As Any She Belied By False Compare (Part 1)

by Kinako

Summary

When the Conclave is destroyed, two Dalish elves fall out of the Breach, and each of them has identically marked green glowing hands. One of the elves is everything you would expect; the other, with her short, well-muscled build, her dwarf-like features, and her unusual magical abilities, promises to lead to far more questions than answers.

This is a non-canon retelling of DA:I from beginning to end with far more emphasis on the relationships between the principal characters than on the specific quests from the game. The main plot points are the same, but who is involved, how things are resolved, and the resulting implications may be different.

Meta question: How much can I change things about the story and still use the big cutscenes as consistent checkpoints?
Answer: Quite a lot.

Part 1 covers the part of the story that occurs in Haven.
NSFW chapter (of which there are only two) names start with an asterisk (*) and can be skipped without losing the story.

Notes

I received advice and inspiration from several people on this site. Particular thanks to WickedWitchoftheWilde, LonelyAgain, RogueLioness, Niedosynx, and RikaDivani.

Gim's appearance was inspired by Frida Khalo.
Cold, dark, dank, confining. She wakes to pain, stench, and an overwhelming need to hide anything she can from whoever has placed her in this horrible place. Confusion. Silence. Is she alone? She mustn't move; mustn't give anything away until she knows what she is up against; who she is up against.

Silence? No, she hears breathing that isn't hers—groaning that isn't hers. Inventory: why was she unconscious? Is she wounded, is she whole, is she healing? Head pounding, stomach churning, ache in all quarters—but the hand, the left hand has been dipped in acid. She can't even think of it as her hand: it is a hostile presence in her body—flaring sickly green and sputtering ominous and wavering shadows across the stone floor. Acid and ... restraint. Her hands are connected by a heavy iron bar that pulls at her joints and adds the, until now unnoticed, irritation of raw scrapes to the overwhelming presence of consuming green immolation.

Two sets of green-limned shadows; two sources of sputtering green light. The other light is across the room in the same direction that produced the groans. Lando! He's here; he lives. He is Lando, so she is ... Gim. The wavering horror that is the world becomes a little more dependable: Yes, she is Gim. And she has resources she has to protect. She can't let her captors know all she can draw upon. And who are the captors? Why are she and Lando in this room?

Room? Stone floor, stench, filth, the smell of waste and blood and mold and iron bars. Yes, bars. This is a...dungeon? A traditional dungeon, perhaps with a... yes, a stone floor. Stone is good. Stone is probably why she's awake and Lando isn't. Unless of course Lando is also awake and just as cautious as she is. Wouldn't that be a first. She wonders which of them was responsible for whatever bad choices have them unconscious, altered, hurt, and restrained in some dungeon. She has to admit it was more likely to have been her fault than Lando's. Now she has to get them out of this.

More inventory. They are alone, as far as she can tell, and she is about as far away from where Lando lies in the center in the room as she can get. She can even see trails of muck showing that she has moved, or been pulled, away from him. Why would she do that? In this cold, they would normally have huddled for warmth and comfort. She was warned before she woke that things were dire. Normally she didn't mind cryptic warnings, but a little more specificity would have been appreciated in this case. At least she has appropriate aid today. This day looks to be trying, and Fortitude will come in handy.

Lando is groaning again. And he's trying to move. Oh, Lando. If there is anything more calculated to make her forget her own hurts, it is the sound of Lando in distress. She can't remember how they ended up here, but she's already awash in the guilt of Lando's pain. He could have been with the clan. He could have been safe. How many times would he have to suffer for no greater crime than having a big heart and having the misfortune to give a substantial piece of it to her? It is time to take advantage of being alone before they acquire the kind of company usually afforded in sewers or dungeons or whatever the local populace tries to pretend this place is.

Getting to a more upright position is not easy, not painless, and not graceful. She eventually manages, with attendant embarrassing grunts and whimpers, to laboriously simulate an inch worm to get closer to Lando. Having those big haunch muscles is good for something, after all. The first part of him that she can reach is his foot. Thank goodness for the skin available at the bottom of his foot wrap. She touches his skin, glances furtively around the room once again to make sure no one is
watching, closes her eyes, and begins to glow. Even with her eyes closed, she knows the blue glow is making the green glow less nauseating. *Fortitude, thank you,* she thinks.

Her survey of Lando is brief, and it is frustrating. Much of Lando is *wrong,* but she can't get a handle on the wrongness centered around his right hand. Right hand? Yes: his sickly green glow is on the opposite hand from hers. She quickly deals with the small things—the things far enough from that annoying mark. Scrapes, bruises, muscle tears, and needed temporary modifications to minimize nausea, she can deal with; his being dehydrated, filthy, and having lain on a cold, hard, stone floor for too long, is harder to remedy.

The ability of her mind to grab on to the inconsequential never ceases to amaze her as she fixates on the mess that his careful blond braids have become. If they survive, braids can be fixed. Still no one here, so she takes a moment to heal herself as well. This done, she makes sure that anyone who comes into the room will only see a grubby, non-glowing, Gim shaking a grubby Lando.

"Lando. *Adahl'falon.* Awaken. Be at peace, but I need you." She keeps shaking him and muttering softly until he starts responding. She tries to move her hand closer to his hand, but she feels like she is pushing against a strong wind, so she keeps stroking and jiggling his leg. He is unhappy, stubbornly fighting consciousness, and who could blame him? But she has seen him no worse after a long night of drinking. He is starting to come around. She knows the minute he starts thinking more clearly, because he goes completely still and his eyes snap open. *That's it, Lando: get your bearings.*

Lando rolls up near her, confusion and anxiety writ across his face along with his vallaslin. He has Mythal's vallaslin and she has Sylaise's. Neither of them had wanted the blood writing, but it had been better than being exiled—at least for a time. She knew she was lucky they had even given her the option of receiving vallaslin—no matter how unpleasant she found having to wear the markings.

She sees the moment he tries to move closer to her—sees him discover how hard it is for them to get near each other now. *Never a one to waste time with why,* Lando kneels near her without touching her and seeks her eyes. "Gim," he starts, "where ... ?" And that is when the clang and creak of metal door and uncooperative metal hinges presage the entry of several armored humans who waste no time stomping around them and pointing some lethal-enough weaponry in their direction. Should they be flattered that the soldiers, or those in charge of them, think the two of them are a threat in this condition? Gim thinks a pair of cornered nugs would present more of a challenge than the two of them do.

Now that the soldiers have surrounded them, those in charge come in: two women in armor, though their armor is very different. Gim wonders at herself for taking the time to notice how beautiful, and how different, the women are, which only makes her reflect on how deeply ingrained is her own image as an unattractive female. Detached. She figures she is detached: thinking of inconsequential things is better than thinking of failing Lando. Her reality is still a bit liquid, a bit changing. She wonders if she has been drugged: there is a strange feeling of deja vu that she does not trust but can't completely discount.

After circling them once, the fierce plate-wearer says in exotically accented common, "Tell me why we shouldn't kill you now." Tall and slim and dark, she looks lethal and all-business, but she has spent the time to precisely apply eye liner. What kind of person wears eye liner to talk to filth in dungeons? "The Conclave is destroyed. Everyone who attended is dead. Except for you" Conclave! Yes. They had gone to the Conclave. Except, they don't exactly want to talk to these fierce women about *why* they went to the Conclave.

Well. If Gim doesn't want to explain why two Dalish elves (nevermind whether or not either "Dalish" or "elf" applies to both of them) were at the Conclave, she really doesn't want to explain
how the two of them are the only ones to survive...what? What would they do now? How would they regain their freedom? She has no memory past first arriving at the Conclave, when neither of them had a glowing green hand. Right on cue, the plate-wearer grabs Lando's hand and says, "Explain this. Explain the circumstance that has led to the two of you having your hands desecrated with such suspicious magic."

"We don't know what that is or how it got onto each of us," says Lando. Lando will know that he should be the spokesman as long as possible. Shemlen--humans--could be counted upon to discount Gim. They had taken advantage of that kind of underestimation time and time again on the trip here. They might as well hope that it will help them now.

"You are lying!" says the plate-wearer in a rough, threatening voice as she invades Lando's space. Trying to intimidate Lando will never work, and Gim can't help but be proud that he doesn't flinch at all—even when the fierce woman looks like she will knock Lando over with a head-butt. "The marks you have are perfect mirror images of each other. You are obviously part of a conspiracy!" Gim can see spittle from the woman landing on Lando's face.

Now the other woman, the hooded redhead with the chain mail, pushes the plate-wearer back and says in a clear Orlesian accent, "We need them, Cassandra." Well, now they have a name for the plate-wearer. And maybe they will survive a while longer, if the hooded Orlesian has her way. The Orlesian paces. After a bit, she says (in a voice calculated to be less threatening), "Do you remember what happened?"

Gim is eager to hear Lando's answer. She isn't sure what she remembers, and given their nature, Lando is an even less reliable reporter than she is. Lando says, "We were running. Things were chasing us, and then...a woman?"

The Orlesian darts a glance at Cassandra and then calmly encourages Lando with, "a woman?"

Lando continues, "She reached out to us but then..." Lando looks down at the floor and Gim can't tell if he will continue. Apparently the two women in charge are not going to wait to see if he has more to say.

Cassandra says, "Go to the forward camp, Leliana. I will take him to the rift." Gim feels like she has been punched. Him. They want to take Lando without her. No, no, no. At least they have names for both of the women now. Leliana. Why does that name sound familiar? She is still off balance, still hazy. If she had time to think, she is sure some of the information that was just out of focus will become clearer and the best path will crystallize. But she can depend on Lando. He knows good ways to present the two of them to violent people like these.

"If you need me, you need her. I can't leave her here," he says.

"Do you think we are foolish?" says Cassandra. "Do you think I wish to be outnumbered by you two in the chaos that is outside this chamber?"

"I swear on our clan and our Gods that we will make no trouble, Serras. Look at her. Does she look like trouble?" Gim knows what Lando is depending on. Humans generally took one look at her and associated her broad features and half closed eyes with that of a mental defective. "If you want my full attention for whatever is out there, bring her along. I fear for her life if she is left here alone." Of course, the humans will have no idea how little either of them revere their clan or their Gods.

The two women look at each other and something passes between them that Gim can't see. Leliana leaves, and Cassandra kneels down to Lando and unlocks the heavy bar connecting his wrists. She stands over Gim and looks down on her as Lando waites quietly nearby, rubbing his wrists. Gim
smiles up while trying very hard to project "simple" with every fiber of her being. She wonders if the pounding of her heart is audible all the way up by Cassandra's ears.

In time to come, Gim will think back on that long, still moment before she knew if she would be left behind. She will wonder how things would have gone—who would have died and who she would never have met—if Cassandra had made the other choice.

She knows what Cassandra sees when she looks down at her. She knows she is too broad, too short, and too heavily muscled to be truly elven. Her ears are not visible, but if she had Lando's long proud ears, she would not have been able to hide them with her thick black hair. Who has ever seen an elven woman with one long, thick, wavering eyebrow instead of two distinct, slim eyebrows? She knows her face lacks delicacy, but the curling vallaslin has nothing in common with any tattoo that any other race would sport, and her attire, from her forest tunic to her foot wraps, is something only a Dalish elf would ever wear.

In her favor, her traveling companion, who is the opposite of her in every way, has claimed her. Lando is tall, delicate, beautiful, and blond with cheekbones as sharp as the tips of his ears. Most viewing them together eventually come to the conclusion that she is just one of those robbed by an accident of birth—one who most clans would have mercifully left in the woods instead of raising to adulthood. Lando is just a soft-hearted elf who is unfortunately attached to a defective Gim. Now is not the time to think about the ways in which this conclusion is correct. Now is the time to smile—to simulate calm—and to hide the storm of tension inside her.

She feels Fortitude surging up—needing to help her—but now is not the time. *Wait*, she says inside herself. *Patience. You have helped. You will help. There will be more to see.*

And Cassandra kneels down and unlocks Gim's wrists and leads both of them outside to the town of Haven.

Chapter End Notes

*Adahl'falon* is Gim's pet name for Lando. It literally means tree-friend.
Lando stays close to Cassandra as all three climb the stairs out of the dungeon. He knows Gim wants him to take the lead and to claim the majority of Cassandra's attention. He feels Gim's eyes on him—can practically hear the ribbing she would be giving him if Cassandra were not here. Yes, the situation is imperfect, but action is always preferable to inaction, and Lando is always in favor of assessing on the move. As they climb, he asks, "What did happen?"

As they open the door at the top of the stairs, Cassandra pauses and looks at Lando directly. For a moment, he thinks she will answer, but then she turns her head and keeps walking through the heavy doors. As they rise to the top of the stairs, she says, "It will be easier to show you." He takes in what is clearly the main hall of a shemlen religious house. The smells are much better than where they had awakened, and the lighting is less ominous, but the religious iconography is not encouraging: Two accused elves being escorted out of a Chantry dungeon by a warrior-zealot is not the beginning of any story that ends well. A quick glance back at Gim reassures him: they will just have to make sure their story is the exception. He takes a few long strides to catch up with Cassandra.

They reach the outside, and it is bright—too bright after so long in the dungeon. The snow around the doors is slushed and dirty, and there is an overriding impression of putrescent green light over everything. Cassandra stops and looks to him expectantly, so Lando scans the sad collection of tents and huts outside the Chantry. And then he sees the source of the green wash: He squints up at the gigantic swirl of pulsating green that covers the sky. It isn't just green: it is the same color of green that is on their hands, and it has obliterated the blue of a normal Winter's sky. Seeing his gaze, Cassandra says, "We call it the Breach. It's a massive rift into the world of demons that grows larger with each passing hour.

Lando turns to look briefly at Gim. She is to his left, of course. Neither wants to get their glowing hand near the other's glowing hand: he doesn't need to be told that. And it doesn't matter why it is true. When Gim figures out why, she will tell him. He turns back to Cassandra. "An explosion can do that?"

"This one did," she affirms. "Unless we act, the Breach may grow until it swallows the world." As if aware that it is being plotted against, the swirling green storm pulses and throws out green lightning. The simultaneous explosion of pain in Lando's right hand blots out all awareness and drops him to his knees. When he looks up, he is just in time to see Gim drop to her knees—a few seconds too late, and a little too deliberately for it to have been the involuntary act that it had been for Lando. Lando holds his hand for a moment while musing about just how tough Gim is and just how much hiding she is going to have to do from Cassandra.

Continuing to ignore Gim, Cassandra drops down in front of Lando and speaks with the intensity of a plea, "Each time the Breach expands, your mark spreads. And it is killing you." Lando thinks she
is selling this a little too hard; he has seen the look on Gim's face. They are in. They are coming. As if Gim would ever leave when people are hurt; as if Lando would want to avoid fighting demons. The fact that this puts them on the side of the Chantry is a troubling detail best left to consider another time.

"If we can help, we will do what we can," he says. In response she takes his arm and starts walking him through the village. Gim trails behind, as he knew she would. The townsfolk are not friendly. Several jeer and one strides purposefully toward him until Cassandra stops and stares the man down. Fortunately the ire is directed at Lando. Or maybe it is not, for Gim is directly on the other side of Cassandra. He needs to remain more aware of her placement.

After stopping the confrontation, Cassandra unnecessarily elaborates, "They have decided your guilt. They need it." Cassandra swallows: fierce until now, Lando can see grief as she continues, "The people of Haven mourn our most Holy: Devine Justinia, head of the Chantry. The Conclave was hers. It was a chance for peace between mages and Templars." Lando refrains from saying that their preferred peace with the Templars involves every last Templar disappearing from the face of Thedas. Some things—probably most things—are best left unsaid.

They leave Haven and walk onto a bridge leading closer to the Breach. Cassandra stops and turns to him, searching his face. Is it too early to try to be charming? Probably it is best to look solemn and concerned. It appears there will be time for charm later: the adventure has just begun. "There will be a trial. I can promise no more," Cassandra says. Lando thinks she is trying to be reassuring, and that alone is a step in the right direction.

Lando looks back at still-silent Gim as Cassandra calls to the soldiers to open the doors so they can go into the valley. They run past soldiers in every possible state: living (but scared), wounded, and very gruesomely dead. At least none of these soldiers are actively threatening them. His relief forgotten, he once more falls to his knees as the Breach flares. Cassandra helps him up as she says something that he half hears, but he thinks it amounts to a desire to move them to the Breach as soon as possible.

He is up again, more determined to press on. "How did I survive the Breach," he asks. Honestly, he isn't sure he needs to know, but he is sure that Gim wants him to ask.

"They said you both...stepped out of a rift, and then fell unconscious," she says, sounding hesistant. "They said a woman was behind you in the rift behind you."

This will make a great story some day, and Lando knows it, but he doesn't quite know what is being asked of him. Demons have been mentioned. If there are demons to kill, Lando knows what to do. But for everything else, he is going to depend on Gim. And he knows she can't afford to display her full range of talents yet. There is no use worrying about it. This is a good cause, and he knows how to fight, and he has never in his life been wrong to trust Gim to get him out of a tight fix.

He strides after Cassandra towards another bridge.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we meet up with Solas and Varric
Chapter Summary

Gim and Lando meet Varric, Solas, and their first rift.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All three travelers are tossed into the air when a green meteor hits their bridge. Gim and Lando turn in the air and roll to their feet softly, but Gim hears Cassandra hit hard. The woman's fierceness isn't all show: she is directly up and charging a shade. Gim is happy to obey Cassandra's demand that they stay behind; Lando, however, immediately moves towards a large sword peaking out of a broken crate.

A second whistling impact near her, and Gim is given a shade of her own to deal with. She moves to Lando, who does not find the shade much of a challenge; it is a hiss of falling vapor within seconds of Lando's reaching it. He approaches Cassandra's shade, but Cassandra finishes it off before he can strike it. Lando strides up to Cassandra with a grin and says, "It's over, for the moment."

Cassandra snarls and turns her longsword on Lando, "Drop your weapon, now," she barks. Gim doesn't think Cassandra can take Lando, even if Gim was absent. But Gim is here, and Lando knows it. This, of course, leaves Lando with one option that does not irrevocably end their new adventure: he gives Cassandra soulful eyes and gently lays the sword down.

As it should, Lando being passive gives Cassandra pause, and she relents. "Wait. I cannot protect you. And I cannot expect you to be defenseless. Can she use a weapon? We can perhaps find her a dagger or a shield."

"She will be fine. I will keep her safe," Lando replies, and the two of them set off. Gim has no doubt that Lando can do as he claims, and she also has no doubt that he is enjoying slicing and dodging and sweating with their new friend a little too much. She doesn't really blame him for enjoying the immediate: it's a trait that has helped them through a lot.

Through several more fights with shades and minor demons, Gim sticks right by Lando as he swings his large sword energetically. Gim knows Lando's fighting style very well: no matter how Lando moves his sword—no matter what Lando's opponents do—Gim is clear of contact.

After several battles, Cassandra levels inquiring looks at Gim. Gim liked it better when Cassandra was ignoring her, and she doesn't know if Cassandra just finds Gim's dodging around Lando unsettling or if there is some other reason for her scrutiny. For Gim, the fights and the cold and the quickly dispatched demons all blur together. She is never in any danger, and she is never once tempted to use any of the abilities that could draw unfortunate attention from Cassandra.

All that changes as they approached a stairway leading towards the noise of fighting. Gim's hand has been vibrating for some time, but as they near the top of the stairway, her hand is positively screaming at her. Lando gives her a quick glance while grimacing and shaking his own hand as if he is trying to wake it.
Cassandra calls to Lando to help the fighters, and Lando surges forward to join an elf and a dwarf who are fighting several lesser demons. Gim climbs up on the side of a fallen wall near what is clearly what Cassandra called a rift: it is a small copy of the Breach that is close enough to the ground to be within arrow shot. Looking at the rift gives Gim a feeling of imminent unavoidable action. She imagines she would feel this way before jumping off a cliff or before doing magic in front of a field of Templars.

Suddenly her attention is drawn down and to her side as she hears someone cry, "Quickly, before more come through." She realizes the sounds of fighting have been absent for a few seconds. In front of her, she sees the back of the elf, and he is holding Lando's right hand up towards the rift. It does not look like Lando is fighting the elf, but the elf is shaking Lando's hand and making sounds of effort and frustration.

The events of the day have been extraordinary so far, but it is the next moment that Gim will remember with utmost clarity for the rest of her life. She will wonder how she knew to do what she did next, which will bring her back to musing about how all of their lives would have been different had she been left behind in the Chantry dungeon. Perhaps Fortitude gave her a little push.

Without moving from her place atop the demolished wall, Gim raises her left hand up towards the rift—just as the new elf has raised up Lando's right hand. A green ribbon of energy starts at Lando's hand, hits the rift dead center, and then turns sharply back towards where Gim stands atop the wall; The green line sinks into Gim's hand. It happens quickly, but the order is clear: Lando, rift, Gim. The lines to the rift squirm like living things trying to trap the boiling, flaring rift. It takes effort to keep her hand up through the sear of the mark and the living pulse of the green line, but Gim feels that it would cost her something important if she dropped her hand. Finally, the rift blinks out of existence, and in the silence, Gim wonders if the rift had been that punishingly loud for those who did not have green marks on their hands.

Lando looks tired and perhaps slightly horrified. He says, "What did you do?" and the elf turns to answer him. No, Gim is wrong: it is not an elf who turns to answer Lando. This man is clearly Elvhen—a bald (bald!) Elvhen mage dressed in broadly stitched scraps of coarse fabric, carrying a distinctly rustic looking staff.

A conversation occurs around her, but Gim finds herself in a fascinated trance. Even when she becomes aware that the conversation has become a heated argument, she can't focus on anything but the mage. No one is really addressing her; as expected, the conversation is with Lando. She knows she is staring, and this elvhen mage, who is clearly attempting to hide his nature, is beginning to notice her fixated silence. Her sense of preservation finally snaps into place; she shakes her head and tries to catch up to the ongoing conversation. No doubt she looks like an idiot—not that this will surprise anyone but her rather worried looking Lando.

The Elvhen, her Elvhen, has turned to her and is speaking. He says, "It is fortunate that you also attempted to close the rift. It appears we need to use both marked hands to close the tear—at least this one required it."

His comment doesn't need a response, so she smiles at him. There is no point in trying to fool someone like this, so she doesn't try. She uses the ancient elvhen obeisance in the manner of a commoner to a lord—complete with the hand to bowed forehead at the end. He tilts his head at her and blinks. Gim wonders in an abstract way if he will kill her for this lack of discretion, but as long as he does not visit his retribution on Lando, Gim thinks the chance is worth it. This is the culmination of their trip. The green marks, the dungeon, the demons, the violent inhabitants of Haven all fade into the inconsequential: this is why Gim left the clan, and everything depends on what
Lando moves to her side, looking concerned. Lando says, "Gim, did you hear that Varric here has a crossbow named Bianca?" His emphasis on the names is quite pronounced. Gim turns to the dwarf. Before this day, she would never have believed that meeting a beardless, strawberry-haired, dwarf named Varric was one of the least surprising events of the day. Add the name "Bianca" to his list of associations, and this is not just a dwarf. Gim hopes vaguely that she gets to talk to Serrah Tethras in the future, but that is a secondary concern.

"Gim, is it?" says Varric. "I think I will just call you, Beauty." Gim is glad that this particular kick to the heart happened now: she is already on overload and what might once have been a disappointment is just a cynical confirmation.

Varric turns to the Elvhen and says, "Chuckles, I hope you have a plan for when a rift wants three marked hands." Varric turns and follows Cassandra down a trail leading to the frozen river below. Chuckles? Oh yes, it all makes sense: the Elvhen is Chuckles and she is Beauty.

Gim is left with the Elvhen mage. He says, "Did I hear that your name is Gim? Surely that is an unusual name for a ... Dalish woman to go by." That last part was not technically a question, but she heard the question in it.

Now she must decide how to respond to him. No sense in being reticent now. She does not want to be guilty of attempting to mislead this man—not even briefly. She replies in rushed high Elvhen, "Lord, by all I revere, I would not by action or inaction share your secrets with a soul. When you notice things about me that I would keep close, I would welcome the same discretion from you. I will answer any questions you have when there is opportunity. I will not speak to you in the language of the people unless we are alone." At this, being sure the others are far down the trail, she summons just enough of a glow that he cannot have missed it—but anyone at range will probably think it a trick of the sun.

The mage's brow is furrowed and his mouth opens; he gazes down at her with a startling intensity. Mindful of her manners and her desire to continue breathing, Gim risks a curtsy again, and then quickly turns and runs down the trail after the other three.

As she runs, she hears Cassandra yelling, "Solas, please bring that girl down to us before she gets herself killed."

Solas. Her Elvhen mage is named Pride. Well, well.

*Ha*, she says inside herself, *either the day will get less peculiar from this point, or I will be dead and will not need to worry about it. And in either case, this day has been worth it."

She feels excitement and amusement from Fortitude. *Hold on for the show, friend. Thank you for joining me on the most important day of my life,* she says to it. And she runs to join Lando, who has just finished slicing a demon in half. He shoots her a grin, and they follow Cassandra along the frozen lake.

Chapter End Notes

I am intending to use text in *boldface italic to indicate ancient elvhen*. The only straight elvhen I will include will be the standards that all game players run into, such as *Ir*
abelas.
Gim and Lando accompany Cassandra, Varric, and Solas to the forward camp.

At first Gim stays near Lando and shadows his fights as before, but Varric complains. "If you are trying to become a pin cushion, Beauty, you are doing a great job." Gim, who on her better days actually understands ranged support, moves to hover near Solas and Varric.

But Varric isn't done. "You know, demons aren't just a spectator sport. You feel free to pick up a weapon, or even—I don't know—just throw rocks."

Gim knew this was coming, but this isn't how she wants her first conversation with a dwarf to go. She is trying to think of something to say, when Lando takes responsibility for her actions. "I don't want her to fight. Please, just keep her safe. I will kill enough for the both of us."

Varric's opinion of Lando's sentiment is expressed in grunts of irritation as Gim rolls out of the way of an approaching demon. He shakes his head and says, "I've never seen someone who wasn't even fighting spend so much time in the dirt. I don't know if she is a person or a dust-devil."

Solas smiles but says nothing. He works around her and throws her an unneeded shield any time demons are near.

When the current batch of demons is dead, Varric makes a small huff of annoyance, and heads after the warriors. Solas looks at her for a moment, reaches out a hand to slow her down, and says, "You do not fight, da'len?"

"I can't, ha'hren," she says, "I've taken oaths." Solas nods as if he was expecting this.

"Have you taken similar oaths concerning conversation? I notice you have only spoken when we are unaccompanied."

"Lando is trying to save me from too much attention. Cassandra has made certain ... assumptions ... about me," she says.

Solas gives her a wry half-smile and a bare nod. He gestures that they should catch up with the rest of them.

They meet the others as they are climbing up some snowy stairs; they hear Varric asking Lando, "So, are you innocent?"

Lando says, "We don't remember."

"Should have spun a story. It's more believable, and less prone to result in premature execution," says Varric smugly.

Lando says with exaggerated cheer, "Well in that case...Cassandra, did I tell you about how I saw Varric helping a large, cackling Antivan carry several barrels of explosive towards the conclave on the morning of the explosion?"
Cassandra looks shocked and confused briefly before she makes a sound of disgust and turns her back.

Varric says, "Hey now!" and looks briefly offended, but he quickly smirks back at Lando upon seeing the huge open grin on Lando's face. "That might have worked better if Cassandra hadn't been keeping pretty close tabs on me, but good effort, Braids," he adds, and trudges up after Cassandra.

Just as with the last set of stairs, Gim's hand is vibrating and pulling. The top of the stairs brings demons, and Gim thinks she spies the green light of a rift ahead through the trees. One of the demons shoots at Gim, but the shots are lobbed slowly enough that rolls and dodges work well to avoid harm. Solas shields her regardless, and then he freezes the demon before it even has a chance to test the shield. Gim is still not in any danger, but that does not keep Varric from shaking his head at her in apparent exasperation.

As they finish off the first set of demons, Cassandra says, "I hope Leliana made it through all this." Someone has been fighting this particular set of demons for a while: "all this" refers to the ground being littered with flaming debris and churned, bloody snow. However, as they run past, Gim doesn't see any actual bodies as she did earlier; she guesses that any casualties have been taken to a nearby camp.

Varric actually sounds warm when he says, "She's resourceful, Seeker." Perhaps Varric has more empathy than she has seen until now. Perhaps someone could be associated with the Davri family and not be an utter waste of breath.

Solas adds, "We will see for ourselves at the forward camp; we are almost there." Gim sees the rift that her hand has been warning her about in front of a large structure with a gate. The soldiers fighting in front of the gate see Gim's party as they arrive and call for help.

Solas shouts with more desperation that Gim has heard from him so far, "We must seal it!" Gim keeps an eye on Lando and tries to keep out of the way. When the final demon dies, Lando sticks his hand up in the air, and Gim follows suit.

Once again there are two ribbons of green energy tethering the rift, and eventually the rift closes. Gim sees sweat sliding off of Lando's forehead, and Lando is breathing hard. Gim doesn't feel particularly exhausted, but she hasn't been slicing up demons with a sword that is longer than she is tall, and...well, Lando doesn't have help from Fortitude.

Cassandra calls, "The rift is gone. Open the gate." The gate guards snap to follow her orders.

Solas looks at Gim and says tiredly, "We are clear for the moment. Well done."

Varric says, "Whatever those things on your hands are, they are useful."

Ahead, Gim see's Leliana talking to a man in Chantry garb. The only males representing the Chantry that Gim has encountered were Templars, but this man is not wearing armor, and Gim cannot imagine a Templar in this man's square cloth hat or his knee-length A-line tunic. As soon as this man see's the approaching party, he says, "Ah. Here they come." Gim thinks it might be possible to sound less welcoming than this man, but it would be difficult.

All the welcome missing previously is present in Leliana's voice as she steps forward and says, "You made it! Chancellor Roderick, these are ..."

Chancellor Roderick cuts her off with, "I know who they are. As Grand Chancellor of the Chantry, I hereby order you to take these criminals to Val Royeaux to face execution."
Cassandra looks like she is considering running Chancellor Roderick through as she rushes forward. "Order me? You are a glorified clerk. A bureaucrat!" Gim thinks if Chancellor Roderick keeps talking, Cassandra will become their staunchest supporter, just to spite Roderick.

Chancellor Roderick says, "And you are a thug. But a thug who supposedly serves the Chantry."

Leliana moves between Cassandra and Roderick and says, "We serve the most Holy, Chancellor, as you well know."

Roderick throws his hands up in Leliana's face and says, "Justinia is dead! We must elect a replacement and obey her orders on the matter!" Gim thinks following that advice leaves Haven in ruins with a permanent green hue and more than just two Dalish prisoners dead—both consequences reaped long before anyone now present reaches Val Royeaux.

Lando speaks up, "Do you mind telling us who will be closing the Breach while Gim and I are on the way to Val Royeaux?"

Gim tunes out a little as Cassandra and Roderick posture a bit more. She isn't worried. She would bet on Cassandra and Leliana over Roderick using any weapons from blades to words to adjudicated fashion sense. She begins to focus again only when she hears Lando speak.

"Gim would want us to take the mountain trail. If someone is hurt, Gim will want to try to help them." Cassandra rolls her eyes at Lando's statement, but Solas looks supportive.

Gim swallows past a knot in her throat. Lando hasn't thought this through. How can she help the injured without making Cassandra want to kill her? Cassandra is eyeing her narrowly. Gim imagines that Cassandra can't decide whether to consider Gim a threat or as something akin to Lando's imaginary friend.

Fortunately, Cassandra's attention moves to Liliana, who she asks to bring all those remaining in the valley to the temple. Chancellor Roderick has to get in the final word as they file off the bridge and take an uphill path.

"On your head be the consequences, Seeker."

Somehow Gim doesn't think it is Cassandra's head that is most in jeopardy. But maybe Lando's excitement is catching. Gim's situation may not be perfect, but even with unknown and powerfully painful magic on their hands, her companions and her perception of future possibilities give her more than glimmers of hope.

She silently says to Fortitude, *It looks like we both have been given opportunities to learn today, my friend. I am very glad to have you with me.* She feels Fortitude's excitement for the day and pleasure in her praise.

She just has to keep her wits about her as they start up the mountain path.
Chapter Summary

The Breach

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As the five of them climb through the cold air up towards the base of the path-proper, Lando considers the events of the day so far.

If his hand didn't hurt so much, and if Gim was not forced to hide her skills, Lando would be very happy. The day started poorly—more than poorly—admittedly. That much death can never be dismissed, but Lando knew none of those at this Shem event, and people die every day in great numbers—though usually Gim and Lando are not blamed for these deaths. But, there are people who yet live who may be saved by their efforts, and Lando is always cheered by battle. The destruction of demons doesn't have any of the troublesome ambiguity of many other forms of battle. Finally, and most interestingly, their new companions are interesting.

The passionate Seeker, as Varric has taught Lando to call her, is a thing of beauty during battle. Lando has rarely had an opportunity to work with such a talented warrior. Sadly, Cassandra is dismissive of Gim, but Lando must admit that he and Gim have encouraged the Seeker in this attitude. If they continue to fight together, this can be remedied after Gim and Lando prove themselves to be of value.

Gim seems to be talking with the city elf mage, Solas; Lando knows Gim will be disappointed if Lando slips and calls the city elf a flat ear. Lando will try to be open-minded, and after all, Gim's judgement is worth trusting. Perhaps Solas will have things to teach Gim; if Solas is lucky, Gim will have things to teach him.

And finally there is Varric. Could he possibly *not* be the Varric connected to the Davri family? It seems unlikely. Lando is happy for Gim to get a chance to talk to a dwarf, but couldn't the dwarf be one not connected to the Davris? Knowing Gim, if she talks to him at all, it will not be soon. It always takes her a while to become comfortable with new people. Perhaps she will lose her chance to have an honest discussion with Varric. No need to borrow trouble.

As they near a set of ladders, Cassandra assures them that the path to the temple is near. A bit of discussion among them makes it clear that these old tunnels are abandoned mining caverns. Lando feels the pleasant edge of battle anticipation as he thinks of rescuing the missing soldiers from whatever has detained them.

Sure enough, the apex of their climb brings them to a cramped maze of wood-reinforced walls and some quickly killed demons. Lando finds himself almost being annoyed that the other people in the party are killing the demons so quickly that he can't get the satisfying sensation of the killing blow and its explosion of ichor. At least Gim is reliably safe in these conditions.

The increase in daylight indicates that they are nearing the exit of the complex, and the vibration and burning pressure in his hand presage the presence of a nearby rift. At the exit, there are several dead
soldiers. Cassandra says, "That can't be all of them," so they continue down the path towards the green glow.

As they get closer, they hear the sounds of fighting. Those poor soldiers: with no way to seal the rift, they are forced to fight demons until they inevitably make fatal mistakes. One of the soldiers calls out, "Lady Cassandra!" with palpable relief.

Cassandra replies, "Lieutenant, you're alive," and suddenly Lando thinks Cassandra, who originally did not seem to want to take this path, is glad she came.

The one called Lieutenant replies, "Just Barely," and then watches in slumped amazement as the new arrivals quickly finish off all the demons.

With the demons gone, Lando raises his hand and concentrates, just as he did at the previous two rifts. Gim waits just long enough that he knows she is testing to see if both of them are still necessary for closure. The rift closes, and the soldiers fall forward, panting and trying to support each other. Lando is beginning to feel like he could use a little support, himself.

Solas says, "Sealed. As before. You two are becoming quite proficient at this." Lando may be having trouble catching his breath, but he grins at Solas.

Varric says, "Let's hope it works on the big one." Now there is an interesting question: if they seal the Breach, is the adventure over? Will Gim be able to find what she needs if the Seeker is done with the two of them? Will they be allowed their freedom?

Cassandra helps the lieutenant to a more upright posture. The lieutenant says, "Thank the Maker you finally arrived, Lady Cassandra. I don't think we could have held out much longer." Lando looks to Gim to see if she is going to help these people. But they don't seem mortally wounded—exhaustion and the need for mundane repair is all he sees.

Cassandra says, "Thank our prisoners, Lieutenant. They insisted we come this way." Lando quickly becomes uncomfortable with the way the soldiers are looking at him.

The lieutenant says, "The prisoners? Then you ...?" Lando looks down and mutters a few things about it being worth saving people. He doesn't say it well, but she doesn't seem to mind. She says, "Then you have my sincere gratitude," and salutes him, fist to chest.

Gim holds Lando's unmarked arm just long enough to delay him so that they are out of sight of the other three; she risks enough of a glow to help him with his roiling stomach and his stumbling exhaustion. At first Lando thinks no one notices, but then he sees Solas looking back at Gim.

"Durgen'falon, the elf is observing," he murmurs to her.

"He is aware of some of my nature," she replies. Lando thinks this is good news. If she is beginning
to trust their companions, all their future tasks will be easier.

They enter a final corridor, and then a huge rift is directly in front of, and considerably above them; even further up is the Breach itself. Varric says, "The Breach is a long way up." Everyone in the party stops and stares solemnly up at the pulsating green.

Leliana appears and breaks the trance with, "You are here! Thank the Maker."

Cassandra asks Leliana to have her men spread out around the temple. Then she turns to Lando and says, "This is your chance to end this. Are you ready?"

Lando looks over Cassandra's shoulder to see Gim nod decisively. He says, "We will try. This rift sure seems a long way up—are you sure we can reach it?"

Solas reacts as if Lando had suggested they bypass this rift. He says, "No, this rift is the first, and it is the key. Seal it, and perhaps we seal the Breach." If sealing this rift will allow him to think of his right hand as anything other than a giant exposed vibrating nerve, Lando is for it.

"Then let's find a way down. And be careful," responds Cassandra. And with that they start piecing their way around the edges of what used to be a place of worship for these Shems. It is covered in ominous glowing crystals now, and the pulsating shadows cast by the rift flicker across the crumbling masonry in a nauseating fashion.

Suddenly a smooth deep voice reverberates through the ruin, "Now is the hour of our victory. Bring forth the sacrifice."

When Cassandra asks what they are hearing, Solas says, "At a guess, the person who created the Breach." Lando sees Gim watching Solas after he says that. He wishes he could ask her what she is thinking.

As they get lower in the structure, glowing spikes of red crystal are thrust out of the ground. Varric says, "You know this stuff is red lyrium, Seeker." Lando doesn't know what red lyrium is, but he knows Gim doesn't like the thought of even the plain-old blue kind, and this stuff makes him feel anxious. A quick look at Gim shows him that she is using her stoic look, which probably means she is worse off than he is.

Cassandra must know what red lyrium is, because she says, "I see it Varric."

When Varric asks why the red lyrium is here in the temple, Solas says, "Magic could have drawn on lyrium beneath the temple. Corrupted it..."

Varric says, "It's evil. Whatever you do, don't touch it." Lando doesn't think he has ever been given a direction he is happier to follow. The problem is, winding through the pathway and completely ignoring the large red crystals is not easy.

Now the reverberating voice is back with, "Keep the sacrifice still."

Next comes a refined Orlesian accent calling out, "Someone! Help me!"

Cassandra's voice is full of grief when she says, "That was Divine Justinia's voice!"

Then Lando hears Gim's voice saying, "What's going on here?" Lando had no memory of hearing Gim say that, and from the look on her face, she didn't remember it either. Now shadowy figures play in front of them. An old Chantry mother, presumably Divine Justinia, is being held in suspension by an ominous shadowy giant. Everyone sees Gim and Lando run up to Divine Justinia,
and again they hear Gim ask what is going on.

Divine Justinia says, "Run while you can! Warn them!" The intangible Gim and Lando being displayed for them are not listening. They seem frozen, staring at the threatening figure restraining Divine Justinia. Then the figure speaks.

"Keep the sacrifice still," says the deep reverberating voice. "Kill them now!" And then the ethereal replay stops.

Cassandra leaps forward excitedly and says, "You were there! Who attacked? And the Divine, is she...? Was this vision true? What are we seeing?"

Gim says, "We don't remember." Lando realizes this is the first time Cassandra has heard Gim's voice in person.

Solas breaks in with, "Echos of what happened here. The Fade bleeds into this place." Cassandra does not look happy with this explanation, but the Breach flares again, the rift below it pulses, and even Gim looks like she is having trouble remaining upright. Solas tries to bring everyone back to the matter at hand.

"This rift is not sealed, but it is closed. Albeit temporarily," he says. "I believe that with the marks, the rift can be opened, and then sealed properly and safely. However, opening the rift will likely attract attention from the other side."

Cassandra and Lando both start talking at once about how that means demons are on the way. Lando thinks Cassandra is as happy as he is to have something to kill. More soldiers than Lando has seen before now are surrounding the rift. All the soldiers are warriors or rogues, and they all have weapons drawn and ready.

Lando raises his right hand, Gim raises her left, and the green ribbons hit the rift. This time the rift opens wide and a gigantic pride demon appears and roars a challenge. Lando rushes in, but Gim calls to him, "Adahl'falon, no! Let the others work on the demon. You and I need to be ready to act on the rift!"

Lando finds this suggestion frustrating, but he moves to stand next to Gim. The others are getting nowhere with the pride demon; their weapons are just sliding off it, and the demon shows little sign of being hurt.

Gim says, "Let's see what happens if we try our marks on the rift while the demon is still out." So they raise their arms and the green ribbons appear, channel, and disappear. The rift does not close, but but it pulses and the demon is paralyzed. Taking advantage of the demon's immobility, the soldiers attack it, doing some serious damage.

Solas yells, "Yes. You have successfully disrupted the rift and left the demon vulnerable." Lando runs forward to get a few slices in while the demon is in a diminished state. When the demon starts moving again, Lando rejoins Gim.

They try to disrupt the rift again, but nothing happens. And worse luck, more demons have come through the rift and they are heading right for the rift-disrupters. Lando starts cutting through them, and he sees Solas and Varric also attacking the new demons. When no more of the lately appearing demons remain, Gim and Lando once again try to disrupt the rift, and this time it works.

By now everyone knows how the disruption works, and everyone in the ruin pours on the damage. By the time the pride demon is moving again, more lesser demons have appeared, and the cycle of
kill lesser demons, disrupt rift, damage pride demon is repeated two more times. There are a few tight moments, but having gotten the approach down, everyone in the ruin fulfills their parts well. The pride demon looks like it will be vanquished soon; anticipation of the end of the fight shows on many faces.

When what Lando hopes is the last set of small demons are dead, Gim and Lando disrupt the rift again. Everyone fighting knows that this is it: the paralyzed pride demon is the nexus of fury of many very angry, grieving soldiers. The demon goes down.

Cassandra shouts to seal the rift, and Lando raises his hand up. As soon as Gim raises her hand up, the green ribbons of energy flow, and Lando drops to his knees. He does not drop his hand: he puts every ounce of strength into keeping his hand up. This is not the same as the previous three rifts they sealed: this is taking so much out of him. Lando is exhausted, he is in pain, and his body has stopped obeying him. He can only hope Gim is doing better.

The edges of Lando's vision are darkening, and there is no point trying to look. His hand is up, but his head is down. Finally he sees a flash of green through his eyelids, the horrible sound stops, and...

Lando slides into darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Durgen'falon and Adahl'falon are pet names meaning roughly "stone-friend" and "tree-friend."

Next chapter, several of your questions will be answered.
When Dreams Do Show Thee Me

Chapter Summary

After the Breach is stabilized, Gim collects her thoughts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gim sits up in her stone bed on her stuffed mattress. Alive and dreaming. Being asleep is much better than being dead, and after blacking out trying to seal the Breach, Gim's is very happy to be back with the familiar.

The main room of her Thaig is empty, as she expects. The decorations of the room look very dwarven to Gim. Of course, she has never been to a dwarven cavern in the waking world, but spirits have been able to give her a few tours from occasions when non-dwarves have visited Dwarven places. A spirit who had accompanied the Hero of Ferelden was one of those who had shared with her—though she didn’t care to incorporate any of the more harrowing decorations which that spirit had viewed.

The main room of Gim's Thaig heavily features stone and metal with very little wood in evidence. The decorations are all geometric and repetitive, with golden alabaster sconces around the room casting warm light on the furnishings. The colors are mostly grays, creams, and browns, but accent gem decorations appear in all colors. Everything in the room is heavy and squat: sized for a dwarf's proportions. The desk is covered with papers and writing implements, the bookshelf is filled with books, and the fireplace looks more like captured lava than the sort of wood fires that Gim has seen in her waking life. Around the room there are several pieces of art displayed in nooks, and many of those reflect an aesthetic more elven than dwarven.

This room had changed as Gim grew older, but this room was the first. When it was new, she knew nothing of dwarves or their fashions, and she had not yet begun calling this place her Thaig. At first it was just a stone room with a small courtyard—not that Gim can actually remember back that far. From her point of view, she’s always gone to her Thaig when she dreamed, and as she grew—as she made friends those who visited her as she slept—her Thaig expanded. Just looking around her room makes Gim feel stronger and more centered.

Gim walks through the stone archway to her practice yard. Several spirits in elf, dwarf, or human form are practicing throws and tumbles together. Towards the garden she sees other spirits, and a few wisps, floating in groups. She notices that Fortitude is watching the bouts, and she smiles at him. In her yard, Fortitude looks like a grizzled male elf warrior who could handle anything. He is tall, leanly muscled, and he looks a bit grim. From scenes that have been shared with her, Gim can guess that Fortitude would have looked like a normal warrior in a battle in ancient Thedas. Fortitude is not a particular friend, but he has done well for her, and she smiles at it. Him. It. Here, Fortitude presents as male, so she usually thinks of it as "him."

Fortitude comes over to speak with her. "I am honored. Together we were more and yet less than possible."

Gim answers, "The Conclave was organized by the Chantry, and the person who took us to the
Breach is a Seeker of Truth. If she had seen you with me, she would most likely have thought I was an abomination. You know that you helped me over and over—even if I did not always feel safe enough to use your connection to the Fade."

Fortitude says, "Your waking; your choice," and bows. "My debt is deep—my experience was rich; Speak it now or anon, and all that I can show or share is yours."

Gim says, "Do you know anything about Lando, or the Breach?"

"My window closed as you fell—as he fell. The fabric of existence is yet torn, but the first tear is inert; it endangers no spirit. The fabric is pierced here and here and here. We wish to join but not to be pushed. There is...concern." Fortitude stops and looks lost in thought for a moment. Then he says, "Solas is in Haven."

Gim knows that asking about the passage of time won't lead to useful answers. She says, "I don't think I should wake up too soon. Do you know if Wisdom is around? I would appreciate a chance to talk to her."

Fortitude replies, "She is. She would have Tea."

Gim enters her main hall and finds Wisdom pouring tea into matching cups. Gim may never have owned a physical teapot, but in her main hall, her kettle is of rarest metals and her teapot is exquisite. Her dear friend Wisdom has prepared tea in that pot on many occasions. Wisdom appears as a gentle elven woman with short dark hair and gently laughing eyes. Wisdom is Gim's closest spirit friend—her elgar'falon. Wisdom looks up and says, "When we encouraged you to seek ancients in Ferelden and Orlais, we did not expect you to be in such danger. I am warmed to see you well. May I see your hand?"

Gim sits opposite Wisdom and offers her left hand. Wisdom holds her hand and runs her fingers over the glowing mark in her palm. Wisdom stills, but she still does not look up. Gim says, "You know that Lando has a mark like this also? The two of us can close rifts with these marks."

Wisdom looks up and nods. She says, "Fortitude shared with me. He reported much that was good on his trip with you. Much he told me surprised me, and some did not. I would not have wished these marks on you, but you will experience many things because of the marks, and some of them will be of great value to you and to all of Thedas."

"We do seem to have stumbled upon an adventure," Gim says and sighs. "I suppose an adventure would not be an adventure if there was no risk. I am very worried about working with the Chantry, of course." She pauses for a bit. Wisdom looks like she is waiting for the rest of that thought. After a long pause, Gim says, "I met Solas."

"Ah," says Wisdom, and tilts her head. "You understand: you may talk with me about Solas at any time—about anything you learn or that you think. You know that if you have not seen him on one of your trips, I cannot discuss his actions or history with you."

"Oh, Wisdom," says Gim, reaching for Wisdom's hand. "I trust you. I honor your faith, your trust, and your discretion. But I knew immediately when I met him that he was the one I had been herded towards." She smiled a little wickedly at Wisdom. "You do know that when you talk about certain things, there is an absence in your descriptions and feelings that has a palpable shape, don't you?"

Gim knows Wisdom recognizes that she is being teased. Wisdom doesn't seem to mind, and she gives Gim's hand a squeeze.
Gim says, "Does Solas know anything about me? I revealed myself to him. I didn't want him to ever look back and think I had misled him." Gim pauses, then continues with, "For a moment, I was afraid my adventure was going to end prematurely."

This is the closest to uncomfortable that Gim has ever seen Wisdom. Wisdom says, "Solas did not wake that long ago. I suspect you will remember when the spirits began to speak of another sleeper waking. We have never thought it was a good time to tell Solas about you. Solas has...goals. We think he will react better to you by meeting you than by being told of you."

"Fair enough," says Gim. "I'm excited to get to know him—if he will let me. I don't know that he will find me at all interesting; I know how elves see me, and I can't imagine elvhen will have fewer preconceptions. But if he can talk to me with an open mind, I think I can help him."

"Of course you can, my child, and I am excited for each of you to know the other. Solas may surprise you, and I have no doubt that you have already surprised him. Would you like me to come with you when you meet him next?"

Gim brightens. "Would you, please? I think that will give us the best start. But I don't yet feel like it is time to wake. I don't know what stabilizing that rift did to me, how long I have been out, or when I should wake. I am sorry to keep you from others who need you."

Wisdom says, "Oh no, I am happy to be here. Your Thaig is a safe oasis in a tortured realm. Spirits are terrified of being pushed into the waking without intent or preparation. No such danger can be found in your space. I think you will find you will have many new visitors in your Thaig in the time to come. And they will all be eager to repay your hospitality. If you have new areas of study or new trips you want to make, I am sure you can find many guides."

"Actually," Gim says, "my recent experiences make me even more interested in my ongoing studies. Perhaps I would appreciate some more instruction on healing that does not require any spirit manifestation. Stitches, splints, poultices, and such. I wonder if I will have trouble getting supplies... Actually, I wonder if I will still be confined."

Wisdom smiles, "I think you will find your circumstances have improved—at least in some ways. You are going to need Patience though. I'm sure it would be happy to join you."

"But not today!" says Gim.

"But not today," Wisdom Agrees.

"Speaking of which," says Gim, "I think it is nearly time. May I escort you to my focus?"

Rising, Wisdom says, "I know the way." Gim watched Wisdom exit the room and go down a hallway. Soon she hears the soft sound of a door closing.

Gim closes her eyes, centers herself, takes a deep breath, ...and then she awakens.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, Gim talks with Solas about what's what...and stuff.
This Insubstantial Pageant Faded

Chapter Summary

Gim wakes and talks with Solas.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As Gim wakes, she remains still, just as she had the last time she awoke in Haven. This time she is in a bed, warm, and for the most part, comfortable. This room smells clean and warm: wood fire, herbs, books, wool, and the breath of sleepers is what she detects. She waits a bit, but the only sounds and lights she feels are from the fireplace. She opens her eyes.

Sitting in a chair by the fire with a book in his lap is Solas, and he is staring right at her. Heart racing, she sits up in the narrow bed, grateful to be dressed in a loose, clean tunic and leggings. She wasn't expecting him to be in the same room, but after all, his presence should not be surprising: either that he would have healing talents or that he would be interested in talking to her before she had a chance to speak with anyone else. First things first: She twists her head looking to see if Lando is in the room.

Solas brings up a mage light, and he is clearly discernible. "He is merely in the other portion of this cabin, da'len; I can detect nothing wrong with him but exhaustion," says Solas. "He has not shown the signs of waking that you have." At this he shuts his book and puts it on the floor under his chair. He gestures at the chair on the other side of the fire. "If you are well enough, this may be an opportunity for us to talk in some privacy."

Gim gets out of bed. First she goes to the other side of the interior wall to see Lando sleeping on another narrow bed. Solas's magelight floats near so that she can see that Lando has clearly been well-tended, and he is sleeping deeply. She touches his unmarked hand and manifests enough to tap Wisdom's connection to the Fade. Her investigation shows her that, as Solas has said, there is nothing wrong with Lando—other than, of course, the magic mark on his palm. She has a few things she can do to aid with his exhaustion, but she can wait to do that until after her conversation with Solas. She tucks Lando's hand under his blankets, smooths his hair, and walks back over to the fire.

Solas's magelight is now suspended between the two of them, Solas examining her closely. He says, "When I met you, I detected no aura. I told Cassandra that neither of you were mages. And yet I have just seen you perform magic."

Gim thinks he likes to make statements that double as questions. She says, "I would be surprised if all you detected was the performance of magic."

"You know that the Breach has not been closed, but it is stable," says Solas. And it is most definitely not a question.

Gim nods. "How long?" she asks.

"Two days," he says.
"We seem to have had our lodgings upgraded," she says. To this, he only smiles.

Neither of them seem to want to be the first to advance the conversation. After a certain amount of expectant silence, Gim says, "Solas, can you make it so that sounds and magical traces inside this building are not detectable outside it?"

"It is already warded and shielded. Neither of us need worry that anyone outside of this cabin would know of anything taking place inside it."

Something about the way he says that gives Gim an unpleasant chill, but she feels Wisdom trying to reassure her. Now is the perfect time, but she so rarely goes out of her way to fully reveal herself; it takes a moment to work up the courage. She closes her eyes, breathes deeply a few times, and invites Wisdom to come to the fore.

She watches passively as Wisdom opens her eyes. From what she has been told, she knows her eyes are now glowing blue, and blue seams are running across her skin. She thinks of it as if she is the chrysalis and Wisdom emerges from inside her—fully-formed and beautiful. The glow fades a bit as her form settles, but no one could possibly mistake her for a normal mortal.

Gim watches Solas as Wisdom says, "I am so happy to see you on this side of the Veil, Solas," in a voice that sounds nothing like Gim's normal voice.

Solas leaps to his feet with pain and anger clear on his face. He grabs Wisdom's shoulders and yanks her up out of her chair. He is practically shouting, "My friend! How did she capture you? No wonder I have been unable to contact you! Oh, vile act!"

"Atisha, Solas," Wisdom says soothingly. "I am under no geas. I am here as a gift—to you and to me. Gim is my dear friend. I offered to come to introduce my two friends to each other. Be content. Let me feel your hand in the waking world."

Solas looks at where his hands grip the woman's shoulders as if he is not quite sure how they got there. He withdraws his arms and takes a half step back. His face is impassive as he once again gestures that Wisdom should seat herself. After placing his hands behind his back, he says in tense and clipped high Elvhen, "Please quiet my misgivings. Tell me something only you would know."

Wisdom sits, smiles, and says in the same language, "I cannot eject my host from her own mind, and she will understand anything I tell you. What would you have me say? Shall I speak of the counsel I gave you before you came to Haven?"

Solas turns a bit away and brings his hand to his chin, and then he suddenly turns back, swinging his hand back down in a gesture that breathes of exasperation. He seems to have come to a decision, but he still looks agitated. He steps to Wisdom, sits at her feet, takes her hand, and briefly presses her hand to his forehead. "Ir abelas, my friend. You have, you both have, surprised me. Please tell me how you have come to be here," he says earnestly. His voice is not yet warm, but it is no longer combative.

Wisdom says, "Tel abelas. I will let Gim tell you her own story, but I will tell you that when next she sleeps, or whenever she tires of me, I will return to the Fade, unharmed; for the moment, I am safer with her than I am in my normal environs. When you traveled to the Breach with Gim, she was accompanied by Fortitude, who considers itself to be quite indebted to her for the experience—even though Gim was too worried about the Chantry folk to allow Fortitude to contribute during the fighting."

Solas blinks. He says, "You say that she is your friend. How long have you known each other? I am
quite curious how it is that you did not mention to me that you have such a singular friend. For that matter, I wonder if I have you to thank for her recognition of my...nature."

Wisdom laughs gently. Gim can feel her facial muscles being put through a much more severe workout than Gim usually gives them. It is clear to Gim that Wisdom is delighted to be answering these questions. Wisdom says, "Gim has known me so long that she doesn't remember meeting me. I was introduced to her by Innocence, who found her entrancing. Since that time, many spirits have called Gim, friend-to-spirits. She and her home are great favorites. I hope that Gim will show you her fade-home; I am positive you will find the experience...fascinating." Solas is searching her face; he seems to be calming down.

"As for her knowledge of your nature, once again I refer you to her. I know that she will not mind that I tell you that you are not the first Elvhen she has met. In fact, you are not the first Elvhen who has awakened from uthenera that she has met." Gim hastens to reassure Wisdom: Wisdom may tell Solas whatever she likes.

"She and I first discussed you in particular after the Breach was stabilized. It might amuse you to know that she asked me if you knew of her, but she knew better than to ask me why I had not spoken of you to her."

Solas squeezes her hand firmly and says, "Ir abelas, falon. My poor manners shame me. Let me assure you—my trust in you is unsullied. This situation is without peer for me, and I am awash in curiosity."

"As I would expect," says Wisdom. "This will not be the last time that Gim surprises you. I think you will find your relationship with her to be very...fruitful. I trust her. I would encourage you to trust her. She is well-accustomed to keeping secrets and honoring promises. And she will not pry."

"What an intriguing idea," says Solas. "And what is her interest in me. Do you know?" Solas may actually be smiling now, but Gim isn't sure if it is a nice smile.

"As it stands, I would imagine that Gim and Lando will need help to deal with the Breach, the Chantry, and the mysterious marks on their palms. Only you can decide if you can offer such help." Gim notices that Solas has brought his facial features back to inscrutable. If he feels that he needs to hide his reactions now, she can't wait to see how he reacts to the next revelation.

Wisdom continued, "But neither of them knew they would need such help when they came here. Gim and Lando left their clan to come to the Conclave...in search of you." Solas didn't move a muscle. Gim wasn't even sure he was still breathing.

"I will let Gim explain all this to you," Wisdom says, "but before I go, Gim says it is important that I embrace you; she says it is an important waking-world custom for friends meeting or parting. Are you willing for me to give you a hug, my friend?"

After a pause, Solas nods gravely and stands. Wisdom stands and steps to Solas's side. She puts one arm around Solas's back and executes what Gim would call a side-hug, butting her head into Solas's shoulder. What Solas does next is one of those memories that Gim would replay after everything that happened. He turns towards Wisdom, throws both of his arms around her fully, squeezes her tight, and lays his cheek atop her head. Gim doesn't know what emotion is causing it, but she can feel him quivering.

As for Wisdom, Gim knows she is pleased. Wisdom squeezes Solas back once, and then retreats, leaving Gim in Solas's arms.
Other than the fan-fic standards of *ir abelas* (in context, I'm sorry), *tel abelas* (in context, no need to be sorry), and *falon* (dear friend), I used *Atisha* (taken from FenxShiral's Project Elven) to mean "be calm" or "peace!"
Gim and Solas speak further.

Gim does not want to pull away suddenly after Wisdom withdraws. She goes completely passive as she waits for Solas to retreat. As soon as her eyes are no longer blue, her glow is low, and no blue seams split her skin, Solas raises his head, unwraps his arms, and moves to his original chair. Gim sits in her chair and looks across to Solas: his gaze is down and his focus appears to be inward.

Not wanting to interrupt him, Gim straightens her posture, closes her eyes, and begins a simple breath-centered meditation. She trusts Wisdom to alert her if Solas wants her attention.

After a while, Wisdom suggests she surface, so she takes two very deep, very slow breaths and opens her eyes on the final long exhale. Solas is now looking at her.

He says, "Wisdom is still with you."

"She is." Gim hopes he doesn't mind the imputed gender; Gim certainly wouldn't mind if Solas wanted to use some other pronoun.

"Wisdom does not usually accompany you?"

"She knows I would always be happy to have her along," says Gim. "I am not sure why she doesn't offer more often. I suspect it is both that she has many other interests and also that she knows how many spirits wish to join the living." After a pause, "I imagine she thinks I need her less than I did when I was younger." Gim feels Wisdom's approval of that assessment. For a moment, Gim worries that the last part of that statement makes her sound too proud, but then she remembers who she is talking to.

Solas is silent for a while. He doesn't seem that comfortable—Gim wonders if encountering something new is such a rare experience for him that he finds it unsettling. Or maybe it is just that everything since he has awakened from uthenera has been unsettling. Once again, Gim feels Wisdom projecting patience and calm.

Gim suspects she could make things more comfortable if she were to expound at length, but she doesn't normally describe this to anyone, and she finds it difficult to pick the best way to explain her situation to someone who has known spirits for thousands of years. How much of what she is saying sounds like trying to teach a clan hunter how to clean a ram?

Finally, she says, "Solas, now that we have met, I invite you to visit me in the Fade. Much of what is hard for me to explain will be clear when you see my ..." She stops. If she calls it her Thaig, that will lead to a whole new topic, and they have enough topics open now. "My fade-home."

"Ma Nuvenin, Da'len. Am I correct that you are a spirit healer? You mentioned oaths earlier."
Gim smiles. This part is easier to explain. "When I began to take spirits with me, they were very eager to give me experiences or training. Wisdom convinced me that I should pick just a few topics of interest, and the first thing I wanted to learn was healing. She brought a very old spirit: Insight. It spent a day with me in the waking, and that night, it quizzed me at length about how serious I was about healing.

"I was young, I was barely tolerated by my clan, and Insight could tell I was bitter and ambitious. Honestly, I hadn't thought it through, and Insight could tell. I wanted skills that were valuable and special, and I wasn't thinking about how others would react to the obvious signs of manifestation that I would need to heal.

"Additionally, as I look back now, I think Inspiration was also concerned about the power I had access to when I manifested. Its solution was the Vir Atish'an. I swore many things, but for me the summary is 'First, do no harm.' I touch no weapons and I use no skills with the intent to harm any person; in combat, I am limited to purely defensive and evasive skills. Even with the limitations, I am very powerful as long as I am not alone. Lando and I together are quite formidable.

"I said that I am very powerful, but that is after years of training. I didn't actually learn any practical skills for a long time. My early training had more to do with not being an idiot than anything else, but the oaths affected my waking life immediately: A member of a Dalish clan refusing to use a bow has a lot of explaining to do." Gim shakes her head and snorts a bitter laugh.

Solas smiles at her; his eyes are sparkling, and Gim begins to feel better. After a pause he squares his shoulders and asks more formally, "What is it you hope to gain from me?"

Gim swallows. She says, "Honestly, many things, but I will ask for little. One of the things I want is just the chance to talk to someone who doesn't think almost every thing I have to say makes me harellan. Another of the things I want is to help you. I have a set of skills specifically designed to help those who have awakened from uthenera, and as you might guess, I have had little chance to practice these techniques.

"The thing I want the most right now is advice: How do I keep these shemlen fanatics from killing me as an abomination? Do I need to hide my nature from them, always? Wisdom said I need to bring Patience with me, and I think she is right, but I don't think I can explain how frustrating it is to not be able to use most of my skills."

Solas grimaces and says, "I am aware of the frustration inherent in dealing with narrow beliefs. But, I think you may find your situation has changed. Patience is indeed called for, but perhaps for not as long as you fear."

Solas tilts his head and appears to be considering something. He finally says, "And what of Lando? What does he know?"

Gim says, "Lando is older than I am. When we were children, he was the only clan member whose attitude was unreservedly positive, and he was very protective of me. I have tried to gift him with every skill I have learned—to pay back the loyalty he never had a reason to give me. Lando's concerns tend to be immediate. He likes to laugh, to fight, to eat, and to love. I try not to complicate his life. He knew I wanted to go to the Conclave and that I hoped to find opportunities to grow as a healer. He didn't know I was looking for someone the spirits told me had awakened from uthenera.

"Solas, I am not asking to swear fealty to you. I wanted to find you before Lando and I had these marks, but now it seems we will have to commit to whatever it takes to close the Breach. My actions seem to have been chosen for me—at least for a time. If you are here, I want to talk to you about the Fade, and the things I have seen of Arlathan, and the nature of magic."
Solas looked at Gim, pursed his lips thoughtfully, and then looked away. "I will stay then. At least until the Breach has been closed."

Gim smiled wryly. "Was that in doubt?"

"I am an apostate mage surrounded by Chantry forces, and unlike you, I do not have a mark that allows me to close holes in the veil. Cassandra has been accommodating, but I know that you understand my caution."

Gim's eyes widen as she realizes how much more dangerous the shemlen are to Solas than they are to Lando and to her. She says, "You have been helping these people, Solas. We won't let anyone use that against you."

"How would you stop them?"

Wisdom surges up. Gim's glow intensifies and her eyes shine blue. Her voice, her voices—for she can hear two tones at once—ring out with, "However we had to."

Solas looks surprised. "Thank you." He stands and approaches the door of the cabin. "But now, dawn is near, and I think your day will be full. I will return to my cabin. Feel free to find me after you speak to Cassandra and Leliana.

Solas slips outside, and Gim goes to sit at Lando's bedside.

"Oh, Lando. What have I got us into?"

Chapter End Notes

The Vir Atish'an is the Way of Peace. Some license here discernible from context.
Lando wakes to the familiar feel of Gim's magic. As he opens his eyes, she's smiling at him. And it's a real smile; it isn't the stoic "let's put a positive spin on disaster smile" or the sad and guilty "I am so grateful that you are with me" smile. This is an honest, full smile that says the world is full of possibilities.

"Give me the short version," he says as he grabs her unmarked hand. She squeezes his hand and gets right to the précis she knows he wants. "I woke up only a few hours before you, we were out for more than two days, we were mostly just tired from trying to close the Breach, the Breach is not closed, but it is stable (as are the marks on our hands), we aren't in the dungeons, and someone made sure we are very comfortable. On top of all that, there are many rifts, and the Breach itself, to be closed. I think we just got ourselves a job."

He grins at her. But he can't be selfish. "Can you get what you need here, Gim?" he asks gently. "I know heroic tasks are more to your taste than mine," she says as she releases his hand and pokes him in the ribs, "but I suspect I will have many opportunities to learn from our experiences."

"Have you talked to Cassandra and Leliana yet, or is this all just spirit information?" he asks in a teasing tone. "A little spirit talking; a little guessing—we will find out what they propose together."

"So, are you going to tell them of your nature? I know you can't be comfortable until you do. They need you, Gim. Surely they would not hurt you when they need you so badly." He can't push too hard; Gim has to do things in her own time. "I will, as always, follow your lead."

