduous day combined with the bitter cold whipping through the snowy mountain air makes her bones ache. She uses her magic to start a few small fires for groups to sit around, warm, sup, and partake in quiet conversation.

She receives a bowl of stew when it’s presented to her, but she just silently picks at it. She stirs the contents of the bowl and wonders, why didn’t he come to her? Why didn’t he look at her? It must have happened. He’s decided she is too dangerous. Probably better to let her disappear into the west, than to deal with what she is.

“You doin’ okay?” a familiar and also foreign brogue asks from next to Aurora. She looks over to find Abner has sat beside her. The woman chews on a piece of ram jerky, looking at Aurora. She doesn’t look worried or even overly friendly, just looking.

“I don’t really know anymore.”

Abner nods and moves her gaze to the fire. Not the type to pry, or distract, Aurora appreciates that she is just silently supportive. It feels nice. Without looking, Abner passes her a small bottle.

“Drink?”

They brought alcohol? How didn’t she know about this? Aurora takes the bottle and enjoys a long swig. The contents are strong and bitter. It burns her throat as it goes down, but it is a good burn, a comforting burn, a numbing burn. So, she takes another drink.

Then another.

And another.

As the loud and painful questions in her mind wash into just a dull throb, Abner chuckles, “Yeah? Okay, you can keep that.” She pats Aurora on the back and rises to her feet. Aurora watches in a fog as the petite rogue wanders in the direction of the Champion of Kirkwall. He leans against a wagon not far from the fire. He watches Abner intently as she slinks over to him.

Hawke is not a particularly tall man. He is on the shorter edge of average really, but the tiny woman still needs to arch onto her tip-toes in order to reach him. She brings her hand to the back of his head and pulls his smirking face down to meet hers. Aurora looks away, drinking more of the bitter alcohol, and stares at the fire. Another display of romance for her to feel sick about. When she averts her eyes, she spots the warden Alistair across the fire watching the lovers with a scowl on his face before he gets up and leaves.

There’s no telling how long she sat there, silently drinking and staring at the dancing of the flames, but she is left alone. Most travelers are just as tired or sore as she, and many turn-in early to their tents with awaiting bedrolls. Another long day of travel tomorrow, but they should at least be able to clear
the cold, snowy mountain forests.

Aurora feels her eyes start to droop and she drops the empty bottle of mystery booze on the ground. A set of hands comes from behind, pulling her to her feet. Holding her shoulders, she is guided by the hands to her tent. Low murmuring words are spoken from the source of the hands, but she can’t understand them. She is eased through the thick canvas flap of her tent. The soft, green glow of veillfire illuminates the inside. The hands sit her down on her bedroll and remove her boots. They pull loose her knotty, sad bun and drape her hair over her shoulders. Beyond the helpful, caring hands, she stares at a mouth that softly smiles at her. She watches as a black curled mustache moves while lips continue to form words, humming gentle sounds to her. A tear trickles down her cheek, escaping and running free only to be caught by the soft, tan finger from one of those aiding hands. The hands help her ease down onto her bedroll and tuck her in.

Blurry vision, she watches the warm-brown shapes of the hands stride to the other side of the tent and prepare their body and bedroll. Glinting buckles and buttons shine in the pale green light as she watches the figure settle. She listens to the soothing sound of the voice she is too drunk and too tried to decipher. As her calming protector lays in the bedroll opposite her, the eerily comforting light of the veillfire vanishes.

In the darkness it is quiet. Aurora only listens to the howling of the wind and distant wolves for a short while before her eyes close and she drifts into the fade.
Advising Friends & Influencing Nobles

Chapter Notes

If you would like to listen to music while you read, I would say anything Orlesian from the DAI sound track would work :) we have a little noble business happening tonight.

This chapter is a little late, I meant for it to by up on Thursday, but it didn't happen. Thank Kagetsukai for inadvertently lighting a fire under my ass.

The journey into the west is arduous. After clearing the mountains, breaking at least two wagon wheels, and crossing the beautiful forests in the Dales, the group of travelers stop at the last town before the desert wasteland. Val Firmin.

It is a standard Orlesian city, as far as Izzalea is concerned. Lots of frilly people, frilly buildings, and frilly things, but it is nice to stop in civilization nevertheless. She is surprised to witness probably the least frilly person she knows, Abner, delight in the city. As soon as camp is set in Val Firmin’s outskirts, the rogue grabs Hawke’s arm and hightails it to the walls, talking vibrantly about finding a bakery, and how she ‘will teach him the true meaning of ecstasy.’
Izzalea takes the time to restock on provisions with the assistance of the men in charge of the wagons and travel requisitions. It doesn’t take long after perusing the shops and ordering supplies that word spreads of not only the Inquisition’s presence, but the Inquisitor herself. While most people are still wary of her, suspicious of the Inquisition’s purpose, Duke Stefan de Firmin - and a collection of visiting noble associates - seizes the opportunity to entertain her and her inner circle for the evening.

Izzalea later attends an ostentatious display of wealth and flattery poorly disguised as ‘dinner.’ They are presented with not one, not two, but three nesting roasts – a flagrant parade of birds stuffed within other birds. A quail is stuffed in a pheasant and then stuffed in a swan, roasted, and carved meticulously into delicate layered slices. Not only that, but the ornate and gilded banquet table where they sit is also covered with other Orlesian delicacies. Rare poached fruits, braised vegetables, piles of exquisitely crafted and braided rolls, beautiful fruit pies, and bottles upon bottles of fine Antivan wine all span across the large table in the equally large estate dining room.

It is a feast that would make Josephine envious. Izzalea is sure her ambassador would want her to take notes on everything, perhaps even convince the Duke’s chef to lend aid to the Inquisition, but she is sure that Madame Vivienne is already securing such feats and then some. Izzalea watches the Grand Enchanter amusedly as she delights the Duke in rhetoric that Izzalea herself hasn’t the patience for. Izzalea smiles and nods when appropriate, adding as little to the conversations as she can get away with while still being gracious and gallant to the Duke and his guests.

Even though she is of noble birth, she’s never enjoyed noble gatherings. Ever. She secretly wishes she could have skipped the dinner all together like Blackwall managed to do. The man had positively disappeared by the time everyone was ready to go. Of course there were others not in attendance as well. Solas, Sera, Bull, Abner, and Cole were all deemed ‘unfit’ to attend such an affair by the enchanter.

“A shabby elven apostate, a belligerent elven delinquent, a qunari spy, a dirty chasind, and a demon are not guests for a Duke, my dear,” Vivienne had said before they left for the estate that evening.

When Izzalea angrily protested the harsh criticism, Vivienne promptly set her in her place. “Do you want to gain more support for the Inquisition, or do you want to damage its fragile reputation further? Choose wisely, my dear. There will be other Lords and Lady’s in attendance, including Lady Seryl of Jader who has already expressed sympathy for your divine cause in the past. She is an ally that cannot be discounted. It is your duty to put your best assets in the forefront during this fortunate, albeit accidental, turn of events. One can never know when one may need to call upon friends in high places, darling. While you may enjoy the company of mixed allies, it fails to be the more important issue at this juncture.”

Izzalea sips wine from a beautiful crystal glass and glances around the table at her included companions, the ones deemed worthy enough to attend and represent the Inquisition. Varric has been forced to endure countless prying questions due to his notoriety as an author. Apparently, the Duke’s wife, Duchess Caralina de Firmin, is an ardent fan of his saucier fictions. Cassandra’s royal lineage caused her to be considered essential, much to her chagrin. Cassandra hates these types of functions even more than Izzalea. Hawke’s title and celebrity also made him a requirement, as did Alistair’s blight-ending infamy. Dorian was ordered to keep his Tevinter comments down to nil. He was also permitted to bring his mage assistant, Aurora, because Vivienne thinks the woman has a stoic poise that is acceptable and even preferred at such occasions, as long as she abstains from drinking any of the wine.

The magical researcher had been drinking herself into a sour, silent, stupor most of the early nights during their journey. She often rides her mare in a quiet hangover. Even so, she thankfully has been slowly relaxing. Izzalea has noticed that she and Dorian spend most of their time side by side,
murmuring little conversations while riding or sitting around the fire, until they retire to their shared tent. The last few nights, Izzalea has even noticed the mage smiling and partaking in debates about magical techniques with the other mages in camp. Izzalea is relieved that she seems to be mending from the violent altercation before they left.

“My Lady Inquisitor, you must do me the honor of staying here in my home tonight,” the Duke says, pulling Izzalea from her thoughts. “I cannot bear to have you sleeping in a dusty tent outside the city when I have a suitable bed here for someone of your station.”

“That is very kind of you,” she smiles and bows her head as she speaks. “But I have such an early rise in the morning. I couldn’t live with myself if I disturbed you or your lovely guests any more than I already have. As much as I would love to accept your gracious offer, the call to my righteous purpose unfortunately means I must sacrifice life’s finer pleasures.” She can’t get out of this ridiculous estate fast enough. The talk of staying longer makes her gut pinch. Perhaps it is time to find her exit, before any more insistence is pressured.

“I am impressed that Andraste’s Herald takes her duty so seriously. Though you are from Ostwick, I am sure even still that the harsh change of which your noble birth is accustomed is truly tested time and time again during your mission. The fact that you are so willing to endure such hardship for the Maker and your quest for divine justice is endlessly inspiring, Inquisitor,” Lady Seryl says from across the table. “If I can ever be of use to your cause, please do not hesitate to ask. And I must admit, I have been in contact with your lovely Ambassador for some time now. Seeing you here tonight with your dignity and determination has done nothing but bring me great pleasure and confidence that my faith has not been misguided when I chose to support you and your endeavors. How truly lucky I am, no, how truly lucky we all are, to have been here in Val Firmin during your journey.”

“You are too kind, my Lady. The Inquisition is grateful for your support.” Izzalea rises from her seat, and bows to the nobles peppering the edges of the table betwixt her companions. Slowly, cautiously, her friends begin to rise as well, taking the cue and hoping this means they all get to leave now. “If you will please excuse us, we have a long road ahead. I cannot thank you enough for hosting us during this wonderful evening. May Andraste watch over you all.”

Nailed it.

Maybe.

Who can say when dealing with these types, but she feels good about it. Evading the request was probably the wrong move, given the way she noticed Vivienne’s eye twitch when she said it, but Lady Seryl seemed pleased by her display of humility.

No matter what damage or assistance her presence has done for the Inquisition this night, Izzalea is ready to leave.

She and her cohorts continue in what feels like never-ending farewells and sycophancy until they are finally released into the cool night air. The yellow glow emanating from the windows of the ornate estate twinkles in the dark blue ambient light of late evening. Most of her friends mount their awaiting horses and begin to trot down the road toward camp, relief writ plainly on their faces.

Izzalea sneaks Ebony a stolen braised carrot and calls for Cassandra to hang back with her, requesting to walk their horses instead of ride. She feels the need to have a normal conversation with her closest ally and friend after the night of lofty facades. No one ever really saying what they mean. Everyone forced to participate in a dance of hidden agendas.
Cassandra agrees and the pair walk from the estate down its gravel carriage way. They lead their horses slowly, not speaking at first. Rather, they revel in the silence of the night. Sounds still travel from their friends trotting and laughing ahead of them. Hawke apparently couldn’t wait to reach even the edge of the property before ridiculing and sniping about things people had said. Eventually, they have a far enough lead on the warrior women that the only sounds come from their boots and their horses’ hooves crunching on gravel.

“With everything that has been going on lately, and this large group of ours, you and I haven’t had much time to just chat, just the two of us. How goes it, my friend?” Izzalea asks, stirring Cassandra from whatever she had been quietly contemplating.

“As good as can be expected, I suppose.”

“I noticed that Azzedine didn’t come to see you off before we left Skyhold…” Izzalea knows she is prying, but she can’t help herself. It feels like it’s been ages since she got to talk to her brother. Cassandra is the only other person who has regular dealings with him, and while Izzalea has hoped a romance was blossoming, she has suspicions that it had mired.

“That was by design.”

Not the response she had hoped to hear. “Oh? Are things… not going well?”

Cassandra grunts. “Lord Trevelyan can be,” she pauses searching for a word, “trying. He seems to think if he wants something, it should just be handed to him without question. Even if that something is me.”

“He’s not the best at relationships,” Izzalea concedes with a sigh.

“That… is an understatement.”

“If it’s any consolation, our parents really did a number on us. In fact, Dean has never even had an actual relationship before. He resolved himself to bachelorhood, told me he would pass the estate down to a niece or nephew. Mother tried to match him. Noble fathers have approached him often. But, he’s never had an interest in anyone. That is… until you, Cassandra.” The seeker doesn’t comment on Izzalea’s admission.

They continued in silence for a while, Izzalea wondering if she overstepped. She cares so much for her brother and also for Cassandra. She wants them both to find happiness, even if that means she steps on stubborn toes.

“Our parents were once in love… so I’ve heard, anyway. Dean saw it first hand when he was young. But something happened. Our father… He… well, things happened. Now he parades young mistresses around like it’s nothing. Our mother, she keeps a strong face. It’s the only one I know. She became completely devoted to the chantry, devoted to raising strong and respectable children. That took a toll on Dean. We always thought love was fleeting. So, what was the point?” She stops and grabs Cassandra’s arm, turning the seeker to face her. “You’re an exception, Cass.”

Cassandra’s eyes fall and she looks to the side, evading the emotions Izzalea is undoubtedly stirring. “I’m sorry,” Izzalea says, feeling like she has done too much, even though she felt so compelled to do it. She grabs Ebony’s reigns tighter and pushes on. Cassandra follows, her stare distant and emotional.

“You do not seem to have been affected by your upbringing with regards to how you deal with Cullen,” she says after a few minutes of silence.
Izzalea puffs a sharp breath of laughter. “Oh, it has. I… I never thought I would find anyone either. I treated love as a novelty. The complete opposite of Azzedine, really.” She laughs under her breath and shakes her head. “In fact my mother always said I had ‘too much’ of my father in me. Never taking anything seriously. Her ‘rebellious child doomed to a life of ridiculous.’” She sighs a heavy, weighted sigh and stares up at the stars as they walk. “With Cullen… At first it was just lust, another game. I mean just look at him, he is… woof… he is something.” Cassandra barks a laugh that makes Izzalea feel more at ease and she smiles while darting a look to her friend from the corner of her eye. “But…” she continues, dropping her voice to a pensive, sullen sound. “If I’m honest, he makes me feel things that I don’t know how to handle. I flirt with him, but I’m not sure how to actually open up to him. I don’t know how to be vulnerable. I’ve never wanted to be vulnerable. I just kind of… kiss him, and that’s it. It’s hard for me to trust someone in that way.”

“Cullen is a good man.”

“So is Azzedine.” She stops again, petting the snout of Ebony. She looks at the soft glow of Cassandra’s skin in the pale moonlight. “I know he can be arrogant and a little too serious, but that’s just who my mother taught him to be. She is like an Iron Lady. But he has a soft side, I’ve had the pleasure of seeing it firsthand.”

Izzalea thinks she detects a soft smile from the seeker before she says, “It is getting late, shall we ride the rest of the way?”

“Yes, that’s probably a good idea.”

The two women mount their horses and ride their way back to camp, they see the dotted lights from the fires between clusters of tents before anything else. Upon arrival, they tend to their horses and then Casandra leaves for her tent. The seeker usually turns in early so that she can rise, limber up, and spar a little in the morning before everyone else wakes. Izzalea thinks she also likes to read her saucy romance novels alone, rather than deal with the shenanigans of camp fire rowdiness.

When they part ways, Izzalea walks over to the fire burning closest to her tent. It seems many have retired for the evening, but Alistair still sits on a log, perched and staring into the fire. Varric is next to him, mumbling something, but stops when he sees Izzalea approach. All she hears is, “He will. You need to let it go.”

Izzalea sits on the other side of Alistair and smiles. She smacks hims playfully on the back of his shoulder as she settles. “Hi guys! How’s it going?”

Alistair doesn’t respond more than and shrug and a grunt, she leans past him to see Varric. The dwarf shrugs at her, more lightheartedly than the warden, smiles, and brings a jug of something to his lips. Izzalea leans forward with her elbows on her knees, and rests her chin in her hands, peering into the fire. It is then that she sees Hawke is on the other side, a little farther away and almost out of range for the orange glow to illuminate his figure. He is leaning against and facing a tree. Abner is pinned between the champion and said tree, and they seem to be sharing a moment so intense and private that Izzalea immediately feels like a letch for having seen it. She smiles anyway, happy that some people are so comfortable with their feelings.

Izzalea looks at Alistair again, this time she realizes that he isn’t looking into the fire. He is staring past it and at the couple beyond, and he is seething. His eyes are narrowed, jaw set tight, and he has a frown that is somehow straight and biting as well as plunging. Why would he be seething? “Are you… missing Lymeria?” she asks with hesitation. Perhaps the warden is an envious type.

He grunts and shakes his head before rising. “Something like that,” he says with a sneer in Hawke’s
direction. He throws a small glass bottle that once held ale into the fire. The high-pitched shattering sound jerks the heads of Abner and Hawke toward the warm, orange lit trio opposite them, and Alistair turns to leave.

“Don’t worry about the Warden, Rusty,” Varric says as the lovebirds go back to their canoodling, and Alistair disappears into the small tent city behind them. “He’s just a little cranky and tired. One of those nobles wouldn’t stop asking him questions about the Hero of Ferelden. It’s probably best if we all just go to bed and put this crazy night behind us.”

“Alright, goodnight Varric,” she says while rising again. It seems there will be no jokes or comradery on this evening as there have been in the past. “I think you’re right. It’s been a long day.” She nods at the dwarf before they go their separate ways. She crinkles her brows together and shakes her head, knocking out that strange altercation with the warden before entering her tent. Before turning in, she lights a candle, grabs her vellum for missives, and jots down a note for tomorrow’s ravens.

*Dean-o,*

*Now is the time. You have to buck up and show yourself to her. A grand romantic gesture. I’m talking candles, flowers, stars, poetry! The works. You have a couple months to plan something epic. Do it. Do me proud, brother. Take the leap. I believe in you. I will keep her safe, don’t disappoint.*

-*Izz*

She smiles to herself and folds the note, carefully sticking it with a stack of other messages to be sent back to Skyhold in the morning. Blowing out the candle, she settles into her bedroll and wonders if she needs to heed her own advice.
The feeling of frisky fingers pulls her from her dreams. They glide and trickle their way around from the back of her hip, down the side of her thigh, then back up to land, nestle, and cup her firmly in the center. Eyes still shut, she smiles and groans, pushing her hips back to find another set pressing against her from behind.

Her smile morphs into a hushed gasp. Her lips part just enough for her to catch the bottom one between her teeth, when his kisses began to caress her back. Slow. Warm. Wet. His mouth worships her skin around the sensitive areas of her neck while his hand presses on her below. Her hips
involuntarily sway in rhythmic motions, and he follows her.

Hoarse and light whines escape her throat and he chuckles a breathy, rumbling sound. “Good morning,” he whispers in her ear. It is the sound of rolling thunder at daybreak, high in the heavens during early, sweet spring. The sound that promises a shower of life. It is needed. Wanted. Triumphant.

She smiles broadly and writhes against his naked body inside their combined bedrolls. They connect in a symphony of primal emotion. Elemental harmony. It is a carnal ritual that they have perfected together in misty twilight. Flesh working in tandem, creating senses within an ethereal trance.

It is a connection they make jointly with body and spirit. They entwine themselves together until they sweat and ache in savage, heaving satisfaction.

This is more than fun. This is more than anything.

She’s falling in love with him.

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Griffin Wing Keep is only a day or two out of reach. They have been travelling across Orlias for the better part of two weeks. Abner was unexpectedly jubilant about sharing little things like frilly cakes with Hawke at every opportunity. She even told him a few stories about her travels through northern Orlesian cities. She’s bonding with him in a way she hasn’t allowed with anyone in years.

When they finally reach the desert, Abner realizes how absolutely beautiful it is, especially at night. The scorching sun leaves the large, beautiful, and cool moon in its stead. It’s even more romantic to her than the forests in the Dales were.

She is really glad Hawke bribed Leliana with nugs.

It all has felt… special. They travel on their horse’s side-by-side throughout the day, they joke with everyone who is willing, and they share a tent at night. They warm each other up near the fire in the evenings, blatantly displaying their affection, only to then stumble into their tent when the urges are just too strong to leash any longer. It’s already a very lax leash to begin with.

On this night, after she catches a few fennecs for supper, and while waiting for their meat to be cooked, Abner wanders a little farther from camp to sit on a large bolder and stare at the moon. Hawke finds her after a few minutes of solitude.

“There you are, my little minx,” he coos as he sits beside her. Wrapping his arms around her, he kisses her temple before watching the beauty of the moon as well. She nuzzles her head into the inside of his shoulder and breathes in his scent. He has a natural calming quality. She feels more at ease with him each passing day. His essence is unique… perfect.

“You are certainly a skilled hunter. There hasn’t been a single night where you haven’t provided something for dinner. It’s impressive,” he says while squeezing her between his arms.

“My parents taught me. They were both the best hunters in our clan. It’s how we were allowed to stay.” She feels Hawke stiffen, obviously unsure of how to react to the information. She has never spoken of her parents to him. While she has shared escapades as a spy and assassin, she still hasn’t said a word about life before that.

Until now.
He clears his throat. “Allowed to stay?” he asks, uncertainty ringing in his voice.

“Yes. They weren’t supposed to find each other, but they did anyway. My father was Avvar, but my mother was Dalish. When she became pregnant, she was cast out of her clan. The Avvar at least see value in a pair of expert hunters.” She stays quiet for a few moments then giggles at a thought in her mind. “I think my father would have liked you. He had a thing for ‘unconventional.’ He liked breaking the rules.”

“What happened to your parents?” his voice is still hesitant, unsure if a question will cause her to shut back down, while still wanting to know more about her.

She doesn’t shut down, however. She trusts him now. She can’t explain any of it, but for the first time in her new life, she found someone she actually wants to know her. “They died during the blight. That’s when I was given to Ofred. My parents wouldn’t have allowed such a… transaction.” She grits her teeth and her hands grab onto Hawke’s arm that crosses the front of her. “Lots of people died during the blight, but I was told the Gods no longer favored our clan because I was a disgrace, and that I should be grateful of the fact another clan would take me at all. I was cursed and could rot for all they cared. It was only some twisted loyalty to my father that kept me alive.”

Hawke doesn’t speak, he just holds her. She’s glad. She doesn’t need his pity, or words of sorrow, or reassurance. “Ofred was a monster. He broke me in more ways than one. But that Avvar Izzy judged before we left, he and his wife saved me. They got me out. I wandered scared and alone for a while, terrified that he would track me. Then I met Leliana, and everything changed.” She sits up and smiles at the sad gaze Hawke gives her. She presses a kiss to his lips and says, “And now I’m here with you.”

He smiles at this and kisses her back. “Thank you for telling me,” he says.

“I… I care about you, Rhaegar,” her heart races as soon as the phrase is spoken. It’s out now, carried away in the gentle evening breeze. Carried away with sands and wishes.

“I care about you, too,” he says. “I need to…” his voice falters and he begins to pull away. “I need to tell you something.” He drops both his eye contact and his touch.

“What is it?” Abner’s hand finds his shoulder and she tips her head to the side with an encouraging smile trying to coax him back to her.

“Hey! Idiots! Soups on!” Bull beckons with his booming voice behind them. His horned figure is silhouetted by the fire light behind him as he stands at the edge of camp.

“We should go,” Hawke says, lifting himself off the boulder.

Abner grabs his hand before he can walk away. “What were you going to tell me?”

His eyes still don’t make contact, “It’s nothing. We can talk about it later.” He looks at her and smiles in a way that seems… odd… He speaks while squeezes her hand, “C’mon, let's go enjoy the fruits of your labor.” He pulls her up from the rock and swings her into his arms, wrapping himself around her again. They walk toward the beckoning Qunari.

“You two are utterly disgusting,” Bull grunts with a smirk as they approach. Abner immediately starts laughing. “What?” He squints at her.

“Utterly… Utters… Ox man…” She laughs, releasing herself from Hawke’s side to clutch her stomach and giggle while doubled over.
“Oh, for the love of…” Bull laughs, grabbing her into an easy headlock and rubbing his knuckles into the top of her head.

Her laughter is robust. Vivacious, carefree joy emanates from her. She feels amazing. “Hey,” she laughs and swats the Qunari’s hands away. “You said it, not me. Not my fault!”

“Go on, you,” he grunts, pushing her snickering body toward camp in good humor.

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After they sup, Abner is leaning against a wagon near one of the fires. She listens to the lively conversations with a proud smirk on her face. Watching Hawke as he tells a story to a fascinated and giggling Izzy with Varric's assistance. They regale her in a tale about nobles they found under a demon’s spell. They walked through a mansion finding its occupants doing crazy, sexual things as if no one was watching - much to some tight-ass Starkhaven prince’s horror.

“Sebastien turned ten shades of crimson when he saw that lord enjoying some… oral attention. It is hilarious to think about now, I bet he prayed to the maker all night after that one,” Varric chuckles in his raspy, cheerful tones.

Hawke snickers and looks over at Abner, motioning for her to come sit beside him. She does, and he brings her into his arms, kissing the top of her head as she settles.

“Was the Lady of the house not heartbroken from the infidelity?” Alistair’s voice cracks like a whip and he appears from between a couple of tents.

All of the cheer vacates Varric’s voice, replaced with terse sounds through clenched teeth. “It was her doing, Warden. She called the demon into the house in the first place, she was already mad. Her mind long gone by the time we arrived.”

“Hmm, I see. I guess virtue to one’s spouse is not highly regarded by some,” Alistair says as he seats himself next to a puzzled Izzalea. She looks back and forth between the warden and the dwarf as if questions are flying through her mind, but decides to say nothing. Abner has noticed that the man whom so many have referred to as sarcastic and silly, is much more serious and dour than she’d expected. She’s often caught him looking at her with a dark, angered look in his eye.

“Leave it alone, Warden,” Varric grumbles before taking a swig from a jug of ale in his hand. He passes it to Izzalea, motioning for her to pass it on, “Here, share this with him. He needs to lighten up.”

Izzalea attempts to hand Alistair the jug, but he closes his eyes, purses his lips, and lifts his hand with a shake of his head. “What’s going on here?” Izzalea says, a pinch in her brows. She hands the jug back to the dwarf. “Are you alright, Alistair?”

“Oh, me? No. No. I’m fine.” There is an edge to his voice and length to his words that makes Abner uneasy. “What I want to know is, how’s Hawke doing?”

“Alistair—” Varric starts, warning in his voice, but Alistair cuts him off.

“Now, now, Varric, let the man speak for himself. How are you Hawke? You seem to be having a fine time.”

Hawke and Abner sit straighter, but he keeps an arm around her. “I am, yes. Is there a problem?”

“Oh, good… good. I’m glad. Tell me, Hawke,” each word is bladed to a sharp point. “How is
“Merrill doing these days?”

Abner feels everything about Hawke tense immediately. “She’s fine, last I knew.” Abner looks at his face and sees a stern look in his eye and a firmly set jaw as he glowers across the fire at the warden.

“Last you knew? You don’t keep in regular contact?”

“I send her a letter from time to time.”

“So… what is the darling woman up to?”

Every word is slow and punctuated coming from Hawke, at this point. “She’s. Helping. The. Elves.”

Alistair tips his head pensively. “Oh, that’s nice of her. I’ve always thought her such a sweet and caring woman. So, does she know what you are up to?” His tone is positively antagonistic.


Izzalea and Abner sit silent, confusion and suspicion in their eyes as they watch and listen to the men. Abner doesn’t like this. She doesn’t like this one bit. “Who is Merrill?” she asks.

“Oh, you don’t know? She’s Hawke’s wife.”

Silence follows.

The air could be cut with a knife.

Abner sits there, stunned. Every inch of her skin that has contact with Hawke boils, wanting to recoil away. She doesn’t look at him. She doesn’t move. She just stares into the hazel eyes of the Warden. Then she finds her voice. “The fuck you just say?”

“We were never formally married,” Hawke’s tone is indistinguishable. It is neither angered nor sad, it just is.

“You may as well have been, no? You’ve been together for what, seven? Eight years?”

She hears Varric groan and drop his forehead into his hands. “I told you to let it go, to let him handle it.”

Abner’s eyebrows lift, her eyes widen and she looks down at the groaning, doubled over dwarf. Hawke fails to respond, or move, or do anything. The longer she stays in this position, his repulsive body touching hers, the sicker she begins to feel. She starts to pull away from him as her stomach flips and flops inside her.

“Abner…” he whispers, “Abner, I meant to…” He reaches out his hand to try and stop her retreat.

“Don’t you fucking touch me,” she snarls at him, growling from the pit of her being.

She stands and starts backing away. “You are fucking married?”

She glares at Varric who has lifted his head slightly to watch her, “And you fucking knew?” She points an accusatory finger at the rest of the group, “You all knew?”

Izzalea shakes her head silently, pity in her eyes and a sorrowful frown.

“I’m sorry that he didn’t tell you—” Alistair begins.
“Shut the fuck up. I don’t want to hear anymore from you,” she snaps at the warden, pointing her finger at him. She looks at Hawke and drops her arm to her side. He is staring at her so helplessly. She feels emotion well behind her eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me? I trusted you.” Her lower lip quivers, so she bits it from within.

Hawke doesn’t respond, he just sits there. Pathetic. Izzalea mumbles to the other two men that they should go. The three quietly rise and disappear in an attempt to give Abner some privacy. Once they are gone, he moves toward her, reaching for her again. She recoils and backs away from grasp with a look of pure hatred. He drops to his knees.

“Explain yourself.”

“We never had a fully monogamous relationship, I swear. And I haven’t even seen her in two years. We write to each other less and less.” He’s begging. Her heart races as she looks down at him.

The sound is flat, emotionless. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“At first I didn’t think it would matter. I didn’t think I would know you very long. And then… ever since you reconciled with me, it’s loomed over me. I knew I should have said something, but I couldn’t figure out how. I just got you back, I didn't want to risk losing you again, didn’t know how you’d react. But I was going to tell you, I swear it.”

“I told you everything.”

He tips his head, “Well… today you did, but not befo—“

“Oh, fuck right off.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” He inches toward her. She stands her ground this time, looking down at him with a sneer. He grabs her hands and brings them to his mouth, speaking into her flesh, “I’m so, so sorry.” He looks up at her, pleading. “Please don’t look at me like that. Don’t look at me like you wouldn’t care if I just disappeared.”

“It’s not even the fact that you're married, or not married, or whatever-the-fuck you claim she is to you. It’s that you didn’t give me a chance to decide if I was okay with it.” Her heart breaks and she hates it. “You lied to me.”

“Well, if you think about it, you didn’t tell me you were married either…”

She snaps her hands away and hurdles her body away incredulously. “How dare you compare that to what you’ve done!” Her voice is like a wolf’s growl. His stupid fucking mouth. He says the dumbest fucking things.

“Shit. I know. I fucked up. I keep fucking up. I’m only human, Abner. I make mistakes. I’m sorry.”

She looks away from him and starts pacing back and forth agitatedly. Dust from her boots stomping in the dirty sand cloud around them. Her arms crossed she shakes her head and mumbles under her breath in her native tongue that she knows he can’t understand.

“I’m a fool, Abner. I will do anything. Anything. I have never felt—“

“Shut up! Shutupshutupshutup! Shut! Up!” she orders as she paces. She straightens he arms to her sides, hands balled into fists.

“I love you.”
“Shut up!” she covers her ears and screams the words. She can’t deal with this anymore. This is too messed up. She doesn’t know how she feels. Her care for him was already new and strange, and now this? “I need some space,” she says and walks away.

Abner leaves him behind her, his knees in the dirt, head and shoulders slouched. She marches through the camp, not particularly sure where she’s going or what she is going to do… about any of it. She sees another group around another small fire. The elven apostate sits there, one of the members in a small cluster of people.

She gets an idea.

She needs an escape.

She marches up to him and grabs the small knapsack he always keeps next to him with a couple books inside. *The weirdo even reads on horseback.* She rifles through it and everyone hushes their conversations to watch her.

“How can I help you?” Solas asks indignantly.

“Where do you hide it?” she asks poking her fingers around little pockets within the lining of the bag.

“Hide what?”

She stops long enough to stare him as if her face groans. “Solas, don’t insult my intelligence. Someone as experienced in escapism as you, and all your *Fade shit,* has got to keep a couple joints on him at all times.”

Sera snorts and laughs from the other side of the fire. “She’s got you pegged, elfy,” she says.

With a roll of his eyes, he groans and reaches into his sleeve. He must have some hidden pocket stitched there, because he produces a long, thin roll of elfroot. “This is *medicine,* Abner,” he says, annoyed.

“Yeah? Well, I need some healing, apostate,” she snarks and snatches it from his hand. She stands up straight and looks him in his piercing grey eyes. “Well? You comin’ or what?”

She detects a subtle twitch of a smirk at the corner of his mouth and he narrows his eyes briefly. He leans down to rifle through his bag for a moment and produces two apples. “One for me and one for you, since you would most likely take mine, anyway.” Effortlessly he tosses the apple in the air with a flick of his wrist, and she just as deftly catches it with a coy, lopsided grin.

He rises from his perch and they disappear into the dark sands beyond the edge of camp.

Chapter End Notes
I can't tell you how heart broken I am. I had a minor panic attack while writing this chapter. I really really hate this part of their story, but... it's just how it happened. I'm really sorry.

This has been looming over me for months, when I finished the last one, I had fitful sleep and had to wake up and just write this. I had to get out. So there it is. Don't give up on me yet. There is a plan. It's just a bumpy, winding road. If you've lasted this long, I really hope you stick with me.

Thanks for reading, I appreciate you.

If you'd like to hear the song I have listened to on repeat while this chapter haunted me - sending me to a very dark place on more than one occasion (to which I am so glad I have some truly wonderful internet writer friends who, sometimes unknowingly, help talk me off of the ledge. You know who you are) then it's:

"Never Be Like You" By Flume -- I'm listening to it now with tears in my eyes. And more recently, I found "Devil Side" by Foxes... and that is like Abner right now. And it makes me want to tear my own heart out.
She leaves him there, his knees in the dirt. He hears his voice plead softly, “Come back...Come back, please,” but it is carried away with the blowing sands. He will die here - without her - lost forever in this desert.

Can they come back from this?

He feels his hand drift in her direction as her silhouette disappears into the cold darkness.

“Come back...”

Every one he loves. Every single one of them. They all get hurt. He can’t take it anymore. He never gets it right.

He can’t breathe. The sand whips around him, stinging his watering eyes, piercing his skin. He
lowers his head. Wet trails become the pathways of his pain on his face as grains of mistakes collide and stick there. His hands form bright steel fists that slam repeatedly into the ground, blood drawn in trembling palms from dirty, jagged fingernails. Cuts rip across his knuckles, ribbons of red criss-crossing along the stark white in a flurry of bitter, angry regret. His breath is quick and ragged, lungs burning. The agony in his chest sears and pulses with enough force to make him want to vomit.

When the ground beneath his knees is sufficiently stained crimson. When the breath in his lungs is thick enough that he chokes. He stops. Kneeling there, shoulders quaking, he wishes. He doesn’t even know what for, there is so much... but he wishes, and he rises on shaky legs.

He tries to sleep. Having wandered to his tent in a haze - a shell - lying to himself that everything will be okay. He tries to sleep.

Instead, his kicks and spins. Her scent is in their blankets. Proof of her is everywhere. She’d been annoyed that they slept ‘trapped in canvas’ night after night, but she stayed there anyway… for him. For his comfort. And he sees her everywhere. He feels her absence and it is unbearable.

So he rises again to wander the camp, the night, the sands... and wish.

He wonders if anything in his life will go the way it’s supposed to. Perhaps he’s doomed. Doomed by his own stupidity and arrogance.

He should have told her about Merrill back at the Inn. When her secret was revealed. When he wormed his way back to her side. He should have done it then. But he didn’t.

He told himself that Abner was a passing fancy for his narcissistic fickle heart. He didn’t think he would actually fall, but he has. She is his lifeblood. She has woken feelings that he hasn’t felt for years. And now… now Alistair has thrown a steaming pile of gatlock into everything. She’s heard his secret through the angry words of another person, instead of from him.

It should have been him.

As he wanders, he spots the small fire of the person keeping watch while the others sleep. He heads in the direction of the low, crackling flames.

It doesn’t take long for her to hear him, turning her head to see the man who lied to her. She’d rather stay up all night, killing the beasts that threaten them... threaten him... while they sleep, than to be by his side. The thought strikes a searing knife through his heart, a wrenching twist in his gut.

Abner sits there, a dagger she’s cleaning in her hands, the corpses of two rabid hyenas at her feet. She connects her eyes with his and the corners of her mouth drop. Her eyes narrow before they fall to the sand below. He edges closer and glances at the beasts. He feels a sad sense of pride. She is so capable. One of the many reasons he loves her.

Slowly, she turns her attention back to the blade in her hands. They say nothing and he turns to walk back to his bedroll. Every fiber in his body screams at him to go to her, to beg her to listen, beg her to understand. But he ignores the cries.

She doesn’t want him.

He tells himself that at least he knows she’s safe… and alone. He feels an odd comfort in knowing that she is alone rather than in the arms of another. He takes that as a promising sign. And right now, he’ll take anything.

He sleeps only a fraction easier after that, he still lies awake most of the night. Thoughts about
Abner, about Merrill… about Alistair… roll through his mind in a constant, torturous replay of his delusions. Thoughts of the warden make Hawke seethe. Thoughts that ferment in his mind and fester hatred.

He hasn’t calmed by the time morning finally comes and camp is torn down. Every glimpse Hawke has of the meddling prick makes his blood boil.

There isn’t far to travel before they reach Griffon Wing Keep. As they ride, Hawke tries to occupy his thoughts with something that isn’t damning, when he notices the hint of green sparks and flinching grimmances. First it was by happenstance that he saw the green flash, but he keeps looking at the Inquisitor and notices a series of event after event.

Izzalea’s left hand is bothering her more and more with each step they take into the Approach. A fact that she is obviously trying to hide, but he sees. He sees it spark and zap her. He sees that each time it sparks, she jerks and shakes her hand quickly before making a fist and attempting to hide the green magic causing her distress.

It’s hurting her, but she isn’t telling anyone. He’s wonders if he should mention it or stay out. Nothing good ever comes from his meddling. Nothing good comes from any of his decisions. How could he possibly know how to make the right one?

If he did step in, talking to the bald elf seems the most logical choice. The man seems to know a great deal about it all, even if that still amounts to relatively nothing. And he might not think twice at alerting Solas to Izzalea’s secret, if it wasn’t for the cold glare he receives anytime Hawke looks in his direction. The elf doesn’t like him. He’s not sure why… but he definitely doesn’t like him. If he’s honest, he doesn’t care for the elf either. Something about him has always felt off to Hawke.

Regardless, he doesn’t want to accidentally unearth some kind of war with that egg-head. So, he decides to keep out of it. Resolving that if the flare-ups continue to progress, and she continues to hide it, he will have to say something. At least to her.

Even with that distraction, Abner is still the focus of his mind along with the gut wrenching pain her name causes in his mind. Yet he repeats it to himself over… and over… and over...

She sleeps, or at least lies, in one of the wagons. He suspects she is just staring at the sky, because every time a creature dares to attack the caravan, she is one of the first to respond.

Jumping from the wagon’s edge, she tears through the sands to sink her daggers into the seemingly endless amounts of crap living in the Western Approach. Funny how this is supposedly and barren wasteland, yet so much dangerous wildlife lurks everywhere, ready to murder their faces off, even if they are a group almost twenty people.

She is bitten and clawed more than once, but the stubborn woman refuses to wear proper armor. Each time she takes a hit, Hawke flinches and want to run to her, but Solas comes up beside her and heals her wounds without a single word exchanged between the two. She just stands there silently, eyes combing the desert for more attackers, and the bald elf twiddles his creepy-little-green-glowing-fingers over her skin.

Another sight to make Hawke’s blood boil.

By the time they reach the keep, Hawke is nothing more than a petulant child. He knows it. Everyone who tries to speak to him knows it. He doesn’t care. He can’t keep his sour mood from sniping at anyone who dares speak to him. He doesn’t care.
The keep is still a little worse for wear when they walk in, but they’ve had a difficult time getting supplies and finding merchants willing to come to the desert. Soldiers and workers scurry around like crazed animals trying to fix up the place for the Inquisitor. The man in charge in her absence, Knight-Captain Rylen, apologizes to Izzalea for the state of the old warden hold.

Izzalea is gracious, as always, telling him not to worry. Hawke watches her intently as her hand flexes behind her. It’s still bothering her. Scout Harding approaches her from behind, after also seeing the way Izzalea fidgets with her marked hand, the dwarf gives Hawke a quick glance that could only be described as ‘fuck.’

She clears her throat, “Inquisitor.”

Izzalea spins around to see the dwarven scout and smiles broadly. “Lace! Hello, so good to see you!”

“I can say the same thing, Inquisitor,” Scout Harding replies with a worry to her voice. “Your arrival couldn’t have come at a better time. You’re needed… immediately, I’m sorry to say. I just received word from my men in the field that a group of wardens is heading to an old Tevinter ritual tower… and they are lead by a man who is definitely not a warden.” She crinkles her brow and looks to Izzalea, Hawke, and Alistair who at some point walked up beside them.

Hawke suppresses the urge to punch him in the face, but it’s not easy.

“Maker… Okay. Thank you Lace, I will gather a team and leave immediately.” Upon Izzalea’s words, Lace produces a map to show her where she is currently and where the tower is. “That’s not far, we better move and see if we can talk to them.” She looks at Hawke and Alistair, and the group of her inner circle who gathered behind them. “Hawke, Alistair, it’s time.” Looking past them her eyes scan her companions. “Dorian, Solas, Blackwall… Drop your stuff with someone and let’s move.”

The group quickly finds and mounts their horses again. With Izzalea leading the way, they gallop as fast as they can to the ritual tower. They tie their horses near the front entrance and carefully walk inside.

“It smells like death and blood,” Hawke sneers. He glares at the warden beside him. “What have your brethren done, Alistair?”

“If I knew that, we wouldn’t be here, Hawke,” he chides back.

“Shut up, both of you,” Izzalea hushes them over her shoulder. She raises her hand in a command of silence only to immediately shake it, form a fist, and bring it back down to her side. Hawke spots a few flashes of green before she can hide it.

What they find is worse than Hawke could have imagined. At the end of a sandstone walkway that leads to the tower they discover a group of enchanted, or enslaved, wardens bound to a group of demons, a pile of sacrificed warden bodies, and a Tevinter Magister… Lord Livius Erimond.

Erimond, in a pompous, far too arrogant way - as if he is a villain in one of Varric’s stories - reveals his plan. Corypheus enlisted the aid of a demon to create a false calling, terrifying the wardens and causing them to panic. Erimond then arrived to lend the Warden Commander his advice, telling her that if she just sacrifices a few wardens, they can bind her mages to demons, create a demon army, and attack the deep roads to hunt and kill the old gods that lie there. No more gods. No more blights.

“That is preposterous! You have no idea what killing the old gods could do, for all we know it could make it worse!” Solas yells, eyes smoldering and boring holes into the the Magister.
“You’re a bit thick, aren’t you, elf?” Erimond chuckles. “Once the rituals are complete and all mage wardens are bound to a demon, and thus enslaved to my master, it is Corypheus who will have a demon army. Not the wardens. He will conquer Thedas with a power that has never been seen before. Demons don’t eat, don’t sleep, and they don’t question their commands. My master will bring on a new era, bring back Tevinter to a power that can never be denied!”

“Livius, you’re a fool,” Dorian groans, crossing his arms and glaring at his countryman. “The only thing your master will do is ruin the world.”

“A demon army. Of course it’s a demon army. Your wardens sure have great plans, Alistair. I guess they’re all about as smart as you,” Hawke sneers under her breath.

“Clarel couldn’t have possibly known,” Alistair growls back.

“Release the wardens, now!” Izzalea roars over everyone’s squabbling, clanging her sword against her shield in a fearsome act of aggression.

“My master told me you might come, that you might attempt to foil his plans again. But he also taught me how to stop you.” The man glares a wicked grin at her and red magic swirls around him. Izzalea screams, drops her sword and shield and falls to her knees. Her left head glows and sparks like Hawke has never seen. She clutches in with her right hand, hollering in pain.

He should have told someone it had been bothering her.

If this goes south, it will be his fault.

Again.

He has to do something.

Before he can think of a counter spell to stop the power Erimond and wielding over Izzalea, however, she stands to her feet. Determination in her eyes she shoots an electric green light from her hand and blasts Erimond onto his back.

“No!” he calls out. “You can’t! You won’t win!” He raises a hand to the bewitched wardens lining the walls of the ritual tower along with their bound demons. “Wardens! Attack!” With that, Erimond fade-steps before Hawke can string him with an electrifying bolt. The magister reappears behind them, running his way down the walkway, away from the tower.

They cannot chase him as the wardens and demons descend upon their small group. Izzalea, Blackwall, and Alistair do their best to taunt and shield the attacks from the onslaught while the magic attack with all their might. Solas places barriers and freezes any enemies he can. Dorian enslaves corpses, making them rising and fight for the Inquisition, until they are nothing but putrid mush. Hawke pulls forth a cage of lightning and electrifies those caught inside, before he force pushes them off the high walls of the tower’s edge.

When it is all over, Solas heals what minor injuries the warriors incurred.

“I can’t believe this, the Wardens wouldn’t do something like this,” Blackwall shakes his head in disbelief as they walk back to their horses.

“Believe it. It’s happened. Your kind has started a plan that could end Thedas,” Hawke snarls. He is so angry with everything he can barely see straight.

“They didn’t know what they were doing!” Alistair stops in front of Hawke, the two glaring into
each other’s eyes. Their fists clench, their chests heave. Hawke wants nothing more than to break his face in this moment.

“That doesn’t excuse the fact that they willingly murder others to bind themselves to demons, Alistair! Fucking, Demons!”

“A warden’s entire purpose is to stop the blights. Warden Commander Clarel saw no other option! She was tricked!”

“If she could be duped that easily, by that Tevinter half-wit we just met… maybe the world would be better off without wardens to blunder it up!”

“You? You are going to accuse the entire agency of blundering Thedas? I wonder where Kirkwall would be right now if Hawke hadn’t decided he wanted to help. How about the mage-Templar war, huh? Better yet, where would Corypheus be if you hadn’t bloody released him!” Alistair screams at the top of his lungs, then shoves Hawke backwards.

“I thought he was dead!” he screams back, winding up his fist to punch the warden in the face. All he sees is red. He cannot focus on anything now except for his hatred for the warden standing, glaring, in front of him.

“ENOUGH!” Izzalea roars in that way she does, the way that makes fear ignite in your chest. She stand between him and the warden, pushing them both back with a hand.

“He’s taken one of our horses, Inquisitor!” Dorian yells from the entrance. “I can still see him on the horizon!”

The three left on the walkway immediately run to where Dorian, the others, and the left horses now wait. Alistair peers into the distance, a small black shape of the magister flees on horseback. “I know where he’s going,” he says calmly. “Adamant Fortress, it’s an old warden citadel, and it is in that direction. I’d hazard to guess that that is where the rest of the wardens are as well.”

“Inquisitor, I found this on one of the sacrificed warden bodies,” Blackwall says gravely, handing Izzalea a crumpled note. “It says that the non-mage wardens are worried. They don’t know what is happening to the other men. Some are disappearing, while other’s personalities are altered… made cold… distant. I don’t think they all know what Erimond and Clarel are doing. Perhaps they can be reasoned with, but regardless, Inquisitor… milady… we must do something. We must save them.”

Izzalea’s eyes scan the note and sighs heavily. “Yes,” she says softly. She places the note in a pocket and stands straighter, feigning strength and resolve. “Back to Griffon Wing Keep. I have ravens to send.”

They all mount horses, Alistair joining Izzalea on the back of hers, and they gallop back to the keep.

It’s all gone to shit, Hawke thinks to himself. Everything. Broken. As always. It’s all crumbling around him.

No one speaks as they ride back to Griffon Wing, and when they arrive, they all quickly disperse in separate directions. Tensions are high, and he notices more than one searing stare pointing at him before they’ve all have left.

Hawke needs some time. He needs some still.

After asking a worker for the directions to his quarters, he wanders with heavy shoulders to his room. The door is unimposing, he almost walks right by it, at first. One small, wooden door that he needs to
duck through in order to enter. It is open to the outside, off the courtyard and by the keep’s small, dismal market.

He opens the door, it creaks and sand falls from the old wooden slats onto his floor. He groans. If he never has to come back to the desert, he will die a happy man. He squeezes inside and looks around the room, if it can even be called a room at all. It’s more like a cupboard with a small bed shoved in the corner. There are no windows in this dark hovel, so he conjures a flame in his palm and looks around. Spotting three large candles on a tiny table beside the tiny bed, he flicks his fingers to light them.

Taking stock in his small space, his chest and bags already placed here by the workers, he shakes his head at the fact that sand coats everything. He does his best to wipe it from the table and a tome that sits on it, and he gathers the bedding, shaking the menacing grains from its fibers. He then digs through his chest for something cool to wear. This desert is hot and he feels as if he is cooking inside his armor.

Peeling off each layer, Hawke carefully hangs his gear from pegs that jut out from the wall before pulling a loose, light shirt over his head and basic lounging breeches over his legs. He eyes the tome on the table, shrugs his shoulders, and sits on the bed with it in his hands. He rests it on bent knees, gliding his fingers across the embossed leather binding. Strange and beautiful designs decorate the worn cover, and upon opening the tome, he realizes that it is written in Tevene. Of course it’s in Tevene.

He stares at the letters making up the language he doesn’t know, and tries not to think of everything else he probably should be thinking about. The entire scene is drab and depressing, but he needs to just sit here for a while.

He hears a soft click followed by the loud creak of his door. Light from the outside filters in and he squints - his eyes already adjusted to the dimness of his surroundings. Although he can only see the silhouette, he’d know that shape anywhere and his heart nearly explodes from his chest.

Abner stands there, hand still resting on the knob, staring at him. They say nothing, but after a short pause, she enters the room fully. Closing the door behind her, taking the two steps needed in that small sandstone room to approach the bed, and she sits on the edge.

He can see her now, in his low candle light. She is beautiful, but her eyes are heavy, her shoulders dipped low.

“You were going to tell me last night, weren’t you,” she says softly.

“I was going to try.”

“And say what?”

“I don’t really know.”

“Try.”

Hawke closes his book, placing it back on the table next to the flickering, dripping candles. He brings his knees down to a crossed legged position and leans forward, arms and hands resting in his lap. He fidgets with his hands nervously.

His voice is low, cautious, and full of regret. “Well, I was going to tell you that I care for you, deeply. I never expected to, but still, I want to see where this goes…” He looks at Abner, she is impassive, waiting for more.
Hawke sighs, takes a deep breath, and presses on. “But I come with baggage.” He winces and looks into her eyes. “I have a past, too, Abner, and while you know a lot of it. You don’t know all of it.” He stops and stares at her, biting his lip.

“Keep going,” she says. He glances at her lips. Her beautiful soft lips. He wants to kiss her, it’d be easier, but he knows he can’t. Instead... he tells her.

She listens without words, without judgement. Her face even, her ears open. He explains to her how he met Merrill and that when he did, he was a different man than he is now. Over the course of the years, as Kirkwall changed, so did he. He wanted to help her, wanted to help Kirkwall, but with everything he did, he felt like he made it all steadily worse. Merrill was always there, beside him, forgiving him, but he didn’t deserve it. He knew he didn’t. So, he tried to push her away, it would be easier if she’d left him, but she never did.

“Then my blindness to the truth around me came to a head,” he says, his eyes falling to his hands lying limp in his lap. “I should have seen the signs. I should have paid attention to her better. Everyone around me gets hurt. I shouldn’t have been so blind, so caught up in my own shit.” He can’t find the words... well... he can... he just doesn’t want to say them. “Varric left it out of his book.”

“What happened?” she asks.

“There was man. A murderer that we caught... too late. A mage who was killing women and creating some kind of patchwork wife with all of their pieces. That man killed my mother... to take her face.” He feels himself start to seethe again, remembering the state he found his mother in, the pain she was in. “He lured her with attention and affection, until he killed her.” Hawke’s hands form trembling fists. He growls through clenched teeth, “And I watched her die.”

They remain silent for a moment, as Hawke tries to quell the storm wreaking havoc inside him. “I lost it then. I lost what little of myself I still had. I was broken. I cared for nothing and no one. I spent my time in brothels and taverns. I came home smelling of booze and women. I wanted Merrill to leave, I didn’t want her to suffer the same fate as everyone else did. And then…” he laughs to himself while shaking his head in comic disbelief. “Then I killed her clan. Because I was too stupid to see what was happening, I allowed events to transpire that resulted in the death of her entire clan.”

He falls silent a moment, pensively staring at fabric covering his legs. “And then she was broken, too.” His stomach feels sick as his memory flashes images of the bloody elven bodies surrounding him and Merrill. The look on her face. The pain in her eyes. Now, she was as empty inside as he.

Hawke inhales, pushing past the memories, picking up the height in his voice, and pushing through with greater speed. As if none of this matters. “Shortly after that, Ander’s blew up the Chantry and we decided we needed to run. I told Merrill she couldn’t come with me. She needed to stay safe and that would only happen if she was nowhere near me. That time, she finally listened.” A soft smile spread on his lips, at least she had finally listened.

“I spent the last two years anywhere that allowed me to drink, gamble, and fuck. I wrote to Merrill here and there, but the letters became less and less frequent.” He looks up at Abner, “We never officially ended our relationship, but we haven’t really had one for years, either.” He rakes his a hand through his hair, sighing. “Still... I should have told you before that idiot had the chance. I guess as far as everyone else is concerned, Merrill and Hawke are still a happy couple. Neither of us have ever been very good at telling people what is really going on.”

Hawke sits and waits for Abner to say something. Do something. Anything. But she sits still, her gaze remaining impassive.
“I didn’t think I could feel anymore, Abner. Nothing beyond anger and regret, anyway. But you’ve changed all that. Ever since I met you, you’ve made me feel… alive. You make me feel in a way that I’m not sure I ever could, even before Kirkwall.”

He falls silent again, waiting for her... again. This time she speaks. “I’m sorry that I walked away,” she says, dropping her head.

“I’m sorry that I was an asshole.”

She smiles and he feels lighter, but then she looks at him seriously. “You need to tell her.”

“I know. I will.”

She gets on her knees then, crawling on the side of the small bed and curling up to his side. He watches her as if he is dreaming, feeling the need to pinch himself. He wraps his arm around her shoulder instead, and she rests her head on his shoulder, her hand lightly touching his chest. He’s not sure how to feel, stunned that she is beside him again.

“I should have listened to you. I just... I felt things for you and trusted you and opened up to you. I didn’t know how to handle the idea that everything was a lie.”

“It wasn’t a lie, just more… complicated… than I let on.”

“I’ve told you about Ofred. But I never loved him. I have loved, though... once. It was new, it was amazing, it was... heartbreaking. I decided I wouldn’t let it happen again. I knew you were trouble when I met you. I’ve tried to stay away from you, Rhae... but I can’t.”

He kisses the top of her head and holds her tightly in his arms.

“Last night, it just felt too familiar,” she whispers.

He dares to ask, “What happened?”

“Leliana found me, yeah? Well, she thought I had potential. She connected me with a friend of hers. She wanted to give me strength. So she left me with a man who was... is... an assassin. He was amazing. He taught me great things. I knew skills for hunting, but he expanded on that. He made me more cunning, more agile. He taught me to use all of me. Taught me how to enjoy life, no matter what the past tried to do to me. He taught me to detach myself from pain.”

Hawke feels her press herself against him tighter, her hand trailing her fingers around his chest. “That worked... except when it came to him. We did everything together. We worked together, we killed together, we traveled together, we slept together, we fucked together.” Abner pauses and he feels her inhale deeply, he chest expanding against his side.

“I fell in love with him. He told me he loved me, too... but his heart also belonged to another. He couldn’t give me what I wanted. Since he couldn’t give me all of him, he decided it best to give me none of him. By that time, he thought I was ready to work on my own... so we parted.” She laughs softly, “Funny enough... the woman he loves will never be his either. And that woman is the one the Warden drones on and on about.” She snickers, patting Hawke on his chest.

“The Hero of Ferelden?” he asks in disbelief, incredulous.

Abner laughs in the way one does when they feel like life is too ridiculous not to. “Yup! That’s the one.” She sighs and her laughter subsides. “Last night it felt like it was happening again. But I still should have listened to you.” She lifts her head and looks into his eyes. She has the most beautiful
She has nothing to be sorry about. He pulls her into a hug, kissing the side of her head. “You did nothing wrong, and I’m not leaving you. Your mentor was a fool to give you up.”

She twists and rests her head back against his shoulder. They sit in silence, holding each other, staring into nothingness. Hawke feels a pang of nervousness in his gut. He does love her, and he never wants to leave her. But… does that mean her demise? He wants her. He needs her. But wonders if his doom hurt her too. It feels selfish, but he can’t fathom the idea of leaving her… even to protect her.

“This is a really shitty room,” she says dryly and Hawke barks a laugh that releases more tension he could ever imagine.

“Yeah, I don’t think I’m everyone’s favorite fuck-up right now. I think this might be a message.”

“Wanna get out of here?”

He sighs in exuberant relief, “Maker, yes.”

“The Chargers are here. I’ll introduce you to the crew, I think they’re playing cards down below.”

She chuckles to herself and sits up, a brightness in the dark night skies that are her eyes. He never wants to leave her side. He feels closer to her now than he’s ever felt to anyone.

She smirks at him, grabbing his hand and pulling as she edges off the bed. “Skinner’s going to love you.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry that it took me awhile to get this one done. After the reactions from the last chapter, I really, really wanted to get this one right. (I kind of think I rushed the last one, just to get it off my chest) I’m happy with the results, I hope you are, too!

OH! And I started a new fic with long_LIV_prairies. It's called Strangers In Arms and it's a really smutty (super filthy) AU that involves Abner and her character James from "Neither Angels, Nor Demons, Nor Powers" - obviously not canon to ILS, it's an AU of our AUs... AU inception ;)

Check it out!! (if you like smut...)
“Sand is so dumb,” Aurora sneers wiping herself of the grains that coat her riding gear and hide in every crevice.

“How very eloquent, my dear,” Dorian muses and she grins at him through the corner of her eye. “One could almost confuse you for Sera.”

“Ey! Yer tryin’a be smart, but she’s right. Sand is dumb,” Sera pouts and sticks her tongue out at the Tevinter Altus while she helps shake grains from Aurora’s hooded cloak.

They’ve finally made it to Griffon Wing Keep and Aurora hopes that the high walls will help protect her from sand whipping and blowing in her face all Maker-damned day.

She’s been uncomfortable ever since they hit the desert. Couple that with the fact that the veil has also been particularly strange, and has only grown more so the deeper they traveled, Aurora can definitively say that she is not a fan of the Western Approach. There is an evil presence hiding in this land, but she’s not sure if it’s only her power that can sense it. She’s kept quiet about it, watching the others to see if anyone complains of strange feelings or nightmares.
No one has, to her knowledge, but they may also be keeping their experiences to themselves.

Upon reaching the keep, everyone had steered their horses directly to waiting stable hands. Not long after, workers came rushing from the keep, diligently retrieving the caravan’s supplies and chest’s from the wagons. Aurora and her fellow travelers are all exhausted and relieved to have finally made it. As the last of them finish dismounting their horses, she follows Dorian and Sera amongst the group of slouching shoulders, sleepy eyes, and sore bottoms. They all blearily trudge up a steep, sandy incline to the keep’s front gates.

“Who we gotta see about findin’ our rooms?” Sera asks, standing on her tiptoes and searching through the bodies of people. “I wanna room with Rory this time. You got her in yer tent the whole trip, ’s my turn,” she says to Dorian as she gives him a light smack on the arm.

Aurora smiles to herself, glad that if nothing else, she has two good friends with her in this blasted desert with its funky fade. Sera is always fun to have around, like a partner in crime, and Dorian… She’d been pretty angry that he took her away from Skyhold, but on the road, they’ve actually bonded. Aurora now has a fondness for the fellow mage. It surprises her, but she really enjoys his company and the in depth conversations they can have about magic, politics, theory, and well… anything, really.

It doesn’t take long for the Inquisitor to be pulled away. She barely steps foot in keep before she has to turn around and take a team with her to some ritual tower. She takes Dorian with her too, leaving Sera and Aurora to figure out how to settle in without him. Sera, determined to get a room with her, starts running around and bothering every person she can find, shrieking about where the rooms are, and getting distracted by more than one pretty face along the way.

“We actually planned on grouping the women together, aside from Madame Inquisitor, of course,” a young Orlesian requisition girl finally informs them. She then looks down, mumbling under her breath, “Like we did with the men, except for that Hawke… No one wanted him in their room…” Shaking her head she sighs and looks at Sera and Aurora with worry in her eyes. “But Madame De Fer also requested her own quarters… I’m not sure what we’re going to do, we only have so much space. She’s taken the room meant for all of you. There are a couple of bunks in the women’s bunk house, though…” she looks at them with hopeful eyes and Aurora can only imagine what Vivienne had put the poor girl through.

“That will be fine,” Aurora pipes up. “We don’t need anything fancy.” Sera shoots her a scrunchy face of disgust, but doesn't object.

“I guess, if Vivienne had to swipe our room for herself,” the blonde elf groans, then mutters, “Bitch,” under her breath.

The pair follow the lead of the relieved young woman to the lower depths of the keep where the soldiers and workers bunk rooms are kept. Gawking, Aurora stares at her surroundings the entire way. She’s never been this far from Ferelden before. This building is old like Skyhold but so, so different. Put together with sandstones and ancient ornate reliefs that she feared would crumble to dust from only looking at them for too long.

They arrive in the women’s bunk room and Aurora grins, it’s really not that different from what she’s used to in Skyhold. More women and more beds line the walls than her small mage quarters, but nothing she can’t adjust to. It actually takes her back to the days when she was a young apprentice in the circle. Sometimes it’s nice to be surrounded by other women. Perhaps comradery will build. Something to help keep Aurora’s mind off of… other things.

Sera, however, is used to having her own little room in the tavern and at first, looks around the space
with disappointment in her eyes.