At that moment, the cabin door quietly opens, and a city elf enters the cabin carrying a small box. When she sees Lando and Gim, she drops the box and cries out, "I didn't know you were awake. I swear!"

Lando says, "We are grateful to to you for coming to get us. And for bringing some..." After taking a quick look at the cracked box on the floor he continues with, "herbs."

But it gets worse: she falls to her knees and bows her head to the floor. She says, almost breaking into tears, "I ask your forgiveness and your blessing. I am but a humble servant." Lando and Gim look at each other in shock. She continues, "You are back in Haven, my lord and lady. They say you saved us. The Breach stopped growing—just like the marks on your hands. It's all anyone has talked about for days."

Lando tries again. He says, "Then we have time to close it properly. Each of us will be important as
we work on that goal."

The girl gets up, but she looks like she is about to flee. She says, "I'm certain Lady Cassandra would want to know you have awakened. She said, 'at once.'"

Before the girl could get completely away, Lando called, "And where is she?"

They could barely hear, "In the Chantry, with the Lord ..." as the girl ran away.

Gim says, "Well, you tried. You will just have to use that charm to greater effect on Cassandra. Are you ready to go?"

Lando says, "Fix my braids, and I will escort you to the Chantry."

For the next few moments, Lando enjoys the familiar and homey task of Gim drawing a few slim horse-tail braids along the side of his head to the back of his head, where the braids can be combined with the smooth, unbraided hair from the top of his head. In this way he can keep his straight hair just past his shoulders, but none of it will get in his eyes, even in enthusiastic combat. Gim likes to tease him about being vain, but it never hurts to take a few minutes to look composed. Gim has been awake a while, so Lando supposes her black, thick, wavy hair is the way she wants it. In any case, Gim doesn't appreciate comments about her appearance—no matter how well-meaning.

With that, Lando opens the door for Gim, and they both walk outside to...a silent, standing, audience.

There are soldiers saluting on either side of the walkway, but even more surprising, also lining the walkway, there are dozens of what look like normal townsfolk with the standard fist to chest salute and bowed heads. Gim and Lando look at each other, and start the march up to the hilltop Chantry. Lando smiles and tries to talk to a few townsfolk, but they all look too scared to respond.

As they walk they hear murmurs of the "Heralds of Andraste" and references to closing rifts or the Breach in the future. When they enter the Chantry, they hear Chancellor Roderick talking behind a closed door at the back of the building, "Have you gone completely mad? They should be taken to Val Royeaux immediately to be tried by whoever becomes Divine."

Next they hear Cassandra's accented voice saying, "I do not believe they are guilty."

Lando is not comfortable overhearing their conversation, so he strides directly to the door and opens it. As he enters, Chancellor Roderick says, "Chain them. I want them prepared for travel to the capital for trial." Lando looks behind himself to see who the Chancellor is talking to. He sees that two of the soldiers who had initially saluted them have trailed them to the Chantry; the soldiers now bar exit from the room. In front of him he sees not only the expected Chancellor and Cassandra, but also Leliana. All three are standing next to a sturdy table with a large map and some tokens on it.

Cassandra says, "Disregard that, and leave us." The soldiers immediately turn tail and shut the door. It is good to know that the supercilious Chancellor is not the voice of authority here.

But, authority or not, the Chancellor is not finished posturing: he pours venom into his voice. "You walk a dangerous line, Seeker."

Cassandra comes up to Roderick and speaks directly into his face. Every word she says is pronounced separately; it is as if she has to convince herself not to smash his head into the table between every word. "The Breach is stable but it is still a threat. I will not ignore it."

Cassandra is already on their side, so Lando speaks to Roderick, "Chancellor, I expect you have heard that Gim and I have been able to close several rifts and to stabilize the Breach. I understand..."
your concerns, and I promise you that when the immediate threat is past, Gim and I will submit to you and happily await trial. I assure you, we would never hurt your Divine, but I am not naive enough to think you will believe me. Let us work to make Haven safe, and we can begin to prove to you that we are on your side. You would not wish to sacrifice the lives of any good Andrastians for a reason as thin as a slightly speedier trial, would you?"

Lando sees Leliana and Cassandra sharing a look, but the Chancellor is ignoring them. He says, "A convenient result that you two are so crucial to this effort and everyone you have killed is unable to implicate you."

Before he can say anything else, Cassandra says, "Have a care, Chancellor. The Breach is not the only threat we face." Lando glances at Gim to see her stifling a smile.

Leliana jumps in with, "Someone was behind the explosion at the Conclave; Someone Most Holy did not expect. Perhaps they died with the others—or have allies who yet live."

Chancellor Roderick, now mightily offended, says, "I am a suspect?" This isn't the direction Lando would have gone in. They need the man to calm down, and threatening him isn't going to help.

Leliana is clearly not of this mind. She says, "You, and many others."

To which the Chancellor sarcastically says, "But not the prisoners."

Cassandra sounds almost enraptured when she says, "I heard the voices in the Temple. The Divine called out to them for help." Lando spares a thought to which spirit Gim has with her today. Faith might have been a good choice, but it is too late to change now—a good thing to keep in mind for the future.

The Chancellor is not giving up. He says, "So their survival—those identical things on their hands—all coincidence?"

Cassandra says, "Providence. The Maker sent them to us in our darkest hour."

Lando decides again to address himself to the one still doubting. "Chancellor, when first we met Seeker Cassandra, she wanted to kill us; were it not for Leliana, she might have done so. It is only through our deeds that her faith in us has risen. I hope very much to be able to convince you similarly. Give us a chance."

Cassandra and Leliana share another glance. Cassandra turns to a side table and retrieves a book while Leliana says, "The Breach remains, and their marks are still our only hope of closing it."

At this point Cassandra slaps the book she has retrieved onto the table. She says, "This is a writ from the Divine granting us the authority to act. As of this moment, I declare the Inquisition reborn. We will close the Breach, we will find those responsible, and we will restore order." As she says this, she is eyeing the Chancellor as if daring him to challenge her. Lando is not surprised when the man says nothing. Lando can't imagine trying to talk the impassioned Cassandra out of anything.

The Chancellor leaves the room, but Leliana and Cassandra are not done. Leliana says, "This is the Divine's directive: Rebuild the Inquisition of old. Find those who will stand against the chaos. We aren't ready. We have no leader, no numbers, and now no Chantry support."

Cassandra nods and says, "But we have no choice. We must act now, with you at our side."

Lando nods to Gim: their earlier misdirections will not be so useful going forward. Gim says, "We will both do all in our power to close the Breach and heal Thedas."
Cassandra and Leliana step forward and shake hands with each of them in turn.

Leliana smiles and says, "Haven will be your home for a while. Why don't you get to know the town? Particular points of interest include the tavern, the quartermaster, the smithy, the alchemist, and the training grounds. If you need help, ask anyone. Everyone knows who you are."

As she finishes, she looks over at Cassandra, who says, "This evening, we will introduce you to a few more important people. For now, why don't we visit the tavern for a meal?"

As soon as she says this, Lando can't imagine why he wasn't already thinking of food. He opens the door and then stands aside, barely bowing to Cassandra in an invitation to exit. Cassandra gives her one-sided bare smile, and strides out of the room.

Gim whispers, "I can't tell if she finds you exasperating or charming," to Lando before she follows Cassandra out to the Chantry hallway.

Lando thinks there is only one way to find out, and follows the two women to the tavern.

Chapter End Notes

If you have suggestions or comments you don't want to post publicly, feel free to email me at kinako.aooo@gmail.com
Be Pleasant Without Scurrility

Chapter Summary

A chat with the lovely Cassandra.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lando notices that Cassandra never takes her hand off her sword on the entire walk to the tavern. It isn't far from the Chantry, so that doesn't necessarily mean much, but it fits with her serious demeanor. Lando is developing a strong desire to see Cassandra relax—maybe even to openly smile.

The tavern is called The Singing Maiden, and there actually is a young woman strumming a lute and singing inside the warm, wood-paneled room. The room is very human, with heavy tables and chairs, a roaring fireplace, and assortment of paintings and trophies on the walls.

Cassandra approaches a woman behind a serving counter and says, "Flissa, these are the Heralds. Please see that they are taken care of whenever they come in." Lando has heard he and Gim called Heralds of Andraste by faceless crowd members, but he is surprised to hear Cassandra refer to them this way. Flissa clearly was not surprised.

"Oh, your worships! Andraste sent you to us to show her love for us and I can do no better than to show the same love to you," she says, turning red and flustered towards the end. Lando notices her appraising glance and decides that last part wasn't entirely a slip of the tongue. "Whatever you should want, you just let me know. Anytime." That last with a smile, a ducked head, and a bit of a sway.

Cassandra rolls her eyes and says to Lando, "Now, if you will excuse me..."

Lando's eyes widen a bit as Gim actually reaches out and touches Cassandra—and on her sword arm. Cassandra jerks away fractionally and then stops herself. Gim says, "Do you have a moment, Cassandra? We didn't have a good start, and I would like a chance for us to get to know each other. We will be working together, will we not?" Cassandra's brow is creased with indecision. Gim continues with, "I would appreciate it if you could help us understand this 'Herald of Andraste' title, at least."

From the look on her face, Lando doesn't think calling them Heralds was her choice. She finally says, "Very well. I will sit with you briefly, but I must tell you, the other advisors will do a better job of explaining such things."

Gim gives Lando a look, so he goes to talk to Flissa about food and drink while Cassandra and Gim find a table. While he is ordering, Flissa continues to make her interest in him clear, but it is not as bad with Cassandra not watching it happen. He uses his "good-naturedly oblivious" face during the whole conversation. When he is finished ordering, he goes to join Gim and Cassandra.

As he comes over, he hears Cassandra saying, "...and some still think you are guilty, but... People saw what you did at the temple. how you stopped the Breach from growing. Many who heard of the woman behind you in the Fade and saw your good deeds began to call you the Heralds of Andraste."
We have not discouraged it."

Gim looks to Lando then back to Cassandra. She says, "But Cassandra, non-humans aren't even
allowed to serve in the Chantry, and we are most definitely not human. Apart from expediency, how
do you feel about we two being Heralds of your religion?"

Cassandra was silent a moment. Finally she says, "Blessed are they who stand before the corrupt and
the wicked and do not falter."

To which Lando replies, "Canticle of Benedictions, 4." When Cassandra's mouth drops open, Lando
says, "Your Templars have been a significant danger to the Dalish. We felt it prudent to study your
holy texts.

Cassandra smiles at this, and says, "As there is but one world, one life, one death, there is but one
God, and He is our Maker." She looks from one to the other of them and says, "And so do you
believe in the Maker, or do you follow the elven Gods?"

This is making Lando uncomfortable. He quietly says, "Canticle of Transfigurations, 1." He hears
the door opposite to the one they came in open, and he sees the city elf, Solas, enter, just as Flissa
drops off two bowls of stew and two slabs of bread.

Gim picks up a piece of bread and uses it to punctuate her sentences in the air. She says, "We do not
worship the Elven Gods." Gim looks to Lando, and he knows she is about to be much more
forthright than is prudent.

He sighs. She continues with, "You could never call us Andrastians. From
the removal of the Canticle of Shartan to several events reported in the surviving texts, we do not
believe that the Chant of Light tells the full truth, and once we move to the implementation given by
the Chantry—the Circles, the Templars—Well, we take severe issue.

"However, we do believe there exist powerful forces that we do not understand. For one to be the
first—the Maker—the creator of all, is a pleasant thought. We don't know who placed us at the
Temple or gave us these marks. Perhaps your Maker planned this from the time of our births, or
before—using countless unknowing agents to make this happen. Or maybe we are just hapless
victims of coincidence. We don't know.

"We don't believe it is right to punish people for what they believe, and that means we don't want to
punish Andrastians who are trying to make sense out of the recent chaos. We will not object to being
called the Heralds of Andraste, but we will not call ourselves that or support these titles in any way
but answering to them. On the other hand, we believe Andraste was a visionary and a good woman.
Trying to do the right thing with her as a model is not such a bad idea. Without all that warring-with-
Tevinter part."

Cassandra looks between them again, and this time, she is smiling. It's not a large smile, but it is an
honest one. She says, "That you have put such consideration into this—that you deal respectfully
with our faith—this is more consideration than we can expect from two such as you who we
confined in a dungeon. This is more comforting than you know. For my part, I can promise you that
if you have occasion to tell me that your own beliefs have not been treated as fairly as you have
treated mine, I will do my best to remedy the situation. I have faith that you two are what we need
right now. I have faith that the Maker put all of us on this path for a reason."

At this point, Solas, who has clearly been listening, approaches the table and says, "You say that you
do not worship the elven Gods, and yet one of you wears the Vallaslin of Mythal and one of you
wears the Vallaslin of Sylase."

Lando says, "We did not want Vallaslin, but we came to a point where we had a choice between the
blood writing or exile from the clan. We tried to see it as honoring the reputed virtues of the Gods we chose. Now that we have left the clan, Gim is looking for a way to remove our Vallaslin."

Cassandra looked from Lando to Gim in apparent agitation. Gone was the gentle smile of earlier, and her beautiful eyebrows seemed to be trying to merge with her hairline. "Gim? But," she says while turning to Gim, "...are you a researcher?"

Gim gives Lando a look that makes him sure he will be hearing about this later. She says, "I very much love learning things," and takes a small bite of stew.

Cassandra tilts her head sideways and gives a suspicious half smile. She says, "Gim, somehow you do not much resemble the woman I first met in the Chantry Dungeon."

Gim grins and says, "I am not so afraid of you now." After a pause she says, "Lando is never afraid. It's a character flaw, but I put up with it." Lando can't tell if Gim is talking him up for Cassandra's benefit or just teasing him. Either is fine with him.

Cassandra says, If you are to be our Heralds, then it is good that you should fear me less. We must both adjust to this idea." At this Cassandra rises and says, "I will see you later in the Chantry."

When she leaves, Solas sits down and leans towards both of them. "The Chosen of Andraste. The blessed heros sent to save us all," he says. Lando isn't sure if he is ridiculing them, but it really doesn't matter.

Lando grins widely and says, "We have the titles: now we need some shiny armor and impressive mounts."

Gim says, "If our being Heralds helps us close the Breach, I am all for it. Maybe what we need is more titles. We need a title for you, Solas."

Solas says, "I believe I will let you two handle the necessary posturing." At this point Solas's eyes look unfocused and his voice takes on almost the quality of an incantation. "I've journeyed deep into the Fade in ancient ruins and battlefields to see the dreams of lost civilizations. I've watched as hosts of spirits clash to reenact the bloody past in ancient ruins both famous and forgotten. Every great war has its heroes; I'm just curious what kind you two will be."

Oh, this is better and better. Lando says, "Solas! You are like Gim! We've been looking for someone like you for her to talk to. Maybe your title should be 'Inquisition Fade Walker'."

Lando grins happily at Solas and Gim, but Solas looks like someone stole his thunder, and Gim is looking mysteriously sympathetic. Lando figures he's been eating slowly enough that he can now safely finish his stew.

Gim says, "Solas, perhaps you and I can talk tonight, after we meet with the advisors? Now, I am going to find the alchemist, and Lando is going to the Smithy. Would you mind showing me where you stay?"

"Ma nuvenin," says Solas, and all three of them exit The Singing Maiden.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any comments or suggestions that you do not wish to post publicly, feel free
to email me at kinako.aaaa@gmail.com.
When they come out of the tavern, Solas and Gim go uphill, and Lando goes across to the quartermaster.

The human quartermaster, Threnn, assumes Lando is there for cleaning and then assures him she can help him if anyone calls him 'knife ear'. After that initial mistake, she realizes he is one of the Heralds and gives instructions about how to fulfill requisitions, but the taste in his mouth is still bad. At least Gim wasn't there for the conversation. Lando thinks it's best if the quartermaster and Gim don't talk much.

Directly below the quartermaster, Lando sees Varric standing by a fire. Lando mimes being shocked as he says, "Varric! Out on the town without Bianca, I see. Trouble in paradise?"

Varric cocks his head and says, "Nah. Sometimes after you show a lady a good time, you have to give her some time to relax and recharge." After a moment, Varric's demeanor changes and he asks seriously, "So, Braids, now that Cassandra is out of earshot, are you holding up alright? I mean, you go from being the most wanted criminal in Thedas to joining the armies of the faithful. Most people would have spread that out over more than one day..."

Lando looks up at the stable Breach and then down to his right palm. He says, "To be honest, we didn't care for the start of the story, but there is no doubt that we are needed here and that we can make a difference. Few people have the luxury of such clarity in challenging times."

Varric nods and says, "For days now we have been staring at the Breach, watching demons and Maker-knows-what fall out of it: 'bad for morale' would be an understatement." Varric shudders as he looks at something Lando can't see.

"So, tell me again why you stayed though days of being unable to close a single rift."

"I like to think I am as selfish and irresponsible as the next guy, but this..." says Varric as he looks at the fire before turning back to Lando. "Thousands of people died on that mountain. I was almost one of them. And now there's a hole in the sky. Even I can't walk away and just leave that to sort itself out."

Lando says, "Then we are of like mind. I am happy we will be working together to seal the Breach."

"If it can be sealed. You might want to consider running at the first opportunity. I've written enough tragedies to recognize where this is going. Heroes are everywhere; I've seen that. But the hole in the sky? That's beyond heroes. We are going to need a miracle."

"And yet you stay. Would you expect less of us?"
"Point taken." After staring up at Lando for a moment, Varric says, "Do you mind if I ask you if Beauty is as committed to this project as you are? She seems more like she wants to be a mascot than a comrade-in-arms."

"She was—we both were—scared of Cassandra. Gim is usually quiet until she knows people. She talked a fair amount when we met with the advisors. I suspect she will be down here before long; I know she wants to talk to you."

Varric practically squeals, "Me? I'm flattered. Also prone to extravagant lies. Mind telling me why she didn't fight when we were on the way to the Breach?"

"You should ask her when you talk. There is more to her than you have seen, Varric. I think you will enjoy talking to her."

"Right," Varric grumbles. "I look forward to it."

Lando isn't concerned that Varric sounds sarcastic. He just got the wrong idea. Things will be fine.

Lando continues his Haven tour. The smithy doesn't have much selection now, but Lando is relieved that the smith, Harrit, already has their measurements. The word Harrit had received on Lando is clear, so he is able to supplement Lando's already serviceable sword with decent plate armor and a very warm cloak.

Harrit says, "And the Lady Herald? I wasn't quite informed as to what type of armor to prepare for her..."

Lando replies with, "Gim needs to be nimble and quick, and she likes dark colors. Probably standard rogue gear—leaning to the lighter armor but greater flexibility—would be great. She won't be needing a weapon."

"No weapon. at all?" says Harrit looking rather skeptical.

Lando decides a little innocent misdirection is fine, so he says, "Yes, she has that part covered." That seems to make Harrit feel better. Lando wishes he and Gim didn't have to protect these shems' delicate sensitivities.

Walking away from Harrit's place, Lando sees Cassandra practicing on a training dummy. She is so beautiful and so fierce: that dummy is not going to survive much more of her attention. Cassandra doesn't appear to be satisfied with her own performance, because she makes a healthy, and curiously appealing, noise of disgust just as Lando walks up.

"I hope that noise was because of your opponent's shocking tendency to keep his right side open," he says with a grin as he walks up. She apparently doesn't see the humor of that statement. She glances at him briefly and then turns a serious eye to her adversary. Lando decides to change tack.

"Worried?" he asks with a more serious tone.

"Is it that obvious?" she says.

"I'm afraid so."

She turns away from her dummy and walks towards the frozen lake. "Did I do the right thing? What I have set in motion here could destroy everything I have revered my whole life. One day, they may write about me as a traitor, a madwoman, a fool. And they may be right."

Lando says, "Would you rather there were no peaceful Andristians to write anything about you? I
saw a number of people in Haven battered but going about their lives. How many fewer of them would there be now if Chancellor Roderick had got his way before we stabilized the Breach?"

Cassandra stops and gazes at him with her head cocked. She says, "Between my actions and his there may be many paths. My trainers always said, 'Cassandra, you are too brash. You must think before you act.' I see what must be done, and I do it. I see no point in running around in circles like a dog chasing its tail. But I misjudged you in the beginning, did I not? I thought the answer was before me, clear as day. I cannot afford to be so careless again."

Lando shines his best smile at her and says, "I have never been so grateful to have a lady change her mind about me."

"After all I saw on that day, I have to believe we were put on this path for a reason."

Lando says, "You worry about your actions being rash, but what I see is a passionate woman sowing the seeds of destiny. Now it simply remains to see what we will reap from those seeds. We are the only ones who can close the Breach, and we would not have that chance without you."

Cassandra looks less distracted now. Before, she was lost in worry and self-doubt. Now she is gazing straight at him with one eye brow raised. She says, "It occurs to me that I don't actually know much about you."

Oh this is good. She's interested. He says, "What do you want to know?"

Now she hesitates. "I'm...I'm not sure. Where are you from?"

"Gim and I are from Clan Lavellan. The clan never stayed in one place for long, but they primarily roamed the Freemarches. We left the clan a year ago, and we have been slowly making our way to the Frostbacks. We supported ourselves with hunting, selling a few crafted items, and occasional services. We learned a lot about shh...humans on the way here," he says as he mentally kicks himself for almost calling her people shems. Not that she would even know that as an unfriendly word.

She says, "Oh? I didn't think your people roamed that far north. Clearly I am mistaken. Do you intend to go back?"

Lando thinks about just how much of this to go into now. He doesn't want to force Gim's hand. "When we left a year ago, we left for good. They would not take us back now. We would rather not even advertise our clan name, for no good could come of it. They would not be happy to claim us—even if we were not being named prophets of a human religion—and we do not want those unhappy with us to punish our old clan for an association the clan now disavows."

She eyes him closely, and he can almost see her deciding not to pry. She says, "Really? That is good to know. Perhaps you and Gim should talk to our Ambassador about this. You will meet her tonight."

Time for a topic shift. "And what about you? May I also get to know you better?"

Cassandra examines each finger of her gauntlets and then looks up at him. "I'm just curious as to your motivation," she says.

Lando smiles broadly, "The reports of open rifts lead me to believe we will have many chances to talk in the future. No need to tell me your life story now. Just tell me where you are from," he says, emphasizing that he asking for no more than what she asked of him.
She says, "As you wish. My name is Cassandra Pentaghast, daughter of the royal house of Nevarra, seventy-eighth in line for the Nevarran throne. I joined the seekers of truth as a young woman, and I was with the Order until they withdrew from the Chantry. I remained as the Divine's right hand, carrying out her order to form the Inquisition—and here we are. That's all there is to know."

He says, "You are a member of Nevarra's royal family? Are you sure you should be seen with an exiled Dalish warrior with a disfiguring green mark on his hand?"

She says, "I can see that you jest, but the Pentaghasts are a very large clan. Half of Cumberland could say the same. And if you think your, as you say, disfigured hand will bring to mind the most troubling association I have had in my career, you are mistaken."

Lando takes in a deep breath as he shows unmistakeable signs of wrapping up their conversation. He says, "Well, that's good to know. You have given me much to think on. Don't tell me more now: what if we had nothing to talk of the next time we traveled to close a rift?"

She smiles, returns to her dummy, and draws back her sword in preparation for another punishing strike. Lando detects a bit of a cynical tone as she says, "Something tells me you are never at a loss for words."

Lando walks away thinking of Cassandra. He thinks he should wait for the next natural opportunity for them to talk, and he should let her guide the conversation. He needs more opportunity to show her some substance—that he is not all words.

"Where is a rift when you need one?" he mutters as he walks back through the gates of Haven.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any comments or suggestions that you do not wish to post publicly, feel free to email me at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
An Understanding But No Tongue

Chapter Summary

Gim explores Haven.

Ya gotta have Faith.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Once they part from Lando, Gim walks with Solas to the door of the apothecary. He points and says, "My cabin is right next door. I will be interested to speak tonight. I may be of some help with respect to that spell you were looking for."

Gim brightens. She does not, however, think discussing it further where they are is a good idea. She says, "I am very happy to hear it. I will be by later, and I will knock if I see a light. If not, perhaps you can find me—perhaps with the aid of a mutual friend."

Solas's eyebrows go up. He says, "Indeed. I will leave you to talk to Adan, then. Before I go, I am curious, Is Wisdom still...?"

Gim shakes her head. "No, I took a short nap after you left." She looks at him for a moment, makes a decision and says, "If we are to be working together, you might enjoy playing a game that Lando and I play. He tries to guess my spirit from tiny clues in my behavior. I don't think it is easy, so feel free to just ask if it interests you. Do you have any guesses from the little you saw in the tavern?" She feels a bit mischievous asking him, but it is so nice to have another person know about her.

"I would not presume to know you so well, da'len," he says calmly. He gives Gim a polite nod before gracefully striding off to his own cabin.

Gim feels Faith's merriment. She says inside herself, Well at least someone is amused. Message received: no unasked confidences.

On opening the door to Adan's cabin, Gim sees most of the apparatus that she expects to find in the vicinity of an apothecary, but some of it is hooked up strangely, and the collection of herbs seems very low. She suspects that Adan has not been an apothecary for very long.

Talking with Adan is illuminating: he's only been the town's apothecary for a short time. He was promoted when his Master, Taigin, died in the explosion. Adan has done his best, and he was brought in to help with Lando and her twice now. Gim thanks him. Gim knows more about the healing aspects of alchemy than Adan does, but he knows much more about poisons and grenades than she does.

When she finds out that Adan is not enjoying acting as the town's healer, she asks him to take her to where the wounded are. Adan is skeptical, but he does so.

When she gets to the makeshift infirmary, Gim is distressed to find many wounded soldiers in a large room with no privacy. These are men and women who can't be fixed with healing potions and simple ministrations—in time, some will survive, but some will dwindle. Gim could help many of
these people, but not without scaring them and glowing distressingly. Caution and the need to help war in her for a bit. Lando has been pressing her to tell others about her abilities: Best to start at the top.

Gim returns to her cabin to get her pack. She had been very grateful to find it in the room where she had awakened. Her pack has a small collection of tools particular to her activities as a healer.

After asking directions, Gim finds her way to the tent near the quartermaster where Leliana is often found. As she walks up to the tent, she finds Leliana kneeling by the side of a cot, reciting from the Canticle of Benedictions.

"Blessed are the Peacekeepers, the champions of the just. Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadow. In their blood, the makers will is written." At this point, Leliana moves away from the Canticles and she sounds distressed. "Is that what you want from us? Blood? To die so that your will is done? Is death your only blessing?"

Leliana turns to Gim and her manner flows from pleading to challenging. She says, "You speak for Andraste, no? What does the Maker's prophet have to say about all of this? What's his game?"

Gim can feel Faith clamoring to help. She says, "Leliana, can we talk in private? I need your help, and I think I can help you."

Either Leliana did not hear Gim, or she thinks Gim is not taking her seriously. She says, "Do you see the sky? What about the Temple ruins? The bones lying in the dust? Even if you didn't support the Divine's Peace, you wouldn't call this just. Who could? So many innocent lives—the people murdered where the Holiest of Holmes once stood. If the maker willed this, what is it, what is it but a game or a cruel joke?"

Gim reaches for Leliana's hand. She says, "Leliana, please let us speak inside the Chantry. It won't take long, and I honestly think it will help both of us."

Leliana doesn't pull away from Gim, but she seems to shake off her unease. She says, "No. I regret that I even let you see me like this."

Gim fears that she is missing her chance—missing Faith's chance. She says, "Leliana, you may not need me, but I desperately need you, and if I can't talk to you privately now, I fear that we will be unable to close the Breach."

This seems to snap Leliana back to her professional demeanor. She yanks her hand away from Gim and says, "Unable to close the Breach? Why?"

Gim pleads, "Unable because every rift we have tried has required both Lando and me to close it, and if I don't get your counsel, privately, and very soon, I could easily be killed. Please come to the Chantry and talk to me out of earshot of anyone else." Leliana may not know her well enough to know how unusual this tone of voice is for Gim, but it is easily the most emotional she has sounded in front of anyone in Haven.

After scanning Gim's face for a few moments, Leliana says, "This is important to you; we should include the other advisors."

"What I have to say concerns secrets that I will indeed also want to tell the other advisors, but I need your advice first. You are the expert on secrets here, right? I am no threat to you, and I promise to tell you the truth and to allow you to tell the other advisors whatever you like after we talk."

At this point, Leliana's face is completely blank and completely terrifying. Leliana gestures towards
the Chantry—suggesting that Gim precede her. Gim walks to the Chantry, enters the front doors and
waits. Leliana again gestures forwards, to the War room. When Gim reaches the War room, she
opens the door to an empty room. Gim goes in and stands by the table. Leliana follows, closes the
door, and leans on it.

Leliana says, "We are now in private. Tell me who would threaten your life."

"I don't know for sure, but the ones I fear the most are Cullen and Cassandra."

Leliana sighs. "Explain why they would harm you. Explain why you would tell me this."

Time to get right to it. "Leliana, I understand that all of the advisors will need to know this, but I
approached you for two reasons: First, you are the spymaster, and I don't want to lie to you in any
way. Second, I know from your history that you have some sympathy for mages and that you have
traveled with a spirit healer."

Leliana's face is still impassive. She says, "But Solas has said that you are not a mage."

"I am not a conventional kind of mage. My only connection to the Fade comes from a spirt I have
visiting me, each day a different spirit visits me. I am not an abomination, and I have complete
control over the visiting spirits, who I can eject at any time. If Solas observed me now, he would not
see any sign that I can cast magic. I can only cast magic if I manifest the spirit, and if I manifest
around the wrong kind of people, my life is in danger."

Leliana moves away from the door towards Gim. She says, "And this is why you didn't show us
your abilities before?"

Gim says, "There hasn't been much time to do so. I thought it might be better to wait to use my
abilities at a crucial juncture and thus show how valuable they are, but there are wounded soldiers
that I could help right now, and I would rather not be run through by a Templar when I start
glowing."

"You glow when you manifest?"

Gim nods. "I do. It is unmistakeable. If I can't do it in complete privacy, I announce that I, a non-
mage, am producing a lot of magic. Experience leads me to believe Templars will see this as a reason
to attack me."

"Can you show me?"

Gim approaches Leliana and takes her hand gently. She closes her eyes, calls on Faith, and scans
Leliana. Leliana has not been sleeping well, and Gim can see signs of this all over Leliana's body.
She takes down some swelling, soothes some nerves, and knits up a tear in Leliana's shoulder that
would probably make archery painful.

When Gim opens her eyes, Leliana is no longer looking impassive; now she looks like someone
gave her a surprise gift. Gim says, "I want to show you what happens when I fully manifest. There is
no danger. You can talk to the spirit."

Gim is still holding Leliana's hand as she calls Faith to the fore. She feels the familiar blue seams
move across her skin and she knows her eyes are blue. As her form settles, Leliana gasps but she
does not pull her hand away.

Leliana says, "Wynne?"
Faith replies, "No, child, but I know your history and I thought this form would be familiar to you. Wynne held the interest of a spirit such as I for many years, and I honor her. That is all. In the Fade, I do not have a habitual form; for you I picked this one."

Leliana says, "You said you know my history?"

"Of course. I am a spirit of Faith. How can I not know the Hands of the Divine? There is much in your nature that calls to me, child, and at times I felt you so close. In Lothering, when I gave you the rose, it was easy to see that you felt me. It has been harder to touch you of late. I thank Gim for giving us a chance to talk. Without a spirit medium, misunderstandings are almost inevitable."

Leliana gasps when Faith mentions the rose. She says, "I thought that was the Maker."

Faith says, "I am not the Maker, child, but does not your Chant of Light say that I am one of his first children? Perhaps He used me to give you the rose."

Leliana now has tears in her eyes. She says, "What would you have of me Spirit of Faith? Will you punish me for my lapses?"

"Child, Faith does not punish," Faith says as it opens its arms. "I would hold you, as the Maker cannot. I would comfort you, as I have always sought to do. I would tell you to forgive the world for not being perfect, to forgive the Maker for not making a better world, to reach out to the people struggling alongside you, and to go on living despite all the suffering and pain."

Leliana steps into Faith's arms, and Faith stroked her back and murmured motherly nonsense into her hair. After many minutes of this, Faith's form glowed brightly again, and then the glow dropped and the figure holding Leliana had brown eyes and not blue. Gim gives Leliana a last squeeze and steps just a bit away.

"You see, Leliana," Gim says gently, "why I was moved to trust you first? My friend loves you; may I not also love you a little?"

Leliana wipes her eyes and smiles. She says, "We can do this. Josie will tell us how to present this most safely, and Cullen and Cassandra must see the great tactical advantage of having a spirit healer. We will make this work." She paces a little and then says, "Now, about those wounded soldiers. Come with me."

Leliana leads Gim out of the Chantry, and Leliana's step is light and purposeful. She takes Gim to the infirmary, and after glancing at the dozen or so men and women lying on cots and bedrolls, she moves to a room nearby where amputations and other less-savory healing functions are performed.

Leliana gestures to a sturdy table then goes out into the main infirmary room. She says to the attendants, "Please bring one of the most seriously wounded soldiers into this treatment room."

One of the attendants, a Chantry sister with a very solid build, nods, and then she and another attendant bring in a moaning man, place him on the table, and then leave. The man has gashes on his face arms and legs, and from the looks of it, fever and infection has set in.

This is the first soldier, and Gim sees each one: mostly men, with a few women. She sends them to sleep, scans them and then deals with infection, pooled blood, gashes, and killed tissue. On occasion she calls a flame and heats a small thin knife—more like a wooden-handled needle than a knife. She makes a few incisions, drains some fluid, and sends her blue glow where it is needed.

She tells Leliana she can't help two of the soldiers, and that two more need to have bones broken and reset—she will need help for that.
Finally, very tired, she turns to Leliana. "Thank you for letting me help them."

Leliana says, "It was my honor, Herald."

Gim says, "I have wrapped my arms around you. Will you not call me Gim?"

Leliana says, "I will be very pleased to call you Gim when in private. I can see you need to rest. May I escort you to your cabin? We have some hours before we meet tonight. Then, I will support you. I assure you, Commander Cullen will be well-disposed towards someone who has saved his soldiers. It will be OK."

Gim thanks Leliana and then stumbles back to her cabin, where she falls on her bed.

*Thank you, Faith, she says inside herself.*

Faith projects warmth and contentment as Gim falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Comments or personal communication to kinako.aaaa@gmail.com very much welcome.
Gim awakes to a pounding on her door. She is decently, if lightly, covered, but she knows her sleep-tossed hair is haphazard and wild. She figures it must be urgent, so she staggers to the door and opens it. Commander Cullen strides in with an expression that looks akin to contained outrage. Gim tries to sound like this is a social call. She says, "Commander. We haven't really had a chance to talk, but I did see you briefly on the field."

He steps inside the door, but Gim is worried about closing it. She stands there for a moment with the door to the freezing outdoors open. She says, "Is it time for the meeting of all the advisors?"

"No it is not. What it is, is time for you to explain what you were doing with my soldiers."

Gim finally shuts the door and walks over to the hearth. She takes a seat and motions towards the other seat for the commander. She says, "I did not hurt any of your soldiers, Commander. Do you have some reason to believe I have? I did visit them, but I had Sister Leliana with me the entire time. She can vouch that I have not harmed any of them."

The commander has not seated himself. He is pacing back and forth. Now he looks closer to stoic disappointment than rage.

Gim says, "Can you tell me what complaint you have heard of me?" Gim concentrates on looking innocent—whatever that means. The only particulars she can think of right now are to look him in the eye and to keep her voice from quavering.

"One of the Templars, Lysette, came to me," says the commander. "She told me that she felt the presence of magic coming from the Infirmary, and when she entered the main room, she found two attendants whispering to each other. When confronted, they would only say that one of the patients was in a closed room with the lady Herald, and no one was to interrupt. Lysette waited outside the closed room for a bit and felt once again the presence of magic. She is a new Templar, and she has had little cause to deal with demons, but she reported a strange feeling in the magic coming from the closed room. After a bit, the door opened, and one of the patients walked out slowly—apparently healthy. At this point, feeling her duty, she left to find me. It took her some time to find me, but as soon as she reported I came directly to find you."

So many feelings. Gim is awash in shame and fear. She didn't handle this well; she should have expected her healing to be detected. She should have waited until after she met with the advisors tonight—but then it would be so late. How can she explain this to the commander? Time to prevaricate.

"Have you seen your men, Commander? Have you seen any of them to be hurt?" she asks.
He is no longer pacing; he looks like he is standing at attention—like this whole conversation is something he must endure. It doesn't escape Gim that he is centered and his hand is near his sword. He says, "I have not, but I trust Lysette, and I would know what magic was performed on my soldier."

Gim says, "I swear I did not hurt your soldier, or anyone else, in any way. Can we please get Leliana?"

"I fail to see how Leliana's absence prevents you from telling me the truth."

Just then the door opens and Lando comes partway in before stopping dead. Gim says, "Lando, get Leliana, now!" Lando is out the door before the commander can move. Lando has left the door open, and now even though she is by the hearth, Gim has begun shivering—although she is not sure if it is fear or cold that is making her tremble. She takes one glance up at Commander Cullen, but that glance only increases her fear.

Faith is becoming agitated—it wants Gim to manifest and just show the commander. Gim realizes her options are narrowing and Faith is probably right. If nothing else, manifesting would allow her to warm herself and stop shaking.

Gim says, "I healed your soldiers. I healed eight of them and reduced the pain of four more."

The commander says, "And just how did you do that. I can see right now that you have no magic."

Gim says dejectedly, "I was going to explain all of this to all of you tonight. Please. Just wait for Leliana."

At this moment, right on cue, Leliana and Lando appear. Both of them show signs of having run here. Leliana says, "Lando, place your trust in me. I ask you to remain outside—right outside. If she calls for you or you hear distress, come in. For now, let me help clear things up."

Lando looks to Gim, and Gim nods. Lando stands tall, gives the commander a challenging look and says, "I will hold you responsible for her safety, Serrah," and leaves, shutting the door.

Leliana comes over to Gim and begins to chafe her hands up and down Gim's arms. She says, "Do not worry, Gim. I told you we will make this work, and we will. Have Faith."

Then, to the commander she says more sharply, "Cullen, is there some reason you are terrifying the woman who healed the armies of the faithful?"

The commander says, "She said she healed them, but I was a Templar. She has no magic about her at all."

Leliana cocks her head and says, "She is a spirit healer."

The commander's voice now drips with disappointment and frustration. Gim can easily imagine this tone of voice being used on a very stupid recruit. He says, "Leliana, I was a Templar in two different circles over more than ten years: spirit healers are vanishingly rare, and they are mages. This elf is not a mage."

"Cullen, I hear what you are afraid of—what you are always afraid of—but that woman is not a demon, nor is she possessed. When have you ever heard of a demon healing the armies of the faithful?" says an increasingly frustrated Leliana.

Cullen begins to respond, just as the door to the cabin opens and Solas comes in. Solas looks at the room's inhabitants briefly, and then says, "Lando told me that I might manage to clear up a
misunderstanding concerning spirits and magic."

Commander Cullen whips his head towards Solas and says, "And just why would we take the word of an apostate on this matter?"

Leliana says, "Cullen. He has been helpful and his advice has borne out more than once. There is no harm in listening to him."

The commander yells, "He is an apostate and an elf just like her. For all we know he is setting us up with apparent good deeds for some end we have not even begun to imagine."

Solas and Leliana start to angrily answer at the same time, but Gim says firmly but quietly, "Actually... I am not an elf."

Gim doesn't know if they will hear her through the noise, but they all stop talking and stare at her, so she supposes they did hear her. Leliana says, "What did you say?"

"I am not an elf," she says, "or to be more clear, I am not just an elf. I am half dwarf. My connection to the Fade is unusual—I believe because of my heritage. You have heard of mages who are dreamers, fade-walkers, right?" Leliana and Solas are open-mouthed, but they nod. "Well, I am more like a fade-landowner. I have a home in the Fade that I have complete control over, but I cannot roam the greater Fade at will. I can be visited, though, and since I was a child, spirits have visited me. I can allow one to come with me when I wake, and that spirit gives me a strong connection to the Fade if I manifest it. Like this."

At this Gim begins to glow. She does not take it to the full manifestation of seams and blue eyes, but even at this, Cullen reflexively jerks back. Now that she has Faith with her fully, Gim feels much better. She stops shivering, and she feels confident. Solas and Leliana are with her, and she, as Leliana asked of her, has Faith.

Solas says, "This morning Gim showed me her abilities as I was tending Lando, and she is telling the truth. The spirit who came with her this morning is a benevolent one that I am familiar with and who I would have no trouble recognizing."

The commander does not look happy. Gim says, "Cullen, can you see my magic abilities now?" He nods, so Gim continues, "Cullen, if you have any aches or pains or small injuries, I could heal you, or I can show you other things." She makes a small flame on her hand and casts a barrier around Cullen, who flinches again.

Cullen says, in the tone Gim knows he would use to resist the temptation of an actual demon, "I will not let you touch me and I do not know the source of your powers."

"Cullen, I can manifest my spirit all the way, and you can see it. Or..." she says and then stops—clearly considering something. "Cullen do you know the Litany of Adralla?"

"Of course I do, but it will not help here because you are clearly already in its thrall; the litany does not work if the bloodmage has been fully controlled."

Solas says, "There is no bloodmagic here, Commander. I believe you have been exposed to blood magic enough that you know I am telling the truth."

Gim is beginning to believe that he will have an answer for everything she has to say. She decides to see if Faith has something useful to say. As she manifests fully, she feels herself once again taking on Wynne's form.
Cullen draws his sword and moves back against the wall. His voice is ragged as he says, "No. You are dead. And you—you don't have glowing eyes. And you were there—at Kinloch. Stay back, demon!"

Faith says, in its doubled resonant voice, "My son, I am not Wynne, who I know you served with in Kinloch, but you are correct that I was at Kinloch when Uldred took over. Why do you think you survived the horrors they visited upon you? Every one of your brother Templars fell, but you did not. You know me. Your faith is strong, and that drew me to you. There was so much death and horror there—the veil was so thin. Many spirits gathered there to watch, but to me, you were one of two who shone like stars."

Cullen appears to be calming. His voice is still ragged, but he sounds much less sure as he says, "Two...And the other...?"

Leliana steps closer to Cullen. Her voice is melodic and soothing as she says, "Was Wynne. I traveled with her, Cullen. I knew her. She was an incredible spirit healer and she had a spirit of Faith with her, just as in front of you is another, a different, spirit of Faith. This spirit has touched me before, just as it has touched you. It is one of the Maker's first children, Cullen. It is not here to thwart our efforts." She pauses and moves closer to Cullen, who is silently staring at Faith.

Leliana continues, "Cullen, this is the spirit who has saved the lives of many of your men and who may save the mobility of two more. This is for us, to use terms important to you, a tactical advantage." Now she is close enough to touch Cullen, and she gently puts a hand on his arm. She says, "You are a strong man of faith, Cullen, as I try to be a strong woman of faith. When I met this spirit earlier, I allowed it to embrace me. I felt peace. I felt known. I recommend strongly that you let it embrace you. I will be here. I will let no harm come to you."

Faith puts out her arms in invitation, but Gim does not believe that Cullen will come to her. But he sheathes his sword and wipes his face. He turns to Leliana, "Would you...?"

Leliana apparently knew what he meant, because she says, "Most gladly," and comes over to hug Faith. Faith enfolds her in its arms and whispers, "You are a strong woman of faith," into Leliana's ear. Leliana kisses Faith on each cheek, after the fashion of the Orlesians. She steps back and smiles at Cullen with happy, damp eyes.

Cullen is so much taller than Faith. As Gim looks out of Faith's eyes, Cullen looks to be a giant. He starts moving very slowly towards her. At first he moves an inch, then two, then he stops, then he starts again. When he is within a step of Faith, Faith moves forward, wraps her arms around his waist, and gazes up at his face beatifically. Cullen's eyes open wide, his face relaxes into an almost smile, and he lays his head on top of her hair.

Faith pats Cullen's back in the manner of loving grandmothers through the ages. After a while, she says, "You are so hard on yourself, my son. 'The Maker is with us. His light shall be our banner.' Remember, my son, you are loved."

At that, Gim felt Faith do a scan on Cullen, from which Gim learned many things. As Faith began to withdraw, Gim quickly lowered some inflammation and made some temporary changes to the function of one of Cullen's large internal organs. She was already glowing, and Cullen has been overwhelmed. She hopes this small act doesn't push him away from her.

Cullen steps back and raises a hand to his head. he says bewilderedly, "My headache is gone."

Gim, perhaps unwisely pushing a delicate situation, says, "You are welcome." She smiles at him. He weakly smiles back.
Now Gim turns her attention from just Cullen to everyone in the room. She says, "Lando has to be worried out there, and I am tired and starving. Do you think we could postpone our meeting with the full council until tomorrow morning? Feel free to tell the other council members whatever you would like. And I will happily answer any questions, tomorrow."

Leliana says, "Of course, Herald. We will see you even before breakfast, then." And she links arms with Cullen and begins to gently steer him out of the room.

At the door, Cullen stops and turns back. "I apologize, Lady Herald. I hope we will do better together after this." And then he and Leliana are gone and Lando is back in the room.

Lando stomps to the fire and warms his hands. He says, "I was dying out there, Gim, but I take it everything turned out ok?"

Gim says, "I will be shocked if the commander does not continue watching me like a hawk, but we made it past the first test. Now I just have to make sure Varric, Cassandra, and the ambassador know. Telling them has to be easier than this was, right? Are you happy about this, Lando?"

Lando laughs. "Of course I am happy, but if you had asked me while I was waiting outside that closed door listening to the commander yell about demons I would have given you a different answer."

"Tell me," says Solas, "do your spirits often go about hugging people?"

"Physical affection is very important for the well-being of corporeal entities, Solas," Gim says authoritatively.

Solas raises one eyebrow and almost smiles. "Is that so?" he says.

"It is so," says Gim, "and I wasn't kidding that I was starving. Care to join me, you two? Just give me a moment to put on warmer clothing."

Solas and Lando leave, and after some very hasty garment tossing, but no attention paid to her hair, Gim, with a wild black cloud about her face and shoulders, follows them.

Chapter End Notes

Comments or personal communication to kinako.aooo@gmail.com very much welcome.
Chapter Summary

Cassandra, Faith, and tattoos.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Just as Gim exits the cabin to join Lando and Solas, Cassandra strides up.

Cassandra says, "I have just seen Leliana supporting a shaken Cullen. I have never seen him thus. Leliana waved me off as I was about to ask. She said I should find you, Gim."

Gim looks from Cassandra to Lando to Solas. She is tired, but she doesn't think Cassandra, who has fought at her side, will be as difficult to convince as Cullen was, and the thought of having this revelation behind her is a good one. She takes a deep breath and says, "Well. I suppose I should be getting good at this today. Lando and Solas, do you want to go order for me?"

Lando says, "Oh no. I didn't get to watch the last two: I want to be there for this one. Besides, I think I can help with this one; I know how we warriors think, after all."

"I would prefer to accompany you as well," says Solas with a nod.

This whole time Cassandra has been moving her gaze from speaker to speaker. She makes a noise of exasperation and says, "Are you just going to stand here discussing the manner of telling me this, or are you going to tell me?"

Lando grins, walks to Cassandra, offers her his crooked elbow with a small bow, and says, "My Lady Seeker, if you will come with us..."

This earns him another disgusted noise from Cassandra, but she does take his arm. Solas opens the door of the cabin, and all four go in.

Gim says to Faith, Are you ready for another appearance?, and she receives a happy, expectant response.

Aloud, Gim says, "Cassandra, I judge that you appreciate directness. I am a spirit medium and a spirit healer. Earlier today I healed eight Inquisition soldiers, and the odd magic I emitted was observed by a Templar, who told Commander Cullen. Cullen feared I was possessed, but Leliana and the spirit I carry convinced him otherwise. I think he found that my abilities and my spirit challenged his beliefs. Leliana is helping him come to terms."

Cassandra has her arms crossed in front of her and is looking at Gim like she is waiting for the punch line to the joke.

Lando says, "Just show her, Gim."

Gim calls on Faith, and Faith comes to the fore. But this time as her eyes glow and her skin is split with blue seams, Faith does not take on the form of a deceased senior mage; this time her blue glow
is supplemented with formless pulsing gold, and from the reaction of the others, her glow is uncomfortably bright.

Lando squints and turns his eyes, and Solas laces his fingers in front of his eyes but keeps looking forward. Only Cassandra does not look away: she drops to her knees.

Faith's voice doesn't just resonate this time, it rings. Faith says, "Do not kneel to me, daughter. I am not the Maker. Though I spill light unearthly from the waters of the Fade, it is you who are a light in the shadow; you are a Peacekeeper—a Champion of the Just."

Cassandra stands. She says, "My vigil...I felt...are you...?"

Faith says, "I came when I was called for you. I was honored to do so. Be fierce, be sure, daughter, but open your heart: Love is the Maker's best gift and it is infinite."

Faith's light moves to Cassandra and envelopes her. Cassandra closes her eyes and basks. Then Faith recedes, and once again, Gim finds herself with her hands tight around a waist and her head pressed against unyielding armor. She moves her hands to Cassandra's and grasps them briefly while doing a quick scan. Then she steps back and drops her glow completely.

She says to Faith, You should warn me when you are going to put on a show like that, but the response is just the shimmer of quiet joy.

Cassandra opens her eyes. She says, "I did not think to ever feel that again." She takes a breath, squares her shoulders, and turns to Gim. "Was this inside you when we threw you in our dungeon? Did we imprison Faith?"

Gim hastens to reassure her, "Oh no. I usually have a different spirit every day, and in the dungeon, I only had a spirit with me once I awoke. Don't worry about imprisoning any spirits."

Cassandra says, "And they allow you to heal?"

"They do, but when they taught me, I made a pact with them: I can't use a weapon or spells with the intent to harm."

Cassandra nods. "This explains much." She cocks her head and says, "Perhaps I begin to see why Andraste chose you."

Gim says, "If you believe she chose me, then you believe she chose Lando."

Cassandra looks at Lando. She says, "I will consider this." At this she exits the cabin, closing the door behind her.

Lando says, "That woman doesn't waste any time once she knows her heart."

Gim says, "Heart?" And Lando grins. "You two were sure quiet during that."

Solas says, "Would you have me speak when there is no call to do so? I must admit, Faith is not a spirit with whom I have conversed much. I had no idea it could be so entertaining."

Lando laughs. "Solas, life around Gim is never dull. And Gim, thank you for the endorsement."

Gim says, "Oh wait, before we go, Solas says he might be able to help with removing our vallaslin."

Lando says, "That would be very helpful for a number of reasons. Among them, if we have to name our old clan, it could leave them open to reprisals from whoever our enemies are. I've mentioned this
to Cassandra, and she told me to talk to the Ambassador about it. It might ease the Ambassador's job if we have no blood writing. Perhaps we can be advertised as wandering elves—like Solas."

Solas doesn't look entirely happy about that idea. "Perhaps you should leave the crafting of your story to the Ambassador. But before I talk to you about removing your Vallaslin, can you, Lando, tell me why you don't want to be marked for Mythal?"

Lando says, "I am not a slave."

"Indeed, you are not. Your clan must be very unusual."

"Oh," says Lando, "don't assume they feel as we do. There are reasons we left the clan."

"I shall enjoy hearing about such reasons some day. For the moment, please sit in that chair and turn it away from the fire." Then Solas moves the other chair opposite Lando's chair in such a manner that it looks like they might play chess. He leans forwards and runs his hands slowly up Lando's face without touching it. His hands glow blue, but the blue is closer to aqua than Gim's ice blue.

When his hands reach Lando's forehead, Solas says, "Ar lasa mala revas. You are free."

Lando's face is pale and ink-free. Lando looks to Gim with a clear question in his eyes. She nods. At this he stands up and makes room for Gim to take his place in the chair.

Gim sits and faces Solas. His face is so close to hers. The only time she has been this close to him was when Wisdom embraced him. His eyes are blue, and they are deep. Unlike Lando, she knows there are thousands of years behind those eyes, and she is having trouble not ducking his gaze. She feels Faith give her a little kick of conviction, and she does not look down. It is true that she is not beautiful like Lando is, but to an elven, they are probably both something like domesticated sheep, or maybe, if they are lucky, loyal hounds.

Once again, Solas moves his hands up, and once again at the apex, he says, "Ar lasa mala revas."

So this is what free feels like. Gim feels possibilities and challenges that have nothing to do with being trapped in a narrow role with people who don't believe her or value her. The Inquisition needs her. Even apart from her mark, she is a "tactical advantage." So be it. She must make sure this is also a good change for Lando. But first, she must make sure she is not an unwitting burden.

She says, "Solas, how would you like us to explain when we are asked about the loss of our vallaslin?"

Solas looks at her a moment. He almost looks like he might smile. He says, "How would you suggest?"

Gim feels like this is some sort of test. She looks at Lando. Lando says, "Whatever you say I will back up." Gim knows he said that for Solas's benefit.

Gim says, "We no longer have vallaslin. Therefore, our vallaslin were temporary. Let us tell people that we had temporary vallaslin that helped us to move without question across Thedas. Who knows our clan name?"

"Only Cassandra, to my knowledge, and she also heard you say you were trying to learn to remove the vallaslin. I can speak with her," says Lando.

Gim looks at Solas. "Is this acceptable to you?"
"Ma nuvenin," he says.

At this point, they finally go to the tavern, and Gim supposes she eats, but mostly she remembers being awakened from where she was resting across the table, and then she remembers stumbling back to the cabin between Solas and Lando.

And then she is in her room, and Solas is leaving. He says, "I will see you soon, da'len. I look forward to it."

And she just barely gets her coat and wraps off, and she thinks Lando puts her covers over her, and then, she is out.

Chapter End Notes

Comments or personal communication to kinako.aooo@gmail.com very much welcome.
Gim opens her eyes and stretches—squirming like a pup on her back. The last few waking days have had many high points, but things have always been easier for her in the Fade. Here there is warmth, beauty and friendship. And tonight, the company promises to be intriguing.

She walks out to her yard, and as usual, many spirits are enjoying her grounds. Faith, again using the form of Wynne, is waiting for her as she exits her hall. Gim says, "Thank you so much, friend. You have made my life so much better. I owe you."

Faith says, "Dear one, it is I who am indebted to you. You are keeping rarified company, you know. Those I saw with you today—I said things to three of them that I have been trying, and failing, to communicate without your help."

Gim says, "Yes, you were absolutely the right one to bring with me. Now who should I take with me when I meet the lady ambassador?" As she continues to talk to Faith, more spirits approach.

Soon, she feels a polite request. This is surprising, because she expected her guest to arrive with Wisdom, who can walk right in, anytime. She projects invitation.

Solas, dressed as he was when last she saw him, walks up to her and the spirits. All of the spirits but Faith withdraw as she greets her guest.

"Andaran atish'an, Solas," says Gim.

"Savhalla, Gim," he replies, giving nods to Gim and to Faith. "So this is what you called your fade-home? Impressive."

"I didn't want to have to explain this under pressure, but I call it my Thaig. Come into my great room, and we can talk about it. Faith, you are also welcome to join us."

Faith says, "I will make my good-byes now. It was ... interesting to see you, Solas." Gim hears the emphasis on the name and files it away for later consideration.

Solas says, "Yes, well, perhaps we can talk more often in the future."

Faith chuckles gently and says, "I'm not sure you have much use for my kind, but nothing is inevitable." At this Faith grows more transparent and floats away.

Gim walks towards her archway, and Solas follows. She says, "Would you like something to drink? Lyree berry juice? Mead? Wine?" He is looking around as he enters. He approaches her hearth.

Solas laughs. "Lyree berry juice."
Gim says, "I'm not offering you anything you can't produce for yourself in the Fade. Although, probably not here."

Solas appears to concentrate for a moment, and then he looks up surprised. "You are correct. I am unable to manipulate the Fade here. I have observed that you are fond of answering questions in a manner that generates more questions."

Gim grins. This is her home. She could never be this comfortable talking to him anywhere else, but here, she is relaxed and secure. "But Solas, you never actually ask any questions! I will answer some of the unasked, if you wish.

"First, as far as I know, I can't keep you here, so you always have the power to leave this place, even should I wish to detain you against your will, which I surely would not. I, on the other hand, can only leave this place if a spirit or a dreamer," at which point she gestures to Solas, "takes me with them. I have full control here and no control elsewhere." Just for emphasis, she hands him an opal goblet filled with lyree berry juice.

"Were you considering answering my unstated question of how you even know of the existence of lyree berry juice?" he says with a smile as he takes the goblet from her.

"I have several areas of study that I pursue in the Fade. Spirits bring me gifts, instruct me, or take me on trips to view past events. My areas of study include, as you know, healing, and also ancient Elvhenan, evasive and defensive combat maneuvers, and pretty much anything about dwarves and their ancient empire. One of my trips included learning about lyree berry juice. And I thought you might like it."

"Fascinating. And what happens if a spirit takes you somewhere and then loses interest in you?"

"I'm rooted in my Thaig. No matter where I go, my Thaig is there. I've sent much time talking to my friends about my nature, and my theory is that if you take someone with a strong stone sense and someone who is a fade-walker, and somehow intersect the two, you get me. It has its limitations, but it has some strong advantages. I am fortunate; my dreaming life is rich."

Gim is glad to see that Solas has completely abandoned his inscrutable mask. He is openly smiling. He says, "I've never heard of anyone like you. I did know of some half-elf, half-dwarf children, although the combination is rare. I have never heard that any of them had your Fade connection."

Gim says, "None of my friends have heard of such either. But then, someone with the ability to be a fade-walker is rare, and to add strong stone sense... Well, as I said, I am fortunate."

"One thing I am curious about: how will the mark on my hand affect my nature? Will the mark affect me differently than it does Lando?"

Solas's smile is gone. He says, "It has not troubled you since you awakened?"

"I am aware of it. I'm aware of the spirits walling it off from themselves. I don't know how to explain that, but the spirits don't want to be touched by it. It did not hurt Fortitude when I activated it, and in fact, I did some play-acting on the way up the mountain so that my being in less pain than Lando was not too obvious to Cassandra. I think Fortitude kept me insulated from some effects."

Solas is considering something deeply while twirling the juice around in his goblet. Gim has no idea how anyone could look at him and not know he is, in essence, royalty. Modern Thedans are so used to elves barely coping that they just can't see it. She wouldn't have seen it if she hadn't seen what elvhen look like in their courts, at their balls, in their wars.
Solas says, "I would like to look at your mark again when next I see you in the waking."

Gim says, "Of course. And I, with your permission, I would like to look at you when next I see you in the waking."

Solas's eyebrows shoot up. Gim says, "I suspect you remember that I said I have a specialty with respect to those who have awakened from uthenera? I may be able to limit the negative affects of your long sleep. I've been able to before."

"How is it that you have encountered other elvhen?"

"I knew that there were sleepers. My obsessions with Elvhenan and healing had me studying uthenera and the problems of those who came out of the long sleep even when there was no application. In at least one case, my spirit friends essentially advertised my existence to someone who could use my skills."

Solas freezes. There is no smile. His gaze is intense, and Gim would not call it friendly.

She says, "Yes, I know what question that brings to mind. Why didn't they tell you about me? I have some ideas about that. You might not like them."

Solas says very quietly, "I might not."

Deep breath in. Deep breath out. This is her home. She is safe here. She is safe. "Solas, please remember that I have sworn to you to keep your secrets, and that includes ones that I derive on my own."

"And have you, da'len, discovered my secrets?"

Gim must be crazy, because she barks out a laugh. Inappropriate. She says, "Solas, I don't even think you know all your secrets."

"But I do know that no spirit ever spoke to me about you specifically—that sometimes there was an interesting absence in what I was told. I know that in all the scenes of Arlathan I have been shown, I have never seen your face. I know that my friends value me greatly. I think they fear for my life; I think they fear you. I think other elvhen were told of me because they were bit players and you are not. I called you Tarlen when I met you. I meant it."

"And what does this mean about my actions? Little. I've told you what I want from you already. I will not thwart your plans, no matter what they are. I would not even try to stop you from ending my life, though I admit I would prefer you did not."

Solas looks at her. He looks tired, suddenly. He blinks a few times. He throws his opal goblet into the hearth; it makes a lovely cathartic sound.

Gim quietly waits for his response.

He says, "I have one request."

Gim says, "Anything."

He says, "I want to see you spar with our good Commander Cullen. He won't believe you are serious when you ask him. But I see evidence of the training you have had, and I am sure he will take you more seriously after you toss him on his back a few times."
Gim says with her most serious voice, "So shall it be done."

And Solas fades out of her sight and out of her Thaig.

Chapter End Notes

*Andaran atish'an* and *Savhalla* are greetings.

According to FenxShiral, *Tarlen* is noble, noble person, prince, lord.

Comments or personal communication to kinako.aaaa@gmail.com very much welcome.
When the Hurlyburly's done

Chapter Summary

The first full meeting of the war council. Plans are made to go to the Hinterlands. Cullen learns a thing or two.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gim and Lando are up early, and Lando is glad that she lets him braid her wild, dark hair. They are both presentable before Cassandra drops by for the morning meeting. Given the rumors that are bound to start about Gim, a little attention to a polished appearance can't hurt.

As Lando opens the door to Cassandra, he gives her his best "my morning is the better for seeing you" smile. That she smiles back at all is good, even if it is a little wan. She looks past him to Gim, and she looks a little uneasy, but uneasy in an anticipatory way. Lando would much prefer that she look at him with that expression of provocative possibility. He knows that is unfair: she isn't really looking at Gim that way; she is looking at the vessel of Faith that way.

Cassandra says, "I don't think I thanked you for allowing me to talk with Faith. And I do, I mean, I do thank you. As a matter of course, I do not think I care to interact with spirits, but that one, as soon as I felt it, I knew it. It was...special for me."

Gim says, "You are most welcome, Cassandra. I will tell you, when I talked with Faith later that night, it said something very similar about how much it meant to talk to you. It said something about my keeping 'rarified company'. For the future, outside of a specific request, you shouldn't have to interact with my spirits. I do almost always have one with me though. I can't heal or protect myself as well without one visiting me."

Lando, trying to sound reassuring, says, "Most of the time, she keeps her ethereal passengers to herself, Cassandra, so don't worry. A small amount of blue glow now and then, and that's it."

Cassandra looks relieved. She says, "Understood." She pauses for a moment, and then says, "Were not you just speaking yesterday of finding a way to remove your facial markings?"

Gim says, "Our markings were temporary, and we were able to completely remove them last night. This can be a sensitive topic for elves, so we hope to avoid the topic in the future. I believe Lando has mentioned our desire to avoid association with our old clan. We intend to speak to the ambassador today about how our histories should be presented."

Cassandra says, "A wise precaution," and leads them out of their cabin and up the hill to the Chantry.

The morning is crisp, the Breach is stable, nothing about his body hurts, and he is walking between two exceptional women—exceptional enough that they aren't even trying to replace the quiet camaraderie with chatter: Lando is content. He hopes the day continues so well.

When they reach the War room, Cassandra says, "I believe you have met everyone here but Lady
Josephine Montilyet, our ambassador and chief diplomat."

Josephine is very pretty and very aristocratic. She steps forward and says, "Andaran atish'an."

Surprised, Lando says, "You speak elven?"

Josephine says, "You have just heard the entirety of it, I am afraid."

Lando says, "I prefer common myself, and don't let Gim teach you any elven. Whenever Gim speaks it around any Dalish, they just get annoyed. We mostly stick to common. We are very happy to meet the last member of the leadership. We are, of course, familiar with the rest of you."

Cullen turns to Gim, but he isn't looking directly at her, and his posture is very stiff. He says, "Lady Herald, I was not at my best yesterday, and I said many things that should never have left my mouth. I am grateful that you healed our soldiers: our losses from the fighting in the Valley would have been much worse without you."

"Think nothing of it," says Gim. "What is most important is that we work well together going forward, don't you think?" Lando notices Leliana giving Gim a sparkle of approval. "Healing our forces is my privilege, and while I would rather they were not hurt, I will be ready to help with healing whenever necessary."

Cullen's posture seems more natural now. "Quite," He says, "and furthermore, I noticed at the temple that you seem to have no weapons training. Because you will need to leave Haven with Lando to close rifts, you will need to learn basic defense with a weapon. I would like to help you find a trainer who is appropriate to your level."

Cassandra starts to speak, but all she gets out is Cullen's name before Gim interrupts her by raising her hand and addressing Cullen. "I think you may be surprised, Commander. I would welcome a chance to spar with you—say exactly one hour after whenever this meeting breaks up. Is that ok with you?" Behind Cullen, Lando sees Cassandra and Leliana sharing a look. Cassandra looks interested and amused, and Leliana looks...well, Leliana looks delighted.

Cullen looks a little confused, but he answers gently, "Of course, Lady Herald. It would be my honor. I will see you at the training yard." All the women in the room are now looking politely interested. This is going to be good.

Cassandra says, "As you know, the Breach is now stable. Solas thinks we have a good chance of closing the Breach if we can harness more power."

Leliana says, "Which means we must approach the rebel mages for help."

Cullen counters with, "I still disagree. The Templars could serve just as well."

Lando hopes Gim isn't going to explode about Templars. Now isn't a good time to be truthful about that. Just let it pass Gim! He tries very hard to communicate this to her silently. He sees she is about to speak, and he holds his breath.

She says, "Speaking of which, we are relying on Solas's knowledge, and he seems to be the only one whose field of study is the Fade and arcane magics such as this. Could we appoint him as something like an Arcane Advisor and ask him to come to these meetings?"

Cassandra says, "He has been very helpful." Leliana and Josephine are projecting approval, and Lando can see Cullen look around the room—can see him realize that he isn't going to win this argument. Perhaps he would have tried harder if he wasn't so fresh from having over-argued with
Gim yesterday. Cullen does not object, but Lando can see a vein pulsing in his forehead.

Josephine says, "Excellent. I will let him know about future meetings." She makes a note on her writing board. "However, whether the Templars or the Mages can help us is entirely academic now, for neither of them will consent to speak with us. The Chantry has denounced the Inquisition, and the Heralds specifically. The majority of the Mothers seem divided as to whether they find your titles as Heralds of Andraste as more frightening or more blasphemous, but they are united in seeing the Inquisition as heretics for harboring you."

Cassandra says, "Chancellor Roderick's doing, no doubt." Lando knew they should have spent more time trying to charm that old man.

Leliana says, "But not all the mothers feel this way. There is a Chantry Cleric named Mother Giselle who is helping refugees in the Hinterlands. She has asked to speak to the Heralds. She is not far, and she knows the individuals and the politics in the Chantry well."

Gim says, "let's go then. Lando tells me there is armor being produced for me that I should have by tomorrow, and I will need help this afternoon in the infirmary to deal with the soldiers we saw yesterday, Leliana. How about if we leave in two days time? Is that acceptable?" Lando notices that when she gets to the part about needing help, her eye zeros in on him. That's fine. He likes helping her.

Cullen says, "Excellent. Getting out of Haven will allow you to recruit, to be a force for order in the Hinterlands, and to close rifts between here and Redcliffe. We will make sure everything is in order for your departure."

Josephine says, "If that is all, we can all adjourn to our other duties."

Lando and Gim approach Josephine as the others file out. Lando says, "May we ask your advice, Lady Josephine?"

Josephine smiles and says, "Of course, Heralds, how may I be of help. And please call me Josephine."

Gim says, "Has Leliana or Cullen talked to you about my being a spirit healer?"

Josephine says, "Leliana has given me a full description of her time with you yesterday, and she says we are most fortunate to have an accomplished spirit healer as part of the inquisition." Lando would feel better if that sentence didn't smell of having been carefully crafted. He's pretty sure Gim is noting that Josephine is not one to be bothered with the goings on of spirits.

Lando says, "As I am sure you know, not everyone feels that way. Gim glows blue when she is healing or using abilities, and some people—even some people in Haven—are not going to be happy with that sort of display. We were hoping to get your advice in terms of how best to present her abilities to the world."

Gim says, "Would you like a demonstration—just of the blue glow." When Josephine nods slowly, Gim starts her usual blue glow.

Josephine examines Gim for a bit and then says, "This really isn't much more than we expect from mages. Perhaps we should just say you have some mage abilities."

Gim says, "The problem is that mages and Templars can see that I have no magic abilities when I am not glowing. Yesterday, when a Templar sensed my magic, she found it odd enough that she alerted Cullen."
"Ah, I see the problem, but I think you should not worry so much about our forces: the commander
will speak to our troops so they know what is to be expected. For the rest of the world... Let me think
on this."

Lando says, "We have another problem. We were born as part of a Dalish clan, but we left under
bad circumstances. We don't want to be connected to that clan anymore, and they don't want to be
connected to us. We have no vallaslin, and we have been traveling Thedas for the past year. We
would like to know how the Inquisition should present us. We could just be traveling hunters. We
would prefer not to be associated with a particular city because of our distaste for the Alienages—not
to mention our lack of actual history in any city."

"I will consider this also," she responds.

At this, they make their good-byes and leave the War Room.

Outside, they find Leliana with a small bag. She approaches Gim and says, "I thought these might be
helpful for your sparring session today. One of my scouts said she could spare these until you get
your own gear." Gim looks in the bag and gives Leliana a hug. She waves good-bye to Lando and
runs off, but she isn't running in the direction of their cabin—in fact, it looks very much like she is
running towards where Lando found Solas last night. Very interesting.

Well, Lando knows what to do now: Time to find Varric. Lando spent much of yesterday afternoon
with Varric, and he really likes Varric, but maybe Varric needs a little friendly ribbing.

The first place Lando looks is the Tavern, but then he remembers how early it is, and he goes directly
to the the dwarf's tent. Varric is not happy to be found. Varric appears exactly the way a man who
had stayed up late in the local tavern should look when awakened this early in the morning. Varric
squints and says, "This better be good."

Lando says, "It is. Commander Cullen and Gim are going to spar in about half an hour. I want to
know if you want to bet on the bout."

Varric rubs his hand over his eyes and looks confused. "Why would anyone bet on her?" he asks.

Lando says, "I want to bet on her. I will bet all the coin I have that there is a clear winner, and that
winner is Gim."

Varric shakes his head like he is trying to get water out of his ears. He says, "Did I wake up on
Opposite Day or something?"

Lando says defensively, "I am sure there are other people who will bet on a Herald of Andraste over
a failed-Templar."

Varric thinks about this for a bit and says, "Braids, you could be right. Meet you in the Singing
Maiden."

Lando waits outside the tavern for Varric so they can go in together. When Varric shows up, he has
a leather book with him, and when they go in, Varric is overwhelmed with people who want to bet.
At first he has no idea how these people even knew there was a bout, but then he sees that one of the
people who want to place a bet is Leliana. Ha.

Varric takes a lot of coin and makes a lot of notations. After a bit, Leliana suggests they move out to
the training grounds. Varric continues to make entries and take coin all the way there. When they are
almost to the training ground, Solas shows up and asks to place a bet on Gim.
Varric says, "It's your funeral, Chuckles," and writes some notations in his book.

When they get to the training ground, Gim and the Commander are already there, and each of them is wearing a leather tunic and leggings. Lando is very happy that Gim has appropriate gear to wear and that it even looks like it fits. It seems like most of Haven is here to watch Gim and the Commander spar.

He sees Gim and the Cullen talking, but they are speaking quietly enough that he can't hear what they are saying. Gim shakes her head. She is clearly turning down something. Lando suspects she is refusing to use a weapon. He asks her another question, and it looks like she is saying yes to this one. The commander looks distressed—Lando would guess he looks guilty.

The two combatants move to the center of the practice area, standing about ten paces apart. Gim faces the commander with her hands down at her side, and she bows deeply to him. Cullen nods; he gestures at Gim like she should approach, and she shakes her head no. Then, she drops her left foot behind her, lowers her center of gravity, and brings her hands up in front of her. She bounces up and down a few times, and then she gestures for the commander to approach her.

The commander walks carefully forward until he is in arm's reach of Gim, and then he lunges forward, sword leading. The rest, as always, happens very quickly.

Lando sees Gim move forward and to the left while her left hand does something near the commander's sword arm and her right ankle suddenly seems to be in Cullen's way. Whatever happened, Cullen is on his hands and knees in the dirt, and Gim has withdrawn to the other side of the sparring area.

Cullen approaches again. He no longer looks guilty; now he looks determined. This time, he moves towards Gim slowly. As he gets near, Gim spins and is no longer standing in front of the commander's sword; she is behind the sword with her back to the commander's chest—well, briefly. Because the next thing that happens is that Gim ducks and the commander rolls, and he is lying on the ground on his back looking stunned.

This time, instead of withdrawing to the other end of the area, Gim crouches down by the commander—clearly concerned about having hurt him. Cullen waves her off as he gets up and rolls his shoulders a few times.

Lando has forgotten about anything but Gim and Cullen until now, but he glances over at Varric. Varric looks annoyed. Varric says, "How did you know she could do this to him?"

Lando grins and says, "Because she can do this to me."

Cullen approaches Gim very quickly this time, and Gim's responses are so fast. This time Cullen doesn't end up in the dirt, but Gim dances out of the way and is somehow behind him. Those watching can tell that had she wanted to, she could have knocked him down or, had she a knife, sliced him open.

This happens a few more times, and each time Gim is not where Cullen thinks she should be. Sometimes he falls on his face, sometimes he lands on his back, and sometimes Gim just moves out of the way.

Varric says, "This is just painful. Daisy always told me the Dalish were crafty." He pauses, looks at Lando again. "Hey, wait, where is your valla-whatever?"

Lando says, "It will make a good story later. Short version is we don't want to advertise we were
ever Dalish."

Varric grunts. "I didn't know that was one of the options."

Out on the field, Cullen has slowly raised himself to his feet, again. Cullen says loudly, "I yield," and puts out his hand to Gim. Gim comes forward and bows, and then shakes his hand. They walk off talking. Gim looks apologetic, and Cullen is shaking his head. Lando supposes they look friendly enough.

"So why didn't she fight when we were at the temple?"

"Well, a complete answer just adds to that long story I promised you. I can tell it to you once you pay off all the bets. But for the short version, which of the techniques you saw her use do you think would work against blobs of other-worldly ichor without arms?"

Varric says, "Everything that happens around you two is weird," and heads off to the tavern to settle up.

Lando watches him go. As Varric walks away Lando says, "Varric, you ain't seen nuthin' yet."

Chapter End Notes

Comments or personal communication to kinako.aooo@gmail.com very much welcome.
Melancholy is the Nurse of Frenzy

Chapter Summary

The fallout from sparring with Cullen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Gim is relieved that Cullen doesn’t seem to hold a grudge about their bout. If anything, he seems more relaxed around her—more likely to deal with her. She gazes up at him with a sheepish grin. She says, "I didn't mean to trick you. I ..."

Cullen interrupts, "Oh, Maker's breath. You think I don't know I had it coming? I assure you, I've seen trained fighters handle condescension much more poorly. You think this is the only time I've had my ass handed to me by someone using an unfamiliar technique? This is a rare pleasure for me. All I can think of is how much every single one of my soldiers will benefit from learning a few of those moves. I am sure the same holds for Leliana. Come to think of it, I would very much like to see you and Leliana spar. I have the impression she might be more...comfortable with that sort of approach."

Gim says, "I am not sure I am a very good teacher. With Lando, I've mostly only been able to make sure he knows how to fall."

Cullen smiles conspiratorially and the pull of the scar over his lip seems to add a secret message to the smile. He says, "Somehow, I don't find it difficult to believe you gave him plenty of opportunity to practice that." Gim is a bit unbalanced: how did she go from being sure he was going to try to run her through to finding him adorable so quickly? Oh, that's right. Maybe her choice of spirits wasn't really appropriate to today. Oh, he's still talking.

"I'm a teacher, and I have other excellent trainers in the company. All you have to do is be willing to repeat your moves, and if possible, show us what you did at slower speed. We can provide the words for what, to you, is an intuitive process. You meet with a few of mine, and they transfer it in mass. More efficient that way."

"Sounds like you are making this easy for me," she says. "How about if we meet here again tomorrow after breakfast? You can bring whoever you like." Now she tries out her own conspiratorial smile. "Including Leliana."

His meaty hand lands hard on her shoulder, and she's briefly grateful that he never actually got in a good hit earlier. Not that it feels bad, actually. *Fenedhis*. She looks up and they are at the Singing Maiden. Cullen opens the door and looks at her expectantly.

She says, "Well, thank you again. I just think I'll..." and she starts to veer off towards the apothecary.

He says, "You aren't going to greet your fans?"

Oh no. Fans? This concept is unsettling. "Oh, well, another time," and she turns and flat out sprints away. The first place she focuses on is Solas's cabin. He wanted to check her mark anyway. She
knocks.

When he opens the door, she slips under his arm and into the room. He looks a bit taken aback. He shuts the door, turns around, and looks down on her. He's tall. Lando is very tall for an elf, but Solas is taller. She wonders if he is purposefully looming. Maybe it is just that he's looking down his nose at her.

He says, "I don't know how much time you have spent around mages. Has anyone told you that your absolute lack of an aura is...noticeable?"

"Well, I did get called a 'little sneak' by my clan's first often enough. But they didn't spend any time around dwarves. How is my lack of aura different from, say, Varric's?"

Solas considers this. "Varric is an absence—a noticeable hole. You are...nothing."

"There you go, sounding like my clan again." She states it over-dramatically so he will know she is kidding, and then she smiles.

He gestures to a chair. Unlike the upholstered chairs in her cabin, Solas has only bare straight-backed chairs and a table. Honestly, she would rather sit on the floor, but perhaps she and her nothing-aura should take what is offered. As they sit, she says, "I apologize for barging in. It's just that usually when I get that much attention, someone is trying to hurt me. And you did say you wanted to look at my mark."

"I am not surprised you have elicited a reaction," he says, followed by a pause. "Do you remember the conversation we had about posturing? This will help you. You should encourage it. This will help those who might otherwise be put off by your association with spirits to accept you."

"Speaking of acceptance," she starts, not at all sure if he is going to approve of this change she has thrust upon him, "I asked the leadership to appoint you as an Arcane Advisor. Josephine will talk to you about attending future meetings. I know it will take your time," she hastens to explain, "but it will give the two of us a chance to reinforce certain opinions and methods of gathering information, and I think it will cause them to see you as a full ally. I should have asked, but the opportunity presented itself, and ..."

"Stop," he says. He's tilting his head and furrowing his brow at her now, like he is trying to figure something out. "How nervous must you be to fear I would be angered at such a development? You have showed admirable foresight, and I shall be happy to contribute to the council, regardless of the demands upon my time. I am intrigued that they have allowed this change."

She is relieved. She says, "It was the right time to ask. Cullen didn't even voice an objection."

Solas smiles wryly and nods. "Indeed. What fortuitous timing." He is so handsome when he smiles. Every word that comes out of his mouth is so carefully formed. She could listen to him for hours. Ah oh.

"I was curious when you mentioned that your clan spends no time around children of the stone. Whence came your heritage?"

Gim looks down. So much for wanting him to keep talking. Her voice is quiet and studiously-even as she says, "It isn't a secret, and I will tell you the story, but with your permission, I won't tell you the story today. We will be going to the Hinterlands in two days, and I think we will have many opportunities to talk on that trip."

"Ma nuvenin," he says, "I shall be prepared to depart in two days. But for the moment, may I
examine your mark?"

Grateful for the topic change, Gim scoots her chair closer and offers her left hand. Solas takes her hand and begins running his fingers across her palm. It tickles. In a good way. Maybe in too good a way. She needs something to concentrate on. She calls forth her Fade connection and uses his contact with her to start scanning him again.

As soon as her glow comes up, Solas looks up from her hand with a challenge on his face. She says, "This isn't even the first time my abilities have examined you. Wisdom gave you a scan before she withdrew."

"That may be," he says, "but you should not initiate such acts without invitation. That said, it is an efficient use of our time; you may continue."

After a while, they each cease probing the other, and they sit back. Solas is looking into her eyes with that adorable head tilt again. She has to work hard to keep from dropping her gaze.

He says, "That is a curious sensation. At once familiar and yet removed to the recesses of my experience. Without my knowledge that it was not an invasion, I would have naturally prevented it, and you would have been able to see little." After a pause, "But I shall go first. Your mark is stable—unexpectedly so. I venture to say that it is more contained now than it was when I first examined it. I must ask Lando to let me examine his mark for comparison."

"Well, I like the sound of that. As for what I have learned from you, I can help you—I am certain of it." To his questioning look of inquiry, she says, "It is not surprising that you, as a young Elvhen lord who did not specialize in healing, would have been unaware of it, but there is known list of affects—physical, magical, mental, and emotional—that waking from uthenera typically engenders. I cannot be sure about the typical mental and emotional effects, but you have the physical and magical. Did you not awaken with significantly less than your accustomed power?"

Solas's eyebrows shoot up. He should be happy about what she is implying. Why isn't he happy? He says, "Yes, but..."

Gim nods, "but it is complicated by the presence of the veil. Yes. But that isn't all of it. For want of a better description, your system is congested. I can scrape some...cruft...out of your magical conduits."

Solas lowers his head and looks at her out of the tops of his eyes. "Conduits."

"Well," she says, "they aren't really conduits, but I don't have better terms for them. But I really can speed your recovery."

"By all means," he says, "do so."

"It isn't that simple. It will...inconvenience you. It will not be quick. It will require you to trust me completely. I will tell you honestly that you will be at my mercy when I do this. Do you trust me and my oaths? And I would like to have Wisdom along when I do it. Your deciding to cut me off in the middle of the process would be traumatizing to the both of us. I need you to be fully relaxed and committed."

"I would also like permission to talk to you about the other affects I have mentioned. I cannot scan for those. Only you would know if you are subject to them. It would take very private conversations that I would accept as a sacred part of my oaths. They are sensitive topics, and I would not expect you to enjoy the sessions. I can promise you that I am trained and that there is considerable study backing the efficacy of the conversations."
Solas looks at her with a small frown and a furrowed brow. He says, "Awakened Elvhen gave this amount of trust to a newly-met, half-dwarven quickling?"

Gim runs her left index finger from the parting of her hair to her chin, which she rests on the bowed back of her fingers. She bats her eyes up at him. "I have a very trustworthy nature. I mean, just look at this face."

She meant it to be self-effacing, but Solas says seriously, "I am looking." His eyes dart around her face, and his eyes are soft.

She can feel herself blushing. It's too warm in here. Oh no. She knows all too well how even modern elves see her broad nose, her single eyebrow, her apple cheeks, her wide mouth. And for someone like him... She doesn't know if he is trying to manipulate her, or maybe it is one of those uthenera affects she mentioned earlier.

In any case, she can feel the over-reaction encouraged by her spirit. Stop that! You are not helping! she says inside herself. All she gets is amusement in return.

"Well, think about it," she says aloud. "I should be going. I have...things...to...you know..."

And she's out the door. She keeps going down the hill and around the Singing Maiden. When she sees Varric's tent and fire, she stops to collect herself by the side of the fire.

She is just beginning to regain a little composure when Varric strolls up. He says, "Got any more exhibitions planned, Beauty? Or would you like me to just give you all my coin now?" Gim blinks at him in confusion.

Varric is moving his mouth like he is chewing on a toothpick, but Gim doesn't see a toothpick. "Your boyfriend won quite a bit of money off of me betting on you earlier."

"Well, think about it," she says aloud. "I should be going. I have...things...to...you know..."

"Betting? From when I sparred?"

The topic change has her reeling. He is separating them. He is defining her as other. She needs to tell him they are connected.

She dives right in. She can't look at him when she says this. She couldn't say this to anyone while locking eyes, but it is even harder with Varric. "You know, we have more in common than you think. There is a family, a notorious family, and they have...touched each of us. So to speak." She looks up and he isn't looking at her either. That's fine. She looks back down.

She says, "The Davri family..." And then she hears a rush of movement and a mechanical sound. She looks up and Varric has pulled his crossbow off his back and he has it in his hands. It isn't pointed at her, but he is looking at her menacingly.

Varric hisses, "Who are you? What do you want?"

Gim is beyond confused. Time is moving slowly. She just needs to figure this out. What could he be thinking that leads to this as a rational response to what she said? Oh. She has been an idiot. Blinking, she says in quiet astonishment, "You think I'm threatening you; I'm not. I would never..."
Varric surges forward. He says into her ear, "Well let me tell you what I want. I want to never hear that name out of your mouth again. I want to never have anyone else hear that name out of your mouth. Are we understood?"

She nods. She still doesn't look at him. She doesn't want to see the face that goes with those words. She doesn't want to feel any more about how she has completely botched this. She doesn't want him looking at her either. She doesn't want anyone looking at her.

Her spirit is not comforting her. Her spirit is flopping about inside her in distress. This. Is. Not. Right.

She says hurriedly, "Yes. I won't. I didn't mean..." At which point she bolts for her cabin.

It is cold. Her nose is running. Her eyes burn. She has the hiccups. She can't get her breath. Her breath. She will breath in her cabin.

When she gets to the cabin door, she sees Cassandra. Cassandra initially smiles, but her face falls immediately. Cassandra comes to Gim and places her hand on Gim's arm. She says, "Herald. Gim. Has something happened? Are you hurt?"

Gim shakes her head. She tries to speak and at first nothing comes. Then she just squeakes out one pleading word: "Lando."

Cassandra doesn't even respond. She leaves Gim blessedly alone. Gim goes into the cabin and shuts the door. She finds a spot between her bed and the wall. She puts her back against the wall and slides down onto her butt. She wraps her arms around her legs and just tries to breath into her belly.

And the day started so well.

Chapter End Notes

At the risk of a spoiler, if you are thinking that Varric is out of character, there is briefly alluded-to context that neither Gim nor the reader has.

Comments or personal communication to kinako.aooo@gmail.com very much welcome.
Lando comforts Gim.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lando is still sitting in the tavern even though he's finished his meal and Varric left quite some time ago. He still doesn't understand completely why Varric got so mad.

Varric had been fine at first. Lando doesn't actually understand exactly how profit and loss is determined in Varric's betting operation, but Varric doesn't seem to have lost much money even though he personally had bet against Gim. Varric had said something about the other folks mostly being as big a sucker as he was.

Even after the last bet was paid off, Varric had still been in a decent mood—which is to say, he came up with occasional sharp, humorous comments, but no really bitter ones. He had seemed especially amused that Leliana had bet on Gim. Lando remembers Varric saying, "Braids, I should have known I was being had once I saw how Leliana bet. As a general rule, don't bet against Ruffles or the Nightingale: they know where the bodies are buried."

Lando hadn't said so, but Lando had thought that today's event excepted, it probably wasn't a good idea to bet against Varric either.

Then Lando had given Varric the agreed-upon story about the vallaslin, and Varric had seemed a bit confused, but not in any serious way.

Lando is pretty sure that the problem started when Lando had tried to explain more about why Gim hadn't fought the demons on the way to the Breach. He had started with the fact that Gim couldn't use weapons, but when he tried to explain her oaths to her teachers, that led to the teachers being spirits. Varric already seemed uncomfortable just talking about the Fade and spirits.

Lando should have stopped at that point. He really should have left the rest of the story to Gim. But things had gone so well yesterday—eventually. It seemed only natural to finish the story: to tell Varric that Gim was a spirit healer. This did not go over well.

Varric had ranted about Gim, and he had thrown a couple of coins at Lando, saying it was for "Gim's cut of the scam," and then he had left.

Lando is drawn out of his musings when Cullen sits down opposite him. Lando looks up and gives Cullen a smile.

Cullen says, "I couldn't help seeing the scene Varric's caused before he left; he seems confused about my bout with Gim. You three will be leaving for the Hinterlands in two days, and I would hate for things to be awkward because of something I could clear up."

Lando says, "I don't think that is what he was really mad about. He didn't get upset until I answered his questions about Gim."
Cullen grimaces and swears. He looks like he has just been told that Lando has decided to hunt druffalo bare-handed. Cullen says, "Let me guess. You just told Varric about Gim and spirits."

Lando nods nervously.

Cullen says, "I'm assuming you haven't read 'The Tale of the Champion' then. I imagine you have heard that most people think the start of the mage rebellion was when someone blew up the Kirkwall Chantry, killing Grand Cleric Elthina as well as hundreds of other innocent people. Is that right?"

When Lando nods, Cullen continues. "The person who set the explosives in the Chantry was Varric's friend Anders. He and Anders were part of the Champion's companions, and they had been working together for years. Anders had a spirit of Justice inside him, and after a time, the spirit became corrupted into a spirit of Vengeance—or at least that is the common explanation for why someone so dedicated to healing innocents would turn around and murder them. Varric took it pretty hard when Hawke forgave Anders after all that death and destruction."

Cullen's eyes are full of sympathy. Very gently, he says, "Lando, did you explain fully about Gim, or did you leave Varric with the impression that Gim is like Anders?"

Lando thanks Cullen and stands up. Should he find Varric or Gim first? Varric should be the easiest to find. After all, Varric isn't in the tavern, so he is probably at his tent; Gim could be anywhere. He leaves the tavern.

Lando is just approaching Varric's tent when Cassandra hails him. She approaches and very quietly says, "Lando, don't react too precipitously, but Gim needs you in your cabin. I don't know what has happened, but she is very unhappy."

Lando says, "I suspect I know what happened. Cassandra, this is going to sound like the weirdest request ever, but could you find Cullen in the tavern and ask him if he would please tell Varric that Gim is not an abomination?"

As Lando leaves, he hears Cassandra making one of her noises of disgust followed by an impassioned, "That dwarf."

Lando opens the door to what appears to be an empty cabin. He goes through the door, closes it, removes his cloak, and moves to tend the fire.

After the fire is revived, he stands and says, "I'm going to come over now."

He finds her on the floor beside the bed, her head back against the wall, her knees up. One of her arms is bent at the elbow, resting on her knees, and the other is extended straight, palm up, with her straightened elbow over her bent arm. He imagines he can see the remnants of the tears she has wiped away on that extended hand.

Her eye lashes are gathered into little starred clumps—but she isn't crying now. Now her brow is smooth and her eyes are wide but red; she looks drained and resigned. She raises her head away from the wall and smiles at him, and that thin smile is sadder than any tears would have been.

He kneels with his knees against her feet, grabs her extended hand, and brings it up to his mouth where he kisses the backs of her fingers; he keeps her hand. He says, "I have caused you pain, Durgen'falon; please forgive me." She looks confused, but he continues before she can ask any questions.

"After your bout, Varric had questions, and I thought I was answering them well." At Varrie's name, her brow furrows briefly, then smooths again. "I thought I was doing a fine job of explaining, but I
only got so far as saying you were a spirit healer before he left in a rage. I fancy he met up with you after that and...was unkind.

"Cullen tells me that had I read 'The Tale of the Champion,' I would have understood better how I had raised fears in Varrie—fears that you might follow in Anders's footsteps."

He watches her take a deep breath and then close her eyes and drop her head back against the wall again. Her voice is low and crackly when she speaks. "And I made it worse."

He kisses her fingers again, squeezes her hand, and waits. She will talk when she is ready.

She laughs; she opens her eyes. He can see her in there now, at least. "He called you my boyfriend. You better make sure that view isn't shared by any of our other companions."

"On the contrary, ma falon, association with you can but raise my value."

She smiles and jerks her hand away from him so she can poke him. After a bit she says, "He thinks I was threatening him with Bianca. Not the crossbow. I was trying to tell him..." She shakes her head and her breath catches again: harbinger of more tears. "It was so stupid. I totally fucked it up. I was off balance when he was so disdainful, and I did the worst possible thing."

Lando says, "Cullen is going to explain to him that you are not an abomination." That makes her smile.

"Really. You took the man who almost ran me through in this very room and sent him to defend me?"

Lando grins back at her. "I aim to serve."

She swallows. Presses her lips together. Lowers her gaze. He knows these signs. Now he will hear the core of her pain. She says, "I was so excited to meet a dwarf. Now I know. I'm just as repellent to dwarves as I am to elves."

He backhands her shoulder. Part of him wants to really hurt her a bit; at least shake her. This is so frustrating. Her self-image has been poisoned and has nothing to do with reality.

"Gim. You are beautiful. The reactions of one back-water clan are not the measurement of your worth. And one dwarf who has the bad sense to get tangled up with that heinous Davri family is no better a judge than a nug."

She's looking at him. He knows this look too. She doesn't believe a word he is saying, but she loves him for saying it anyway. She grabs his hand. She says, "Hey, don't punish him over this, please. And don't tell him about Bianca being my sister."

He nods. He says, "Have you had breakfast? Because it's lunchtime soon."

She says, "No, but I have to take a nap. I had Love with me, and apart from making every conversation I had today awkward, it reacted very poorly to my conversation with Master Tethras. It was so upset I let it go. I don't want to go out without a spirit."

He says, "No wonder you look so pathetic." He's glad when she hits him again. "Well then, how about I go and get you something to eat and leave it on the table. You can eat it when you wake. Then you can find me and we can go to the Infirmary. I'll be out at the practice yard. OK?"

She nods. He leaves, gets bread, cheese, and some cold meat spread and leaves it under a large bowl
on the table together with a carafe of water. She's under the covers when he comes back, and he leaves quickly.

There are a few people he wants to check in with now, before she wakes. He starts in the tavern, but none of them are there. He goes out the other door and knocks on Solas's cabin door.

Solas politely invites him in and offers him a chair. He sits on the very edge of the chair and steels himself: Solas makes him nervous.

"Solas, we haven't talked much, but I know you have certain things in common with Gim. She is in pain, and I am hoping you might be able to help." He is sure he has all of Solas's attention now. Solas nods, and Lando takes that as a suggestion to continue.

"Her early years were rough. Our clan treated her shamefully. The details aren't important, and if you hear them, you should hear them from her, but the part that is important now is that she is convinced that all elves find her repugnant. She was holding out hope that her appearance might be more appealing to dwarves, but..." He stops. Not wanting to make things worse with Varric. "Well, let's just say that didn't turn out to be the case."

Solas is frowning. He says, "And how do you think I can help with this issue without making things awkward?"

Lando says, "Maybe you can't. I think she is beautiful, but I am family, and she just thinks I'm biased. If you find her ugly, then do nothing. If you think she has appeal, and you can tell her in a way that doesn't lead her on, please help her mend her broken self-perception."

Solas says, "I am gratified to see your care for her well-being. I shall give this full consideration."

Lando thanks Solas, excuses himself, and walks towards the Haven gates.

He sees Varric sitting on a camp stool to the side of the path in front of him and he slows down and approaches carefully. When Varric sees Lando coming, he stands, crosses his arms over his chest, and frowns furiously.

Varric says, "Curly already talked to me. I have to admit, if she can convince the ex-Knight Commander of Kirkwall that she is no danger, she must be fine. So tell me what you want? You want to hit me? Because I might let you. Do you want me to apologize? What?"

Lando says, "She forbade me from punishing you in any way, Varric. And no, I don't want you to apologize to her. I want you to do your best to start over and give her another chance. We are all leaving for the Hinterlands in two days: treat her normally. Tease her, tell her stories, ignore her, complain to her: whatever you do when you are dragged through a dangerous wilderness. Just don't tease her about...well, anything you talked about this morning. Can you do that?"

Varric purses his lips and looks up at Lando. "You still want me to come with you?"

"Of course." Lando grins. "I have a weakness for friends who are clever assholes, and you fit the bill."

Varric says, "How could I decline the offer after such a ringing endorsement. I will be ready to travel."

Lando starts for the gate, but then he stops and turns back to Varric. "And Varric, the reason I don't have to punish you is that you are going to punish yourself. At some point you are going to feel like the utter shit you have been, and you are going to deserve it. But it won't be my doing."
As Lando walks away, he hears Varric call, "You sure are adapting well to Chantry service, Herald." But Lando keeps walking through the gate—heading for the practice dummies.

As he approaches the dummies, he sees Cassandra, who walks over and gets Cullen's attention. Then both of them approach Lando.

Cassandra says, "Is she well?" She looks honestly concerned for Gim, which Lando sees as more evidence that Cassandra not only has excellent judgement, but possibly even a warm heart.

Lando says, "She is fine. She just needs to eat and rest. I want to thank both of you for what you did for her, but now that it is in the past, let's let it drop. That is, unless she brings it up, which would surprise me."

Cullen says, "Of course, Herald. It was my honor to be of service." Cassandra doesn't say anything, but she murmurs and makes it clear she agrees.

Lando says, "Gim is going to meet me out here after her nap. Is there anything I can do to be of help out here?"

Cullen smiles and says, "Gim tells me you are very good at falling down, and much as I discounted this skill before today, my backside tells me it is a skill I should master."

Lando grins. "Sure! Round up as many as you can and we will roll all over the practice yard."

And that's what they do.

Chapter End Notes

Comments or personal communication to kinako.aooo@gmail.com very much welcome.
Chapter Summary

Gim's day gets better.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Gim gets to her Thaig, the first thing she does is go in search of Love.

As is often the case with recent spirit passengers, Love is right outside. Many of the spirits who travel with her choose to take forms from the waking after they get back, but love is just a floating transparent form.

Gim begins apologizing with, "I am so sorry to cause you distress. I didn't realize that dealing with anger would make you so uncomfortable."

Love may not have changed its form in response to its visit, but it has changed its voice: Gim hears her own voice when Love talks. "Acts of passion: Love knows. Anger—even rage—Love dances. No emotion from another can negate Love. But a vessel filled with self-loathing has no room for Love."

There is no hiding. She can't smile away this spirit's perceptions the way she can Lando's. She says, "I'm working on it, spirit."

The spirit says, "You are. There are seeds within you." Now Love glows more brightly, and the voice resonates, "Love abides." And with that, it drifts away.

Other spirits are drawing near: some walk on legs, some float, some fly. She needs one that will help her with the rest of the day but won't mind having only a partial day's tour of the waking. And then she sees the perfect solution. If she is willing to come with her, Gim could face anything.

"Wisdom," she says, "sometimes I am so foolish."

Wisdom says, "And sometimes you are not, dear one. I would be honored to join you. To again see your world through an immediate lens. I like this process you have introduced me to: the hug. I have some of those to hand out." Wisdom's smile looks like she is making a joke, but Gim thinks she is serious.

Gim says, "Such a tyrant you are!" and turns to walk quickly into her main hall. Wisdom follows and immediately turns down the hall to the focus.

As soon as she hears the latch click, Gim closes her eyes...and opens them to the roof of her cabin.

She gets out of bed, adjusts her hair and clothing, and heads for the table. Food is good. This food is great, or at least very much to the purpose. She finishes the last bite and she is out the door.

As she hustles past Varric's spot, she see's him working on something. She yells, "Buy you a drink later, Varric?" but she doesn't stop.
Varric looks up, but he doesn't respond right away. She barely hears, "Never turn down a free drink," as she passes the Haven gate on approach to the practice field.

When she gets there, she sees about a dozen soldiers all doing forward rolls across the practice field with Lando in the lead. They seem to be leading with their shoulders appropriately, although they aren't all going straight, and she notices a few good-natured collisions. Cassandra and Cullen are among the rollers. Oh, better and better.

On their next pass, she joins them and does long forward rolls so that she catches their attention and finishes before they do. At this Cullen calls recess, and Lando, Cullen, and Cassandra walk towards Gim.

As Lando approaches, Gim gives him a big hug and whispers in his ear, "That is from Wisdom; she says you deserve a hug." He smiles and hugs her back.

"Do you feel better about falling yet, Commander?" she says as the others walk up.

"A bit, yes, but I look forward to watching you tomorrow. We need someone who can throw you onto your back so that we can see how rolling helps you to survive to the next attack," he says.

"We can do that. I can show you a throw, and you can attempt it on me, and if you get anywhere close, I can take the fall." Then she turns to Cassandra. "Falling is useful even if your opponent isn't trying to throw you. I don't know if you noticed, but Lando and I both rolled off that exploding bridge when we were first on our way to the Breach."

Cassandra smiles. She says, "I admit I found your spinning curious at first, but by the time we got to the Breach, and you had not once been harmed by any assailant, I was beginning to see a method at work."

Gim says, "Lando and I are going to the infirmary now. Lady Josephine told us that you would be speaking to your troops about my odd magic and how it is not cause for alarm. If either of you would like to observe my healing your soldiers, it would be fine. There will be no shocking displays: just a bit of glow. Well, and some pain. We have to do some bone work."

Cullen says, "Another time, perhaps, Lady Herald. I am afraid I have exceeded all my non-administrative time for today, but I will be ready to meet tomorrow morning, after breakfast, as previously arranged." With that, he gives a small bow and strides off.

Cassandra says, "I will come to the infirmary. I imagine you may need to heal someone in the Hinterlands, and it may be wise to have observed the process in advance."

When they get to the mostly empty Infirmary, Cassandra is very helpful. Having two strong warriors available for bone-work makes things easier for Gim. Magic and force break three bones, and while the owners of those bones have to endure pain, Gim is able to minimize it. Magic starts the re-knitting of bone in the right configuration, and it is all finished rather quickly. Cassandra does not appear to be disturbed by the glow, and the patients are unreservedly grateful at the promises of full range of movement in the future.

When they are done, Cassandra and Lando begin discussing two-warrior battle configurations for small skirmishes and whether or not he should bring a shield to the Hinterlands. Gim slips away.

As she wanders away, she first checks Leliana's tent. Leliana looks busy with several papers, but she smiles as Gim walks up.

Gim says, "Thank you so much for everything you did for me yesterday, Leliana."
"Oh? So your sparring match with Cullen was not my reward?" Leliana says, with a wide-eyed look of innocence.

Gim laughs and says, "Lando told me you bet on me. How did you know?"

Leliana purses her lips. She says, "I did not know you would do quite so well as you did, but there were a few factors that led me to believe you would excel. I saw grace in your evasions at the temple, I heard Cassandra speaking of your 'rolling about,' and finally, I saw the way you held yourself when you offered to spar with the commander."

"See, this is why I am never going to lie to you, or even play cards with you," says Gim. "Now let's see if I am right about my perceptions of you. I won't be making mention of my spirits to most members of the Inquisition, but you don't seem bothered by my friends. Am I correct that you wouldn't mind it if a spirit had something to say to you?"

Leliana says, "Do you think a good spymaster would turn down an information source?"

"Well, in this case, not so many facts are involved; Shall we go to the war room?"

Just as they turn to leave, one of Leliana's agents runs up and hands Leliana a communique. Leliana looks solemn. She says to the agent, "There were so many questions following Faria's death. Did he think we wouldn't notice? He's killed Faria—one of my best agents—and knows where the others are. You know what must be done. Make it clean. Painless if you can. We were friends once."

Gim says, "Leliana, do you think your agent could wait just for a bit? I am sure we won't be in the war room long."

"Of course, Herald," says Leliana. Gim sinks a little bit at the coldness of her tone. They walk towards the Chanty, and while it is much more pleasant than the last time they took this walk, it is more awkward than the first part of their conversation had indicated.

Once inside the war room, Leliana says, "Yes?"

Gim says, "My passenger today is Wisdom," and brings her friend to the fore. Leliana shows no signs of shock or unease as the blue seams settle into the form of the elven woman that Wisdom always uses.

Wisdom's resonant voice is soft in the War room. She says, "I asked Gim to allow me to thank you personally. She is dear to me, and without your help, things could have gone much worse for her."

As Wisdom walks up and envelopes Leliana in a hug, Gim is worried that the spymaster might not like such forward affections from strangers, but Leliana hugs back and seems pleased.

Wisdom breaks the hug and steps back, but she moves her arms to Leliana's shoulders and she is looking into Leliana's face. She says, "You have been a tool for so long. You carried out others' plans, and you saved the mighty from being caught in dirty realities. But you make the decisions now. If Thedas survives, the Inquisition will be remembered for hundreds of years. How do you want it remembered?"

Leliana is not answering and she is not showing emotion.

Wisdom continues, "I remember the brave young woman who fought against the blight. A woman who said 'sometimes following your heart rather than your head leads you to remarkable places'—a woman who did not want to become Marjolaine." Wisdom waits for a moment. "For you, my dear, I wish for nothing more than that you turn into...Leliana. For she is a remarkable woman." Then Wisdom leans forward, kisses Leliana on each cheek, and then withdraws, leaving Gim behind.
Gim looks at Leliana, worrying that Wisdom has been intrusive. Leliana says, "You feel very strongly about this, don't you? Very well. I will think of another way to deal with this man." At this, Leliana steps forward and gives Gim a hug. She says, "the other embrace was for Wisdom, but this one is for you," and then she leaves the War room to talk to her agent.

Gim says inside herself, *I am pretty sure where we need to go now...* and she leaves the War room. In a bit, she is knocking on Solas's door.

When Solas opens the door, Gim says, "I bring you a visitor."

Solas says, "Did you not bring a visitor earlier?"

"Yes, but this one wants to talk to you. In fact, she told me she wants to give you another hug," says Gim, with a grin.

Solas says, "I've never known spirits to be so ... clingy as they are when they are with you."

"And here I am claiming that I don't corrupt them!" she quips.

Solas laughs. He says, "So I take it the nature of the one you had with you earlier does not lead to touching." Gim blushes, and she can tell Solas sees it. "Or perhaps that is a bad assumption. I suppose corruption can go both ways."

Gim doesn't know what to say next, so she turns control over to Wisdom. Solas has seen her transformation several times now, but he still seems fascinated. He's looking at her like she might be a new species of magical fauna.

Once Wisdom is fully manifested, she says, "Must you tease the poor thing?"

Solas says, "I must." Solas pauses a moment. "She told me she wants to get rid of my so-called 'clogged magical conduits' but it puts me at her mercy and she wants you here when she does it. Is that why you are here?"

"No, that isn't why I am here, but given that I am here, would you like to ask my opinion or to be reassured?"

"Are you implying I should not trust Gim?" he says.

"You should trust her, but I'm not sure you can trust her," says Wisdom. That stung, even though she knew it was the truth.

"And can I trust You? You are aware that if I had known that I could accelerate my personal power gain, things would be different now, are you not?" he says grimly.

Gim can tell Wisdom isn't even a bit intimidated by this question. She says, "And shall I tell her private information about you that would benefit her—or benefit Lando—without your permission?"

Solas says, "I do not grant that as a fair comparison. First because the scale of our need is disparate and second because apparently Gim's abilities were advertised to other Elvhen, but not to me."

"I do not admit the first nor did I participate in the second," says Wisdom. Which seems to put an end to that branch of the conversation, because now they are just silently considering each other.

After a bit, Solas shakes his head at Wisdom in the manner of someone exasperated with an adorable
puppy, and sweeps Wisdom into a hug. She laughs. They actually rock from side to side a time or two—almost like they might start dancing a polka.

But soon enough they break apart and sit down in the matching chairs. As they sit, Solas says, "So tell me what it takes and what it will cost me and when it should happen."

"She wants you to commit to discussing the emotional and mental affects before she works on the physical and magical. It will take more than one session. Each session will exhaust you and fully drain your mana. You will need to be still and allow her complete access to your person. You are likely to have intense emotional reactions to the process that are not rational or pleasant. You would not normally wish anyone to see you be that vulnerable, so I expect that you will not like it. Fighting it will make it worse and may prevent the work from succeeding. She's a healer and not just of physical maladies. You should accept that she won't do anything to hurt you, that she will never share your weaknesses or tales of this process with others, and that she won't think less of you for being a normal elvhen. She thinks it's funny that I used the phrase 'normal elvhen'.

"And when should this happen?"

"Whenever you like," she says. "You need two or so hours of privacy, You need to be willing to be weak the next day, and you need to give her enough time to get me along to help—or so I assume. Do you have another spirit you would rather have observe you at your worst?"

"You know I do not." Solas looks like he is considering all the information he has been given. "And you believe this will be helpful to me?"

Wisdom says confidently, "I know it will be. If you allow it to happen as she asks."

"You said it would take several sessions. Separated by what period of time? If I do not see a benefit after the first session, I may not consent to repeating the session."

Wisdom says, "You will consent. There needs to be several days between sessions. You need to have full mana again. I think you need to talk to her directly."

At that, Wisdom withdraws, and Solas once again examines the transformation closely. He says, "Is that uncomfortable for you at all? Does it tire you?"

Gim says, "it actually feels nice. Like dancing, or swimming through bright water: the form of fulfilling you get from using your talents to a purpose. And I liken it to standing on one foot: it isn't tiring to do, but it is tiring to maintain for too long."

Solas raises one eyebrow. He says, "Speaking of talents, as a gift to the inquisition, I would like to paint you and Lando. They should have an image of their Heralds. I have spoken to the Ambassador about acquiring the supplies I will need."

Gim feels horrified. "Paint? Me? That sounds time consuming and utterly unimportant compared to the work we have to do."

Solas says, "The Ambassador tells me it is very important and she is very grateful that the three of us are willing to invest a little time to accomplish it. I will minimize your time commitment, and I will go to some effort to make the time you spend doing it entertaining."

Something tells Gim she isn't getting out of this. Oh well. She says, "So do you want me to make you miserable sometime soon?"

Gim interprets Solas's look to be his "why do I have to put up with this" face. She grins. He says,
"How about tonight?"

She says, "I promised to buy Varric a drink. I can come by after. Is that acceptable?"

He says, "Ma nuvenin."

She stands up, waves good-bye in an exaggerated manner, smirks at him, and leaves his cabin.

This should be an interesting night.

Chapter End Notes

Comments or personal communication to kinako.aooo@gmail.com very much welcome.
A Great Provoker of Three Things

Chapter Summary

A trip to the Singing Maiden.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Lando and Gim walk into the Singing Maiden, Lando has high hopes. Gim has calmed down, she has Wisdom with her, and she is in a forcefully positive mood. This seems a chance for others to know the real Gim. If she will talk, she will get along fine.

As they walk in, they see Varric already at a table with a soldier that Lando doesn't recognize. The soldier, however, recognizes them. In particular, he is looking at Gim with a certain amount of hero worship.

As they walk up, Varric says, "Gim, I know you have met Calder. Calder has been telling me about how he thought he was dying, and then you healed him." Lando thinks Varric might be skeptical about this healing. He'll learn.

"Yes, yer Grace," says Calder, with a certain amount of awe and deference. "I don't know what I done to be so blessed as to have the very Herald of Andraste tend to me, but if there was ever so much as aught I could do for ye, me n' my missus would give ye all we could."

Gim smiles and grabs his hand. She says, "I don't think you would have died, Calder. I just made certain things easier going forward. I made it so you could continue serving the Inquisition—I hope your missus won't mind that."

"The missus serves, her own self, and she be honored to do so. The both of us is at yer service yer Grace, and contented to follow the leadership's orders—be they have summit to do with demons or trenches or runnin' papers: we'll serve with a light heart and a grateful step."

"Truly, you have more than paid me back, Calder. We fight on the same side, and I was honored to help a good man—even better that I return him to a good woman."

Lando can see Gim is a bit embarrassed and just wants this to be over with. He can see Calder figure this out too. Calder stands, pats Gim on the shoulder and walks over to Flissa. Gim's eyes are big and her lips almost look like she is smiling, but both lips are tight against her upper teeth. Lando recognizes this as her way of smiling through embarrassment. She says, "Well..." and he and Varric are looking at her like she actually has something to say.

But before it can get too awkward, Calder is back with three mugs, and he puts one down in front of Gim, Lando, and Varric. He pats Gim on the shoulder again, and walks away from the table. Now they don't have to talk. Now they can concentrate on their mugs.

Lando sees Gim looking at Varric a few times. Then he sees Gim note that Varric is looking at her: her immediate response is to drain her mug. That little manipulator! Well, at least she knows her audience.
Varric says, "Woah there, Beauty! Never took you for such an enthusiast. How will I keep my reputation if the Herald of Andraste finishes her drink before the resident reprobate writer?"

"Oh," says Gim, "Are we doing R-sounds now? Or just repeated consonants?" She taps her unibrow briefly and continues, "if that is the case, just call me Her hirsute Herald."

Lando is horrified that she would refer to herself that way, but Varric is laughing hard, and that can't be bad.

When Varric stops laughing, he says, "Me, I mostly mumble my mistakes—moreover, my muse makes off with my meaning most times."

At this, Gim stands and gives a courtly bow. She says, "I know when to cede the fight: you are the author—and that deserves another round." At this she leaves the table to talk to Flissa. Once she is gone, Lando says to Varric, "Word to a friend: don't try to match drinks with her unless you like passing out."

Varric raises an eyebrow and gets a competitive light in his eye, but then he must see something in Lando's face. He says, "Oh, is this like what she did to Curly?"

When Lando nods solemnly, Varric says, "Well, I suppose it would be wise to just keep that in mind for future benefit."

At this point, Gim returns with a large pitcher, pours herself a mug and tops off both Lando's and Varric's. As Gim sits, Lando pokes Gim in the side and says in a deliberate manner, "Feel free to savor this one, Gim."

Gim stage pouts, and then grins at the two of them. She says to Varric, "He must like you. Usually he doesn't warn my drinking companions."

Lando says, "Usually you haven't said you can't stay for long, and usually I am not trying to convince you to tell stories to someone."

Gim lifts her brows in inquiry as Varric says, "Yes, Lando says I should ask you about stories where you were asked to heal someone and they were trying to delude you."

Gim frowns. She looks back and forth between Lando and Varric. She finally takes a deep breath and lets it out. She says, "Well, Lando knows that I don't judge, and I keep confidences, but as long as you have zero chance of figuring out who I am talking about, I guess I could share a story or two."

Varric says, "No doubt you are telling stories about Tevinters or Nevarrans or some other far off people I have never met. But I'm all ears."

Gim says, "Lando and I have been traveling for a year or so. We have made money via hunting and selling assorted things. I often had a few potions for sale, and just as happened when we were stuck in Haven's dungeon, people always assume that someone who has skill in apothecary also has skill in healing. It happens that I am actually a better healer than an apothecary, but for obvious reasons, I wasn't advertising that fact.

"I've read your books, so I know you have a firm grasp on human nature; I assume you know what the subject area of the most desperate inquiries were."

"For purposes of this story, yes," says Gim, "although, honestly the parents of hurt children are more
desperate, but I would not usually tell drunken stories about them. Although, come to think on it,
perhaps this story straddles the line between the two types of desperation."

"Hunh," says Varric, and somehow Lando gets the impression that Varric doesn't spend a lot of time
thinking about either children or parenthood.

"Anyway," she continues, "there was a village where Lando and I stayed for a bit. We sold some
things at the market, and my potions were appreciated. A well-to-do merchant found me after we had
been there several days and asked me to see his wife, to whom he had been married for several years.
He took me to his house, and as soon as I entered, I was overcome with how beautiful his wife was.
She was delicate, and I thought the problem might be that her constitution might not be strong. She
was clearly embarrassed to have me see her, and I asked right away if there was a room where I
could examine her in private. The husband respectfully left the house, and I turned to the good
woman.

"Before I examined her, I tried to gently ask her what the problem was. The wife was distraught and
she had trouble speaking much, but eventually I figured out that there was no problem with their sex
life, which had been my first guess, but that she and her husband had not been gifted with a child. I
asked if I could examine her, and she was overwhelmingly shy and unwilling to disrobe. I had no
need that she disrobe, so I asked her if I could just hold her hand. This she allowed.

"As I took her hand, I brought up my Fade connection and scanned her. Imagine my surprise when I
found a perfectly healthy body completely lacking ovaries...or a womb...or a vagina. I asked her if
her husband really thought she could bear him a child. She responded that she was a good woman
who prayed to Andraste every night, and surely the Maker would smile on her."

At this, Varric guffawed. Gim smiles sadly and says, "I'm the one who started this as a humorous
story, but to be truthful, I really felt for her—and her husband. They were happy. They loved each
other. Really, their situation is no different from many other couples who through no fault of their
own, couldn't bear a living child."

"Except for the fact that the wife wasn't being exactly truthful to the husband," says Varric. "Not to
mention everyone involved seemed to have a certain ignorance of the ways of nature."

"Well," says Gim, "I'm not sure I see it that way. The wife knew herself to be a woman, and the
mechanics of their love life are probably not even that unusual given the range of human inclination
and habit. The husband had made it clear that he loved his wife: in that they were very lucky."

Varric says, "All you needed to tell that was to hold her hand?"

"Yes. I assume it was similar with Anders, was it not?"

Varric doesn't actually answer this. He is holding his mug near his mouth and staring closely into it.
Lando is worried this will get awkward, but Gim can see it is better to just continue.

"So I went outside and found the husband. I said to him, 'Serrah, I have examined your wife, and I
am sad to tell you, no matter how much she wants to bear you a child, she will be unable to do so.'
He asked me if I had told his lady wife the bad news, and I said I had not and asked him if he would
like me to. He patted my hand and told me he could handle it. He thanked me generously in both
word and coin, and soon after that, Lando and I moved on. I think of them sometimes at night. I hope
they are happy."

Varric says, "Beauty, you promised me a funny story and then you tell me that? I think you owe me
some genuinely silly people now.” Lando thinks Varric better get used to Gim's stories changing to show sympathy for those who would traditionally be the targets of humor. But she does tell good stories, even if the listener does sometimes need a little more patience than that needed for the traditional storyteller.

"I guess I can't blame you, Varric," Gim says. "How about I tell you about the man who tried to get an insect out of his ear by setting it on fire, or I regale you with tales of the woman who carried the crutch I gave her so she could keep off her hurt knee all day—except she had it strapped to her back like it was a mage's staff? Do those stories fit the bill better? Except, I seem to have ruined the punchlines of the stories..."

Varric says, "For the moment, yes, I will accept those almost-stories, and I will enjoy telling you a better story in return."

Gim says, "Hold that thought, Varric. From what I hear, it will take us two full days of travel to get to the Hinterlands, and I imagine stories will make the trip much more pleasant. Also, Lando and I have promised to do a fair amount to prepare for our trip, so we shouldn't stay long tonight."

Lando looks at Gim, trying hard not to show the surprise he feels. This is the first he's heard that he has things to do tonight. But Gim doesn't do things for no reason, so he packs up with Gim, makes his good byes, and leaves with her.

Once they get outside, Gim says, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier, but I really need your help. I would like you to make sure that I am not interrupted while I perform a small healing. It will take about two hours. I don't want attention drawn to me or the person I am healing. If you could just relax and enjoy the scenery nearby and distract anyone who looks like he or she is headed for the wrong cabin, that would help."

Lando is always willing to help Gim, but she is stretching the truth if she is calling something that takes two hours a "small healing." Not that it matters. Of course he will help.

Lando says, "So whose cabin are we going to?"

It's dark, so he can't be sure, but Lando would swear Gim is behaving the way she does when she is blushing from embarrassment. She says, "Solas's cabin."

Oh. Better and better.

He very carefully does not tease her about it as they walk towards the named cabin. Lando separates off and finds a good spot to sit in the shadows and await Gim, and she goes up to the door and knocks.

Lando will have plenty to think about while he waits for Gim to finish.

Chapter End Notes

Comments or email to kinako.aooo@gmail.com very much welcome.
Troubled with Thick-coming Fancies

Chapter Summary

A medical ritual.

Chapter Notes

English in bold should be read as high elvhen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Solas opens the door to Gim, Gim almost steps back away from the door. He doesn't look hostile so much as forbiddingly cold. He says, "You smell of drink."

Gim grins and says, "You can tell the difference between someone who smells drunk and someone who smells like their system has already broken down all the alcohol into other substances, can't you? I can't get drunk unless I want to." He isn't smiling back at her during this explanation. Super serious Solas is scary. Oops. Maybe she spent too much time being playful with Varric.

She says, "Have you changed your mind about wanting my help?" Gim would be disappointed, but there is always the future.

Solas says, "Explain what you intend to do and the alternatives."

"Happy to," says Gim. "I will ask you to lie on your bed in a comfortable position that you can stay in for more than hour. I will ask you to lower you defenses and let me immobilize your arms and legs (but not your head or your voice). You have unprocessed emotions and experiences from uthenera. They prevent your magical process from working as well as it did before you entered the long sleep. An alternative would be to wait for your mana pool to grow naturally over time, but that will take quite a while, and it will lead to certain foreseeable pitfalls. There are other alternatives, but they involve doing explicit harm to others and have nothing to do with the healing arts.

"In uthenera, when your body was still and you wandered the Fade, you did not have your ability to fully handle the experiences you partook in. This is a normal, protective part of uthenera. If sleepers fully processed events, they would not be able to continue to let their spirits drift through the Fade without either letting go of life entirely or jolting themselves awake."

Solas says, "But some do leave life, and some do awaken." At the last, he gestures at himself.

"Nothing is prescriptive, but your kind have been entering the long sleep for millennia, and your healers have been studying the people who let go and the people who awakened and what were the aspects of both sets of people. If you had slipped away, we would not be talking. You were asleep a long time, and many things happened while you were asleep—or even just before you slept—that you have been unable to process fully."

"You are saying that my unhappiness is limiting my magical abilities?" he says.
"Not precisely. You could be pretty content, right now, and still have a backlog of experience and emotion that keeps you from fully exercising what I think of as your spirit muscles."

"Muscles?" he says. "What will I experience, and what will you know of what I am experiencing?"

Gim says, "I am not a mind reader: I will not be violating your mental privacy, but I will know some of the emotions you experience as you cleanse yourself. Normal, healthy, good people who have slept as long as you have experience very intense emotions when they undergo this ritual. It will not mean anything bad about you that you are ashamed, that you grieve, that you despair. If you allow it, it should be cathartic, and it will not only expand the strength of your magical abilities, but it will also increase your emotional stability."

"How will this be different for me because I am a fade-walker? I would assume I dealt with more while in uthenera than a non-fade-walker would," says Solas.

"I thought that might be the case, but I can see your..I don't have a good word for it, but congestion will do. And you have reported that your power is less than you would like. You should know that you can fail to commit to this experience and thus block your emotional processing. In that case, you would waste our time and place yourself in significant discomfort."

Solas is looking directly at her. His eyes dart around her face as if he is looking for evidence that her intentions are good—or otherwise. He says, "You are asking an enormous amount of trust from me."

Gim swallows. She looks back at him with all the honesty, confidence, and empathy she can summon. "I know that I am. Logically, you probably shouldn't trust me. But while you can't read my mind, I have someone you do trust with me, and she can read my mind. You have heard what she has to say about this ritual. If it will help, I will swear a binding oath that everything I am doing with you tonight is for your benefit, and to the best of my ability, I will not cause you harm or any unnecessary consequence. You are familiar with the oaths I already keep, and with or without any additional process, everything I do with you tonight will be covered under, 'First, do no harm'. You have seen that I am unwilling to hurt demons. Would I be willing to hurt an immortal being who my kin name as a god?"

Solas's eyes narrow. Gim knows this is the first time she has said aloud that she knows exactly who he is, but she all but said it before. This should not be a shock.

Solas stills. As he opens his mouth, Gim gets the feeling that this is the important question. He says, "So we have covered why I should trust you. Why do you trust me enough to increase my power in this way? You have mentioned that I am the great adversary of your people. Why should you help me?"

"Solas, you are not the great adversary of my people—no matter what they might think. Sadly, many today would oppose you not through wisdom but through legend and tradition. As for you and I: Fate has bound us fast with many linkages—more than either of us even know. For now, you are my ally and you are loved by someone who I love. More importantly, you are a person who has been hurt—one I can help. You will lift me up by allowing me to help you.

"I don't know why you made me say this. I know my attitude is familiar to you because I know the source of my oaths and my trainers. This is just another way to show your lack of faith in me."

Solas drops his gaze. "Ir abelas, da'len."

Gim smiles, "I am not sure you should call someone who is about to immobilize you on your bed da'len."
Solas says, "I'm not sure your trainers know how wicked you can be."

"You would be surprised," she says. She wiggles her eyebrows with over the top suggestion.

Solas says, "I have been surprised since the moment I met you."

Gim says, "So, are we doing this now?"

"How do you want me?"

"I need skin. Please bare your chest and lie on your bed—on your side or back according to your comfort." As she said this, she moves one of the chairs to the head of the bed. She sits directly behind his head. He stares up at her. She thinks he is trying to not be nervous. She opens her pack and gets out a container of oil and spreads a thin sheen of it onto her palms. She starts rubbing her hands along his neck and shoulders.

She says, "Please relax. Feel free to meditate, but do not fight and do not slip into the Fade."

Gim is glowing strongly now. The sweet oil—scented with embrium, arbor blessing, and prophet's laurel—helps her connection and helps Solas relax. She leans forward and places both hands directly over his heart. His skin is smooth, his bare chest is perfectly formed and corded with muscle. This beautiful man allows no one near him as a matter of course. Gim knows he would not normally let anyone give him so much as a neck rub, and it is a shame. This will have to be one of the topics for their future conversations about emotional health and waking from the long sleep.

She reaches out and runs her awareness through Solas's system. She can feel him tense and then deliberately relax. She reaches below her hands to his spine and disconnects willful movement. This will leave him comfortably breathing and able to speak, but he won't be able to move his torso, arms, or legs. When she does this, she feels Solas fight it again, but then she recognizes the pattern of a 4-7-8 breathing exercise, and she knows he is trying to cooperate. His face is determinedly passive, giving away nothing.

Gim closes her eyes, but she moves her hands so she is kneading Solas's neck and skull. She feels his spirit-self and the flowing mana that gives him his abilities. He is a powerful mage, but the system is constricted: toxic with the disuse of the hundreds of years of sleep. She starts turning the mana into a corrosive flow: blasting through the outer layer of magical sediment. As she feels the unwanted material just beginning to yield, she opens her eyes to examine Solas's face.

His eyelids are shut, but his eyes are moving behind his lids, and his breathing follows no pattern. She watches him swallow, and she sees tears start to collect and spill out of his eyes. She can't tell what loss he is experiencing, but she can feel his grief. This is a very good sign. The only sleepers who can avoid strong emotion during this process are the broken who have lost their values and their true selves. Gim has to admit, she was afraid that Solas would not have let himself feel the strong negative emotions that are part of the cleansing. She is very happy to have worried pointlessly.

She changes her hands to caress his forehead and temples. She says in high Elvhen, "I am here, Solas. Wisdom is here. She says you can do this. She says you are dear to her—dear to others—needed by Thedas." Gim keeps talking, and most of it is nonsense. She just wants Solas to have a calm, supportive voice to hold on to. Occasionally she is quiet as she concentrates on the, to Solas, unthinkable things she is doing to his mana and his spirit-self.

After a while, his tears have stopped and his face is oscillating between the tension of anger and the attempt to relax. "Don't fight it Solas. Your anger is real. It isn't a trap. Feel it, let it pass through you, but don't let it control you. There is no demon here, Solas. You are safe to feel in extremis."
With the anger, she concentrates her stroking to his lower neck, and the tops of his shoulders and chest. He has started humming—or is it growling. Something about that growling is the embodiment of anger. If Gim heard that sound in other circumstances, she would believe her life was at risk. She keeps talking to him, keeps kneading his flesh, and keeps channeling her spell that is reaming the detritus out of his system.

He has a lot of mana, and she is careful about the rate she converts it. She has a moment of fear that she won't be able to deal with all his mana before she collapses. She thinks she can make it, but what about the next step in the series when his mana pool should be even larger?

She shouldn't worry about this now. She should concentrate on Solas, and now he is experiencing pleasant emotions. He looks regal. He looks satisfied. She closes her eyes to feel better... Yes, this is pride. How very appropriate. Some of what he experienced in uthenera convinced him he was doing the right thing. That is a positive sign all around.

But then, he moves towards anger again, and when she closes her eyes and concentrates, she can tell this is the direct counterpart of pride: he is filled with self-loathing. She keeps up the patter and the kneading, and she blesses the depth of spirit that enables the reality of ambivalence. She leans forward and kisses his bald scalp and murmurs about his being worthy, about choices being hard: whatever comes into her mind that feels right.

This continues on. Solas careens from emotion to emotion. He rides them out: sometimes silently and sometimes with growls and sobs. Gim keeps up her spirit work and her attention to Solas's physical well-being. It is hard work, and the splashback from Solas's feelings leaves Gim reeling as if the emotions were her own.

Finally the last of the mana has been converted. Solas is still—scarily still. She leans over him and appears to be giving him an upside-down kiss. She touches her lips to his and blows the Fade, clean, untainted Fade, into his spirit self. It isn't much, but it will keep him from being completely drained. She leans back in her chair, settles herself, and releases her hold on his movements.

She says, "Can you sit up? Move slowly. You will be weak. I have some food I would like you to eat if you can."

Solas raises himself on one elbow, and he looks behind himself at her. She smiles at him. He turns back, sits up the rest of the way, and sits cross-legged on the bed. He rubs his face—especially around his eyes. Gim opens her pack and hands him some bread, a piece of fruit, and a water flask. Solas immediately opens the flask and drinks.

She says, "You did really well. It will help you if you can eat this food before you sleep. The oil won't hurt you. I rubbed most of it in. I know how tired you must be. We can talk another time and I will tell you whatever you want to know. Is there anything you want to ask before I leave for the night?"

Solas, biting in to the fruit, says, "How much of that did you feel?"

"Enough that I am pretty wrung out, myself. But they weren't my feelings. They weren't the ones I needed to feel. They were yours. They were very good ones to get out of your system."

"Will the next time be as...unpleasant as this time?"

"I've been told that knowing what to expect will help. You will also know for sure next time that the ritual is helping you. It is easier to endure hardship when there is a point."
Solas says, "Is there anything special I need to do tomorrow?"

"No, not really. Make sure you eat. No matter what you do, don't drain your mana. If you need to fight, it would be better that you use a sword than you use your magic too soon. I would like to come and talk to you tomorrow if that is acceptable to you."

Solas nods, then he looks at her closely. He finally says, "This did not hurt you?"

She blushes. "No, it didn't hurt me. You have a lot of mana. I may have to figure out how to deal with it all the next time we do this when your pool will be even deeper. We can talk about it then. I'm pretty tired. I think I will go to sleep now. Don't get up. I can let myself out. Your job is to rest."

Gim let's herself out and finds Lando right outside. She makes it all the way to him before she starts to collapse. He grabs her and supports her back to the cabin.

Tomorrow she can ask him if anything interesting happened while he was waiting for her.

Chapter End Notes

Comments or email to kinako.aooo@gmail.com very much welcomed.
When Lando awakes, Gim is still fully asleep. He slips out to get food for them, and after a bit of consideration, he gets three meals rather than two. He approaches Solas's cabin, the door opens, and a stern-faced Solas appears.

Lando says, "I was picking up breakfast, and I thought I might as well bring some to you." Solas continues to glower, so Lando continues, "I'm sorry, did I awaken you?"

"Did she ask you to bring that to me?" asks Solas.

Lando notices Solas did not answer the question. "No, Serrah, but she was here last night, and if she was that tired after being here for the evening, you will need food—just as she will."

Solas motions Lando inside. After he shuts the door, Lando places the bowl and fruit on the table. He turns and sees Solas regarding him carefully. Lando says, "Look, I have no idea why she was here. She asked me to make sure you were not interrupted. I know if she asked, it was important. I've been running interference for her for three decades: I know how to do it smoothly and discreetly."

Lando thinks the tension in the room is going down, so he smiles, and moves towards the door.

Solas says, "Before you go, may I look at your mark?" Lando offers his hand, and Solas adds, "I would like to sit while I examine it, if you don't mind." They move to the chair next to the window, and Solas sits and holds Lando's right hand in the light. He runs his finger over Lando's palm. He says, "Does it ever pain you?"

"I wouldn't say it pains me—not since the Breach. It does sometimes flare up with a bit of light or tingling."

"Fascinating," says Solas. "Neither of you seems to be suffering from negative effects—though Gim's mark is smaller than yours. I will be very interested to see what happens when we next encounter a rift."

"I imagine we will find that out tomorrow," says Lando as he moves for the door with the rest of the food.

Once he gets back to the cabin, he finds Gim working on her hair. He makes her sit while he braids her hair tightly. Then they chat and eat and Lando reports that he didn't have to waylay anyone last night to prevent her from being interrupted while she was in Solas's cabin. He does not mention taking Solas food earlier. Somehow it seems more amusing to leave that realization to Gim—he knows she will check on him today after doing such a substantial healing on him last night.

They make their way down to the practice field, where they find Cullen, Leliana, Cassandra, and a small collection of people Lando doesn't know. As they walk up to the group, Leliana says, "Gim,
you told me that Cullen would like to see me spar with you, but I have taken that one better: I have brought Maya, who is better at close-fighting than I." At this, a dwarven scout steps forward with a large friendly smile on her face. Lando is delighted at this development for two reasons: first because he had been afraid that he would be drafted to be Gim's tumble-dummy, and second because Gim meeting another dwarf is a good thing.

The two of them move out into the open space while talking in low voices. Lando can't hear what they are saying, but they are both smiling and laughing. Once they are gone, Lando moves over so he can stand near Cassandra. He says, "Do you want to toss people on their backs, Seeker?"