“Just think of it as the tavern. With beds instead of tables,” Aurora grins and pats her friend on the back. Following the requisition agent to empty bunk beds, Aurora squeezes Sera’s shoulder. “You want top or bottom?”

“Top!” Sera screeches and launches herself sky-high to climb onto her bed. Swinging her feet off the edge, she presses the mattress with her hands, testing the springiness. “Guess it’s better than a bedroll on the ground. This’ll do.”

Aurora crawls underneath her and onto her bed after thanking the young woman who brought them there. Sera’s kicking feet quickly disappear and are replaced with her head hanging upside down, a wide grin on her face as she looks around Aurora’s lower bunk. “At least we still get to be together.” She points at the bare wall behind the mage. “Find me some paper and I’ll draw you some pictures of things you like, to tack on yer wall.”

Aurora smiles, both Sera and Dorian have been doing such a great job with making her feel better while they have been on this trip. She’s been feeling a lot lighter lately, almost like she did back before this whole mess began. She tries not to think about Delrin, or the Templar attack, and she’s even almost forgotten how scared she is to be here.

At that time, Lace Harding comes into view, walking up to their bunk from the back of the room. Aurora doesn’t know her well, but every encounter they’ve had has been pleasant. The pretty dwarf smiles softly as she comes up behind Sera and Aurora returns a warm grin.

“Aurora… hi,” she says. Sera cranks her head to see the freckle-faced redhead. “Hi, Sera.”

“Hey Lace, wanna have a bow competition later? I’m itchin’ to stomp someone’s arse and Varric always cheats,” Sera asks in a taunting but friendly way and spins into a backflip to hop off her bunk, landing beside the dwarf.

“You could try to beat me, I suppose, but I’m pretty sure you’re the one who’s going to be stomped, Sera,” she replies, grinning. Sera sticks out her tongue and thumbs her nose. Lace winks back while returning her attention to Aurora. “I have these for you,” she says, producing a bundle of letters from behind her back. “They started coming in not long after you all left Skyhold. I’ve kept them safe in my bunk for you, until now.”

Aurora stares at the bundle baffled, but takes the neatly wrapped and tied collection of parchment from Lace’s hand and sets it in her lap. “Thank you,” she says, staring at the bundle, heart racing as she thumbs the edges.

“They’re… all from the same person. Each one has--”

“The Knight-Commander’s seal,” Aurora finishes Lace’s sentence in a soft, hushed voice. She feels emotion well in her chest and behind her eyes, wondering - no, dreading - what words lie beyond the folded parchment.

“I intercepted all of them,” Lace continues, “No one else knows he’s been writing to you. I had a feeling you would prefer it that way.”

“Thank you, Lace,” Aurora whispers, still staring at the letters in silent fear. Lace Harding was right, Aurora wasn’t sure what was going on between her and Delrin anymore, but she knew for certain that she wants it kept private. The less of a chance of a repeat attack, because of their connection, the better. But maybe these letters have nothing to do with that. Maybe this is him ending things,
officially. Perhaps he wants to put her on trial… maybe that Templar made up stories to cover his ass.

Whatever is in these letters, she can't allow herself to be hopeful.

After setting up a time for a friendly bow competition later with Sera, the dwarf leaves their bunks and Sera sits beside Aurora - still staring at the bundle.

Sera brings her knees in, sitting cross-legged and facing her friend while softly rubbing her back. “You gonna open ‘em?” she asks.

“I’m… I’m afraid of what they might say.”

“You got yerself a lil’ pile there, I’d guess that the odds are in yer favor.”

Aurora just sighs, placing the palm of her hand over the top letter. She can almost feel him.

“You won’t know until you read. You’ll drive yerself nuts worrying about what they say. Just start with the first one and go from there. I’m here for you.”

“Will you read them? I don’t know if I can.”

“Rory…”

“Please?” Aurora pulls the top letter from pile and hands it to Sera while looking the opposite direction. “I can’t… Please, Sera.”

The elf takes the letter with a sigh and Aurora hears her break the wax seal. The Templar seal. The Templar Knight-Commander seal…

Sera clears her throat and takes a deep breath. “Andraste, what I step in?” she mutters under her breath, “Oh, seriously?” Aurora turns to see Sera glaring at the parchment.

“Aloud, Sera. Read it aloud.”

“Right, sorry,” she clears her throat again. “My Dearest Aurora,” she rolls her eyes and makes gagging sounds. “I have failed you. You were attacked by one of my men, a man right under my nose, a man known for his harsh views on mages, yet I let him roam Skyhold unchecked. Now that he has hurt you, I’m not sure that I can forgive myself for allowing it to happen. Not only that, but I let your story cloud me. I allowed myself to get caught up in details that have no bearing on how I feel about you.

I hadn’t realized that you had a history with the Knight-Commander of the Ferelden Circle. I let my own doubt sway me and I regret it. I wish I had come to you after I left the cells that night. I wish I had seen you off before you left Skyhold. I told you I would be there for you, and I failed you. I shouldn’t have let your past affect the trust I have for you today. I know better than that. I hope you will forgive me and that we can talk about this when you return. Please be safe, Delrin.” Sera finishes and looks up at Aurora. “That’s it.” She pauses for a moment then mutters, “Asshole.”

Aurora takes the parchment from her hands and stares at the words, stares at the the letters written in ink by Delrin’s hand. “You think?” Aurora asks, a fingertip lightly tracing the ink, wanting to it to be him, wishing she could touch him.

“He lets that tit run ‘round Skyhold all puffed up n’ pissed! Yeah, I think he’s an asshole. You could
have died, Rory.”

No, she couldn’t have, the Templar would have died, Aurora knows that. The tit was no match for her.

“And then he was holdin’ your relationship with the other one against you? Pfffft,” Sera crosses her arms and rolls her eyes.

“He probably was worried I set out to use him like I did Greagior.” Sera groans at that. “But I did Sera, the first time I met Delrin, I had every intention of doing that.”

“But that’s not what it’s about now.”

“But he didn’t know that… or well, he questioned that. I think he had every right to question that.” It was true. It is the very thing she’s worried about. Delrin discovering who she is and doubting her. Now it’s happened, and while he sounds like he wants to continue whatever it is that they are doing, she wonders if it's best to let him go. It will hurt, she knows that, but if learning about Greagior made him pause… what will his reaction be when he finds out the rest? She’s so uncertain. If only she was still in Skyhold and not in this blasted sandy basement.

“Sounds like you want to forgive ‘im.”

“I think I’m the one who needs forgiving,” Aurora says through hushed breath. Delrin only did what she’d expect any man in his position would do.

“Oh, piss on that. If I can trust you, then Ser Stick-Up-His-Arse should be able to wrap his big, dumb head ‘round it.”

“He doesn’t have a stick up his ass.”

“Whatever.”

“They’re back from the tower!” Aurora hears a soldier call into the bunk house before they quickly run back toward the stairs up to the main level of the keep.

Aurora refolds the letter carefully. “We should go see what happened,” she says. She turns to tuck her bundle under her blanket and between the wall and her bed. Sera follows when she rises and they find their way up to the courtyard. When they emerge, the sun almost blinds them after having been adjusted to a much dimmer basement of the keep.

Dorian sees the pair squinting in the sunlight and rushes toward them, panic plastered on his face.

“What happened, why do you look so worried?” Aurora asks.

“Bad news, I’m afraid,” he responds and grabs her elbow, steering her and Sera to a private corner of a look-out tower, away from listening ears. “The Grey Wardens are enslaving their mages to Corypheus, and sacrificing the rest to make it happen.”

Aurora gasps, covering her mouth in abject horror. “How could they do that?”

“It appears that they have been tricked by a…” he sighs and rolls his eyes, “Now don’t go pointing and wagging your fingers at me when I tell you this, we are not all like him. They have been tricked by a Tevinter Magister.”

“Fucking tits, the lot of ’em.” Sera scowls and crosses her arms. “How are they gettin’ enslaved,
“They are using blood magic to bind them with demons. Corypheus is building an army.” Dorian answers, shaking his head and dipping it low with disbelief. He presses the heel of his hand to his forehead. “Izzy is sending out Ravens right now to Skyhold, and sending scouts toward a gigantic fortress to the east where we think the wardens are holed up.” He groans and peers out a window in the lookout tower, watching sand blow by and staring at the horizon. “I think we are going to war.”

“Shit,” Aurora and Sera sigh in unison.

“How is Alistair taking the news?” Aurora asks, she’d bonded with the man. He has such a kind a good spirit, and he loves the wardens. This revelation must be killing him.

“Hmph,” Dorian grunts, turning back to her and bobbing his head with crossed arms. “He and Hawke are almost ready to kill each other. I swear, there sniping has given me a headache. We have enough on our plates, but they continue to take it out on each other.” He looks at Sera and smiles in a soft hopeful way. “Sera? Would you be a so kind as to fish out some kind of remedy for my aching head? I can barely even think straight. A bottle of wine should do the trick… maybe two.”

Sera grunts at the mage, but when he bats his eyes and asks her nicely with a “Please?” she rolls her eyes and walks off to retrieve some wine. Once she is out of earshot Dorian pulls Aurora closer and deeper into the corner. “Finally,” he sighs. “Listen, Rory. I know you aren’t going to like this, but we need you.

Aurora hesitates, “Need me?”

“You have fought against an onslaught of demons before, do you have any insight?”

Aurora relaxes a little. Knowledge. He wants knowledge. Knowledge she can do. “The Hero of Ferelden saved the tower, but she had to fight through the fade to do so. There was a powerful demon there that she had to defeat before she could get to the mages.” She dips her head a little and whispers, “Does the veil feel funny here, to you?”

Dorian nods with a shrug, “Maybe a little.”

“Oh, to me it feels crazy. I sense something really strong on the other side. Maybe it’s what’s causing the fake calling for the wardens.”

“Erimond did mention a demon working with Corypheus…”

Aurora nods, “That must be it. Dorian… It’s massive. Powerful. And the veil is so thin. You can’t feel that?”

“I guess not. Not in the way you can, at least. But I thought you held more power than me. This proves me right.”

Aurora stiffens, color leaving her face. She’s said too much. She should have kept her stupid mouth shut.

He squeezes her arms in his hands and levels his eyes with hers. The seriousness of his gaze is unsettling. “Even if the power I sense within you is only a fraction of what you truly yield, Aurora, we need you. I know you don’t like to kill. I’m aware you want to hide who you are, but darling, this is going to be bloody. And we have to win. Corypheus cannot succeed with creating a demon army. You are going to have to fight with us. Really fight, too. None of this just flitting your staff around anyway? What does Coryphishit want with warden mages?”
like you don’t know what you’re doing, as you did on our trip.”

Aurora frowns. Her heart races. “I don’t—”

“Yes you do, Aurora. You know exactly what I’m talking about. Please, promise me you will help us.”

Aurora doesn't know what to do. She trembles in his hands. If she does what he asks everyone will know, and she may never be safe again. If she doesn’t, and Corypheus wins, Thedas is over. Conflicted is an understatement for how she feels. She wishes Greagior and Irving were here. They taught her to hide and control her power… they would know what to do now. They would protect her. Her heart aches at the thought.

The only men she’s ever trusted with her secret are dead.

“Aurora, please,” Dorian pleads again, she’s been staring at him in fear for too long.

“I… I… I... will try,” she laments. That is at least close to what he wants to hear, and he pulls her into his arms. Whether or not she means her words matters not at this moment. She can't allow Thedas to fall to Corypheus, but she needs to keep herself in check, too.

“I suppose that’s all I can ask.” He leans back, looking into her eyes but still holding her. His curled mustache twitches and his eye sparkle with a smile. “You know, for all you have against Tevinter, they would at least celebrate you rather than making you feel like you had to hide who you actually are.” Aurora tips her head and sighs. “I know, I know. Ewww, Vints.” He releases her and guides her out of the look-out tower. “Come. Let’s go see if that elf has found anything decent to drink. I really do have a headache, you know.”

Chapter End Notes

Kudos, Comments, etc are always loved cherished and appreciated <3
The desert sun is hot and burning, even as it begins to set. Izzalea looks down at her ever darkening skin, her arms bare from discarding her tunics long ago. She should be protecting herself from the sun, but the days are so hot, and she sweats so much that she just cannot handle the touch of stinking, wet cloth anymore. She’s resorted to wandering around with the least amount of cloth she can get away with, loose sleeveless shirts with linen pants that she rolls up to her knees. She would refuse shoes, too, if it wasn’t for the fact that the stone is so bloody hot, so she fashioned together the lightest slipper-of-a-shoe she could dream up.

She wishes she could wear even less, but she’s still Inquisitor. She needs to be decent. But thankfully, in a keep made up of mainly fighters, there is an atmosphere of a brotherhood. A comradery that has helped her relax, even if just a little bit. No one gives her a second glance as she walks around, her brown skin showing and deepening under the sizzling sun. There are no faint-of-heart nobles poking around to be shocked and appalled at having just witnessed the Inquisitor’s unsheathed calves and forearms.

It’s the little things that are keeping her going and she has so precious few of those anymore. The lack of nobles squawking at her day in and day out is the silver lining to this entire wretched existence in which she’s found herself.
Izzalea leans on the walls on the ramparts and stares to the east. Adamant Keep is out there. It’s waiting.

She’d tried to talk to Clarel, she really did. She took a team to the fortress and called out for parley. As they approached the gates of the massive structure, however, arrows came raining down upon them. If it hadn’t been for a well timed barrier cast by Solas, she’d probably be dead.

Now, more Grey Wardens arrive at Adamant daily. Izzalea has scouts positioned outside the keep around the clock. Watching. Reporting.

Eerie lights can be seen in flashes from the center of the keep at night, and agents report fires of bodies being burned far from the keep’s walls. The dead are snuck out in the cover of darkness, taken far to another old ritual tower, and set ablaze. Clarel is definitely hiding what she is doing from her men.

People are being murdered for sacrifice every night. Corypheus’ demon army grows every night. And every night, Izzalea stares to the east, wishing she could stop it…

She will stop it, though. The Inquisition’s ravens have been especially busy over the last two weeks, and now her army is marching across Orlias to meet her. They will stop this, together. They have to. There is no other alternative.

With the support of the Empress and the aid of Lady Seryl - who proved to be a very advantageous ally in supplying the Inquisition with new and stronger trebuchets - Izzalea’s army will lay siege on the fortress and stop the demon army by force.

Cullen is very confident that with their access to modern equipment, the walls of the ancient citadel will come crumbling down, giving them the ability to storm the keep and destroy Corypheus’ plans. She just hopes that the Wardens who’ve not been enslaved will see reason. She cannot stomach the idea of killing all of the Wardens in southern Thedas. No matter how misguided they are at this juncture, they are still Grey Wardens. They are still heroes.

Izzalea sighs as she stares into the dimming eastern sky. Cullen is out there. He is coming to her. She squeezes her eyes shut and mumbles a prayer to the Maker to keep him safe.

Amidst the endless letters sent by ravens, Leliana had slipped a note in one to warn Izzalea of Cullen’s condition.

“He is still functional, but his fatigue is worsening. He leans on the closest steady object whenever he stands and his skin is only growing more pekid. He tries to hide his weakening health, but he fails. I do not want you to be surprised when you see him.”

Cullen is deteriorating due to his lyrium withdrawals, and he is continuing to fight the battle alone. When he told her months ago that he’d stopped taking lyrium, he warned her that he could go mad or even die. She could tell quitting was extremely important to him, and encouraged him to stick to it. She’d hoped they could find a cure or something to help him, but she allowed her focus to fall. Now he’s growing sicker, and she can’t help him. He’s traveling across vast lands, he’s going to fight in a siege battle, and there is nothing she can do to bolster his strength.

If he dies, whether from the withdrawal or falling to someone’s blade due to his weakened state…

No.

She can’t think about that.
Cassandra agreed to watch Cullen, assess his progress - or lack thereof. She is a Seeker, if anyone knows whether or not Cullen can handle this, it will be her. They can meet before the battle and decide if he needs to stay behind, or stay in the very back while their army charges forward.

If he even makes it to her in the first place…

She scrunches her face and rubs her eyes with the heels of her hands. She has to stop thinking like that. The situation’s out of her hands right now. All she can do is pray that it won’t end in Cullen’s death. He will endure. He has to. Izzalea has enough to worry about without adding fears that the man she cares for may be taken from her.

The blasted mark on her hand decides that now is the time to spark and sputter, sending a jolt of bright energy against her face. Izzalea yelps and cringes from the pain. She forms a fist and considers smashing her stupid mark through the battlement walls. It hurts. A lot. It started its frequent pulsing as she entered the desert, and it’s only gotten worse as the days pass.

She’d hoped it would calm, hoped it was just a temporary fluke. At least mark isn’t growing, it’s just sparking, and ringing, and screaming at her all the Maker-damned time. She’s tried her best to hide it, because she doesn’t want anyone to know she’s in pain. Her people can’t know she has a weakness.

She knocks her fist against the stone a few times as the stinging subsides, but she still hears its song in her ears. Her only break from the ringing is when she sleeps… if she sleeps. If it’s not the heat or green-glowing-torture keeping her awake, it’s her dreams. Truthfully, she doesn’t want to sleep. It’s become too much. She’s not completely sure if it’s him, or if it’s just nightmares. But it feels like it’s him, and it’s maddening. Night after night, since reaching Griffon Wing Keep, Corypheus has haunted her dreams.

She can’t see him, but she hears him. He taunts her. Twists her. Sets her soul on fire with anger. He threatens her and everything she holds dear. He won’t shut up. She screams that she’s not afraid, that he is revealing his fear of her by attacking her sleep.

Corypheus is nervous. He should be.

But the lack of rest is catching up to her. Her emotions are getting harder and harder to control. Every time she shuts her eyes he’s able dig past her defenses a little deeper, screw with her mind a little further. He’s trying to break her, and she’s terrified that it’s working.

So she doesn’t sleep. She barely eats. She just paces, and stresses, and writes to Skyhold.

Her mark flares up again and she yells out in frustration, punching the sandstone wall as she does.

“Inquisitor?” she hears Solas ask softly behind her.

Izzalea spins and blinks, trying to control her breathing and forcing her heart to stop beating like a hummingbird’s wings. She hadn’t heard him approach. “Solas,” she says, clutching her chest. Her nerves are so shot. She shouldn’t be this easy to sneak up on.

“You need to let me look at that,” he says and points to her fisted hand. It aches and green glows from between her fingers. “It’s been hurting you consistently for a while now. You aren’t hiding it from anybody.”

She grunts and tries to think of a lie, but she’s so tired, she just…can’t. Her shoulders slump forward as she places her hand in his palm, mark glowing and facing up.

“I was hoping it would just kind of…knock it off, eventually.” She sighs her words, shoulders
slumping forward even more. She sounds stupid. Her logic has definitely been flawed, but Solas is kind and doesn’t chastise her.

He peers at the mark for a moment, then waves his hand above it. Blue and white glyph-type markings appear in the air over her hand and the pain lessens. The mark still sputters, still sings, but the sharp ache that shoots up her arm every time it acts up subdues. She flexes her fingers and turns her hand around, inspecting it like it’s the first time she’s seen it.

“What did you do?” she asks softly, bewildered and thankful.

He smiles and touches her cheek where the mark struck her earlier. She feels his healing magic mend a cut she didn’t even know was there, and with a cloth, he wipes a bit of blood and sweat from her face.

“I cannot make it stop, but I can at least try to aid against the pain,” the mage says as a white light from his fingers cleans the cloth, leaving behind no trace of grime. He carefully folds it and slips it in his pocket.

“I’ve been speaking with the other mages,” Solas continues. He places his hands behind his back and paces past Izzalea to peer out into the horizon toward Adamant. “Aurora confirms it wholeheartedly. The Veil is particularly thin here, feels as if it is stretching thinner every hour.” He turns his steely gaze back to Izzalea. “There is a powerful entity lurking in the Fade. I believe it is the cause of your mark’s…malfunction.”

“Fabulous,” Izzalea huffs, sinking her back again the crenelation. She wonders if that is why Corypheus has also been able to invade her dreams.

Solas turns back to stare into the void. “I believe it to be a fear demon, growing stronger every night. It feeds upon the fears of the forces within Adamant, the forces here…” Solas pauses and turns his head to his shoulder with downcast eyes. “And the fears in you, Inquisitor.”

Izzalea starts to object but he cuts her off.

“You’ve become ragged,” he says, a slight harshness to his voice. “You need to rest or your defenses will continue to strip until you are left with nothing.”

“I’ve just been having a hard time sleeping, that’s all,” Izzalea says.

“I can provide you with an enchantment that will allow you to sleep through the night.”

Then she’d be trapped with Corypheus’ threats all night long. That’s not something she’s interested in. “Thanks, Solas, but--”

“I apologize, I suppose that sounded like an offer,” he says as he turns back to her. He takes her hand in his, firm but not hostile, and presses a rune into her palm. His eyes stare into the depths of her sleepy soul. “It is a demand.”

She allows her eyelids to drop, too exhausted to put up a fight. Plus, she knows he’s right…

“I could join you in the Fade if you like. Similar to how we walked through Haven after arriving in Skyhold.”

She wonders if he is testing her. Could it be possible he knows about her nightmares? She can’t risk him hearing Corypheus. She can’t risk anyone finding out she’s weak. “No…No thank you, Solas,” she says finally. “I will take your enchantment, but will be fine dreaming alone.”
“As you wish.”

When she makes it to her quarters, she places the small rune that Solas gave her under her pillow. She is going to have to risk listening to her enemy for an entire night to even attempt to gain an amount of strength back. Who knows, maybe Corypheus will be busy tonight…

Staring into a looking glass on a table next to her bed, she sees how haggard her appearance has become. Her eyes are bloodshot, her skin is drooping, and the undersides of her eyes are puffy and dark. She looks terrible. Weak. All she can think as she stares at her reflection is, *failure*.

“Get your shit together,” she mutters to herself with determination and a deep frown.

She sits on the edge of her bed and whispers a prayer to the Maker. She asks him to protect her tonight, to keep the nightmares from unfolding for *one* night. That’s all she needs. Just one night to regain some strength, some sanity, and perhaps she can find a way to fight back tomorrow.

She blows out a small candle by her bed and takes one last glance through an east facing window. She sees a faint flash of green far off in the distance, and her heart sinks. If she is going to stop this madness, she needs to be strong.

Lying down on her bed, she nuzzles her head into her pillow and above the rune. With a deep breath, she closes her eyes allowing herself to drift into the Fade.

When Izzalea opens her eyes, she’s in her room at Skyhold. The air is so much thinner there. It feels cool and refreshing on her seared skin. She sits up from her bed and looks around with a smile. It feels good to be back here. She’s missed this room. She feels safe here.

She hears the clatter of his boots on stone, and quickly, the golden curls of his hair appear through the railing as Cullen climbs the final steps of her tower’s staircase.

She feels elated to see him. *Maker, he’s beautiful.* What a sight for her tired, sore eyes. Izzalea rushes from her bed, running with barefeet slapping against cold stone. “Cullen!” she yells in jubilation.

She practically knocks him over when her body collides with his. He laughs and holds her tightly. “Good morning, my love,” he says between deep, breathy chuckles. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, I believe so, the best I’ve had in a long time,” she says with a smile and backs out from their hug with a long toe-to-fingertip stretch. “I’m so happy to see you.”

“As am I,” he says with a wicked smirk, his scar curling in that enticing way that it does. “I missed you desperately, Izzalea.” His voice has grown darker and her chest flutters.

“Oh, have you?” She smirks back.

He winks at her just before lunging and lifting her into his arms as if she weighs nothing. The feeling gives her as much of a thrill as it did the first time he lifted her in the war room months before.

He carries her to her bed and throws her playfully onto her sheets. She bounces with a squeal. She’s never had the pleasure of seeing him so confident about wanting her. Perhaps he really did miss her desperately. How long has he been planning to take her this way, she wonders.

He begins stripping from his armor and Izzalea adores the sight. Layer by layer, he peels off his mantle, back and breastplates, gauntlets, bracers, and shirts until he is left barechested and grinning.

“Cullen,” Izzalea says in a throaty moan. “You surprise me.”
“Is this alright?” he asks, kneeling on the bed and leaning over her as she lies flat against the sheets.

“It’s more than alright. I’ve been waiting for this for so long.” She feels dizzy. Her heart beats with so much excitement that it’s spastic, made even more spastic when she feels his hand glide up the length of her inner thigh. She gasps and heat pools in her smalls. She looks into his gorgeous, golden, smoldering eyes. “Cullen…”

He leans down and brushes soft kisses against her lips as his hand cups at her heat over her pajamas. She moans and press her hips forward to rub herself firmer into his palm. Cullen smiles and leans back, breaking their kiss. Izzalea bites her lower lip, overcome with warmth and feelings about how much she adores this man.

Just as she is feeling compelled to tell him how she feels about him, how much he means to her, a deep furrow appears between his brows. He looks at her with such deep concern that it’s worrying. Attempting to speak, only husky grunts crack in his throat. The pulls his hand that was seated between her thighs and knocks his fist against his chest. Panic then sparks in his eyes just before they roll back, only showing white while his eyelids flutter wildly. Cullen slumps, rolling backward onto the bed next to her.

“Cullen?!” Izzalea shrieks and sits up. She shakes him by the shoulders, “Cullen what’s happening? Cullen, wake up!”

He doesn't respond aside from low, disconcerting gurgling sounds, his mouth open and jaw loose. Izzalea continues to shake him, screaming for him to wake up, when he suddenly starts convulsing. His body springs into vicious shudders and jerks, limp and shaking violently at the same time.

Izzalea screams, “No! No, no, no, no, no!” She doesn’t know what to do, how to stop his fit, how to save him. She needs help. She starts to get up to scream from her balcony. Scream for healers to come quickly, when he stops. Just as suddenly as his convulsions began, they stopped. His body lies still. Terrifyingly still.

“No…” Her voice cracks. She rushes to feel a pulse, something to tell her he is still alive, but he isn’t breathing, his heart’s not beating. “No, Cullen,” she cries, tears streaming down her face, her body aching and trembling. “Please, wake up.” Her voice is only a crackling squeak of a sound as sobs overpower everything else. “Help,” she cries through the choking tears, but no one can hear her, no one can help. He’s gone.

The lyrium…

It must have been the lyrium…

Why did she encourage him to quit when she knew he could die? Now he’s gone.

“This will happen to your precious commander.” The voice rings in her ears so loudly that it’s almost deafening. “He is dying. Now. As he marches to your aid.” The booming voice of Corypheus echoes against the walls. “And Calpernia is watching. She is waiting for him to fall. When he does, Herald, she will be there to bring him back.”

“What are you talking about?” Izzalea calls out in anger, wiping her eyes of salty tears. It is then that she hears the tiny tinkling sounds. Millions of tiny little tink-tink-tinks echo as droves of small red creatures pour from every opening, every crack, every crevice in her bedroom walls. A tiny army of red lyrium creatures. Like small lyrium spiders. They flow as if one unit from the walls and toward the bed.
Izzalea growls and crashes against them, desperately trying to protect Cullen. She throws her feet, her fists, anything, to push them back or crush them. Her body bloodies against the sharp rocky creatures. There are too many of them. She’s overrun. The creatures cover Cullen’s body and begin eating and tearing away at his flesh.

Izzalea screams in horror. “Stop this! Stop this, you monster!” She jumps off the bed, backing away as Cullen’s body is destroyed right before her eyes.

This isn’t real, she tells herself. Corypheus trapped her in another nightmare. He is feeding off of her fears about losing Cullen to lyrium. She needs to calm down. He can’t be allowed to manipulate her like this. But seeing Cullen ripped to shreds is too much. It’s too much!

“Imagine the crippling effects to your Inquisition, once I have your commander. I believe he is much better suited helping Calpernia than your ridiculous Inquisition, don’t you?” The voice roars like violent thunder in her head. The mangled body on her bed starts to move.

Cullen sits up, the tiny red creatures forming large crystals of lyrium that jut from grey, decaying flesh. His eyes glow with a bright, radiating crimson and he stands, glaring into her.

“No. Cullen. Stop. Stop this, Corypheus!” Izzalea screams.

Cullen begins taking slow, ragged steps toward her and she backs up faster.

“Cease your ridiculous plot to undo me, Izzalea, and I will stop torturing your dreams. Submit to me, and I will make you a General. I will save your precious Cullen, and you will only know glory. For that is what you want most in this world, is it not? Your pride hunts for glory. You feed off it. I will bestow it upon you. You need only submit.”

“Never!” Izzalea screams at the top of her lungs. She rushes to her wardrobe and with a powerful shove, knocks it down toward Cullen. It was an attempt to slow him down, but the tiny red lyrium creatures encircle the wood and cut through it like a sharp dagger through soft flesh.

Izzalea backs up onto her balcony. She’s trapped. She can’t wake up. And she has no idea what this monstrous version of Cullen and the army of lyrium creatures are going to do to her.

“You are a fool, Herald. Your Maker will not save you. His prophet will not aid you. They are gone. The heavens are empty. I will be your God. There is nothing you can do to stop me. I will find your Commander at his weakest moment, and I will make him mine. And I will destroy you.” The voice booms from the skies. He is everywhere. There is no escape.

Cullen walks out onto the balcony, hands outstretched to rip her apart. Izzalea screams and trips against the the stone railing behind her, flipping her off the edge.

She falls, and falls, and falls. She falls for longer than ever seemed possible, the air whipping past her as the skies and air laugh around her. Cullen leans over the edge of the balcony smiling at her, and she falls.

Just as trees come into her periphery and she knows she is about to hit the ground, her eyes snap open.

Izzalea gasps for air and jerks up from her bed, her eyes wide and blinded by the early morning sun coming through her windows. She pants and gasps for air. Her body is trembling. Her clothing and sheets are soaked through with sweat. Her heart is racing so fast that she fears it will trip on itself and stop completely. She hears it beating in her ears along with the screaming song of her mark.
She pulls her knees to her chest and wraps her arms around them. She rests her head between her knees, trying desperately to regain control of her body. Slowly, she catches her breath and slowly, her heart rate slows to a less life threatening speed. As the panic subsides, the realization of what she just dreamt sets in.

Izzalea grips at her body tightly.

And she cries.

Chapter End Notes

Next is Adamant! It will be a massive chapter, and I plan on taking my time with it.

Also, big news, hubs found out today that he got a fancy new job at his company. (I've been saying my Hawke just got made Champion... hahahaha)

We are moving 8 hours away. I have the month of May to find us a house and pack up the one we are in. I plan on still writing, because how can I not, but if the move affects my update schedule, you'll know why.

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Comments are love, I want to hear from you <3 Thanks for reading!
Adamant: Part One

Chapter Summary

And so it begins...

Chapter Notes

Sorry that this took me so long. I’m in the process of buying my first home - oy vey is it a process.

Instead of having one massive chapter like I had planned, I’ve changed it to two pairs of chapters, each pair to be released together.

This one and its counterpart (that I will be posting shortly) deal with Adamant fortress. Later there will be a pair of chapters released about the Fade (once I have time to write them, bare with me through this crazy time)

Anyway, here you go, I hope it's worth the wait :)

Leaning against an ancient stone wall in a dimly lit basement room of Griffon Wing Keep, Abner’s eyes wash over her surroundings with a discerning stare. After the army had arrived and settled in camp a few clicks away, the higher ranking officials gathered in the keep. Rows of tables and chairs with the butts of the important placed upon them fill the space. Drinks are poured, but not too many. No hangovers allowed for tomorrow’s march on Adamant.