She responds, "Mostly I wish them not to toss me upon my back. I saw what she did to Cullen, and I do not wish to experience it for the first time under pressure. And I should prefer that you call me Cassandra—Cass if that seems excessively formal." None of this is said facing Lando. Cassandra is looking out at the field, where Gim is bowing deeply. Maya hesitates for a beat and then mirrors the bow.

Gim drops into position and bounces, and Maya approaches. She moves in on the balls of her feet, and she is circling Gim. When she gets near, she feints left and moves right very quickly. Gim moves, and Maya is not thrown down, but it looks a bit like Maya is racing away to keep her feet under her body. She approaches again, and this time, she dances in and out of range of Gim, seemingly trying to hit her quickly and dart away, but Maya never connects. After a few of these, Gim grabs Maya's arm and then it looks like she plows over Maya, landing her pinned on her back. Maya slaps the ground, and Gim gets off her and moves away.

On the next approach, as Maya gets near, she throws a smoke bomb and disappears. In response, Gim throws out a glow. A moment later, Maya appears behind Gim, but Gim is already moving: Gim's shoulder dips, and Maya is on her back with Gim standing over her. But unlike when this happened to the Commander, Maya just keeps rolling and is up approaching Gim again.

This time Gim appears to welcome Maya in, and it looks like Maya will throw Gim. Except at the last second, almost without seeming to move, somehow it is Maya on the ground, and Gim, with a wide stance, is looking down on her. Maya slaps the ground again and stands facing Gim. Gim bows, Maya bows, and they both come over to the group.

Gim and Maya are peppered with questions ranging from how each combatant picked her approach to if Gim needs to glow during combat to requests to repeat moves. Lando knows the answers and he figures the group will be busy for a while, so he wanders back towards the Chantry. On the way he runs into Varric standing outside his tent.

"If it isn't the man with the nest on his chest. You look a bit the worse for wear," Lando calls out as he approaches.

"Me thinks I hear a jealous nave approaching," says Varric, "and you two deserted me last night. I had no one to tell stories to, and that's what keeps me from drinking too fast."

Lando laughs. "I will remember that for the future. Hey, you know you missed another chance to bet on Gim. Leliana had her sparring with one of her scouts."

"Would I have won money if I bet on her?"

"You know it," says Lando.

"And would anyone have bet against me?"
"Not sure. I wouldn't have, but that little dwarf was awfully nimble. I think you might have been able to bet against Leliana—she seemed a little smug. I'm so happy Gim got to spar with a dwarf."

"Why? Are you going for a height match? Gim isn't much taller than a dwarf. In fact, I know dwarf girls who are taller than she is," says Varric.

Lando looks at Varric quizzically. "You do know Gim's half dwarf, don't you?"

Varric crosses his arms over his chest and frowns up at Lando. "Now, why would I know that? You think I'm a dwarf-detector? How do I know what all elves look like? She had those face markings and the foot wrappy-things and she goes every where with you: elf male-model."

Lando laughs. "Trust me, there are no other elves that look like Gim. You know you had the honor of being the first dwarf she ever had a chance to talk to? She was very excited to meet you."

Varric covers his eyes and then pinches the bridge of his nose. "You know, you are not making me feel better, Braids. I've never met any elf-dwarf hybrids before: I just thought she was an especially attractive elf."

"Attractive! She thinks you call her 'Beauty' for the same reason you call Solas 'Chuckles'. She grew up with Dalish elves, most of whom constantly indicated how homely she was. She wondered if dwarves would be less offended by her mixed-race appearance—until she met you."

Varric sits down hard on his camp stool and puts his head in his hands. After a bit, he looks up at Lando through his fingers. He says, "You know, it is getting harder and harder for me to understand why you haven't just kicked my ass by now."

Lando, all smiles, slaps Varric on the back and says, "Maybe I just needed something to look forward to." At this he leaves and continues walking up to the Chantry.

He enters the Chantry hallway and walks along until he finds the Ambassador's office. As he comes in, the Ambassador says, "Lando, I am so happy to see you. How may I be of help?"

"Lady Montilyet, we leave early tomorrow morning, and I wanted to know if there is anything we should do before we leave. I am also curious if you have any instructions as to how we present ourselves to people we meet in the Hinterlands."

The Ambassador smiles at Lando with a bit of an admonishment. She says, "Josephine. or Josie if you wish. Unless you want me to start referring to you exclusively as 'the Blessed Herald of Andraste' even in private. I have put everything I think you will need in your cabin—including a pack that will be attached to a pack animal for your trip down to the Crossroads. Once you are down there, we have high hopes you can secure mounts from Redcliffe Farms—with luck, mounts for our whole effort, but at least for your party."

"As for the approach, we have some ideas. Please talk with Gim and tell us if they are acceptable. We know that you have traveled here from the Freemarches, and that you have supported yourselves on the way. We think it is a small modification to say that you lived in a remote hunting cabin near some town such as Ansberg or Markham, and that you left your cabin due to conflict arising from the mage rebellion. We figured you could pick the town nearest to your 'remote cabin' better than we could."

"Similarly, we did a little experimenting and some listening—especially among the soldiers who were either healed by Gim or are friends of those she healed. You may be surprised to know that the glow is called 'Andraste's Grace'."
Lando whistles. "Is it, now? And here I thought Andraste's Grace was a flower."

Josephine looks down and chuckles gently. She says, "That too."

"You know she isn't likely to be willing to call it that, right?" asks Lando.

Josephine smiles brightly. "We don't think that will be a problem. You already don't correct those who call you Heralds of Andraste even though you never name yourselves with that title. This is just one more thing you need only fail to deny. And if I understood what Cassandra reported of her conversations with Gim about religion, Gim would find it offensive to correct others who found her glow to be of comfort. Am I wrong?"

Lando sighed in exasperation. "No, you are not wrong. I can just hear her saying that we don't even know that her glow isn't ultimately due to some act of Andraste or the Maker from hundreds of years ago. Gim may not believe in much, but she's equally firm about the large set of things she doesn't know."

Josephine laughs. Lando flatters himself that it might have even been a real laugh instead of a polite laugh. He supposes he will never know. Hell, maybe Josephine doesn't even know the difference by now.

"One more thing, Josephine. Is there a bath house in Haven, or a chance for Gim, at least, to have a bath before we leave for the Hinterlands?"

Josephine seems horrified that they have not been offered a bath before now, and she arranges for each of them to have a hot bath in the afternoon. Pleased that he will at least have a few good things to report to Gim, Lando bids Josephine good-bye and leaves the Chantry.

Rather than return to their cabin directly, Lando goes to the apothecary. With luck, Adan can spare some oil or herbs that he knows Gim is running low on—maybe even the ones he enjoys using on his hair after a bath.

Adan doesn't have everything, but he has some things, and while he is grumpy, he does seem willing to part with the goods. Lando promises to bring him some nice materials from their trip.

Lando returns to their cabin secure in firm anticipation of meeting a happy, bouncing Gim later.

Chapter End Notes

Comments or email to kinako.aooo@gmail.com very much appreciated.
To Unpathed Waters

Chapter Summary

The initial trip to the Hinterlands: departure, travel, rifts, and stories of ancient history.

Chapter Notes

One of the tags for the story says "OC origins mention abuse." This is the chapter where the origins are discussed, but they are rather abstract discussions. If you were constantly berated or undervalued as a child, you could find the description distressing.

On the morning of the departure, Gim stands on a rock looking out at the frozen lake outside the Haven gates. The air is cold and crisp and her view is full of the mountain beauty that makes the cold worth it.

Yesterday had been a good day: no shocks or traumas to taint today's leavetaking. Her new armor fit perfectly, it was in a nice dark green, and she was able to put it on over a clean and refreshed body; Solas had been fine, if a bit distant, when she checked on him; Varric had waived and smiled when she saw him; and the solutions that the leadership had come up with in terms of protecting their history and keeping her glowy ass alive were...workable. She and Lando had asked them to come up with stories, and they did so. Now she just had to adjust to telling people she was from vaguely near Arnsberg. For the right definition of "vaguely near," she supposes it isn't too far from the truth.

The training had been more fun than she had imagined. She had never tried to show anyone but Lando how to throw someone, and Lando hadn't been that interested. The scout, Maya, on the other hand, had almost thrown her on their first sparring session, and by the end of the practice, Maya could throw Gim almost as often as Gim could throw Maya. This was much more instructive to the watchers, and it left Gim with a confidence that Maya could pass on the techniques to other interested members of the Inquisition.

After practice, she and Maya had gone for a quick lunch. The talk was easy, and Maya hadn't called her by a title even once. Maybe Gim could have a dwarf friend. Maybe.

Gim walks back to the cabin to collect Lando and finds Leliana clearly waiting for her. Gim walks up smiling and says, "May I hug you good-bye?"

Leliana opens her arms and says, "But of course!"

After pulling back, Gim says, "Thank you so much for bringing Maya yesterday. She was really fun to practice with. She gives me faith that the others who want to learn throws and falls will have a chance to do so." The next part she says in a whisper. "Also, I'm so happy to meet a dwarven woman. Is that shallow of me?"

"I thought you might like her. She is a very good scout, so I can't keep her in Haven forever, but I do
want my other people to learn your methods, so she has much to do here. Perhaps she will be here when you get back, you shallow thing, you." The last part is accompanied by a tone of stage admonishment. Gim grins at her. "And one final thing, Gim. I sent a present for you out to the Inquisition base camp in the Hinterlands: Lace."

Gim narrows her eyes at Leliana's smug expression. "Lace?"

"You will figure it out. Now if you know what is good for you, you won't keep Cassandra waiting."

At this, Gim goes inside the cabin to find Lando rummaging though all of his possessions again and again. How does he even own enough that it is worth checking? Gim isn't worried about her own packing. The form of travel the Inquisition provides them seems luxurious to her. She only has to carry her personal items, and a pack animal will have the provisions and tents. Tents! Actual tents: plural. It is almost like traveling with aravels. She grabs her personal pack and tells Lando she will see him at the stable.

Haven is still quiet, and even when she gets to the stables, no one is here but Solas. Solas nods in greeting. Gim walks close to Solas, puts hand near his arm, and says, "May I?"

He nods again, and she touches his skin and brings up her Fade connection. Everything is as she expects: he should be noticing the positive effects sometime soon. He's still acting rather coldly, but she hasn't known him long enough to know if this is just the way he is. Gim figures traveling together for two days will give her a better chance to judge his normal demeanor. Accordingly, she damps her glow, smiles at him encouragingly, and moves over to the stolid-looking pack horse to introduce herself.

Horses are not the allies that halla are, but Gim can't bring herself to ignore the horse as if he was just a tool. She pats his flank, murmuring friendly sounds, and then offers him a piece of apple she saved from breakfast. The formerly placid gelding perks up at the apple piece, and Gim is pretty sure she has made a friend.

Looking up from the horse, she sees Varric and Cassandra approaching, and Cassandra does not look happy. As they walk up, Cassandra is saying, "As I told you, Storyteller, the others have gathered and you have been delaying us."

Varric looks at the horse, Gim, and Solas and says, "I suppose Lando does have very long legs, so he shouldn't have too much trouble catching up with us."

Gim starts to say something about Lando's being ready, when Lando himself strides up. Lando says, "Varric, are you eager to have me as our second pack-animal?" and moves to the horse where he starts affixing his and Gim's saddlebag to the horse.

Cassandra makes her now familiar exhalation of disgust and strides off down the trail towards the Hinterlands road. Lando walks quickly after her, and Solas follows at a slower pace. This leaves Varric and Gim to come up the rear leading the horse.

Varric falls into step beside Gim and says, "Do you think it entirely smart of them to leave the two with the shortest legs to bring up the rear?"

Gim says, "I don't mind having the storyteller all to myself. And don't give me that short legs stuff. I've fought with you. I know how fast you can move. Besides, I like having Gail with us."

"Gayle? All the Gayle's I know are female, and this particular horse," Varric says while glancing between the horse's legs, "is in the process of making me feel inadequate."
"Don't feel inadequate, Varric. Itel'gail is Elvhen for castrated."

Varric cringes and says, "Ouch. You are making me feel differently about the gale-force winds I experienced on the way here from Kirkwall. Now I'm never going to be able to be at sea without thinking of ball-sweat, so thank you for that."

Gim laughs and says, "Ah, yes, Kirkwall: I have questions about 'Tale of the Champion', if you will indulge me."

"That's a pretty common reaction. Go Ahead."

This is the beginning of hours of conversation with Varric where she asks everything she can think of about Marion Hawke and which parts of Varric's adventures with Hawke didn't make it into the book. Apparently Marion had a much more exciting love life than Varric's book had indicated, but Marion isn't currently with any of the people from the book. Eventually Gim ran out of questions directly from the book, but Varric just kept talking about Carver, Merrill, and Avaline still being in Kirkwall and what he knew of the adventures of the others. Gim knew better than to ask about Anders.

As they walk down the roadside, before much longer there are more extensive expanses of visible ground rather than snow, and the sound of running water is commonly heard. Cassandra calls a rest stop for the horse to drink and forage and the rest of them to have a quick lunch. The first day's rations are of the sort that would go stale if depended on for many days, but for the moment they are delicious, as is the water from the snow-melt stream.

As they sit eating, Gim realizes that she has been more aware of the mark on her palm than she has been for the past two days. It doesn't hurt, but it feels almost as if she is holding a dense object—even though her hand is empty. She brings up her Fade connection, closes her eyes, and extends her awareness.

Yes, there is a rift off to the south.

When she opens her eyes, she sees the others looking at her. She points and says, "There is a rift off that way."

Cassandra looks puzzled. She says, "We have reports that our first rift is further on and that we should not find it until near time to camp for the night."

Gim waves her left hand in the air and says, "We have some unfair advantages when it comes to rift detection, and the rift is not close to the trail from what I can sense; I am not surprised the scouts didn't report it." Gim sees Lando staring at his own palm with a furrowed brow. When he looks up, she raises her brow in question, and he purses his lips and nods slowly. He might not have noticed it first, but he can feel it now.

With that, everyone starts collecting themselves and their weapons and Cassandra secures the horse to a tree away from potential prying eyes. Cassandra gestures off towards the south so that Gim and Lando can lead the way. The progress is slower than it was on the established route: terrain is variable, and getting past some of the downed trees and puddles leads to not taking the most direct route.

Soon enough, the green glow of the rift is visible through the trees even to the unmarked, and moreover, Gim's and Lando's hands have started flaring brightly. Gim thinks Lando is showing signs of some discomfort, but Gim feels nothing but vibration and a bit of heat.

Cassandra shield-slams the first demon they see, but she keeps going so that she places herself close to directly under the comparatively minor rift, trying to draw the attention of each of five demons
attached to the rift. Solas and Varric hang back and delay attacking anything until Cassandra has established herself. Lando doesn't seem to to feel the same reticence, and he stays near to Cassandra, attacking everything she attacks right away. Gim keeps shields on Lando and Cassandra. Gim thinks all the tactics are fine, but really almost too much for such a minor infestation. Before long the demons are gone, Lando puts his hand in the air, and she joins him. The ribbons stream, and the rift pops out of existence. It wasn't hard, but no one can do it but she and Lando. Gim is glad she didn't have to fight the poor spirits pulled through to the waking and corrupted in shock.

No one has been hurt by this short battle, but Gim puts out full glow and touches Lando. Lando's mark is larger than hers, and his flesh is inflamed around it. She does her best to minimize the inflammation. She looks up and sees Solas looking at them. Once Solas sees her face, he comes up and takes Lando's hand. Gim keeps hold on Lando's other hand, and she watches very closely when Solas acts on Lando's mark. Solas's familiarity with the mark is undeniable, and Gim is beginning to suspect that this goes beyond what he could have acquired while he tended to them as they slept in Haven's dungeon. In any case, Solas is helping Lando, and that is the important thing.

When Solas reaches for her hand, she gives it to him, but he barely examines it before he drops it. Gim isn't having problems, and Solas can tell.

They hike back to the horse and continue on without incident until Cassandra indicates a good place to camp for the night. They secure the horse and then go to the previously scouted rift, which is another minor one that is dispatched promptly and without incident.

Back at camp, Solas sets wards, Lando tends the horse, Cassandra and Varric set up the tents, and Gim starts dinner. She has herbs, salt, and some spices with her, and she is accustomed to being responsible for cooking. Once again, dinner is mostly fresh fare that wouldn't be available without hunting if they hadn't been so close to Haven. It's easy for her to turn bread, meat, a rub, some roots, and a well-tended fire into a delicious meal.

Someone has moved some nice logs around the fire, so they can all sit and enjoy the food together. Gim is gratified at the appreciative grunts she hears a few times. One of those appreciative grunts was from Varric, who says, "I'm just curious, Gim: what would have happened if we had asked you to go out and hunt down our supper?"

Gim laughs. She says, "Well, if you prevented Lando from coming with me—and I know he would immediately offer to come with me in such a situation—you would have had to be happy with an assortment of roots and fruits. If Lando and I went out together, we would have quickly located something, killed it, dressed it, and brought it back for...you, I presume, to cook."

Varric says, "Hey now! I just asked a question; no need to get punitive."

Solas has been quiet all day, but now he says, "Speaking of questions, I believe you told me you would explain your ancestry on our trip."

At this question, Lando gets up and pokes the fire a few times, giving him an excuse to sit nearer to Gim. Gim smiles at him and then says, "What I know of it is simple, although there are some mysteries. Lando is five years older than I am and may know more. My mother was a beautiful elf without vallaslin who showed up injured and distraught in the then territory of our clan. She was tended by the man who was then our keeper—Lando's father. As I understand it, many in the clan were not in favor of allowing her to join the clan, but the keeper was a widower and he took her in. All the tales from that time that I know of emphasize that she was very beautiful, and some imply she bewitched him.

"Sometime after she showed up, it became clear that she was with child. She continued to stay with
the keeper, who was not known for his talkative nature. The keeper made no claim to the woman's child—nor did he disavow her or her child. When the child—when I—was born, any belief that I was the keeper's child ended. It turns out that my appearance and that of an elf with a certain kind of mental disability are similar. My mother died soon after I was born and many people in the clan were in favor of leaving me in the woods. The keeper would not allow this. He said he was keeping me, and he dispatched a group of hunters to find out all they could about a dwarven man living in the southern Freemarches. They were not to do anything about the man: just be aware of him and generally what he was up to.

"I was raised as part of the Keeper's family, but he was never affectionate—to anyone, as far as I could tell." At this she looks at Lando, who shakes his head wryly. "He provided for me. He kept others from physically harming me, and he gave me my Adahl'falon, my most dear tree friend, as I am his Durgen'falon, his most dear rock friend. The keeper never seemed to recover from my mother's death. He bound his first, Deshanna, who is now the keeper of the clan, to promises of continuing my protection. In a bit more than three decades, no one raised a hand to me in anger, but no one but Lando, and one other ever gave me affection in the waking world."

Cassandra asks, "One other?"

Gim looks over at Lando, and he shakes his head almost imperceptibly. Gim says, "A story for another time, and one that won't be told by me." Gim sees the speculation on Cassandra's face, but she is sensitive enough to leave it alone.

Varric says, "How do you know that they wanted to expose you as an infant?"

Gim looks at Lando, and they both laugh. Lando says, "Obviously, I don't know of all of the times someone from the clan told Gim that she should have been abandoned to the wolves—quite literally, I might add—but I heard it over and over. Once she grew a little, refused to learn to use a bow, and started saying things about her spirit friends, things got even worse. We heard long involved stories of the imputed sins of Gim's mother and her hold over my father. We will spare you those stories; they are not pleasant to listen to. But my father kept his promises, whatever they were. She and I made sure people acknowledged our contributions: between the two of us, our clan was better fed and healthier than most other clans, but we were never given anything but grudging acceptance."

Gim says, "They would have accepted Lando with open arms if he hadn't been so steadfastly in my corner. He is a good hunter, and he was a strapping young man eyed by several young women, but I tainted him with my crazy opinions, so he got to share my status as harellan.

Cassandra says, "harellan?"

Lando says, "Traitor. Heretic. But I assure you, if baby Gim had been placed in your arms when you were young, if young Gim had told you endless stories of your revered ancestors, if adult Gim made you into the most successful hunter in the clan, if she saved the life of ..." At this Lando stops. Clears his throat. Swallows. Looks to Gim.

Gim takes up the narrative. "Lando is a good man. You would think my mother had made him take oaths to support me, but if she did, Lando doesn't remember it. He just always loved me, always believed me, and always stood up for me."

Varric says tightly, "And the dwarven man?"

Lando says, "We kept tabs on him as an enemy of the clan. He never tried to contact us. We don't know if he knows who Gim is, but he has been observed making exceedingly negative statements about the feral Dalish and how they should be treated."
Varric says, "And the man's name?"

Lando says nothing. Gim is looking at her feet, listening to the silence. After a bit she looks up at Varric. His gaze is challenging. Gim feels her eyes tearing up. She opens her mouth to say something, though she doesn't quite know what it is. She gives up and shuts it again and looks down at her feet.

She looks up when she hears someone stomping away from the fire. Varric is gone.

Solas says, "On that note, I volunteer for first watch. I need to talk to Gim, so she can be second watch. It seems we should leave Varric for morning watch. I am sure Gim will get Lando when her time is up, and he will get Cassandra. Any objections?"

No one objects. Gim sees Lando drag Varric's bags into his tent, and Gim puts her bag into the tent where Cassandra went. That leaves one tent to be occupied by Solas, who remains sitting by the fire. Gim returns to the fire, sits opposite Solas, and waits expectantly.

Solas says, "While we are traveling with each other and have time, I thought you might like me to teach you some magic that does not violate your oaths."

Gim says, "I would like that. I also have a question for you."

Solas raises an eyebrow and says, "Just one? That is surprising. I have many for you, but I am trying to be patient. For example, I do not believe for a moment that your mother gave you the name Gim. You've told enough stories for tonight, but keep in mind I would like to hear about your birth name and how you came to be called Gim sometime."

Gim says, "I will keep that in mind. My question is actually more of a request. If Lando ever wanders into you while dreaming, if you have the time to bring him to my Thaig, I would be most grateful. You, of course, are welcome in my Thaig anytime."

Solas looks quite surprised. She isn't sure which part of what she said was surprising.

Solas says, "Lando is not a mage."

She says, "He is not. But since he got the mark, his dreams have changed, he says. He now has magic. Maybe it won't change things, but maybe it will. I've spent so much time wishing I could do more than tell him stories about my Thaig, and since you are a fade walker, I just wanted to make sure that if you encountered him, you could bring him by."

Solas stands and walks over to where Gim is seated. He strokes her hair briefly before he says, "I would be honored to be of service, da'len."

At this, he walks out of the circle of firelight, and Gim returns to the tent she shares with Cassandra.

Chapter End Notes

All the elvhen is explained in the text of the story, but the one for "castrated" comes from FenxShiral's Project Elvhen (well, I took the word for without and the word for testicle and ran with it).
Comments or email to kinako.aaaa@gmail.com very much welcome.
Chapter Summary

Conversations, sleep, and spirits on the eve of their arrival in the Hinterlands.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When Gim enters the tent, she sees Cassandra lying on her side propped up on one elbow. Gim smiles, spreads out her bedroll and then comes over to sit next to Cassandra. Gim says, "May I look you over, briefly?"

Cassandra says, "Oh, I am not injured. There is no need."

"I can tell you are fine," says Gim, "but if you will allow me, it will help me in the future when the battles are more intense." Gim sits and waits patiently. She can tell Cassandra does not want to do this, but she just waits. Cassandra either will, or she will not let Gim examine her, and Gim does not think that arguing about it will help.

Gim would love to know what is going on inside Cassandra's head, because the varying emotions flowing across her face are fascinating. However, after a bit, she purses her lips and nods. Gim touches Cassandra's elbow and brings up her glow. Cassandra is in good shape, but there is some inflammation in her sword-arm wrist and elbow and her shield-arm shoulder. Gim makes some small adjustments to help there. She also tries to ease some tension in Cassandra's shoulders and neck. Gim brings down her glow.

Gim says, "I see some evidence you have repeated problems with your right wrist and elbow and left shoulder. May I show you some very brief exercises that will minimize that in the future? One set of exercises you can do while lying down just before you get up, and the other you can do before your daily practice."

Cassandra is willing, so Gim goes through the set that starts flat on the stomach, and then she goes through the standing wrist extensions. Cassandra is old enough that she understands how crucial the care for her body is, so she is very attentive.

Gim says, "I like healing my friends, Cassandra. Rash, headache, smashed finger? I can help. Keeping you in top condition could save my life. And just so you know, my oaths prevent me from sharing anything I learn about a person when I heal them. The only exceptions are if you give me permission to share information or in emergencies."

Cassandra looks uncomfortable for a moment. She says, "As if you could have learned anything more private about me than I have learned this evening about you. I know it is not easy to speak of one's past in such a manner. I am grateful that you have allowed me to get to know the two of you better. When I look back on the day we approached the Breach, I am unsettled. I...made assumptions about you—you both, but especially you—that did me no credit."

Gim knows an apology when she sees it. She says, "Cassandra, do not think I fault you. Had you failed to suspect us, you would not have been fulfilling your duty. You did nothing rash and you
gave us a chance to show our good intentions. Honestly, Cassandra, The explosion—the formation of the Breach—was a tragedy, but our lives are better for being part of the effort to deal with the tragedy. Lando's whole life he has been waiting for an epic purpose, and me...I've had little reason other than Lando to value my life outside of the Fade until now. You make me look forward to the waking in a way I never have before."

"So you do not harbor resentment?" Cassandra said.

"Against you, I do not. Your Chantry, however, scares me. The circles, the Templars, the intolerance for other races, for magic, for spirits: it is all very disturbing, and now I am a representative of the Inquisition, an organization founded within the Chantry. I will try to avoid ranting, but it will be hard when dealing with situations that strike me as no better than torture or slavery; I fear that will put you and me at odds."

Cassandra looks thoughtful. "Are you always so forthright?"

"I prefer to be, with my friends. I needn't broadcast all my opinions to strangers or opponents. If you will remember, I was not so talkative when we first met."

"True." Cassandra briefly smiles before her expression turns more serious. "Well, we shall see. My faith, as you know, is important to me. But I know the Chantry is not perfect. Divine Justinia received harsh criticism for trying to change too much, too quickly. Would that I could hear her council now." Cassandra's look reminds Gim that grief and loss are still very close to Cassandra.

After a silent moment, Cassandra looks Gim in the eye, and then says with an air of great decision, "You have been accepting of my beliefs; I will do my best to be accepting of your lack of them. In the end, we may argue. There are worse things."

"There are," says Gim, "but I am keeping you from sleeping and your shift will be too soon."

Gim doesn't want to try to sleep when Solas will be calling her so soon, so she goes out and sits by the fire. Solas is still no where to be seen. She half-shuts her eyes and uses the fire and her breath to move into meditation. For her, this is almost as restful as sleeping—the only downside being it does not allow her to enter her Thaig. She can feel Patience's approval of the meditation, which makes great sense because Patience had been one of her teachers when she first learned her poses, relaxation techniques, and meditations.

She moves into more active awareness as she sees Varric approaching, stiffly. He comes up to her and sits on a log near her. After a moment, he asks, "Loiram Davri?"

She nods. 

Varric says, "And that's what you were trying to tell me. How did you know about my connection to the Davri family?"

She says, "Clan members paid particular attention to when he met with Carta agents. He doesn't like you or your relationship with his daughter."

"You are his daughter. Andraste's dimpled buttcheeks! You are Bianca's sister."

Gim shakes her head. "They wouldn't see it that way. I don't see it that way. We share blood. We are not family. I don't want them for my family."

Varric looks at her sharply. He doesn't say anything, but she hears it: she should be careful about saying anything negative about Bianca. She doesn't need to say anything about Bianca. Ever.
Varric says, "Well, is there anything else? Let's get this all out of the way. Did you have my Brother Bartrand's love child? Do you speak disrespectfully of card cheats? Did you write one of those knockoffs of one of my books that my publisher has such a hard time chasing down?"

Gim smiles with sympathetic eyes; if he is joking, things will be ok. "I think we've covered the high points, although I reserve the right to speak disrespectfully of just about anything but your crossbow and your chest hair."

Varric says, "I can live with that. Goodnight, Gim."

"I don't have a nickname anymore?"

Varric sighs. "Oh, you do. I just can't get into that with you right now. So your nickname is on vacation."

Gim furrows her brow, but Varric is paying no attention. He enters his tent.

Gim turns back to the fire and brings up her full glow. She can feel Cassandra and Lando sleeping. She can feel Varric settling down. She ranges further looking for Solas, and she finds him standing not far outside the area lit by the fire, silently watching. She doesn't know how long he has been there, but given what she knows about Elvhen hearing, she will assume he heard everything that was said—not that she minds. As soon as she detects him, he walks forward, bows to her, and walks into his tent. He doesn't say anything, but she gets the message that if she is going to be up, she might as well watch. True enough. With Patience to help, it's not much of a chore. She keeps her, and therefore Patience's, awareness wide and slides into another form of meditation.

After a couple of hours of this, and nothing more exciting happening than small animals coming into range of the fire and then leaving, Gim rises to wake Lando. Varric doesn't even stir when she shakes Lando.

Gim returns to her tent with Cassandra, slips off her leathers, and collapses into her bedroll. It doesn't take her long to fall asleep.

When she wakes in her Thaig, she knows she will have less time than usual, so she goes right outside to thank Patience. Except Patience isn't where she expects it to be. She sees a collection of spirits, including Patience, grouped along the outside stone wall of her great hall. She walks over, and they part ways allowing her to see...Varric.

Varric is sitting on the ground leaning back against a stone wall in her Thaig. He isn't responsive. His eyes are open, but it is as if he is in a trance. He's just sitting on the ground, and no amount of talking to him, passing her hands in front of his eyes, or shaking him causes him to appear more aware.

Gim doesn't know if she should feel some sort of distant dwarven solidarity or if she should feel like her space has been invaded. Moreover, she doesn't know if she should just ignore him or if that would ultimately be rude.

She is crouched on the ground contemplating the catatonic dwarf when Solas walks up. Solas says, "Fascinating. I wondered if this would happen. I have discovered that I can enter your Thaig even if you are not in the Fade."

Gim says, “This does not surprise me. Many spirits come here when I am in the waking, but that doesn’t explain Varric’s being here. This is the first time I have slept near a dwarf.” She is silent for a moment, thinking. Aloud she says, “My Thaig is Stone. I feel the Stone. I did not expect any other dwarf to feel my Stone.”
Solas looks delighted. Gim almost feels as if she has given him a gift. He says, “I questioned Varric a few days ago, and he claimed to have no Stone sense. I do not know exactly what Stone sense is, but I would venture that the nature of your Thaig and the nature of Children of the Stone must somehow explain Varric’s presence here. Full blooded durgen’len may not dream, but the recuperative powers of sleep are not all attributed to lack of consciousness. I believe Varric is here because he is durgen’len, the Stone gives him strength, and your Thaig is a potent manifestation of the Stone. I wonder if this will change his perception of Stone sense.”

“Well, he is welcome here, and he certainly isn’t causing me any trouble. Whether or not I should tell him he appeared in my Thaig is another matter.”

Solas, still smiling, says, “I shall be interested to see how this develops.”

Gim says, “Give me a moment, and then if you like, we can talk.” She sees Patience still grouped with some of the spirits who were examining Varric when she showed up. She approaches it, thanks it for its help, and then turns to the other spirits in the group. She spots the one she is after, says, “It is your turn, is it not?” and upon receiving a nod, walks towards Solas, who falls in as all three walk into her great hall.

She and Solas sit down near the hearth, and the spirit keeps walking down the hallway. Solas raises an eyebrow in inquiry and Gim says, “That one will be spending the next waking period with me.”

Solas says, “Are you always so careful to greet and thank the spirit who has been with you?”

“Of course,” Gim says. You are here, so I am talking with you, but most nights I spend the entire time with spirits. They are not my tools; they are my friends. We enrich each others’ lives. Most of my life I have thought of the Fade—my Thaig—as my true life, and the waking as what I had to endure so I could come back here. The realization that the last few days of my life have drawn my attention from the Fade is shocking to me.”

Solas is so much more open here than he is in the waking. He seems cold there, but here he is smiling and comfortable. His smile looks pleasantly surprised and friendly, but also crafty. Gim thinks this is a man who is always calculating. He says, “You are not the only one who has been surprised by recent experiences.”

Gim doesn’t know how to respond to this, so she waits. He continues, “So, did your mother actually name you, Gim?”

Gim always feels sad when her mother is mentioned. She says, “I have an elven name, but you would never use it—nor would any other elf. My use-name comes from less pleasant origins, but it is mine now and I own it.” He looks at her pointedly, waiting for her to continue. “Gim was how the other children shortened ghiman.”

Solas is not smiling any more. “The other children called you a whale, and you happily go by that?”

Gim laughs. “I made my peace with that decades ago. I am rather hefty by elf standards. It’s fine. I am also strong, healthy, and flexible by elf standards—all of which are also the traits of whales, which are beautiful, intelligent creatures.” She suspects that last came out a bit defensively.

Solas says, “I may be unwilling to call you Gim now. What is your elven name?”

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Gim doesn’t want to answer. She swallows. Oh well. “Vhenan,” she says quietly. “But then, I have never heard you use my name to my face. I am always Da’len to you. Call me what you will.”

Solas says, “I will think on this. For the moment, I will be going. Before I leave you, I want you to
know I begin to see the benefit of the healing you did for me in Haven. I don’t know if I thanked you at the time. If I did not, please forgive my poor manners.”

Gim smiles and says, “I am happy you are pleased. And you are most welcome. We can talk further of other things I want to do for you another time.”

Solas bows, leaves, and Gim goes down the hallway to talk to Command. She always likes to chat with the spirits who accompany her before the waking begins. Command is happy to be coming and sure it can be of use, but it doesn’t express any desire for particular experiences or to meet particular people. After they have talked for a bit, Gim feels the day approaching, the door to her focus closes, and Gim’s awareness moves to the waking.

Chapter End Notes

All elven words are explained in the text. Ghiman comes from FenxShiral's Project Elven.

Comments or criticism very much appreciated here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
But Eat and Drink As Friends

Chapter Summary

Breakfast, fights, and Lace.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Lando crawls out of his tent in the morning, Gim is already tending the fire. He walks up to see if she has any tasks, and she gives him a large water skin and directions to where she has detected more than one nest with new-laid eggs. Lando hopes the mention of eggs means what he thinks it means. Does she have the spices she would need for that? He hopes so.

When he comes back with the eggs and water, she has arranged some of her cooking apparatus and has sliced the last of the, now stale, bread they brought from Haven. Lando's stomach is joyful and demanding, so he tries to find something distracting to do. Cassandra's and Solas's tents are empty, so he starts breaking them down. Cassandra is with the horse, and Lando has no idea where Solas is.

Varric—no surprise—is still in his bedroll. Lando goes in to their tent and bangs around a bit collecting his gear. After he has everything, he turns to see Varric, still in his bedroll, squinting at him and doing his best curmudgeon impersonation. Lando says, "I think breakfast is going to be good, Varric."

Varric says, "You must be confused. There is no one named Varric here. Perhaps I should introduce myself: I am Utter Shit."

Lando laughs. "I knew this was coming. This is good. No more punches to the gut waiting for you. Now get out of here so you can enjoy breakfast: I saw evidence of one of Gim's treats in the works."

Varric shows no sign of getting out of the bedroll. He says, "She's probably not going to let me have any."

"Varric, she didn't learn anything new about you yesterday. Nothing has changed for her. Cut the wallowing and act like a man."

Varric grumbles. "This would all be so much easier over a pint. Or a deck of cards. But no: we have to eat food with dirt in it and walk all day over rocks and bushes and other blister-making instruments of torture."

Lando says, "I'm pulling the tent stays in five minutes whether or not you emerge. And if you have blisters, you should talk to Gim. Seriously." As he leaves, he hears rustling that indicates that Varric is at least moving about.

The smell of the air as he approaches the fire tells him that Gim has already fried the bacon, and he sees her taking soaked bread out of one of those collapsible beeswax-infused cloth bowls. She has moved the pan to a part of the fire with lower heat and is packing the pan with the bread. She puts in the last piece in the pan, and then she uses some wooden spacers so the lid can reflect heat but steam can still escape.
Lando watches as Solas walks up to Gim and hands her a cloth pouch. She looks into the pouch and her face explodes in joy. Any day that starts with that look on Gim's face is a good day. He wonders about the contents of that cloth as he watches Gim throw her arms around Solas, squeezing him tightly. Solas's face is a study in shock, but maybe also something that Lando might term delight—almost a faint mirroring of the way Gim's face looked when she saw what Solas had given her. Each of them seems to have been offered something pleasant that they weren't expecting. Well, well. Lando will keep an eye on this.

He looks back at Gim, who has released Solas and is rinsing out the beeswax bowl she had the bread in earlier. Now she is mashing something red: berries! No wonder she is excited. She adds some water and few drops and grains from some vials she keeps in their pack. She gestures at Lando, and he eagerly brings his bowl over.

She places some bacon in his bowl, then a slab of fried, egg-soaked bread with a dollop of berry sauce on the top. He whispers in her ear, "Varric has blisters." When he walks away as he sees Solas approaching with his own bowl.

Lando wanders off towards the horse in hopes of finding Cassandra, and he is successful. He breaks off a piece of bread, makes sure it has berry sauce on it and extends it towards her mouth. She looks unsure—curling her lip and moving her head back from her torso without moving her body—but he knows the smell of the spices, egg, and oil has to be hitting her about now, and eventually she brings her head forward and accepts the bite into her mouth.

Immediately her eyebrows shoot up, her eyes widen and then clamp shut, and she starts making delightful pleasure noises. *Oh, Cassandra, you know not what you do to me.* He is going to have to make sure he helps Gim find all her best ingredients. His number one priority has become figuring out how to get some chocolate.

He walks Cassandra back to the fire so she can get her own bowl. As he arrives, Solas is slowly eating, and he looks more content than Lando has ever seen him. Gim is oozing exasperation after trying to convince Varric to bring his bowl over, and Varric has clearly been saying he isn't hungry. Lando walks to Varric's pack, rummages through it until he finds the bowl, and brings it to Gim. Gim fills it, and hands it back to Lando.

Lando, on approach to Varric says, "Varric, you would have to be one sad, sorry, asshole to not at least try this; if you don't like it, I will happily take it off your hands." Varric takes the bowl and puts on a tolerant face. Fishing under the bread, he takes the bacon and nibbles on it.

Lando finishes taking down the last of the tents, and when he turns back, Varric's bowl is empty. Lando smirks at Varric. Varric says, "Alright already. I swallowed my pride with my breakfast. I thank you for being a persistent prick, and I will thank her for... well, for ... stuff." Varric looks a little defiant at the start of the speech, but by the end, he has rearranged his features into what Lando thinks of as his charming face. Fair enough: Varric is charming when he isn't busy kicking himself.

Lando keeps working with an eye on Varric, who walks over to Gim. Varric says cheerily, "Thank you, Gim. For everything. May I help you clean up or pack?" Gim sends him to refill the big water skin and bustles about cleaning and stacking things. Lando recognizes the pile of unwanted scraps (including the egg shells) and leaves to put the scraps at the bottom of the tree where he found the eggs. It isn't a fair trade, but maybe the birds can make some use of the remnants. Nothing ever goes wasted in the wild.

When he comes back, Gim is glowing and using fire and ice to make sure things are clean and dry and ready to be packed. Solas must be all packed, because he almost seems to be treating Gim's actions as a form of entertainment.

Varric returns with the water skin, and Gim is still glowing. He hands her the water, and as she
reaches for it, she says, "may I touch you briefly? It won't hurt." Varric nods, and Gim takes the water bag with one hand and touches Varric's hand with the other. She shuts her eyes for a bit, and then opens them and says, "There. Your feet should do better today," and then releases him. After a moment she says, "Do you feel well today? Rested? No ill effects from yesterdays fighting?" 

Varric looks confused at the questions. He says, "Yeah, I feel great. Maybe sleeping outside of a proper town—ideally a proper tavern—isn't as bad as I thought." Lando thinks he catches some sort of look between Solas and Gim in response to this, but Lando has no idea what is being communicated. Varric stomps his feet a bit and then purses his lips in what Lando interprets as grudging admiration. "Hunh. Thank you again—my feet feel much better."

In any case, everything is packed and ready to go soon, and they are on the road. Solas and Gim are in the midst of a serious magic discussion. Something to do with the cleanup spells she used and ones he could help her add to her arsenal.

The non-magic users, with Lando leading the horse, fall into step. They begin in silence, but that feels too much like they are silent participants in a magic lecture. Lando asks some very general questions about Navarra, and that leads to similar questions about the Freemarches, to which both Varric and Lando contribute answers.

Most of the day passes similarly to the previous one, with breaks for lunch and rift closing along with companionable walking, but the the events starting with the second rift of the day do not follow the previous pattern.

The rift and demons are no more of a challenge than the previous three, but while they are still fighting the demons, Lando hears shouting and commotion away from the center of the demon activity where he and Cassandra are. Sparing a look or two, he sees that Solas and Varric are fighting some scruffy-looking folks. He sees a number of shields in place before he has to turn back to the demons. By the time the demons are down, he turns to see Gim near him. He puts up his hand, Gim joins him, and the rift is closed.

As soon as the rift is gone, Gim runs back to where Lando saw the scruffy fighters, and Lando runs after her. Solas and Varric are still standing alertly over a couple of the strangers.

Gim says, "I can't detect any at range but the one Varric shot." Solas nods agreement, and he and Varric take off together. She drops down to check the bodies on the ground. Lando stays near Gim, ready to help with whatever she needs. He looks up at Cassandra and nods towards where the other two have disappeared. One of the attackers on the ground is still breathing, but Gim shakes her head. Lando knows what that means, so he quickly slits the mans throat in mercy, and the two of them rise to follow the rest of their companions.

When they catch up with them, they find them standing over a sad looking archer with one of Varric's bolts in his chest. The man is in pain and unable to talk. Lando can see that the man is panicking and his color is worsening.

Gim says, "Lando, my tools," and immediately starts working on the man.

Cassandra, sounding exasperated, says, "This man was just trying to kill us and you are healing him?"

Gim is busy, and Lando knows the answers. "Do you want to question him, Cassandra? He has to be alive to question. Also, you had best get used to this. If someone can be saved, Gim will try to save them—whether or not you consider them to be an enemy. Solas and Cassandra, can you help hold him still?"
Gim has taken his dagger, and using it and a flare of magic, she has cut off the end of the bolt. She turns him onto his uninjured side, and she pushes the bolt all the way through his chest. She is fully glowing, and when she puts out her hand, Lando puts a small knife and a thin glass tube into her hand. She makes some cuts, pushes the end of the tube into one of the cuts, and a small rush of air whistles out of the tube. The man is breathing better now, and he's using his newfound breath to scream at them.

Lando clamps down on the man's leg and says, "Shut up and be still if you want to live. She's saving your life." The man's eyes are wild, but he clenches his jaw and mostly stays still. Gim gives Solas a pleading look, and the injured man goes rigid. Gim looks grateful and makes some more cuts where the bolt exited the man's body. Soon, she hands the knife to Lando and shuts her eyes. Some watery blood with brown and black particles moves out of the wound in the man's back and then Lando sees the familiar sight of flesh healing from the inside out. She starts to move him onto his back, and Solas and Cassandra do the muscle work of making that happen.

She takes the knife again, prods at holes in his chest, and then the same healing starts on the entry points. She slides the tube out, and his wounds close. She nods at Solas, and the man's paralysis ends and he rolls into a ball, holding his chest and looking at Gim with open mouth and wide eyes. At least he isn't screaming any more.

Lando says, "She just heals them. You get to decide what to do with them," and he helps Gim over to a rock. He gets her a water skin, and she drinks and rinses her hands and instruments. Then she does something to her tools before she wraps them carefully and hands them to Lando to put into her pack.

Lando has been ignoring her patient, but he has heard him talking with the other three. Eventually Varric comes over. He says, "His name is Baldwin. He's just some poor desperate bastard. I don't know about the dead ones, but this one has a family and was willing to do anything to get them some food or the means to buy it. He can walk, but he's close to hysterical. I would say he doesn't know whether to worship you or decry you as a demon. Cassandra has decided we are taking him the rest of the way to the Inquisition base camp."

Gim says, "Varric, can you see if you can find anything in our packs we could give him to eat? I am sure we can get food for ourselves at camp tonight." With that she puts her hand on Lando's bare neck and she feels her magic flow through him. He hadn't even been aware that his marked hand was hurting until she made it stop.

Varric walks back and gives Gim some smoked meat before continuing on to hand some to Baldwin. Cassandra flaps her hands in exasperation and says, "We had best not be attacked by many more desperate folk or Gim may give away all of our possessions."

Lando hopes Cassandra doesn't realize how realistic her concerns are. Specifically, he hopes it takes Cassandra a while to figure out how little Cassandra's big picture concerns correspond to Gim's. Lando will keep track of the larger goals for both of them.

As they collect up and walk back to the horse, Baldwin seems confused to the point of delirium, but he isn't making trouble. They suggest Baldwin should look to see if there is anything on his dead former-companions that he would want to take with him, and they give him a few minutes to rifle through the men's clothes and weapons. He puts several things in his pack, and he takes both of their daggers.

The party is moving more slowly than they were at the start of the day, but Cassandra says they are not far from camp. As they walk along, Baldwin always keeps Gim in view, and his eyes are open so wide that Lando can see white all the way around the man's pupils. The man is muttering. Lando
casually moves closer as they walk along so he can hear. Baldwin is saying "Andraste's Grace" over and over. It must have been Cassandra who gave him that phrase.

Finally, they see smoke ahead, and Lando notices sentries. As they come in to camp, they are welcomed by a dwarf woman. She says, "The Heralds of Andraste. I've heard the stories. Everyone has. We know what you did at the Breach and what you did for our wounded soldiers."

At this point, Baldwin pipes up, "She healed me. She used Andraste's Grace. I tried to rob them when they were fighting, and she healed me. Maker forgive me!"

The dwarf scout nods to another scout—this one human—and Baldwin is escorted off. The scout says, "Inquisition Scout Harding at your service. I—all of us here—we'll do whatever we can to help. I imagine you are tired. We can get you fed and show you where to rest, and we can talk tomorrow about what you want done with that one."

Varric says, "Harding, hunh? Ever been to Kirkwall's Hightown?"

Harding says, "I can't say I have. Why?"

"You'd be Harding in ...Oh, nevermind."

Lando laughs in delight, but he cuts it off quickly in response to Cassandra's sharp look and disgusted exhalation. Lando is happy that he learned enough of Varric on the road to even get the joke. Lando says, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Harding nods and says, "It would be too dangerous to go to the Crossroads now. Why not head over to the mess and I will have you shown to your tents. These are larger than the ones you brought with you, with actual cots and tables, but we only have two to give you: one with two cots and one with three."

They all nod in thanks and most of them start heading in the direction where Harding had said the mess was. Gim is hanging back, so Lando stays with her.

Gim says to Harding, "Forgive me, but does the word "Lace" mean anything to you?"

Harding looks unsure but politely interested. She says, "The only Lace you will find around here is me: it's my first name."

Gim laughs. She says, "I think Leliana has decided we are to become fast friends. And I trust her. Please call me Gim. And that big lug is Lando."

Lando can see that Scout Harding is going to ask a lot of questions, but he knows when he isn't needed. He goes on to the mess and leaves Gim to chat with Harding—or should he call her Lace? From the smell in the air, tonight's food won't be bad. Tomorrow will probably be hard, but maybe tonight he can set by the fire, fill his belly, and enjoy the company.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and criticism very much welcomed. Here, or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Chapter Summary

Solas is a troublemaker and Mother Giselle is a good person.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Gim awakes in her Thaig, she is fresh from having spent the evening with Lace Harding, and the memory is soothing. Lace had been fun to talk to, and she had been fascinated to learn that one of the Heralds was half dwarf. Lace laughed often, and she thought it was a good joke that Leliana had told Gim that she had sent a "gift" of lace to the Hinterlands. She had also given Gim a full rundown on the Hinterlands landmarks, the various fighting factions, and the status and whereabouts of Horsemaster Dennet. She had even let Gim examine her as part of Gim's ongoing investigation of Stone sense, and to Gim's delight, Lace hadn't been bothered in the slightest by Gim's glow.

Now Gim had met, and liked, three dwarves. It was a nice change. Thinking of the dwarves she likes causes Gim to get up so she can investigate the presence of any potential visitors to her Thaig. She exits her hall, and she once again finds a cluster of spirits examining something—probably someone—lying against her stone hall.

Just as she suspects, Varric is again sitting on the ground, leaning back against her wall. She turns to the spirits watching and says, "Have any of you seen dwarves in the Fade before? Do any of you have ideas as to why Varric, who has been traveling with me, is in my Thaig?"

Command says, "The form of your Thaig is most unusual for spirits; it heeds only your commands and ignores ours. The solid nature of your Thaig affects more than you imagine, and I venture that is why I have never seen a dwarf, other than you or your friend here, in the Fade." No other spirit speaks up, but Gim can feel assent in the air.

Gim sits down by Varric and leans her head on his shoulder. He is, of course, unresponsive. She takes his hand and rubs it between hers. She says, "I would like to know if anything that happens to you here gets through to you, Varric. I think we will have a bit of a one-sided conversation here. Now what can I do that would matter to a storyteller? Perhaps I will tell you a story." Gim raises his hand up and kisses the back of it and lays her cheek on it. "What kind of story should I tell you, Varric? I think I will tell you a fable. I'm honestly not sure if either your heart or your bosom fits the moral, but we shall see."

She settles down, still holding Varric's hand. "The Graces demanded of a fisherman that he judge which of them was the most beautiful. His honest answer, 'Yer none on ye a patch on my Griselda,' was not what they wanted to hear, and they blasted him with lightning, and his Griselda with him. Moral: An honest heart beats longest in a tactful bosom."

Varric continues as before, so Gim gets up. She almost walks away when she turns back, bends at the waist to give Varric a quick kiss on the lips, and then walks over to Command.

"Thank you for spending the day with me, Command," she says.
Command says, "The day was most fascinating. Your friend, the Seeker, particularly intrigues me. Her virtues call to me, and yet she has no joy in commanding anyone. I will keep an eye on that one."

Gim says, "If I can help you with your study of Cassandra, let me know. For my part, I have two lines of inquiry that are important to me, Command. If you come across spirits who can help me learn about the dwarven relationship with Titans or who can tell me more about the elvhen magic on my hand and how to contain the similar magic on Lando's hand, I would very much like to talk with them. I think you spirits are helping me, and I am finding the mark much less troublesome than Lando is. His mark is growing, and if anything, mine takes up a smaller--a more confined--space on my hand than it did when the mark was new."

Command assures Gim it will spread the word. As Gim turns away from the spirit, she notices that Solas is standing off to the side; when she thinks back on it, she realizes she has been aware of his presence for a while.

Gim is embarrassed. She says, "Oh no, while he wouldn't want to speak of it, Varric is committed to a long-term lover. I was trying to see if he has any awareness of what I do here. I figured of all the things I could do that might cause a reaction I could detect, kissing was high on the list."

Solas says, "What an interesting idea. Presumably then, should I ever find you insensate, I have permission to kiss you?"

Gim continues to be brutally honest, saying, "I would prefer to be awake when I receive my first kiss, thank you very much."

Solas's eyebrows go up, and his smile looks ever so slightly wicked. "Understood. Only waking kisses then. From now on."

What? He can't have meant that. He seems to enjoy rattling her.

Solas says, "why don't you do something to cause minor damage to him so we can see if damage to him in your Thaig transfers to the waking?"

"Solas, I can't hurt my enemies: What makes you think I can hurt my friends?"

Solas says, "I have taken no such oaths." He strides up to Varric, picks up his hand, and uses the nail on one long finger to scratch down the back of Varric's hand. No blood, but a rising red welt appears.

Gim says, "I understand your point, but could you please affirm for me that you will not hurt Varric in any way in my Thaig in the future?"

Solas appears to consider it, and then nods. He says, "I came to offer you a chance to speak to me of the non-magical effects of uthenera. If now is not convenient, we can talk another time." After a bit of silence he continues, "Or if there is a more pressing issue you would like to address..."

Gim waves him into her hall, and they take their now-expected spots at the hearth.

Once they settle in, Gim begins, "There is a large section of the Vir Dirthara that deals with the study of those who have awakened from Uthenera, and the effects are somewhat predictable, with certain effects being much more likely the longer the sleeper has been inactive."
"Almost all those who wake are convinced that things became much worse while they slept. They often feel guilty for having entered uthenera or for something they did before entering uthenera--feeling that the degraded state of the world is directly attributable to them, even when their actions had been severely constrained.

"They almost always believed that the Elvhen had become more simple, more gullible, more craven, less noble while they slept. They thought no one could possibly understand their feelings, and they felt detached from the world into which they awakened."

Solas is clearly about to say something, but it takes quite a while before he opens his mouth. He is struggling either with what to say or how to say it. He says, "Surely some of them were at fault. Not to mention, Elvhen society did degrade over the millennia."

Gim is excited to hear him say that. She says, "According to the seminal work on those who awaken from the long sleep, that is exactly what you are expected to say on being presented with this information. You should know that ancient healers reported that, even in cases where there had been a clear decline, the newly awakeneds' perceptions were exaggerated, and their assessments of their compatriots were biased."

Once again, Solas is blinking and appears to be working hard to compose himself. He says, "Did the text you refer to only catalog the effects of the long sleep, or did they have suggestions for how best to cope with them?"

"There are several suggestions. The first is that you should talk honestly about your feelings with those who you can bring yourself to trust on a regular basis. The second is that you should seek physical contact and affection: In essence, you are touch starved. Relationships with pets, children, platonic friends who enjoy touch, or loved ones--these are of great benefit to you. Also very beneficial to you is an attempt to force empathy--even for those who seem very different than you. If you can place yourself in their shoes, so to speak, it will stretch your sleep-stunted perceptions and blunt sanctimonious tendencies. Lastly, you should not make any major life decisions until the effects of uthenera have worn off, which will probably take years. No life-bonds, change of fealty, declarations of war or the like. To put it bluntly, someone in your state is too emotionally charged to be true to himself."

Solas says, "I cannot help but note that you are no longer speaking of a theoretical sleeper. What reason do you have to speak with such confidence?"

"Solas, you are correct that I don't know you as well as I would like to, but you asked what advice would be given to one in your situation and I spoke directly. Ultimately, the decision of how much of these guidelines you should follow is yours alone--as well as the decision of how many of these guidelines you have the liberty to consider during a time of crisis."

Solas says, "Thank you, da'len, you have given me much to consider." Solas stands and begins to look as if he will walk out of Gim's great hall. He stops, turns, and says, "Did you give this advice to previous sleepers?" When Gim nods, Solas asks, "Was one of them named Felassan?"

Gim says, "I think you know that I would no more tell you that than I would tell Cassandra that you are several thousand years old."

Solas smiles. "Oh, I knew you would not explicitly tell me, but that did not mean there was nothing to be gained by asking the question. Thank you again, da'len. I will leave you to ready yourself for the day. Another time we can discuss Titans and Elvhen magic." At that, he fades from the Thaig.

Titans, Elvhen magic, and Felassan. That man likes to make an exit. She can't tell if she gave herself
away when he asked about Felassan. She hopes Felassan is doing well.

Just as Solas suggested, Gim makes sure all is in readiness for the coming day, and then she does some reading.

When Gim awakens in the Inquisition camp, it is still dark and Cassandra is shaking her. Cassandra says, "Scouts report fighting has already begun at the Crossroads. We need to move quickly. There is porridge at the center of the camp."

Once Gim is dressed, she finds the others at the porridge pot. Each of them is eating quickly except for Varric, who is eyeing the porridge as if it might jump out of the pot and attack him.

Gim spoons up a bowl of porridge. She says, "This could be the last food you see for a while, Varric. Would you like this bowl?" Varric frowns even deeper, but he reaches out his hand to take the bowl. Gim can see a scratch on the hand: one long red welt. She looks up to see Solas's raised brows and half smile. Thinking about this will be interesting later, but for now, there are more immediate, more violent, concerns.

As Gim finishes her porridge, Cassandra comes to Gim and places her hands on Gim's shoulders. She is looking into Gim's eyes when she says, "There will be fighting. People will be hurt. You must stay with us. We will have agents following us, and anyone we can save will be transported to Mother Giselle. You can't stop to heal our opponents while we are fighting. Are we in agreement? Our survival depends on your staying with us."

Gim can understand this. Both why Cassandra is worried and why Gim needs to say with them. She doesn't explain that before she had only healed an opponent after the pressures of combat. It is most important now that she just says, "We are in agreement."

The light is just beginning to creep through the sky as they follow the trail down out of the hills towards the Crossroads. There is an open space as they come out of the trees, and that is where they find the first crazy people. They find crazy, violent people who were probably mages and crazy, violent people who were probably Templars, but it doesn't matter. They are all enraged and unwilling to listen to either Seeker or mage--deaf to anything but a sharp implement and a loss of blood.

Gim keeps shields up, and twirls out of danger at need, and once she did some emergency healing to close a bleeding wound on Cassandra, but the whole chain of events is more like a dance celebrating anarchy than a planned campaign. Gim lives in the immediate and keeps her people as safe as possible amidst fighting and blood and screaming. When the other four finally stop fighting, Gim looks around, still disoriented. She sees buildings and many agents of the Inquisition and the Chantry: This must be the Crossroads.

Cassandra steers Gim towards a collection of tents. As they walk up, Gim sees a beautiful religious woman with a kind face bordered by the tall red and white hat that important Chantry women wear. She is speaking to a wounded Inquisition soldier. The Soldier is begging her to keep mages away, but the religious woman is speaking well of mages: Gim likes this woman already. Gim catches the woman's eye and says, "Mother Giselle?"

Mother Giselle nods, and says to the wounded soldier, "Here, dear boy, is one of the Heralds of Andraste. It is said that the first thing she did after stabilizing the Breach at the Temple of Sacred Ashes was to heal the Inquisition soldiers. Many say she glows with Andraste's Grace. Will you not let her help you?"

Cassandra speaks up, "I, a Seeker of Truth, detected no magic upon her when we met, but I have
seen her heal soldiers with my own eyes."

The soldier looks at Cassandra and then at Gim. He says, "My Lady. Will you stay with me while she heals me?"

Cassandra says, "I would be honored to do so," and takes his hand. Gim takes his other hand, brings up her glow—which makes the young man flinch—and begins to inspect him.

When she finishes her scan, she takes off her pack and gets out her tools. She turns to see Solas, Varric, and Lando watching quietly. She says, "After I heal this one, perhaps Solas and I could stay and help here while the other three of you check in with the Inquisition agents and find out the status here." She turns back to the soldier and starts working on him. She looks up to see Mother Giselle watching her. Gim says, "I'm Gim, and the other Herald is Lando, the blond Elf over there. I was told you asked to speak with us."

Mother Giselle watches her for a bit, and then she says, "I know of the Chantry's denouncement, and I am familiar with those behind it. I won't lie to you. Some of them are grandstanding--hoping to increase their chances to become the new Divine. Some are simply terrified: so many good people senselessly taken from us."

Gim says, "You seem to be neither a grandstander nor terrified, Mother Giselle."

Mother Giselle says, "With no Divine, we are each left to our own conscience, and mine tells me to say this to you: Go to them. Convince the remaining clerics that you are no demon to be feared. They have heard only frightful tales of you. Give them something else to believe. You needn't convince them all: you just need to sow a little doubt."

Lando, stepping in so Gim can concentrate on her healing, says, "You believe they will find the marks on our hands enough of a reason to deal with us? Won't we just inspire more fear?"

Mother Giselle nods and says, "Not all will fear. I don't honestly know if fate has sent you, but I hope, and hope is what we need now. If you continue as you have begun, the word will spread. If the people listen to your rallying call, the clerics will follow."

Lando says, "We won't be able to leave for Val Royeaux until we have done some work in the Hinterlands. I couldn't tear Gim away from injured or hungry people unless I used chains."

"All the better, dear boy. I will leave the Crossroads, and the Hinterlands, in your capable hands, and I will go to Haven. I will give Sister Leliana the names of those in the Chantry who would be amenable to a gathering. It is not much, but I will do whatever I can."

Gim says, "We will do right by these people, Mother Giselle, I promise you. I thank you for your faith and your help. I hope to speak with you further in Haven."

Mother Giselle gives a gracious nod and says, "I can take the three of you who are not healers to see Corporal Vale."

When the other three leave, an Inquisition agent shows up with water, cloths, and an offer to get anything the healers need.

Gim and Solas get to work. Solas does the surface injuries, and Gim heals internal injuries or anything involving an unknown diagnosis. The two are working well together, and several soldiers have been healed. Gim is just starting on a young woman who is unconscious when she feels Solas walk up behind her. He says, "You seem to be not only a healer, but also an entertainer." She looks up and she sees several people watching them work, and some of those watching are on their knees,
clearly praying.

Gim shakes her head and says quietly, "I may not share their beliefs, but I prefer that they pray than that they try to run me through." Solas returns to healing, and the two of them are busy right up until the time the the other three reappear.

Gim is quite tired, and they have addressed all of the most urgent injuries. Gim and Solas wash and pack and they walk back towards the Inquisition camp for the night. The others have performed many tasks around the Crossroads: helping to establish a merchant, providing ram meat and roots to feed the hungry, and setting up temporary shelters. The Crossroads is starting to look like a safe village, but Gim is happy to be going back to her cot and her tent. She looks up at Lando, and he gives her a big smile and wraps his arm around her shoulders. "You really helped those people, Gim."

Gim says, "We all did. But there is so much left to do."

Cassandra says, "It is a good beginning. One day at a time," as they wind their way up the trail to their camp.

On a switchback near the summit, Solas comes up and wraps his arm around Gim's shoulder just as Lando had. He says quietly into her ear, "Someone wise once told me that I should seek physical affection."

Gim wraps her arm around Solas's back and gives him a squeeze. She smiles up at him and says, "I will tell you a secret: that was just someone who likes to read fat books."

They have a brief chuckle of camaraderie just as the reach the top of the trail, where they find Varric waiting for them. Gim isn't sure she likes the look on Varric's face, so she scoops him up with her other arm. Varric seems surprised, but he doesn't pull away.

As the three of them walk into camp, Gim says inside herself, *Much better than last time; don't you think so, Love?*

She can feel that Love is pleased. That's OK, because she is too.

Chapter End Notes

The fable Gim tells in her Thaig is from *The Moral Alphabet of Vice and Folly*, by Stan Washburn (It is G). It's a great book and I highly recommend it if you like fables, or alphabet books, or line-drawing/etching style illustrations.

Comments and criticisms are very much welcome: here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Let Lips Do What Hands Do

Chapter Summary

Food, truth, kissing, and stars.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Their time in the Hinterlands has been productive, as far as Lando is concerned. The refugees at the Crossroads were fed and healthy, and the whole area felt much more stable and safe. As soon as Cullen's people finished building the watchtowers, Horsemaster Dennet has promised to provide mounts for the Inquisition. For the moment, the Hinterlands appears to be rift-free, although Lando isn't completely clear on what makes rifts appear in the first place or if they are likely to reappear.

The five of them have fought rogue mages and rogue Templars--even cleared out strongholds from each. Sometimes Solas or Cassandra would try to reason with the combatants, but good sense was in short supply, and they had always had to kill their opponents. If Cassandra noticed that Lando was especially grim when fighting Templars, or that Gim seemed to hover near him in particular after fighting Templars, she didn't comment on it.

Gim continued to be more physically affectionate with all the party members. Lando had even found Gim hugging a wide-eyed and stiff Cassandra, although to give Cassandra credit, she did look like she was attempting to hug back. After seeing the hug, Lando had said to Cassandra, "Gim believes physical affection is important to emotional health."

Cassandra had averted her eyes and been silent a moment before saying, "I do not find it objectionable."

In that moment, Lando had responded in the only possible way: he gave Cassandra an embrace. The feel of her in his arms was wonderful, but he had been most proper: no unseemly pressing or murmuring. But he had not patted her back so much as caressed it, and when he had pulled away, he had allowed himself to show a bit of pleasure in the hug and a bit of reluctance to part. After that, he had acted more formal for a time so that Cassandra would feel no pressure. When that night had come, and Cassandra sat next to him for the evening meal, Lando had taken that as permission to return to giving her more attention. Now, whenever they walked anywhere, the groups they naturally fell into seemed to be Lando with Cassandra and Gim with Solas and Varric.

Lando and Cassandra had been careful with each other. He had learned much about her childhood in Nevarra, and she had learned more about his life in the clan, but each of them had been oh-so-careful to avoid the personal details: stopping a line of inquiry immediately upon any sign of unease or discomfort. Neither asked about previous relationships or family.

Now, they are on their way back to Haven to prepare for the trip to Val Royeaux. They know they will have to set and strike their own gear, cook their own food, and keep their own watches--all of which sounds tedious--but somehow Lando feels a sense of freedom in being with only the five of them, and he doesn't think he is the only one. The scouts are lovely and helpful, but they also provide a restraining influence.
Even though it is only the second night they have been alone under the stars, everyone seems to naturally know what to do. Lando and Varric go off to see if they could get some fresh meat and other edibles, Gim tends the fire and cooking equipment, and Solas and Cassandra start putting up tents and tending to the horse.

Varric and Lando find a lake with water fowl and edible greens, and they quickly bring down two hens. Varric sits near the lake and cleans and plucks the fat birds while Lando collects the appropriate roots, stems, leaves, and occasional rare berries from in and around the lake. It's a bit tedious to check every plant for the correct phase, but he knows Gim can use the tubers with the birds to produce a very tasty meal. He's glad he replenished her spice supply from that mysterious Crossroads merchant.

Lando has taken off his leggings and footwraps as he moves though the water's edge, crouching and kneeling and picking choice greens. Varric watches him for a while and then says, "Better you than me out there in that wet. Your toes must be deep in the mud. Tell me: would you be so quick to be out there in only your smalls if Cassandra was here?"

Lando says, "We aren't very modest where I grew up, Varric. It wouldn't actually occur to me to be embarrassed unless I saw that she was uncomfortable. You know, Gim would think it unremarkable to undress near you for some appropriate reason--unless she thought it would bother you."

Varric laughs, "Who says I would be bothered? But that doesn't fit with some rather restrained things I've heard her say. In a conversation with Solas and me it became clear that she has never been romantically kissed. Do you people just run around naked and never touch each other?"

Lando stops picking greens. He stands up with a wistful smile on his face. "Oh, we touch each other." After a moment, of silence, the smile is replaced with a more grim face. "Varric, you have heard Gim talk about how she was treated by our clan members. I assure you, she was not courted."

Lando returns to picking greens out of the water without looking at Varric. Lando says, "You have surprised me: I had no idea she would discuss this with you two--and together. If you told me she had said this to you alone, I would have thought she was issuing you an invitation to relieve her of the burden of being untouched, but I have no idea what it means that she told both of you."

Varric says, "Is kissing among unmarried--unbetrothed--folk against your customs? If either Solas or I were to kiss her, would it mean we were paired or be some sort of declaration?"

Lando is working hard to keep his responses casual as he says, "If the kiss were in public, or in private but not given too much emotional weight, it would mean little. It might be interpreted as possible interest--an investigation of sorts. We have kissing games that the unbonded sometimes participate in: We are not a prudish people."

Varric says, "What an interesting idea." Lando shoots him a look, but he keeps quiet. Soon he gets out of the water, shucks his smalls, rings them out, and flaps them in the breeze a bit. He sees Varric giving him a sidelong glance.

Varric grumbles, "It's beginning to make sense to me that you folks aren't nervous about being bare around each other."

Lando says, "Don't give me that, serah! I've seen you and your muscular legs in the morning before you get your leathers on."

"Your legs are twice as long as mine," says Varric.
Lando says, "And? Are you telling me long legs are inherently more attractive? That Cassandra is much more attractive than Gim, for example?"

Varric says, "That's not the same thing."

Lando says, "Whatever you say, Storyteller," and he shimmies back into all his clothes and returns to camp, with leaves, tubers, and a few precious berries in hand. Varric is close behind with the birds.

They get back to camp and deliver their goods to Gim, who is very pleased. Varric returns to the fire with two bottles of wine and his own cup. He raises an eyebrow at Lando, so Lando starts collecting cups. He gets his, Gim's and after receiving permission in the form of a radiant one-sided smile, he gets Cassandra's. While he is doing this, he sees Varric conferring with Solas.

Soon all of them are sitting around the fire drinking wine and watching Gim cook. Gim, who already had a pan hot, is placing scored, seasoned bird flesh, fatty side down, into the pan. The burst of flavor in the smoke is mouth watering. Gim removes drippings as the meat cooks, and then she smears some on some clean, smooth, hot rocks she has been preparing at the side of the fire. Soon the smell of camp cakes cooking in poultry fat is added to the air, and Lando doesn't think he is the only one who is suddenly very aware of being hungry. Gim messes with the cakes a lot: moving them, adding spoons of fat, turning them. She also turns the bird meat. After a bit, the tubers Lando harvested replace the meat, and Gim adds spices and a splash of the wine. Some more fussing happens while everyone makes sure they have their bowls. By the time the tubers are ready, the meat is rested and the cakes are still hot. Each bowl gets meat, greens, cakes, and a flash of pan drippings and smashed berries: it is a delicious, juicy, crispy treat. Everyone is very appreciative, and Gim looks genuinely happy, and just a bit flushed.

After the food is gone, Varric interrupts their food glow with, "Gim. Solas and I have some entertainment to offer you." At this, Cassandra shoots Lando a questioning look, but Lando shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders. Varric continues, "We offer you, in all respect and admiration, a thoughtful and passionate kiss from each of us. We offer it here, before your family member, so that you can feel safe and know that there is no hidden agenda. Each of us will give you what we think of as the best kiss we are capable of, without theatrics or any pressure. You can pull away at any time."

Lando is watching Gim's face during all of this, and first she looks stunned, then suspicious, then embarrassed. Towards the end of this declaration, she still looks embarrassed, but also pleased. Lando looks over at Cassandra. She comes to sit by him. She murmurs, "Is this acceptable to you?"

Lando whispers back, "I think it is more important if it is acceptable to her. For my part, I am delighted to have someone get it through her head that she is attractive. These are good men, but I will intervene if I sense anything that would hurt her." Cassandra looks skeptical, but she says nothing more.

Solas says, "May I kiss you, Lethallen? If you will allow it, Varric has given me the honor of kissing you first." Lando thinks Solas looks stilted. His posture is ramrod straight and his hands are behind his back. Solas looks more like he is about to deliver a pronouncement than a kiss.

Gim looks at Solas, then she looks at Varric with a question in her eyes. Varric says, "I would rather be the last to kiss you than the first." Varric raises one eyebrow as he says this with a smooth, low voice: he looks supremely self-assured.

Gim is clearly flushed now, but she is smiling and her eyes are bright. She says, "You may kiss me."

Solas comes to sit next to Gim, and he instantly drops the dispassionate act. He takes her right hand,
and brings it to his lips, where uncurls her fingers and kisses the heal of her palm while looking into her eyes. He raises his hand and strokes the side of her face--long fingers tucking her wild hair strands behind her ear. Something he does or something she feels causes her to tilt her head, baring her neck to him. He kisses up her neck to her jaw, and then he nuzzles the spot below her ear and runs his nose all the way around the shell of her ear. Gim shuts her eyes. He pulls back, one hand is tipping her jaw up, and one hand swoops behind her, pressing her close to him, arching her back up to him. Lando hears her exhalation when Solas does this, and suddenly he is embarrassed to be watching.

Solas is smiling with assurance now: he looks almost like he and Gim share a dangerous secret. He shakes his head and bends down gracefully to capture Gim's mouth. Lando can't see the actual kiss--because of their heights, Solas's shoulder is acting as a modesty shield--but he can see Solas's head and red-tipped ears moving. Lando wonders briefly if Solas is writing the alphabet with his lips or tongue. Is there tongue? Lando guesses there is quite a lot of tongue: there are damp sounds, and then there is humming. Humming? Lando doesn't think he hums when he kisses.

Solas pulls back, and then he bends forward again to give a gentle kiss to Gim's mouth, then her nose, and lastly her forehead. He puts both arms around her and holds her close, running the flat of one palm slowly up and down her back. Finally, he stands and turns to Varric. The look on Solas's face is particularly wicked as he nods and says, "Child of the stone."

Gim's eyes are still closed. She almost looks like she does when she meditates, but Lando thinks he sees some moisture at the edge of her eyes, and her breathing is much too fast for meditation. She blinks a few times and looks at Varric as he comes to sit where Solas had been sitting.

Varric says, "Don't worry, I will give you a chance to catch your breath. We are in no rush, are we? Besides, I have been waiting for a good time to tell you something, and I think now is a good time." Gim, who usually has much more to say than her behavior this night would indicate, merely nods.

When Varric starts talking, his voice is deep and slower than usual--full of warmth. He takes both Gim's hands in his and he says, "From Lando, I have learned that I thoughtlessly hurt you by giving you the nickname, Beauty. He told me you assumed I named you ironically. Let me set the record straight.

"Your eyes have the fire of the darkest gems; your generous mouth is lush and ripe; your cheeks are round with health and laughter; your small figure is heavenly and full; Although I did not know it when I named you, your dulcet voice is a warm echo of your active mind. And to top it all off, while a cantankerous dwarf yatters like a fool, making little sense, still you like him." Varric stops for a moment. He catches her eye with purpose and smiles at her until she smiles back. He squeezes her hands tightly. He says, "I declare you excellent in every way and I say that I have named you true: Beauty."

Varric and Gim are close in height. Varric leans forward and places a soft kiss on Gim's lips. He drops her hands and runs his hands up her arms and sinks his fingers into the mass of hair at her neck and the kiss becomes less gentle. The deepening of the kiss must have been mutual, because Gim's hands have come up. One is behind Varric's neck and one is... one is in his chest hair. Oh my. Lando doesn't know why, but somehow that small hand in Varric's chest hair is the most intimate act he has witnessed this night.

A moment more, and they both pull away. This time, Gim's eyes pop open immediately, and she watches Varric withdraw.

Lando hears a sniff. Suddenly he is very aware of Cassandra at his side. He looks over and Cassandra's eyes are wet. She is smiling, but she doesn't look entirely happy. If Lando remembers
what this look means...if his memories can be extrapolated to Cassandra... Well, he will have to be careful here. First he should check in with Gim.

He stands. He says, "Well, Cassandra and then I will take the first two watches, and then I will wake Varric, who will wake Gim, then Solas. OK?" Nods and murmurs indicate agreement.

Varric and Solas walk off towards the tent. They don't say anything, but they are trading sharp glances. Lando hopes this isn't going to be a problem. Lando will worry about that tomorrow. Just before Solas ducks into his tent, he turns and gives Lando a smug look. Oh. So Solas was attending to Lando's request to help Gim's self-image. Was that all this was for both of them? Another thing to consider tomorrow.

He sits down next to Gim and says, "You seem to be having quite a night."

She smiles at him and says, "Yes. I'm fine. That was. I'm not sure what it was yet. But it was. I will need to process."

Lando says, "You know where to find me if you need me, but I know what your need to process means: Off to your Thaig with you. We can talk in the morning." He stands and tugs her up with him. "Wait," he says. "I think your spirit is Courage or Valor. Am I right?"

She smiles conspiratorially. "You know me too well." She gives him a quick hug and goes off to the tent she shares with Cassandra. Lando thinks she might be floating just a bit as she approaches the canvas.

When Lando turns back to where he had been sitting with Cassandra, she is no longer there. He finds her at the limit of the light from their fire, standing up against a tree. As he walks up to her, he says quietly, "So what did you think of the entertainment?"

It is dark, and he can barely see her face, but her voice sounds like she is trying to be generous, but she still sounds sad as she says, "It has been quite a while since I had my first kiss, and it was under very different circumstances. It looked like she enjoyed it, and so I am happy for her."

Lando steps closer. He can feel the wine humming through him: not enough to be an excuse, but enough for him to not let the fear of receiving a no stop him. He says, "It has been years since my first kiss and years since my last; I miss them. Now I stand next to a strong, beautiful woman. I don't think it fair that only those three get a good-night kiss, do you?"

Lando feels Cassandra go still next to him. She says, "I am not normally comfortable just watching such events."

He takes that as assent, and he puts both hands around her waist and leans his forehead against hers. He can feel her adjust subtly to welcome his actions and her arms settle around his waist. He butts his head against her as a cat might: feeling her face with his face. Then it is their noses that are touching, and he caresses first one side of her nose with his, and then the other. She laughs gently: a warm little burble of joy in his attention, and the sound gives his soul wings.

He must touch the lips that produced that sound. He captures her lower lip with his, and he sucks gently on it in invitation. She moves and she sighs and all the warm, wet, wonder of her is open to him. He can taste the wine. Something in her breath almost smells like cookies. He can't tell if he has his tongue in her mouth or she has her tongue in his, but her strong arms are around him, and she's pressing against him, and any intention he may have had to keep to restrained and decorous kissing is shattered to the night sky.
After moments--much too short moments--of this, Cassandra pulls back, although she keeps her arms around his waist. She says, "I may have to be nicer to that dwarf tomorrow." She has the smile: the wicked, joyous, affectionate smile. She says, "You seem...up. Wake me when it's my turn," and she releases him and walks towards the tent she shares with Gim. Lando hopes he isn't imagining the extra sway in her hips as he watches her.

Lando doesn't return to the fire. He can't imagine being cold. He stands and thinks and admires the stars. The beautiful stars that grace the best night he has had in years.

Chapter End Notes

Varric's comments are a bit of a tribute to John Berryman's Dream Song 171.

Comments or criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.ao00@gmail.com.
Chapter Summary

The ramifications of kissing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When Gim shows up in her Thaig, instead of her usual leap out of bed, she snuggles in and thinks of kisses. She is not a young woman, and these are her first kisses; she isn't accustomed to even thinking of herself as someone who is ever kissed. Will she next be kissed in another thirty-something years or does the rate-change imply that she will be flooded with kissing offers in the next few days? She laughs to herself as she wonders if anyone she knows would find any humor in her bookish joke. Maybe Solas would--assuming he finds humor in anything.

Jokes aside, she really was kissed, and twice. They were so different, those two kisses she received: as different as the men who gave them to her.

Solas was all about technique. Unlike those watching, Gim knows that Solas has kissed more women than she has days in her life, and she strongly suspects that he would no more consider her seriously as a lover than he would consider bonding with a mabari. Her kiss from Solas didn't feel personal or impassioned or as if it had much to do with her. She imagines he interpreted her quivering and pounding heart as an intimate approval, but all she can remember thinking was "I am being kissed by an immortal--I am being kissed by an immortal," on a tight loop. Now, as she lies back, safe in her bed, remembering the kiss, her response is much more personal: possibly the response Solas, or at least Solas's ego, had been hoping for.

She felt overwhelmed when Solas kissed her, and she had the impression that he wanted to overwhelm her, but she hadn't felt noticeable physical pleasure. Now, remembering back to his body and the feel of it against her body, the slip of his tongue against hers, the strength of him as he pulled her against him: it was thrilling in a way that it hadn't been at the time.

A wave of intense sensation sourced in her lower abdomen travels up her core, cresting into a distinct, almost painful, vibration in her nipples. The feeling evokes the loss of control she would feel if falling from a great height or being carried on a huge wave in the ocean. Everything she moves seems to feed into that sensation: clenching her thighs, turning and feeling her bedclothes trailing across her skin, and most especially, remembering the events of yesterday. Gim wonders if it is usual to have a stronger physical reaction to remembering a kiss than she had while receiving the kiss. Was that how it would always be--assuming she received more kisses in her life? Would she always feel her pleasure on a time-delay?

On the other hand, being kissed by Varric had been pleasant, but not overwhelming. Varric had done everything he could to reassure her: gentle voice, reassuring touch, and encouraging speech. Oh, that speech. It was a gift like no other she had ever received, and if she believes him, it must fundamentally alter her self-image. The only part of Gim's waking life that has been important to her is her relationship with Lando. Her other relationships, her pleasures, they are all from the Fade--from her Thaig. Should she let the idea that other dwarves might find her attractive change her life? But away from the hypothetical and back to the very real kisses.
When Varric finally moved his warm mouth to hers, it felt natural and fulfilling. She had felt like he was kissing her and that he was privileged to do so. And when she found her hand in his soft chest hair, it was so visceral—so intimate. She has touched men in every possible location, but never before has she had her hand on a man's body in an even vaguely carnal way. She had no illusions: his affections were engaged elsewhere, but she would always remember the kiss and the speech, and he would be special to her forever—as would Solas. It was kind of them to go against their natural inclinations to please her, but she can't get it out of her mind that this wouldn't have happened if Lando hadn't set it up somehow.

She could have stayed in bed and indulged in her memories to a more obvious completion, but she knew better than to think that would let her stop thinking about what had happened—to be less distractingly aroused. There was something unsatisfying about self-pleasure in the Fade compared to the waking. She would rather wait for some privacy in Haven.

When she walks out of her hall, she finds Valor waiting for her. Gim is amused to see that the form Valor has chosen is her form. Valor says, "Audacity: daring the unknown. In place for singular touch; desired and feared—accepted with grace. Flying high despite public scrutiny unsought. Expectation, experience, exemplar. A signal honor." With this, Valor bows.

Gim says, "I am pleased you enjoyed it. Your support made it possible. I will be forever in your debt," and bows deeply back to Valor.

Valor says, "Not always its own reward. Worthy and fortunate, Gim." At this point Valor walked off becoming more and more transparent. Gim doubts she will see it in her shape again. She always worries when she takes spirits on boring days, but they usually find something that matches their nature in the experience—though they often fixate on aspects of their experiences that are surprising to Gim.

While it is no longer a surprise to find him here, Gim continues to visit Varric every night. Varric is enough of an expected feature that spirits have stopped clustering around him. Gim is very curious if other dwarves would show up in her Thaig with enough exposure to her, or if they slept close enough to where she is.

Solas is not in her Thaig tonight. The last time Solas surprised Gim was enough to cause her to rework things. Solas was still welcome and would have no trouble entering her Thaig, but she has set up wards so that she will be notified if he arrives, or if he is already there when she enters.

Thinking of Solas reminds Gim of the first conversation she ever had with Solas here. Gim told him that she had absolute control over her Thaig. And Varric is in her Thaig. Time for more experiments. The first thing Gim tries is to change Varric's attire to that of member of the Legion of the Dead. That works. She had seen members of the Legion on multiple occasions because echos in the Fade left by non-dwarves who had encountered the Legion on trips to the deep roads.

Next she tries giving him a tattoo: a black triangle under one eye. When that works, she tries willing Varric to stand and walk. The standing part works fine, but the walking seems to involve moving dead weight: moving him feels like manipulating the stone she uses to decorate her Thaig. She moves him over underneath a tree, leaning against the trunk. She considers seeing if she can wake him, but she hasn't had the courage to tell Varric that he has been appearing in her Thaig, so if she succeeded in waking him, it would probably be unpleasant for him.

After that, it is business as usual for her. She double-checks with the spirit who will accompany her in the morning and settles down to some serious study. The most recent books from the Shattered Library are fascinating. Solas knows she is interested in Foci, but does he know she has determined that it was Solas's focus that put the marks on their hands? Reading about the nature of the focus
makes her wonder if she has been mistaken about her assumption that spirits were keeping her mark confined: perhaps it is the influence of the stone that keeps it so circumscribed. Neither hypothesis can help Lando, so she needs to keep studying.

When Gim moves from her Thaig to the waking, it is still dark, and Varric is shaking her shoulder. He leaves the tent, and Gim pulls on her leggings, grabs her footwraps, and follows him out to the remains of the cooking fire. When she gets to the fire, she looks at Varric and the look on her face must give her away. Oh dear. How is she going to explain the tattoo on Varric's face?

Varric says, "Are you ok, Beauty? You don't usually look at me with such horror. Was the kiss that bad?"

"Oh Varric, the kiss was wonderful and it was very kind of you, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to explain something to you now that will make you sorry you ever touched me," says Gim with a quaver in her voice. She wrings her hands. She can tell Varric thinks she is sleep-addled or maybe unhinged. He has the slow, tolerant look of someone dealing with a drunk friend. "Can we sit down? This isn't going to be easy to explain."

"Sure, Beauty, but you should know, I was hoping to get a bit more sleep tonight."

Gim feels even worse. She says, "I will make it quick, but I fear if I didn't tell you now, you would be even madder in the morning." She looks at him again: yes, it is the exact same tattoo she was experimenting with earlier.

"Varric, you have heard me talk about my Thaig--where I go every night when I sleep. The night we first camped on leaving Haven I made a discovery: apparently dwarves can also enter my Thaig. That night when I woke, I found you sleeping up against the wall of my Thaig. I couldn't wake you or talk to you.

"I know, I know: I should have told you. But you seemed to suffer no harm. The next morning you told me that you felt great, and we had just begun to get along well, and I was afraid you would go back to thinking me a danger if I told you right away. So every night when I go to sleep, I go check on you to see if you are there."

Varric says, "So far what you are describing sounds like you are dreaming of me, and you wouldn't be the first to tell me that."

Gim wonders if she looks as apologetic as she feels. She says, "I'm afraid it is more than that. Tonight, when I found you in my Thaig, I decided to see if I had as much control over your person as I did over everything else in my Thaig. With a thought, I dressed you in an outfit I have seen on members of the Legion of the Dead, and I gave the version of you I found in my Thaig a triangular tattoo below your eye. I didn't do it to be disrespectful. I was curious if I could and it did not occur to me that it would transfer to the waking..."

Varric reaches up to his cheek in alarm. "The other cheek," she says, reaching towards his face. When Varric flinches away from her, she grimaces. "I am so sorry. I can remove it, I am sure. May I touch you?"

"You know, Beauty, earlier tonight, if someone had told me you would be asking to touch me, I would have predicted a very different reaction. Go ahead. But...no new decorations, please."

She brings up her glow and touches him. A quick scan, and now she has to tell him, "I'm sorry, Varric, but it isn't a tattoo. I can't remove it in the waking at all. It is more like I changed your skin color than I gave you a tattoo. But don't worry. I am positive I can change it in the Thaig. And I
promise, I will never alter you there again: I promise I will keep you safe. When I am off watch and I wake Solas, I will go to sleep and remove the tattoo."

Varric does not look happy. He says, "So you are telling I am transported to the Fade when I sleep? At least your creepy Stone-Fade hybrid? How am I going to go to sleep knowing that? I think I would rather have been drunk when I learned about this. Lando said things were never boring with you around." He shakes his head and grimaces. "Gim, I know you don't know much about surface dwarves, but tattoos are usually reserved for members of the Carta, which I am most certainly not. If a member of the Carta saw me with a tattoo, they might take offense in a rather physical way."

"I can help you sleep. Completely natural sleep that won't hurt you in any way. I can get the marking off, Varric. Don't worry."

Varric shakes his head and says, "I'm almost afraid to find out what happens the next time I kiss you."

Gim blinks. Next time? He can't have meant that. She should keep her mind on what's needed now. She says, "I will walk you to your tent, and when you are ready to sleep, just tap the side and I will help you sleep. When you wake up, you should be back to your old self."

She walks him to the tent he shares with Solas, waits for the tap and then goes in. She brings up her glow, encourages his body to a natural sleep, and turns to step away. She sees Solas awake and looking at her. Silently, she brings a magelight and points to Varric's sleeping face. Solas, looks at Varric and then sharply turns back to Gim with a clear look of inquiry.

Gim leaves the tent, returning to the fire, and Solas follows her. Gim says, "I was experimenting, and made Varric walk, changed his attire, and gave him a tattoo in my Thaig. Or what I thought was a tattoo. Turns out I just changed his skin color. I had no idea the effect would carry to the waking."

Solas, lover of Fade-experiments, seems to be delighted. He says, "Fascinating. I wonder if it is his dwarven nature that enabled you to do this. Do you think you could work on me there? Perhaps you could do the post-uthenera work in your Thaig in place of doing it in Haven?"

Gim, after a moment of thinking, says, "Possibly, but we will both be exhausted afterwards, and a day of travel would make for an unpleasant recovery. In addition, you and I will not be asleep at the same time again tonight. But we could try it from Haven. I am curious. It took no effort at all to give Varric that mark in my Thaig; it would take much more effort to do it in the waking. The last time I worked on you, I knew it would be harder the next time because of your increase in power. If I can work on you in my Thaig, that my solve that issue. If you are willing to try, I am."

Solas says, "This is well worth trying. If it doesn't work, we have lost nothing. For the moment, I am awake and rested. Go sleep and address Varric's appearance. Tonight, in Haven, we can try our experiment."

"It might be a long day, but if it is easier in my Thaig, perhaps that won't be a hindrance. Don't forget, as our Arcane Advisor, you will be expected to debrief with the advisors as well."

"I am grateful that my voice will be heard. I will have no trouble finishing the watch. I will be interested to learn the results."

Gim heads back to her tent and crawls back into her bedroll. Soon she is back in her Thaig and heading back out to find Varric. He is under the tree where she left him last, and he is still sporting his black triangle. From several paces away, she resets his skin to the normal color. Even on closer inspection, the place where the triangle was is undetectable. She checks in with Justice, her spirit.
companion for the day, and wakes herself up. She checks on Varric, and his face is back to normal.

Approaching Solas, she says, "Varric's face is triangle-free now. I have some thinking to do about the implications of my being able to modify Varric's skin color when he is in my Thaig. I find it troubling. Are you sure you want to let me modify your state in such a way?"

Solas appears thoughtful. He says, "Was I somehow less at your mercy when you performed your healing ritual on me in Haven?"

"I could have harmed you in Haven, but what we are talking about me is perhaps an ability to change your nature. To alter your eye color or grow your hair or change the way your body reacts to strong drink. Although you are not so unaware as Varric is, and perhaps you would be able to prevent such actions, or to change them back. Is that the case? Come to think of it, perhaps what I am describing—the power that makes me uncomfortable—is something that would have been considered normal during the time of Arlathan. The power to act on each other a normally accepted one and one that probably had quite a bit of etiquette associated with it."

Solas says, "You are correct, except that what was accepted was that the powerful could always act on the less powerful. What is unusual about your abilities is that you have one place where you are all-powerful. In the time of Arlathan, limits had less to do with location and more to do with affinity. With your permission, I would like to learn more about your abilities as we work together. In return, I can share with you how those with Stone sense were different in ancient times."

This is trade is an excellent one. Gim says, "Gladly. That is one of my main areas of study, and I would be most grateful. By the way, Varric knows about appearing in my Thaig, and I think he would class it as 'more of the weird shit that you cause.' I'm not sure how much of this I should explain to him or how much he would welcome knowing."

Solas smiles. "I am sure you will manage the right balance to keep him informed and content."

Dawn has come, and Gim can see more clearly now. Lando is awake and approaches the fire. He says, "Good morning. Any instructions, Gim? Or shall I just find us some more firewood for breakfast?"

Gim says, "I have things left over from dinner we can have with little fuss. I suspect everyone would rather be back in Haven than to have an elaborate breakfast. We have plenty of wood. You can chat with me while I get our food choices arranged."

Lando says, "Sounds good. I'm sure the advisors are eager to hear our report." He waggles his eyebrows a bit to punctuate the sentence.

Gim says, "Hey!" And pokes Lando in the ribs.

Lando laughs. "Oh Gim, don't worry. We don't need to tell them everything."

_Gim looks over at Solas briefly before wrapping her arms around Lando and saying, "I'm glad you feel that way, but in terms of things to tell you, Let's start with the story of why Varric might not be in a good mood this morning."_
Comments and criticism welcome here or by email kinako.aaaa@gmail.com.
Let Them Fight Against the Churches

Chapter Summary

Travel, revelations, and return to Haven.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lando walks along with Cassandra and Varric and muses about today's change in walking groups. Usually, Varric would be walking back with Gim and Solas and the horse; today Varric is walking with Lando and Cassandra, and to add to the strangeness, he isn't even telling stories. Lando doesn't blame Varric for being put off by learning he was appearing, vulnerable, in Gim's Thaig, but Lando's main reaction is envy.

Lando would love to be able to visit Gim's Thaig. His dreams have more vivid and realistic since he got the mark, and in hopes that the magic of the mark has given him a more intentional relationship with the Fade, he has talked to Wisdom and Gim about what they know about dreamers. He tries to think of Gim every night before he sleeps, but lately his thoughts drift naturally to Cassandra.

Cassandra, who seems to be completely unaware of any sort of awkwardness, strides along next to him exactly as she has for the last many days. He keeps hoping to see a blush or an inviting glance--any sign at all that she remembers the kiss with the same excitement he does--but so far he sees nothing. Patience is a virtue he has an affinity for, so he turns his attention to Varric.

Lando says, "You know, Varric, the rest of us have had to come to term with the fact that we go somewhere when we sleep quite some time ago."

When Varric looks at Lando, he looks a little harried. Varric says, "But that was one of the perks of being a dwarf. The short stature, the exclusionary elitist ancestors, the ever-present crime syndicate, and the limited supply of hot, short girls were the downside, but having a calm, blank absence of time while I slept was the good part. Now it seems I 'visit the stone' when I sleep, whatever the fuck that means. Or at least I visit her stone when I'm near her. I can't even complain because she's right: I've felt great since we left Haven. Given all this travel and fighting and labor I should have been a mess, but I've felt fresh as a daisy every morning. Wait. Do I have to start talking about underground things instead of surface things like flowers now? Do I need to be fresh as a fungus or a gemstone or something?"

Lando says, "You might be taking this a bit harshly, Varric. I don't think some sort of dwarven enforcers are going to show up and make you change the way you live your life. Didn't Gim promise to not mess with you in her Thaig? All you do is just sit there, from what she said. It doesn't have to be a change. You could get her to build a little privacy screen around you. One thing you should have learned about Gim: if she says she will do something, she will. She takes oaths very seriously. I'm sure all of us who know can be easily convinced to keep this development between us. Isn't that so, Cassandra?"

Cassandra looks surprised to be addressed. She says, "Unless mentioning it were necessary for some emergency that I cannot visualize, I would see no reason to discuss either your dreams or Gim's, Varric. I am not normally comfortable discussing my own time in the Fade; I have never in my life
discussed anyone else's time there. If you would like me to promise you I would keep it to myself, Varric, I have no objection."

Lando raises and eyebrow and raises one side of his mouth at Varric in the universal sign for "See?" Varric shakes his head with pressed lips in the equally universal sign of "you just don't get it."

Lando says, "I promise to discuss this with no one new without your permission, Varric. And I will mention this to Solas and Gim. I think you need some time to get used to this idea."

After a bit more silent walking along, Lando says, "So are you sorry you kissed her?"

Varric stops dead. Lando stops with him, and a few steps further, Cassandra also stops. Varric says, "No! What kind of a man do you think I am? Of course I am not sorry I kissed her. I'm not in the business of regretting kissing brave and beautiful women. Andraste's consecrated ass, I wasn't even drunk."

"All right. Didn't mean to cast doubt upon your honor, Ser dwarf." They all started walking again. After a few strides, Lando continues, "She didn't seem to regret it either."

Now for the first time today, Lando sees a smile on Varric's face. He looks pleased with himself when he says, "She told me it was wonderful. I told her I was going to do it again."

Lando isn't sure if this is good news. He says, "Before or after she told you about the black triangle?"

Varric looks smug as he says, "After."

"Varric, she and I had the impression your affections were already engaged," Lando says.

Varric looks down at his feet for a few strides. Lando thinks he looks embarrassed. Varric says, "They were engaged. But the person they were engaged with was herself already engaged. And then married. Maybe it's best I move on."

Lando says, "Well I have two things to say about that. First, if that's how you feel, why are you leaving her to walk with the other man she kissed last night? Second, I think you need to get to know Gim better before you decide to court her. I love her, but I know there are some things about her that some people will find difficult to live with." By the end of that speech, Lando's voice was tight with controlled emotion.

Varric says carefully, "I'm listening."

After more silent walking, Lando says, "I wasn't joking around when I said she takes oaths seriously. She's taken several oaths on the subject of healing. Let me describe a scenario you might find troubling. Suppose someone you loved was in a cage--or even just tied up. For the sake of the argument, the person confined is healthy--just unable to leave. Suppose your enemy wants to harm your loved one, but he can't because he has been mortally wounded. If your enemy dies, your loved one is safe; if your enemy lives, he will hurt, or even kill, your loved one. Add Gim to that scene. What do you think she will do?"

Cassandra says, "She will release the loved one, of course."

Lando says, "Fair enough. She tries, but she can't free the loved one. Say she doesn't have the key to the cage or the loved one is suspended over a cliff on a branch to flimsy to climb on or whatever other scenario you need to make that work."

Cassandra says, "Then she will come and find you to help."
"She can't do that, because she knows your enemy will die if she does that. She can't even confine him before she heals him. Or maybe she tries, but she doesn't do a good enough job. Anyway, I won't make you guess: she heals the enemy. She has sworn she will always heal anyone she can help, with certain exceptions that do not come into play here."

Cassandra says, "But I have seen her put people to sleep. No doubt she subdues the enemy while waiting for you to come, or so that she can leave to find you."

Lando says, "That is an excellent thought, but in this case, in her opinion, as a healer, she can't put him to sleep without putting him in danger. Or maybe it is that she's sees that as an aggressive act if the sleep is not part of the healing. I don't really know. I just know she heals him and he is left free to attack your loved one, and she dies."

Cassandra says, "She?"

Lando sees both of them looking at him in trepidation. They are too smart to not know what this story means. He says, "Shiren. We were bonded. You would say married. She was a mage, and she was killed by a Templar that Gim saved from dying."

"Oh, Braids," says Varric. Varric is a good man, and his face is full of sympathy, and Lando can't look at him.

It is easier to look at Cassandra. She's fighting the import of the story. He knows what she wants to ask but is trying not too. She's too sensitive to ask it right now, but she wants to know. He says, "This was years ago; before the Mage-Templar war. There are a lot of bad Templars in the world, Cassandra. Not all of them needed the mage rebellion to behave abominably. Kirkwall wasn't an idyllic, fair paradise before Anders just went insane and blew up the Chantry, you know. You've heard Varric's stories. He probably even pulled some of his punches, if I know Varric. The reality of life as a Dalish mage is that an encounter with a Templar means kidnap to a tower at the best, and that best is rare. I'm not the only elf from the Freemarches with dead loved ones due to Templar swords."

Lando knows his voice sounds bitter: how could it not. He's not sorry. If he's going to kiss Cassandra, she needs to know some of his realities and attitudes. He reigns in his bile, clears his throat, and continues in a more rational tone, "I believe you consider Commander Cullen to have been a good Templar. I know he fought at Varric's side in Kirkwall. Cullen almost killed Gim in our cabin on the night Gim introduced you to her Faith spirit, Cassandra. I don't think he would do so now, but she was in danger from him because of his training. Gim told me he is suffering now from that training." A few more beats of silence. He can't stand to see how Cassandra is taking this. He can't leave her in doubt. He says, "We are here to help, Cassandra, and I do not want to disrespect your faith." Several more steps. He finally looks up at her. Her expression is hard and remote. "But we hate your system that creates the Templar training that has abused us our entire lives."

With that he turns and walks back along the pathway towards Solas and Gim. As he leaves, he hears Varric saying, "Seeker." He imagines Varric is telling her to stay with him and let Lando go. Varric is a good friend.

When he gets back to the others, Gim can tell with one look that something is up. Lando says, "I told them about Shiren. Oh, and Varric would like us to promise to not discuss his appearance in your Thaig with others without speaking with him about it first."

Solas, head tilted, brow furrowed, says, "Certainly." He looks from Gim to Lando, but he does not ask the obvious question.
Gim is looking at her feet. He is sorry to give her pain. He knows how bad she feels about this. He wishes he didn't know how bad she feels; he wishes he didn't understand her motivations as well as he does. He steps in beside her and puts his arm around her shoulder and pulls her close as they walk along. He drops a quick kiss on the top of her head. At that she looks up at him, her face full of worry.

"Atisha, durgen'falon, nothing has changed. I wanted to walk without oppressive sympathy, so humor me, will you not?"

She smiles up at him. It's a bit forced, but she can't fault her for the effort. Solas's face has no unwanted sympathy on it—or any other emotion that Lando can discern.

The three of them walk in silence for more than an hour. Lando begins to see the signs that Haven is near. Not long after that, they are hailed by a scout.

The scout, a wiry human man in muted greens and browns, says, "Heralds, Advisor, the other advisors will meet you in the War room once you have had a chance to bathe. They will have food in the War room."

Lando thanks the man, and they all pick up their pace. Lando answers the smile on Gim's face with one of his own. Even Solas is smiling. Lando says, "Remember: we have a serious hair braiding appointment after that bath."

She pokes him in the ribs and says, "Yes, Braids," and they stride into the town of Haven.

As they walk in, Lando sees Cassandra looking for him. He walks up to her, and she puts out a hand to him as he nears, pulling him close to her. He leans forward and touches her forehead with his own, just as he had the night before. She allows the touch for several heartbeats, running her hand gently up and down his arm, before she pulls away and looks into his eyes. She says, "I know it is difficult to speak of such things. I want you to know I heard much in that story you told. And I am here."

He allows a little heat into his eyes. Her's answer it. He says, "Perhaps we can share a few stories later."

She says, "I would like that." She walks him to his cabin, smiles awkwardly, and continues up the hill to the Chantry.

Chapter End Notes

Comments or criticism very much welcomed here, via email to kinako.aooo@gmail.com, or via Reddit /u/kinakofic (that last added because I got a couple of PMs—including some lovely art—there when I answered a request for stories where the inquisitor knows about who Solas is from early on.
As they walk up to the Chantry, Gim can hear the dissonant sounds of angry men. As they get closer, they see Cullen standing between a group of Templars and a group of mages—each group screaming at other in righteous indignation, and each group accusing the other of responsibility for the Divine's death. The Templars try to claim Cullen as one of their own by calling him using the Templar title of Knight-Captain, but Cullen will have none of it.

"That is not my title. We are not Templars any longer. We are all part of the Inquisition," Cullen says with a voice thick with force and emotion. His attention alternates between the hostile groups on either side of him. Each is straining with aggressive posture: leaning towards each other, seeking only an excuse to escalate. But Cullen's authority is strong, and the mages and the Templars each step back, though both parties look reluctant.

As the Templars start to flow away towards the tavern, Chancellor Roderick emerges out of their current—clearly on their side of the confrontation. He is dripping disdain as he says, "And what does that mean, exactly?"

Cullen says, "Back already, Chancellor? Haven't you done enough?" This is the first Gim has heard that the Chancellor had left Haven. Cullen's attitude makes it clear that wherever he went, he did it to stir up opposition to the Inquisition.

Roderick says, "I'm curious, Commander, as to how your Inquisition and its Heralds will restore order as you have promised."

Sarcastic Cullen says, "Of course you are." Then he moves his attention to those from the altercation still in front of the Chantry. "Back to your duties, all of you."

Roderick turns to follow the Templars. Gim catches Lando's eye and gestures for him to go on without her.

Lando looks worried as he says, "Are you sure? I'm usually better at buttering up the officious than you are, Gim."

Gim tries to look sure of herself. She says, "I'm the one he will have more of a problem with. Let me give it a chance. Older men are often well disposed towards women who ease their pains. You can
tell the war room about all our hard work, and I can see if I can sway Roderick to our side."

Gim can practically see Lando trying to convince himself to trust her to do this alone. He smiles gamely, pats her on the back, and enters the Chantry. Gim catches up with the Chancellor.

Gim follows the Chancellor around the tavern and behind Solas's cabin. She, doing her best to look innocent and biddable, says, "Chancellor Roderick. I was wondering if you would like to talk to me about our trip to the Hinterlands and all our activities there. We are ready to go to Val Royeaux, just as you have suggested, to speak to the Mothers of the Chantry. We could use your guidance for our trip."

Chancellor Roderick looks stoically amused. He says, "No, girl, that isn't going to work. You may be happy to underestimate me, but I shall not return the favor." He turns his back on Gim, clasps his hands behind his waist, and retraces the path that brought him here.

Gim starts to follow him, but two large Templar men appear from the corner of the cabin. The men look like archetypes of Templars created to engender fear in Dalish children: blond, muscular, a little dull around the eyes: these are not men to be reasoned with. The one in the back nods in the direction of the retreating Chancellor, though Gim cannot see if the Chancellor acknowledged them.

One of them says, "He don't much look like he wants to talk with you, do he, abomination? We know what you have inside you. We know you got your eye on the hands of the Divine. We got other plans for you."

Gim is shocked at how quickly this went from her believing she was cajoling a reluctant but reasonable man to her being waylaid by religious thugs. She tries to keep her voice low and even as she says, "Have you spoken to Commander Cullen about me? He did a thorough investigation of me and found me a credit to the inquisition. You could call him here to explain it to you."

The man who spoke before laughs bitterly and says, "Now why would we care what a heretic working against the Chantry says? He took vows. He fought against his own superior. He says he is no longer a Templar. Ain't no way for a true man to stop being a Templar. Besides, we more interested in you than him just now."

With that he reaches forward and grabs her. She has time to make one loud sound that would have been Lando's name if she had been able to finish it, but he quickly has his hand over her mouth. Except it isn't just her mouth. He has his hand over her nose too, and she can't breath.

Can't Breath. Can't think. Justice wants out. She can't harm these men. Justice knows she can't harm...these...men. She is going to lose consciousness. She begins to glow to make some adjustments--to change the flow of blood to her head--to keep her wits about her.

The men shout triumphantly at her glow, clearly taking it as a sign of her corrupted nature. The men are rougher, and her adjustments will not last, but at least the hand covering her mouth has changed its grip and she can breath. The sound of her breath through her nostrils is louder than thunder, and she is still panicking. Justice wants out. Gim barely manages to form the question inside herself, *You promise you will not hurt them?* When she receives the affirmative response, she feels the manifestation beginning.

As the blue seams begin to split her skin, the men have lifted her into the air. A mechanical sound makes it through the cacophony of the struggles. She knows that sound, and it gives her hope even though she can't quite place it. She is not in control of her body or she would twist towards that sound.
She hears a clear, angry, strong voice ring out. "I would put her down now if I were you." Varric. It is Varric, and the sound was that of his crossbow being cocked. Now she hears his voice again, and it is not so strong. Varric says hesitantly, "Anders?"

Oh no. Justice has chosen the form of the human who aided a spirit of his kind. No. No. No.

The man holding her spits. He growls, "This ain't no her; it's a demon. Its kind caused all this--the explosion, the death of the Divine, the war: all of it. You can't stop us."

Gim feels a surge of Templar abilities. The man not holding her has something in his hand. Justice is not fighting, and it has yet to speak. Gim can see the face of the man holding her, and his head snaps back as it suddenly sprouts a crossbow bolt. It takes the man a moment to drop to his knees, and as she falls, she sees the odd object the other man was holding rushing towards her: it is a lyrium brand.

The lyrium brand sears her flesh, the Templar magic is around her and in her, Varric is yelling, and she feels herself--only singular her without Justice--swirling down a dark drain into blackness.

Chapter End Notes

Comments or criticism welcome here or via email to kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Honor Wins Bad Humors

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Gim wakes in her Thaig and immediately rolls, crying, into a fetal ball. Turmoil and confusion and great loss are running through her and she can't string any coherent thoughts together. Suddenly she sits up and then leaps out of bed to run outside.

Justice is outside, still in Anders's form. Gim stops dead in front of Justice. She says, in a breathy flustered voice, "I am so happy to see you uninjured."

Justice is flickering a bit in a way that Gim recognizes as distress. As Justice begins to speak, Gim sees Wisdom stride toward her. It is all she can do to keep her attention on Justice. This spirit has aided her under duress: it deserves her attention.


"No, no, Justice. You were with me when I needed you. The bolt was Justice: do you not feel it? I am unsure what state I am in, but you tried to help and I would never fault you for it."

Wisdom wraps her arms around Gim and says warmly, "Justice has frantically communicated all, Gim, and neither of you should be distressed. Gim, you are here--trying to console your friend. Justice, she is here, and you can feel that her essence is unharmed. Those men can eject Justice from the waking, but they can't block Gim's connection to her Thaig. That brand does nothing to a connection to the stone, dear ones.

"Gim, you are here. You are here and so are your emotions. They have put you through much and ultimately effected nothing but a mark on your forehead. Calm yourself. Even though it is an unneeded habit here, I counsel you to breathe. You. Are. Here."

Gim bursts out crying in relief. She thinks she will never hear the words "you are here" again without remembering the hypnotic comfort injected when Wisdom repeated them for her. She holds Wisdom with so much force, she suddenly wonders if she is capable of hurting her. She stops, draws back, and looks in Wisdom's face.

"No, beloved," says Wisdom. "You cannot hurt me by feeling the honest realization that you endure. I am sorry for your pain, but I feel your joy in survival."

Gim's joy deflates. She says, "Wisdom, I feel here, but what about in the waking? When I wake, will I be Tranquil?"

Wisdom smiles indulgently. "You know the answer to that. You know what control you have over your person. Even the choice to keep or erase the brand on your forehead is yours." Wisdom must
see the sheepish look on Gim's face, for she says, "No, do not be shamed to take reassurance from me. Stronger ones than either of us would be off balance after such an attack. You are a wonder for moving first to reassure. But I think you know there are others who need reassurance."

"Oh no!" Gim yells, putting her hand to her mouth, overloaded with empathetic pain. She says to Wisdom, "Will you...?"

Wisdom knowing the question, says, "Of course. With Justice's permission. Do you mind losing part of your day, Justice?"

Justice says, "Another day; smoothed away; pain decays; Wisdom sways."

Gim says, "Yes of course, Justice. Another day. And perhaps we can talk later about what happened and how you helped."

Justice nods and floats away, its form becoming more nebulous and less recognizably human by the second.

Gim wastes no time, running directly for her hall, with Wisdom right next to her.

She stops at her hearth, and to her surprise, Wisdom stops too. Wisdom says, "You might consider dropping the sunburst scar before you awaken. I think the sight of it will only hurt your loved ones in the future."

Gim startles. It had not occurred to her that she could remove the scar from here. And what did Wisdom mean with that plural on those who would be hurt? But if she can change Varric's skin tone, of course she can heal her own scar.

She conjures a mirror into her hand and looks at the raw, red, blistered skin on her forehead. She had not been aware of it before Wisdom mentioned it, but seeing it, she can't help but wince.

Gim shuts her eyes, concentrates, and when she opens them again, the mirror shows that her forehead is as it was before the two brutish Templars attacked her. She dissolves the mirror as Wisdom goes down the hall to her focus.

Once she hears the door click, she closes her eyes and transitions to the waking.

She opens her eyes to a vignette she could never have imagined. No one is moving. Cullen is holding his chin as if he has just been hit; Cassandra has her arms crossed, and something about the position of her body makes Gim think that Cassandra approves of whatever happened to Cullen; and of all people, Josephine and Leliana are restraining Varric. It very much appears that it was Varric who has punched Cullen. Lando is ignoring whatever happened with Cullen; he is kneeling by the bed she is on with tears streaming down his face. Solas is sitting on the other side of the bed holding her hand, and he is the only person in the room who doesn't look shocked or horrified; if anything, he looks pleased. Every single person in the room is silently staring at her.

Gim takes only a moment to observe all this, and then she is sitting up, throwing her arms around Lando's neck, and saying apologetic things into his monumentally mussed braids. Gim isn't even sure what all she is saying, but "I'm sorry, Adahl'falon. I'm so sorry" figure heavily.

Lando shushes her and pets her wild hair. He says, "You are sorry? I may never forgive myself for leaving you alone." After a few more dueling apologies, Gim pulls back.

She is no longer being stared at, but the tension in the room is still high. Josephine, ever the smoother of ruffled feathers, says brightly, "Well! Gim appears to be recovering nicely. Perhaps we should give her some space."

Cullen says, "I will go check on the prisoners and see about seeing if there are other sympathizer
among the others," and starts to shove his way out of the room.

Gim says, "Wait, Cullen, please. Did you say prisoners? I thought one of them was killed by Varric."

Cullen frowns. Gim gets the feeling whatever he says next is not something he is enjoying being forced to say. Cullen stands at attention and dispassionately says, "It was thought Chancellor Roderick should also be confined."

"I know I left with him, but he wouldn't talk to me; he left before the assailants showed up. The only people who attacked me were the two Templars who Varric confronted," she says as she turns a grateful eye to Varric. To her surprise, he won't meet her eyes. He looks very guilty.

Cullen gruffly says, "I will discuss this with Cassandra, Leliana, and Josephine." The named group exits, leaving Gim with Solas, Lando, and Varric.

Varric says, "Well, I will leave you to..." At which point Gim surges off the bed and grabs Varric's hands.

She says, "Varric, I am so sorry that Justice took Anders's form. I promise you Anders had nothing to do with that choice or with that spirit of Justice. It's just that Anders helped a spirit of Justice when it would not have survived otherwise, so to the spirit, Anders is an honorable man. I didn't know it would choose that form or I would have asked it not to."

Varric's eyes are bright, and his voice catches as he says, "I hesitated. I could have got both of them. I left you open for them to ... to do that to you."

"Oh Varric. I'm OK. I'm going to be OK. And I might not have been without you. You have no idea how welcome the sound of Bi..." Here Gim clears her throat, runs her hands up Varric's arms to rest her hands on his shoulders, and continues, "...how welcome the sound of your crossbow was. I don't know how often you have been sure you will die and then a friend shows up and saves you, but it is a powerful feeling. Next time I see your crossbow I am going to kiss her--or at least buy her a new aiming module."

Varric doesn't sound as dejected anymore. Still careful, but more amazed than embarrassed as he says, "You would be surprised how often I've had that exact same feeling, so I know what you mean. You can call her Bianca, you know. And she says I can collect all her kisses, though she's a sucker for a good aiming module."

Gim puts her arms around Varric's neck and pulls him to her. She peppers his face with little kisses: both eyes, nose, mouth, and then one on each cheek. Then she steps back with a grin on her face. Varric looks adorably embarrassed, which is so much better than guilty.

Gim goes back to the bed and sits down, leaning against the headboard. She says, "Now will someone please tell me what happened after I blacked out?"

The three men look at each other, and finally Varric speaks again. "After you went down, the living one tried to get away. He has a crossbow bolt embedded in his backside. I don't imagine he is too comfortable. I used my powerful voice to get Adan's attention..."

At this point, Lando interrupts by saying, "He means he screamed like a little boy." Gim is so thankful that Lando can make jokes. She laughs gently and smiles at Varric.

Varric says, "Who is telling this story?" But he doesn't really look annoyed. He continues, "Adan ran to the war room, and very soon all the faces you saw when you woke were staring down on you. Lando wouldn't let anyone else touch you, the ladies made inconsolable sounds--I think they might
be fond of you, Gim." Varric stops here, and he looks like he is collecting his thoughts. He swallows and then he says, "Solas demanded to be told what had happened. I had no idea you had such a temper, Chuckles. Anyway, I told them that I had seen you walk off with that Chantry prig and it made me nervous. I saw him leave soon after, but then I heard a yelp in the direction he had come from. You saw the rest of what I had to tell them.

"All of us but Cullen and Leliana followed Lando, who carried you to your cabin, where he placed you on this bed. Once there, he let Solas examine you. I will let Solas tell that part. Mostly we were all silent and showing signs of distress until Cullen and Leliana came back. They said they had locked up that Templar, whose name is Marvin, by the way, as well as Chancellor Roderick. Cullen didn't seem to be too happy about locking up the Chancellor. Leliana went on about how if there was even a chance he had been involved he had to be interrogated, and how he might have doomed Thedas with that trick.

"Cullen said you weren't dead, you were just tranquil, and that you might be even easier to deal with as a tranquil. When he said that, there was a certain amount of gasping and growling, some of which might have been mine, and I found I just had to sock him. Leliana and Josephine seemed to think this was not a productive use of our time.

"Soon after that, the Seeker yelped something about your mark, and I thought she meant the one on your hand, but I saw where everyone else was looking, and your forehead no longer had the Chantry sunburst on it. You woke up around then, and that's all I know."

Gim looks to Solas. Solas says, "As you know, Lethal'len, you do not have a detectable aura for me unless you are manifesting, which you most certainly were not doing when we found you. Once we got to the cabin, and I received, ah, permission to investigate further..." Something in Solas's tone makes it clear that the permission he spoke of was an event of some moment. Solas continues, "I could find nothing wrong with your body other than some bruises and the brand on your forehead. I did not think you felt tranquil, but my familiarity with the tranquil is scant, and I could not be certain. I said nothing, as I did not want to give your companions false hope. I was looking at your face when your mark began to dissolve, and then I could feel the whisper of your connection to the Fade: something no tranquil could have. I knew your emotions were intact a few moments before you flew into Lando's arms, but none were in doubt long after that. Now, if you will, tell us how you escaped the lyrium brand."

Gim says, "Hold on to your chest hair, Varric. I'm going to let the person who explained it to me explain it to Solas." Varric looks confused for just a moment, but as the blue seams spread across her skin, his eyes go wild and he backs away from the bed.

Wisdom's warm, resonant voice addresses Varric with, "Do not be disturbed, Child of the Stone. I am very glad to have a chance to meet you in the waking. You may call me Wisdom, as these three do, or you may address me as 'Spirit.' The other three know me well, but you do not. You are dear to me though, as you have done much for Gim, who is more precious to me than I can say."

Varric looks a little less panicked. He says, "I didn't do anything anyone else wouldn't have done."

Wisdom smiles and raises an eyebrow. She says, "I think you know that isn't the case, Varric. May I call you Varric?"

Varric nods. "I like that name better than Child of the Stone."

Wisdom says, "You can't escape what you are, Varric--not if you wish to associate with an Avatar of the Stone."
Gim swallows. What? Solas looks surprised by this phrase, but Varric and Lando seem to have gone past the point when new information that establishes no immediate physical threat can throw them.

Wisdom turns to Lando, who she hugs, and then to Solas, whose hand she takes. Wisdom says, "The brand did sever her connection to the Fade, and Justice was ejected without Gim releasing it. But the brand did nothing to her connection to the Stone. Once she was back in her Thaig, she was everything she believed herself to be. She was quite distressed, and it took a while for her to understand that the simple fact that she was distressed meant that she would be ok. Before we left her Thaig, I suggested that her companions would appreciate it if she healed the scar from the lyrium brand, and she agreed.

"If there is a way to make Gim truly tranquil, I do not know what it would be. We spirits know less of the stone than we might, and much of what I know I have learned because of Gim."

"Fascinating," Solas says. "I predict that if this becomes known, it will distress the zealots even more. They will see her as an untameable threat. They may try for more permanent solutions. You must be cautious, Gim. I think it might be best if we implied something about the ritual went awry and not that you foiled their attempt."

Lando says, "I think that is an excellent idea. We should talk to Leliana and Josephine."

Wisdom says, "Gim has things to ask. I will let her ask them in her own voice." She leans forward, embraces Solas, and sits back as the blue seams presage Gim's return.

Gim says, "Did anyone heal Marvin?"

Varric snorts. "You have got to be kidding."

Lando says with resignation and a bit of humor, "I warned you, Varric."

Gim says, "Well, whoever is coming with me--and I know better than to think you are going to let me walk across Haven by myself right now--let's go. And do try not to torture the Commander for trying to find a way around bad tidings."

Varric's mouth drops open and Lando shoots him a look that Gim interprets as another "I told you so."

All four of them walk up to the Chantry together. They see Josephine as they head for the stairs down to the dungeon. Josephine looks very happy to see Gim, but she clearly expects her to continue on to the war room. When Gim waves and starts down the dungeon stairs, Josephine brushes past them and runs ahead of them down the stairs.

Gim shoots a confused glance at Lando, who returns equal befuddlement. When she turns to the other two, she sees them sharing a look of cynical disappointment. Gim doesn't feel like having her horizons broadened, so she continues on to the dungeon.

When she reaches the cells, she finds Leliana in the cell with the Templar from earlier and Josephine right outside the cell. Leliana looks as if there is no more natural place for her to be, but Josephine looks flustered. Marvin, obviously in pain, is sweaty and breathing hard.

Leliana says, "Gim. I did not expect you to come to the Chantry tonight."

Gim looks at Leliana and then at Marvin, who has yet to speak. Gim says, "I have to heal him, Leliana."
Leliana's eyebrows shoot up. She says, "And how would you do that, pray, if you can't get into his cell."

Gim says, "You say that when you can see an excellent lockpick standing next to me?"

Varric says, "Hey, don't put me in the middle of this. My sympathies are with the Nightingale."

Gim thinks Leliana might be gritting her teeth. Leliana says, "You feel very strongly about this."

Gim says, "I took oaths, Leliana. I believe you understand how much such things can mean to a person."

Leliana walks to the door to the cell, uses a key on the lock, and lets Gim into the cell. Gim squats down near Marvin, who is cowering away from her. Gim says, "Marvin, I am not going to hurt you. I want to heal your wounds."

Marvin still doesn't speak. He looks terrified. He reminds Gim of a scared child. To Gim, he is no longer her attacker; he is a wounded man worthy of her care. She is beginning to suspect that Marvin might not be capable of coherent speech.

When she brings up her glow and touches him, her scan reveals the reason for her suspicions. Marvin is in the latter stages of a life of heavy lyrium use. Parts of his brain more resemble pudding than healthy crenulated tissue, and Gim doesn't think he can have had any part of plotting to hurt her. The hole in his backside is clean and easy to heal, but she can't do much for his mind. She looks up to see Leliana looking down on her. She says, "I don't think Marvin will be able to tell you, or anyone else, much—even should he wish it. It is a wonder the man was able to get the brand onto my forehead: he is severely disabled at this point. I shudder to think how many Rituals of Tranquility he must have performed if he retains the muscle memory at this stage. I'm afraid Varric killed the only man who could have told us anything."

Leliana nods. After a moment, her stiff posture and inscrutable expression disappear. She grabs Gim's hand and says, "I don't know why I challenged you. It's not been an easy evening. Gim, I am so happy that you are well. You are not just a hand that closes rifts to me. I would miss you so if you were...If you no longer...related to us."

"Well, you don't have to miss me," says Gim, her smile moving from fond to mischievous. "And we should get together later and talk about my trip and my observations and such."

Leliana says, "I would like that."

Gim says, "As would I, but not tonight. I am not even sure I will be functional in the morning, but for now, all I want is food."

Lando says, "I will keep the other advisors aware of Gim's situation. We can go to the tavern now. Or perhaps Solas and Varric would like to accompany you to the tavern."

Leliana looks like she wants to ask a question, but she does not. Varric also looks thoughtful. He says, "Of course. We would love to, wouldn't we, Solas?"

Solas makes a little formal bow and says, "Without a doubt." And they all begin walking up to the ground floor of the Chantry.

As they climb the stairs, Lando says, "I think I would like to look at the war room map again."

When Gim looks at Leliana, she sees a knowing sparkle. Gim looks back at Lando. She says, "Go
ahead. I won't wait up for you." She turns to Varric and Solas and says, "I hope you two don't mind making sure I make it back to my cabin. I fear I might fall asleep in my bowl."

As they part, Gim glances back at Lando and wishes him luck and love on this night that is ending better than any of them could have hoped it would. As for herself, Gim is pretty sure she could fall in love with anything edible. She takes one of Solas's arms and one of Varric's and they all three walk off to the tavern.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and criticisms (really: I can take it) welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Chapter Summary

Lando gets a little pissy and a little kissy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As he walks towards the War room door, Lando thinks about how grateful he is for Solas and Varric. They can accompany Gim without being accused of hovering over her.

He knows how it would go if he had gone to the tavern with her: he would be accused of not trusting her to do things on her own. Nevermind that he let her go to talk to Roderick on her own and the resultant mess left him emotionally battered and raw. This way, he can avoid Gim's indignation and he can indulge in being just a bit angry with her by himself--or at least not where he has to endure her pique. He will get over it. He always does. Varric and Solas don't have his history with her: their frustration is likely to be more easily dealt with.

As he raises his hand to the wooden door, he hears Josephine saying, "Commander, no one doubts your commitment to the Inquisition, but it is simply not reasonable to discipline Varric for reacting that way under pressure. Were it not for him, Gim could be dead right now, and you are not his commanding officer."

Lando begins to open the door so that he only hears part of what Cullen has to say about this. He hears, "I wasn't asking that we flog him just that the Inquisition can do without..."

"Hello Commander, Cassandra, Ambassador. I came to report the sad tidings that Marvin's brain is a victim of long-term lyrium use and he is incapable of speech. I also wanted to reassure you that even hearing Varric's story, Gim bears no grudge. Her exact words were, 'do try not to torture the Commander for trying to find a way around bad tidings,' but I am certain she will have something far more pointed to say if you ask Varric to leave the Inquisition."

Cullen looks furious. Lando guesses he looked furious before Lando walked in, but Cullen's ire is now fully directed at Lando. Cullen has sweat pouring down his face, and his posture is not so much military as stiff. Cullen says harshly, "That is not your concern."

Lando can't help but be amused. "Clearly," he says. "Gim and I are just mindless Breach-closing tools. Is this Cassandra's or Josephine's concern? Or Leliana's? Was there a coup while we were gone?"

"Maker's breath. I can see there will be no productive discussion possible this night." Cullen turns his back on Lando, willfully excluding him as he says, "If you need me, I will be in my tent attempting to finish some paperwork." At this he opens the door and marches out.

Josephine tilts her head and says, "Oh, Lando. This must have been a very difficult night for you, as it has for all of us. I hope you will be generous with us as we cope with extraordinary circumstances." Josephine sounds and looks sympathetic, but Cassandra's look, while intense, does not exactly look like sympathy.
Cassandra says, "Do you think your remarks were entirely constructive?"

Lando knows he shouldn't feel disappointed in Cassandra's chastisement, but he is. He says, "Honestly, they were not meant to be entirely constructive. If you had a sister, you would know how I feel."

Josephine's eyes snap to Cassandra's face, and her hand flies up to Cassandra's shoulder. Cassandra shakes her head minutely and briefly closes her eyes. Then she looks at Josephine and nods. Josephine gives Cassandra's arm a quick squeeze and then silently leaves the room. Lando's stomach is now unsettled in a way that combat and possible death have never caused. He waits with as much patience as he can.

She says quietly, "It is true that I have no sister, but I had a brother. Antony was older than I. A dragon-hunter who showed what a Pentaghast could truly be. I idolized him. I wanted to hunt dragons as he did, even though our uncle forbade it. Antony promised to train me in secret. We would hunt together: brother and sister vanquishing the beasts of old.

"And then he died on me."

Lando reaches for Cassandra. She pulls back and gives him a wan smile. She says with a quavering voice, "If you touch me, I won't be able to finish, and I want to finish."

Her voice returns to its normal tone as she says, "A group of apostates wanted dragon blood and wanted Antony to get it for them. He refused, and they killed him for it. In front of me. I begged the Chantry to let me become a Templar. Instead, they sent me to the Seekers. It took many years to let go of my drive for vengeance. At times I could not breathe. The rage nearly choked me."

Lando says, "I know that feeling." After a pause, he says, "While we are being completely honest, I am very grateful that you are a Seeker and not a Templar. Apart from whether or not I could have become...friends...with a Templar, given my own history, the thought of you crippled with lyrium addiction turns my stomach."

Now Cassandra reaches forward to clasp Lando's hand. She says, "I too am happy to have avoided lyrium, but Lando, you must see: good people have reason to want to join the Templars, and good people have joined the Templars. Cullen's history is no less colorful than your own. Do not judge him. Do not take his words tonight as ones that represent his whole mind or heart. I should think you would have sympathy for a man who had good reason to join the Templars and then had the strength of will to leave them.

"For the record, had someone ever told me that it was good that Antony had been merely maimed rather than killed, my response would have been strong and immediate. But I know Cullen. I ask you to be generous to him in a way that I do not know I could be in the same situation."

Lando feels the moisture in his eyes. She is so strong; she is speaking from her heart. This is not a casual request. He says, "Cassandra, you and Gim could not be more different, and yet you both urge the same things. How could I deny the two of you? I will not paint Cullen with the acts of those who were once his brothers-in-arms. I will try hard to leave some unfortunate words in the past. I hope that he can do the same for Gim and me."

Cassandra steps forward to stand close to Lando. She is not just holding his hand anymore: she is caressing it, raising it to her chest, cherishing it. She says, "I have faith that he will accept your good will, as I do."

"Do you accept my good will? I am not always unconflicted. I admit to some...envy. I sometimes
look at you and Gim and wonder how different my life would be if Antony was still alive. What joys would now be in my life? What joys would I miss? Surviving the loss of the single most important person in one's life leads to change. Must I feel guilty when I experience happiness that I would not have known without Antony's loss? It may sound foolish when said that way, but deep feelings do not yield to intellect."

Lando says, hopefully, "Happiness?"

Cassandra smiles gently and moves even closer to Lando as she says, "Potential happiness."

Lando says, "I can work with potential." Lando nuzzles her hair and caresses her back. He does not press for more. This is a moment when he can forget his worries briefly and be fully present--where every detail he can experience is precious to him. He can smell the soap she used earlier along with the metallic tang of her armor. He runs his fingers down her long coronet of a braid.

Her response is to move her head back from him a little and to run one hand along his side-braids. This places her in a perfect position, so he leans in and runs his lips slowly along hers as if he was trying to map every bit of her lips with his own. Her lips gently grip and then release one of his, and then he returns the favor. Their mouths are soft and slightly open as they breathe in unison. This is not like their first kiss. This kiss could never be interpreted as a lark; this kiss is a beginning--a promise of more and deeper kisses on less complicated nights. They end, once again, forehead to forehead, each caressing the other's back and neck.

Cassandra says, "Now go. I know you need to know if Gim is OK. Soon we will travel to Val Royeaux, and I am very much looking forward to it."

Cassandra looks settled into the war room, so Lando gives her another hug, and leaves her to her thoughts. He gets no more than three steps away from the door when Josephine appears from her office. He stops and waits quietly for her to approach.

When she gets close to him, she leans into his ear and whispers, "She likes poetry and romantic stories. But if you repeat that, I shall not give you the Antivan chocolate I have secured for you."

Lando assures Josephine that he would never tell, and he follows her to her office. Chocolate secured, he is off to find Gim.

Chocolate and poetry: Lando has plans to make.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and criticism welcome here or via email to kinako.aoee@gmail.com.

Much thanks to my new beta and inspiration, genuinelyterribleperson.
Justice More Than Thou Desirest

Chapter Summary

Gim is a big baby...and so is Solas.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gim isn't asleep. She knows she isn't asleep because she can still feel the rough, and slightly sticky, surface of the table. Varric and Solas had each tried to carry her to her cabin, but it just wasn't right, so she didn't let them. Something about this surprised them, but it was too confusing to think about too much. She is so tired...and a bit befuddled...and she is waiting for...something.

When the door opens, she once again pops her head up to see who it is. And it is Lando. Of course it is Lando. He wouldn't leave her here.

Solas says, "Lando, perhaps you can explain to us why Gim has been so very firm in her distaste for all of our attempts to take her to your cabin." Solas is so funny.

Lando says, "Distaste?"

Varric says, "Well first we tried to convince her to come with us, and when it looked like she might be falling asleep, Solas tried to carry her. She started glowing blue and became completely unmoveable. Which was, I must say, much more amusing to watch than it was to experience when she did the same thing to me. I could have sworn she weighed a thousand pounds." Varric is a meanie.

Lando sits down next to her. He puts his arm around her shoulders. He says, "Gim, why didn't you let the nice men take you to the cabin?"

She says, "I was waiting for you. Besides, if they took me to the cabin, they would have left. And ..."

"You are not ready to be alone." Lando turns away from Gim and says, "This, gentlemen, is what a very, very tired Gim is like; this state is the closest to drunk I have ever seen her--although I am not sure why I say that because it is pretty close to the way she behaved when she was twelve. In this state, it is very difficult to convince her of anything she doesn't want to believe. One thing that sometimes works is to talk to her spirit, if you know which one is with her. I'm surprised you didn't try that, Solas." He turns back to Gim, but Gim is watching Solas. Solas looks annoyed. Solas shouldn't look annoyed; it is bad for Solas to be angry--it is especially important that Solas not be angry with Lando.

Lando's voice is warm, but also tired. Why is he so tired? Maybe everyone is tired. "Shall we go to our cabin, Durgen'falon?"

Gim awkwardly climbs off the bench and starts stumbling towards the door, pulling Lando with her.

Varric says, "Oh, so you can't pick her up either." Silly Varric.
Lando laughs and says, "Oh, I can; I sometimes think she gets this tired just to have an excuse for me to carry her. By the way, did you happen to ask her if you could carry her, or did you just attempt to pick her up?" Once again addressing himself to Gim, he says, "And may I carry you, Durgen'falon?"

Gim nods in large swooping head bobs. Lando picks her up like he is picking up a child. Her legs are swung over one arm, and her head is nestled into his neck. She makes an audible sigh. Varric jumps ahead and opens the door. The cabin isn't far, and by the time they get there, Varric once again has the door open. Everyone is so nice.