-Abner-
At the front of the room sit the leaders of the siege. The Inquisitor beside her Commander, and the whistleblowers, Hawke and Alistair, flanking them on either side.

Izzalea grips Cullen’s hand under the table, hiding it from the room at large, but Abner sees. After Izzalea gives a speech in an attempt to raise morale and stoke the fire in her army’s heart, the room settles into a low rumble of voices. Laughter is speckled across the room from time to time, but the encompassing mood is serious and dreary.

No one is completely sure what lies in wait beyond those old fortress walls across the desert. As Abner watches the room with a scowl on her face, she is reminded of why she prefers to work alone. How many of these people, and the rest in the army’s encampment, will never make it home? When alone, she only has herself to consider, but a battle is different. In a battle, it is not only the assholes who die.

Hawke catches Abner’s eye as she sweeps her gaze across the tops of heads and back to the leaders’ table. He smiles softly at her, but her frown doesn’t lift. Holding his stare, she adjusts her arms that are held tightly across her chest, rolling her shoulders and grunting at the pain stretching through her muscles. Hawke stands from his seat and walks over to her, head tipped to the side and a soft worry to his eyes.

“You didn’t want to toast to a successful day tomorrow?” Hawke murmurs in her ear as he saddles up beside her. Abner merely shakes her head in response. “How come?”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed them.” Her voice is low, serious, as her chin lifts to point at the table from whence he came. “They both look about two steps from death. Puttin’ on a good show, but I see it. How’re they supposed to lead us when they barely look like they can stand?”

“They’re tired, but they’re strong. Plus, they have us to back them up,” he says with a wink in his voice while dipping his shoulder against hers. A smile twitches on her face, it doesn’t take much from the man to lighten her mood, even just a little.

“You are onto something, though, my little bear. It’s rather dull in here,” he continues with a grunt, scanning the room alongside her. “I’ve never had the pleasure of knowing it was the eve of battle before. Combat has always just sprung up like, ‘oh hello, we’ve come to kill you now.’” Hawke chuckles under his breath. “I guess I thought there would be some living tonight.” He phrases his thought as if it were a question and then sighs, pressing more of his weight on to Abner through their shoulders. “Tomorrow we might very well die. I think that tonight we should live.”

Hawke turns, taking her chin in his hand and angling her face to his. A spark sets off in his stormy-blue eyes. “Shall we go stir up some of our own trouble?”

Abner smiles, leaning up on her toes to brush a soft, but powerfully sultry, kiss to his lips. “Yes.” She hums as she settles back down to her feet. Taking his hand in hers, she leads them up the old, sandy stairs, through the dark and vacant courtyard, and into Hawke’s tiny, shitty storage room. She enters the closet disguised as a bedroom, and turns to face the man following her. The man who has her heart.

Hawke dips his head low to fit through the short doorway, closing the rickety thing behind him with a ridiculous creak. Even the door groans at the ludicrous ‘room’ that it guards.

They stand in silence at first. Appreciating and anticipating while low flickering candlelight bounces glowing amber off their bodies. A quiet moment in which Hawke gives her that look. That look of his that makes her entire body burst into a shiver. It is disarming, that look. She’s transported back to the first time their eyes met. When he’d entered her life and shocked the air from her lungs. When he
first captivated her with his wicked smirk...the impish twinkle in his eyes. Hawke could convince her
to do anything while she lies bewitched under his thundery gaze.

Abner thought she’d loved before, but she was mistaken. Until Rhaegar Hawke, she’d never known
the intense, iridescent, all-over feeling that now possesses her body. A flush of sparkling light that
rushes through her veins every time she sees him. A feeling that is not only of lust and passion, but
acceptance. Harmony. Comfortable security coursing deep below the surface. A river of forever
flowing beneath their stable feet.

Their feelings are layered, complex. They make no sense at all, while making all the sense in the
world. Terrifying, at first, this vulnerability she has around him. But now ...now she cannot bare to
live without him. Now, she needs him to breathe. She’s bonded to him. Bonded in such a way that
she can sense his presence without seeing him. She could feel him there in total darkness.

And she would fucking die for him.

Hawke steps forward, an invisible force pulling him to her that he can no longer fight. Running his
hands down her sun-kissed shoulders, every touch of his is both energizing and calming. Leaning
down, he kisses her with enough emotion packed behind his lips that it spreads wildfire throughout
her body. At the same time, her stinging sunburn chills, quivering as small ridges prick and tingle
across her skin. Every touch of his is like the first.

Abner’s hands roam underneath his loose cotton shirt, fingers gliding through soft hair on his chest.
The coarser hair of his beard tickles her skin as his lips trail down the tender slope of her neck. His
tongue slides teasingly along her pulse, causing heat to burst between her legs while her fingernails
dig and graze against him.

Wet, swirling lines his tongue leaves behind dry in the hot evening air, leaving her throbbing, breath
hitching. A soft, barely audible declaration of love passes her lips. As the words touch his ears, his
hooded, lustful eyes are leveled with hers, a beautiful smirk splayed on his face.

Hungry, he pulls her sleeveless tunic over her head and repeats the action on himself. Desire
rumbles in his chest and he presses their bodies together, lifting her as if she weighs nothing, and
gently laying her on the bed.

Kissing his adoration down her neck, chest, and stomach, Hawke loosens the one tie holding her
oversized linen trousers above her waist, and slips them off her body. Dropping his as well, he settles
on the bed above her and between her legs.

Gasping breaths, sinking fingers, and murmured words of devotion follow in perfect hedonistic
rhythm. All Abner ever wants to do, all she ever wants to be , is here in this dirty, dusty old closet.
Here with the man that makes her torn heart feel uncut, untarnished... whole again.

The touch of his hands make her soar through the fucking heavens. The passion in his lips has
disintegrated the iron walls she’d erected a lifetime ago. His eyes send shockwaves to her soul.

A symphony of grunting, sighing, and whispered words fill the small space. The haphazard wooden
posts someone deemed a bed knock against the stone walls and wail as if they may crumble to dust
beneath them.

Hawke’s eyes never leave hers, except to lean down and tangle their lips in a kiss. His auburn hair
sways through the air, casting a shadow on his face and covering all but the gorgeous, heated
shimmer in his eyes.
Abner licks and bites her lips as pressure mounts in her core. Her brows knitting together in the middle, she stares up at him. He is so beautiful. Breathtaking.

Hawke rests his forehead on hers, and she feels him come apart. She glides her hands through his hair, pulling the auburn tresses from his face. Arching herself forward, she whispers, “I love you,” against his lips, then follows him into the abyss.

Their bodies glow, radiating bliss. Hawke eases himself beside her, her head finding its favorite nook on his chest. Their fingers travel idly along slick, sensitive skin as a few hums and giggles emanate from their chests. Catching breath, they slowly calm from exertion.

Abner feels complete here, wrapped in Hawke’s body. She follows the feeling, resting on a drifting cloud that pleasantly carries her into the Fade.

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Far too soon, it feels way too fucking soon, Hawke’s sleepy voice rasps in her ear. “Time to wake up, bear. Don’t want to sleep through all the fun.”

Abner groans, she doesn’t want to get up yet. She could swear that she’d just closed her eyes, and she is far too comfortable to leave the heat of Hawke’s fuzzy, soothing body. She’s feeling a bit salty about the idea, and grumbles while squeezing him tightly in her arms, clenching her eyes shut. “Parish the thought of missing out on the demon army.”

“Stick with me, and there will be plenty more where this comes from.” Hawke chuckles and starts to lift his body from the bed, but she grips him harder and grunts. “I can’t walk ten paces without tripping over a mage saying crazy shit and going bananas with blood magic,” he says and pries her stubborn limbs loose so he can stand.

Reluctantly, Abner opens her eyes, rubbing away the sleep with the heels of her hands, a deep scowl on her face. “Let’s just try to avoid the entire army of blood rituals and demons next time though, ok?” She blinks in the focus, finding the handsome form of her lover standing by the bed. Her lips form a smile as she takes in the sight of his paler, naked skin. Pouting a little when she notices his lightly furred, round ass disappear underneath thick leather armor.

“Ha! But where’s the fun in that?” He winks at her over his shoulder in that seductive way he does, and she immediately wishes she could pull him back in bed.

“Yer right, I don’t know what I was thinking.” She rolls her eyes and smiles back at him, still watching him dress, still refusing to accept the fact that she should be doing the same.

“When this is over, we should have a spa day.”

Abner laughs at his statement with a loud snort. When Hawke stops his dressing to look at her expectantly, she chokes on her laughter. “What? Yer serious?”

“As the blight. I love a good day of pampering. Pretty ladies rubbing their hands on your body, polishing your nails.” He takes a moment to look at his dirty, torn fingernails in utter disgust. He looks back at her and smiles, “And they give these great little cheese wheels to put on your eyes.”

“What the fuck is that for?”

Hawke shrugs his shoulders and sets back to dressing, grabbing his belt. “I don’t know, but it’s fun. And something we can do together that isn’t just killing crazies.”
“A man like you wants to be so uselessly pampered like that. It’s a bit staggering, don’t you think?” Abner peers at him, trying to decide if he is joking.

“It’s not useless, Abner, it’s relaxing. I promise you’ll love it.” There is a pride to his voice and his smile that is intriguing. They fall into silence while she watches him ready for battle, admiring how much he can perplex her at times.

Hawke turns to her while buckling his belt, a wash of seriousness befalling his face. She doesn’t like it. “Listen,” he begins with a sigh, a small slump to his shoulders, “No matter what happens today, know that I love you.”

Taken back by the seriousness of his comment, Abner grimaces. “Shut up,” she says, voice low. “Don’t talk like that.”

“Promise me, Abner,” Hawke says. Leaning down on his knees before her, he takes her hands in his and kisses the tops of her bronze knuckles. Dusky eyes transfixed on hers, his gaze has a gravity that sinks into the pit of her stomach. “Promise me you won’t get emotional. You lose your focus when you get emotional.”

She pops air through her lips and pulls her hands away. “I don’t get emotional,” she chides. Hawke smiles. Warm hand squeezing at her bent knee, he stands to resume placing his unique mage robes. “You say that,” he says before pulling a sleeveless undershirt over his head, “but then something will set you off.” He reaches for some of her leather armor piled in his trunk and tosses it to her naked body, her obstinance still unwavering on the bed. “You’ll get all crazy-eyed and fling yourself at something you shouldn’t. We can’t risk that today. No ‘Abner the Crazy Carnal Monkey,’ ok?”

He’s smiling at her. Joking. But it is weighted. While the somber meaning behind his words is hidden behind his tone and grin, it is not hidden in his eyes. Abner inhales long and slow before grinning a sly smirk back at him. “I don’t know what yer talking about. I’m always level.”

She starts sorting through her armor to actually begin dressing, allowing her gaze to drop from Hawke’s in effort to find all of her appropriate pieces. Leaning up on her knees she crawls to the end of the bed and digs for missing bracers within Hawke’s trunk.

“Just take care of yourself...I love you, Abner,” she hears him say while she pulls the bracers from beneath a pile of clothing. She falls back on her knees, smacking the bracers against her bare skin with a thwack.

Groaning an exasperated sound, she glares up at him. “What’s wrong with you? Stop it. It’s bad luck.”

Hawke perches beside her on the bed. A calloused hand from years of fighting with a staff strokes down her back and he leans in to kiss the tip of her shoulder. “I just want you to know,” he whispers against her skin, the light grazing of his facial hair sending shivers down her spine.

Abner shoves Hawke away, annoyed with his persistence. “This is ridiculous,” Abner scolds, a razor sharp edge to her voice. “We’re is going to win.” She shoves a finger in his face and glares into those heather blue eyes. “And I swear, Hawke, if you let anything happen to you, I will hunt down your spirit, and kill you again.”

He chuckles and nips his teeth at her fingers causing her to snap out of the anger that was washing over her. “See?” he says playfully. “Emotional.” Abner grunts, but allows a small smile creep on her
face as she sets back to rifling through her armor, her eyes glancing back to him frequently.

Hawke laughs, shaking his head as he buckles leather across his chest. “I love you, bear.”

“I love you, too,” she finally concedes, but reaches out to push her fist into his thigh. “Idiot.”

Once dressed and ready for battle, the pair leaves Hawke’s hovel only to be swallowed up by a sea of bodies congregating near the keep’s gates. Quickly pushing their way through the crowd to join the leaders and the inner circle, they begin to file out of the stronghold and march to meet the rest of the army, to trek to Adamant Fortress. To begin their siege. Side by side.

The march flows through the hours of the day like sand through the hourglass. The morning turns to midday and then quickly into evening before the Fortress comes into view in the horizon. Abner’s heart begins to pitter away like a woodpecker in her chest. Anticipation, anxiety, all of the agitated ‘A’ words, well up in her blood and she squeezes Hawke’s hand in hers.

A restrained mood suffocates the air, stifling all but the lowest hushed remarks and conversations. Abner scans her surroundings, taking in the faces of her brothers and sisters in arms. She spots Aurora walking alongside Dorian. Beads of sweat drip down the mage’s face, and she keeps her eyes closed more often than open. She is murmuring something under her breath, her pink lips barely moving to form words. She clutches her staff so tightly in front of her that her knuckles almost glow from reddish pink, sun-scorched skin.

They were both party to many journeys in search of fade rifts in their weeks spent in the desert. Seasoning the inexperienced mage, and there were so many rifts scattered throughout the area, that Aurora had plenty of practice to accompany those sun burns on her skin. But through it all, Abner saw little improvement in Aurora’s tactics. Something seems off about it, but she isn’t sure what. All she’s sure about is that there’s something interesting hidden in that mage.

Abner leaves Hawke’s side, meandering through the sober, marching bodies to the blonde woman. Soon standing beside her, Aurora doesn’t even blink, no acknowledgment what so ever. But in this close proximity, Abner can almost hear what the mage is mumbling.

“I cannot see the path. Perhaps there is only abyss. Trembling, I step forward, in darkness enveloped.”

Abner leans forward, catching Dorian’s eyes - which he promptly rolls with a shrug of his shoulders and a flippant wave of his hand.

“Though all before me is shadow, yet shall the Maker be my guide. I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond.”

“She’s been at this for hours,” Dorian says, his irritation palpable.

“For there is not darkness in the Maker’s Light,” Aurora continues a little louder. Most likely to both drown out Dorian’s complaints and irritate him further. “And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost.”

“Rory?” Abner attempts to call the mage from her trance. She reaches up to place a hand on the taller woman’s shoulder, coaxing her to open her eyes and look down. Abner smiles up at her. “Don’t worry, we all have each other’s backs. Yer gonna get through it just fine.” She pats her on the shoulder then squeezes as she says, “No wandering the Abyss for you.”

“I’m doomed no matter what,” she responds blankly. Blinking her eyes, it is as if the Aurora Abner has come to know is completely gone, replaced with an even more fatalistic imposter.
“There’s no getting through to her. Believe me, I’ve tried. And Sera abandoned all hope hours ago.” Dorian grunts and thumbs his hand back to where Sera walks alongside Iron Bull. The two speak low, but their hands are vibrantly acting out something with large grins on their faces.

“I just hope she can snap out of it by the time we need her,” Dorian continues, pulling Abner’s attention back to the mumbling blonde mage.

“Yer not doomed, maybe a little mad, but not doomed. You watch my back…” Abner twinkles her fingers in front of Aurora’s nose. “Do those little barrier spells over me, maybe knock some idiots around that get too close, and I will gut anyone who so much as thinks ‘bout lookin’ at ya funny.” She motions her hand as if a dagger’s in it, striking into an invisible enemy with viper speed, and twisting the blade with a proud, sick grin on her face.

Aurora crinkles her brow, chewing the inside of her cheek, and Abner looks forward. There are already members of the army manning the many trebuchets around the facades of the fortress. The sun is beginning to set, but instead of reds and oranges painted through the skies, it’s green and grey. Unnerving colors, but somehow appropriate. Even the sky knows evil is thriving in this citadel.

Adamant sits at the edge of a cliff, protecting two of its sides. The other stretches of the high ramparts are littered with warden archers and demons. So many demons. Far more than Abner had expected or ever wanted to see in one place. She steels her heart and ignores the cold tingling down her legs, the dripping sweat down her back. As the army begins to chant and flank the fortress, Abner looks for Hawke, but he’s lost in the rushing waves of organized chaos. So she grabs Aurora’s hand and squeezes tightly, a quick prayer of her own ringing in her head to any of the Gods who may care to listen.
“AURORA! BEHIND YOU!” Dorian screams and she instinctively ducks, darting away with a spin to see what’s coming. Aurora narrowly misses a blast of flames from a rage demon, and trips, rolling across the cold hard stone.

She’d stormed the keep with members of the inner circle and the Inquisitor after a large battering ram - equipped with an even larger metal fist of righteous fury - smashed through the Warden’s frontdoor. She followed Izzalea to the top of the walls from within the fortress. They must clear a section of the battlements so that their army can gain a foothold.

There are so many demons crawling the walls, bodies of Templars and Inquisition soldiers are flung through the air by wretched abominations who should be locked in the Fade, not here. Not here.

The final words of Delrin’s last letter repeat in her mind. The Templars are accompanying the Inquisition to Adamant. Keep safe. I will see you soon.

But Aurora hasn’t seen him. While the Templars focus their power on the east wall of the fortress,
the Inquisition focuses on the south, desperately trying to breach the ramparts with tall ladders. In the fray of battle, Aurora witnesses so many... too many... bodies thrown off, ladders unlocked and shoved backwards, arrows flying down into necks...

Where is Delrin? Is he safe? Is he dead?

Stunned on the ground for a moment, Aurora watches as Abner fearlessly flings herself into the rage demon. Daggers jamming into its back, ichor sprays on her blood covered face, and she cringes from burns searing her flesh through the demon’s fiery skin. Solas quickly throws a spell of ice toward the demon, turning its molten body into glassy white. Abner dangles from its shoulders, her daggers stuck in the ice, she grunts and curses as she tries to rip them out.

Iron Bull roars and storms toward them. He slams his impossibly large mace into the belly of the frozen demon, shattering its body into a million glassy pieces of rage and ick.

Dorian leans into her view, offering a hand to lift her to her feet, which Aurora takes. “Be careful,” he says to her. “And whenever you feel like showing your true strength, by all means do it.” There is an edge to his voice underneath the its frantic pace.

It’s not that easy. Years of training for her to keep it all under wraps. It’s just not that easy to leave that all behind. She is terrified, for so many reasons.

A high-pitched whizzing sound of an arrow shrieks by Aurora’s ear and lands with a wet smack into Abner’s arm and she shrieks a curse on impact. Aurora and Solas throw barriers while spinning around. They find a lone archer hiding behind a pile rubble, frantically casting arrows with trembling hands.

“You don’t have to do this! You aren’t one of them. I have no issue with the Wardens, I only want to stop the demons!” Izzalea yells to the scared archer.

“In War, Victory!” his meek voice calls out as he aims his shaky arrow toward Izzalea. But the arrow falls flat, unceremonious in its limp tumble down the wreckage in front of him. A different arrow now protruding from his eye, the archer tips back and falls dead.

“Your death is a sacrifice,” Sera mumbles, walking toward the dead man to retrieve her arrow. She yanks it from his face with a disgusting wet popping sound and wipes off the blood onto her heavily red-stained armor. “One you shouldn’t’ve had to make for this shite.” The elf looks at Izzalea, “When are we going to find this Clarel bitch? I have a few arrows with her name on them.”

Abner hisses as she rips out the one that had pierced her leather armor, then rubs a poultice on the wound to stop the bleeding. Solas attempts to heal her, but she stops him. “Save your strength. I’m fine,” her pained voice says through clenched teeth.

Izzalea looks around as her soldiers begin to overtake the south wall, having been almost completely cleared of demons and wardens. “To the west wall first,” she says. “I want to make sure the Templars are able to breach it as well. We need them. Then we can cut a path to the main hall.” She points her left hand toward the center of the fortress where green crackling light sparks in the distance. Her hand echos the green cracks as if the rift there is calling to it, and Izzalea curses. Grabbing her shield, she looks at them all with a grave face. “Let’s move.”

The fortress is severe. Spires and spikes made of both stone and metal jut skyward from the foundation with a sharpness that Aurora has now grown to expect from ancient Tevinter design. A severity that paints a picture of what the country must really be like, and reinforcing her preconceived notion. Harsh, stern cruelty and maleficence. It suits the inhumanity and folly that has been cursing
this place since Clarel began following the advice of Ermond. Since she became a puppet to Corypheus.

As they fight their way through to the other facade, they come across a group of demons surrounding one man and shoving off any Templars who try to climb over the wall.

“Hawke!” Abner screams and races toward the melee with Izzalea, Cole, and Iron Bull quickly following.

“Emotions! He warned you!” Cole yells out, looking as if he is trying to reach for Abner to slow her down, but she shrugs him off and runs faster.

Dorian throws out bolts of lightning shocking and stunning demons as the others advance. Solas concentrates, placing glyphs around the mages, protection in case enemies run in their direction.

Hawke is overrun, no one will be able to stop enough demons in time to save him. Aurora takes a deep breath. She can help...she can help enough to save Hawke without endangering herself. She just needs to focus her power down...keep it under control...

Calling on the energy in the Fade, Aurora pushes the demons away from him, throwing their wretched bodies against the battlement crenelation.

“That’s more like it!” Dorian’s pride exudes from his yell. His body bends and swings in a type of dance while he aims his power through his staff, sending shockwaves through the demons.

Izzalea screams a thunderous battle cry, pulling the attention of a large pride demon away from Hawke. Izzalea slams into the hulking demon with the force of a battering ram as Hawke backs away. Battered and fatigued, the man stumbles and leans against the wall, regaining his composure, now that the demons are distracted.

Abner’s body twirls with daggers swinging, ducking her body and slicing at screaming demons. She's almost completely covered in black ichor and red blood. Coated, she's terrifying, almost like a demon herself.

Solas conjures fists made of rock in the air, hurling them toward the demons, bones and jagged exoskeletons crack and break upon impact.

Sera’s expert aim riddles others with arrows, creating screeching pin cushions as she counts her kills. “Take that demon bitch-balls!” she yells. “Snuffed it! Six for me, that! Pissbags!”

Cole’s body is like an illusion, darting from location to location. Appearing only for a moment to slice throats, stab through skulls, and then disappear again, flashing to another combatant in the blink of an eye.

A screeching despair demon appears beside Aurora, having flown completely over Solas’ glyphs. Aurora screams with fright, frozen. Before she can come to her senses, Cole appears behind it. She hears him whisper, “Do you hear it? Don’t listen,” before jabbing his daggers into either side of the its wailing skull. The demon falls limp, becoming merely a pile rags by Aurora’s feet, and Cole is gone again.

Focusing back on the melee before her, Aurora places barriers around her allies, watching and shoving demons back to the walls when they get too close to the active skirmish. Frantically trying to mitigate the sheer number of fiends surrounding her friends.

There are so many of them.
Iron Bull rages against the pride demon in the center and beside Izzalea, bloodthirst glowing from his eyes. Electric whips crack against his flesh and blood pours from his wounds, but he fights even harder, even more ferociously. A large, jagged fist of pride slams into Iron Bull’s head. It was the tipping point, and bull falls to the stone floor with a crash.

“SOME ONE HELP BULL,” Izzalea hollers at the top of her war-torn lungs.

Dorian calls out in horror beside Aurora, but he before he can crusade into the chaos himself, Aurora rips at the air and the veil, dragging Bull’s body across the blood soaked rock and back toward the mages.

Solas and Dorian stare at her for one sharp moment, a small smile inched onto Dorian’s face before he drops to his knees with Solas to waken the knocked out Qunari.

Aurora looks back at the scene, all but the enormous pride demon have fallen. Its thick hide nearly impenetrable, her friends all bloody and fatigued. Bull isn't coming to, and she can’t watch this any longer.

The demon’s whip cracks again. Cole and Abner jump backwards, just out of reach. The creature won’t let them close enough to flank it. Hawke has backed away, but he’s drained, only enough power to send sparks from his staff to the tough, spiky skin. Sparks that ricochet off the demon like they’re nothing. It is resistant to their attacks. Solas can’t freeze it, Dorian can’t fear it, Izzalea and Sera can’t pierce it. Stone fists that Solas had thrown damaged Pride, but not enough.

The hulking figure creates a ball of purple energy, bone-chilling laughter roaring from its open, black mouth. Twelve black eyes look in all directions, and then focus on Izzalea. It sends the explosive ball into her shield, throwing her back, her body skidding across the stone.

“Do something!” Dorian calls up to Aurora. She looks down, Iron Bull beginning to groan as they manage to slowly draw him out of his unconscious state.

Sera aims her last arrow as the demon stomps toward them, tremors rippling through the rock to the foundation with each step. “TAKE THIS, BLIGHTY,” she shouts before the arrow strikes dead-center into one of those black eyes.

Izzalea hops back to her feet, roaring and charging forward again as it bellows and rips the arrow from its eye. Black ooze sprays and drips from the now empty socket. It glares the other eleven at the charging warrior and its bright whip cracks into Izzalea’s shield, electrifying the metal and stunning her to a halt.

Aurora gapes at their group, they’re losing. They’re fucking losing to this one demon.

“Fucking DO SOMETHING!” a braver voice screams in her head, and she drops her staff. Focusing all of her power through the disturbingly weak veil -- a weakness that allows her to draw even more power from the Fade, a weakness she can exploit -- she calls all of her allies back, ripping them from harm's way, pulling them through the air to where the mages stand. Before they realize what’s happened, Aurora takes that power the Fade and the Maker bestowed upon her, and creates a typhoon of force. Wicked green air pommels the demon into the crenulation. Another pull, and it comes toward them, helplessly trapped in her bending of space and air. She wraps the veil around it tightly and shoves the creature so fast, so powerfully, that it destroys the battlement walls and shoots into the dark horizon. Banished. Broken. Dead.

Aurora drops to her knees, and her allies rise around her, rubbing their heads, elbows, or any other lace that was banged or scraped when she sucked them through the air.
Templars start flooding over the stone, the magic of the pride demon being the last thing keeping them from victory against the west wall. Aurora closes her eyes and prays to the Maker, hearing incredulous voices speak, “Maker’s balls,” “How’d she do that?” and, “I’ve never seen anything like that,” around her.

“I cannot see the path. Perhaps there is only abyss. Trembling, I step forward, in darkness enveloped. Though all before me is shadow, yet shall the Maker be my guide. I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond. For there is not darkness in the Maker’s Light, and nothing that He has wrought shall be lost.”

“Aurora,” Izzalea shakes her from her prayer. She looks up to see the Inquisitor's sage green eyes boring holes into hers. “Thank you,” Izzalea says earnestly and pulls Aurora back to her feet. She looks around as everyone drinks red health -- blue strength for the mages. No one threatening her, staring at her, or seemingly upset in anyway about what she just did. They all just tend to their wounds and retrieve arrows.

This is truly bizarre, the initial shock settled so quickly and no one seems to care that she just dispatched a demon none of them could kill.

“I don’t know how you did that,” Hawke says, stepping toward her with a wide grin, “but I’m a force mage too, and I really want to learn that. You think you can teach me when we get back?”

"I...uhhh…”

“Inquisitor!” The rich Fereldan voice of Delrin is like the Maker’s Light to Aurora’s ears. She turns to see him running up from further down the wall. “Thank you. My men are unimpeded now, the demons will be out matched.”

“Delrin.” His name passes Aurora lips in a soft, thankful whisper. He’s alive.

He notices her there and smiles like a weight vanished from his shoulders. “Aurora…I…”

“We have to get to Clarel. Barris, back up my men!” Izzalea orders, grabbing her sword and shield once more and rolling her shoulders.

“Yes, your Worship. It is my honor.”

As quickly as she’s found him, she’s taken from him. Her heart sinking, Aurora looks back continually as they run to the stairs until she can no longer see him, and they enter the winding halls of the inner keep.

They meet up with Alistair, and more of the Inquisition’s finest, fighting through the belly of Adamant.

“Inquisitor! You’re safe, thank the Maker!,” Cassandra calls out when she sees them enter a lower room.

“Too many Warden lives are being lost, this has to stop, we must try to get through to the warriors!” Alistair yells, running up behind Cassandra. “They are lining the halls to Clarel, but they aren’t listening to me, perhaps you…”

“Inquisition!” a warrior yells from a doorway opposite them. A group of Wardens file in behind, swords drawn but hesitating.

“Wardens, I have no quarrel with you, but Corypheus has enslaved your mages. They will only do
his bidding now.”

“I told you there was something about about Darius...John...and all the others, they were our friends, now they are cold,” a Warden exclaims beside his leader.

“Do not die for Corypheus! We are here to stop this!” Alistair calls to them, desperation in his voice.

“But...Clarel says it will stop the blights.”

“Believe me, if this was really to stop the blights I would be with you, but it’s not. Clarel has been tricked, the mages have been enslaved. Please. Please listen to us, we don’t want to fight you,” Alistair pleads.

Blackwall steps forward from the back of the group, “You don’t know me, but you may know my name. I am Blackwall, and I assure you what he says is true. This is not what what you think it is, this is not what the Wardens are meant for.”

“Please, fall back, we will not attack you if you do not attack us.” Izzalea’s voice is strong and commanding.

Aurora swallows hard, watching the group of heavily armed and shielded warriors shift and hesitate, waiting for their commanding officer to either yell for attack, or surrender. She doesn’t want to kill anymore Wardens. She doesn’t want to kill anyone.

“Alright…” he says finally, dropping his sword and shield. “I won’t let any more of my men die for this fool’s errand.” He backs away from the doorway and points down its hallway. You will find Clarel down there and up the grand stairs. There is a large mezzanine with an altar. Last I knew, they were preparing for her binding.

“We have to stop her before she is lost and bound to Corypheus!” Alistair hollers and rushes toward the door.

“My men will stand down, Inquisitor. Please. Make this this right,” the Warden says solemnly as the group surges past the surrendered warriors, racing to the altar.

Thankful that the warriors allowed their passing, Aurora follows, praying that the blood shed is complete. But horror strikes again when they stumble into the large open space where the ritual is taking place. There is a sick, metallic stench of blood in the air. The mezzanine is filled with mages. Corrupted, bound mages. Eyes glowing. Faces blank. It is too familiar and Aurora crumbles, succumbed to her grief. She’s killed possessed blood mages before, she never wanted to again.

At the altar, a terrified young elven girl’s blood is sprayed by the hand of an older Warden woman who must be Clarel. They were too late to save her.

Izzalea cries, “No! Clarel, stop!” but the girl falls limp, gurgling and twitching on the altar’s stone as she bleeds out. “Jana…” Izzalea whispers, her voice all but gone. “Jana, I let you join. Oh, Jana, why didn’t I stop you?”

“Stop them!” Erimond shouts, pointing at Aurora’s group. “Continue the ritual Clarel, the demon awaiting you is the only one worthy of your power!” Erimond’s wicked voice sneers beside the Warden Commander.