As they go in, she hears Solas call out. Solas says, "Are you so tired I should not visit you tonight, da'len?"

Gim raises her head from Lando's shoulder and pronounces, complete with a decorous wave of her arm, "You are all welcome." She then puts her head back down and says into Lando's neck, "Have I ever been tired in my Thaig?"

Lando starts lowering Gim onto her bed as he says, "If you have, you have never mentioned it to me." To the others he says, "Thank you very much for your help with Gim. You can't know how much I appreciate it."

Varric says, "We weren't helping; we were enjoying her company."

Lando says, "I am thankful that this is so." Lando likes her to make friends.

Gim is slowly melting into the bed. Lando gets her tunic off as she goes down and then starts working on her footwraps. Gim says, "I will see them soon. I see you the most but never there. I wish I could bring you. You would like it; I would make you a ..."

And then she is awake in her Thaig and she no longer remembers what specific thing she was offering to make for Lando; she would make him so many. She still has hopes that perhaps Solas can bring Lando here.

She jumps out of bed and makes it only a step or two before Wisdom comes striding into her hall. Gim runs up and says, "Oh, Wisdom, was I very childish?"

Wisdom hugs her and says warmly, "No, dear one. Or at least not unreasonably so. Had Solas addressed himself to me, I would have been delighted to answer, with your permission, but you were doing nothing that needed to be corrected.

Gim looks off and her eyes unfocus a bit. "He is here," she says. We were going to try the post-uthenera healing here. Do you think it will work?"

Wisdom looks indulgently pleased. "I was wondering when you would try that. As for whether or not it will work, I think you should investigate on your own."

"Will you stay, please? If it doesn't work here we might have to make other arrangements."

Solas walks up smiling. He says, "You do not look at all like the exhausted woman who wouldn't let me carry her out of the tavern."

Gim, feels the echo of embarrassment, but with Wisdom's comments so recently in her ears, it is only an echo. She says, "My spirits provide me with a connection to the Fade, but they can't provide me the full support that my Thaig does."

Solas looks thoughtful for a moment. He says, "Are you certain? Perhaps it is habit that keeps you
from asking for the sustenance from the Fade that you could have. Perhaps you even find the exhaustedness of a full day's work to be somewhat fulfilling." Solas looks disturbingly like he is chastising her. He continues, "From what I have seen, you could be drawing more energy from your spirit connection than you do." On seeing the look on her face, Solas hastens to add, "I mean no criticism. I merely suggest that you might want to reassess the next time you are tired in the waking and have a spirit with you."

Gim looks to Wisdom and sees a begrudging agreement. In response to the obvious question on Gim's face, Wisdom says, "Your exhaustion in the waking was an appropriate relief valve. For you to seek your Thaig during times of overload did not seem such a bad thing. I knew you would grow beyond that need, but it was comforting you had such a feedback mechanism to keep you physically and emotionally safe."

Gim is going to have to think about this. But right now, she isn't in the waking. It is time to see if she can work on Solas here. Not that anything she learns will be applicable to anyone but other dreamers, but it is a fascinating area of inquiry.

Gim says, "Would you mind accompanying me to my bed?"

Solas's eyes are intense, and his smile is wicked. He says, "I would be delighted to do so." he doesn't do anything explicitly improper, but Gim is embarrassed, and she knows he means her to be so. She follows a pace behind him as he approaches her bed and repeats the preparations from last time. He takes off his shirt and lies down on his back in her bed. She sits by the head of his bed.

She says, "First, I just want to see if I can affect you the way I did Varric." She takes his hand and concentrates on changing a triangle of skin black. Nothing happens, and she feels no potential for anything to happen. She says, "Are you doing anything active to prevent me from manipulating your hand?"

Solas shakes his head and watches her carefully. Gim glances at Wisdom, but Wisdom is showing no reaction. Gim investigates a bit further, but the skin on Solas's long pale hand remains pristine. She says, "I can't change the color of your skin. Let us see if I can change your body in the manner that I did during the ritual last time. If I cannot, we won't be able to do this here. Relax, please--just as you did last time."

Solas settles down and begins the familiar 4-7-8 breathing pattern. Wisdom comes to stand right by Gim, and Gim begins to caress Solas's chest, moving both of her hands to over his heart. It feels odd to not bring up a glow. She thinks for a moment, and reaches for the feeling of her glow. At first the feeling is elusive. She stops, sits back, and looks up at Wisdom. She says, "Would you mind putting your hands on my neck as I work?"

Wisdom complies, and Gim returns her hands to Solas's mid-chest. This time the feeling comes, and she can reach down to his spine and disconnect his ability to move his limbs in the same way as she did when she performed the ritual in Haven. It feels right to have Wisdom in contact with her when she does this. She doesn't know if it is necessary or if it is just making it easier for her.

Gim caresses and kneads Solas's skin in the way she did last time. His spirit-self feels somehow larger here, and his flowing mana smaller. He is a powerful mage, but she has no fear she won't be able to process all his mana this time. She starts the transformation of his mana into the corrosive blast that will expand his abilities, and she can feel that Solas is welcoming it. Last time he resisted the emotions as they rose--as if he was afraid of being lost. This time the emotions pass over his face, but they are more fleeting.

As before, Gim feels the splashback from Solas's emotions, but they do not exhaust her the way they
did before. Anger, fear, shame, and grief are easy to recognize, but some of the positive emotions are harder to name. She is sure she detects pride, but the others might be affection or accomplishment or purpose. She is with him--she feels with him--but naming the feelings is more difficult. As Gim rides his emotions with him, she is reminded of listening to stirring music: her emotions are high and engaged, but they are safe: she knows they are not hers. She feels as if she is participating in an intricate dance requiring every one of her skill, but it is a dance well within her capabilities.

Gim gets to the end of Solas's mana, and she knows the ritual has been successful. Solas is motionless, emotionless, still and empty. Gim leans down to Solas and away from Wisdom, restores Solas's ability to move, and as before, touches her lips to his--to blow the clean power of the Fade into his spirit self. Last time it was a tiny remnant to start Solas on his path to healing, but this time it is a full wash of energy.

Solas holds Gim's face, wrenches his mouth away from hers, and says almost frantically, "I am at surfeit." Gim is shocked into immobility. She stares into his eyes and blinks in surprise. Solas has not moved his hands. He is staring into her eyes and panting into her mouth. He pulls her to him and crashes into her mouth. This is no medical ritual: this is a full on kiss, and a much more passionate one than their first. Gim, still tied to all of Solas's sensations, can feel that this is no act: he is aroused and ready, he wants her, and the thrill and pleasure shoot up her body leaving her limp and aching. But this must be an artifact of the medical procedure. His spirit is full and his expression of it is lustful. This is not ethical. She must stop this without making it seem that she rejects him.

She disconnects from him, slowly, firmly, and she says, "Tarlen, your ritual is complete, and I think it was quite successful. How do you feel?"

Solas sits up abruptly. He looks dazed. He says, "I feel as I have not felt in ages. I have had more power than this but only with my... with outside augmentation. I so wish I had known of your abilities before I met you."

Gim sees this as her opening. She says slowly, "I know your focus is what put the marks on our hands. I doubt that you meant to mark us, so I can only assume you did not have possession of your focus when it was used at the Temple of Sacred Ashes."

Solas looks at her sharply, then he looks at Wisdom challengingly. The connection that engendered a kiss moments ago is completely absent. Gim says, "Wisdom has never spoken of this to me, and I know better than to tell what I know to anyone. I am certain the explanation is one no human--no being without knowledge of ancient Elvenan--would understand."

Solas says coldly, "Do you understand?"

Gim says, "No, but I don't need to. Why it happened is beyond me. It did, and now we deal with it. That's all I need to know."

Solas looks defensive. When he speaks, it is in the detached manner of a recitation. "I awoke a year or so ago, and I did not have the power to unlock my focus. There was an ancient magister, a detestable creature, and he had power, but no sense. I left the orb where he could find it, knowing he would unlock it and die in the process. Unfortunately, he appears to have tried to unlock it at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, and the resultant explosion killed many--and somehow left an imprint of the focus on your and Lando's hands."

This information is not that surprising to Gim, although she was not expecting that he gave the focus to another person voluntarily. This would be disastrous if any of the others in the Inquisition knew this. She says, "I assume you have searched the Temple for your focus--or is all that remains on our hands?"
Solas says, "No, there will be an actual orb left, although without the power on your hands, it will not be anywhere near as powerful. Yes, I have searched the Temple many times. It is not there: I would feel it if it were." Solas, still shirtless and glistening, paces through Gim's hall. After what are clearly some difficult thoughts, he says, "If I had then the power I have now, I could have unlocked my focus. To know that I caused all that destruction, not to mention the loss of my orb, through impatience is ... indescribable."

Gim says, "You could not have known."

Solas looks at Wisdom, stiff and silent and temporarily forgotten, and says, "But I could have known."

Wisdom says, "Have we not discussed this already?"

Gim can feel the tension between Solas and Wisdom and it feels wrong. Solas has said Wisdom is his oldest friend, so how could he be so angry with her? How could he question her...wisdom?

Gim says, "Solas, I am newer to the spirit world than you are, but I have always believed that questioning the embodiment of the nature of a spirit is not helpful to them. Is this situation different because Wisdom is so ancient?"

Solas looks chagrined; he looks down and away. After a moment he seems to have collected himself. He says, "My apologies. I seem to be more off balance following the healing ritual than I had realized. What has passed is unchangeable. We must all work to undo the results of my poor judgement."

Gim says, "Even optimal decisions can still lead to bad outcomes. In any case, we are where we are. We move forward from here. I would like to point out that your reactions are entirely of a piece with the predictions of post-uthenera behavior that we discussed before. We should talk about your feelings of guilt and how to move forward without that emotion clouding your judgement."

Solas looks at her, and Gim is suddenly aware that she has been lecturing an ancient. But she would not be fulfilling her oaths if she did not offer such counsel--welcome or not. Wisdom must pick up on Gim's unease, because she puts an arm around her.

Wisdom says, "Time has passed, dear one. I think you had best talk to your next spirit visitor before it gets much later."

Gim leaps up. She can't believe she didn't do this before starting the ritual. Having Solas here is too distracting. In any case, the right spirit is right outside the door. She talks to it, notes that Varric is again under what she now thinks of as his tree, and heads back to the hall. When she returns, Solas is gone.

Gim walks up to Wisdom and says, "Was it unwise of me to tell him I knew about his focus?"

Wisdom hugs her and says, "No, dear one. I think your policy of not hiding your realizations from him is a good one. I also think you will need his help to protect Lando from the mark, and it will be much easier to ask for his help now that you both know where the mark came from."

Gim looks down at her left hand. She says, "I wish I could bring Lando here."

Wisdom says, "Are you sure Lando, a non-dwarf, would be helped by coming here?"

Gim sighs. "I am sure of so little," she says. She looks at Wisdom. For a moment it is as it was when she was a child, terrified to return to the waking and wishing she could stay with Wisdom always.
Wisdom, as always, senses her mood. She smiles fondly and a little sadly. She says, "I know what I am sure of: you."

And Gim opens her eyes and breathes in the cold Haven air.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and Criticism welcome here or via email to kinako.aooo@gmail.com.

Thanks to Love_in_nature for helping me get my head on straight.
Chapter Summary

Everyone catches their breath as they plan to go to Val Royeaux.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Gim sits up, she sees Lando at their table eating porridge out of a bowl. There is another bowl on the table, and Lando raises his spoon to her in salute when he notices she is awake. She pulls her tunic on, grabs her blanket to huddle in, and joins Lando. She sits with one leg under her and the other swinging freely under the table. The porridge is good, and it is gone quickly. They both put their empty bowls on the table and look at each other.

Gim says, a little sheepishly, "So are you mad at me?"

Lando says, "I was. A little. But you keep telling me trust is justified even in the face of occasional calamity. I'm trying to believe you." After a pass, he says, "So you are really completely OK?"

"Completely OK," says Gim.

Lando says, "You would tell me if anything even might be wrong, right?"

"Don't I tell you enough of my imaginary troubles that you can trust me to tell you my real ones?" asks Gim.

"Good point," says Lando.

"So ....," says Gim, with a long, long vowel and an obvious air of reluctance.

"So?" asks Lando, with one eyebrow up. Gim suspects he recognizes a confessional tone when he hears it.

"So, Solas and Wisdom say I've been enjoying getting over-tired: using it as a crutch and that I could pull more support from the Fade via my spirit in order to avoid imposing on you the way I did last night."

Lando grins and scoffs. He says, "First, they did not say it in that way, oh sister who consistently presents herself in the worst possible light. Second, carrying you is not an imposition. Third, I am usually in charge of the more subjective aspects of our lives, and I am telling you that for others to see you so tired is politically expedient. And fourth and most importantly, I got Josie to give me some Antivan chocolate, and if you make me something supremely delicious with which to tempt Cass, I will carry you everywhere you want to go for a month."

"Courting chocolate, you say," says Gim, thoughtfully. "Is there anything in particular you want me to try for? Do you know if we can get cream or eggs?" Then Gim thinks about what she's saying, and her eyes lock onto Lando's and she backhands his shoulder. "Courting chocolate? I knew you liked her and that she did not object to hot, elven company, but I think perhaps I have missed a bit of the story while I have been so wound up in my own events."
Lando's happy laugh is the best sound Gim's waking ears have ever heard. Lando says, "There is a bit of a story, and I promise to tell it all. The short version is she makes the best noises when eating treats, and I have every indication of being able to enjoy your chocolate creation with a bit of appreciative Seeker as a chaser. Let me braid your hair, and I will tell more."

The next few minutes are filled with hair-related domesticity, good-natured teasing, feigned embarrassment, praise of the distinction that a fine scar adds to a strong face, and some defense of the continued use of eye liner under deprivation. Gim is happy for Lando--beyond happy for Lando. She feels the strain of long and painful guilt relax just a little. As far as Gim knows, Lando gives his heart rarely but completely. She hopes Cassandra knows this is not a casual interest.

After a bit of bustling about, they are ready to go when they hear a knock on the door. They call out for admission, and Solas opens the door. Solas says, "I thought we might walk up to the Chantry together."

While Solas isn't effusive, Gim thinks his coming by is a good sign that he hasn't withdrawn into himself the way he did the last time she healed him. She graces him with a smile and takes the liberty of threading her arm through his as they start up the path. Lando walks along next to her until they can see Cassandra ahead standing by the door to the Chantry. Gim isn't surprised when Lando skips ahead, but she is taken aback when Solas shows an indulgent and knowing smile. It seems Solas is aware of, and well-disposed towards, this new relationship.

As they walk down the corridor to the war room, Gim sees Mother Giselle in rapt conversation with a woman who...Gim's spirit sees it immediately: this woman is tranquil. Mother Giselle is asking her about being tranquil. Gim doesn't stop, but she will have to carefully talk to this woman in the future. She sees that Solas has noted her attention. Solas looks angry. Anger could mean so many things here. Gim will keep an eye on it.

As they enter the room, Gim catches the tail-end of a conversation that is clearly about Chancellor Roderick. Josephine is saying to Cullen and Leliana, "...as I have told him he is free to go, and I have apologized for his brief confinement, but he insists he must talk to her."

Gim says, "Her. Me?"

Lando comes to stand beside her. "I know you will want to talk to him Gim. This time please tell me you will not do it alone."

Gim says, "This time I promise to take you with me. And Josephine, if you would like; You seem to be the person he is already speaking with, and you are good with difficult people, are you not?"

Josephine looks unsure; she looks from Leliana to Cullen, but neither of them move a facial muscle. Josephine says, "Herald, I did not want to impose upon you given the...events...of last night. But if you wish to speak to him, I will be happy to accompany you. Will we need soldiers when you meet with him?"

Lando barks a cynical snort of a laugh. "Josephine, I assure you, I can protect Gim from Roderick, and the sort of protection he will need from her could not be afforded by soldiers."

Josephine, smiles her competent smile, but the smile doesn't reach her eyes. She says, "We will visit the Chancellor later. For the moment, let us consider how best to approach the Mothers in Val Royeaux. I still maintain that having the Heralds address the clerics is not a terrible idea."

Cullen says angrily, "You can't be serious." Cullen looks stoic, but he looks like he has many things about which to be stoic. The bags under his eyes are huge, his hair is in more disarray than usual, and
he is holding himself more like a man who is afraid that relaxing his posture will cause pain than as a military man. Gim itches to get her hands on him. She knows exactly what is wrong with him.

Gim realizes she missed some of the conversation. Leliana and Josephine have been talking about sending them to Val Royeaux, and now they want a response. Fortunately, Lando was paying attention.

Lando says, "It is worth a try. With Cassandra along for guidance, we may make some headway. We went to the trouble to get Mother Giselle's advice: we should try following it."

Leliana says, "But what of the danger to you. Those who believe you killed the Divine are well-represented in Val Royeaux, and you must not underestimate the danger of an angry mob."

Cassandra shares a glance with Solas and says, "The five of us will go. We are a small, versatile group, and we will travel without ceremony. I am no more than usually concerned for our safety. Use the names Mother Giselle gave us to have the Mothers waiting for us. We've been through this: we must break the stalemate we are in. This is our only option to find help to seal the Breach."

Leliana and Cullen still look very unhappy, but they are holding their peace. Leliana says, "Now that we are agreed, I will make arrangements," and she leaves the room.

Cullen says, "Heralds," nods, and begins to follow.

Gim says, "Commander, may I speak with you a moment?" Cullen looks like he would rather face a hostile army by himself, but he is a professional, and she can see him resolve to endure this. He gestures that she should precede him out of the room. Lando starts to follow, but Gim gives him a look that he knows well, and he stops. The commander takes the lead once out of the room and he ushers her into a side chamber.

Once the door is closed, Cullen starts, "Herald, I had to act on the interests of the ..."

Gim cuts him off "Commander, I have no issue with anything you have done. You did not attack me, and you reacted appropriately. I hope we will continue to work together well." The commander looks confused but a bit less tense. Gim continues, "Cullen, I am a trained healer, and I know that you are in pain right now. Further, I know that you are a former Templar and you are suffering from lyrium withdrawal."

Cullen's confusion vanishes and his tension returns twice over. He stares ahead, past Gim, as he says, "Herald, these are personal matters unless you doubt my ability to perform my duties..."

Once again, Gim cuts him off. "I have faith in you, but I can help you. May I please heal you?"

Cullen's eyes snap to Gim's. He says, "I would prefer to continue as I am, but I appreciate the gesture."

Gim says, "It isn't a gesture, and I would urge you to reconsider. Are you completely sure that your suffering will not compromise the Inquisition in any way? That you would not hesitate because of a headache? That your nausea would not keep you from eating long enough that you would become weaker? That your joint pains will not keep you from adequately training your troops? That your emotions will be stable enough to keep you from snapping at a soldier who needed another tone—one you would have ordinarily given him?" Gim knows she has listed the usual symptoms of lyrium withdrawal—minus the nightmares and the cravings—but she does not think mentioning those will help her case.

Cullen says, "You healed me before, and it was helpful, but all the symptoms came back. You will
be gone from Haven soon: you cannot keep me healed constantly. I must learn to cope."

Gim says, "Actually, I made some adjustments to lessen your symptoms the last time I healed you. You may not choose to believe me, but your symptoms between then and now would be worse if I had not done that. I know you are trying to out-wait your symptoms, and I believe you will be able to do that, but lessening them now will not make your enduring the full sum of them less likely. You are not the first person I have helped through withdrawal. I will not only help your immediate symptoms, I will make some changes in your body that will alter the way your residual lyrium is processed: accepting treatment will not dishonor your strength and commitment. And of course, I would never tell anyone about this."

Gim can tell Cullen has another objection, and that it is a big one. She waits. Finally. He says, "Additionally, and I hope you realize how much faith I am putting into you by mentioning this, the thought of a magic user who is immune to the Rite of Tranquility is a terrifying one for someone of my training."

Gim says, "I don't blame you, which is not to say that I agree with the use or the results of the ritual. I am bound by restrictions more permanent than tranquility, and I am on your side. Until the Breach is closed, you are stuck with me." She grins during the last part. If they had an easier relationship, she would have poked him.

Cullen is no longer so stiff. He does look like he doesn't believe everything she has said, but he says slowly, "How long will this take, and what preparations will you need."

Gim says, "I need no preparations but your permission to touch you and a tiny bit of forbearance as I glow. We can do it now."

Cullen nods. The instant his head starts to drop in assent, Gim is reaching for his neck. She would have normally taken his hand, but he is wearing gloves. She reaches through his furred pauldrons and touches his neck and the line of his chin. In other situations, this would be an intimate touch, and this thought reminds her how very beautiful Cullen is when he is in less pain. Gim can tell that Cullen is not reminded of intimacy, and she can see the effort he is putting into not pulling away from her. She brings up her glow and that effort intensifies.

Gim rushes for the headache first, thinking that the cessation of that signature pain will win her a little patience. The inflammation and muscular tension are quickly dealt with, and the commander cannot repress the sigh of relief he releases. Next she deals with his digestive system and his joints, and Cullen's stiffness is replaced with the normal stance of a soldier at rest. Finally she makes the organ tweaks she made last time. His symptoms will return, just as he said, but this change will make them return more slowly. Gim is done, but she doesn't remove her hand.

Gim says, "Commander, the physical effects of lyrium withdrawal are considerable, but they are not the hardest symptoms to deal with. You have broken from a way of life that was your world for years. You need someone to talk to about this. I fear you will discount what I have to say, but I need you to understand: I know what an incredible thing you are doing and how impossible many others have found it. I honor your dedication and commitment and I will never take it for granted. As we work together, we are going to disagree. Never think that because I disagree with you, I don't respect you."

Cullen looks stunned--perhaps a bit horrified. Gim decides she has already overwhelmed him; she might as well go the whole way. She steps closer to him, slides her hand more to the back of his neck, and wraps her other hand around his waist. She lays her head on his breastplate and tries very hard to indicate that Cullen is precious and worthy of care.
Cullen doesn't move at first, which is already a bit of a victory. Then he gently puts one hand on her back. He's still stiff, but he's trying, and that is more than anyone could ask.

She steps away as she says, "Don't let anyone get to you with stupid assumptions about our being at odds. We know what we are. We know there is no bad blood between us."

Cullen's hand goes to the back of his neck where her hand lately was. He says, "Maker's breath! No bad... yes, Herald. As you say."

Gim says, "Do you want me to get Varric to apologize? You know, I am pretty sure that you would have done the same if someone had been cavalier about the loss of someone you care for."

Cullen still flustered, throws up his hands in the universal gesture for stop and says, "No need." Then he tilts his head and says, "care for?"

Gim smiles like she sees something surprising and wonderful and says, "I think so." She reaches for the door knob, but she turns back and says, "I wouldn't expect it in public, but if you could bring yourself to call me by my name, I would take it as a friendly gesture."

As she leaves the room, she hears quietly behind her, "Thank you...Gim." There was a long pause before her name, but he used it. She is smiling to herself when she realizes she is essentially running into Solas and Lando. Solas looks grim, but Lando looks like normal Lando.

Lando says, "See, I told you it was nothing dire. She just does this. If her little side consultations throw you, you will be spending a lot of time out of kilter."

Solas looks as if he is consciously composing his face. Gim smiles at him and waits. Finally Solas says, "It seems I must trust you. I am working on it."

Gim throws her arms around Solas and squeezes him tightly. Almost before Solas can return the embrace, Gim is off and walking out the Chantry door. She hears Lando say as she walks off, "She makes it hard sometimes, but trusting her is usually worth it."

She almost doesn't hear Solas's response, but it drifts out the stone doorway: "So it would seem."

Chapter End Notes

Comments and criticisms welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.

Thanks to my fabulous beta, genuinelyterribleperson.
After saying a hasty goodbye to Solas, Lando runs after Gim and catches her around the waist. He says, "Where do you go with such purpose, Gim?"

Gim says, "I need to find out what ingredients I have access to and if there is a kitchen I can use. If I'm going to have to try to bake in our cabin, I want to know as soon as possible."

"You are in luck," Lando says as he starts encouraging Gim to walk with him. "Josephine left me with directions to bring you to her so you can talk with the chancellor. You can ask her all about kitchens and such, after."

Gim smiles at him, and suddenly he feels more like he is leading a dance and less like he is shoving a druffalo around. They arrive at a nondescript cottage, and when Lando knocks, Josephine opens the door. They stamp the snow off their feet before entering the main room. Lando holds back a bit, assuming Gim will indicate if she needs him.

The room they have come into is warm, well-appointed, and clearly furnished with meetings and paperwork in mind: nothing is out of place, and everything is in rigid rows and right angles. There is a large desk on the far side of the room, and nearby, Josephine and the chancellor are standing by two of four starkly grouped chairs. The one element of the room that is not bare and utilitarian is the statue of Andraste upon a small altar.

Lando stands by one of the unused seats, but Gim walks straight up to the Chancellor. Everything about her manner indicates that this is a visit between friends, but Chancellor Roderick does not look so welcoming.

Gim walks straight up and offers her hand. She says, "I'm so sorry that you were treated poorly last night, Chancellor. I hope you forgive them for their actions during a time of stress."

Lando is not surprised when the chancellor does not take Gim's hand. His gaze is so straight and intense that Lando could almost believe the chancellor was unaware of the proffered hand. In his creaky voice, he says, "As I understand it, you are the reason I was released."

"Yes, Chancellor," says Gim respectfully, dropping her hand smoothly. "As soon as I figured out
that you were in custody I argued for your release."

The chancellor appears to be thinking. After a moment, he says, "I am concerned that you are either incredibly naive, or you are lacking good sense."

Josephine, bustling into placation, says, "Oh Chancellor, I am sure that the Herald had some evidence that you were not involved."

Gim, without taking her eyes away from the chancellor's, says "But I didn't. To be clear, I had no evidence that you were involved, either."

To Gim's side, Josephine sputters to a stop and makes a gesture indicating she is giving up on this part of the conversation.

Chancellor Roderick is still holding Gim's gaze. He says, "Then why did you ask that I be released?"

Gim says, "because if you were part of a larger conspiracy, I was no safer with you in the dungeon, and whether or not you were part of a larger conspiracy, our pleas would be less likely to be taken seriously in Val Royeaux if word got out that you were confined or punished."

The chancellor gives a grim rictus of a smile. He says, "Now that is the sort of reasoning I can appreciate. Why didn't you put it that way to them?"

Josephine stands on tiptoe and interjects, "I too would like to know this."

Gim glances at first Lando and then Josephine apologetically, and then she says, "Because if they hadn't figured that out for themselves, they weren't going to listen to a supposedly hysterical female. Because some men lose all perspective when they are protecting loved ones." Now her glance goes back to Lando for a moment, and while it is there it is soft and loving. "Because I was very tired, but there were things I needed to accomplish, and I didn't want to waste time arguing. And finally because their willingness to lock you up, at least initially, told me that they--mostly--were not happy to have me as a diminished tool. To be fair, it is possible they also followed my reasoning, but wanted me to believe that they valued my life on the same scale as they valued their cause."

Josephine says in a very tired voice, almost as an aside to herself and not to the others, "I only wish I could claim that was the case."

The chancellor finally gestures to the chairs and sits in his own. Gim, and then Lando and Josephine, also sit in their appropriate chairs. Their arrangement looks very much like it lacks two chessboards to be placed between the chairs.

The chancellor says, "I am sure you noticed that I did not disclaim all responsibility for your attack."

Gim says, "I did. However, though I have no direct evidence either way, my sense of you as a person is that you would never advocate such chaotic retribution. You want us in custody and on trial: not subject to mob justice."

The chancellor nods like a teacher who has been given the answer to a trick question. He says, "It perturbs me greatly that my pursuing the actions of my conscience left the door open for the actions of violent zealots."

Gim says, "Look to My work, said the Voice of Creation. See what My children in arrogance wrought."

Lando says automatically before he can stop himself, "First Canticle of Andraste."
The chancellor looks from Gim to Lando with a furrowed brow. He says, "The Chant is no less true when quoted by an unbeliever. I will grant I deserved that, but not that you had the right to say it to me."

Gim says, "Honestly, Chancellor, I can appreciate your desire for justice. We are leaving for Val Royeaux tomorrow, but I very much hope they won't hold us over for trial. If you had seen what the demons and the conflict have done to the Hinterlands, and how much better shape it is now that we have closed the rifts, I think you would understand why we are so focused on closing the Breach. Sometimes the legal niceties are less important than people's lives."

The chancellor says, with a preemptive glance at Lando, "The Fourth Canticle of Benedictions says 'Blessed are they who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter,' but I am no longer certain which of us in the room is an appropriate subject for that verse." He becomes silent, and no one else steps into the pause. Eventually the chancellor continues, "From this point, until you return, I will seek no counsel, send no birds, write no letters. I will do nothing to foment rancor against the Inquisition or its heralds."

Gim bows her head and says, "Thank you, Chancellor."

The Chancellor says, "History may see this as an afterthought, though I am unsure if this point will be remembered as realization or betrayal."

Gim says, "The one who repents, who has faith, unshaken by the darkness of the world, he shall know true peace."

The chancellor says quickly, "Transfigurations ten, but you have altered the verse."

Gim says, "I think I will be forgiven."  

The chancellor is silent for a while--his thoughts clearly turned inward. Finally he sighs and says, "And so do I, child. And so do I. Now leave me to my reflections."

Gim says, "Before I go, would you allow me to heal you?"

Chancellor Roderick, with more kindness and sadness than Lando had thought him capable of, says, "No. I don't think I will let you do that now. I will consider it when you return from Val Royeaux."

Gim nods her head in acquiescence, and all three of them file out of the chancellor's cabin. When they get outside, Josephine says, "I am not sure why you wanted me there, Gim."

Gim says, "It might not have gone like that. And besides, I suspect you have a number of ideas as to why I wanted you there."

Josephine says, "I might. I will think on this."

Lando says, "Gim wants to know about baking ingredients and if there is a kitchen she can use."

Lando lets the conversation between Josephine and Gim wash over him. He doesn't need the particulars; Gim sounds happy, and he is pretty sure he will have an exceptional delicacy to present to Cassandra later.

Josephine leads them all back to the Chantry and into a private kitchen that was used lately to prepare meals for Chantry officials. Gim assures Lando she has all she needs, and he heads back to the cabin for the chocolate. When he gets back, Gim is beating egg whites, and she immediately puts him to work grinding nuts. The next few hours pass with Lando aiding as he can, mysterious metal sheets covered in dollops of dough going into and out of the oven and resting around the kitchen, and the
two of them foraging for a light lunch.

Part of the conversation is a continuation of their earlier conversation about Cassandra. Gim is looking for more clues about the final form of the offered treats.

After a time, she presents him with a plate of perfectly circular, domed confections about the size of a child's palm. Each creation is lightly colored with an amazingly beautiful red dragon flying across it. They are things of wonder. He looks at Gim and says, "How can anyone eat these?"

She laughs. She says, "They are mostly air and sugar and they will melt if you do not. The Orlesians call them macarons. I made two for each member of our party and the advisors, as well as a few more for some folks I wanted to treat. Take the four for you and Cassandra, and I will distribute the rest. I will happily clean up and you will have time to find Cassandra before she can learn of the treats from anyone else."

Lando grins, twists some baking paper into a protective container for the macarons, gives Gim a big sloppy kiss on the cheek, and runs off to their cabin. At the cabin he stuffs a blanket into his pack and then he heads to the practice yard.

Cassandra is where he expects her to be, but she stops practicing as soon as she sees him. He walks up to her and says warmly, "If you have some time, I have a gift for you that I think you will like."

"A gift? How intriguing," she says. She looks very sure of herself, but something about her makes Lando believe he knows what she was like as a happy child--before the losses that made her more severe.

"Would you walk with me? I would prefer to give you the gift somewhere more private," he says.

Cassandra's eyebrow goes up, in inquiry but she looks no less happy. Lando gestures towards the lake, and they walk off together. Lando has a place in mind. There is a sheltered bench out of the normal traffic patterns, and it has a nice view. As they walk, Lando asks, "Have you had your mid-day meal?"

She gasps a bit as she turns towards him and says, "Yes. Was I...Should I have ..."

"Oh," he hastens to break in, "It is good that you have eaten, because I have brought you an after-meal treat."

"A treat!" And now her eyes are full on sparkling. Lando thinks this woman cannot possibly have been pampered enough. He would like to change this.

As they get to the bench, he invites her to sit and then he spreads the blanket across their laps. Once they are settled he gets out his twisted paper and sets it between them with great ceremony. Cassandra looks at him with open anticipation and a little suspicion that this is a joke. He opens the paper, and the four beautiful macarons are visible to both of them.

Cassandra's hands fly to her mouth and her eyes are wide with astonishment as they move from the macarons to his face. She says, "For me?" She looks frightened. The earlier comparison to the child version of Cassandra makes him briefly consider that she fears they will be taken from her.

Lando says, "For us to enjoy together. I got some special ingredients for Gim and asked her to make them for us. She has some she will give to the others."

Cassandra says, "I can't believe we are to eat these. I have had macarons as a child in Neverra, but never any with such beauty." Her hands are still up by her face, but now they are clasped below her
chin. She says *macarons* with the full Orlesean-r down in her throat. Everything this woman does makes him think of sex. He must have patience. They are not there yet, and he wants both of them to savor every step on the path. On the other hand, no harm in projecting a little lust now.

He looks at her and says, "Gim says they will not last, even if we do not eat them. Besides, some experiences are worth a little destruction, don't you think?"

As he says this, her eyes move from the macarons to him, and she no longer reminds him of a child. She says, "Then I am glad I get to share this experience with you."

He picks up one of the macarons and slowly moves it towards her mouth. Unlike the last time he did such a thing, she does not move her head away from him. Instead, she licks her lips slowly with her eyes locked on his. His response must be somehow visible, because she juts her chin in mild triumph in his response. Then she opens her mouth. The motion looks very practiced and deliberately inviting right up to the moment that the macaron hits her tongue.

Pretense gone, her eyes shoot open and then snap shut as she bites down on the macaron. "Mmmmmm," she moans. Her hand takes possession of the macaron as she eats the rest. Every movement and sound is a delight, and Lando savors her eating the macaron as much as she does eating it. Little crumbs are left on the corner of her mouth when she finishes. Before she can lick them off herself, Lando moves forward and firmly attaches his open mouth to the corner of hers. She opens to him immediately, and she moans again as he kisses her deeply while scooting closer and enveloping her in his arms.

The paper crinkles, and she jerks minutely out of his arms. "Attention! Zee macarons!" she says, once again slipping into the Orlesian accent.

"Cassandra, you wound me. Do you mean to say you love chocolate more than me?"

Cassandra tilts her head and gives the wry, lopsided smile that is the first thing he can remember loving about her. She says teasingly, "There are some things a man should not ask."

He grins and says, "In that case, have another macaron."

She looks guilty now as she says, "But it is your turn."

His voice is hoarse and he doesn't shy away from showing the need she stirs in him. He says, "Believe me, I fully enjoy watching the macaron enter your mouth." When his eyes go to her mouth, she licks her lips again.

Lando did not know Cassandra could play the coquette; now he knows. She says, "Did it not occur to you that I might enjoy watching your mouth in action with the same delight?"

"In that case..." he says. He picks up a macaron and brings it towards his mouth vertically. He extends his tongue and slides the pointed tip up the edge of the macaron and back down again while gazing into Cassandra's eyes. Her eyebrows go up and her mouth drops open. He can sense her breasts moving but he keeps his eyes with hers. Then he moves the macaron so the dragon decoration is towards him and he uses the flat of his tongue against it to completely remove the decoration in smooth undulations. He shows her the now bare top of Gim's creation. Cassandra visibly swallows.

Only then does he place the rest of the macaron into his mouth and consume it. He is thinking it really is very good when suddenly his arms and mouth are filled with Cassandra. He hears the crinkling of paper, but she does not withdraw this time.
Chapter End Notes

These are the macarons that inspired Lando's gift. And now that I have learned to do this, here is the self-portrait of Frida Khalo that calls out to Gim's appearance. Here is a photo of the real Frida when she was very young, wearing a suit for a family portrait.

Comments and criticism welcome here or via email to kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Too Wise to Woo Peaceably

Chapter Summary

Party time! Cakes and ale! Declarations! Gossip!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gim has rarely been in a cooking area specifically designed to be easily cleaned, and with no one in the room, the magic-aided scouring is more a lark than a chore.

She borrows what looks like a delivery box together with quite a bit more baking paper and leaves the room. Her first stop is Josephine's office. When she comes in, the tranquil woman she saw earlier is leaving. Josephine is seated at her desk, but she stops writing when she looks up to see Gim.

Gim says, "Thank you so much for your help earlier, Josie. I would like to ask for your help again, though you should feel free to say no."

"Herald, I would be honored to be of service," says Josephine.

Gim frowns in an exaggerated manner at Josephine while crossing her arms. Josephine tilts her head and looks confused. Gim says, "And to think I actually called you Josie."

Josephine laughs and says, "Let me try this again. Gim, I would be honored to be of service."

Gim says, "That's better. Do you have someone who can run errands for you or get messages to people?" When Josephine nods, Gim continues, "Do you think you could get a collection of our friends to the Tavern in about an hour? Those I want are Cullen, Leliana, you, Adan, and the dwarf scouts Lace and Maya if they are in Haven."

Josephine is leaking repressed curiosity. She tilts her head, points her pen at Gim, and says slowly, "I could do that. First, you must tell me: does this have anything to do with the wisps of aroma from the Chantry kitchen?"

Gim smiles confidently. She says, "Good guess!"

Josephine quickly stands up and says, "In that case, they shall be there--you have my word."

Gim turns to leave but then turns back to Josephine and says, "One other thing: can you tell me about the tranquil woman I saw leaving as I came in?"

"Helisma?" asks Josephine, "I am afraid I don't know her well. She works with Minaeve on creature research."

"Thank you so much, Josie," Gim calls as she leaves the room.

Walking down towards the tavern, Gim still hasn't decided how she wants to give Solas and Varric their macarons. She would guess that Varric would enjoy any gathering, but there is an itch of doubt about that. The easiest thing is just to ask him, so she walks to his tent, where he is busily writing.
Varric's face brightens the moment he sees Gim. He says, "I'm so glad to see you bustling about, Beauty." His face falls a bit and he continues, "I don't want to bring you down on such a crisp and clear day, but I've seen the transformation of tranquility before, and the thought of losing you that way...” He stops, exhales sharply through pursed lips, and shakes his head. "I just...I don't have words--at least not yet."

Gim puts the box down and gives Varric a quick hug. She says, "You don't have to because I'm fine. More than fine, in fact. I've spent the first part of the day baking and I have some desserts I'm going to distribute to the advisors and a few others in the tavern. I wanted to know if you would like to join."

Varric shuffles his feet and looks down. He says, "Advisors. I take it that includes Curly?"

Gim gives Varric a sideways glance of admonishment. "Varric," she says, "I've talked with him about this and he and I are good. You have to give the man who betrayed his evil bitch commander for you some leeway, don't you think?"

Varric says, "For you I will, but I'm not apologizing."

Gim grins and says, "Who asked you to? I only wish I had seen it."

"It is a good story, isn't it?" Varric says animatedly while gesturing to whatever he was writing. "And your waking up is quite the climax." Taking on a conspiratorial and possibly over-dramatic tone, Varric continues with, "Just to give you fair warning, in my version, you might fly into a different person's arms than you did last night. I think the phrase 'my hero' might appear."

Gim laughs and says, "I don't recall your ever taking center stage in 'The Tale of the Champion'."

Varric suddenly seems more serious as he says, "Maybe this time I want to take the time to do it right."

Gim's breath is harder to catch, and a warm wave sweeps though her body. She doesn't know what to say--she isn't even sure she remembers her own name. She finally settles on, "Varric..."

Varric's voice is less serious as he says, "Don't worry: I have, as my mother would say, the patience of the Dwarva. I don't need to push. Besides, I figure I am ahead of the game. After all, I get to sleep with you every night."

Varric is grinning by the end, and Gim feels her tension diminish, but the butterflies in her stomachs and the tightness in her hips stay. She picks up her box and says, "Well, then I will see you in the tavern in a half hour or so."

Varric says, "I look forward to it." The way he says it, Gim has complete faith that he really does consider it the highlight of his day. Varric is dangerously charming.

Gim backs up and then turns and half-runs to Solas's cabin, where she is about to knock on the door when it opens. Solas takes her box and sets in on his table as he says, "You often seem to arrive here out of breath."

Gim smiles and says, "You don't object to my using you as an escape, do you?"

Solas still has his body turned away from her, leaning down with his hands on the box; he turns his head and fixes her with an almost smile. His eyes are not light blue today: in the shadow they are darker--a gray so deep as to be almost black. He says, "On the contrary. I approve." He rises, turns towards her and places one hand on each of her shoulders. "I would wish to return the comfort you
Gim is startled. She says, "Comfort? I had the impression I was more unsettling than comforting."

Solas says, "I will not deny that some of our encounters have left me initially off balance, but to have a trusted companion is surprisingly soothing."

Gim realizes her mouth is open. She shuts it and blinks up at him. Finally she says, "I like the sound of ‘trusted’.

He says, "What is in the box?"

She shakes her head to restart her spinning brain. She says, "I made some desserts to hand out in the tavern in a bit, and I wanted to know if you wanted to come to the party or have me give you yours now."

"Intriguing," he says. "And who will be there?"

She says, "The advisors, Varric, Adan, and possibly one or two of the scouts we have met."

He tilts his head. He says, "No Lando or Cassandra?"

Gim laughs and says, "Oh no. He actually asked me to make him some courting chocolate to give to her. They are off somewhere enjoying it. I made extras for the rest of us."

Solas says, "May I see them?"

"Of course," she says as she gets out one of the twisted paper packages and then hands it to him.

He opens the package and gazes down on the macarons. He picks one up, sniffs it delicately, bounces it in his palm and says, "siu'era, and exquisitely decorated. The flavoring is unfamiliar to me."

Gim says, "You call them ‘Sweet dreams’? The Orlesians call them *macarons* and the flavor you smell is chocolate. It comes from Antiva. In the Freemarches, we use it for special occasions and gifts--particularly for courting."

Solas's attention is pulled away from the sweet in his hand. "He has chosen well. The dragon clearly recalls her heritage. I wonder what she will give to him in return." Solas picks up the macaron and bites into it. He closes his eyes, freezes, and then chews slowly. Gim watches in fascination, but the filling is starting to run off the edge of the confection and it will soon besmear his tunic.

Gim gestures ineffectually and says, "Um...the...filling..." In response, Solas opens his eyes, pops the rest into his mouth and then runs one long finger along his full lips and then into his mouth where he sucks it. Gim is almost in a trance watching him.

Solas says, "Wars have been fought over the fealty of someone who can create such delicacies. Did you use magic?"

Gim says, "A bit, but not in a major way. You have watched me use more magic while cooking with stale bread in the forest."

He is still holding the paper with his other macaron. He says, grinning mischievously, "You have given me courting chocolate."

Gim backs up as she says, "Oh no. From Lando to Cassandra it is courting chocolate. From me to
the five or six I will bestow them upon today, it is just dessert."

Solas says, "And if I should wish for it to be courting chocolate?"

Gim is starting to get mad. She says, "You have an unfortunate sense of humor. I don't know what you hope to get out of teasing me this way, but I don't find it funny."

Solas puts the paper and macaron down next to the box and walks slowly to Gim. He says, "Nor do I." He runs the long fingers of one hand down her face, pushing the locks that have escaped her braid behind her ear. He looks into her eyes, and there is none of the arrogance or calculation she has seen before. He says, "I have learned that I must ask. Will you let me kiss you again, little spitfire?"

Gim says a little frantically, "Why would an immortal wish to be courted by a half dwarven exile?

Solas says, "Why indeed. So special you are, da'ean, my little bird, that in my long years I have never guessed that one like you could be. Varric has fewer years, and he fought it at first, but he also sees you. You call to us: we answer."

Gim says, "I don't recall doing any calling." Gim can feel her brow screwing up and her mouth contorting. If there was ever a time she was desirable, now is not that time. She is overwhelmed and close to panic. He could kill her. He could kill Lando. He could destroy the world. He may have already destroyed the world. Isn't that what the Inquisition is? An organization dedicated to mitigating Solas's actions that would otherwise destroy the world? And Solas wants to kiss her--again! How did she get here? She starts to ugly cry--with hiccups.

Solas strokes her hair and says soothingly, "Now, da'ean, I did not know this would shock you so. Have I not kissed you twice already? Have I not spoken openly of my interest?"

Gim hiccups out, "You did that as a kindness, and you...you are my patient. That is wrong!"

"I was your patient. I have no need for further healing. But I do not mean to distress you. I will show more reserve: no longer your patient, I will instead...be...patient."

Solas withdraws a little. He is no longer impinging on her space. He smooths her hair again, but without the heat of earlier. "There are worse things in this harsh world than to accept the attentions of men besmitten by you. You do not even need to choose. Your course will become clear to you: I am sure of it."

Solas crosses to the other side of his desk, removes his water bottle from his pack, and opens it. He pours some water on a cloth, walks over to Gim, and delicately dabs at her face with the cloth. The damp cloth running over her skin feels good. She no longer feels quite so repellent. She looks up at Solas; his manner now is so different than before. Now he is acting more like a caring brother than a suitor, and it makes her feel much less anxious.

Solas says, "I believe we have a small gathering to attend. Let us go. I will carry the refreshments for you." He picks up the box, gestures her out and then follows her to the tavern. Before he opens the door he says, "Are you ready to socialize?" She nods, and he opens the door.

Everyone she asked for is there except for Lace. When they come in, everyone turns to look at them, and there are smiles and anticipatory looks. Gim would guess that Cullen had to be dragged here, but he is making the best of it, and he is smiling along with everyone else. Everyone seems to have a drink already. Varric walks up and says, "What kind of drink can I get you, Beauty?"

Gim says, "I like tea with my chocolate." Solas and Varric share disgusted looks, but Varric goes off to Flissa to ask after tea.
Leliana approaches and says, "Do I hear rumors of chocolate?"

Gim laughs. She says, "Yes, you must all thank Josephine for getting me some Antivan chocolate. The sweets I made are small, but they are special. I just wanted to thank you all for making us so welcome and helping us in so many ways."

Solas drops the box down lower, and Gim starts handing out paper twists to people. She gives Flissa the package that had been meant for Lace, so everyone in the room has a baking paper twist--even Solas seems to have his.

Gim says, "Go ahead, open them." First the room is filled with crinkling paper, and then with sound of appreciative cooing.

Leliana says, "You made these? You can make Orlesian pastry? And so beautiful!"

Gim says, "Oh no. Just a few things. Lando likes to get me special ingredients, and then I must learn something good that takes that ingredient. This is my best recipe. I hope you like it."

With that the nibbling begins.

Josephine is the first of the women to start moaning about the chocolate, but Leliana, Flissa, and Maya join in. Gim thinks they are overdoing it to egg each other on. They accompany the sounds with faces of ecstasy and with smacked lips. Gim sees the men looking at the women and then looking at each other like they are silently asking "are you hearing what I am hearing?"

Josephine finishes her macaron and approaches Gim. She says, "Gim, I just want to take you to visit my family--especially my sister, who is an artist like you. You know how to respect the true Antivan ingredient. Tell me, do you like café? Do you ever use it as a flavoring?"

Gim is excited. Is this an offer? Please let it be an offer. She says, "I love it, and I will drink it, use it as a flavoring, or bathe in it if you give me enough of it. I had no idea anyone had coffee here."

Josephine tips her head close and sounds very conspiratorial as she says, "I will get you some, and you must make sure to keep me apprised of your café-related creations."

Gim says, "Deal!" and gives Josephine a hug.

Gim makes a point to speak a bit with everyone who came. Gim sees Leliana and Josephine conferring, and she gets the impression Leliana has arranged some sort of side-deal with Josephine concerning coffee creations. Everyone is very kind about the sweets, although Varric states apologetically that he is "more of an Ale person than a cake person."

To this, Solas says, "If you would like to part with your second dragon macaron, I would be only too happy to buy you a drink of your choosing." Varric seems to think this is a great deal, and the two of them approach Flissa. Gim watches them for a while, and they seem to be enjoying each other's company. Something about this is unsettling. She shakes her head: it should not be unsettling--it should be gratifying to have her friends get along. Should be.

She moves her attention to Cullen when he asks where Cassandra and Lando are. Just as Gim is trying to figure out what to say, the door opens and Cassandra and Lando come in. Cass and Lando are acting like a couple, and Gim can see that many of the room are seeing this for the first time. Flissa and Cullen don't look that happy about it, but Leliana, Josephine, and Maya huddle a bit, talking in whispered comments with pleased looks on their faces.

Lando breaks away from Cassandra and approaches Gim. Gim says, "And?"
Lando almost looks happy-drunk, but she knows he is sober. He says, "I hope you would like to be carried to our cabin tonight, because I think I owe you a lot of carting about."

Gim says, "That good, eh?"

Lando says, with sincerity and a serene look, "Better."

Gim says, "You aren't the only one in the courting business, you know."

Lando cocks his head and says, "Oh? Which one of them declared?"

Gim backhands his shoulder. "You knew? About both of them!"

Lando says, "Gim, everybody but you knew. But which one?"

Gim sighs heavily. She says, "Both of them."

Lando glances over at Solas and Varric and says, "and now they are drinking buddies?"

Gim says, "So it appears. It isn't going to surprise you that I have no idea what is going on."

Lando nods appreciatively. He says, "I think I need a drink. I also think it's going to be an interesting trip to Val Royeaux."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to FenxShiral, from whose lexicon I have created two words explained in the text: *sui'era* for sweet dreams (the Elvhen name for the spun air of a macaron) and *da'ean* for little bird.

Thanks to my beta, Genuinellyterribleperson, who calmed me down and told me I was not as lost as I initially thought. I ended up being pretty happy with it.

Comments and criticism welcome here or via email to kinako.ao00@gmail.com.
Chapter Summary

A dark night before entering Val Royeaux. I think this is what is called Smut and Fluff.

NSFW towards the end of the chapter. You would miss minimal, easily inferred, plot if you skipped that part.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lando wakes up at the end of their last night on the road with a tremendous sense of well-being. Perhaps it is improper to feel so good when the world is so endangered by the Breach, but honestly, Lando's whole life has taken place in a state of crisis, and it is hard to react appropriately to various shades of dire. Which is a more inappropriate time to be happy: when the children of your clan are starving, when a loved one is murdered, or when the world of demons is leaking more than usual into Thedas?

Lando knows that might sound glib, but it is only part of the confusing things going on. He certainly didn't expect to feel safer on the road with three who were strangers until recently than he did in a village--a village where he and Gim had an official residence and an organization to protect them. Lando knows he can depend on these supposed strangers, and the occasional rift they have encountered so far has been laughably easy to close--with the minor exception of the pain in his hand when the rifts actually snap shut.

Dropping out of the Frostbacks to warmer weather and clear skies is part of his cheer, and Gim's endearing befuddlement over being sought-after would normally have been the highlight of his year, but the main reason for his happiness is beaming at him through the firelight as he ducks out of his tent: powerful, passionate, precipitant Cassandra.

He and Cassandra aren't sharing a tent yet, and for a lot of good reasons--some of which Lando actually agrees with--but that doesn't keep them from finding and cherishing time alone. The other three have conspired to always have the two of them take the last two watches, and somehow or other, all three otherwise-stealthy companions make a good deal of noise as they exit their tents. Lando thinks this vast amount of mostly-private time wherein they can't quite sink into each other is perfect for this stage of their relationship.

Cassandra continues to have rather biting conversations with Varric, but Lando thinks it is more like recreational sparring than animosity. Lando laughed hard when, after Cassandra had said that she had recruited Commander Cullen and that Cullen didn't complain as Varric had, Varric had said Cullen's last boss was a raving lunatic who turned into a statue and that wasn't a high bar. Cassandra had tried to look stern when Lando burst out laughing, but she couldn't keep it up and soon she gave up trying and laughed along with them.

Cassandra looks like she is again ready to join him in laughter as he sits beside her and takes her hand. She says, "I believe I saw you doing your brotherly duty earlier. Are you actually worried that they are toying with her, or are you interested in protecting her honor?"
Lando laughs and says, "Gim would have a thing or two to say if I implied I had any authority over her honor. I have to admit part of my desire to talk to each of them was sheer confusion on my part. Perhaps their behavior is more typical among humans?"

Cassandra says, "You mean the fact that they act more like conspirators than rivals for the woman they have declared for? In Orlais, I have seen friendly sport made of wooing a lady, but nothing like this. They actually seem to wish each other well. I am sure you have noticed that they seem to have scheduled solo-time with Gim between them."

"Yes, that was one of the first things I brought up when I first talked to Solas. Would you believe it? First he said it was only fair, and second, he implied that time with Varric would be mentally restful for Gim after her more stimulating time with him. He actually used the word, 'stimulating'." Lando shakes his head in wonder and then continues, "He said he was not in a hurry, and that he and Gim were destined for each other because of their similar nature."

Cassandra looks thoughtful. She says, "This cannot but make me think of the condemnation of the magisters: 'Only pride and desire in their eyes, and He knew that they knew Him not'."

Lando reflexively pops out with, "Third Canticle of Silence."

Cassandra grabs his hand harder. She sounds agitated as she says, "Every time you do that I think on your having had to learn it because the Chantry was your enemy. I think what happened to your wife, and ..."

Lando says, "Shush, love. I know the Chantry is vitally important to you. I know there are many good Andrastians. The Andrate who treated with Shartan would never have been my enemy. You are not my enemy." He grins and nuzzles her ear as he says, "Unless you want to do a little play-acting and be very severe with me..."

She pushes him away but her smile is wicked and her eyes are afire. She says, "You do make it difficult to have a serious discussion. Now tell me about your discussion with Varric."

Lando says, "Varric said he had seen what time pressure does to otherwise good relationships, and 'when Beauty makes her choice, she should feel it as an unstated assumption of the proper configuration of the world.'" The last part is said with a storyteller's flourish. Cassandra appears to like his rendition of Varric: she scoots over to regain the distance she created when she pushed him away. Lando continues, "So I asked him what if Gim chose Solas? When would Varric withdraw his interest? Varric told me that she could have Solas's babies and Varric would still want to be with her, but if she told him to cease his attentions, he would, instantly."

Cassandra nods slowly. She says, "I had thought him to be cynical and manipulative until now, but I must admit, he sounds sincere. And I must say, while Gim seems gobsmacked, signs that she is enjoying their attentions are creeping in." After a moment, Cassandra adds, "I guess I can understand a hobo apostate showing his interest through magic lessons, but I believe he would as soon lecture a nug...or the wind. The man surely loves the sound of his own declamations."

Lando says, "That is true for you or me, but Gim seems to like the lessons. Although she occasionally seems more irritated or embarrassed than pleased. This is a big change for her. Even good upheavals require adjustment." After another long pause during which Lando traces each of Cassandra's fingers and then brings her wrist to his nose for a deep inhalation, Lando says, "She never seems irritated at Varric though. I wonder what that means."

Cassandra scoots a bit and is animated as she says, "How could she be irritated by the stories he crafts for her! That new heroine, Ginhan, who happens to be half-dwarf, half-elf who has a dwarven,
crossbow-using, sidekick! The way she has a hidden identity and fights crime in Kirkwall by night while being an unassuming cook by day!"

Lando says, "Well. I think we may have found the jealousy we were hunting for earlier." But, he smiles at her and squeezes her hand while he says it.

She says, "Indeed I am not jealous. I just hope he won't neglect his other writings."

Lando says, "Other writings? And I thought you just wanted to make sure you could hear all of Ginhan's adventures." He can't help but note that Cassandra is looking a mite evasive.

Cassandra says, "I do enjoy the stories, but I know I should leave them alone when he tells them."

Lando says, "I haven't noticed that Gim minds if you listen with her. I also haven't noticed that Varric minds repeating himself later--whether or not you show any interest. For that matter, I think Gim is getting more joy out of observing me with you than she is out of the company of her own suitors. If I try to spend time with her she always shoos me off to find you. I want her to get to know you the way I have come to know you."

At this, Cassandra presses her body closely against Lando's, puts her hands behind his neck, and pulls his mouth to hers in a kiss that leaves his toes curling and his leggings uncomfortable. Then she pulls back and rests forehead to forehead in what has become their signature move and says, "Perhaps not exactly in the way you have come to know me."

Lando could stay like this forever--after some clothing adjustment, at least. He really is a bit worried about Gim and Cass getting to know each other, though. Cassandra appears to be trying to win over the only remaining member of Lando's family--as a well-brought-up young woman would. As if Gim would ever disapprove of any woman Lando loved! Cassandra could throw druffalo pies at Gim and Gim would still approve of her. He must get Cassandra to loosen up. How can Gim learn to love the full Cassandra if Cassandra is always putting her best (and much less interesting) face forward? Lando loves Cass's anger and her rashness and her absolutely insane need to protect others to the point of self-harm. Lando loves her resilience in the face of quiet grief and her impatience with ceremony or duplicity of any kind. Lando loves that she always looks at him as if he is about to give her another precious macaron.

Speaking of macaron, Cassandra smells better than anything that ever came out of a bakery. Here, in the middle of the night after sleep and travel she smells of cookies. Why does the smell of cookies make his blood rush? He pulls her to him and grips her strong ass. Her gasp of pleasure reminds him that she loosens her armor during watch, and he knows just how to slip his hand beneath her under-tunic. He gently kisses her as he navigates her straps and overlapping folds of fabric.

Her skin is the smoothest, warmest, softest thing he has ever felt, and as his hand travels up her abdomen, he can feel her inhaling to make room. Cassandra does not have a large chest, and her fitted armor means that she can do without a breast band. As his hand moves up, the moment that his fingers touch the cusp of the fallen globe of her breast, he stills. She does not move, but she somehow communicates impatience to him. If there is anything in the universe more enthralling than knowing that the woman of your choice is on fire for you, Lando does not need to know what it is.

He inches further up, grabs her erect nipple between his thumb and forefinger and surges fully into the kiss. Her moan into his mouth when he squeezes her nipple harder pushes him near an edge that wouldn't be there if they had ever been able to fully explore their passions. His pulse is in his ears, overwhelming his blood and body past mere ache to the point of pain.

Suddenly she climbs onto his near thigh, riding against him in rut. He has to tense that leg--for her so
that her friction will be sweet and for him so that his leg survives her attentions. It is good. Just enough of his brain is needed to manage this and it keeps him from falling fully into release.

But then her hand is atop him, through his leggings, squeezing and stroking him and that addition undoes him completely. He grabs her ass perhaps too strongly--perhaps she will bruise--grinding her into his leg in rhythm with his pulses as his shudder and groan transmit themselves to her. They both quiver, twitch, gasp and then relax. Lando is embarrassed, but Cassandra is exultant.

She climbs off his leg, stands, and then leans over and cups his downcast face in her hands. When he looks up, she says, "I did not know that I could feel so powerful--so desirable--as you have made me feel. You do not know the gift that you are to me." She kisses him quickly, then looking at his face a moment more, she does it again, but slowly and gently. She says, "I don't know that I will survive time and leisure in a bed with you, but it is a danger I will willingly risk. Now you are briefly our only watch. I can't meet the Chantry Mothers with Lake Calenhad in my smalls."

With that she vanishes into the dark. He plans his own ministrations, grateful for the spare leggings he has in his pack and the creek that lies beyond the copse of trees behind him.

Val Royeaux would have to be awfully exciting to be of more moment than this time he has spent with Cassandra.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my marvelous Beta, Genuinelyterribleperson.

Comments and criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.ao00@gmail.com.
Trip no Further, Pretty Sweeting

Chapter Summary

The start of a very eventful day in Val Royeaux.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Most of the trip to Val Royeaux had been planned to avoid people, but on this bright and crisp morning, the party was approaching the Val Royeaux ferry, and there was no alternative route. Lando was glad they got everything sorted out on the first part of the trip with respect to the peculiarities of traveling with Gim.

The look on Cassandra's face when Lando had started explaining what Gim would do if she encountered anyone in need of healing would have been amusing—except that Lando knew that look was covering real frustration. Cassandra had tried so hard not to look dismissive, but she failed. Cass had been even more shocked when Lando brought Gim in for corroboration—as if Gim was somehow unaware about how her oaths impacted her own life and the lives of her companions—as if it would have been rude to bring it up.

Gim had said, in a manner that indicated that this should have been obvious to Cassandra, "There are more damaged people in the world than I can heal, and if I don't see them or hear them, my oaths don't kick in."

When Cassandra continued to look nonplussed, Lando had said, "Cassandra, could you deny the Maker, if it made things more convenient?"

Cassandra had looked offended at the question, and she immediately burst out with, "Never!" To Cassandra's credit, when she saw Gim and Lando looking at her expectantly, she realized on her own, without being told, that Gim's oaths were as sacred to Gim as the Maker was to Cassandra. Lando wondered if she, like Lando, was remembering their first conversation in the tavern in Haven, where Cassandra promised to be respectful of their beliefs. From that point, Cassandra had moved directly to coping with the eccentricities of the shorter of Andraste's Heralds.

Cassandra had been stationed in Val Royeaux for years, so she knew exactly how to plot a route that was beautiful, quiet, and just enough off the usual pathway to be free from troublesomely damaged people. Lando had been worried that Varric would constantly bemoan the lack of tavern access, but Cassandra always had them stop for the night close enough to a town that someone could be sent to retrieve a cask or two. As long as he had a mug in his hand, Varric was just as happy to tell stories by their fire as by a tavern hearth.

But now, as they approached the ferry, people were everywhere, and once on the ferry, there was the prospect of widespread seasickness to look forward to. Cassandra has told Lando of plans she has for once they reach the other side, but first they have to get past the Ferry. Lando finds Solas and says, "Is there any chance you could hide Gim's glow?"

Solas has clearly thought about this. He says, "If there are no Templars on board, I can ensure that specific individuals do not notice Gim or her glow. However, I am not sure that this should even be a
Solas turns to Gim, who has been watching this conversation from a few steps away. He says, "No one will be in danger of death or permanent injury because of a small number of hours of seasickness. Will your oaths require you to intervene because of something so inconsequential in the long term?"

Gim thinks about it. She says, "If it is just discomfort from a stranger, then I can fail to heal them, but if someone's life is in danger I will have to act—unless we are in active combat; I don't have to heal anyone during ongoing combat. But please, if one of you is seasick, please let me heal you."

Varric says, "I will be fine, Beauty. Rivaini even commented on my iron stomach. Well, what she really said was she 'never knew a dwarf to throw up such a fuss at a little tunnel but have no trouble getting drunk in the hold on the way back.'" At the blank looks, Varric shrugs and says, "I don't like caves."

Solas and Cassandra both indicate there wouldn't be a problem, so of course Gim pipes up with, "So it will just be Lando I have to take care of."

Lando looks up to see Cassandra trying to suppress a smile. Lando says, "Go ahead: laugh all you want, but you better make it up to me when we get to the city."

Cassandra finally lets her smile bloom fully and says, "I shall endeavor to do so." Lando likes the sound of that.

As they board the ferry, Varric is telling Gim one of his stories about Ginhan, and all the others are surrounding them closely, ready to distract Gim if her attention should wander—but also very much enjoying Varric's story. The way Varric describes Ginhan's clueless employer and the odd things Ginhan hides in her kitchen are really very funny.

They manage to get Gim and Lando below, and the small amount of glow that Gim risks to keep Lando comfortable seems to draw no undue attention. Varric keeps up his story, nonstop, until about halfway through the voyage, when some cryptic looks pass between Solas and Varric, and Varric shuts up and Solas begins holding forth. The new conversation about magic drives everyone else up onto deck.

Gim's adjustments are enough for Lando to be near the prow when the ferry begins to dock; the sight of Val Royeaux is both breathtaking and a mite horrifying. Why would anyone spend that amount of paint and gilt on a harbor exposed to constant weather?

Cassandra is the first down the gangplank when they dock, and when Solas and Gim join Varric and Lando, all four walk down to a bustling pier. Lando spies Cassandra talking to a carriage driver, so he guides the group to join her.

As they walk up, the driver is saying, "As you wish my lady, but it would be faster to reach the Summer Bazaar if we went by the alien..."

Cassandra interrupts with evident ire and a fierce scowl, "Did I ask you for a faster route? I told you exactly how I wanted you to take us. Now do you want the fare or not?"

As Lando walks up with the other three non-humans, the driver gives them some hard looks. For a moment, Lando thought the man would refuse to transport them, but one fierce stare from Cassandra, and the driver meekly gestures everyone into the carriage. After a short, silent ride where Gim didn't even try to look out the window, the carriage stops and all five of them walk across a bridge into a
smelly corridor with large statues on either side.

Almost the instant they descend, a masked noblewoman swoons in fear at the sight of them and hastily retreats. Varric says, "Just a guess, Seeker, but I think they all know who we are."

Cassandra says, "Your skills of observation never fail to impress me, Varric."

Before Varric can come up with a rejoinder, an Inquisition scout runs up and bows before them. Cassandra asks the scout what she has found, and the scout says, "The Chantry Mothers await you, but so do a great many Templars. People seem to think the Templars will protect them from...from the Inquisition. They are gathering on the other side of the Market. I think that is where the Templars intend to meet you."

Lando is relieved when Cassandra marches resolutely forward after a short conversation with the scout. This is a city filled with bright sunshine, art, and nobles: it is hard to fear anything here—even Templars. Everyone is tense, but Lando sees all party members taking in the market, the merchants, the gallows, the Chantry Mothers grouped past the gallows, and the nobles and guardsmen watching. Everything he sees is pretty: pretty like a painting—pretty like something that belongs to someone else. Lando is sure that if he were to disarrange something so small as an apple leaf, he would be the subject of censure and more. The snatches of conversation Lando hears make it clear that the people see the Inquisition as heretics at the least and quite possibly murderers.

The Mothers are standing on a raised dais, with one Mother standing in a place of prominence with a Templar just behind her. Cassandra says quietly, "That one is Mother Hevara, and the Templar with her is Delrin Barris."

As they come near, Mother Hevara, her voice filled with righteous indignation, says, "Good people of Val Royeaux, hear me! Together we mourn our Divine. Her naive and beautiful heart silenced by treachery! You wonder what will become of her murderers. Well. Wonder no more! Behold. The so-called Heralds of Andraste! Claiming to rise where our beloved fell. We say, these are false prophets. The Maker would send no elves in our hour of need."