“Clarel! If you continue, you will be doing just what Corypheus wants!” Izzalea screams with all her might, her deep voice booming and ricocheting off the stone around them.
“Corypheus? But he’s dead. Do not spread these lies. We are betrayed by the very world we have sworn to protect! We make the sacrifices no one else will. It is our sacred duty to stop the blights. Our warriors have died proudly for a world that will never thank them.”

Alistair points a dagged finger to Erimond. “And then he binds your mages to Corypheus! He is alive, Warden Commander, free and trying to take over the world!”

Erimond looms behind Clarel, his wicked lies swirling around her. “These people will say anything to shake your confidence. Do not listen.”

Clarel glares at the members on the Inquisition, rubbing her forehead with a gloved hand, then looks down to her mages. “Bring it through,” she orders.

The mages circle and cast spells, green magic shooting straight from their chests. A large fade rift appears. It sparks and twists at the center of the hall. On the other side...Aurora’s stomach wretches when she sees it...the demon she’s sensed since they entered the blasted desert. She knows it. It stares through the rift, awaiting its summoning, far too large and powerful to be able to simply fall through.

The creature is gigantic. The end to Thedas as she knows it, surely. Aurora fights the urge to retch, it feels like the demon is burrowing through her soul, feeding off of her terror. Solas was right...it is some embodiment of fear...a nightmare incarnate. Tears fall from Aurora’s eyes. If this demon is freed, they are all doomed, even she cannot fight such a being.

The sight of the thing waiting to be bound to her is even startling to Clarel. Her jaw drops, eyes darting around. Doubt forming, she starts to back away from the alter.

“Please! I have seen my share of blood magic, it is never worth the cost!” Hawke yells to her, a plea to stop the ritual before it’s too late.

“Continue, Clarel,” Erimond eerily encroaches on the hesitating commander.

“Listen to me!” Izzalea cries out again. “I have spared those I could, I don’t want to kill you, but you are being used! And some of you know it, don’t you.”

The warriors who allowed their passing, enter the hall behind the Inquisition. “She’s right, ever since the rituals, my friends have acted like nothing more than puppets on strings!” one of them shouts.

“Do not let fear cloud your judgement, Warden Charnoff,” Clarel answers, but there is a slight waver to her voice.

“He’s not afraid, you are!” Hawke growls his words. “You’re afraid that you ordered all these brave men and women to die for nothing!”

Clarel looks to Erimond who looms beside her. Questioning. “We have come so far, Clarel,” he says to her, the malice dripping in his voice chills Aurora to the core. “You are the only one who can do this.”

“Perhaps we could tests these accusations, to avoid more bloodshed,” Clarel rubs her forehead again.

Erimond stops, shaking his head. “Or...” He groans. “Perhaps I should bring in a more reliable ally.” He turns his piercing stare to Izzalea. Thumping his staff on the stone floor, he calls out, “My master told me you were coming, Inquisitor. You should have heeded his advice, but since you didn’t, he sent me this to welcome you!”
A screech shrieks in the skies and Aurora chokes on fear. The menacing *thwap-thwap* sound of air pushed by large wings surrounds them before they see it.

The dragon.

They’d seen Corypheus’ dragon once before, in Haven, when it destroyed their home and murdered their people. Now it circles Adamant, its shrieks ripping and cracking through the crisp air like thunder and lightning. Like it will bring doom upon the world.

It swoops down toward where she and the Inquisition stand, and they run and dart in separate directions, dodging the sharp red lyrium that the dragon spits. Red lyrium falling like glass, it rings and sings and makes them feel ill. A spike of sharp, slick red rock pierces and skewers a warrior beside Aurora, a man who was too slow to dodge its path. A man whose body drains of life and blood before her eyes.

The red glow and evil song the lyrium's singing to her, coupled with the twitching body of the man as he slowly dies beside her, causes Aurora to finally retch. Her body expelling the fear and sickness while it also overtakes her.

Petrified, she stumbles backwards to the back edge wall. Her legs shake and the cold wash of fear drips as sweat down her back.

“An archdemon?!” Clarel gasps as the dragon lands on a high wall above Aurora. Stone breaks and tumbles down beside her, but she is too frozen to move. Sweat now pouring from her body, she feels painfully cold as she trembles there and waits for death.

Clarel looks back and forth between Erimond and the dragon, then shoots a stunning spell through her staff into the Tevinter Magister's back and he falls to the ground.

“Clarel...don’t!” He reaches out to her as she stares at the dragon, but she doesn’t listen to him, *for once*, and shoots a powerful ball of electricity toward the perched dragon.

It hollers out more in anger than pain, its booming voice shaking the foundation below Aurora’s feet. It launches itself back into the air to fly high above any spell’s reach, but not before spewing more of its lyrium waste toward the Warden Commander. She launches her body out of the way, narrowly missing the spikes of death and rot, and rolls, whirling down the altar stairs to the lower mezzanine.

At that moment, demons fall from the rift, but thankfully not the nightmare that was meant to come. Instead, smaller demons similar to those they had been fighting on the walls erupt through, accompanied with a pride demon...even larger than the last.

“Templars! To arms!” Delrin’s voice rings as he and a small group of his men storm into the space. Aurora - still unable to move - stares at him, gasping for air that refuses to fill her lungs. He’s still alive, but he’s *here*, in the most dangerous area of the battle. And with his shield raised, he is approaching the group of bound mages, and that impossibly large demon of pride.

Erimond stands and starts to hobble to an exit. “Help the Inquisition!” Clarel’s voice rings out, her body cracked and limping its way back up the stairs in pursuit of the Magister. The Warden mages do not listen though. Instead, they begin attacking, but the Warden warriors charge forward, forced to murder the men and women they once called allies. Brothers. Sisters.

The scene devolves into terrifying mess of screaming bodies. People fighting demons, people fighting each other. She sees her friends casts arrows and spells, ripping daggers and swords, as red and black spills and paints the ground.
Blood and rot and flesh and bone and dark putrid fluids spray and crack and wail through the thick air. Even still, Aurora cannot move. Her body pressed firmly against the wall, she can’t make sense of it. Any of it. Her mind flashing back to the circle. Demons ripping apart people she’d known her entire life, right before her eyes. The blood of people who were once her closest confidants drenching her hands. The unmatched fear of being trapped in that tower, left to die. And the screaming…

The screaming…

She closes her eyes, clenching them as tight as she can and tries to breathe, tries to wake up from this nightmare. It’s too much. Is this when she finally dies? Her nails scratch and break against the sandstone wall behind her, when a voice within her calls out, “Delrin.”

Snapping her eyes wide she searches the chaos, she needs to see him, she cannot abandon him now. She can’t crumble. She spots him circling the pride demon, slowly taking steps, finding his moment to strike. But it has him in its sights, as well. They stare each other down, and it cracks its whip on the ground tauntingly.

Delrin takes his moment to charge, but the demon laughs and snaps the sparkling white whip around the Knight-Commander’s body. It yanks at him and Derlin screams as his bones are snapped and body's crushed. Pride flings him loose of its tether and Derlin flies through the air, landing limp and moaning with a hard crash into the stone, yards away.

“NO!” Aurora bellows louder and deeper than she ever knew she could. Possessed, she loses all control of herself. That inner voice within her taking over as the scared, weak girl she’s become falls away. All Aurora sees is white and sparkling blackness. Rage boils over and she almost feels herself grow as she stands, staring at the demon. Blackness swirling around her, she steps forward, summoning energy that builds in her palms. Words tumble from her lips, words she has not uttered in what feels like a lifetime. Fingers splayed, her staff falls to the stone below, hands pointing toward the demon.

She slowly raises outstretched arms as she chants. The veil rips and cracks and pops around her. She bends her elbows, then fiercely snaps them back straight. Every bound mage, every screeching demon, is immediately flung through the air and to the pride demon.

Bodies contorting and smashing around each other, the mages scream and holler in agony as the entities become one mass or writhing, stuck, enemies. With a flash and a crack in the atmosphere she springs her arms to the sky and the mass soars into the the air. It soars higher than the tallest tower, higher than the dragon flies, higher than the screams can be heard.

On the ground below, people stare at the sky and at Aurora, slowly backing away from the center of the mezzanine. With the immediate area is cleared, she flings her arms straight down and then flashes them out wide. A strange static tingle fills the air as a barely visible shield surrounds her stunned allies. And before they know it, the mass of demons and mages slams into the stone as an exploding ball of blood, bone, black, and death. The if I coats the ground and walls and everything near the point of impact, and a mist of putrid dark red hangs in the air.

The shield then falls - with Aurora - her body dropping to the floor. Chest heaving, she feels faint. She starts to come back from the place where she hid deep in her mind, and all she wants to do is sleep. Her eyelids sag and the dizziness all but overtakes her when her memory claps in her mind.

Delrin.

She jumps up onto her shaky legs and rushes to his limp body. The rest of the world falls away. The
sounds of her allies, the wardens, the Inquisitor, even the fucking dragon wailing in the air, all sound distant. Miles and miles away. Her body falls beside him. Ripping her ragged robes, she feels the cold sting of blood spread under her knees.

He is alive, but barely. His body broken, his breath shallow. Tears erupt from her eyes, shaky, scratchy, cries tear through her throat. She cannot heal him, she hasn’t the knowledge nor ability for the intensity of healing that he needs. Even if she did, she’s spent to the brink of exhaustion, to the brink of her own death.

“Help!” her voice squeaks as she looks around, vision blurry and warped from her stinging watery eyes. “Solas?... Some one, please .”

Dorian runs from the center of bodies standing around her. “Solas ran after Izzy, they’re chasing Erimond,” he says. He looks around the room of stunned murmuring people. “Someone get us a healer, or a stretcher...something, quickly!” His authoritative voice hollers over everyone, and bodies finally begin to move and respond.

“I can’t heal him,” she sobs. “Why can I only kill? Why? ” Her body shakes and folds over Delrin’s. Dorian crouches beside her, rubbing her back.

“How don’t cry,” a soft voice strains. Aurora lifts her head and stares at Delrin. He is smiling through his pain. His green eyes both slightly glazed and slightly shining. “It’s just a few broken bones,” he lies.

Tears continue to roll down her cheeks. He is dying there, right before her, she hasn’t saved him. Maybe if she hadn’t been so cowardly, she could have stopped this before the demon broke him. Now everyone knows her secret...and if Delrin still dies…

“Don’t worry,” he says, he tries to lift his arm to touch her, but the pain is too much and he only flinches. “I’ll protect you.”

Aurora smiles, but softly. This man who owes her nothing, this man who is meant to put down mages like her, this man who is broken, dying, still shows her kindness and trust. After everything. This silly, foolish man. She cups his cheek with her hand and he smiles into it. If he dies, there will be one thing that she will not regret… She leans down over his cracked, dry, and bleeding lips and brushes her own against them. She feels him receive her, however weak, and a shimmer washes over her body.

Two Warden warriors appear then, carrying a stretcher between them. They set it down beside Delrin and Aurora backs away, watching as Templars and Wardens gingerly place Delrin’s failing body on it. Rising to her feet, her heart aching, Dorian wraps his arms around her, as they watch Delrin wince and groan.

“The Inquisitor!” a man screams, running into the hall from the direction Erimond escaped, “The Inquisitor!”


“She’s gone!”
They say that before you die, your entire life flashes before your eyes. But that didn’t happen. Not for Izzalea Trevelyan, first of her name, Inquisitor, and Grand Failure to Thedas. She didn’t see her life pass before her eyes. No. All she saw was failure. Down, down, down, she fell. Descending an impossible distance off the broken fortress cliff. It almost felt like time stood still, with everything moving in ultra slow motion, as it was. She watched the dragon fly away - injured, but alive. She watched the ground below, inching closer, rocks from the broken keep’s walls tumbling down with her. She looked up at the faces of those who fell behind her. The faces of everyone she let down and lead to their deaths. The mark screamed at her, but she didn’t care. One last hurrah for the blighted thing before its torture over her would cease forever…

A sharp pain pulls Izzalea into consciousness. It pulses and stabs and shrieks at her to wake up. She groans through gravelled vocal chords, her hand moving to clutch the wailing hip. Pain in the afterlife? That doesn’t seem fair… She opens her eyes to find a dank, dark, and ominous place. Black and green atmosphere swirls around jagged rocks. The air is wet, cold, and rumbling with an eerie, whispered tune. “Where… where are we?” Hawke’s familiar voice startles Izzalea. She looks around, unable to see anyone or anything beyond the black and green and rock, but she finally spots him...standing on a rock that is parallel to the ground... he is parallel to the ground.
“If this is the afterlife, the Chantry owes me an apology. This looks nothing like the Maker’s bosom,” he quips. Izzalea groans inwardly. Only Hawke would make jokes when he’s dead.

“Well... this is unexpected,” Alistair's voice says and she snaps her head to look above her, finding the Warden standing on a rock upside down.

She hadn’t expected the people she’d lead to the slaughter to be here in the afterlife with her. But then again, nothing about what she is seeing is anything like what she would expect.

“Are we... dead ?” she hears herself ask, feet stepping in a slow, stationary circle while she takes in her direful surroundings.

“No.” The voice of Solas is now behind her and she spins around, discovering that the solemn elf has slightest spark of wonderment in his eyes. “This is the Fade,” Solas whispers as he walks up beside her. Izzalea sighs, thankful and relieved that he is standing on the same level as her.

Solas connects his wandering gaze with Izzalea’s, his tone stays flat but his eyebrows lift. “We were falling when you opened a rift. We came through...and we survived.” A smile inches its way across his face. “Physically in the Fade. It is indeed remarkable.” He looks above, where in the distance, a cluster of black spires float. “And there, the Black City. Almost close enough to touch…”

Cole’s frantic body races by the two of them, spinning and surging around. Sweating and agitated, he bumps and smacks into the jagged rock surrounding them. “No no no no,” he utters softly below his breath.

“How does it feel to be home, Cole?” Solas asks.

“No!” Cole shouts. “This is wrong, I can’t be here. I can’t change anything. Why can’t I... No! We have to get out of here!”

“That sounds like a great idea, I’m with the kid,” Hawke says before grunting into a jump. He hurls himself from the rock he was standing on, and somehow manages to land his two feet firmly beside Izzalea.

Alistair follows suit, though his jump was farther and more cumbersome, and he slips and falls upon landing. She and Hawke help him up, and Izzalea’s mind races with worry and terror and confusion. They do need to get out of here. There must be a way… she hopes there’s a way… “Solas,” she says with a waver in her voice, “if you have any incite as to how we get out, I’d be glad to hear it.”

The elf paces around, stroking his cleft chin and peering through the dark-dankness. “The Fade is shaped by the world around it. This seems to be the lair of that demon Erimond wanted to pull through. It’s not my first choice of locations to visit physically in the fade, but--”

“Solas. I know this must be exciting for you, but I need focus. How can we get out?”

Cutting his eyes at her, he grunts and stands still a moment. Pondering. Then brilliantly, the elf’s face lights up with the shine of an idea. “The world around it. Exactly. Around us - in the physical world - is Adamant Fortress...”

“And there was a rift in the center, where the demons came through!” Alistair adds, excitement and hope pouring from his tired lungs.

Solas nods. “Yes, and perhaps we can use it to leave the Fade as well.”
“We have to go. We have to go!” Cole tugs at Izzalea’s arm. She looks down at the boy, her heart pained to see him so scared, but all of this feels like a dream. She is too frightened, too tired, too confused to believe this is really happening. The world around her still feels as if time is shaken...slower...foggier.

Reaching out slowly to the spirit beside her, Izzalea rubs his back and looks around for some kind of indication as to which way they should go. “It’s okay Cole,” she mumbles softly as her eyes search through the cold dark. “We will get you out of here,” she says, privately praying that it’s true.

Then she sees it. A bright swirling rift of green in the distance. Like a beacon through the starless sky, a dazzling spinning orb calls to her from the distance. “There!” Izzalea yells and points to the beckoning tear in the veil. Her tired eyes circle around the faces of the sad souls who were unlucky enough to fall through with her, “Do we have everyone?”

They each take a moment to glance around when Hawke begins spinning frantically. “Varric,” he says through the sound of air trapped in his lungs and a panicked tremor clutching his voice. “I saw him follow when I chased after you. After that mage did that... thing ...But I don’t…”

Hawke races around the area looking behind rocks and searching through the thick atmosphere. “I don’t see him. He should be be here… Varric!” he cries the dwarf’s name desperately as they all search the area. Bodies running and sliding on slippery rock, calling out his name over and over... until they hear a raspy groan.

“I’m here,” Varric yells as he pulls himself up and out of some rubble. “I woke up inside the ground...had to follow some stupid tunnel to get out. If this is the ancestor’s idea of a joke, I’m not laughing.”

But Hawke laughs, and he grabs ahold of his old friend, throwing them into a relieved hug. “The ancestors will have to wait a bit longer for you to return to the stone, my friend. You’re in the Fade.”

“Andraste’s tits, really ?” the dwarf looks around, his jaw slack. “This is where you people go when you dream? Somehow I pictured something...oh, I don’t know...less creepy and shit.”

“No.” Solas approaches, shaking his head. “The demon that controls this place has been feeding and growing off of the fear of those around it, shaping what you see here.”

Varric groans and rubs his hands over his face. “Ah, great. We are walking in an actual living nightmare. Fantastic.”

“Just think of the story this will be, Varric.” Hawke nudges his elbow into the dwarf’s shoulder.

“Heh...like anyone would believe it.”

“Since when did you care about what’s believable.” Hawke winks.

While listening to the men joke, Izzalea finds her shield - battered, bloodied, and lying on the slippery rock. She picks it up, thankful that it came through the rift with her. “He’ll never get the chance to tell it if we don’t get out of here.” She settles the strapping around her left arm and bounces the weight around in her grip. Battered and damaged, yes, but at least it is still usable. She looks into the eyes of her companions. “Let’s get to that rift.”

The group walks and climbs and trudges through the filth and muck of the Fade. Malevolent spirits, or demons, or wisps, or whatever, appear in their way from time to time. Not exactly surprising, and they fight through them with relative ease, considering their fatigue. But when Izzalea reaches the top of some jagged, rocky steps, what she sees there stops her dead in her tracks.
“Divine Justinia?” Alistair’s words are pulled from his lungs and carried away in the billowing, humid air.

A woman stands stoically before them, draped in white and red. Painted gold detailing depicts the light of the Maker on red fabric. Proud and comforting, the Divine’s tall headdress sits atop her head, but below, an icy-blue stare makes Izzalea’s blood run cold.

The Divine had been murdered during the explosion at the Conclave. She couldn’t possibly have lived in the Fade this entire time. How could Izzalea have made it out while the Divine stood here?

Tentatively, they gather around the woman. Her face is aged, pale wrinkles spread from her eyes, nose, and mouth. Izzalea wants to reach out to touch the soft folds, to prove that they are real. Her fingers tingle with want, but she leaves them where they are and instead, grips her shield and sword tighter.

“Are you really her?” Izzalea’s deep voice rumbles the question, her eyes matching the piercing stare the woman sends her.

“It is more likely that this is a spirit.” Solas nods.

The woman smiles, her voice is coated in a thick orlesian accent. “We do not have the time to discuss what I may or may not be, the fact is that I am here to help you.”

“Surely you understand why we may be a bit apprehensive,” Hawke says.

She looks at Hawke but ignores his comment and directs her gaze back to Izzalea. “You do not remember what happened before you fell from the rift at the conclave. The demon here works for Corypheus and has stolen your memories, but I can help you retrieve them and defeat the Nightmare.”

Izzalea feels her heart race. Everything between arriving at the conclave, to waking up in chains with thousands of souls dead, has been black in her mind for over a year. “My...my memories are here?”

“Yes.”

Izzalea looks at Solas, a crinkle in her brow, silently asking him if they can trust the Divine, or whatever this is. Solas responds with a brief but sturdy nod.

“Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. I can’t relax. I can’t release. I need to go. I need to get out of here,” Coles panicked voice chatters in the background causing a pit in Izzalea’s stomach.

Over her shoulder she calmly speaks to the spirit. “It’s alright, Cole. We will get you out of here.” Izzalea returning her attention to the thing...in front of her, she says “Alright. If getting my memories back will help us through here and defeat the creature that holds this place, then I will do everything I can.”

The spirit, for surely that is what it is, floats beyond their group and forces the Nightmare’s minions to appear - minions that carry Izzalea’s lost memories. And one by one. Piece by piece. Izzalea recovers her past and the empty spot in her mind becomes whole again.

She remembers wandering the halls of the Temple of Sacred Ashes. She remembers being in awe of the history held in those grand halls, and her excitement for being there. She even remembers privately thanking her mother for sending her there, though she’d never admit it.

After each battle against the Nightmare’s minions, she finds more. She remembers the Divine - the
real Divine - screaming down a hallway. She remembers racing to the sound and bursting through a set of old doors. She remembers discovering the Divine suspended in air, crying and shouting while Warden mages held her still with some kind of red, pulsing magic. She remembers shouting for them to stop when a tall, menacing figure showed himself and pointed a long skeletal finger right at her, ordering her death. Corypheus. And she remembers the Divine screaming as she launched herself forward, knocking a strange orb from Corypheus’ hand, the same orb that he held when she met him again in Haven, and how that orb sparked green and rolled to Izzalea’s feet.

She’d picked up that orb...

And then the entire temple was destroyed.

As each memory finds its home in her mind, Izzalea feels sick. She retches and wobbles and braces herself against the rocky landscape. She coughs and sputters, “Corypheus…”

Somehow the others are able to see her memories too, and Solas shakes his head. “The foci. That was the orb that he carried. It gave you the mark and unlocking it caused the explosion.”

Izzalea stares at the mark glowing through her gloved hand and flexes her fingers. “What he said at Haven...it was true. I am a mistake.”

“A mistake? Or divine intervention?” Varric says softly, the Dwarf’s hidden faith shining through just for her.

Feeling her stomach slowly right itself again, she looks up to the helpful spirit of the Divine...or just helpful spirit masquerading as the Divine...it didn’t matter to Izzalea either way. “But then what? How did I get out of the Fade?”

The spirit floats forward silently and whips magic through the air, causing more angry minions to appear in the distance. Izzalea follows, shield raised and sword drawn. More minions. More memories. More answers.

She rips through the demons, slashing her sword into the trapped pieces of herself. More pieces that then fill the gaps, and rapidly project visions in her mind.

She remembers running. She remembers being here, in this twisted form of the Fade. She remembers the tormented bloodied face of her brother Azzedine chasing and wailing at her like a banshee.

His face was twisted. Contorted. And his voice was not his own. He screamed at her and she ran. She ran and she ran and she ran. She ran until a white light called to her. It was kind and it sounded like the Divine, and she ran to it. It was glowing high atop a platform made of slick rock, and she climbed to it.

Turning her frightened eyes behind her, terror raked through her again. Terror that she could taste. It was metallic and bloody and cold. The disjointed version of brother still chased her. It gained on her. Bloodthirsty, it cried out to tear her apart.

A radiant white hand pulled Izzalea onto a platform, and then a green rift swirled and pulsed in front of her, but she didn’t know what it was. Azzedine too, crawled up the rocky ledge. Bloody talons replaced his fingers, and he gripped and sliced through rock. His voice changed from high-pitched screams to low terrifying bellows. Nooooooo, thundered through the air so loudly that she thought her eardrums would burst. Her heart beat so fast that she thought it may explode. She didn’t know what to do now. There was no where else to run. And she looked to the Divine for help.
The glowing figure moved to stand between her and the creature who looked like her brother. The creature that bellowed and stood on the platform. It reached for Izzalea, but sliced through the Divine instead in a horrifying display of blood, flesh, and light.

“Go!” the Divine called out in a gurgled scream, and she shoved Izzalea backward through the rift.

...And then she fell in a heap on the hard stone rubble of the exploded temple...

“You… you saved me…” Izzalea’s voice is but a coarse whisper, tears streaming down her cheeks as the memory stops its projection in her mind. “It was you that they saw, not Andraste.” Her shoulders slump forward, for she is exhausted. Worn out. Beaten. “I’m…” She sniffs softly. “I’m not the Herald.”

She was never sure she really was, but there was a piece of her that had hoped. That piece of her is now gone, and filled with the pieces that hold the truth.

Varric steps beside her, placing a comforting hand on her arm. He looks at her with a face of empathy. He’d believed she was sent by Andraste to save Thedas, too. But she was not. She was a mistake. There’s nothing he can say, so he remains silent. There’s nothing to be said. The truth is the truth.

Izzalea wipes the tears from her eyes and shakes her shoulders. “We need to keep moving.”

The spirit continues to guide them through the maze, but something changes. As they get closer to the rift, the air shifts. And soon the nightmare reveals itself in their minds.

“You should have let me keep those memories for you, Izzalea,” a voice says in their heads. They all look to each other, confirming that everyone’s heard it. It is a dark and sinister voice and it chuckles with amusement as if it watches them. “You feared you were nothing, and now you know you are just that. Nothing. A mistake, storming through the world in search of glory. No glory will come for you, Izzalea. For your entire life you have been nothing more than a folly.”

Izzalea bites her tongue and inhales deeply. It is trying to shake her, and with how tired and strung-out she feels…it’s working. She tries to think of a response, but before she can speak, Azzedine appears from behind a rock. The same version of Azzedine as her memories, and tears immediately fall from her eyes.

“No...no please...don’t make me…” She whimpers and trembles as her contorted, bloody brother walks toward her.

“Help me, Izz,” he says softly. He sounds in pain, but he must be. His limbs are broken and wrong, jutting and haphazard. Red lyrium protrudes from his body like the monsters she’s seen Templars become from extended use of the evil stuff.

“It hurts, Izz. Please just help me.”

“You’re not real,” she says. She shakes her head. “No. You’re not real.”

“She can’t.”

“I am Izz, please. It hurts.” He steps closer to her, too close. Her sword arm shakes with an uncontrollable tremor. She can’t. Even as a twisted figment, she can’t kill her brother. He’s the only one who ever believed in her. The only one who ever loved her for who she is. She can’t.

“Go. Go away. Leave me!” she screams, but he lunges at her. Thin, sharp talons like a terror demon’s swipe through the air and she screams. She screams and she closes her eyes. Her shield flies up to protect her body, out of habit. And out of habit, her arm thrusts forward into the gut of her
brother.

He falls at her feet, a crumpled mess of wrong. Black ooze pools from the wound to the ground and flows around her feet. She cries and shakes and cries some more. She watches as his body fades away and she hears the voices of her companions. She hadn’t even noticed they’d been gone.

“Are you okay? What did you see?” Hawke says to her as jogs to her side.

“What?” she asks, bewildered and looking for the body of her brother.

Hawke gestures to the others who all had the appearance that they’d just seen ghosts as well. “We each were pulled...I don’t know... Apart? Alone? And we each saw something different that we had to kill in order to come back. We were worried you were gone, but you’re back. What did you see?”

“We need to leave. Now. Before that happens again,” she responds.

They push on and the nightmare continues to taunt them all. It makes the point to speak to each person, taunting them with their fears. And she is drawn away from them over and over again. Forced to kill Azzedine over and over again. Each time worse and more terrifying than the last.

But eventually, Izzalea is not quick to rise to her feet after she crumples by her brother’s dead body. This time, when she’s brought back to her friends, she stays on the stone ground and cries.

“I can’t do this anymore. We’re never going to get out of here.” She sobs into her gloves that are caked in the black blood of her not-brother. “I’m nothing. I can’t do this.”

“Don’t let him in,” Coles soft voice whispers in her ear. He has found the strength that she has lost. He is far better than she could ever be. “It tries to break. Cripple. Don’t do it. I cannot change, but I can move. We can move. Move, we must. If we move and fight and move and fight we will find the end. The Nightmare cannot keep it from us.”

The Divine spirit floats beside Cole. “Make it to the rift, Inquisitor. Break through and shut it hard. Banish the demons from this place.”

“We’re never going to make it!”

“We can and we will,” Alistair says. He and Hawke pull her to her feet, but her head hangs low. Don’t let him break her? He already has. He started long ago when he and Corypheus attacked her dreams. He started when she was in the Fade the first time.

Solas pulls a red potion of health and energy from his satchel. “Drink,” he says and places the edge of the bottle to her lips, tipping it so that she has no choice. She drinks and feels a jolt spin throughout her body. Her muscles are slightly less tired. Her vision a slightly more clear.

Solas places a hand on her shoulder when she’s finished. “We’re almost there.” He turns to point ahead, and she follows the direction of his long, slender finger though a cave in front of them. On the other side glows the large, swirling rift.

“See? We already made it,” Hawke says beside her, smiling at her in that clever, smug away of his.

They walk through the cave and aren’t torn apart from each other again, but as they reach the end, they see it.

The demon that could be seen from the mezzanine of the fortress, but it is so much larger than she ever could have imagined. Like some kind of giant mutant spider, it’s both disgusting and horrific,
and it steps in front of the rift.

She is so tired. Even with Solas’ potion, she is too tired to fight that.

“Run to the rift! Close it, and close it hard!” the Divine spirit shouts as she flies through the air. A large white light bursts, blinding everyone in a flash. As the light fades, Izzalea sees the nightmare on it’s back, far from them and the rift. It is injured and immobile, but surely not dead.

“Run!” Izzalea screams and they all charge toward the rift. Just as she is about jump through, the green swirling light disappears and she falls into an empty space. She spins around, searching, but there is nothing but pitch-black and a mysterious green light shining only on her.

“What is this?” she asks. “WHAT IS THIS?”

“Izzy…” A hand reaches out from behind her and touches her shoulder. She jumps and spins, prepared to stab her brother one final time. Prepared to gut him again and be forced to watch his entrails fall out of his belly as a puddle of black oozes around them.

But’s it’s not Azzedine, and she freezes still. “C--Cullen?” her shaky voice asks.

Cullen smiles. “We’ve been waiting for you. I was so worried.”

“I...I made it out?”

His hand strokes her cheek, wiping away tears that stream there. “Yes of course, my love. You made it out years ago.”

“What?” Izzalea shakes her head. “No...no, Cullen I was just there.” She points behind her as if pointing into the blackness proved anything at all. But the black is gone, and instead she’s standing in the middle of a hearth room in a cottage. A small fire burns there, and there are wooden rocking chairs with blankets and books lying on them. Where is she?

“Oh my darling wife,” Cullen says. Pulling her head back to him, he kisses her forehead. “I wish you didn’t send yourself back there. It’s over. It’s all over. You’ve won, remember?’ His lips feel soft and warm as they move against her skin. She feels herself melt into his embrace. She’s so tired, and this feels so nice.

“Oh look who’s here to say hello!” he says and turns her body around. A small figure appears from a narrow hallway. A child. A small girl with tan skin, curly red hair, and sage eyes.

Izzalea stares at the child. “Who is this?”

“Momma,” the little girl says with outstretched arms. “Up.”

Izzale’s heart stops. Her child? Her and Cullen’s child? Has she gone mad? Why doesn’t she remember her own child? When did they marry? Tears saturate her skin and she lifts the child into her arms. She holds her stiffly and darts her eyes back and forth between the little girl and Cullen. Why can she not remember any of this?

The little girl furrows her brow and looks to her father.

“It’s okay, my sweet. Momma’s has just forgotten again. She will remember soon. I promise,” Cullen says and just then, there is a flash of red in his amber eyes.

That’s not right. A chill shoots down Izzalea’s spine. The little girl looks back to her, red shimmering
in her eyes as well. “Momma?” she asks.

“No!” Izzalea yells and drops the child. She lands on her feet and stares up at Izzalea, those once sage eyes now sustaining a constant red glow.

“No. Fuck this. No.” Izzalea shakes her head and backs away. “No. I can’t do this. No.”

“Not again. Izzalea, calm yourself,” Cullen says and picks up the glowing child. Her entire body glows a hot red hue now. Cullen kisses her cheek and the hue flows onto him until he emits the same hot shine. His eyes are piercing and angry, and he steps forward.

“Izzalea. There is nothing to be afraid of.” His voice is calm but there is nothing calming about this.

“Shut up. You’re not real. None of this is real.” With each step toward her that he takes, she steps back. “Help!” she screams. “Pull me out! Help! Solas! Hawke! Alistair! I can’t!”


Cullen becomes agitated by the spirit’s intrusion and springs forward. Murder in his and the child’s eyes alike.

Izzalea clenches her eyes shut and screams louder than she’s ever screamed before. Her throat tears and she swings her body in a whirlwind, sword in hand. She feels her sword make impact. It slices through cloth and flesh and bone, but she doesn’t open her eyes. She just keeps swinging and screaming until she cannot scream or swing any more.

She falls to her knees and sobs, her chest feeling torn apart and set ablaze. She feels the most broken she has ever felt. And still, she does not open her eyes.

She doesn’t open her eyes until she hears their voices.

Everyone. Every single one of them looks battered and broken. Forced to see something that threatened to consume them forever if they did not do their unthinkable. Their worst nightmare.

“We have to go. Now,” Solas says. Even he, the man with the strongest composure perhaps she’s ever met, even he looks shaken from whatever it was he fought. But they woke far from the rift again. The trick in their minds ported them back at least a hundred yards away.

Solas grabs Cole and runs toward the rift, Varric following close behind. They reach it and jump through. Izzalea watches, her mind still a little broken from her vision, but in watching her friends make their escape she realizes that she, Hawke, and Alistair have yet to move.

Izzalea motions for them to run, but then the ground begins to shake. In the distance, the Nightmare has righted itself and is charging back to them. Eight legs of terror hurdle through black rock, splinters of the stone flying around it in a flurry.

“We have to go! Now!” Izzalea screams and tugs the men’s arms.

They run, but Hawke calls out from behind her. “We’re not going to make it! Go! I’ll distract it!” She sees him veer off in another direction, waving his staff and shooting bolts of static toward the demon. “Tell Bear that I love her… and… and that I’m sorry!”

“No, Hawke!” She screams after him.

“I should be the one who stays. The Wardens did this. A Warden should end it.” Alistair motions to
run directly toward the demon, but Izzalea grabs his arm with a vice-hard grip.

Hawke shouts louder as distance grows between them. “Thedas needs you Alistair! You too, Inquisitor! You are not a mistake!” The demon follows Hawke’s incessant taunting with static bolts, turning toward him, rather than the rift.

Izzalea stops just before the jumping through. Alistair hesitates behind her, acting as if he might still run off. “No,” Izzalea says, grabbing him close again. “We need you to rebuild the rubble that Clarel left behind.” The words growl from her lips into his ear, and she shoves the man through the rift.

She lingers though, finding it difficult to go through herself.

She stares at Hawke. She can’t find the will to leave him.

“It’s always got to be the Maker-damned spiders ,” Hawke yells and spins his body out of reach from one of the Nightmare’s strikes. He looks at her with a large, smug smile on his face and winks. Then with his hands, he forms a ball of force and propels it toward Izzalea like a shooting star. The ball of energy slams into her gut, knocking her off her feet, and throwing her backwards into the rift.

Just before she’s swallowed up, the last thing she sees is Hawke knocked out… and his body falls hard onto the ground…

Flying through a bright green wind, there is no time to mourn the loss of the Champion before Izzalea is slammed into Adamant’s sandstone floor. And Without thinking, she staggers to her feet and flings her mark in the direction of the rift. Bright static fills the air as she connects her body, her will, and her mark to the tear… and seals it.

Though it feels distant, with reality slowly catching up to her, Izzalea hears cheering. She swivels around slowly. Blurry, watery eyes taking in the droves of soldiers, Wardens, Templars, friends... all cheering and celebrating her.

Cullen - the real Cullen - bursts through the crowd. She hopes that he will embrace her, but instead he stops short and kneels. His head lowered, she hears him say, “Inquisitor, you were victorious.” The rest of the crowd follows, everyone quietly kneeling in respect to her. As if anything she just did deserves respect.

All Izzalea wants to do is cry and collapse into nothing. She’s won nothing. She is nothing. For if that is what it takes to win...she’s not sure it’s worth it.

A small, bloody, brown, and limping figure walks through the kneeling crowd. Confident through her obvious injuries, and not one to bow to anyone, Abner stops in front of Izzalea.

“What’s Hawke?”

Pain shoots through her heart. Abner has already lost so much… Izzalea hangs her head, her eyes looking back to where the rift once was. “He...he wanted me to tell you that he loved you, and he’s sorry.”

Abner stands there, icely quiet, and the bodies surrounding them begin to slowly rise from their knees.

“Where is he?” she asks again. Izzalea lifts her sorrow filled eyes to Abner’s stern stare.

“Abner, he stayed behind. He sacrificed himself. We…” Izzalea’s voice comes out quickly and wildly, stumbling through her words. She feels too awful - too defeated - to care about her status and
how someone like her is supposed to act in this such situation. “We couldn’t defeat the demon. We tried. It was too much. We weren’t going to make it. He...he ran off to drive it away. He didn’t give me a choice, Abner... Abner, I’m sorry. He’s...The Champion is gone.”

Abner glances at where the rift was and back to Izzalea. “Open it.”

“What? Abner, no... I... I can’t.”

“Bullshit. Open it. You’ve gone into the fade twice already. You’ve come out twice. Open it like you did hours ago, and go get him.”

“Abner, no. He’s gone. I saw him... I saw him fall.” A tear drips down her cheek and a headache from dehydration, misery, and exhaustion bangs behind her eyes.

“Hawke is not gone. I’d know it. You left him there in there alive, and we have to save him. Open it now, Izzalea.” Abner steps closer, eyes glassy from emotion, and visibly trembling with rage.

“I can’t do that Abner. You need to calm down.”

In the blink of an eye, Abner unsheathes one of her daggers and places it against Izzalea’s throat. Everyone around them snaps into alert. Soldiers and Cullen immediately unsheathe their swords and point them at the small, steeled, Inquisition assassin.

“Put the knife down, agent,” Cullen growls and steps forward.

“Open it, Inquisitor, or I will kill you right here.”

Izzalea stands perfectly still, the cold sharp edge of Abner’s blade pressed firm enough that she feels a small cut form and the cool drip of blood slide down her neck. “Abner,” she says, feeling the cut grow as she speaks. “Think about what you’re doing.”

Izzalea watches as the woman bites her lip. Another tear streams down Izzalea’s face and Abner’s eyes follow it. Abner’s nostrils flair, she bites harder on her lips, and her eyes well.

“Fuck,” she whispers. At the same moment, her arm falls limp. Her dagger clatters on the stone as the sound of boots rushing forward overpowers the ringing of the metal... and then Abner is swooped up in the angry, rough arms of loyal men. “You did this,” she shouts. “You left him. He is everything, and your are nothing!” And then Abner’s tormented, shaking body is carried away...

Cullen comes forth again, this time wrapping his arms around Izzalea just before her legs give out from under her. It is only his strength holding her up, and he hushes into her hair.

And she sobs into his armor.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are always appreciated. This was heavy, but I still like to know your thoughts!
The ground shakes below. Rumbling and thundering, it quakes in a fit beneath his body. A horrifying, ear piercing screech scrapes its way through the depths of his ear drums, rousing him from his senseless state.

And his head is killing him.

Hawke pinches his forehead between gauntleted fingers. He groans and curses under his breath. Blinking, he opens his eyes to find the swirling black and green sky of the Fade directly above him.

He’s still here.

Stiffly, Hawke manages to sit up on the hard rock ground from which he woke splayed out and stunned. And there it is. The Nightmare. Dead. He thinks.

The giant spider-like creature, with it’s legs mostly curled up into itself, is motionless aside from a few disconcerting twitches. Hawke would spring into action - the action of running away and screaming for his life - if it wasn’t for a large, rocky spike that juts from the ground and has pierced through the demon like a very eccentric lawn ornament that Hawke is sure some Tevinter Magisters would be dying to have.

Black ooze drips and pools from the body of the dead demon, creating a sea of stinking ichor beneath it. Large boulders of slightly iridescent Fade rock are scattered around the corpse. A leg caught and crushed here...some chunk of spider-shit smashed there… It’s dead. Definitely. But he didn’t kill it. He doesn’t think he killed it, anyway. He can move rock and shit around, sure, but not like that... can he?

Looking around for a moment, still sitting on the damp ground with the sea of ichor drifting his way,
Hawke gets that deep sinking feeling in his gut. There is nothing. No one. The rift is gone, Izzalea must have escaped and shut it.

Good. It worked.

They’re all safe. And any residual demons seemed to have been banished as the creepy spirit had predicted.

But now he is stuck - *alone* - in the Maker damned Fade…

Hawke looks back to the Nightmare, all twitches subside and the pool of black expands, getting too close for comfort. But as he rises to his feet, Hawke discovers an injury to his leg that causes him to skip backwards with a painful limp.

*Wonderful.*

Hopping to a nearby and demon-ick-free bolder, Hawke rests and smiles at the spider.

“Say, you wouldn’t happen to know a way out of here, would you? As much as I love this place, and believe me when I say this, you’ve done an excellent job with the decorating... and I can’t wait to leave a testimonial for the brochure… I really must be going.” He stares at the corpse for a few seconds. “No? Well that’s too bad. I’m afraid this will be affecting your tip.”

Hissing with discomfort, Hawke redirects his interest to his bum leg. Pressing at the epicenter of the pain, he tries to think of some of the old healing spells Anders taught him years ago, but nothing functional is coming to him.

“I’m pleased to see you took my advice, dear boy,” a voice calls out through the thick air. It startles Hawke and he jumps up, wincing at the ache in his leg. He circles his body around looking for the source, but sees nothing.

“Who’s there?” Hawke yells. He grabs his staff and readies himself for another battle, although he’s not sure he has the strength for it. Either way, he won’t go out sitting on his ass, that’s for damn sure.

“The world fears the inevitable plummet into the abyss. Watch for that moment... and when it comes, do not hesitate to leap. Sound familiar?” The voice laughs, it calls to him much like the Nightmare had called to them all - through the air surrounding and encompassing him and yet also directly in his mind.

But this was not the demon… No. He knows this voice. The voice of an old woman, and as she laughs, Hawke has no doubt as to who owns the bone chilling sounds as it shakes the heavens around him.

“Flemeth,” Hawke mutters under his breath, still looking for the old witch to materialize somewhere near by.

“It is only when you fall that you learn whether you can fly,” she says after her chuckles subside. There is an eerie, serpent-like quality to her voice that is unmistakable. But where is she?

“I remember, thank you,” Hawke says with a sigh. He leans back to sit on the boulder once more, giving up on the idea that he could spot her before she’s ready to be spotted. If she wants to be seen, she will make it so, whether or not he is looking for her.

Rubbing his leg, he peers into the sky, for lack of any better direction to point his words. “Is this the part where you finally teach me to be a dragon?”
“This is the part where you learn much, dear boy, for the time is coming, sooner than they may think,” Flemeth’s voice responds.

“Always helpful and direct, I’m glad to hear you haven’t changed, old girl,” Hawke groans, gritting his teeth a little. Part out of annoyance, and part from still being unable to mend his blasted leg.

She chuckles again. “Oh Hawke, you see? This is what I like about you. Through it all, you’ve never lost your clever tongue.”

“So…” Hawke gestures around wildly. “All of this? You knew about this? You knew I’d have to stay here, even back when we were standing on that mountain?”

“What I knew, or what I felt is of no consequence,” she responds dryly. Then the atmosphere shifts. It swirls and spins around his leg, and magically, the pain fades away almost completely.

“Thanks for that… I guess… But I can’t help but think it’s your fault I’m here in the first place.”

“My fault? No. I’m here to help.”

“Your help has never been free. What’s the catch this time?”

“Smart boy.” Her raspy voice chuckles again and a chill spreads through his healed leg. “I just need you to find a little something, and then we can continue.”

“This is sounding better all the time. What is it you need me to find?”

“Your young Merrill spent years on her eluvian. All you need to do is find the other side.”

“The eluvian?! Are you serious? Merrill agonized over that damned this for years!” Hawke’s voice stops and reality hits him. “When her clan found it… they’d pulled the blight from it.”

“Yes…”

Hawke groans. He looks in the distance at the omnipresent but always distant black city. “You cannot be serious.”

“Oh but I am, dear boy. Oh but I am.”

“Merrill never got the blasted mirror to work, you know.”

“Why do you think you’re here?”

Hawke sighs a long, drawn out, tired sigh. “I guess this means there’s no spa day in my future…”

“Come now, Champion. You’ve always been a clever boy. I’m sure you will learn to bend and shape this world around you. It can be quite… fruitful.”

“I’m nothing if not adaptable…” Hawke groans and shakes his head. Lifting onto his feet, he shakes the kinks from his previously injured leg. He takes only a few steps forward, when he stops. His eyes drift to the spot where the rift had once been, and his heart bangs and aches in his chest. What must she be thinking? What would she have done when he didn’t come through? Will she know he’s not dead?

Flemeth’s voice laughs again. “Do not fret Hawke, it doesn’t work for you. The girl is strong. She’ll find her way. Now move. You’ve far to go, and none of this was for you to stare hapless into an empty space.”
“Are you sure we’re not related? It’d help explain why no one likes me.”

Hawke begins trudging forward. Each step increases the distance between him and the spot he associates with Abner’s waiting body, and his heart sinks further. Perhaps he *can* learn to bend the physical Fade. And maybe then… maybe then he can get some kind of message to her…

If nothing else… For Hawke, Abner will be his beacon guiding him through the abyss.

Chapter End Notes

I've been working toward this for a long time. If this were a book series, I think this would be the end of book one.

I'd love to know what you think of my theories. I really think something like this happened when we left the fade in the e game.
Control & Careful Watch

Chapter Summary

A day has passed since the siege on Adamant. The Inquisitor stares into the camp of her surviving fighters and attempts to find something she can change...something she can make better...

Chapter Notes

And we're back! Oh my goodness you guys, I'm so sorry for all of the silence. I won't bore you with the details, but real life made it impossible for me to write for a while. However, I've returned and I am determined to get this story finished before the Nuglet is born. Did I say on here that I'm pregnant? If not, I am! And the little thing is due mid Feb, so... here we go!

This is a shortie, and the next one will be too, but I should be able to get the next one out sometime this week or weekend as well :) Thanks for your patience, and as always, I love your feedback. Don't be shy, say hello! It helps give me the motivation to write this thing, knowing you're there and learning what you're thinking!
Rich amber patterns move slowly across canvas as the desert sun casts its final evening glow on the Inquisition. Izzalea stands at the mouth of her large, central tent, eyes silently surveying the expansive camp around her. She watches smiles as soldiers embrace, celebrating their victory and rejoicing in the discovery that their friends survived. She watches downcast eyes and shaking heads as soldiers mourn the loss of those who did not.

Throughout the entire day of marching, she was congratulated and thanked for her victory. But it does not feel much like a victory. Not like this. Not with the hit Thedas has taken. The corners of her mouth weighted down, a deep pain in her chest, her mind filters back to Hawke’s sacrifice, and she stares off in the direction she knows her prison cart sits.

A hand comes from behind and lightly clutches her shoulder. Cullen stares into the camp beside Izzalea and holds her silence, waiting patiently.

After a few long moments, her voice cracks softly. “I still don’t think she should be locked up.”

Cullen’s strong hand slides down the inside of her arm, fingers finding hers and twining together. “She threatened to kill you. I know that you like her, but the woman is unhinged. It is not the first time she has stepped outside the boundaries of propriety, but it was surely the most severe.”

Izzalea drops her hand from his. “She had just lost the man she loves,” she says sternly, turning to stare into Cullen’s amber eyes, amber and soft like the light of the setting sun. The warmth of them trips her anger and she hesitates, feeling a tremor roll through her heart. The loss Abner endured... A loss Izzalea cannot fathom, staring into those soft, golden, lion eyes. “If something had happened to you... I... I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same.”

A somber smile glides across his face as his hands glide down her arms. “Keeping you safe is more important than whether or not you understand her motives, Izzalea.”

“If she wanted me dead, I’d be dead.”

Cullen’s brow furrows and his fingers squeeze her for a fraction of a second before he sighs a quick, frustrated sound. “Regardless, as long as she believes Hawke alive, we cannot guarantee that she won’t try to force your hand again. It’s best that she cools off under our control and careful watch.”

Izzalea scoffs. She turns her gaze back to camp, firelight peppering the canvas peaked horizon. “She’s locked in a cage. Are we letting her cool off? Or solidifying her hatred?”

Cullen’s thumb finds her chin and tilts it back to him. “Please trust me on this, Izzalea. I’m only looking out for your safety.”

Izzalea raises her hand to squeeze around those caring fingers. She attempts to smile, but the motions result in a thin pressed line, and she turns into her tent. Cullen follows by her side, but he falters and groans as he slides into the nearest chair. Izzalea kneels beside him, worry in her eyes, she inspects his clammy, pale skin. It is a state that he is in often, growing worse by the day, though he tries to deny it.

“Your withdrawals are worsening,” she says, reaching for a cloth to gingerly pat his forehead dry.

“I can endure.” The words attempt to sound confident, but the meaning is lost with his jaw clenched so tightly and his visible agony trembling through his limbs.
“There must be something we can do.”

Cullen pinches the bridge of his nose and grunts through the wave of pain accosting in body. “I have a potion that Adaan put together back at Haven, the healers are good about mixing it when I need it.”

“Are you taking it?”

He smiles coyly for the briefest of moments, his stubbornness shining through the pain. “I’m not interested in replacing one substance with another. I try my best not to.”

Frustrated, Izzalea slumps fully to the ground in a huff. “There must be another way. Have you ever looked into it?”

“The Chantry is not partial to finding ways for Templars to stop lyrium.”

Crossing her arms, determination washing over her as Izzalea’s own stubbornness gleams through. “Well… we aren’t the Chantry. They certainly made that clear, and now knowing that I was not sent by Andraste, I think that pretty much solidifies our separation. Perhaps the Inquisition can look into it. Perhaps there are more Templars who would like to stop, but are too afraid… Or the poor souls who also left the Chantry and are going mad, or worse, resorting to red lyrium and Corypheus.”

Cullen grimaces. “I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

Mind reeling and searching for an answer, Izzalea pauses and thinks. No matter what, they must find a way. At his current rate of deterioration, Cullen’s life is in jeopardy. And then it strikes her.

“Aurora.”

“Aurora? She… I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Cullen attempts to stand but slips back almost as quickly. Izzalea presses her hand upon his knee in a firm, voiceless command to stay.

“Why not? She’s certainly powerful, we’ve learned that. And I’ve heard her discussing research and theory with others while we’ve been in this Maker forsaken desert. She’s quite smart. Maybe she could figure it out. That is her role here anyway, a researcher...a thinker...a problem solver.”

“There are people here who wonder if she’s even safe to have freely walking the camp, let alone put to work on finding a way to remove lyrium from Templars? Izzalea, that’s a dangerous combination.”

“Cullen.” The hand holding his knee squeezes him gently. “Listen to yourself. Aurora saved my ass back there. And then she saved the life of the Knight-Commander. I won’t have these superstitions about mages poison my Inquisition. I thought you knew better.”

A long frustrated and pain-filled sigh radiates through the golden haired man. A hand finds it’s way through his blonde locks - locks made ever the more curly by the heat and sweat of desert and stressful living - and then moves to the back of his neck, an attempt to rub away his shame. “I… I know… But I also know what is whispered in my ranks. People fear her, Izzalea.”

“Well, they shouldn’t. If not for her, I’m not sure we would have taken the east wall. The Templar wall, Cullen.” She rises to her feet and paces a small line through the dirt. Smacking her fist into the palm of her left hand, she continues, “We need to change the narrative. We need to come together.”

“What are you saying?”

Bending over the chair where her love sits, hands on either armrest, and fire igniting in her green
eyes, she stares into his. “I want you to ensure none of your men whisper about what happened at Adamant. Everyone that was there. Everyone that saw what she did. They all need to agree to protect her. We owe her our lives.”

“That power is not something people will ignore, and as people tell the tale, she will only get more powerful. The story will warp until she is an abomination working for the Inquisition,” he advises.

Izzalea shrugs and stands tall once again. “In that case… It didn’t happen.”

“What?”

“It didn’t happen. It may still drift around as a rumor, we can’t help that, but every soldier who witnessed it will deny it.”

“Izzalea…”

She swivels back to him, brows knitted in the center, stern power emanating from her voice. “That’s an order,” she says, crossing her arms. Chin high, she looks down at her Commander, awaiting his compliance.

Cullen glares back in return, but his code of conduct won’t allow him to push farther, no matter how scorned he may feel for her slamming him back in his place so suddenly. “…As you wish, Inquisitor.”

Izzalea softens again, remembering her goal for this entire thing. She crouches beside the sick man to which she is falling in love. The sick man for which she would do anything, if it meant saving his life. She reaches for Cullen’s hand, runs her thumb over his rough knuckles, and smiles coyly at him through her lashes.

“Trust me, Cullen. I’m only looking out for your safety.”
Only A Light In This Darken’d Time Breaks

Chapter Summary

Still on the evening after Adamant, Aurora paces and frets outside a certain healing tent. Will she go in?

Chapter Notes

This was a little later than I thought it would be, but it’s also a little longer! trade off <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-Aurora-

Her lips still tingle from the kiss and she finds herself touching them often. Each time, a fizzy smile bursts in her chest.

Healers had been buzzing around his tent through the night, and his transport during the day was met with the utmost care. Aurora has tried her best to stay away, to let him rest and heal, but as the evening draws to a close, and the activity surrounding his tent has died down, she’s finding it more
difficult to ignore her urge to visit him.

She finds reasons, or rather, no reason at all, to walk through the area of camp that holds the healing tents. But she wanders past, pauses by his tent, then skitters away in another direction every single time.

And now, standing there, staring, she’s just a few steps from the Knight-Commander with only some tightly woven threads of canvas separating them, but she still can’t seem to find the courage.

“Just go in,” a friendly Tevinter voice whispers in her ear as she stands gawking and still for about the fiftieth time that day.

“I probably shouldn’t, Dorian. He needs his rest,” Aurora says softly, but before she can back away again, one helpful little shove sends her forward the few steps she needs to gain the courage to pull back the canvas flap and enter.

Stepping inside, there is a low glowing lantern on a small stand beside the bed where Delrin lies. His eyes were closed, but upon hearing someone walk in, they open and he smiles broadly.

“Aurora.”

That fizzy smile bursts in her chest again as a shimmer covers her skin. “Delrin,” she says, unable to suppress the smile that consumes her face. “I wanted to see how you were doing.”

“Much better than dead, thanks to you.”

Blush blooming across her cheeks and ears, she dips her head. What must he think of her? “Delrin, I…”

“You saved my life. You may have saved many lives. If you weren’t there… well frankly, I’m not sure we could have won, not without a massive amount of more casualties, including myself.” He reaches out for her, one weakened hand stretching for hers. She dares to step closer and take his fingers.

“You are putting too much faith in me,” she says, staring at the ground.

Delrin runs his thumb along her palm and it sends a rain of sparks down her arm to her heart. “I don’t think I’m the only one,” he says, “nor the only one who ever has.”

“Aurora.”

Aurora remains silent, unsure of what to say, unsure of why she’s there or what they are even doing. Unsure of her future with the Inquisition, with him, with anything. Her life has been turned so far from where she had always intended, that she is shrouded in uncertainty, and yet, she can’t retreat from this man. He pulls at her gently, urging her to sit on the edge of the cot beside him, and without thinking, she does.

“The Knight-Commander at Kinloch Hold knew this about you too, did he not?” he asks, an innocuous thing, but for her, it carries so much.

It takes her a moment, but Aurora finds her voice. “And the First Enchanter. They taught me to hide it. As my powers intensified, things would… accidentally happen. They personally taught me to control it.”

“You are a kind woman with the best of intentions. They saw it. I see it.”

A faint smile flashes on her face, and she finally looks back at Delrin. “I don’t know, I passed my
harrowing...there wasn’t that much they could do. Greagoir wasn’t like Meredith.”

He grins broadly and squeezes her hand. “Thank the Maker for that,” he says and they both laugh. They laugh because of everything. This newness budding between them. This path their lives took to bring them here in this tent. Better to laugh at the mess than to cry, in this moment anyway.

As they regain their composure, Delrin pulls her hand toward his lips. “I’m no Meredith either, Aurora. I think you are a gift from the Maker.” He places a soft kiss on her knuckles, soft like morning dew on a delicate petal. “I became a Templar to protect you… not chain you.”

“You are a rare man, Delrin Barris.”

“No. I am the luckiest man in Thedas to have met you.” He grins proudly.

Aurora choke and a laugh, of all the crazy...“Charmer,” she says while shaking her head and he haughtily holds his proud grin.

It probably shouldn’t, but the man’s confidence actually makes her feel more relaxed. Their hands still held, fingers lightly brushing and stroking each other’s skin, she feels as if she missed his touch, though she’s barely felt it in the first place. Her mind slips back to nights she spent reading his letters in her bunk. Nights she sat with one small spark of fire emanating from her fingers as she read in secret. Those nights, she felt like she could smell him, like she could feel him, his warmth, his confidence, his touch reaching for her through the parchment she held in her hands.

Staring contently where their skin now touches, his rich mahogany enveloping her alabaster, she says, “I… I received your letters.”

“I’m glad. I’m hoping that this means you have accepted my apology? I wasn’t sure what to think when you never responded.”

Aurora shrugs and watches his thumb graze lightly across her pale wrist. “I wasn’t sure what to say.” She lifts her eyes to his, peridot shimmering back at her. “But I enjoyed reading them.”

His expression drops a fraction, a small line forms between his brows. “When I dishonored you by questioning your integrity,” he pauses and sighs, shaking his head at himself. “I realized something. However strong my feelings for you are - and they are - I didn’t know much about you, nor you me…”

She tilts her head, her voice satin smooth and at ease. “So you wrote me stories about your life.”

“Was it too forward? Too presumptuous?”

She places another hand on his, a way of clasping him in her heart. “I told you already, I enjoyed reading them.”

“A good.” He sighs a contented little thing, and she sits in silence a moment, just enjoying whatever this is she is feeling between them.

Aurora begins to feel open enough to share, as he did with her in those letters, and never having known the feeling of being this accepted in such a long time, possibly... ever ... “There was a time,” she says quietly, testing her courage, “after the massacre at the circle… Ser Cullen was patrolling the library.” Aurora stops to peer at Delrin, and he nods for her to continue.

“He had been through a lot, we all had, but he made a comment…” Aurora shakes her head, bringing a hand to her forehead. “Honestly, I don’t even remember what it was now, but it made me
so mad.” She grins sheepishly. “He is different now, but when he was a young man, he was kind of... a jerk…” She giggles out of embarrassment for speaking so ill about the Commander.

Delrin laughs along with her and her chest sparkles like his eyes. “I can see that. Go on.”

“Well...I got angry and I slammed my fists on the table.” Aurora releases his hand and mimes the action in front of her. “And when I did, all of the books...” She swings her arms wide, imagining the library at Kinloch, and she looks back at Delrin in amazement. “All of the books in the entire library flew off the shelves and around the room!”

Aurora smiles to herself, bringing her fingers to her lips and shakes her head. “We were the only two in there. It was rather late, mind you, but I couldn’t sleep, and then... chaos.” She laughs freely, remembering the scene. “The look on Cullen’s face… the look on my face! It’s funny to think about now, but I was so scared when it happened. He ran off to tell Greagoir, of course. But when Greagoir came back…” She pauses again, remembering fondly, for the first time, the event that ultimately brought them together. “He was... so kind. I couldn’t believe it. He set up private meetings in his office with the two of us and Irving... after that.” She shakes her head again and rests her hand in her lap, looking back at Delrin and the sweet smile on his face. “That’s when they taught me to control it.”

Delrin reaches back for her hand, and she gives it willingly. “Sounds like maybe Cullen deserved a little shock.”

Aurora chuckles a low breathy sound. “I wish I could remember what he said… There were a lot of snide comments from Templars in those days following the massacre. They had been put through a lot, and a lot of them died. But so did we...”

Delrin nods silently and she sighs before continuing. “I just wanted to be treated like a person. I didn’t want the focus to be on my power, I wanted it to be me. I wanted to be Aurora, not that mage who is too powerful to be trusted, that mage who was part of a circle that had a mass blood magic and abomination outbreak. I just wanted to feel... normal?”

“Understandable.”

She groans through a silly smile. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all of this.”

“I’m glad that you are.”

Silence falls between them again as her mind leaves the contented feeling she has and finds the anxiety of her power once again. No matter how much Delrin may be okay with her, and no matter how ridiculous that seems, it is not only his opinion that matters. And now... the world will know…

“After what happened yesterday… After what people saw… Delrin... I don’t kno--”

“I will keep you safe,” he says with a squeeze of his hand. So much confidence for a man who cannot even lift his head from his pillow...

“You’re such a good man, too good to get mixed up in this. I would tarnish your reputation. Are you quite sure tha--”

“I care about you, Aurora. And I know you care for me.”

Before Aurora can process his statement, before she can dream of a rebuttal, a healer steps into the tent. Aurora stands quickly, a reflex, and backs away from the wounded Knight-Commander. When she sees who the healer is, she relaxes ever so slightly.
“Rose,” she says through her relief. Who was she to sit so close to Delrin, to be touching him, when anyone could walk in? At this rate she will tarnish his reputation long before she has the ability to talk some sense into him. But it was Rose. Thank the maker for Rose.

“Aurora,” Rose nods respectfully before walking toward Delrin to check on him. The woman is young, and pretty, with a long blonde braid draped over her shoulder. The young mage was also at Kinloch during the fifth blight, but she was just a girl then. Aurora was fond of her, the little girl with healing talent who always had her nose in a book and made heart eyes at Cullen... before the blight, anyway. The young mage who asked to braid Aurora’s hair, and sought her security when the circle went to shit. Yes. It was a good thing it was Rose who walked in and not someone else, someone who might spread rumors without knowing what they’d seen.

“Thank you for helping him.” Aurora says while watching the mage check Delrin’s body, soft light glowing from her hands as she scans and inspects his healing fractures. Aurora feels even more relief knowing that it is Rose aiding him, she’d always shown immense promise in the talents of healing. “Your work is impressive.”

“His injuries were substantial, but with continued magical therapy, I think he can be mended within a week,” Rose responds. She then addresses Delrin directly, “You will be sore for a long time, I’m sure, but your bones will heal.”

Delrin nods in thanks, and as Rose turns to leave, Aurora lightly touches her arm to stop her. “I’ve seen you talking to the other healers, are you the lead?” she asks.

Rose smiles. “I am.”