Lando sees Gim giving him a look, so he says, "You say we are your enemy. The Breach in the sky is our true enemy. We must unite to stop it."

Cassandra says, "It's true. The Inquisition seeks only to stop this madness before it is too late."

Mother Hevara says exultantly, "It is already too late. The Templars have returned to the Chantry! They will face this Inquisition, and the people will be safe once more!"

The one leading the approaching parade of Templars is wearing insignias that Lando recognizes from Cassandra's surcoat: he is a Seeker, and from what Cassandra has said, he must be Lord Seeker Lucius. He walks right by Mother Hevara, but the Templar following the Lord Seeker strikes Mother Hevara from behind hard enough that she falls instantly to the ground. Templar Barris starts forward, but the Lord Seeker, in a baritone voice used to leading soldiers, says, "Still yourself. She is beneath us."

Lando, still facing the Seeker feels Gim leave his side. He knows that in such situations he should distract the person who is the greatest threat, but he is himself distracted because Gim did not head in the direction of the fallen Mother. Later, he must ask Gim why she is acting more like she wishes to hide from the Seeker than she wants to heal the Mother. Lando says, "You are not here to deal with the Inquisition?"

The Lord Seeker says, "As if there were any reason to," and begins to lead his Templars out of the
Summer Bazaar.

Cassandra steps forward, and says with more deference than Lando has ever heard in her voice, "Lord Seeker Lucius, it is imperative that we ..."

But the Lord Seeker says, "You will not address me." When Cassandra expresses dismay, he continues, "Creating a heretical movement. Raising up puppets as Andraste's prophets. You should be ashamed." Turning to address the crowd, he says, "You should all be ashamed. The Templars failed no one when they left the Chantry to purge the mages! You are the ones who have failed. You who'd leash our righteous swords with doubt and fear." Turning back to Cassandra, he says, "If you came to appeal to the Chantry, you are too late. The only destiny here that demands respect is mine."

Varric says, "If you are not here to aid the Chantry, then all you are here for is talk."

Lando hears the Lord Seeker saying something about laughing at old women, but his attention has moved to Gim, who has finally approached the fallen Mother Hevara. He is vaguely aware of Cassandra, Varric, and some of the Templars talking angrily, but much more interesting to Lando is that Solas is standing behind Gim, with his eyes closed in what looks very much like concentration.

As he walks up, Gim says, "She will be fine," and stands. A quick glance away tells Lando that the Templars with the Seeker at their head are marching quickly away.

Mother Hevara says, "Thank you, child. Late as it is, your concern for me leaves me wondering. Can you tell me: do you truly believe you are the maker's chosen?"

Gim says, "We do not name ourselves with this title, but we cannot deny that we were in the right place at the right time to help deal with the disaster. We respect the beliefs of the Andristians who name us Heralds. We will do our best to be worthy."

Mother Hevara sits up, looking a bit bewildered but no worse for the attack. She says, "That is more comforting than you know. In any case, it is out of our hands now. We shall all see the Maker's plans in the days to come. There is no reason for you to stay here: leave me. The gathering you came to address is no more: My fellow clerics have scattered to the winds, along with their convictions."

Lando looks to Gim to see if Gim is willing to leave the woman who is still sitting on the dais. Gim nods and they head towards where Varric is listening to Cassandra. As they walk us, Cassandra is saying "Has Lord Seeker Lucius gone mad?"

Gim asks, "How well do you know the Lord Seeker?" Lando hears something in the question, but he can't tell what.

Cassandra says, "He was always a decent man, never given to ambition or grandstanding. This is very bizarre."

Gim says, "He can no longer be reasoned with." It is not a question: it is a pronouncement.

Before Lando can ask Gim about what is behind her statement, two things happen: A masked lady merchant gestures to Gim, and Cassandra calls out about a mysterious arrow that has landed near the gallows. Gim and Lando share a quick look, with the clear knowledge that the arrow was not meant to be a threat. Gim talks to the merchant, and Lando goes to investigate with Cassandra.

The arrow has a message on it as well as some fanciful illustrations. The message says, "People say you’re special. I want to help and I can bring everyone. There’s a baddie in Val Royeauz. I hear he wants to hurt you. Have a search for the red things in the market, the docks, and ‘round the cafe, and maybe you’ll meet him first. Bring Swords." It was signed, “Friends of Red Jenny.”
Cassandra did not think this was an appropriate way for potential allies to communicate with them, but Varric is delighted. Cassandra encourages Varric to go find the “red things” and then mutters about people who are more interested in being amused than in protecting the goals of the Inquisition.

After watching this in amusement, Gim, who is looking rather pleased with herself, says, "That merchant is going to meet us in Haven. She wants to help supply the Inquisition and its troops."

Cassandra is looking much more pleased with this development than she was about the mysterious message arrow. Lando catches himself wishing that one of the Templars had also stayed to join with the Inquisition and spares a moment to wonder at what wanting Cassandra to be happy has done to his thought processes as he watches a man who appears to be a mage approach their group. As he nears, the man says, "You are the Heralds of Andraste, are you not? I have an invitation for you."

Lando takes the invitation, which says, "You are cordially invited to attend my salon held at the chateau of Duke Bastien de Ghislain." It was signed "Vivienne de Fer, First Enchanter of Montsimmard, Enchanter to the Imperial Court."

Cassandra is looking thoughtful. When Lando raises an inquiring brow, Cassandra says, "This is an invitation Josephine would wish us to pursue."

Gim looks at Lando and then says, "Then we will pursue it. The invitation was for the Heralds. Do we all go or just Lando and me?"

Cassandra says, "Even if I sensed danger, I know what a force you and Lando are when you are together. If you will promise not to be separated, I am content to let you go together. Madame de Fer knows that I know all rules, little as I take the trouble to follow them. You might be subject to less censure without me."

Lando says, "You make this sound so inviting."

Cassandra purses her lips and shrugs, "I did not make Orlais the way it is."

Gim's eyes are darting and she is pulling on one of her pinky fingers. Gim says, "We are to go dressed like this?"

Cassandra says, "I have the funds to buy more appropriate attire, but then we will have to do it right, and you may lose some of your license to be naive."

Gim says, "Why not find an inn for the rest of you to wait for us and allow Lando and I to clean up. If you would allow a bit of shopping to freshen up our current look without going fully formal, I think we could just be better versions of ourselves."

Cassandra seems to think this is a good compromise. Cassandra asks Gim something in a low voice, and Gim laughs and shakes her head in answer. Cassandra comes up to Lando and says, "Gim says you are not needed for shopping, so you can help me find an inn after Varric gets back."

As Cassandra is saying that, Varric is walking up. Varric says, "You might want to delay shopping. Apparently the 'baddie' the mysterious note talked of is meeting at this map location soon." He hands the map to Cassandra, the person who knows the city the best.

Cassandra says, "This isn't that far from here. You are right: we can delay the shopping a bit," and she starts leading back over the bridge from which they entered the market.

As they set foot on the bridge, an elf woman with a soft Orlesian accent calls out, "If I might have a moment of your time..."
Cassandra looks stunned. After a moment, she says, "Grand Enchanter Fiona?"

Solas perks up and says, "Leader of the mage rebellion. Is it not dangerous for you to be here?"

Fiona ignores Solas; she only has eyes for Lando and Gim. She says, "I heard of this gathering, and I wanted to see the fabled Heralds of Andraste with my own eyes. If it's help with the Breach you seek, perhaps my people are the wiser option."

Cassandra is muttering distrustfully under her breath, but Lando ignores her, saying, "The mages weren't willing to talk to the Inquisition before. Why now?"

Fiona looks right at Gim and says, "Because now I've seen what you are. Consider this an invitation to Redcliffe: come meet with the mages. An alliance could help us both, after all. I hope to see you there. Au revoir, my Heralds." At this, Fiona turns and walks away with no more chance to speak with her.

As she starts leading across the bridge again, Cassandra says, "Interesting events on all sides. Fortunately, we need not decide everything at once. For now, I believe there is a 'baddie' awaiting us.

The day is not over, and already Val Royeaux is proving quite eventful for the Inquisition. Lando can't help but hope that Cassandra's earlier promise will lead to something of a bit more personal nature, but there is always tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Love_in_nature for some pertinent thoughts. Thanks to my lovely beta, Genuinelyterribleperson.

Comments or criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aaaa@gmail.com.
Gim can tell they aren't going anywhere visitors to Val Royeaux would normally go. The streets give way to alleys with piled boxes and refuse. The mood is somber, and when the first attackers come, the only surprise is that the attackers themselves sound surprised to see them, even though they are shouting about the Inquisition and its Heralds.

After a few easy battles, they approach the spot marked on the map. On rounding a corner, a masked noble mage throws a fireball at them and begins pontificating with, "Heralds of Andraste. How much did you expend to discover me? It must have weakened the Inquisition immeasurably."

Gim figures this must be the advertised baddie. She says, "It might be weakening us to listen to you, but we don't know who you are."

The baddie arches his back in an unnatural pose more suited to a choreographed dance than a brawl and says, "You don't fool me. I'm too important for this to be an accident. My efforts will survive in victories against you elsewhere."

As he finishes this speech, a slight blonde elf with short spiky hair appears to the side of the alley carrying an obviously dying man who Gim guesses to be a compatriot of the baddie. The elf's accent sounds more like a poor Ferelden than an Orlesian; she says, "Just say, 'What,'" as she aims an arrow at his head.

The Orlesian baddie obligingly begins with "What is the meaning of," with the blond elf loosing the arrow around the time of "meaning."

Without thinking, Gim throws a barrier around the man, and while the force of the arrow knocks him flat onto his back and appears to have broken his nose, the arrow did not penetrate his skull the way it otherwise would have. Gim sees Varric keeping his crossbow trained on the man, so she turns her full attention to the blond elf.

The elf howls in disgust. She is clearly dismayed and offended as she says, "What you go and do that for? You heard me, right? I warned that rich tit fair, yeah? Always reachin' for more 'n they deserve and what they don't deserve is for you to go 'n rescue his squishy ass! 'Blah, blah, blah! Arrow in my face' and you stopped it!"

Calming down, the elf seems to no longer be worrying about the rescued baddie. She says, "Well, you followed the notes well enough. Glad to see you're... And you're elves. Well, hope you aren't too elfy." The tone of disgust when she notices the Heralds are elves is quite marked. But she continues, "I mean it's all good innit? The important thing is you glow? You're the Herald thingies?"
"Some call us Heralds," says Lando, "But who are you, and who is he?" The last said while gesturing at the lump of expensive fabric on the ground. While Lando has the girl's attention, Gim briefly checks the fallen noble. He will be fine, and he should come out of it soon. He will be in pain, but there will be no lasting damage—at least once Gim sets his nose, which she does quickly while keeping an ear on the conversation.

The new elf is saying, "No idea. I don't know this idiot from manners. My people just said the Inquisition should look at him."

Cassandra says, "Your people? Elves?"

"Ha. No. People people," she replies. "Name's Sera. This is cover. Get round it. For the reinforcements. Don't worry. Someone tipped me their equipment shed. They've got no breeches."

This last said with evident delight.

Now several armed but pantsless assailants show up, but it is quickly clear that they are not much of a threat. During the fight, Cassandra asks, "Why didn't you take their weapons?"

Sera responds with, "Because no breeches!" and then giggles heartily. The attackers are quickly dispatched, even with Varric and Gim staying out of the action. As soon as it is over, Sera says, "Friends really came through with that tip. No breeches!" followed by more laughter.

With another of those lightning quick changes in demeanor, Sera becomes serious as she says, "So, Heralds of Andraste. You are strange ones. I would like to join."

Gim stands and approaches Sera. Gim's spirit knows Sera well, and while Gim thinks Sera probably knows her spirit, the chance she would admit it is nil. "You seem eager to join for someone dismayed that we are elves. There are five of us in this party, only one human among us, and she's breathin' in his exhale," Gim says while gesturing between Cassandra and Lando.

Sera looks taken aback. She paces and gesticulates wildly as she says, "I sent you a note to look for hidden stuff, because the 'Friends of Red Jenny,' that's me, or I'm one. So's a fence in Montfort, some woman in Kirkwall...there were three in Starkhaven—brothers or something. It's just a name, yeah? It lets little people, 'Friends,' be part of something while they stick it to nobles they hate. So here, in your face, I'm Sera. 'The Friends of Red Jenny' are sorta out there. I used them to help you. Plus arrows." Sera looks from face to face and seeing skepticism, she continues, "Here's how it is. You important people are up here shovin' your cods around. 'Blah Blah, I'll crush you. I'll crush you.' Gim is a bit mystified by how the kissing noises and hand gestures Sera makes communicate her point, but Sera keeps going. "Then you've got cloaks and spy kings, like this tit. Or is he one of the little knives, all serious with his...little knife? I s'pose you can ask him. But all those secrets and what gave him up? Some houseboy who don't know shite but knows a bad person when he sees one. So no, I'm not knifes all shivdark, all hidden, but if you don't listen down here too, you risk your breeches. Like those guards...I stole there... Look, do you need people or not? I want to get everything back to normal. Like you!"

Gim says, "Your work is important, and the Inquisition could use your aid. There is a woman in Haven, Leliana, who will see that you have resources and tips you can pass to your friends and opportunities to fight bad nobles, but I don't think you will want to travel with the five of us."

Sera's mouth twists up and she says, "Oh, too good for the likes of me, right?"

Gim says quickly, "Far from it. It's just I have a friend who knows you well, and..my friend...tells me you would find spending time with us...uncomfortable."
Sera was clearly readying a blistering retort, but she stops. Slowly she says, "what friend?"

Gim begins manifesting, and as the blue light comes, Sera drops to her buttocks and scoots away on the ground. When the spirit talks, Gim hears the voice of an old woman saying, "Child, they would force their ways upon you; ring you with process; inflict the Fade upon you."

"Shitballs, fuck, shit, crap. Fade, shit, arse, demons, crap! You're not real. Dead, right?" Gim isn't sure if Sera wants to cry or rage. She seems to be tipping closer to crying as she says, "Lady Taraline?"

Spontaneity says, "No child, I just chose a form familiar to you, so you would know that I know you. If you think for a moment, I believe you will realize that you know me too. Remember that time we were walking through the market and you saw ahead of you, that purple table..."

Sera says, "No! Get out of my head! Fucking Fade, demon, fake, fake, fake, fake!"

Spontaneity says, "These Heralds travel in an intimate party where they discuss magic and spirits daily, and this one always has a spirit with her--a different one every day. Many of them know you, dear one, for you are bright in the Fade."

Sera roars forth with, "You just shut it!"

But the spirit continues, "Child, I know you are not ready for this. I tell you these are good people, and you have good work to do with them, but you do not want to travel with them. The Leliana she mentioned, you will like her. And she shares many of your opinions of the undeserving. You and the Friends can be part of righting the world without you hurting yourself every day."

Sera stands. She seems less panicked now, but she does not approach. She says, "Every Friend knows of Leliana. But she don't glow."

The spirit says sadly, "Do you think so little of yourself, child, that you think only those who glow and, what did you say...shove their cods around...make a difference?"

Suddenly Sera seems to remember that there are people here other than the spirit in the form of Lady Taraline. She sneers at the others and says, "What are you lot lookin' at?"

Varric looks specultive. He says calmly, "You have never been to Kirkwall, have you? I know a lot of people from there who would enjoy meeting you."

Solas says, "It is always fascinating to watch Gim bring a spirit to this side of the veil. That she thought to do so for you means you must be more special than first appearances would dictate."

Sera throws her hands over her ears and ducks her head while yelling, "Stop talking, stop talking, stop talking. Look, you've made your point. I will go meet this Leliana. I will have better adventures anyway, without you Fade-lovers and demon kissers." Sera makes exaggerated faces of love and kissing to accompany this point.

Spontaneity says, "Just keep trusting your instincts, Child. They keep you safe."

Sera says, "Yeah, well my instincts tell me to get far away from you lot," with her voice becoming harder to distinguish as she leaves the area.

Gim's manifestation recedes and she calls in her own voice to Sera's retreating back, "Sera, I won't inflict myself on you, but if you ever want to talk to me about any of those instincts, I will be happy to do so."
For a second Gim thinks Sera is going to say something scathing, but she just stops, turns slowly to face Gim and says, "I will remember," and then continues walking away.

Once she is gone, Varric says, “I have got to introduce that one to Rivaini someday. They can draw rude pictures on the backs of unsuspecting patrons while drinking and plotting mischief.”

Cassandra, making a point to ignore Varric, says, "Are you sure you should have turned down this network of Red Jenny?"

Gim says, "I didn't turn her down. I just know that if she were to travel with us, it would shatter the harmony and ease of our days--and hers. Our task is hard enough without adding her to the mix. Leliana will know how to deal with her."

Solas says, "Well, as one of the 'elfy ones,' I thank you, though I must admit to considerable curiosity about her brightness in the Fade. She is clearly an archer."

Gim smiles and says, "I think we know more of her than she would wish as it is. Who knows what the future holds."

Lando says, "Not me, although I hope it holds a nice stew or sandwich."

Varric says, "Are you planning to leave me here with His Foppishness while you all go eat?"

Lando says, "Is there someone we can hand him off to? I suspect Leliana's people would enjoy having a chat with him--even if he does strike me as less important than he thinks he is."

Cassandra says, "We need food, an Inn, to contact the Inquisition, and for Gim to spend a couple of hours shopping." Cassandra is pensive for a moment and then she says, "Wait here and I will return with another carriage. We can let Solas and Varric off to accompany Gim, and they can meet us later at The Gull and Teapot. I have had dealings with them before and I believe they will accommodate us. If not, I will leave word where to find us."

With that, she runs off in the opposite direction from the one Sera had gone. Gim thinks Cassandra's plan is good. The thought of Cassandra and Lando alone in the inn together makes her smile, but this is Orlais, and she hopes Cassandra has remembered how Orlesians view elves.

But why borrow trouble? Now is the time to think about shopping and how to smarten up Lando with only minor tweaks. Gim has never been to a salon; one hosted by the first enchanter of a circle, when most circles were dissolved quite some time ago, should be fascinating.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my generous beta, Genuinelyterribleperson.

Comments or criticism welcome here or via email to kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Mock the Midnight Bell

Chapter Summary

Vivienne, darling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Gim gets to the *The Gull and Teapot* with Solas and Varric, the inn is bustling. Varric disappears to find the innkeeper, and Gim is relieved when Varric returns and matter-of-factly gestures them up the stairs. After turning off the landing, Varric knocks on a door with a painting of an ornate blue and white teapot on it, and a sleepy-looking Lando opens the door.

Varric says, “Come on, Chuckles,” and the two continue on down the hallway as Gim slips into the room.

Gim, a bit hesitant to come in, says, “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

Lando, rubbing his face such that his voice is a bit distorted, responds, “I’m not sure if I should be offended or flattered that you think I could look this tired if you were interrupting something.” By now he is looking more awake, and he grins complacently as he plops down on the slightly rumpled bed and says, “Cassandra left me here to take a nap. She told me I would need my strength after the salon.”

Gim is dismayed to be blocking Lando’s romance; she rushes to him, sits on the bed next to him, and grabs his hands. She says, “Oh no! I can go alone—you don’t need to come with me—you can stay here with her.”

Lando is now grinning wryly. He says, “Let me see. You think I would not only abandon you to an unknown circle mage known to associate with Templars and racist Orlesians, but you think I would make myself more attractive to one of the founders of the Inquisition by abandoning Inquisition business for my own selfish carnal desires.”

Gim laughs and says, “I will lay odds your desires are neither selfish nor purely carnal. If they were, you wouldn’t have turned down that wild rogue with the ironwood bow, or that fiery redhead in the Ferelden town with the druffalo statue, or …”

“Enough,” says Lando, “You’ve made your point. And it may not be just carnal, but it is carnal, and I think tonight I will be glad I took a nap.” Lando looks proud at that last part—and perhaps a little naughty for discussing it with Gim.

Gim fulfills Lando’s expectations by swatting him. She says, “Lucky Cass. So I take it when we come back tonight, I should come back here and you will go to wherever Cass is napping?”

Lando says, while he stands and straightens the coverlet while looking a bit chagrined to have mussed what is effectively Gim’s room, “That is the plan. Of course, you can get lucky tonight too: I’m sure either of your swains would be happy to warm your bed for you.”

Gim says, “I think they would, but I don’t feel like I know which of them to invite, and I don’t want
to mess up our group dynamic unless I am sure. You should have seen them when we were shopping. We had street food, and they each fed me tidbits. In the shops, they gave me opinions and directed my attention to things and commented on how they would look with my eyes. Varric insisted on buying the tunic I settled on, and Solas bought me some small vials of oil for my bath.”

Gim looks around the room. “Are we getting a bath before we go?”

Lando says, “Yes, they were to bring it up when the three of you returned.” Right on cue, a knock on the door leads to a parade of people coming in. When the bath is set up, Lando graciously gives her first shot, bath oils or not. She keeps it short, but the hot water—hotter for the presence of a fire rune on the bottom of the tub—feels great, as does being completely clean.

Once Lando is out, she shows him the fitted cross-front tunic she found for him in a heavy, light cream, embossed fabric. The visible dark brown lining at the neck makes it look more formal, and it emphasizes his proud posture and beautiful face. It will look fine with his normal leggings after a bit of a brush and clean. Her own tunic will also go with leggings, but it is sea foam green, and it is a much lighter, more flowing, fabric. Gim braids Lando’s hair in the normal fashion, but Lando leaves a few of Gim’s locks out of her braids and he teases them into loose ringlets around her face. Whatever he wants to do with her hair is fine with her. It isn’t like anyone will care.

When they finish, they go down to the common room, where they find all their companions. Cassandra is looking at Lando in a clearly admiring, and Gim might even say anticipatory, way. Solas and Varric are also looking appreciative, but their gaze is for her.

Varric says, “I knew that would look beautiful on you. You should do your hair that way more often.” Gim doesn’t really know how to respond. Accepting compliments is not something she has much practice with. She smiles and says something about Lando being responsible for the hair.

Solas comes close, lowers his nose to her neck and says, “You smell delicious. The scent suits you. I find myself almost envying the people you will meet tonight at this otherwise insipid party.”

Gim smiles and says, “Almost,” as Cassandra bustles Lando and her out of the inn and into yet another carriage. Cassandra gives a purse, directions, and intermittent threats to the driver.

Once they are underway, Gim says, "I do not want to bring Spontaneity to meet the First Enchanter of Montsimmard. Do you mind if I have a quick nap? From the looks of you, you will be fully entertained just remembering the way Cassandra was looking at you when we came down the stairs. By the way, you are welcome for buying you a flattering tunic."

Lando says, "You may sleep, I am content, and thank you." Then he pats the seat next to him. He knows how she likes to sleep. So she snuggles up against him, he puts his arm around her, and her head fits perfectly on his chest.

Before she drops off to sleep, she says, "You know, if I wore eye liner, your tunic would get destroyed by this."

Lando says, "So many things you give me to feel grateful for, my durgen'falon."

And that is the last thing she hears before she awakens in her Thaig. She goes out to the expected mutual gratitude session with Spontaneity, and then she feels Wisdom answering her call. Wisdom and she head for her great hall and sit in their usual places.

Wisdom says, "You don't want to take me with you, child. That woman doesn't like any spirits, and she has absolutely no affinity for Wisdom. You need to take Pride or Guile."
Gim says, "I don't think I've run into any Prides that were not corrupted."

Wisdom says, "They are rare, and they are distressingly easy to corrupt, but they exist. I know a very old one who is quite stable. It might be interested. Would you object to an unfamiliar spirit? It would only be unfamiliar to you. I assure you, it is aware of you and how you work."

Gim says, "Do all the spirits know of me?"

"Most do," says Wisdom. "You are a rarity, and you are a wonder and a blessing to us."

Gim says, "Then how is it that Solas knew nothing of me?"

Wisdom pauses for a moment. Gim knows she is verging on sensitive areas. Finally Wisdom says, "He doesn't actually talk to that many spirits, child. Often spirits participate in his memories or enactments, but he doesn't converse with many as themselves. There are exceptions; he does have his particular friends, but we have felt no need to talk to him of you. You must realize, you have been alive for such a short time. We haven't really had much of a chance to gossip about you, even if we had wanted to." Now Wisdom speaks even more slowly. Gim's feels as if the words are being pulled out of her. "And then, as I am sure you know, we were not entirely sure how he would react to you. We thought it would be fine, but we didn't know if we should risk it. We are very grateful that it has worked out as well as it has--and I am still not entirely sure that it would have gone as well if he had known of your knowledge and abilities before the fact."

Gim says, "I can feel that I will wake before long. Can you call Pride for me?"

Moments later, a spirit walks into her great hall, and the spirit looks exactly like Solas...except it is purple. Solas. Pride. Did that spirit do this for her? Her Solas is rather prideful. Gim rises to greet Pride. She says, "Thank you for coming with me. I may need your help in dealing with a difficult woman."

Pride not only has Solas's face, it has Solas's voice--perhaps a bit more thunderous. The humor and compassion that occasionally tinge Solas's voice are completely absent. It says, "I will be honored to accompany you, and I will help in any way you desire."

Wisdom rises to show Pride the way to the focus, and just as she hears the usual click, Gim awakens in the carriage, which has turned into the courtyard of a rather large mansion. It appears that Lando has been gently stroking her face, and he is smiling at her as she opens her eyes.

Gim smiles back and then checks that she hasn't disarranged his tunic. Almost as an afterthought, she also checks her own. When the carriage stops, a footman opens the door and then does an excellent imitation of a statue as they descend from the carriage.

The door to the front hall is open wide, and while no one is in the hall, the sounds of music and laughter and the smells of sumptuous food lead them to the rest of the gathering. As they enter the party proper, they are announced as "Lady Gim and Master Lando on behalf of the Inquisition." Gim would not have thought "Master" and "Lady" to be parallel, but perhaps "Lord" or "Mistress" carry connotations in Orlais.

As they are announced, many faces turn towards them. It should not be surprising that Lando and she are the only ones without masks, but it makes Gim feel more like she is acting on a stage than she is attending a real party--not that anyone ever thought this evening should be fun. The people are acting kindly and making small talk, which she mostly leaves to Lando to handle. Lando is better at being sociable, and while amongst people she doesn't understand, Gim likes to stay to the background.
It is all very forgettable, and very predictably socially correct until one masked man with a very large sword on his back marches down the stairs proclaiming, "The Inquisition? What a load of pig shit! Washed up sisters and crazed Seekers. No one can take them seriously. Everyone knows it is just an excuse for a bunch of political outcasts to grab power."

This popinjay is clearly trying to rile them up. Lando, predictably, tries de-escalating by saying, "The Inquisition is trying to restore peace and order to Thedas."

The troublemaker says, "Here comes the outsider, restoring peace...with an army. We know what your Inquisition truly is. If you were men and women of honor, you would step outside and answer the charges." And then, the crazed fool starts to pull the huge sword off his back. No one can wield a huge sword faster than Lando, but Lando has no sword. For the first time in his life, Lando perfectly executes a throw, stepping in and grabbing the sword-wielding noble by the wrist and flipping him neatly onto his back.

Before the man hits the floor, he is frozen solid with a puff of white and the charming sound of tinkling ice. The resultant pile of Orlesian looks like an unfortunately posed and discarded statue. Gim turns away from the sight as the gentle, mellifluous tones of a woman accustomed to command come floating down the stairs. "My dear marquis, how unkind of you to use such language in my house to my guests." The owner of the voice is a striking woman wearing an elaborate headdress and a rather revealing neckline as part of a form-fitting white garment. She descends the stairs with the slow, deliberate gravitas of someone who knows how to make an entrance. She continues, "You know such rudeness ... is intolerable."

The frozen man appears to be able to speak. He gazes up past the awkward angle of his neck and his encroaching elbow and says, with the attitude of boot-lickers everywhere, "Madame Vivienne, I humbly beg your pardon!"

Vivienne says, "You should." Then disconsolately, "Whatever am I going to do with you my dear?" She then turns to Lando and says, "My lord, you are the wounded party in this unfortunate affair. What would you have me do with this foolish, foolish man?"

Lando says, "He does not interest me. Either kill him or let him go, but please don't hurt him."

Vivienne looks from Lando to Gim and says, "So perhaps some of the stories are true." Turning to the miscreant, she makes a gesture that again brings forth the tinkling sound of breaking ice and the collapse of the no-longer-puffed-up Orlesian. She motions for him to get up and says, "Poor Marquis! Issuing challenges and hurling insults like some Ferelden Dog Lord."

There are quite a few more insults, or perhaps even challenges, hurled at the retreating marquis, but Gim is not paying attention. She is mesmerized by the tone and presentation of Lady Vivienne, even if she is uninterested in the specific biting insults being used on a marquis who was never a threat in the first place. Gim can feel Pride swelling in exultation as Vivienne displays aspects of his nature.

Gim manages to pay more attention once she hears Lady Vivienne say, "I'm delighted you could attend this little gathering. I've so wanted to meet you." With this, Lady Vivienne leads the two of them away from the crowd and to a beautifully appointed private room with a breathtaking view of the moonlight on the surrounding hills.

Gim notices that Vivienne poses in front of the window so the moonlight perfectly, and quite flatteringly, graces her form. Vivienne says, "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Vivienne, First Enchanter of Montsimmard and Enchantress to the Imperial Court."

Lando bows to Vivienne, and Gim nods. Lando says, "Charmed, Lady Vivienne." Gim smiles,
watches carefully, and stays silent.

Lando has been the one speaking, but Lady Vivienne turns to Gim as she says, "Ah, but I didn't invite you to the chateau for pleasantries. With Divine Justinia dead, the Chantry is in Shambles. Only the Inquisition might restore sanity and order to our frightened people. As the leader of the last loyal mages of Thedas, I feel it only right that I lend my assistance to your cause."

Gim takes a deep breath. Time to investigate the nature of Vivienne's assistance, and who, exactly, would benefit from that assistance. She says quietly, "It is possible that we might not agree upon the definitions of sanity and order."

Vivienne draws herself up. Gim wouldn't have thought it possible, but Vivienne seems even taller than she was moments ago; she is certainly looking down her nose. How can she even see out of her mask at that angle? Perhaps she can't, because she removes her mask. She is a very beautiful woman, with creamy dark skin, huge eyes, and full lips. She says, "Rumor says that you are a healer of no small talent. Some talk of Andraste's Grace--a power you use to heal the faithful. Some of the Templars who returned from Haven told me that you were a spirit healer--a possibility I find I must now discount seeing you before me as a non-mage. People can become so confused without proper direction, don't you agree? We must forgive them."

Pride has been filling Gim in on a few pertinent facts. Gim says, "I should like very much to meet Duke Bastien."

Vivienne says, "Normally my dear duke would be only too eager to greet you and discuss the meanings of words and the subtleties of dealing with the uneducated attached to newly-born religious movements, but I am afraid the duke is unavailable for the moment." Vivienne throws off this biting little speech casually, but Gim can see the strain. Perhaps this woman is not so bad—or perhaps she is just as bad as Pride reports, but honestly in love with her duke.

Gim is very careful with what she says: she has information from Pride, and she knows that she has to be wary dealing with Vivienne. She says, "I know he is ill, Lady Vivienne. You seem curious about my skills as a healer. Why not let me show you? If I fail to heal your duke, he will be no worse off, and if I can heal him, I would be gratified to help you. He is a man of no small importance, your Duke Bastien de Ghislain, no? I would spare no effort to help the head of the Council of Heralds, and I would spare no effort to help a man beloved by you." Gim sees Vivienne's eyes narrow and her head tilt. She hastens to assure her with, "I do not need to be alone with him. You can be right next to me, even touching me, the entire time I see him. I swear to you, with my most sacred oaths, that I would not hurt him or you. If you like, Lando would be happy to wait somewhere of your choosing while we see your duke." Gim doesn't have to see Lando to know what look she would find on his face if she did. He doesn't like what she is doing, but he will play along...for a while.

Vivienne's eyes dart around. Gim can tell she wants to believe. Pride assures Gim that for Vivienne, accepting the help of someone who looks like Gim is very difficult. Gim waits quietly. Finally Vivienne opens the door and calls something unintelligible down the hall. Soon an armed man in livery very similar to, but not quite the same as, a Chantry Templar shows up. Vivienne says, "Do stay with Lord Lando and assure he has every comfort while he waits here, in this room until we come back."

No one in the room is confused about the threat she just made, but no one in the room needs to admit that. Gim and Lando know that there is nothing this man could do to stop Lando from doing anything he really wanted to do, but they don't need to share their knowledge with anyone else.

Vivienne leads Gim out into the hallway, up a flight of stairs, down another hallway, and down another flight of stairs. The opulence of the appointments increases with their progression. At the end
of an elegant hallway flanked by incredible oil paintings, Vivienne opens the door on a gigantic bed chamber with very little in it but one gigantic bed with an old and distressed noble upon it.

Vivienne goes directly to the head of the bed, takes the man's--presumably Duke Bastien's--hand and says, "I'm here, my darling." There is a genuine tone in Vivienne's voice that Gim has not heard until now. She strokes his face and coos wordlessly for a moment, and then she says, "Forgive me, my love, but I have brought one more healer to bother you. It won't take long. Forgive me for pursuing all avenues. We have good reports of this one, so be a dear and let her see you, won't you?"

Duke Bastien is clearly trying to speak, and the effort is just as clearly exhausting him. He whispers weakly, "Vivienne. Anything for you."

Gim takes this as permission and moves to the head of the bed--slightly displacing Vivienne--and takes the duke's hand. She says, "I will glow. Please do not be startled, my good duke. I promise I will not hurt you." With this, Gim brings up her glow and shuts her eyes. She feels a start next to her, and for a split second she fears there will be a scene, but she continues examining the duke, and Vivienne does not interrupt further. Gim finds the problem quickly and does what she can to counter it. She feels the duke relax at the same time that she feels Vivienne produce one aborted sob next to her. She opens her eyes to see the duke looking at Vivienne with wide, disbelieving eyes and a slight smile. When she turns to look at Vivienne, she sees evidence of tears, but Vivienne's expression is adoring and serene.

Gim says, "Someone has poisoned him." Vivienne begins to object, and Gim talks over her with, "I know you would be able to detect most poisons, but this is a rare one, derived from a snowy wyvern. He could have lingered this way, diminished and in pain for months, possibly even years, but if anyone administers even a portion of a snowy wyvern heart, it would instantly kill him: such a two-stage death is very difficult to trace. You must find the person who poisoned him, because they could do it again, though I will teach you a spell that detects this poison in food or drink, which would be the most common method of administration--for a man in a monogamous relationship, at least."

Gim turns back to the duke and says, "Duke Bastien, your heart has been weakened, and you are not in the first bloom of youth. I have repaired some damage, but from now on, you should consider all time with your loved ones to be a gift; and rushing about the country participating in civil wars is a task for younger men. You could live another ten years if you are lucky and the Breach doesn't kill us all, but you are on notice and must, as the poet says, 'love that well which thou must leave ere long.'"

The duke tries to sit up, and Vivienne helps him. It is a strain, but he does it, and his color is already better than when they came into the room. He says, "My dear, I am in your, and the Inquisition's, debt. If I can help you with the Council of Heralds, you have only to ask. And I will take your words of wisdom to heart."

Vivienne kisses the duke on the forehead and says, "Just let me say good bye to our guest, dear one, and I will be back." With that she leads Gim half way back to the room where she left Lando.

She stops, turns to Gim, crosses her arms and says, "You mustn't think I am unaware of your calling upon a demon just now."

Gim says, "A spirit. Do you despise all spirit healers, or just ones like me who would have no magic without the aid of the spirit?"

Vivienne says, "You cannot help but be subject to corruption. You are a disaster waiting to happen. I am grateful to you for healing my duke, but that doesn't change the facts."
Gim says, "I have been hosting a different spirit every day since I was a child, and I am over thirty years old. The corruption seems to be setting in rather slowly. Would you like to meet the spirit I have with me? If so, tell me who the most proud person you have ever met is."

Vivienne says, "You come to my house and offer to show me a demon. You asked for pride, but I think enough hubris is being shown by you as we talk. If you mean the positive aspects of pride, then I will say my duke."

With that, Gim starts the manifestation, and Vivienne steps back, grips her staff tightly, and starts leaking tinkling ice crystals. When Gim's blue seams recede, Vivienne's face goes from rage to hesitant wonder. Vivienne says, "Bastien. You are not Bastien, but you are the spitting image of him the night we met."

Pride says, in a vital voice clearly related to that of the frail old man that Gim found lying poisoned upon his bed, "Vivienne, I am Pride, and I have never traveled with Gim before today. I have no desire to corrupt her, but I could no more hurt her than I could wind back time to the night when the duke would dance the gavotte and the rigaudon with only you. I give her the power to use the years of her training to heal, but I cannot control her."

Vivienne face is effete and haughty, but Gim thinks there is pain behind the forcefully neutral expression. Vivienne says, "Put that thing away."

The manifestation recedes, and Gim says, "I hope I have convinced you that I am neither a demon nor demon-influenced, but I will understand if I have not. Gim opens her palm and causes the mark to glow the sickly green. She continues, "But I am needed to close the Breach. I know you offered to help. I would like to take you up on whatever you can do that is consistent with your conscience, but I honestly think you should spend your days closer to Val Royeaux than Haven: your duke needs you."

Vivienne looks thoughtful, and somewhat less hostile than she did when she asked Gim to put Pride away. She says, "You have a point, my dear, and I am aware that I owe you much. I will think on you and our problems. My duke says he will work for you, and I will of course help him. I assume I may write you if I have particular concerns?"

"Of course, Lady Vivienne," says Gim, nodding her head graciously and a little submissively.

Vivienne says, "None of that, darling. We both know better. Now let me get you back to that tall elf you came with."

First, Gim shows Vivienne the spell to detect the poison that was used on Duke Bastien. She only needs to show it once, and Vivienne has it cold. It is true that the attacker could switch to a different poison, but Gim suspects that now that Vivienne knows she has a nemesis, the attacker's days are numbered.

Vivienne takes Gim back to Lando, who looks subtly relieved to see her, and then she escorts both of them back to their carriage for the drive home.

Safely back in the carriage, Lando asks, "So we didn't recruit Lady Vivienne?"

Gim doesn't answer at first. She looks out the dark window into nothing. She says, "I'm honestly not sure if we recruited her, but I am pretty sure we haven't made a new enemy, which is what I was afraid would happen. I will tell you all about it on the way back: anything to distract you so you won't die of impatience on the trip back to Cassandra."
Gim is actually impressed at how much interest Lando is able to feign. Perhaps he is taking notes so he can report to Cassandra later. Much later, if Gim understands what Cassandra has planned. Gim is almost envious. Almost.

Chapter End Notes

The poet mentioned while talking to Duke Bastien is of course Shakespeare from Sonnet 73.

Thanks to my lovely beta, Genuinelyterribleperson.

Comments or criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
His Own Glass, His Own Trumpet, His Own Chronicle

Chapter Summary

Gim returns from the meeting with Vivienne and talks with Solas.

Chapter Notes

Text in **bold italic** is in high Elvhen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When they enter the common room of the *Gull and Teapot* at the end of the long carriage ride, Gim is surprised to see Solas sitting by the fire reading a book. Gim sees Lando look at Solas and then back to Gim with a clear question on his face. Gim waves him up, and then walks over to greet Solas, who closes his book as she approaches.

Gim sits in a chair next to Solas and says, "How was your evening? It must have been interesting for you not to have gone to sleep."

"I spent most of my evening wondering about your evening, da'ean," says Solas, taking her hand. "Although I did enjoy Varric's stories before he...retired. He found another Kirkwaller, as I have learned to call them, and they were full of stories...and ale. Varric is now snoring and smelling in our small room, and I am pleased to see you returned to us. How went your evening with Lady Vivienne?"

Gim sighs and says, "I tended Duke Bastien, though I was unable to fully heal him. He had been poisoned with snowy wyvern poison. She is inclined to despise spirits and those connected to them, but she is indebted to me for giving relief to her duke. I wouldn't count her an ally, but I would count the duke as one. As long as he lives, I don't think Vivienne would work against me. She publicly aids the Inquisition, but her idea of a successful aftermath and mine couldn't be further apart. She is a Chantry apologist--one of those who believe that when a mage is pushed to the brink and then snaps, it is evidence of the need to continue to deal ever more harshly with them."

Solas's facial expressions are subtle, but they make it clear that he understands the repercussions of all she has said. He says, "You manifested for her?"

Gim says, "Yes, I took the perfect spirit, Pride. Pride knows her well. It chose the form of her duke the night they met, and her ambivalence on seeing him was fascinating."

Once again, the changes are minute, but Solas is clearly taken aback and trying to conceal it. He says, "You have inside you now, a spirit of Pride?"

Gim feels Pride's affirmations for a moment and says, "Yes, and I believe it knows you. When I met it, it took your form, except it was purple. It even sounded like you--well it sounded like a cold, distant version of you. It is clamoring to manifest."
Solas says, evenly, “I’m not sure it is the best idea to manifest in the common room of this inn.” Gim looks around. They are the only two in the dim room. On any other person, Gim would say that pinched expression was one of fighting nausea, but all she knows about Solas is he is trying to hide something.

Gim says, "Let's go to my room." Solas looks conflicted. Since his declaration, she would have expected him to take pleasure in being invited to her room, but he is still looking like he is holding something back. After only a moment, she climbs the stairs, not knowing if he will follow. When she reaches the door, he is not far behind.

She decides talking about manifesting is not going to help, so she begins as soon as the door is shut. Solas is looking resigned. She can see the spirit’s purple hand, so she assumes it has taken the form she saw in her Thaig. As soon as the blue seams fade, The spirit says, "Pride. Time itself has changed since we talked last."

Solas, ramrod straight, has his hands behind his back, and he is gazing off into the distance as if Pride holds no interest for him. He says, "I labored under a misapprehension that you could have corrected. Why now?"

Pride is relaxed and matter-of-fact as it says, "Wisdom called me to help the avatar. It seemed prudent to come." Avatar. Wisdom called her that when she spoke to Varric.

Solas says, "I suppose I should not be surprised that Wisdom has not spoken to me about you." Solas's expression is less dispassionate, but Gim isn't sure if she detects anger or pain.

Pride says, "Wisdom keeps its own counsel."

Solas says, "May we speak in the Fade?" Anger. It is definitely anger, but he is still trying not to show it.

Pride says, "I don't think that is prudent. I have no trouble keeping track of one who still touches my nature so often." Neither of them speaks for several long moments, but then Pride continues, "The avatar is very curious why I chose your form."

Solas says, "She has a name."

Pride says, "Indeed. And do you like that name? Is it a fitting name for an immortal or the consort of an immortal?"

Solas snaps defensively, "Which consort concerns you, I wonder. She knows who I am."

Pride says, "You mean she knows your names. You seem to set great store by names."

Solas says, "Would you rather I denied it? Felt shame?"

Pride says, "On the contrary: I am grateful that you embrace your nature and your function. Guilt is of no use in this situation."

Solas's posture relaxes a minute but noticeable amount as he says, "She is helping me work on that."

Pride says, "I begin to understand your affection for her. I wish you every strangest kind of luck, brother. With sincerity and lingering attachment."
With that the seams come and Pride leaves. It not only leaves the manifestation, it leaves Gim. Gim stumbles for a moment and would have fallen if Solas hadn't caught her.

She seeks out Solas's eyes. She says, in a voice that sounds panicked even to her, "It left me. I'm alone and defenseless in the waking."

Solas says, "You are not alone, and I pledge everything I am that you are safe. I will stay with you until you sleep." Solas sets himself at the head of Gim's bed, scoots to the center in a semi-reclined position, and pats the bed beside him.

She says, with more hesitation than she would like, “One moment.” She is alone with Solas in a way she has never been. The symbolic peeling of even more layers gives her pause, even if she wishes it did not.

Solas shuts his eyes. He says, "I will not violate your privacy." Gim thinks briefly of Lando and Cass and almost wishes, contradictorily, that Solas would peek. She quickly removes her tunic, folds it carefully and changes into sleeping attire. She crawls up onto the bed and nestles into Solas similarly to the way she had with Lando in the carriage, but a bit more horizontally. Her head is low on his chest, and she cannot see his face unless she twists considerably. It feels odd to be doing this with someone other than Lando. It doesn't feel bad, but it feels new and it makes her feel somewhat giddy. Solas is larger than Lando: broader and taller. But he feels simultaneously solid and soft in the way Lando does, and he is gently stroking her back in the same way Lando would.

Solas says quietly, "Is there anything you want to ask me?"

Gim says, "No. You know I am not stupid, but I am also not impatient. It means a great deal to me that you would offer."

He says, "Does this change the way you feel about me in any way?"

She half rises off of his chest to look up at his face comfortably. She says, "Hi. I'm Gim, but you may call me da'ean. Have we met?"

He says, "Do you mean to tell me that I worry too much?"

She says, "I know you have a lot on your mind. It only concerns me when your thoughts are tinged with self-blame." She stops and glances down at her marked hand. "I am not trying to say you should disavow responsibility for regrettable acts, but what is done is in the past, and moving forward, we need to do the best we can regardless of the origin of our situation."

She leans forward and kisses Solas gently on the lips. He kisses her back hesitantly. This is not the practiced kiss of technique that she first received from him, nor the uncontrolled passion of the second. This is a kiss of reassurance and regard, and this kiss touches her much more deeply than they other two did. She feels his breath hitch on an inhale, and he touches her face gently. After a moment, she pulls back a bit, kisses his forehead and his long nose, and then drops back down into the cuddle more suited to sleeping.

Solas says, "You are a wonder and a blessing."

She says, "That's what Wisdom said."

He says, "I think Wisdom would say you need your sleep."

She says, "She would at that." After a moment of silence she says, "Good night, Solas. Thank you. For trusting me. And for being so very comfortable."
The last thing she is aware of before she falls asleep is Solas laughing softly and briefly as he gives her a gentle squeeze.

When she wakes in her Thaig and goes outside, Pride is not there.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my lovely beta, Genuinelyterribleperson, who made time for me on a very busy day.

Comments and criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Chapter Summary

Lando comes home from the salon and spends the night with Cassandra.

This chapter is straight up, explicit, written porn. You wouldn't miss any plot points if you skipped it.

NSFW

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lando stands in front of Cassandra’s room–their room, he supposes. The door has a painting of a multi-colored teapot in a bold design that looks more like Antiva or Navarre than Orlais. Lando finds himself wondering if Cassandra chose this room for the teapot on the door. And...that's when he realizes that even though he is eager, he is also nervous: he should be knocking on the door and not contemplating teapots. So he knocks.

"Come in," he hears, and it is her voice, and more than the mere words sound inviting. He opens the door, stops briefly in surprised pleasure, and then shuts the door behind him.

The room is more brightly lit than he expected, and in addition to the fire in the hearth, there are candles in multi-branch candlesticks all around the room. The part of the room he is standing in has a table, a chair, and several small objects on the table. The reason he thinks of it as his part of the room is that there are several staunchions supporting a thick, elegant rope separating his part of the room from the part where Cassandra is standing. Where did she get such things? Oh yes, Right Hand of the Divine. Chantry. Val Royeaux. His woman has made plans. Lando is alight with anticipation.

Cassandra's part of the room has the bed, another chair, and most importantly, a standing, scantily clad, Cassandra in a short robe made of what looks like heavy red silk.

Lando, blood ablaze, stands still and waits. Cassandra clearly has a vision, and he will do his best to help her fulfill it. He has spoken to her of play-acting, has he not?

She is standing proudly, and her eyes are bright, but she is wringing her hands from time to time. She says, "I want to ask you for things, some of which will be difficult or briefly uncomfortable. You must promise to tell me if I ask too much, so that I will feel free to ask absolutely anything."

Lando knows better than to follow his first instinct and move forward to hold her, to reassure her that he trusts her and nothing between them is taboo: she wouldn't have staged this as she had if she meant him to cross the velvet rope. Instead, he stands very still and nods once. If she wants him to speak, she will ask. He must be communicating that he is onboard, because her posture seems easier and her hands are not clenched.

She says, "On the table is a small gift for you and a poem about the gift. Would you please examine them and tell me how they make you feel?"

He looks to the table and he sees a rose. A real white rose with a red tinge at the tips of the petals. It
is quite beautiful, and quite unexpected. He has never lived anywhere that had a garden or gardener that could spare the care it takes to grow such a flower. It smells delicate and delicious--almost edible. Next, he reads the poem:

A White Rose

The red rose whispers of passion,
And the white rose breathes of love;
O, the red rose is a falcon,
And the white rose is a dove.

But I send you a cream-white rosebud
With a flush on its petal tips;
For the love that is purest and sweetest
Has a kiss of desire on the lips.

Gim teases him about being a complete sap, and he supposes it is true, because he begins to tear up. He clears his throat, looks up at her, and says, "I shall remember for the rest of my life that you gave me this bloom and this poem. I will be asking Gim to help me preserve them. But--and this does not lessen my appreciation for the poem--I have to admit that at this very moment, I am thinking less about your purity and sweetness than I am about certain rougher and messier things."

Ah, yes. There is the cockeyed mischievous smile that Lando loves so much. Cassandra nods slowly and then turns her back on Lando. The evil grin is still on her face when she looks back at him over her shoulder. She says, "This is exactly as it should be," and then she wraps her arms around herself and rucks the fabric of her robe up so the globes of her perfect warrior's ass are peeking out from under the hem.

The sight, and the knowledge that she is doing this to tease him, bring his blood pounding through his body and into his very uncomfortable leggings. His face must show it, because her expression changes: her wicked smile now speaks of a realization of power. She says, "You are wearing too much clothing." He wants to rip his beautiful tunic off, but something tells him that he will get more points for displaying care and control. He carefully removes, folds, and drapes his tunic over the chair back with no rush. He keeps his eyes on Cassandra as he does this, and she seems to approve.

She glances down at his footwraps, so he sits on chair and begins removing them. When he stands again, he takes a moment to adjust himself so that his leggings will be more comfortable. She watches closely when he does this.

She says, "Tell me what you see and what you want."

He licks his lips. Forming coherent thoughts is not easy right now. He says, "Your ass. I see your ass. I want to touch it, to bite it, to kiss it, to worship it..." The room is warm, and his blood is warmer. He can feel sweat on his skin. When he glances at his forearm, the sheen of moisture on it throws every muscle and tendon into relief. Lando is not a vain man, but he is honest. He knows his naked torso looks as good to Cassandra as she looks to him.

"But you may not," she says, "Not yet." She moves a half step to the chair and places one knee on the chair. She loosens her robe and slides it down until the collar is at her waist, and her entire back and upper arms are bare. There are two long scars on her back that almost look like the result of giant claws. Dimly, in the back of his mind, he is curious, but for the moment, like the scar on her face, these scars only make her more beautiful to him. When she moves, the interplay of muscles is fascinating. He has fought beside her many times: he knows the muscles are there, but this presentation is so different--so intoxicating.

She says, "Have you touched yourself while thinking of me?"
He says immediately, "Oh yes."

She says, "Show me," and she drops her robe entirely. The crimson liquid puddle on the ground still caresses her ankle in the way he would like to. This beautiful naked woman wants him to get his cock out; she doesn't have to ask twice. Without unlacing, he shoves down his leggings and lifts his balls over the edge with one hand while he begins slowly stroking his shaft with the other.

She watches his stroke, then she moves to his face, and then back to the stroking. She licks her lips. She says, "When did you last climax while thinking of me?"

He doesn't stop stroking, but he does laugh briefly. He says, "Well, tonight. After we returned from the salon, before coming here."

"What!" she says, turning to face him for the first time, mouth and eyes wide in astonishment. "Didn't you want to do that with me?" Her small breasts still bounce with her motions. Her belly is cut with muscle, and the well-defined vee leading to dark curls draw his eye, and he does not try to hide it.

"Yes, love, I did--I do," he says, still slowly stroking, "but I want our first time to extend past my overexcitement. Had I not, I might have spilled my seed already on this floor. Besides, does it look as if I lack desire for you? At your hand--at your whim--I will rise again and again."

She shivers. It must be a good shiver, because she closes her eyes and inhales slowly with an angelic smile on her face. She moves to the bed. She says, "I also have touched myself thinking of you this night. I will show you."

Better and better. She crawls onto the bed on all fours, giving him a completely unobstructed view of the cleft in her buttocks, her pink flesh, and her dark curls. He can already see she is wet and engorged. Oh. He strokes a little faster, then he stops and returns to a slower pump. She lowers herself onto her belly with her right arm under her torso and her hand touching her clit. Her legs are spread, and her ass is up in the air by a hand's breadth or so. Her head is turned to the side, and she is watching his reaction to her show.

Her hand does not move; she moves her hips up and down to bring her sensitive parts in contact with her fingers. Her hips don't just move up and down: she rolls them, she clenches her muscles, and sometimes when her ass is at the apex, she wiggles it back and forth before throwing herself back down against her fingers. He can see her breath catching, hear the gasps. And this whole time she is staring at him--sometimes at his face and sometimes at his cock.

He stays where he stands. She warned him she would ask difficult things of him, and she did not lie. One thing he can do: he undoes his laces and gets his leggings fully off; he does this without once breaking eye contact with the vision on the other side of the rope. Then he returns to his stroking.

She gasps out, slightly distorted by the way her face is pressed into the bed, "Tell me how much you want to fuck me."

"So much," he says, and when he continues, there is a rhythm to his words born of the stroke up and down his shaft. "I want to fuck you with my hand...with my tongue...with my cock. I want to lay my body over yours... to feel you buck up hard. I want to hold your hips down... to slam into them...in a way I would never dare...with any other woman."

She says, frantically, "Your hand. You may use your hand on me. Only your hand." He vaults over that rope before she is done speaking.
He kneels between her legs and brings his right hand forward to her entrance. It is his marked hand: he hopes she won't mind. She stills her thrusting against her own hand to give him time to join the motions. She is soaked, and one finger glides in so quickly that he adds another, and then another and finally he has all four fingers, palm down, in her and she resumes her up and down and rolling motions. At the bottom of her thrust, his thumb touches her slippery, slippery hand as she presses against herself. He keeps his left hand on himself, but more for the sake of following her directions than any need for stimulation, for she is a feast for the senses.

Her smell. Her aroma of cookies is still there, but it is richer and sharper. He wants that smell all over his body. He wants to breathe in this fragrance for the rest of his life. He pumps his hand into her and curls his fingers to rub against that spongy bundle of nerves he knows is there. She begins a wordless croon and wail, and oh, the lady is loud.

"Your cock," she says in a throaty growl, "now. Fuck me now."

He is in her so fast. Then he takes a moment to settle in. He stills her gyrating hips briefly, as he lays himself over her. He plants his right elbow into the bed and brings his right hand to his mouth and sucks each finger as he looks into her eyes. Her eyes are wide--urgent. She says, "I...I need..." And he knows what she needs.

His thrusts start slowly, but strongly. When he is fully in her, he is pressing her into the mattress--into her own hand--so fully that there may be pain, then he pulls out slowly to the point that his tip is at her entrance again, and re-enters to the hilt. She wiggles and pushes back against him, and neither of them is going to last long.

His chest is against her back, and his mouth is at her neck. He murmurs "So good, so fucking good..." into her skin. He brings his left hand under her and finds her breast, squeezing her nipple as he thrusts faster and wilder.

She turns her face into the bed and starts a muffled roar into the mattress. She starts rhythmic clenches around his cock, and his groans join hers as his own pulses join hers. He presses into her a few more times, and she pushes back. Finally he feels all tension in her body collapse, and he rolls them onto their sides. He strokes her arm lazily and nuzzles her neck.

After a warm, lazy time she says, "Was it OK? Was I too demanding?" Her words sound unsure, but her voice does not. He thinks she just likes hearing him say things explicitly.

He says, "It was OK in the same way the first clear day of spring spent in a field of flowers is an OK day. Let me cement a trade. I wish to give to you, part of a poem that says how I feel better than my poor words alone could. And it brings us back to your rose." He recites:

To whom I owe the leaping delight  
That quicken my senses in our wakingtime  
And the rhythm that governs the repose of our sleepingtime,  
The breathing in unison

Of lovers whose bodies smell of each other  
Who think the same thoughts without need of speech  
And babble the same speech without need of meaning...

No peevish winter wind shall chill  
No sullen tropic sun shall wither  
The roses in the rose garden which is ours and ours only

She is silent, and then her breath catches. She begins to shudder. He rolls her onto her back so he can
stare into her face. He says, "Are you crying?"

She says, "In all my long years, I had not thought I would ever receive the gifts you give to me. I have been with only one man before you, and things were...complicated. He was a mage, and a mage and a seeker of the Chantry cannot meet each other as true equals. The times we could be together were furtive and fraught with dissonance.

"But you. I knew. I knew you would be willing to tell me, to show me your passion for me. Please do not laugh at me, but I pray to the Maker in thanks for your desire for me."

Lando wants to laugh, but she might misinterpret, and he will not do that to her. "Willing. Ah, yes. Quite willing. And repeatedly, on your word." He wipes the tears off where they run down the sides of her face and he kisses her. "If the Maker is responsible for my lust for you, then he must be responsible for your desire for me. Do you think he would mind a stray prayer of thanks from a questioning elf?"

Her wet eyes are wide. He sees happiness, but also a tinge of sadness as she says, "The Maker I pray to would never mind such a thing." The Maker she prays to. Hmmm. Perhaps he had best let that one go for now.

He rolls onto his back and she fits herself between his arm and chest with her leg fitted between his two. She runs her hands across all the contours of his chest and belly. It almost tickles. It also is dangerously close to making him hard again. Will she mind? She has been high, but she has come down, and she must be very tired. Perhaps he should move towards sleep. Didn't he just recite her a poem that mentioned sleep?

And then her hand dips lower on his body and wraps around his rapidly hardening shaft.

There will be plenty of time to sleep when they are dead.

Chapter End Notes

A White Rose is by John Boyle O'Reilly and the other poem is part of "A Dedication to my Wife" by T. S. Eliot.

Thanks to my lovely beta, Genuinelyterribleperson, who saw the first part of a first draft and directed me into a less wordy direction (I know, right? This used to be more wordy?).

Comments or criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Will Not Obey Her Heart, Nor Can

Chapter Summary

Traveling back to Haven, Gim and Cassandra come to a disagreement.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Later, Lando will remember that the trip back to Haven started wonderfully.

In the morning He and Cassandra come down to the common room as Varric is having breakfast. When Varric looks up from his bowl, it appears that he is trying very hard not to break into a grin. Varric says with apparent solicitude, "You had a good night, I take it, Seeker?"

"Shut it, dwarf," she says as she sits down at the table, but there is no malice in her tone and her motions are casual.

Then Varric really grins and says, "I'm just happy for you, Seeker." He watches as Lando comes closer and deposits a kiss on the top of Cassandra's head.

Cassandra smiles as Lando approaches and then she looks up at him after the kiss. When she looks back at Varric, she says, with an obvious effort to be pleasant, "Well then. Thank you for your good wishes."

Lando sits down on Varric's other side, and Varric elbows him and pantomimes being impressed with overly wide eyes and a pursed-lip series of full-range head nods. Cassandra gets up in disgust and goes to the kitchen for porridge. Varric stage whispers, "I didn't know the seeker could sing."

Lando says, "Tease me all you want, Varric, but if you make my woman feel bad about last night, I will sic Gim on you."

"Your woman! Easy there, Braids. I really am just happy for you--for both of you," Varric says, and then, as he watches Solas descending the stairs with Gim, he adds slowly, "And a mite envious."

Lando quietly says, "It's best not to assume things when she spends time alone with people" before getting up to hug Gim.

Gim hugs back hard, and as always, she moves right to the point. She asks, "Do you want me to move out of our cabin in Haven? Cassandra didn't grow up in aravels as we did."

Lando says, "You know I don't want that. I know you, and I know her. We will work it out. I do want her with me, though."

"Of course you do, adhal'falon. She is family, or she will be, right?" she says, as he had known she would.

"In my heart she already is, but I will be kind and give her a chance to decide if she wants to join us. After all, we are a handful."
Then Gim says the thing that will echo in Lando's mind. She says, "But Lando, what if she wants you to join her?" He is oblivious; he laughs.

Everyone is all smiles as they collect their things and take a carriage--again taking an obviously circuitous route--to the docks. The boat ride is uneventful, and nothing triggers Gim's oaths. The first day of traveling is easy, and everyone speaks to everyone else and the sound of laughter is common. Looking back, Lando will try to remember what specifically made people laugh, but it is just a haze of good cheer, pleasant talk, and lingering looks of affection between Cassandra and him.

When they stop for the night, Varric produces some great ingredients he bought in Val Royeaux, and Cassandra, to great surprise and loud acclaim, brings forth two bottles of wine. Camp setup is easy, and somehow it is agreed that they set up two tents: one for Lando and Cassandra and one for the other three. Cassandra tries very hard to show no sign of embarrassment--to treat it as matter-of-fact--and it is only in the exceedingly complicit reactions to this stance that the attempt fails, and she finally just sits and laughs for a while. But it is all in good fun.

Dinner is delicious, cleanup is easy, they sit by the fire, Cassandra leaning against Lando, and drink while talking. Everyone is relaxed and out of armor. By this time in their travels, they know they are more than a match for most attackers--whether or not they are surprised. Someone asks about best and worst parts of their trip, and then it happens.

In response to the question about each person's favorite parts of Val Royeaux, Cassandra and Lando look at each other and are about to decline to state, when Varric says, "Yes, yes, we heard all about your favorite part last night. How about you, Gim?" Lando isn't sure if he should be annoyed that Varric would tease like that again or happy that he changed the subject.

Gim says, "This is just what you expect, and so very uninteresting, but it was probably healing Bastien de Ghislain." Lando notices Solas looking wistful, but that could mean so many things.

Cassandra asks, honestly curious, "Why him and not Mother Hevara?"

Gim says, "Partly it was how much closer to death the duke was, and part of it was how distracted I was while tending Mother Hevara. I was more worried about hiding from the demon than healing what was clearly not a mortal wound."

Gim says the last part without concern, but right after she says it, Lando can almost see her gulp, and then she looks up from her wine and around to her companions. The camp is silent. The sound of leaves in the trees rustling is suddenly noticeable. Lando feels Cassandra go still next to him. It is the kind of still she goes right before a battle requiring attention and strategic initiative. Cassandra says, "Demon?"

Lando knows the look Gim has on her face. She has steeled herself. She knows she is in trouble, but she believes she did the right thing. Gim says, "The Lord Seeker was an Envy demon in disguise. My spirit could see it, but the demon could have seen my spirit, and none of the Templars it was commanding would have questioned its orders."

Solas, who is sitting on one side of Gim, suddenly seems very protective of Gim. He says, "I was not aware at the time that there was a demon present, but I could detect the presence of something very powerful. I guessed that Gim would want to use her abilities, so I worked hard to make her blend into the background."

Cassandra's voice sounds like restrained fury. Lando thinks she is talking past a clenched jaw. She says, "You did not think this was appropriate to bring to my attention?"
Gim says, "At first, I was busy healing. Had I stopped healing to call out the powerful demon supported by a company of Templars, it would have meant an all-out fight. Have you not said that preserving the ability to close the Breach is of paramount importance? Should we have risked that to take down the demon?"

Cassandra leaps to her feet. She looks like she will explode. She takes two steps, then two back. She balls her hands into fists and holds her head. Finally she sputters in disjointed sentences with pauses and changes of pacing direction between each sentence, "You! ...this decision! ...so callous! There were good men and women with that demon! I knew some of them! You could have ... We don't even know where they went!" By the end she stops pacing and stares a challenge at Gim.

Gim stares back as she says defensively, "Had I told you, what would we have done? What would we have not done in order to pursue the demon? Would you rather we had not gone to meet the Red Jenny? That we had not visited the Ghislain estate? That we not have had time to...rest last night?" The emphasis on the word, rest, is pronounced. "And I did tell you. Perhaps not clearly enough, but I did tell you that he could no longer be reasoned with. I wasn't guessing."

Varric says, "I see what you are saying, Beauty, but you can't tell us you see so many Envy demons that it slips your mind. You might have mentioned it to Solas or me when we were shopping or to Lando when you were preparing to go to the Salon."

Gim says, "I could have, had I thought of it, which I did not. Even at the time, it was just another enemy among many, and by the time I might have mentioned it, the threat was over, and therefore not something of concern to me." Gim’s agitation appears to be winding down. She turns to Cassandra with a more conciliatory look on her face.

Gim says, "I don't want to hurt you, Cassandra: that is the last thing I want. But those 'good men and women' you mentioned--I am not sure they are still good. Many of the Templars we saw with the Lord Seeker had the unmistakeable air of corruption. Some of them even smelled of blight--in the same way that Wardens do. There was only one with them who I could tell for sure was a good man: the one you named Delrin Barris. Many of the others were just off."

Lando hasn't moved during this whole conversation. He may be able to do damage control at some point, but he doesn't think getting between Cassandra and Gim is a good idea right now. Cassandra is staring at Gim with a stoic expression. Cassandra says bitterly, "All of this is important information, that had you mentioned before we left Val Royeaux, I could have sent on to Haven so that Leliana, Josephine, and Cullen could look into it."

Gim says, "You and I have different opinions of Leliana if you think the Templars--known to be led by a demon or not--could have gone somewhere Leliana’s people will not follow."

Gim stops. She appears to realize she is getting defensive again. She looks at Cassandra, and she is trying her hardest to placate the angry woman. "I am sorry, Cassandra. I really didn't think of it this morning. We can travel more quickly for the rest of the journey. We can even travel directly, and Solas can help put me out before the villages. I know Lando can carry me, and then my oaths won't be an impediment."

Lando hears the pleading in Gim's voice, but Cassandra might not--she certainly doesn't look like anything is piercing her shell of anger. Lando has watched Gim as a child beg members of their clan not to shun her. It hurts him, deep in the gut, to watch her plead like that again. He looks over at Varric and Solas, and he thinks they understand...something...even if he is not sure exactly what. Varric motions with his chin towards Cassandra, suggesting he go to her. Varric indicates they will take care of Gim. Lando is relieved that Varric can tell Gim is distressed and not just defensive.
Lando walks to Cassandra and stands next to her patiently. She swivels to look at him, and he can tell she is ready for a fight. Better she fight with him than with Gim. He says, "Not here. A walk?" At first he thinks she isn't willing, but she gives a terse, reluctant nod, and they walk over to the blessedly noisy river they have camped near.

Lando is very careful not to touch Cassandra. She's angry and she wants to fight; she could misinterpret almost anything he does now. He says, "You are angry. I don't blame you for being angry."