“That’s wonderful, congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

Aurora feels a little embarrassed, she’s barely spoken to the girl in years, but she knows another who would benefits from her kind hand and magical talent. “Will you... do me a favor? There is a woman in the barred carriage. I know that she was badly injured during the siege, but... she’s also the woman who threatened the Inquisitor.” Rose stiffens at her words, but waits for Aurora to finish. “I don’t think anyone has checked on her because of what she’s done, and I know that she’s too proud to ask. Her name is Abner, and... I know she did a bad thing, but she’s not a bad person. She saved my life once. Will you... will you please... please check on her?”

Rose flushes, eyes darting to the ground then back to Aurora’s. “I know she’s not a bad person,” she says. “Yes, I will make sure she’s okay.”

“Thank you.” And with that, Rose bends, lifts the canvas flap, and leaves the tent.

“I told you that you are a good woman,” Delrin says, pulling Aurora’s attention back from where Rose left.

“I just... I don’t want her to be forgotten.” She turns back to Delrin’s cot and leans over him to press a single kiss on his forehead. “You should rest now, it sounds like you have a long road to recovery.”

“Will you visit me again?”

However foolish, she speaks from her heart. “Daily. As long as I am able.”
Chapter End Notes

Aurora Fans Rejoice! <3

And if you caught it, that was a cameo of MaSulevin's character, Rose. Rose is from her fic, *The Fire and the flood*. If you haven't read it, you really should! It's a great Cullen x OC fic about a circle mage (and a certain Aurora Monroe also has a cameo in her AU!)
Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of Adamant, and all that happened there, how is our assassin handling it? Is it as Cullen thinks? Is she cooling off? Or is it as Izzy fears? Is she stewing in her hatred?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

-Abner-

The world is an ugly place while viewing it from behind bars.

Sneers and jeers are thrown into the jail cart. A hacked wad of spit is chucked inside, followed by an explosion of laughter before the men walk away...back to their tents, back to their beds, to their campfires and heroic tales. But no fluids or curses could hurt Abner further than the beating she has already endured. They are nothing, for she has been destroyed repeatedly throughout this life, and the pain has since transcended from the agony of loss into the absolution of hate.

Life may continue outside of the iron bars, but all Abner wants is to watch it burn. Watch as the horses run. Listen to the traitors scream. She would rather see the world aflame, than to live another
moment in it as it is.

She can feel her heartbeat in her ears while she focuses on the braziers and campfires, a dark opera of destruction playing endlessly in her mind. Unsure if this world deserves saving, for all it does is spiral into hell at every chance.

Shuffling at the door to the jail cart attracts her glare. What now? A soldier coming in for a real go at her this time? She is ready.

Instead, another sneering face is shoved inside and her blood boils at the sight of him. One of the world’s chief traitors and ruiners. One of the reasons why no Gods dare protect this ungrateful place, whether they exist or not, for men like him are hellbent on destroying their gifts.

“We caught him trying to escape back to Tevinter on foot. Guess the piss ran outta juice, scouts were finally able to see through his fade steps and cloakin’,” says a soldier to the jail guard.

“I don’t know why the Inquisitor doesn’t just kill the bastard now,” the jailer scoffs.

“Perhaps, because she knows a man of my talents could be of use to her, you insolent peck.” The magister sneers more, but flinches when the guard gestures to strike him. His cowardice brings them all laughter, and they close the iron gate with a reverberating crash.

Erimond settles in the far corner, opposite from Abner. Leaning against the bars with his knees brought to his chest, he crouches in much the same posture as her. He glances over, then pauses before a jarred double-take. “I saw you there,” he says. “Are you not with the Inquisition? What did you do to end up in here?”

The sound of his sniveling voice makes her skin crawl. His beady eyes glaring in her direction infuriates her. Abner shifts and leans toward him, ensuring he can see the fires of damnation raging in her eyes. She speaks slowly so that the demon may understand. “I swear to the Gods...the Creators...the Ancestors...the Maker...to the Lady of the fucking Skies - If you so much as look at me again, I will tear out your eyes.”

Erimond grunts and rolls his shoulders, but looks away and does not speak another word. Abner settles back into her corner, returning her stare to the camp beyond the bars. Her eyes lock on the fires, and her imagination finds its gruesome home of burning pandemonium once again.

A distorted, shadowy figure walks from the fires, blocking her view as it approaches. Soon, she’s able to make out the shape of the dwarf who should be as angry as she, and she feels a sense of relief wash over her like icy fire. Abner crawls to the bars, wincing at the pain calling out through her body from dried-up and bloodied wounds, screaming bones, and tender bruises.

Varric shakes his head at the sight of her. “I can’t believe they have you caged up like this. Hasn’t anyone come to check on you?”

“Inquisition soldiers give no shits for someone who threatened their savior.”

Varric grunts. “Turns out Rusty wasn’t sent by the Maker. We found her memories in the Fade. She walked in while Corypheus was using that orb on the Divine. She touched it, and it caused both the explosion and the mark on her hand. No Maker. No Andraste. Just...a shitty place at a shitty time.”

“Figures.”

His eyes scan the dried blood on her skin and clothing and his expression falls even deeper than where it was. “If she knew you were being treated like this...”
Abner scoffs and spits through the bars at the dirt. “She put me here.”

“Well, you…”

Gripping the iron bars she presses her face between them. “She left him there, Varric. Of all the people who should be just as fuckin’ pissed as I am, it’s you.”

“You didn’t see it...that demon...there’s just no way…”

“He’s not dead!” she curses through gritted teeth. “How can you think he’s dead? Did you see him die?”

“I didn’t have to.”

Abner slams her palms into the bars and the cart rattles with a low hum. “Fucking bullshit!” she screams. “He’s not. I know he’s not. We have to save him!”

Dipping his head, he inches closer to the cart and drops his voice to a barely audible, raspy rumble. “The more you talk like that, Killer, the longer they are going to keep you here.” Abner’s stare burrows into Varric’s whiskey brown eyes. He sighs at her stubborn anger, pain and sadness within him causing the whiskey to glass over. “You need to...accept it.”

“I’m not giving up on him,” she says, sitting back against the bars. “Hawke wouldn’t want you doing this to yourself.”

“Oh, and he wants you to abandon him?”

“That’s not--”

“Just go,” she murmurs and looks away. The one person she thought would understand is just like the rest of them. Fools. Floundering idiots incapable of saving this world. They don’t deserve him. If roles were reversed, he’d do whatever it takes...

“Ki-- Abner, I…”

“Go,” she commands with a sore but razor sharp edge. Abner’s body then balls up into itself. She doesn’t watch him leave, instead, smears away tears before they have the chance to fall. “Fuck them. Fuck them all,” she whispers to herself. Lightly rocking, she attempts to block out the wailing in her mind and find some peace in something...perhaps sleep...

It takes a long time to drift asleep in that rotten iron cage, her wounds pinging through her body relentlessly. But when she finally finds her dreams, she also finds her hut.

Furs hang from the walls. A small fire crackles in the center. There is the faint smell of burning blood lotus drifting through the air from the augur’s hut nearby. And her heart breaks for a fraction of a second when she realizes the soft murmurings sounds in her ear are from the lips of her mother. Abner realizes she is sitting on her mother’s lap as the woman whispers stories in her ear, and she wraps her arms tightly around her warm, loving figure.

She listens to whispered tales of elves from long ago. Great Creators who cared for their people, and the tall spires of a magical city where elves were happy and free. She whispers about the deception of the Gods, how they were locked away from their people, and how that lead to the fall of the world. And she’s warned about the evil trickster that roams the dreams of children who have been naughty. The wolf, dreaded and feared, fixing to trap dreamers much like he did the Creators.
Her mother’s voice is calming. Welcomed. It matters not that she is chastising Abner to stop throwing heavy rocks at the other village children, no matter how mercilessly they’ve teased her.

She whispers her lessons in her native tongue, low enough to hide it from Avvar ears, strong enough to teach Abner who she is. “For all the pain the elves have suffered, if not for the treachery or the shem’s invasion of our lands, I would have never met your father. I would have never had you.”

There is an ache in Abner’s heart. “What if no one deserves this world anymore. What if I want to stop them all...forever?” she asks her mother and the woman stills.

“The hardships are what make us strong, da’len. We can never erase the past, nor should we. Instead, we fight to uphold what is right, not matter the cost to ourselves.”

“How do we know what is right?”

The door of their hut creaks open with the hulking figure of her father stepping inside. His smile is warm, but as he hears the Dalish words whispered, his mood sinks. “Dinasha, still yourself. If the others were to hear you…”

“Hush, Agner, the child needs to know where she comes from, no matter what your brutish shem clan thinks. I am Dalish. I am Sabrae. I will teach my daughter what I will.”

“We’ve been quiet, papa,” Abner says. She grins mischievously and shrugs up at her father. “If anyone hears, I’ve some rocks to knock the nasty outta their heads.”

Dinasha squeezes Abner’s rebellious, young arm. “Have you learned nothing from what I’ve said today?” Abner cringes through her mother’s scolding, but continues to grin at her father.

“I heard my little fighter bloodied noses today…” her father begins sternly, then smiles, kneels before them, and embraces both women in a giant hug. “What God has shown His favor on me to bless me with two such strong-willed women, eh?”

The love of her family surrounds Abner’s heart and in that moment she feels a bittersweet sense of home. She squeezes her eyes shut and relishes in the feeling. Love. True, unconditional love. All she’s ever needed she found here...in her parent’s arms. And at that moment, a breeze bursts wildly through the windows of the hut, whipping through the hanging furs, spreading ash across the floor, and circling around the three of them. But this wind is not filled with the scent of burning wood, charring meat, mystic hints of blood lotus, or anything else expected from her village’s many scents…

The air fills her lungs aggressively. The scent, different, but still familiar… A muskiness to it, with rich leather undertones, and the electric spark of... magic…

Hawke.

A message sent to her through the Fade, and at once, she remembers that she is dreaming and realizes that he is calling out to her.

He is alive.

Abner’s eyes fly open, but instead of the hut, instead of the champion, instead of anything else she could have been expecting, she is in a charred wasteland. The bodies of what were once her parents are bloodied and broken at her feet alongside many other clan members that lie limp on the ground surrounding her, remnants and pieces of darkspawn also scattered throughout.
Tears stream unrestrained from her eyes. She is about to fall to her knees and reach for her parents once more, when a rough hand grabs her arm and yanks her backwards.

A large man covered in bloody furs, yells in a booming, earth-shaking voice as he drags Abner kicking and screaming through the dirty carnage. “Cursed child! Look at what you’ve done! The Gods turned their backs on us because of your wretched birth, and now look! Our clan is destroyed by monsters! You should have never been born. Or at the very least, you should be lying dead with your treacherous father, you lousy little halfling.”

He stops dead in his tracks, turning and leveling his evil eyes with hers. “I would kill you now if the others didn’t feel some sort of misguided kinship with your father. Lucky for you, there is a man from another clan who has been interested in you for a time. Ignorant Agner refused their offerings…” He smiles wickedly at her. “But I won’t, Abner Half-Heart. Your curse is now theirs to bear.”

Suddenly, her young body is flung through darkness and lands on a hard stone floor with a sharp smack. Everything is dark around her. Black, wet, and cold. But she can sense him, barely making out the sinister shape of his dreaded body as it walks closer to her. Abner’s trembling arms push her up, watching Ofred’s menacing face as he looms over her. Eyes glowing red again, he arches his body to kick her back down.

“Fenedhis lasa!” she says with a spit from her bloodied mouth while snarling at the giant. “I welcome death as long as I bring you with me! Na din’an sahlin!”

“I thought I’d’ve beaten that Dalish filth out of you by now,” he growls.

A gust of air bursts into her lungs once again, filling her with the knowledge of Hawke. Filling her with the realization that this, too, is a dream. As Ofred arcs his hand back to bring it down upon her, she clenches her eyes shut and screams with every fiber, every inch of her hatred and frustration, and Ofred’s strike never falls.

Taking in a deep, steady breath, Abner opens her eyes. The nightmare has ceased, but she is still in the Fade, finding herself in an eerily familiar moonglade. Blades of tall grass rustle in a light breeze, and a milky glow washes over everything from a lazy moon.

“Tell me, what have the humans ever done for you?” a silky voice purrs from behind her. She turns to see the Fadewalker in all his mystic savagery. His fingers idly playing with a tiny glass orb, flitting it around in a small elegant dance. Through dark, draping dreadlocks, his eyes peer at her - a subtle glow to them, almost as milky as the moon.

She does not answer and instinctively keeps her breathing even, waiting for his motives.

“Your Elvhen blood is so much stronger in you,” he continues. A sly and crooked smirk glides up his cheek. “Normally, I frown on the mingling. Human blood tends to erase the evidence of Elves.” His fingers snatch the clear, sparkling orb into a closed fist and he leans down closer to her. “But not you.” His slender dark hand slowly snakes through the damp night air and flicks at the shell of her ear. “If not for these, there’d barely be proof at all.”

Abner furrows her brow and swats his hand away. “What do you want?”

The Fadewalker’s grin evens out on both sides and he spins on his heel, walking away casually through the tall grasses. Turning his head to his shoulder and twining his arms behind his back, he says, “I warned you to be wary of that mage-boy pet of yours. Now it seems your humans have left your pet behind. How does that make you feel?”
Abner slowly follows him through the clearing, watching him through suspicious eyes. “They tell me to let go.”

“And?”

“All I see is evil and egos. Hypocrisy and death. I feel like I want it all black.”

He turns back toward her, stopping them both. “So I ask again, what have humans ever done for you?”

“Do you know where he is? How to get to him?”

He ignores the question. His smug grin settled confidently on his face, he raises one eyebrow and waits.

Abner sighs. “They’ve taken everything.”

“Oh, but you’ve yet to unlock your potential. If you feel broken, it is because a part of you aches for what was. But that can change. You can be whole.” A single finger slides below her chin, confidently lifting it up to him. “What if I told you, we could rise up? Bring the world back to how it was meant to be, and bring glory back to our kind. No more taint and humans to take us apart. All you need to do is leave the human behind, and in turn, embrace the Elvhen.”

“Yer mad.”

The Fadewalker releases her chin and produces the small orb again. With a pass of his other hand, the orb changes from clear glass, to a larger, darker, textured orb with a green-glowing light weaving though ridges much like those found on a fingertip. She watches, mesmerized as the dark thing turns above his flat palm. “With this, we can bring back the days of Arlathan.”

“That’s…” Abner dares to reach toward the glowing magic. “That’s the orb Corpheus…”

Before she can finish, before she can touch it, the Fadewalker snatches it away and makes it disappear, startling Abner and releasing her from its trance.

“A mistake,” he scoffs, his face now fallen into one of disgust. “He doesn’t know how to use such magic. He should have been destroyed by it.” Mumbling under his breath, he stares down at the ground and says, “He would have never discovered it, had I known.”

He looks at her again, grinning. “We can get it back. We must get it back. It belongs with the Elves.” He places a hand on either of her shoulders. “You have a strong connection with the Fade, can’t you feel it? Imagine a world wherein you were never separated from it. You belong here. Elves belong here. We can bring it back.”

Abner holds her breath and stares at the man. It was him. Whoever he is, he started all of this. She studies him closer and everything rushes in at once, hitting her so hard that if not for his hands on her shoulders, she may have fallen over.

Her voice is soft, breathless. The word, “Fen’Harel,” sounds almost like the rustling grass, as if the grasses have been whispering it to her all along.

“I have many names, but yes, some know me as thus.”

This man… the trickster… he is too dangerous… too powerful… Abner’s mind stretches and contracts and stretches and contracts while trying to comprehend how her mother’s old stories could
have been real. “You...trapped the Creators?”

Fen’Harel sighs with a roll of his eyes. “The Dalish have many things wrong with their history. I removed tyrants, traitors, threats against true Elvhen.”

She listens as he boasts, releasing her from his grasp to pace through the moonglade and tell her stories of that old magical city and how it had become corrupted. He tells her how they can bring back the world without the corrupt and that their people can be magnificent once again, rather than kicked and beaten, or slaughtered for their mere existence.

She watches him as he rants and dreams, trying to convince her of what she could have, what she could be. As the reality and gravity of the situation slowly settles in, as Abner puts fragmented pieces together in her mind, she realizes that no matter what she wants, no matter what the Thedas of now deserves, or what the Thedas of before was, she must keep a watch on this man. If not her, than he will find others. Perhaps he has. Perhaps he has been building an army of rebellion within the dreams of those he deems worthy...or manipulable. He is obviously powerful, if he is who he says he is. If he is who she thinks he is. Is he a God? A protector? Or is he a ruiner. Another being set to destroy the world for his own personal gains.

A man like this is dangerous if left unchecked, and advantageous if he is the one instead, manipulated...

“How am I supposed to help you?” she asks, cutting him off from his speech. If she works this delicately, perhaps she can find a path to Hawke and save Thedas at the same time, either from itself...or from a wolf. No matter the cost, no matter what it does to her, she must dig and scheme and fight for what is right.

Fen’Harel turns to her with a smile. “I cannot walk the lands as freely as you,” he responds, “and through the Inquisition, you can get close enough to Corypheus to steal back the orb.” He produces the round glowing image of the magical artifact between them again, its green glow reflecting off their skin and surging in their eyes. “You need to tell them what they want to hear, get back in their trust and work alongside the highly-ranked once again.”

“I’m in a cage.”

“Yet, you know what they want. Use them as they’ve used you.”

*Or...use them all.*

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the length of time it took me to write this. This was the most difficult chapter to date.
Chapter Summary

What is that trickster up to, anyway?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You put so much faith into yet another human?"

Flemeth laughs the rich, graveded laugh Fen’Harel has come to expect from his old friend since he woke from his long slumber. He watches as the wrinkles on her human form’s skin compress, forming a roadmap of centuries he’d missed.

“Oh, my dear wolf,” she says as her laughter calms. “Sanctimonious, are we? What of your little half breed?”

He frowns. “She is more Elvhen than the entirety of the Dalish.”
She laughs again. If it was not for the fact that the sound is directed at him, he would almost enjoy it. “The girl has spunk, I’ll give you that. But I will say this, your attraction has clouded your vision.”

His frown deepens and he feels his eyes glow, sending his annoyance to pierce through her. It is a reaction that he knows, however, has no effect. “She will serve a purpose,” he says curtly.

“Mmm,” she hums and Stares off into the Fade in the direction of the ever-present Black City. “Yes. As will he.” They stand silently for a moment before she turns her gaze back to him. “And the Inquisitor?”

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

“Let us hope that works out better for you this time.”

“The girl can succeed where the Inquisitor fails.” She is his strongest contingency plan. If Izzalea fails -- if he fails -- he needs her to infiltrate anything in their way to get the orb, and then help him lead his forces into a better future.

Flemeth sighs, head tipping downward with a subtle shake from side to side. “You should not have given your orb to Corypheus.”

Fen’Harel’s heart pings as the sadness and regret of a millennium pulls at him. “I was too weak to unlock it after my slumber...”

Flemeth’s gauntleted hand reaches for him as she pulls their foreheads together. “You can succeed, Dread Wolf.”

Fen’Harel closes his eyes and sighs with all the gravity of the world on his shoulders. He feels a wisp of air against his skin as his friend disappears from the Fade. And with a flick of his fingers, he steps through the Fade’s rocky facade where they had met, and enters the moonglade where he often calls upon the girl.

He conjures a reflection of her before him. He watches the way she tilts her head as he speaks. Watches as her lower lip is drawn into her mouth while she thinks. He stares at those lips for a little too long, feeling his throat call out in thirst before regaining control of himself and wipes the reflection away. His friend is wrong. She has not clouded his vision. It is not an attraction to the girl that has brought his sights onto her. If anything, she simply reminds him of himself. The man he was so long ago. The man who lead a rebellion. Hot blooded and cocky, always ready to fight.

He peers into a quiet stream beside his feet, the mirror of that younger self staring back him. The version of himself he’s presented in order to reach her and gain her trust. He sees her imagine again, approaching him in that stream’s reflection. She stares at him with all the raw power and determination he knows she embodies.

With a single finger, she redirects his reflection’s jaw toward her and arches upward to place a soft kiss on his lips. Then, both images turn their gaze, looking back at him. Staring into him with the strength of a united front. The protectors of the People.

The Dread Wolf and his Dread Heart...

A premonition? A desire? Perhaps someday…a reality? Fen’Harel scowls at the water’s message, whatever its meaning, and walks from the bank back into the tall grasses of the glade. No matter what he has grown to feel for her, it is more than that. He’s watched her for months. Her passion is undeniable. Like moth to flame he was drawn to her. As he learned of her story, he saw more and more evidence of their kindred spirits and her value to his cause.
His plan had been to convert her slowly. Gain her trust. But with the events after Adamant, he had to seize his opportunity to show her that this world she hated so purely, could be brought to justice and returned to its rightful state. In her dreams, he witnessed a land of flame, a woman no longer able to forgive. So he showed her again, reminded her of what came before, and fed the fire in her heart. He needs her angry. Vengeful. Tenacious.

Night after night he stokes her flame. Visiting her with the truth of the world. Presenting her with the days of Arlathan and the glory of the Elvhen people. Reinforces her trust in spirits and how she was always meant to be with them, rather than separated. She has always cared for the downtrodden and sought death for their oppressors. There are no more downtrodden than the elves.

“The People... they need us,” he had said to her, and she nodded.

“I understand,” she said.

Fen’Harel’s mind filter’s back to the one challenge in Abner’s recruitment. Hawke. Her weakness. The man had almost ruined that first night with his attempts to push through to her dreams. His attempts to demolish the walls Fen’Harel had built around her while he brought forth her darkest memories, her provocation for change.

He has since attempted to reach her again, but Fen’Harel guards her dreams ever the more carefully. Hawke is more dumb luck than true magical talent, so his attempts have been met with easy failure.

If Abner were to know for sure that Hawke survived, if she were lose the one thing that had tipped the scales in Fen’Harel’s favor, she could be lost forever. And now, he has laid himself bare to her. It is a risk he cannot take.

She must stay angry.

Fen’Harel feels the pull of the waking world. He hears the distant sounds of camp bustling around him rather than the soft whispers of the grasses in the glade.

Reluctantly, he opens his eyes to the bright light of the morning sun filtering through a breach in the canvas of his tent. He sits up, stretching the muscles of his older, seasoned body as he does.

Rubbing the top of his head, he exhales a weighted sound through his nose. The long thick locks of hair, gone and replaced with nothing, for now he is no longer Fen’Harel. No longer the rebel leader, the promise for the People.

Now he is Solas.

The stoic mage who knows nothing more than what he has witnessed in the Fade.

Solas reaches for the wolf jaw he wears around his neck. The one adornment he allows himself in this strange world of humans and short lives and ignorance. The one piece of himself that he keeps close. A reminder of what this is all for.

He wraps his feet and steps out of his tent. The smell of campfires and primitive stews fill the air along with the sounds of clanging metal and dreary morning voices. He walks through the camp as it is torn down for the day’s journey. Off to find some silence on the outskirts so that he may stretch and bend his old muscles -- a practice he has perfected to keep him limber, no matter how many centuries pass by.

As he walks toward the edge of camp, he sees the girl outside of the cage the Inquisition has kept her in for days. Sitting on a crate, a lazy guard barely watching her on either side, a blonde healer checks
on Abner’s wounds. A crooked smile on her face, he can tell she is flirting with the healer. A small bud of pride flourishes, she has taken his advice to appear as if she is calming from the rage that festers within her. Slowly, day after day, she gives the Inquisition a little more proof that she is no danger.

He watches as she returns to the jail cart with no contest. Something she says even makes one of the guards laugh, and Solas turns from his intended course to seek out the Inquisitor.

Finding the woman overseeing some early morning sparring next to her commander, Solas clears his throat beside her to gain her attention.

Izzalea turns and smiles at him, a faint trace of sweat glistening on her forehead. Her red hair is pulled back, showing beads of her perspiration clinging to her neck. “Good morning, Solas.” She nods respectfully, her noble upbringing always present in her mannerisms, no matter how dirty, bloody, or worn her appearance. “Anything interesting in the Fade last night?”

He allows the softest lift to his expression. “Nothing of note, Inquisitor.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t be so formal with me all of the time. We’ve been through it together, haven’t we? Can’t you just call me Izzy?”

“I suppose you are correct. I will try.” She winks at him and turns her attention back to the sparring men in front of her. “I was hoping I could discuss a matter with you, if you are able to spare a moment,” he says, urging back her attention.

Izzalea’s brows pinch and she turns fully toward him. “Of course. What is it, Solas?”

“It’s a matter of your agent. Abner.”

Cullen’s groan from the other side of Izzalea causes her to roll her eyes. “Don’t mind him. He has a headache. What about Abner?”

“It is my understanding, through observations and the little I know of the woman, that she poses no real threat to you. If I may ask, what are your plans for her?”

She sighs and shifts her weight to one side, crossing her arms. “I really hate having her in there…”

“It’s for the best,” Cullen’s gruff voice is heard from behind her.

“I have no intention of keeping her locked up,” Izzalea adds firmly, speaking more to the commander than to Solas.

“I remember the days of being young and angry. There was a time or two when I let my passion get the better of me. The challenge of a great fighter is to find the balance between passion and talent. I believe she can obtain that balance and be a large asset to you as your strongest agent.”

Izzalea chews on his words a moment. Pursing her lips she looks in the direction of the jail cart. “I agree with you, Solas.”

“Maker preserve me,” Cullen groans as he moves to show his face beside Izzalea. “Can we at least wait until we are back at Skyhold to discuss this? It is hard enough ensuring your safety during this march without allowing an individual who threatened your life to walk freely through it.”

“Relax, I will be leaving the march soon enough anyway. I need to investigate that...that...Shrine of Dumat, or whatever.”
“Ever the more reason to keep her where she is,” Cullen insists. Solas can feel his irritation for the man’s intrusion bubble in the back of his throat, but he keeps his demeanor flat.

“If you are wrong,” Cullen continues, looking between the two of them. “And if she were to slip out to come after you…” He sighs and pinches his forehead. “At the very least, allow Leliana to assess the woman before you let her free?”

“Fine,” Izzalea says. “Solas, will that work for you?”

“If that is what you think is best.”

“It is,” Cullen grunts, and Solas uses all of his years of experience to control the temper that begs to be unleashed.

“Well, then. Who am I to argue with the Commander of the Inquisition?” Solas directs his vision to Izzalea and nods his head. “Thank you for your time, Inquisitor. If you will excuse me.”

He leaves before either of them can say another word, resuming his walk through camp to find that quiet space beyond. He needs his solitude now, more than before. His mind already searching for what he could do, how he could manipulate this... bring his plan back on course.

He walks far from the noise of the army, contemplating what needs to take place in order for the Inquisition to officially trust their agent again.

...Bring *his* agent back into their fold.
Notes, comments, flailing, fights...all welcomed and encouraged. Thanks for reading!

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It may take me a minute to get the next chapter up because I need to do some refreshing of some lore/events/and all of that for the next bit. But I will try to be diligent! Thanks for sticking around <3

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FYI, if you'd like an extra "awwwww!" about Delrin and Aurora during their journey back to Skyhold, Kagetsukai wrote a sweet little piece about them!

Read it here: Can you feel the love tonight?
Breaking Down & Snapping

Chapter Notes

OOooo has it really been a couple of months? Sorry about that! I couldn't get in the right headspace, and then, of course, I started another story. If trauma, murder, mystery, angst, and all that dark shit is your thing (which it could be since you read my work anyway??) Come on over and check out my 10 chapter mini fic that is a Jack the Ripper and Kirkwall Mash Up. Completely canon divergent and set in an alternate Kirkwall that is heavily influenced by Victorian London. If you're interested, you can find it here: Nemesis of Neglect. So far I have 5 chapters and a prologue up, only 5 more to go!
Hope to see you there!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

-In Love, Serenity-

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

Breaking Down & Snapping

-Izzalea-

The Western Approach took its toll on Izzalea, and it took it hard. She is exhausted due to more than lack of sleep, she is exhausted in her soul. Her entire spirit is weighted. Its brittle spirit bones crack
under the pressure of the endless, endless bullshit.

During the Inquisition’s return march, she was given word that Corypheus had a secret hidden in an old Tevinter temple. Traveling through the sands and away from her army, Izzalea discovered an old man, Magister Erasthenes, trapped in a magical prison. He was living in torture while Corypheus drained him of his knowledge and wisdom against and for his Venatori Leader, Calpernia. A complex web of lies, deception, and manipulation was discovered to the point where Izzalea began to feel sympathy for the former slave woman. “She just wants to help her homeland...and this monster has tricked her into thinking he will actually do that,” Izzalea had murmured to herself.

Izzalea’s exterior cracked more by the day. The more shit that was thrown into her lap, the more the young warrior learned that life was not black and white. There were no ‘good guys versus bad guys.’ There were only people. All of these sad, broken people.

She’d always lived under the guise that whoever was on the other side of her shield was evil and deserved their fate, but now, aside from the monster that is Corypheus, she grows more confused by the individual motives in this entire mess. In her eyes, Calpernia is no evil mage. She is merely a desperate woman duped by a despicable entity. Calpernia’s motives seem just, while her actions are flawed.

When she rode back to the the main body of her marching army, Izzalea found herself thinking that perhaps she is not as equipped to handle this mess as she once thought. It is not as cut-and-dry as find Corypheus and kill him along with his followers. It is so much more complex than that for her now. With every decision she’s made, someone gets hurt. The pain she causes in those she cares about weighs on her the most. Hawke sacrificed himself for her. Alistair now stalks around, a shell of a man he once was, muttering about what he will tell Weisshaupt and that he should leave for the Anderfels soon. Her inner circle is tense and breaking. One of which is even locked in Izzalea’s jail carts, a fact that plagues the battle raging in her mind. Part of her wants to start over. Change things. But another part knows she’d just mess things up a different way.

With each passing day she loses faith in herself. A faith that had been so strong, effervescent even, before they ever stepped a single foot into the Western Approach...

In rejoining the army at the edge of the desert, they all discover that Orlias had erupted into a devastating civil war. Town after town, village after village, family after family were torn asunder. The wreckage piled through the Dales. The death filled the forests.

With the help of endless ravens flying tirelessly through the fray to her, to skyhold, to Halamshiral, and to the battlefront itself, they managed to negotiate a cease fire. Empress Celene’s cousin, General to her army, and primary aggressor in the war agreed to end his attacks on her lands and meet with her for peace talks.

Again, Izzalea left the majority of her army in order to investigate, taking her most trusted fighters with her through the devastation. They attempted to pick up what pieces they could, and put an end to the weak spots demons managed to exploit during the chaos. It took weeks of constant travel, constant fighting, constant stress.

Izzalea’s entire team is now beaten down, but none so much as her.

Sitting around a small fire, their journey’s end in sight, Izzalea stares at the latest missive from Skyhold in her hands. The fire light behind the paper makes it glow, fibers thicker in some areas compared to others give it a pleasant muddled appearance.

Her army arrived in Skyhold. Abner was placed in a cell below the keep. And Josephine managed to
use Izzalea’s military background to secure a place for the Inquisition in Orlia’s peace talks.

“We’re going to a ball,” Izzalea says, voice low, raspy, and tired. She balls up the missive and tosses it into the fire, then leans herself by her elbows onto her knees.

Dorian arches one eyebrow and glances over to her. “Seems like an odd time for such a thing,” he says.

“It’s the peace talks. For some reason the Empress wishes to disguise them as a ball. I have been invited to be a guest of Duke Gaspard’s. Josie worked some of her magic on him, I suppose. I guess he thinks that since we are both warriors, I will sympathize with him and his reasonings for starting this war.”

“And do you?” Dorian asks.

“Maker preserve me. I don’t know, Dorian,” she replies and hangs her head. “I don’t know anything anymore. But no matter what, we need to be there. When I was in Therinfal Redoubt I uncovered a plot of Corypheus’ to murder Empress Celene. I have to ensure that does not happen. Keeping her safe during a ball sounds...so fucking ideal.” Izzalea runs the heels of her hands over her eyes, creating a grinding motion as if she could possibly grind some sense and answers into her head.

“We should be able to make it to Skyhold tomorrow night if we push. We can make more sense of it then,” she adds and stands. Each muscle in her body whines in the action, and a few joints quietly crack. “Rest as best as you can tonight, my friend. Who knows what shit-storm awaits us tomorrow.” She nods at Dorian and he tips his head in return before she trudges to her small tent in the middle of the thick Orlia forest.

The next morning, they rise before dawn and pack their horses. Iron Bull cooks a quick hot meal in the chilly morning darkness, and then they set toward the mountains. They are troubled by a group of bandits on the way, but nothing serious, and no one else attempts attacks once they’re on the steep mountain passages. As they climb through the rocky landscape, the temperature steadily drops, but the dry, cold air is welcomed by Izzalea after what felt like years in the scorching desert followed by weeks in a humid-hot forest.

Before the sun sets, she thinks she can pick out the outline of Skyhold’s towers in the distance. They decide to skip an evening meal in the hopes to arrive home before the next day breaks. They make it, slowly trudging across the keep’s bridge after nightfall, but before most have gone to bed. They can hear songs and cheers filter from the tavern, Izzalea watches the soft glow emanating from Cullen’s office windows, and the large stained glass windows of the Great Hall shine to the tired travelers like a beacon.

They are met with bells ringing upon their arrival, and the stable hands quickly take their horses and gear away for tending. Izzalea yawns and stretches while she watches Leliana steadily approach. The spymaster suggests an evening council meeting to go over the timeline in preparation for the impending ball in Halamshiral, and Izzalea sleepily agrees. If nothing else, she will see Cullen before she falls into her bed, and he is definitely one of the few positives in her life right now.

However, when Cullen enters the the war room, Izzalea is not delighted. She is not overcome with relief in seeing his face, for he appears to be in his worst shape yet. His steps are slow, labored, and heavy. His eyes are sunken-in with the purple darkness of night surrounding them. Beads of sweat cling to his forehead and upper lip, and his normally well managed hair is straggled and haphazard. Instinctively, Izzalea knows that his withdrawals are worsening. Though when she goes to him and urges him to sit, he waves her off, insisting that he looks worse than he is.
“It is just the exhaustion of battle and travel, Inquisitor. I will feel better tomorrow,” he says and rounds the war table to his normal position.

Izzalea barely listens to Josephine and Leliana as they inform her of the news since their last missive. She flits her hand at them when they try to discuss the ball, who should attend, and what they should wear. “Whatever you two think is best, I’m sure is perfect,” she says dismissively, because as they talk her eyes are locked on Cullen.

He leans heavily on his sword. The wrinkles in his forehead are deep in concentration, and he sways tiny movements as sweat drips down his neck. Every time he speaks, he must clear his throat first, and even then his voice is not but razzled gravel crunching through his chest and neck.

Josephine points to a drawing of some kind of armored evening gown on her clipboard. “I think perhaps something that is gilded and flowing while also battle ready would be the most--”

Izzalea raises her hand at the ambassador, eyes not leaving Cullen’s figure. “I’m going to have to stop you right there, Josie. Cullen? Go to bed. Perhaps in an empty guest room so you don’t have to climb that blasted ladder of yours. I’m not sure I trust you to make it up the rungs.” She glances at the other women on either side of the table, “We can reconvene tomorrow afternoon. It’s late.”

They nod and begin to file toward the doors, Izzalea leading the way so that she may hold the door open for Cullen as he passes and then follow him, when she hears a crash behind her.

Spinning on her heel, his name rips from her throat upon finding Cullen lying limp on the floor. A few pieces of armor have broken off and spin on the stone, clanging and ringing in an echoed song of calamity.

She rushes toward him, falling on her knees and yelling for Josie to fetch a healer. Her mind is spinning, a whirling dervish much like the fallen armor, and tears fall easily from her eyes as she lifts Cullen’s shoulders onto her lap. His neck lies limp on her thigh and his jaw is lax and open. She shakes him and begs for him to open his eyes. Everything around her feels slow, blurred, and surreal. Her own voice is a distant echo from herself while she pleads for him to wake.

A healer soon rushes in and checks his pulse. He still breathes and his heart weakly beats. Leliana follows with two large scouts on her tail. She suggests they move the Commander to a bed. The hall is empty beyond the war room doors, but some Skyhold inhabitants still mill around the grounds in the late night.

“As few people as possible should be aware of the Commander’s condition,” Leliana says. Her posture is the complete juxtaposition from that of Izzalea’s. While Izzalea kneels and cries, Leliana stands tall and firm, her icy stare matching her flat, controlled tone. “We cannot risk a panic until we know what is happening.”

“Take him to my room. It’s the closest and I can keep an eye on him,” Izzalea says through sniffs. She watches as if trapped in one of Corypheus’ nightmares while the two large agents grunt and lift Cullen’s limp body into their arms.

“Good idea. We can control who enters and witnesses from there,” Leliana says with a sharp nod. The men carry Cullen through the war room doors and down the hallway past Josephine’s office with Leliana leading the way.

Izzalea follows close behind, and as they climb the stairs of her tower she is both relieved and heartbroken to hear weak little groans rumble from Cullen’s lips. She watches him grimace, though his eyes remain shut, and she silently prays to the Maker that her love will recover from whatever this
Once in her bedroom, they strip him down to his tunic and breeches, and place him carefully into her bed. Izzalea sits at the bedside while Josephine brings cool water and a cloth to blot away Cullen’s fever. Izzalea takes the task seriously and wipes away a few stray tears while she dabs the cloth across his forehead. The healer examines him, but is ultimately unable to do anything.

“It is surely the lyrium, your worship. There is nothing I can do but help you attack the fever and pray the Maker shows mercy on his soul.”

“Thank you,” Izzalea whispers, her cloth wiping down Cullen’s skin in the most tender and wishful way possible. “Please, take your leave. I will call on you again in the morning.”

One by one, the others in the room disappear down the stairs of her tower, leaving her alone with Cullen. She wraps her hands around one of his and prays while pressing his fingers to her lips. She sits there like that as the minutes slowly drift through the night, and until Cullen finally stirs. He opens his eyes and groans in obvious pain, but it takes all that Izzalea has to not jump and celebrate the moment she sees his amber eyes gazing upon her once more.

“Izzalea…” he says weakly. She squeezes his hand, looking down at him with a warm, worried smile. “I should be taking it.”

“Taking what, Cullen?” she whispers into his fingertips.

“Lyrium. I should be taking it.”

“Do you think that will help? You wanted to leave all of that behind,” she says. It pains her to say it. If lyrium is what would stop his suffering, she would gladly provide him all of the lyrium in Thedas. But her conscience weighs on her to not push him down a road he so desperately wanted to leave. The drug may only be a band aid for now, and rather than curing him, would only mask a slow descent into madness with perceived virility.

“I am failing you,” he says.

“Never,” she replies and kisses his knuckles. “I will support you in anything, Cullen.”

“I refuse to give the Inquisition less than I gave the Chantry. I should be taking it.” He groans and thrashes before going rigid. His eyes clench and he moans through the pain accosting his body. All Izzalea can do is watch, horrified.

“If lyrium is what you truly want, I will not stop you. But please don’t walk down that path again only because you think I want it.”

Cullen peers at her, his whiskey eyes shining in the low candle light of her bedroom. He pulls his hand from hers, warily strokes a tear from her cheek, and smiles a pained little thing. He parts his lips as if to say something, but loses the strength. His hand slides back down to the bed and his eyes shut. Izzalea feels a panic strike her chest, though she tries her best to stay calm and monitor his slowly beating heart and deep, labored breaths.

She stays by his side as he drifts in and out of consciousness throughout the night. At times he dreams and speaks to old demons, thrashing and hollering through tense muscles. Other times he lies still, simply sleeping and sweating as she combats his fever. The most relieving is when he briefly opens his eyes to speak to her, but she battles the urge to give him the very drug that is killing him to begin with.
She is losing him. She knows it, and she feels powerless to stop it. While she sits by his side, her mind races as to what she could do outside of lyrium to save this man. This beautiful, stubborn, amazing man to which she feels herself falling so deeply in love. She’d never opened her heart to anyone before, but this man needed no opening. He walked right in without resistance. At once he makes her feel respected, equalled, and cared for. He quickly became everything to her. Images of him in her mind keeps her fighting, keeps her warm, keeps her holding on to her last shreds of sanity. If she is to lose him now, before she has the opportunity to really tell him, really show him how she feels… Before she has the chance to truly live with the man with whom she thinks she’d be happy to spend the rest of her days…

It will destroy her.

As the sun crests the mountain tops, and the sounds of Skyhold filter through the air and into her high tower, Izzalea leans forward and kisses Cullen’s forehead. “I will not give up without a fight,” she says softly.

Perhaps it is her mounting exhaustion, or perhaps it is purely her determination, but Izzalea thinks she has a plan. As much of a plan as she can have at this moment, but it’s something to build on, at the very least.

She rises from the bedside and straightens her tunic. Inhaling a deep breath, she steadies herself and her perseverance, and marches down the stone steps of her tower. She follows her feet with conviction, padding through the hall and up the stairs to the library until she lands in front of the mage Aurora.

The blonde woman raises her eyes from a tome on the table before her and stares up at Izzalea with a deep furrow in her brow. Her voice comes out hoarse and shaky, “Inquisitor?”

Izzalea stands tall, towering over the woman. A stance that she knows is intimidating and therefore exploits it. “Aurora,” she says with command. “You are one of most knowledgeable of our researchers, are you not?”

There is a pause and a visible gulp chokes down the mage’s throat. “You have many great researchers in your employ, Inquisitor.”

“But you grew up in a circle. You have and have had close relations with Templars,” Izzalea says. “Do you know anything about lyrium?”

“Well, yes I know a little…” Aurora hesitates.

“Do you know how to rid it from the body?”

Aurora’s brows lift and her blue eyes widen as if becoming the sky themselves. She clears her throat and fiddles with the binding of the book in front of her. “Lyrium is in the bones of the Templars. It infuses itself into the marrow and the very structure of the body.”

“Yes, but can we get it out?”

She shifts nervously in her seat. “I...I have read theories...but they’re just that, theories. Few have the power to complete the task without immense risk.”

“Tell me these theories, Aurora,” Izzalea commands.

Aurora shuts the tome and drums her fingers on its cover. She takes a deep breath before returning her attention to Izzalea. “The main theory I’ve considered is that one could possibly force the lyrium
from the body while simultaneously healing the injuries it leaves behind. However, it would require truly immense power, more power than your standard mage, Inquisitor.”

Izzalea crosses her arms and stares down at the woman trapped in her gaze. “You have that kind of power, Aurora. I’ve seen it myself.”

A tiny gasp chokes the mage and she coughs. “Inquisitor, no! I am no healer! My talents are only good for killing.” She drops her eyes and wrings her hands. “Which is why I’ve hid it all this time.”

Izzalea slams her palms on the table, leaning over the woman and snarling. “You have the power to force out the lyrium! Do not deny it, mage!”

Her voice cracks and she leans back in her chair as far as she can, away from Izzalea’s aggression. “I do not have the power to heal what is left behind!”

“So we have a healer by your side.”

“Inquisitor, if I push harder than a healer can heal, I would cause damage that could not be repaired fast enough.” She pauses and stills her trembling hands. Closing her eyes, she breathes steady and deep. “Pushing out the lyrium with the force it requires,” she continues calmly, “would leave the body too weak and brittle to survive. If a healer was not strong enough to follow my path precisely, the patient would die, your Worship. The only way we could ever possibly do it safely is if my force was accompanied by an equally powerful healer.”

Izzalea stands straight again. “What about Solas? He is a talented healer.”

“Talented, yes, but I don’t know that he is powerful enough. I wouldn’t want to risk it. Have you witnessed him perform feats of healing in the same way as...as...what you saw of me at Adamant?”

“The patient will die whether or not you think it’s worth the risk.”

Aurora steels herself and a cold edge befalls her. “So you’re willing to end his life sooner, on a hunch?”

Izzalea glares at the woman for her brazen resistance. Through clenched teeth, she says, “Is there a healer with the strength you would feel comfortable with, Aurora?”

Aurora glances to the side, fixing her stare out a library window. “There’s only one healer still living, that I am aware of, who would be powerful enough. But Izzalea,” she says glaring back at her with fiery eyes. “He’s been missing for years.”

“Who?”

Aurora crosses her arms defiantly. “He is too dangerous.”

Izzalea leans down to the woman and speaks in a growl low enough that only the mage could possibly hear. “Maker preserve me, Aurora, if you do not tell me who it is, I will put you in irons. I may have sided with you at Adamant, but I can use that power you wield against you. Your protection is not guaranteed.”

Aurora bores holes into Izzalea, but they do no damage, and she slams her fists on the table. “Tell me, Aurora!!” she hollers and the entire tower falls quiet.

“Lers !” she yells, but then swiftly softens her voice again. “It’s Anders, Inquisitor, but...no one knows where he is.”
Izzalea stands, once again towering over the woman. “Someone does. Come with me. Now.” Aurora stands from her seat and follows her down to the main level of the keep. Izzalea ignores a disapproving look from Dorian as they pass.

Once in the Great Hall, Izzalea finds Varric leaning on the stone wall by the hearth he has claimed as his own. Before he can speak, Izzalea snatches him by the wrist and drags him through the congregating nobles in the hall, ignoring stares and calls out for her attention. She marches the two people into the war room, slamming the door behind them.

“Where is he Varric?” she demands, arms crossed and expression stern.

Varric mirrors her posture and tips his head to the side. “Where’s who?”

“Anders.”

Varric groans and leans a hip against the war table while rubbing his forehead. “What?” he asks incredulously. “You know I don’t know that. What is going on here?”

“I know you know where he is. I don’t care what you have to tell him, but get him here - quickly,” Izzalea insists, taking slow deliberate steps toward the dwarf.

Varric sneers at her and shrugs his shoulders. “Even if I did know where he was, why would I do that? You people left Hawke to die in the fade. I may not like Anders, but I won’t lure him to his death.”

Izzalea grunts and glares at the silent blonde in the corner. “Aurora, tell him what you told me.”

Aurora sighs and steps forward, explaining her theory for ridding a Templar of lyrium. Varric listens to it all silently, but rubs his temples and shakes his head while the mage explains. When she finishes, Izzalea adds, ‘Get him here. I want him here by the time we are back from Halamshiral. Do you understand?’

“What makes you think he will even be willing to help? The man and his spirit are not exactly the biggest fans of Templars.”

“Cullen helped him in the end, did he not? He certainly did not go after the man once he fled. I’m sure there can be...persuading,” Izzalea says.

Varric stares up at her. “This is for Curly?” Izzalea nods and he groans loudly while pacing the room and continuing to shake his head. “And if Blondie comes. If he helps. Then what are you going to do to him?”

“His identity will be kept secret,” she says and she means it. She thinks she means it, anyway. She feels a little out of control of herself at the moment and can’t be sure what she will do next, but she must do something. Cullen’s life depends on it. “No harm will come to him while he is under the Inquisition’s care. I promise,” she says, though it ticks at her conscience.

Varric scoffs and stares at her. “You can’t promise that.”

Her loss of control over herself expands violently and she finds herself snapping and screaming without thinking. “I’m the fucking Inquisitor, Varric!”

“Tell that to Hawke and Abner!” he yells back.

Izzalea stalks towards the dwarf and towers over him, staring daggers into his seemingly unbreakable
resolve. “Hawke knew the risks. He knew what he was getting into.”

“Right,” Varric says, staring up at her unshaken. “That makes me feel better.”

She’s had enough. She knows the dwarf knows how to contact the man. “Just fucking do it Varric, or so help me…” She shakes her head and slams a fist onto the war table. The markers upon it jump, some topple over. “Just do it.” Before he can air his defiance toward her any longer, Izzalea storms from the room, slamming the door and leaving the other two behind.

All she can see is red as she marches her anger through the keep and back to her room. She doesn’t hear the nobles call to her, she doesn’t hear Josephine’s frantic voice, she doesn’t even notice that while she climbs the steps of her tower, she is not alone. It is not until she slams her fists into the bookshelf behind her desk that she realizes she - and Cullen’s sleeping, fevered form - are not the only ones in her room.

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“Sister?” Azzedine says softly. It startles her and she jumps when she feels her brother’s gentle touch on her shoulder.

Izzalea spins around, bumping her back into the bookcase. “Azzedine,” she says. Her voice comes out like a haunting and the red in her vision vanishes like it was all just a nightmare. Her feelings are quickly replaced with the bubbling of sorrow and she bites her lip hard to keep from crying.

“Izzalea, what’s going on? You have been screaming and storming around. I’ve never seen you this way.” He glances behind him at Cullen. “And why is the Commander in your bed looking feverish?”

Izzalea attempts to take steady breaths, but the more she tries the more ragged they become until she is hyperventilating and crumbling to the floor. A flood of emotions overtakes her brain and her chest feels as if her ribs had been ripped apart.

Azzedine sinks to the floor beside her and wraps his arms around her shoulders, pulling her head to rest on his chest. He shushes her as the only sounds she can seem to make turn into to wails that accompany the buckets of liquid pouring from her face. It is not just her eyes, everything is wet and leaking and a maker-damned mess. Her brother gently rocks her and whispers small pleas for her to breathe and to calm down.

“Tell me what’s happened, Izzy,” he says.

She manages to choke a few syllables from between her cries. “Everything is wrong. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

“It seems to me that you’ve been doing your best. Are you not returning from a victorious battle? Did you not help facilitate a cease fire on a civil war directly after?” She feels him smile against her head. “Give yourself some credit, Izz. You’re winning.”

Izzalea sits up and wipes tears and snot from her face. “At the expense of what?” She gestures to Cullen. “Everyone I care about is being destroyed in the process. You think I am returning from victory?” She shakes her head. “Fuck no. I screwed that up so terribly that I was thrown into the Fade, and one of us stayed behind just so I could get out. Me. Not because I’m a good leader. Not because I’m Andraste’s chosen champion.”

Izzalea rips off the glove she keeps on her left hand and shoves the glowing scar across it in into her brother’s face. “It is because of this! I’m the only one with it. I’m the loser that happened to get it. And now I’m responsible for thousands of lives, but I don’t deserve it, and I just keep making it
“You’re being a bit dramatic. You’re at war. There are casualties. I thought you were more pragmatic than this, sister.”

“I can’t. I can’t do it. Not if it means turning my back on my friends. If I had had my fucking eyes open, I would have seen that Cullen was dying. I could have done something sooner to help him, but I’ve been so caught up in my own glory that I took advantage of his stubbornness and did nothing.”

A tear falls down her cheek. “Now he may die. Azzedine, I never known a man like him. He can’t die. I’ve already lost myself. I can’t lose him, too.”

“Templars know the risks of lyrium.”

“Do they?” she yells. “I think not. And I’m beginning to think that the Chantry is just as at fault in all of this mess as anyone else. Even Corypheus. No one’s hands are clean, Azzedine. No one’s.”

“Well, I think it’s common sense to know that Corypheus’ future is the worst possible outcome.”

“Well, no shit,” Izzalea says and rolls her eyes. She sits silently a moment and stares out a nearby window into the scenery of the Frostback Mountains.

“I’m losing myself, Azzedine,” she says and slumps her shoulders. “I’ve tried to be strong and fight through this, but I don’t trust myself anymore. I don’t know myself anymore. I just threatened the lives of two people I respect. Two people who I vowed to protect. I had no control over it, I just did it. That’s not me. I threaten my enemies...not my friends.”

Azzedine reaches for her left hand. Placing it in his, he traces the jagged mark of her scar. “I know you can do this, Izzalea. You were always the strongest of us.” When Izzalea puffs a sharp laugh, he continues, “No, truly. You always had the courage to fight for what you believed in. The rest of us did as we were told, but not you. Your sense of self has always been prominent. Your determination to follow your heart as well as your instincts was always something I admired most in you.”

He closes her fingers over her palm and envelopes her fist within his hands. “You are strong enough to get through this, and you will be even stronger if you allow these people who have gathered here with you to help. They believe in you, that’s why they’re here. It’s not because of this mark, it’s because of this…” He reaches a hand to place it over her heart. “And this,” he adds while moving his hand to her head. “If they didn’t believe in you, you would only be a pawn for the mark’s power, not the leader of the Inquisition.”

Izzalea stares into her brother’s green eyes, feeling tears well in hers. She wants to believe him, but right now, it is so very hard.

He smiles at her and pets her hair lovingly. “But leaders don’t work alone. You are surrounded by a team of people willing and waiting to share your burdens. Reach out when you need help and you will find it. You can do this.”

“You really believe that?” she asks.

“Without a doubt,” he says and pulls her to him, kissing her gently on the top of her head. “I love you, Izzalea, and I am immensely proud of you.”

“Thank you, Azzedine. I love you, too,” she says through sniffles.

“Can I make one more suggestion?” he asks.
“Of course,” she says, sitting back up and peering at him.

“Bathe,” he says and then smirks wildly. “You smell like a ship-rat’s asshole.”

Izzalea throws a series of punches into her brother while he erupts into laughter and they end up rolling on the floor.

She stares up at the ceiling while they calm down and she reflects on the kinder words her brother shared. She’s not sure she can fully believe him yet. She still feels broken. Like an utter failure. But perhaps she can try to lean on her supporters a little more than she has thus far. Perhaps - with certain people - she can let her guard down, just a little. It has been so exhausting trying to appear strong and confident at all times...

Chapter End Notes

My poor broken children.
As always, comments are loved and appreciated. Talk to me! I adore hearing from you.

--

Shoutout to MaSulevin! The way she tackles lyrium in her story, The Fire and the Flood, inspired the journey we are embarking on here. I asked her if I could borrow and stretch her theories, and she said yes! She's awesome and I <3 her. Read her stuff!
The Inquisitor storms out of the room leaving Varric and Aurora in her wake. There is a slight tremor to Aurora’s hands, so she holds them together tightly.

She never wanted to be on the Inquisitor’s bad side.

“Shit,” Varric gruffs under his breath. “Shit, shit, and triple shit.”

“What are we going to do?” she hears herself ask. “You hid Hawke from Cassandra, are you going to hide Anders?”
“Cassandra didn’t know me when she first was looking for Hawke. I was able to get away with my elaborate... storytelling.” Varric says and stares are the door in front of them. “Rusty is an entirely different beast.” He runs his hands through his hair. “I think I’m screwed.”

“We’re both screwed. What if my theory doesn’t work? I had no idea she was asking because of the Commander.” Aurora wrings her fingers together, twisting and pulling at her skin, making it raw and dry in the cool Skyhold air. Varric glances at her with a look of concern. “Even if you do write to Anders, there’s no guarantee that he will agree to come. I mean, think of it, the Inquisition? He’d probably views it as some arm of the Chantry, regardless of the fact that it isn’t. And the Templars? This place is teaming with everything Anders hates.”

His eyes slide back toward the door. “Somehow, I don’t think she cares.”

“Should we run?”

Varric laughs. “Run where, exactly? The Nightingale would have us tracked down before nightfall.”

“Shit,” she says.

“Shit, shit, and triple shit.”

Aurora and Varric step through the door to the war room. There is a faroff stare in both of them, minds running through scenarios of what to do, what this means, and how they can get through this unscathed. Varric pats her on the back when they reach the stairs to the library, offering a last look of we’re screwed but at least we’re screwed together before they part ways.

Aurora attempts to work, but it is no use. Her mind is whirling with how much she wishes she could go back in time and never speak Anders’ name, never speak of her theory in the first place. Perhaps if she were to discover another way, and soon, maybe then she and Varric could be saved. If not, the only other solution she can fathom is that she will have to devise a plan to runaway. If she fails, if the Cullen dies by her hands, she will have very little time to escape. More casualties may even follow in her attempt, but if she can slip away before that, then perhaps she can survive this thing.

She combs through the library, but finding information on lyrium at all - let alone how to completely rid it of a non-mage’s body - is like searching for the Maker himself. It is nowhere. By the end of the night her table is cluttered with stacks of books. She waves off Dorian on more than one occasion. No matter the fact that she has befriended the man, this entire situation feels utterly confidential. It will not be Aurora who leaks this mission to a soul, and therefore getting herself into even more trouble with the indomitable force that is Inquisitor Izzalea Trevelyan.

It is not until she startles herself awake that she realizes she fell asleep in the old tower. She trudges through the halls sleepily. Opening the door to her quarters, she creeps in with everything about her hanging in defeat. She slips off her shoes and gets into bed wearing her mage robes. There is no energy or drive to change in the dark. As she lies her head on her pillow, she feels the crackle of paper. There is a note under her head. Sitting up, curious, she snaps a small flame to her fingers for light.

Delrin’s handwriting is unmistakable to her at this point, especially in the way he writes her name. There is a careful flourish to the letters that always gives her a thrill. With a sudden surge of energy taking over her, she rips the note open.

Aurora,

I attempted to find you in the library this evening, but I was informed that you were not to be
disturbed. I decided to communicate via note instead. It is turning into a habit, I suppose. Though, I would be pleased if this was the beginning to a life-long love letter.

I’m sure you’ve heard that the Inquisition is soon to travel to Halamshiral for a ball. This morning I was requested to represent the Templars and the Inquisition’s forces in Cullen’s stead, as he is unavailable to make the journey.

At this time, I ask that you look under your bed.

Aurora cocks her head and peers at the note quizzically. The pit in her stomach about Cullen not attending is overshadowed by her curiosity, and she quickly drops to the floor to search beneath her bed. What she finds is even more puzzling. A rather large but shallow box tied with a blue ribbon. Wondering what this could be, she quietly drags the box across the floor and sets it on her bed.

Inside, she finds another paper placed atop folded linen. Without hesitation she opens the note.

It just so happens that through connections with a group of visiting nobles, I was able to borrow this.

Aurora, would you do me the honor of accompanying me to the Winter Palace? I would be very proud indeed to have you on my arm when I meet Empress Celene.

With love and hope,

Delrin

Aurora’s heart is racing. Could he be serious, she wonders. Increasing the size of the flame she has hanging in the air beside her, she folds back the linen in the box and freezes. Her breath stills, taken away, and she brings a palm to her chest.

Possibly the most beautiful dress she has ever seen lies there, folded in its silky-sheer blue fabric with golden adornments. Her heart thumps. A smile grows on her face that soon encompasses her entire being. Her anxieties from the rest of the day are a momentary distant memory. For right now, all she feels is bliss.

“Will you try it on?” Helisma’s monotone voice asks from across the room. Aurora starts and looks to the woman, finding her sitting up in her bed watching. In the bed beside her sits her other roommate, Pippa, whose own smile is sleepy, but broad.

“Yes! I was waiting forever for you to get back and find that!” Pippa cheers, clasping her hands together.

Aurora blushes and glides her fingers over the soft fabric. “It’s a bit late, isn’t it?” Looking back at the women she says, “I’m sorry for waking you.”

“Nonsense!” Pippa shrieks, and at once all of the candles in the room are lit and the woman jumps out of bed. “I want to see!”

Pippa coos and carefully unfolds the gown from its box while Helisma pulls Aurora to her feet saying, “Since we are all awake, it would be most practical to know as soon as possible if any measurements need attention.”

“Right you are, Helisma,” Pippa nods. “Oh, Rory, this gown is gorgeous!”

Not comprehending Aurora’s embarrassment by the situation, Helisma begins methodically stripping her down to her underclothes. Without batting an eye, Pippa then starts fastening the layers of the
gown to her body. Aurora wonders if she is considered at all in this venture as the other women busy themselves and speak around her. They take note of the gold details, and the fact that shade of blue is Aurora’s best color. They wrap a gilded, woven belt around her middle as a final touch, then back up to inspect their work.

“It needs letting out in the bust,” Helisma states. “And perhaps the hem, as well.”

“Mmm, yes. Agreed, Helisma.” Pippa nods, and then smiles at Aurora. “Worry not, my dear. I happen to be fantastic with a needle and thread. I was highly sought after for the mending and tailoring of mage robes in the White Spire, you know.” She grabs Aurora’s hand and pulls her to the mirror located in the back corner of their room. “And you must look exquisite when you appear before the imperial court. The Empress appreciates a well fitted gown.” She stands behind Aurora, pushing her forward to look into the mirror, and grins while whispering in her ear. “And we don’t want those nobles to have anything to chide at you. I will make you a vision, my dear.”

Aurora stares into the mirror, mouth a little lax, eyes a little wide. Pippa makes quick work of the bun Aurora’s hair had been set in, and drapes her curls over her shoulders. “Perhaps half up and half down?” Pippa ponders to herself. “You could braid part of it in one of the lovely crowns you used to wear. We could find a lovely set of gold earrings to borrow from someone, I’m sure.” Her eyes light up and she grabs Aurora’s shoulders. “The Ambassador! She can get her hands on something beautiful. After all, she will want to ensure the man who is representing the Templars and the forces is flawless in all aspects, especially the woman on his arm.”

Pippa continues to titter away about jewelry and hair and shoes. In the background, Helisma merely nods and adds the occasional monotone and practical thought. Aurora tunes them both out, however, and stares at her reflection.

The dress couldn’t have been more perfect if she had dreamt of it herself. The bodice is tight, though that will apparently be fixed. It consists of a royal blue silk with a shimmering sheer fabric overlay that has a sheen of almost cerulean, almost aqua green - depending on the light. The fabrics flow and drape elegantly to the ground below the gilded belt. The neckline is high, but there is a lovely keyhole slit down the center giving just a smallest peek of tasteful cleavage. Golden stars adorn the bodice, clustering at the shoulders and then sprinkle down the sleeves which are made of the sheer fabric only, in a billowy fashion that then gathers at her wrists with more clustering of gold embellishments.

It reminds her of the robes she wore the day she met Delrin. The same prized robes that were promptly ruined that evening. Similar to those, yet so much more. She wonders if Delrin thought of those robes while he selected this gown. The thought brings a smile to her face, and she quickly begins to turn and spin around in front of the mirror. She swishes her skirt to the delight of Pippa, and soon finds herself glowing.

It occurs to her that disappearing into Orlais may be easier than an escape from Skyhold. This could be her answer - she will have to consider it.

No matter what her future with the Inquisition has instore for her, she may as well attend one grand ball with one perfect man before her demise at worst, or escape at best.
Here is a very quick, very dirty version of Aurora (using her face claim, Katheryn Winnick) in the Halamshiral dress (designed by Teuta Matoshi Duriqi, but color edited by me)

Chapter End Notes

Another 2 months between updates. I apologize, thank you for sticking around. I have the next 5 chapters outlined now, so I really hope I can stay on top of this for a bit. Mind, I'm 9 months pregnant, so I appreciate your patience and continued interest. Just know that I will never abandon this story.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!