She looks at him, and he can see she is going to spit something venomous and sarcastic. He can take it. He braces himself. Her beloved sparring dummy may not be here, but he can stand in for it.

But she sees him brace himself, and if anything, it makes her angrier. She says, "You are deflecting for her. Do you defend her actions?"

"No," he says, "but I do understand more of why she did what she did than you do. That doesn't mean I excuse it."

She says, "Neither of you understand. You don't understand the Chantry or how my honor binds me to it. You can't understand because you are el..." And she stops. She never got the last word out. She looks at him. Still mad, but with enough sense to know mentioning their race isn't going to allow her to keep to the high ground. She presses her lips together and turns her back on him in silence.

Lando says, "I understand men and women once under your care are now under the sway of a demon--and that is devastating. I understand one of the two forces you and the other advisors were hoping would help seal the Breach is compromised. I understand you are not accustomed to working with less information than the others in your party--especially not less information than someone who was your prisoner not too long ago." She turns around and throws him a look that says clearly that the last part of what he has said is unfair. He continues anyway, "Cassandra, without Gim, you would not know, even now, of this horrible development. Is it not better to know? Be mad at her because she didn't tell you earlier, but don't be mad at her because of what she has told you. She had nothing to do with the presence of the demon."

Cassandra looks like some of that registered, because he can see a bit of conflict in with the anger. She says, "It is more than that. I sometimes willfully ignore certain truths about you--about both of you. She said that demon was just an enemy among enemies, and if I stretch my understanding to its most objective, I honestly cannot say she is wrong to do so--nor that you would be wrong to do so. But I am bound to some of those 'enemies' by honor and faith, and I will be unable to rest until I at least attempt to save them. If I am allied with your enemies, what does that make me?"

Now she is afraid. He prefers anger to fear; he has more faith they can survive her anger than her fear. He steps right next to her, but he still doesn't touch her. He says, "It makes you complicated. It makes you human. One of your philosophers said, 'The most merciful thing in the world is the inability of the human mind to correlate all of its contents.' In this moment, you have been denied that mercy."

She looks into his eyes without flame or flinching. He takes that as an invitation, and he leans in to touch her forehead with his own. He says, "We are not your enemy. I would sooner lose the world than have you call me enemy. We will figure something out when we get to Haven."

She says, "Your optimism can be very provoking." But she relaxes a bit against him, and his feigned optimism becomes more real.

He says, "So I have been told," and he puts his arms around her.
She says, "You are not disappointed in me because I am furious at her?"

He laughs. The natural feel of even a sardonic laugh is a release. He says, "I wish I could tell you that this is the maddest you will ever be at her, but it isn't even the maddest I have ever been at her. Be mad. Just don't go away. We will make it worth your while."

She says, "Don't make me think of her anymore. Not right now."

He says, "Deal."

Cassandra steps back from him, shakes her hands, and bounces up and down. She says, "I need to do something--I need action. My training dummy is sadly unavailable."

He says, "We can spar. We don’t need weapons. I can show you how I tossed that poncy mage on his back at the Ghislain estate."

She laughs and says, "You mean, should I allow you to do so. Go ahead, try to throw me."

He steps in and tries to grab her, but she evades and counters with her own attempted throw. At this point, the extra years with Gim and the automatic responses kick in, and he actually does throw her. She lands hard--way too close to one of the river rocks in the area. She curls into herself on the ground, and he rushes to her in a cloud of fear and guilt. If he has hurt her...

As he stoops down, she surges up and flips him onto his back and sits on him--pinning his arms with her weight and hold. She says, breathing hard, "You are much too gullible."

He does not try to get up. He looks at her face--her eyes now bright with action. He looks at her chest rising and falling with exertion. He says, "I am a poor partner; I am much too easily distracted."

She notices his gaze. Her voice has moved to the tones she used last night as she says, "I would not say that." He continues to stare at her, and he lets his warmth for her show. She releases his arms, scoots lower on his body, and leans forward, bringing her face to his. She says, "I have heard that, in theory, sparring is not the only way for two to work off frustration. I admit that I am unfamiliar with the practical application of this idea."

He says, moving his right hand to her hair as he twirls small bits of it with his fingers, "I have never tried it myself, but some of my clan mates were enthusiastic proponents of what they called 'the angry fuck.' Would you like to investigate?"

She says, "But you said you are not angry with me."

He grabs the hair at the nape of her neck and smashes his nose into her neck. His lips cover his teeth as he roughly talks into her flesh in a distorted but intelligible voice. He is almost biting her; he says, "I think I mentioned a love of play acting to you."

She slips his hold, sits up, and then slams him into the ground before diving down to crush her mouth against his. It hurts, just a bit, and it takes him a moment to adjust comfortably to her tongue’s onslaught before he can return it in force. She breaks away briefly and says, "You did, at that. Well then, for research purposes only..."

Before he loses the ability to make conscious thought, he briefly wonders if he will look as much the worse for wear as one of her sparring dummies after she is done with him.

He can only hope.
Chapter End Notes

The thoughts of the 'philosopher' that Lando mentions are from *The Call of Cthulhu* by H.P. Lovecraft.

Oh no! I forgot to thank my lovely Beta, Genuinelyterribleperson, who went through more than one pass this time, and who convinced me to alter some of my tenses and to present my lovely women in less flattering lights.

Comments or criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Care is No Cure

Chapter Summary

After the fight with Cassandra, Gim talks with Solas and Varric.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gim watches Lando walk off with the embodiment of anger known as Cassandra. It is the best possible thing that could have happened; so why does she feel so hollow? She hears Varric clear his throat next to her, so she wipes her damp eyes and turns his way. Varric coaxes her to sit down by the fire again. She settles in with the two men on either side of her. Varric takes her hand and pets it soothingly.

Varric says, “You look like a woman who didn’t get her say. What do you want to say about what has happened?”

Should she try to explain? She feels helpless. She says, “I’m used to keeping my own counsel. When I have a decision to make, I often can’t even discuss it with Lando. I wasn’t trying to hide the demon from Cassandra.”

Varric says, “I realized that when you made it clear what you meant by saying the Lord Seeker couldn’t be reasoned with. Cassandra will figure that out too. But, Beauty, going forward, it would help to remember that you aren’t working by yourself: we are a team. Not everything is private information.”

Solas says, “I agree with Varric.” Gim takes a moment to congratulate herself for not rolling her eyes in response to that faradiddle. “However, I honestly cannot think that yesterday could have gone any better had you been more forthcoming. Even had you told me, the member of the party most familiar with denizens of the Fade, it might have distracted me, caused me to be so alert to the demon’s presence that I unwittingly gave you away, or made it more difficult for me to camouflage your workings.”

Varric says, “You are talking about the time we were in the market. Of course each of us must make short-term decisions on our own, but once the pressure is off, we need to pool our information.”

Gim turns fully towards Varric and looks him straight in the eye. She says, “Do you, Varric? Do you pool all your information?

Solas says quickly, “He is a contemplative man with an interesting past: of course he uses his judgement, just as any of us do. But Da’ean, none of this drama would have happened if you had used the same judgment I just attributed to Varric. Your logical choices were to have informed us by the end of the day, or to have never informed us, or most of us, at all.”

Varric looks thoughtful but unhappy. He says, “I’m not sure I totally approve of where you are going there, Chuckles, but your reasoning is sound. There is one more defendable choice: she could have waited until Haven. If she did that, she could have told Leliana or Josephine first, and asked their advice. Cassandra would still have been angry, but I think with advice from the masters, things
would have gone smoother.” Varric moves from holding her hand to stroking her back. He ducks his head so he can look into her downcast eyes.

Varric says, “If Solas and I are smart enough to figure that out, so are you. I’m the best person in the world to remind you that relationships between siblings are complicated.” Gim is feeling increasingly anxious about the direction of their comments. Her spirit is trying to reassure her, but somehow the reassurance makes it worse.

Varric says, “Beauty, did you cause tonight’s drama purposefully?”

Gim is ready to deny it, but she can’t. She is dimly aware that Solas and Varric are exchanging glances, and although they are waiting patiently, Solas looks as if he has something he very much wants to say. Finally Gim says, “No. Absolutely not. Or...not consciously...”

Solas’s voice is lacking its warm resonance when he talks. His voice sounds sad and thin as he asks, “Da’eän, which spirit do you have with you?”

Gim’s head is low with her back rounded and her chin near her chest. She says, so quietly that she isn’t sure anyone will hear the response, “Charity.”

Solas says, “Who was the gift for, Da’eän? Cassandra or Lando?”

Varric whips his gaze up to Solas and then back to Gim. He says, “Oh no. It can’t be a gift to antagonize the woman Lando loves. Except...” Varric stands. He walks around the fire. He comes back and squats down in front of Gim. She is still curled in on herself, but Varric is now in the curl with her and she can’t keep him out. He holds her hands. His voice is filled with emotion--filled with more sympathy than Gim can stand.

He says, “This is somehow about Shiren, isn’t it?”

Gim feels sick. Is he right? If he’s wrong, why does the sound of Shiren’s name make her gorge rise? She looks up at Varric. His eyes are sad. Her face is wet. She doesn’t recognize her voice. It sounds like a child’s voice as she says, “I don’t know. I don’t know but when you say that...I don’t know.”

Varric says, “Tell me what Lando deserves.”

She sits up and she talks quickly in a tumble of words as she says, “He deserves to be loved. He’s so good. You have no idea how good he is. And he shouldn’t be torn. He shouldn’t make another person trust me. She shouldn’t trust me. She shouldn’t have trusted me. I’m...I’m dangerous. I don’t deserve...This isn’t my world. This is Lando’s world and he shouldn’t be torn.”

Varric sits back next to Gim and pulls her so she is lying across his lap. He rubs her back and murmurs at her. “Now, now, Beauty. If I didn’t know better, I would say you were the worse for wine. But wine or not, everyone gets to completely lose it now and then. Always so sensible. Always so rational. Who knew you were quietly going crazy in there?”

Gim realizes Solas must have walked away at some point, because now he returns with a damp cloth and crouches down in front of Varric. He coaxes Gim to turn her head towards him and he dabs at her face as he had the time she cried in his cabin. He says, “I’ve seen you in crisis before, Da’eän. In the waking, you want Lando, and in Fade, you want Wisdom. Do you want us to find Lando?”

She half sits up and almost shouts, “No!”

Varric gently encourages her to lie back down while saying, “Easy there, Beauty. We won’t do anything you don’t want us to do.” Varric rubs her back and Solas sits on the ground next to Gim and Varric and holds Gim’s hand. Gim closes her eyes and sinks into the feeling of being surrounded by friendly and undemanding touch.
After a time of warm silence, Varric says, “I’ve spent a lot of time asking Lando about life in your old clan. I thought it might come in handy for a novel—not that that is important. From what I can tell, your clan was really fucked up about you for whatever reason. Lando says, when it works, clan life is very supportive, and you are all encouraged to depend on each other. I’m not saying this to just wallow in it, Beauty. I’m saying...Well, when Solas said that in crisis, you need Lando, I think that is because now you feel like he is your only clan member. Maybe Solas and I can be part of your clan. Maybe we have a new clan. Let’s call it, ‘the Clan of the Dragon Macaron.’ What do you say?”

Gim twists her head and looks up at Varric. His face is nothing but encouragement. Then she twists the other way and looks at Solas. His face is sad, but his eyes are alight with affection. He smiles and nods at her in affirmation. She says, “Are you sure? I’m not safe.”

Varric says, “You have read my book, Beauty, and you have traveled with me and fought with me for some time now. Has anything you have ever learned about me caused you to believe that what I want is ‘safe’?”

She looks to Solas. Solas says, “I think you are aware of the depths to which I will go for my people. You are now one of my people.” Gim’s glow comes up, without her conscious choice, and she feels a surge in the Fade. She can tell Solas felt it also, as his eyes widen slightly.

She says, “And Varric? And Lando?”

Solas looks uncomfortable. He closes his eyes, and she detects some turmoil. Finally, he opens his eyes and he says, in the full rich voice of a Lord, “As they are blood to you, and you are blood to me, so shall they be of my people.” Gim feels the surge in the Fade again. Gim feels tense. Something very important just happened, and she is afraid to think about it too much.

Varric, reliable tension-breaker, says, “Woah there, Chuckles! Does that mean I can’t cheat at cards with you anymore?”

Solas smiles, and Gim detects some relief at the lightened mood. He says, “I propose you should feel exactly as free to cheat with me as you did with your brother.”

Varric says, “Good point. Alright then. I’ve got people.”

Solas says, “Da’ean, may I speak with Charity?”

In answer, Gim sits, begins manifesting, and then stands as the manifestation completes. The two men look at her, and then at each other, and then back at her. She looks down at her arms and she sees slim elven arms with an achingly familiar bracelet on the left wrist.

Solas says, “She named you Charity, but I prefer Generosity. May I name you such?”

“As you wish,” says Generosity.

Solas says, “Why did you chose Shiren’s form? Did you have this form when you stepped into her focus?”

Generosity says, “Gim’s thoughts have been on her; I was with her at the end.”

Solas says, “Did you perhaps encourage Gim in her effort to estrange Cassandra?”

Generosity says, “I did not create the thought, but I recognized the generosity in it.”

Solas says, “Some thoughts, even generous ones, can lead to pain. May I ask you to encourage Gim
to be generous to herself?”

Generosity says, “Ah. You correct me lest I fall into the trap. As the poet said, ‘giving thy sum of more to that which had too much.’”

Solas says, “Exactly.”

Generosity turns to Varric. It says, “I have seen you in the Fade, Child of the Stone. Much in your nature calls to me. I am honored to greet you and thankful for the connection she fosters.”

Varric’s posture is stiff and his eyes are wide, but he is calm as he says, “Any friend of Gim’s is a friend of mine.”

At this, the blue veins come and Generosity recedes.

Varric says, “Alright. That was a little creepy.” Then he looks up from Gim to Solas and back and adds, “But good. Good creepy.”

Gim laughs at Varric. Varric laughs with her. Solas doesn’t exactly laugh, but he does smile fondly. Good enough.

Varric says, “What do you say we leave Solas to his watch and check out that big tent we have.”

Gim nods, and Varric places his hand on her back gently as they walk towards the tent.

Just before she goes into the tent, she turns back to see Lando stepping out of the shadows and approaching Solas. She continues on into the tent, trusting her ‘people’ to call her if they need her.

Chapter End Notes

The quote from the poet that Generosity uses is from As You Like It.

Thanks again to my wonderful beta, Genuinelyterribleperson.

Comments and criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Lando speaks with Solas and with Cassandra.

Possible trigger warning for a very vague description of long-ago family loss (it is in the very end of the chapter, and you will see it coming).

When Lando approaches the fire to check on Gim, he notices Solas and Varric sitting patiently with her. Lando is impressed: they are just being with her and not trying to convince her of anything. He doesn’t want to displace them, so he waits and watches for a moment as he decides if he should just return to Cassandra.

Soon, Gim stands--excited about something that has been said. Gim glows, and then Solas makes a pronouncement and Gim glows again, except this time, something happens to Lando. He hears a roar in his ears, and he holds onto a tree trunk to keep from falling. He thinks he is about back to normal when Gim starts manifesting, and when she settles, her form is Shiren’s.

It’s been a long time since he’s seen Shiren. She looks impossibly young. Lando feels sadness for wasted potential and loss, but his reaction is blunted from the raw edge of impossible loss and irredeemable helplessness of long ago. He knows that isn’t Shiren; he knows that the spirit’s taking Shirin’s form says more about Gim than the spirit.

As soon as Gim and Varric walk towards their tent, Lando approaches Solas. He sees that Gim spots him, but she is feeling busy enough or stable enough--or possibly even angry enough--that she doesn’t need him: this is much better than he expected.

As he walks up, Solas is giving him an unusual, searching look. This is not the polite but detached elf that Lando has known until now. Lando says, “I take it from the spirit’s use of Shiren’s form that there is some tortured reasoning behind Gim’s recent actions.”

Solas tilts his head and nods. He says, “You didn’t realize that until you saw the spirit?”

Lando says “Perhaps I should have. Perhaps I was too distracted by Cassandra’s anger. At the time I just figured Gim slipped up.” He stops for a moment. Shrugs and shakes his head in self-deprecation, and then finishes his thought. “But she really doesn’t do many things by accident.”

Solas says, “I think you are aware how hard she can be on herself.”

Lando says, “Most definitely.”

Solas says, “She is afraid she will cause you pain. She is afraid that she is a danger to you and those you love.”

Lando feels the sinking weight of not finding this surprising. He says, “She tried to drive Cassandra away, and me with her.”
Solas says, “Not knowingly.”

Lando says, “I’ve been played. I’m not any less angry now that I know what was really going on.” He looks at Solas quietly for a moment. Solas is waiting, but he isn’t waiting disinterestedly. Lando continues, “I am very gratified that you two seem to have helped her. I think every crisis of hers that has been resolved outside of the Fade involved me.”

Solas smiles. He says, “We pointed that out to her. I offered to get you, but she didn’t want you interrupted.” Lando feels a blush coming as he imagines how such an interruption might have gone. “Varric says that is just because she’s never had a true clan member but you. He says we are now our own clan: the four of us. Gim and I agreed.”

Lando blinks. He says, “You and I? We are clan now?”

Solas says, “I thought hard about it before I agreed. I meant it. I may not use the ‘clan’ term in the same way that you do, but I consider you my people—perhaps I should say family—now.” Lando is stunned not only at what Solas is saying but also in the way that he is saying it. It sounds almost as if he is thinking out loud: he is demonstrating more openness than Lando has ever thought him capable of.

Still audibly musing, Solas says, “It has been a long time since I have had anyone I thought of as my people, but I find I am surprisingly accepting of the change.” Solas’s eye focus on Lando now. He says, “But none of us considered your preferences. You should get to chose if you consider me your people.”

Lando says, “I think the choice has been taken from me—not that I mind. But something happened when she glowed the second time. Something almost knocked me out. And now, as I look at you and you tell me this, I am just pleased—I might even say I feel expansive. I don’t have to think about if I want you as as my support in times of need or if your burdens are now mine: these things just are. That isn’t a bad thing. It’s the way clan always feel about a new member through birth or adoption.”

Solas looks briefly horrified before he controls his face. He says, “My burdens are yours?”

Lando says, “Solas, your burdens will not weigh on me the way they will on you. If you think about it, I think you knew that even before tonight, I would have died to keep you safe.” Solas nods, slowly. “I would have done that even believing that you would never have done the same for me—though you might have sacrificed to protect my mark. I didn’t think you found me important enough, honestly. Now, I would not only give my life for you, I would do it with the knowledge that you would do the same for me, and that each of us prefers that instead we live long and support the other on our journeys. Is that not the way with your people?”

Solas’s eyes go vague as he thinks. He finally says, “With some of my people. With the best of my people.”

Lando says, “Exactly.” Solas is looking thoughtful. Lando thinks he should leave him alone to come to terms with suddenly having connections, but he has one question he just has to ask. “Solas, you and Varric are still courting Gim, are you not?”

Solas smiles. He says, “You mean to ask if it is not awkward to have accepted Varric as my family when we both desire Gim’s affections. From my point of view, we each have Gim’s affections, permanently, now. I think we have told you that Gim’s choice to be intimate with one of us will be hers alone, and it will flow out of who she is, and not how we act. My recognition that Varric is an exceptional man, an exceptional child of the stone, is no hindrance to this. There are aspects of the
change that are quite difficult for me, but nothing we have discussed touch on them.”

Lando says, “And I thought nothing could be more interesting than being Gim’s brother. I will wish you a good night, Solas.”


This is the first time that Solas has ever spoken elvhen to him. And this occasion is sort of like an adoption or a birth. Lando sweeps Solas into a brief and rather physical hug culminating with a slap on Solas’s surprisingly muscular back. Solas looks startled, but also pleased, and to his credit, he does not flinch at the uninvited familiarity.

Lando walks away from Solas to the more private spot they have pitched their tent. Cassandra is lying in the darkness, and Lando starts trying to sneak in. As he sits and starts removing his footwraps, Cassandra says, “Is she well?” Lando quickly shucks his overtunic after he gets his footwraps off and feels his way to Cassandra.

She is on her side, so he curls behind her and kisses her shoulder softly before saying, “Varric and Solas took care of her. They found out she did it on purpose--driving you away, I mean. She has an irrational fear that if she stays near you, she will hurt you the way she allowed Shiren to be hurt. Solas and Varric coaxed her to that realization and then basically told her that they were her family now and they would support her, keep her safe, and call her on her shit. I saw the last part of that, and it was quite something. I love her, but it is quite freeing having other people who can be there for her when she needs it.” Cassandra has gone tense and Lando can feel it. He continues, “Yes, I know. It didn’t make me any less mad knowing she did it on purpose either.”

Cassandra says, “She wasn’t trying to come between us?”

Lando says, “Far from it. She was trying to separate herself from the two of us.”

Cassandra raises herself on her elbows. She sounds surprised as she says, “But I have seen how much she needs you--how much she loves you.”

Lando stays on his side but also raises himself on an elbow as he says, “She needs me a little less now, and her love for me is the whole point. Her self-image is not healthy. She wants me--us--to be happy, and she thinks she is an impediment to that.”

Cassandra says, “I may be angry at her, but I do not consent to be driven away. This was one thing--one attitude--that caused me pain. She is more than this. I will not have my hand forced.”

Lando says, “Then, ask her to heal your scrapes and bruises tomorrow.”

Cassandra flops noisily down onto her back again as she says, “But they don’t need to be healed, and it will be obvious to her how I got them.”

Lando says, “That is the point. She will know you choose to ask her help rather than you require her help. She will understand instantly that you are open to having her know the intimacies known only to family.”

Cassandra says, “Family?”

Lando says, “I should have said clan, but I didn’t know if the word would mean the right thing to you. Apparently we have become a clan tonight.”

Cassandra reaches up to caress Lando’s face as she asks, “We?”
Lando says, “All five of us. It’s why Gim needs me less. She has more people than just me. I am sure we will all be furious with her from time to time. Now it is your turn.”

Cassandra has relaxed--at least some. She says, “You are saying I am in a family with that dwarf?”

He says, “Don’t give me that. You like fighting with him, but you adore him. Yes, I know you will say you adore his stories, but he is his stories.”

Cassandra says, “And that proud elf. I am to be family to Solas?”

He says, “Well, I will be. I think he is trying.”

She says, “Yes, I think he is very trying.”

He says, “Very funny.”

She is quiet for a bit. Lando lowers himself to curl at her side. He is reveling in the feeling of the new normalcy of their intimacy. After a while she says, “And you. You want to be in a family with me.”

He can see nothing in the dark, but he can feel her weight and how right it feels as he fits against her. That weight, that trust, means it is time to tell the truth. So he says, “Yes. If you will have me.”

She says, “Do you do this often? Acquire more family?”

He says, “If you are asking what I think you are asking, this is the second time in my life that I have enlarged my family in this particular way.” He nuzzles her neck a little, but he is not passionate: he is seeking and offering comfort. He continues, “It has been more than ten years since Shiren died, and I have had no woman but you in all that time.”

She says, “Really. Because you seem quite enthusiastic about…”

He pulls her tight against him and says quickly, “With you I am.”

He thought she might have taken that opportunity to sink into him and revel in their physical connection, but she is tense again. He can hear the strain in her voice: she is trying to sound casual as she says, “Lando, are you certain in your choice? I am not a young woman. I am unlikely to bear you a child.”

He raises his upper body again and braces his arms on either side of her. He lowers his forehead to hers. He says, “Cassandra, I have been a father. I have loved and lost a mate and a child. The heart wants what the heart wants, and mine wants you.”

Cassandra no longer feels tense to him. Now it feels like attention is on him as she strokes his arm in long sympathetic arcs. Her voice is filled with emotion as she says, “you lost a child. Before or after you lost Shiren?”

Lando is quiet for a moment, trying to decide how much to let the emotion roll over him. The instinct to stamp it down is hard to fight. He can do this. If he doesn’t break his silence and tell her now, it might loom between them. And he finds he wants to tell her. This private painful thing that he has hugged to himself and kept away from everyone: He wants to tell her.

He says, “After. Her name is Nehnara. She was never strong. Something was wrong with her from birth--something Gim couldn’t treat. A Dalish clan is a bad place to be a weak child. And our clan was already sure that anyone close to Gim was doomed. I’m glad her mother didn’t have to watch her die.”
Cassandra says, “You don’t talk about her.”

Lando says, “No. Not with anyone. Not even Gim. Gim loved Nehnara, and she blames herself for not being able to heal her and for depriving Nehnara of her mother. Nehnara is an open wound between us. Some things we cannot expect to heal. Perhaps you can understand Gim’s strange behavior just a little better knowing that before you, she thought she had permanently deprived me of love—all love but hers.” Lando stops for a moment, amazed at the broken dam of pain within him and the release of letting it flow free a little. He continues, “And having said her name, Nehnara, for the first time in years, apparently I must rush on and say it four more times.” He stops talking, because he can’t say more, and Cassandra is quiet as she pulls the weight of him down across her chest and strokes his back.

When Cassandra does speak, her voice is raw, and she swallows between words. She says, “You speak of the support of family, and I want to provide that support, but I am blunt and difficult and self-righteous, and I have no practice with healthy relationships. But I will try. I will try for you even though you regularly plunge me into sheer terror.”

Lando says softly, “Am I so frightening?”

Cassandra says, “My not being the woman you deserve: frightening; the chance of failing you, failing Thedas: very frightening; my feelings for you: most frightening.”

Lando says, “If you hold my hand, I will walk into the unknown with you and we will be frightened together.”

Cassandra says, “You are frightened, as well?”

Lando says, “I am shaking.”

Cassandra, his sweet Cassandra, says, “Show me.”

And so he does.

Chapter End Notes

_On nydha_ and Nehnara’s name come from FenXShiral's Project Elvhen.

Much thanks to my not-terrible-at-all beta, Genuinelyterribleperson and to Love_in_nature for their help with various issues.

Comments or criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Chapter Summary

The party returns to Haven and confers with the advisors.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Gim had eventually relaxed on the trip back, but Haven is just ahead, and she is dreading every step. That first morning after the altercation, Cassandra had started out polite but reserved, but when she had clearly fought back embarrassment to ask for healing for injuries of intimate origin, Gim had begun to think that Cassandra believed in their new little clan also. They had never talked about it explicitly, but neither of them were acting estranged. Time and travel, and perhaps even genuine regard, were making things easier. Were making things easier. Now they will have to talk to the advisors, and it will all come up again.

She must have slowed her steps, because she feels Varric’s hand on her arm, urging her along. When she looks up, he smiles at her. He says, “Won’t it be good to have this part over with? Trust me, I know plot. This is the tail end of that chapter. We have other things to deal with.”

Gim gives him an attempt at an honest smile, but Varric keeps reassuring her, so she must look in need of reassurance. He says, “Let Lando and Cassandra lead, don’t be defensive, and don’t stretch the truth. Trust them.” He shakes his head as he walks a few paces and then says, “I never thought I would be counseling another dwarf to trust the seeker.”

Gim says, “You think of me as another dwarf?”

Varric says, “Well, for all that you were not raised in Orzammar, or even as a surface dwarf, there is something about you that says ‘dwarva’ to me: perhaps more than anyone else I have ever met. You make me remember the stone. And even the fact that I didn’t spit that last sentence like poison is a change.”

Gim stops dead in her tracks and says, “I’m changing you?”

“Don’t look so horrified, Beauty. Everything alive changes or dies. You can’t tell me you want me to go back to anger, suspicion, and fear as the natural reaction to spirits.”

Gim says uncertainly, “No.”

Varric says, “Then stop acting like the only effect you can have on your loved ones is negative. Don’t think I don’t know you sometimes bless our injuries so you can tell yourself we need you when we need your healing. We don’t need to be hurt to need you. Personally, I think you should spend more time on your hobbies less associated with panic and blood. I’m a big fan of your cooking and listening skills.”

Gim says, “My loved ones.” Suddenly Gim is feeling sentimental. How did she get so lucky as to find this collection of people to travel with?

Varric gets her moving again and keeps talking. “Loved ones, people who have to put up with me,
people to whom I can be a pain in the ass without fear: whatever term you want to use today is fine.”

Gim laughs. Varric knows how to drag her back to reality. She can play too. She says, “Listening skills! You mean to say that I allow you to be the center of attention.”

Varric says, “Sure, and it’s a rare skill for a woman. You should practice more.”

Gim says, “You can’t tell me Aveline tried to steal center stage from you.”

Varric says, “No, she didn’t, but she was just as likely to leave in the middle of one of my stories as not—or to start a side conversation with someone who would otherwise be interested.”

Gim laughs again. She says, “Poor baby. Well, you can’t tell me sweet Merrill didn’t pay you rapt attention.”

Varric says, “That she did. My tales were equally as interesting as a spider she found in a corner or a story Fenris told about a boil on his butt cheek.”

Gim says, “You have high standards for your audience. I’m not going to go through all the names. Which one of your Kirkwall crew was the best listener? I know it can’t have been Isabella or Hawke.”

Varric says, “You got that right.” Now Varric looks sad. What has she said to make him be sad? She waits and stays by Varric’s side as he trudges forward with his eyes on his feet. After a few paces, Varric says, “Anders. Blondie was sometimes too busy down in Darktown to join us at the Hanged Man, but when he was there, he always gave my stories his full attention. No one laughed deeper or sighed in more sympathy.”

Gim says, carefully, “It sounds like he was a good friend.”

Varric says, “Emphasis on the past tense.”

Gim says, “I like to separate the judgement of an act from the judgement of a person.” She lets that sink in for a beat and then continues, “Anders, your good friend, did a bad thing. I hope that is not a completely foreign concept to you, Varric, because, as you know, I am capable of some truly terrible things by most people’s lights.”

Varric turns to Gim and gives her his rogue’s half smile. This time Gim guesses Varric is the butt of his own unspoken joke. Varric says, “There you go, trying to change me again.” He takes a few steps and then he says carefully, “I know you are capable of things most would call terrible, but you are not capable of that terrible thing, and this is important to me. Dwarves are a logical folk, and I think the repercussions of your oaths are something I can grasp.” After a few more steps, his serious face breaks into a smile, and he says, “And look, there are Ruffles, Curly, and the Nightingale up ahead.”

Gim looks up to see the advisors waiting for them. Varric has done a good job pulling her out of her own worries, and she manages to smile and wave at them. Josephine waves back, but Leliana and Cullen have their attention focused on Lando and Cassandra, who have not yet noticed the advisors and are continuing to smile and laugh at each other as they walk. Solas is even further back than Lando and Cass, but he has noticed the advisors. Gim can’t hear anything, but she has the impression that Solas did something to make the other two aware of their audience because they stop laughing and look forward.

They all gather where the advisors are waiting. Cullen nods at everyone, and Josephine grabs the two hands of each of the women in turn. Leliana keeps her arms folded on her chest, but she looks
friendly--just private. As a stable girl pushes forward to take the horse’s lead, each person moves to unclip their personal pack from the horse. Josephine says, “We learned from last time, and as soon as our furthest scouts sent word, we set up baths for each of you. Can we meet in the War room in an hour?”

Everyone murmurs assent, and most of the inner circle start walking. Gim moves next to Cassandra and says, “May I accompany you? I had something I wanted to mention.”

Cassandra nods. Gim catches her shooting a questioning look at Lando, who starts to walk with them, but Gim quickly shakes her head and stops him in his tracks. Cassandra’s bath appears to be in the Chantry. Cassandra opens a door with three single beds and some religious iconography. She presumes this is for Josephine, Cassandra, and Leliana. When Cassandra turns to her expectantly, Gim gathers her courage.

“Cassandra,” she says, “has Lando asked you if you would like to move into our cabin with us? I know it is a small place, but it is much bigger than the aravels we grew up in, and it is what we are accustomed to do when we bond. I expect it might seem odd to you, much as it will seem normal to us, so I wanted to assure you that I will make sure you get private time.”

Cassandra’s eyebrows are up, and her mouth is open. She looks a bit flummoxed, but friendly. She says, “You want me to live with you in your small cabin?”

Gim, wringing her hands and talking quickly, says, “Yes, of course. I know I went about welcoming you to the family all wrong, and I hope someone has explained that I’m just a nug sometimes, but I do mean well. I would love you for Lando’s sake even if I didn’t think the world of you. Which I do. Think the world of you, I mean.” Gim finally winds down to a stop.

Cassandra smiles. She says, “I am honored you would share your space with me. I may need help adjusting, but I’m sure we can do it.”

Gim says brightly, “Good. Now go take a bath with Lando. I will stay here.”

Cassandra says, “What?” Her skin is dark, but a blush still shows. Gim thinks she is adorable.

Gim says, “I won’t need to go down before the War room. I have all I need with me. I can take my pack down after. Go on. Tell Lando he can carry me back to the room tonight.” Gim starts stripping off her tunic, but Cassandra hasn’t moved. She says, “Well, go on. You are wasting time gawking at me when you could be gawking at him.”

This seems to wake Cassandra up, and she opens the door and backs out of the room before shutting the door behind her. Gim hears sounds that indicate running outside in the stone hall. Gim feels great as she continues stripping and then slides into the tub.

Gim is investigating the pots left by the tub when the door opens up and Gim hears, “I have so many questions!” Gim turns to see a surprised Josephine frozen in the doorway.

Gim says calmly, “Come in and close the door. I suspect I can answer some of your questions.”

Josephine half-turned to flee says, “But I would not want to impose!”

Gim says, “You are not imposing. Can you tell me which of these pots I should use on my hair? I imagine Cassandra’s hair is a bit more tolerant than mine is.”

Josephine comes forward, inspects the pots, and picks up one to hand to Gim. She says, “Your hair is not that different from mine. I think this will do.”
Gim says, “I expect you want to ask about Lando. And why I am here. Is that right?”

Josephine says, “I would not want you to think I was a gossip!”

Gim says, “Not at all. You are the Inquisition’s Ambassador, and you need to know that one of the Heralds is in a romantic relationship with the former Right Hand of the Divine, don’t you? It seems pretty pertinent that the aforementioned Hand is going to be living in the same small cabin with the Heralds, does it not?”

Josephine sits down on a chest at the foot of one of the beds with a huge smile on her face. She claps her hands once and makes a little happy mewling sound halfway between a coo and a squee. She says, “Is she happy? Is he treating her well? She deserves to be happy.”

Gim says, “Josie, have you met my brother? Of course she’s happy. Speaking of which, can you think of anything we could do to our cabin that would make Cassandra more comfortable? A standing screen or a slightly larger bed or an additional trunk or something?”

Gim watches Josephine’s joyful face move to a more professional demeanor. Gim can tell Josephine is about to ooze tact. Josephine says, “Well, we could move them or you to an entirely separate cabin…” Gim’s face must have warned Josephine off of that idea, because she continues with, “...but we are tight for space, and it makes sense to keep you all there. I will see what I can do.” She stands and approaches the door.

Gim calls, “Josie!”

Josephine says, “Yes?”

Gim says, “Probably best not to go down there until they come up to the War room.”

Josephine nods her head, and Gim can’t quite tell, but she might be blushing a little as she escapes from the room.

Gim finishes her bath, washes her hair, and is putting on her cleanest clothes when she hears a knock on the door. She calls out permission, and Leliana comes in.

Leliana says, “Oh, I am in time. May I help you with your hair?” Leliana doesn’t wait for an answer; she opens a drawer from a bedside table and brings a wide-toothed comb that she starts using on damp and voluminous locks. She says, “Your hair is so dark and has so much life.”

Gim loves having her hair played with, so she answers dreamily, “Sometimes it has a bit too much life. When we have to sleep close, Lando says my hair tries to eat him.”

Leliana says, “Speaking of sleeping close…”

Gim says, “Oh come off it. Like you didn’t know. Everyone in the inn we stayed at in Val Royeaux knew, and if you had no one in that inn, I am shocked.”

Leliana looks conspiratorial as she says, “I knew they enjoyed each other’s company, yes, but I did not know she was moving in with the two of you. Does this mean there is true feeling?”

Gim says, “You know her well, do you not?”

Leliana says, “She is my closest friend that is not leagues away.”

Gim says, “She gave him a rose. A cream rose with…”
And Leliana finishes Gim’s statement in unison with her: “A flush on the petal tips.”

Leliana sighs as only one trained to observe love as theater could. Gim says, “Careful, your Orlesian side is showing.”

Leliana says, “I have seen her moon over that poem. She thought her time was done and she would never have the possibility of such feelings.”

Gim says, “He gave her a poem back too. I will let Cass tell you about that. But I think you are going to enjoy hearing about it.”

Leliana looks more like a girl hearing of a romantic epic than the frightening spymaster that some in Haven see her has. But speaking of frightening… Gim says, “I did not have the impression that Cullen was happy to see them so close.”

Leliana moderates her transports a little, and she says, “I am not sure the commander has friends—he seems more given to having superiors and subordinates from what I have seen—but if he has a friend on this side of the Waking Sea, it is Cassandra. He will not want her hurt. He will not want her judgement clouded. He may well see this as inappropriate fraternization.”

Gim says, “Neither of them reports to the other. And Cassandra has not stopped being direct—even at times harsh—for all her affections.” Then Gim remembers something. She reaches up and stops one of Leliana’s hands from its intricate braiding. Gim says, “If I recall correctly, you remember how much it can mean to have the support of a loved one when you are trying to save the world.”

Leliana stays still, and her voice is so low, so breathy, that she is almost whispering as she says, “Yes, I do. It is terrifying and…wonderful, and Cassandra deserves to have this experience.” Then Leliana finishes the braid and ties it off with a leather cord she had wrapped around her wrist. She says, almost as an after-thought, “Cullen will adjust.”

Then she turns Gim to face her and gives her a full on hug. When she pulls back, she keeps her hands on Gim’s shoulders. “And what’s this I hear about you? I hear you are being courted by two men, and you have not chosen between them, you minx!”

Gim feels like Leliana is accusing her of playing Solas and Varric. She says, “No, I haven’t, but they tell me I shouldn’t choose; that it will just be obvious to me eventually what is right for me, and I should take as much time as I like until that happens.”

Leliana sounds much less teasing as she says, “They sound very wise.” Something moves in Leliana’s face, and Gim knows she is now talking to the spymaster. “I was prepared to be annoyed with you for inflicting that Sera on me without having her join your party, but I can see she would make things harder for you—for all of you.”

Gim says, “So she showed up? Has she been difficult?”

Leliana says, “I think she wants to be difficult, but she is nothing compared to some of the characters I have worked with. She has given us some possibly useful information, and she is eager to be of use as long as she gets to play pranks on, or preferably injure, nobles. She will do.

“I know we will be discussing this soon, but it will not surprise me if your party heads back to the Hinterlands soon. If you do, there is something I would like you to check out for me.”

Gim says, “Anything.”

Leliana says, “Several months ago, the Grey Wardens of Ferelden vanished. I sent word to those in
Orlais, but they have also disappeared. Ordinarily I wouldn’t even consider the idea they are involved in all this, but the timing is curious. The others have disregarded my suspicion, but I can’t ignore it. Two days ago, my agents in the Hinterlands heard news of a Grey Warden by the name of Blackwall. If you have the opportunity, please seek him out. Perhaps he can put my mind at ease.”

Gim says, “Either that or...not.”

Leliana says, “Then there may be more going on than we thought, and we will talk more, if that comes to pass.”

Leliana does not startle at the knock on the door, but Gim feels that she instantly changes modes to a more public persona. Gim is grateful that she gets to see the more private Leliana. When the door opens, it is Solas. Leliana greets him politely and begins to excuse herself as Solas comes in. Gim says, “There is something else that might be pertinent to our most recent discussion: we can discuss it in the War room.” Leliana nods, goes out, and shuts the door.

Gim raises her marked hand and says, “This how you found me?” When Solas nods, Gim says, “So you didn’t have to interrupt Lando and Cassandra?”

Solas smiles and moves forward to run his hands up and down Gim’s arms. He says, “You accept so much about my past acts without demur; why does it cut me so to have you believe me capable of such unthinking callousness?”

Gim steps into his arms and lays her head on his chest. She says, “I don’t always remember how much more information you have than the others. I’ve seen your care for them. I revel in it. I love seeing your warm and soft parts.”

His voice rumbles through his chest and vibrates her body when he says, “Do you now, Da’ean?”

She steps away so she can look into his eyes as she says, “It is almost time for us to appear in the War room. Is there anything you wanted to say before we go?” His eyes are gentle and warm. He is not trying to convince her of anything, much as his last statement had sounded playful.

He cocks his head to the side and strokes her hair and the side of her face. He says, “I just wanted to be here for you--for whatever you need. I thought I might have been able to braid your hair for you, but I see I am too late for that.”

She grins. She says, “I love to have my hair braided. Another time, I will happily take you up on it.” She takes a moment to decide, and then she asks, “You have not visited me in my Thaig lately. Should I worry?”

He says, “I suspect many aspects of my past will cause you concern, but never doubt my regard. I was just making sure I did not overwhelm you. I was hoping that the next time I came to your Thaig, it would be at your invitation.”

She says, “Well then, before we go, I would like to do two things. First, I would like to formally invite you to help me with my investigations in the Fade tonight, and second…” She steps slowly back into his arms without breaking eye contact. She is smiling, and it feels like a different smile than any she has ever used before: full of invitation and self-assurance. She runs her hand up his chest to the back of his head where she pulls gently. His answering smile looks a bit wicked as he tilts his head and dives for her mouth.

As he wraps his arms around her, one of his hands drops to her ample rump. This is not to be the decorous kiss of supportive family. Without thinking, her glow comes up, and her magic is alive as
his lips hit hers. She feels his magic as it touches hers, and for a moment her senses blend and she has trouble separating smell, touch, sound, and thought. She is in a pleasantly whirling vortex of pleasure and connection—she barely knows if she is returning the kiss. The vast mountain of patient want she can feel from him is astounding, but it is not unwelcome. She lets the pleasure in the kiss and her affection for Solas shoot through her magic and race along his nerves. His reaction is to freeze, utterly. His magic pauses, and he stills—except for the sharp intake of a stuttered gasp. She steps back quickly. She says, “Solas, are you ok? Did I hurt you?”

His eyes are shut tight, and he does not open them. He says, “No, Da’ean never think such a thing could hurt me. But when you give a man something he has claimed for years beyond counting to no longer want, it requires an adjustment. You gave me a gift, and I apologize for not accepting it more gracefully. Let us go to the War room. And please, feel free to do that again. Anytime.”

Just before the last word, Solas’s eyes open, and the ice blue of those eyes resonate with the word, "anytime". Gim feels a desire to fall into the limpid depths and never emerge. She blinks. He blinks. Solas takes pity on her and moves to the door, which he opens for her.

When they reach the War room, he again opens the door. The room is empty except for Cullen, who is clearly suffering as he was before they left. She looks up at Solas, and Solas understands instantly. Solas says, “If you will excuse me, I promised to give some samples to Minaeve.”

Cullen turns his red-rimmed eyes to Gim and says, “Herald. Welcome home. We have reports of your efforts. It’s a shame the Templars have abandoned their senses as well as the capital.”

Gim comes to stand beside him and reaches for his neck. He flinches, so she freezes, holding his gaze. He slowly relaxes, and then nods, and she brings up her glow. His immediate almost-voiced sigh of relief is more than she ever needs. A moment more and she has checked in on his organs, and he should feel better for several days. Every time she does this, she increases the chance that he will be able to make it past his current withdrawals to a time when the physical effects of his addiction are minimal. Psychological effects are harder, but that will be up to him. A man with the strength to make it so long in such pain can do anything he really wants to do.

She says, “The rest are not here yet. Please go find some water. Promise me you will eat later, but your immediate need is for water.” He looks like he will fight her, but after a moment he swears under his breath and leaves the room. Andristians seem awfully concerned with their deity’s anatomical functions.

Soon, the door opens, and everyone but Cullen enters. Josephine says, “Commander Cullen will be right back.” Everyone arranges themselves around the table. Lando comes to stand near her and Solas stands on the opposite side of the table where he can observe her. After a short delay, Cullen comes in.

Josephine clears her throat. She says, “We have reports on your encounter in Val Royeaux, and we have been in contact with Duke Bastien de Ghislain. He has been most helpful, and I want to commend you for acquiring such a formidable ally.”

Towards the end of her last sentence, Josephine looks to Leliana, who takes up the narrative with, “Similarly, your contacts with the underground organization known as ’The Friends of Red Jenny’ has also been helpful—if at times supremely frustrating.” That last part was said under her breath, but Gim is sure everyone heard.

Josephine says, “The important thing is that we now have the information we need to approach the mages in Redcliffe or the Templars, who have withdrawn to Therinfal Redoubt.”
Cassandra says, “We have details we deemed too sensitive to send via raven on that front: Lord Lucius is no longer the man I remember. In fact, Lord Lucius is no longer a man.”

At this, all three advisors speak at once. Cullen is loudest, and he says, “You may disagree with the man, but there is no reason to attack him personally.” Gim wonders why Cullen made that point when moments before he had said the Templars had lost their senses.

Cassandra stands tall and imperious, and it doesn’t take long for everyone to quiet. She says, “I mean that he is being impersonated by an Envy demon. Furthermore, Gim says that only one of the Templars we came into contact with appeared to be functioning normally: the others may well have been corrupted. Most confusing, Gim reports that many of them smell of Blight in the way that Wardens do.” Gim can’t believe it. Is Cassandra going to try to pass off her negligence? She isn’t even sure if she wants this. Should she confess? Apologize? Who would that serve?

This time, no one clamors to speak. All three jerk their eyes to Gim. It is clear they expect her to say something. Gim looks down at the table as she says, “My spirit can always see other spirits or demons in the waking. They, of course, can see my spirit, but Solas was able to cloak me. Had they been more interested in me, that might not have worked, but Cassandra, Lando, and Varric drew the demon’s attention and I escaped notice.” When she looks up, she sees Leliana looking at her with skeptical eyes.

Cullen, clearly enraged, says, “And you did nothing. You just let that demon leave with all those Templars!”

Cassandra says, “We deemed it most important to preserve the Heralds and their ability to close the Breach. Confronting a demon with a full company at its command in front a population that was demonstrably better disposed to the Templars than to us would have been suicidal. We finished our tasks as quickly as possible and returned here so we could consider our next move.”

Josephine says, “Well, this does change things. We need more information. We need to know to what degree the Templars at Therinfal are compromised. We had thought of enlisting the aid of a consortium of sympathetic nobles to gain us access, but it would be irresponsible to knowingly involve nobles with a demon.”

Leliana says, “Agreed. I believe I will be able to investigate. I know the Heralds have another trip to the Hinterlands they want to make. I should have more information by the time they return.” Gim sees Solas go on alert when Leliana mentions the Hinterlands. She will ask him about that later.

Cullen says, “And you want to send the Heralds off in a completely different direction and leave those Templars to a demon’s mercy!” Gim thinks Cullen’s face looks worse than before she healed him; it almost looks as if it is Cullen who is at a demon’s mercy.

Leliana says, “You, of all people, should appreciate not rushing into a fight without the appropriate preparation. Now is the time for my people and their more subtle skills. I promise I will keep you fully informed. Can you find all you can about Therinfal and how it can be assaulted? Any back entrances or protected approaches would be especially useful, as would more information about any Templars you believe to be inside and who would object to the presence of a demon.”

Cullen roars, “They all would! Every single one of them would!”

Lando says, “You have heard the reports of our trip. How many of these men who would object to the presence of a demon would have struck an unprotected Revered Mother in the back?”

Cullen looks at Lando as if it was Lando who was responsible for the attack against Mother Hevara.
and not a Templar. Cullen says, “There are always troublemakers in any organization, and the war has roused unreasoning ire among the brotherhood.”

Cassandra says, “Cullen, you were not there. Every man there but Delrin Barris, who had accompanied Mother Hevara, was visibly supportive of the Lord Seeker and the attack on the Revered Mother. Something horrible has happened: something we cannot rush into.”

Cullen’s face goes tight and his posture stiffens. He says, “Well if you will excuse me, I seem to have some important investigations to make. Cassandra, if you remember any more...unembellished...details of your encounter in Val Royeaux, I would appreciate hearing them.” At this Cullen spins on the balls of his feet with a military snap and double-times it out of the room.

The rest of them raise their eyebrows at each other and make little puffs of tension-relief. Josephine excuses herself and slips out and Leliana also prepares to go. As Leliana approaches the door, she turns and says, “I also would appreciate any details--from any of you--if you think it important. I have many things to look into. One of the questions at the forefront of my mind is, if Lord Lucius is a demon, where is the original Lord Lucius?”

Before Leliana can slip out, Gim says, “Leliana, do you use codes to communicate with your field agents?”

Leliana says, “Yes, of course, but Cassandra maintains a firm stance against learning any codes.”

Cassandra starts to say something defensive, and Gim talks over her with, “Varric is very good with codes. He even runs a network of informants back in Kirkwall. You can trust him.”

Leliana gives the four of them a knowing look. She says, “I suppose I should learn to trust him as much as I trust the rest of you.” And with that she sweeps out of the room.

With the advisors gone, Gim approaches Cassandra. She says, “Cassandra…”

Cassandra chops the air in front of her and interrupts Gim by saying, “Don’t say it. I did not lie to them. Telling them extraneous details would only make things worse.”

Behind Cassandra, Gim sees Lando giving her a wry, and not entirely friendly, smile. When she looks at Solas, she sees only approval. Is the approval for her? For Cassandra? When Solas sees her looking at him, he says, “I believe we would all be the better for food and drink.”

Cassandra says, “For once, I agree with you,” and Cassandra and Solas open the door and leave together.

Left alone with Lando, Gim says, “Have a good bath?”

In response, Lando lunges forward and grabs Gim and drapes her indecorously over his shoulder with her thighs held against his chest and her ass in the air. He says, “Yes, I am told I owe you some transportation,” and gives her a solid slap on the ass before striding out the door.

She starts to protest, but as Lando charges past Cassandra and Solas with her bouncing and struggling in his wake, Cassandra and Solas laugh so hard that she decides to just go with it. She doesn’t mind being a tool for laughter, and besides, with Cassandra moving in, the opportunities for revenge on Lando will be varied and plentiful.

Time to scheme.
Chapter End Notes

Much thanks to my not-terrible-at-all beta, Genuinelyterribleperson.

Comments or criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Chapter Summary

Varric gets some action.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Gim thought dinner had been nice. Food that she didn’t have to cook, all five of them laughing and teasing each other, Cassandra blushing but smiling at the ribbing, and Varric just buzzed enough to tell his racier stories: it was so much better an evening than she had been anticipating when they arrived in Haven. Gim knows that some unpleasantness remains, and she guesses Cassandra is going to have some sort of scene with Cullen, but that can be dealt with tomorrow.

Solas retires first, which is no surprise, but he had been fully present during the time with them: none of that aloof elf mage posture that had been his staple when she first met him. Cassandra and Lando leave next, and Gim knows that the two of them had been just calculating how long they had to stay to be good sports before they went off to drown in each other. New love! Gim might never have felt it, but she has certainly studied it enough: Cass and Lando are classic cases. Varric and she made hooting noises when they left, and Gim felt a bit vindicated in terms of an appropriate response to having been carted to the tavern like a squirmy sack of potatoes. Lando had looked fierce at the hooting, but when Cassandra had good naturedly threatened to do something dire to Gim’s bed, Lando had lightened up.

Flissa seems to have recovered from her initial indignation in Lando’s choice of romantic partner, and now she was all benevolent smiles. The tavern was sparsely populated, and those that were there were friendly but distant--while they were there, at least. Before too long, only Varric and Gim were left in the Singing Maiden. Even Flissa had gone, after delivering a whole bottle of some high proof drink to Varric.

Sitting across the table from Varric, Gim says, “If you get too drunk, Varric, I might have to sober you up.”

Varric, being just a bit too careful with his pronunciation, says, “I have many reactions to that threat. The first is to wonder what you are offering as an alternative to the pleasant fuzz of inebriation. The second is to inquire as to the meaning of your comparative: too drunk for what? And finally, don’t you have some sort of pesky oaths that prevent you from forcing medical treatment upon innocent and unwilling companions?”

Gim scoffs. She says, “Innocent! Ha! And as to the others, if you get too drunk, you won’t find out.”

In response, Varric stuffs the cork into the bottle of liquor and pushes it to the far side of the table. He stares at Gim with a jutting chin and a bit of a challenge in his eye. He says, “Never let it be said I chose buzz over beauty.”

Gim says, “Varric, can you tell me more about what you meant when you said I make you remember the Stone?”
Varric snorts and rolls his eyes. He says, “You are going to have to get me a lot more drunk if you want to talk about that.”

Gim gets up from her bench and comes around the table so she can sit next to Varric. She sits on the bench facing him, drapes her legs over his lap, and scoots as close as she can get. She grabs both his hands and holds them in her lap. She says, “Varric, I can’t tell if you are having fun being obstreperous or if you really don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to bother you, but if you are just playing, I would really like to know.”

Varric looks at her closely, and then shrugs. He looks down, seems hesitant, and then looks up, seemingly resolved to be more serious. He frees his right hand and raises it to her face. He looks open: vulnerable and possibly a little scared. He says, “You make me remember the Stone, because--and I know this makes no sense--I remember you. Something about you feels like a missing puzzle piece. I feel more whole with you in my life, and somehow the Stone is part of it.”

Gim feels a swell of connection and affection for Varric. It can’t have been easy for him to say this. She says, “May I touch you? May I look at you? I mean, may I glow?”

His eyes are wide, but he nods. She brings the hand she still holds to her lips and manifests enough to glow. The first thing she finds out is that he isn’t as drunk as she thought. Everything is as she expected except...when she checks on his spirit—in the place she has called magical conduits—something has changed: once this area was essentially blank, but now, there is structure. If Varric were human or elf, Gim would assume latent magical abilities. Gim wishes fervently that she had access to a dwarf, other than herself, with full-fledged stone sense.

Returning her attention to Varric, Gim is touched that Varric, who couldn’t have been more suspicious of the Fade, of the Stone, and of Gim not so long ago, trusts her. She moves from sitting next to Varric on the bench to sitting on his lap. Now he has to tilt his face up to look at her. She lowers her face to his and says, “May I ki…”

At which point Varric silences her question with the requested kiss. His lips are warm, and they feel strong. He has stubble. How has she never noticed him shaving? He smells of the drink, and Bianca’s oil and himself. His aura is solid and dependable and safe. When she feels his tongue against hers, a thrill runs up her core. Her glow is still up, and she has to stop herself from running her magic through Varric the way she did through Solas. Should she stop herself? Would he feel it? Would he object? If he wants to be her mate, should she show him some of what that means?

Varric tucks his chin so that their lips no longer touch, and she chases after him as he moves away, but Varric maintains the separation. He says, “I don’t think I have ever kissed a woman who was obviously thinking so intently. You don’t need to kiss me as some sort of obligation or thank you.”

Gim, horrified, says quickly, “Oh no, that’s not it at all. Believe me, I was enjoying kissing you. It is just that because of my nature, which is different from any other woman you have kissed, there is something I naturally want to do in response to your kiss, and I don’t want to hurt you or offend you.”

Varric, looking relieved and perhaps naughty, tilts his head up to her and says, “Can’t be worse than what Rivaini tries with her dagger handles when she’s sloppy drunk. Lay it on me.”

Gim lowers her head and with a pouting motion, lips at Varric’s mouth. Varric smiles, stretching his lips, thus breaking the kiss. Gim smiles back and then presses into Varric, opening to him and inviting him to open to her. As his enthusiasm becomes more apparent and he deepens the kiss, Gim allows her magic to flow into Varric. She does it gently because Varric is no mage, and she isn’t sure what will happen.
Varric has no strong immediate reaction, the way Solas did. They keep kissing, and it is delightful. Varric is gentle but solid and clearly very appreciative. He touches her face reverently, and then he puts his arms around her back and plays with the base of her neck.

Oddly, she starts hearing muttering, when she thought they were alone in the room. After a bit, she can almost hear words in the muttering, and then she can make out a few: "soft, honey, lush." After a few more words, it becomes clear it is Varric’s voice. But it can’t be: his mouth is in use, and she knows for sure no words are coming out of it. She calls a breather on the increasingly intense kissing, and just holds him. Varric does not object.

Inside herself, Gim says, Patience, what is going on? Varric stills.

Gim can feel that patience is eager to tell her things, but she doesn’t think Varric will be happy if she manifests right now. Did he hear her? Gim feels a negative.

Of course. She keeps hugging Varric, and after a while, he rubs her back and kisses her neck. She arches her neck and encourages him to keep kissing her neck; it feels good. She runs some more magic into him, and almost immediately, she starts hearing his voice again, but now she is sure that it is in her head and not in the air.

Inside herself, she says, Am I hearing his thoughts? She gets a positive feeling, but not quite a complete yes.

Is it because of my magic in his body? now she gets an enthusiastic affirmation.

Could this happen with Solas? Negative.

So this is because he is a dwarf? Positive.

This is more than she wants to deal with right now, but she doesn’t want Varric to think he did anything wrong. She moves her head back towards him and ducks her head so that she can get her lips near to his, and he immediately moves to her mouth. She is feeling too unsettled to throw herself into the kiss, but she tries to do what she was doing when they first began kissing. Finally, she pulls slowly back and kisses his nose while twirling her fingers in his chest hair. Oh. Why didn’t she do that earlier? This man has magnificent chest hair.

She says, “I think it is time for me to go to sleep. If you sleep too, I will see you soon. I would like that.”

Varric says, “Please don’t think of anything unpleasant you want me to do, because I am afraid I might promise you anything just now.” Gim smiles pleasantly, but she is afraid of that too.

She scoots off his lap to the bench and then stands. She says, “Would you like to walk me to my cabin? I may need a witness later that I gave them plenty of time alone before I came back and that I fumbled at the door for a while before going in.”

He says, “You have this all figured out, don’t you?” as he opens the tavern door for them both.

She says, “We will develop patterns, I am sure, but I want to give them a lot of leeway while we adjust.”

He says, “And to think I wondered if you were going to dump snow on them.”

She says, “Varric! How could you? Not on the first night!”
He laughs, and then she rattles the door and scratches it quietly a few times before kissing him quickly, going into the room, and shutting the door. The fire is making a dim light that is enough for her to find her bed. She notices a new screen separating the main room from the room where Lando’s bed is. She can’t tell for sure, but she thinks the screen might be painted.

She goes to her bed, preps for sleep, and drops off very quickly.

She wakes in her Thaig and runs outside to see Patience, who is waiting for her in Varric’s form. She says, “He actually comes here, you know.”

Patience smiles and says, “You would know. This is your Thaig. Even if he were to walk up to you, you would always know.”

Gim says, “So what happened?”

Patience says, “You know.”

She says, “I ran my magic through him, and I started to hear parts of his thoughts.”

Patience says, “Yes, but not just any magic. This was your magic of acceptance and joining.”

Gim thinks for a moment. She says, “But my, as you say, magic of acceptance and joining does not do that to Solas.”

Patience says, “He is not durgen’len.”

Gim says, “If Varric had magic like I have, and he ran it into me, would he hear my thoughts?”

Patience says, “No.”

“Why?”

Patience says, “You are not durgen’len. No such thing could happen without your will.”

Confused, Gim says, “I am not durgen’len?”

Patience says, “You are Durgen.”

Gim repeats, dully, “I am Stone.”

Patience says, “Yes.”

Gim says, “But I don’t want to violate his privacy.”

Patience says, “Then don’t will it.”

Gim starts to say she willed no such thing, but she thinks about what she was feeling, and it was a sensation of melting into Varric--of joining with him. So, as long as she kept enough of her wits about her to not do that again, it should not be a problem. Right. Keep her wits about her while kissing. What if… No. She won’t think about that. Suddenly she remembers she didn’t even thank Patience. She says, “Thank you so much for helping me today. I needed your nature, and I needed your advice.”

Patience says, “You are most welcome and also most thanked. I have known you from the time you were only distant potential. It is an honor to see you as you move to realize that potential.”
Gim is agitated, but there is no reason to burden Patience with this. She turns away from Patience, only to see Solas and Wisdom striding up to her. She is so grateful to see them--especially Wisdom. She runs to Wisdom and throws her arms around her.

Wisdom hugs her back and says, “Hush, child. It is not so very bad. You are just unsettled. It will be OK.”

Solas says, “What is wrong?” Gim doesn’t want to be out of Wisdom’s arms.

Wisdom says, “You don’t need to tell him. If you want him to know, and you don’t want to speak, I can tell him.” Gim nods silently against Wisdom. Wisdom continues, “Let’s go into the hall.”

They walk into the hall. Gim stays attached to Wisdom, and even when they get to the hearth, Solas takes one of the ample chairs, and Gim and Wisdom occupy the other one together.

After they settle, Wisdom says, “Gim has learned some of her nature tonight. She has learned that if she is not careful, in ...certain circumstances...she can hear Varric’s thoughts. She knows this does not happen with you, and she knows this is a power she has over Varric but that Varric does not have over her.” Wisdom turns her attention to Gim. She says, “Did I leave anything out, child?”

Gim says, “Patience says I am not a dwarf. Patience says I am Stone.”

Wisdom says, “This is nothing but the conscious realization of something you knew: your nature is Stone--at least in part.”

“And the part about my not being a dwarf?” asks Gim.

Solas says, “Gim, I have been wondering about this, and now I need wonder no longer.” Solas is quiet for a moment, and then he says, “I could mislead you, but I will not. You are not a half-dwarf, you are fully what you are, and it is special. For an enemy to know this would be dangerous to you. I recommend you not tell anyone about this--not even Varric--not even Lando. I would recommend not even the spirits speak of it.”

Wisdom says, “The ones who know Gim well already know it, but they are protective of her. They won’t speak of it to others.”

Gim says, “Is this what you meant by calling me an Avatar of the Stone?”

Wisdom says, “Yes, though not entirely. I think we should follow Solas’s suggestions and not use that term anymore either.”

Gim says, “I don’t want to have that power over Varric.”

Wisdom looks at Solas, and Solas looks at Wisdom. Finally Solas says, “I wish many things about my nature and my past that I cannot have, and you can no more escape reality than I can. But you needn’t exercise any power over Varric at all. You just have to be clear about your desires when you use your magic around him.”

Gim feels like she has been a child having a tantrum. This really is very simple. She tries to smile at Wisdom and Solas. And then she remembers the natural way her glow came up when she kissed Solas. Her glow was already up when she kissed Varric. Would she have brought it up on kissing him if it hadn’t already been up? Would it be hard to kiss Varric without her glow? Is her choice being forced? No. At least not yet. She does not feel the natural recognition of inevitable choice that each of them had told her she would feel.
She thinks of Solas and Wisdom again and notices they are waiting patiently. Gim squeezes Wisdom tightly again and says, “You always know when I need you.”

Wisdom says, “I always do,” and hugs her back.

Gim turns to Solas and says, “Thank you for your help too. I know I invited you here to do research with me, but I am not sure if I could take learning anything else important tonight.”

Solas says, “Would you like to play a game? Cards, or Chess? To spar?”

Gim says, “You would spar with me?”

Solas says, “Of course. It could be helpful to each of us, but perhaps it would be too much like research. How about a game? You may choose.”

Gim says, “Do you know how to play Stone Prisoners?” She gestures, and a 19 by 19 grid board appears on the table complete with two little alabaster pots: one filled with small black stones and one with small white stones.

Solas says, “I would love to play.”

Gim and Solas play three games. They each play decisively, and at first it seems neither is the clear master of the other, but by the time they are in their third round, Gim has won one game, Solas has won another, and Gim has a strong suspicion that Solas will win this game as well. Gim places a stone and looks up to see Solas focusing inwards. He says, “Keep the board if you like and we can finish here or in the waking.” With that, he fades out of her Thaig.

With Solas gone, Gim turns to Wisdom. Wisdom says, “I am grateful that you had Patience with you today. I want you to embrace that virtue. Do not think you understand everything or that you know what cannot be. You have much to learn and many choices to make. No one who cares for you will hurry you.”

Gim says, “You always know what to say to me.”

Wisdom says, “What I say to you now, is that you are losing your choice of who to bring with you today.”

Gim says, “Oh. Do you mind?”

Wisdom says, “I never mind. I would like to see your companions again. This will be a treat for me.” With that, she gets up and walks in the direction of Gim’s focus.

Gim does not rush into the waking. She sits and waits and stares into her hearth and waits for the waking to call to her.

She knows Wisdom will not mind her exercising a little patience.

Chapter End Notes

Much thanks to my not-terrible-at-all beta, Genuinelyterribleperson.

Comments or criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Chapter Summary

A day of rest before heading back to the Hinterlands. Conversations with Avexis, Mother Giselle, Krem, and Varric.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Gim wakes, she sits up in bed and sees Lando eating at the table: just a normal scene from a normal morning from before Cassandra moved in. Lando is smiling warmly at her, and he gestures to a bowl on the table. Gim pulls on her overtunic, and brings her footwraps over to the table. As she sits, she looks at the privacy screen segregating Lando’s part of the cabin from the main room. The screen has a rather lurid painting of Andraste with a bowl of fire In her hands. Gim says, “Eh…”

Lando says, “I know. But it is there to make Cassandra comfortable, not us.” Lando kicks her chair out so she can sit easily.

Gim sits, drops her footwraps to the floor under her chair, scoots into the table and begins eating. Between bites, she says, “And is she?”

Lando says, “Well she might be a little sore …” Gim kicks him without even slowing the deliveries of the porridge to her mouth. Lando smirks in response. He says, “Seriously, it will take her a while. It was nice of you to come to bed so late last night. I told her you would make plenty of noise on the way in and that you sleep very soundly.”

Gim says, “I did stay away at first to give you time to settle in, but I was having fun. I was with Varric.”

Lando twitches his eyebrows up to his hairline for an instant and says, “Fun fun?”

Gim says, “Not as much as you, I am sure, but yes.”

He says, “Have you decided?”

She says, “Oh no. I kissed each of them yesterday, and I feel no more sure than I ever was. If anything, my confusion deepens.”

Lando says in falsetto, “Oh yes. I’m Gim and I am confused. I will just have to accept attentions from these two beautiful men until I become unconfused--sometime next decade.” Lando returns to his normal voice and says, “And just what is the limit of the attentions you are willing to accept while being courted by two men? So far all you have mentioned is kissing.”

Gim is giving Lando a stern look, but he doesn’t seem concerned. She says, “Kissing and holding are about it so far. I’m not sure about…anything: I don’t know what I want, and I don’t know what would be acceptable to them.”

Lando puts his hand on her shoulder and looks much more serious than he has until now. He says, “Durgen’falon when have you ever been shy asking people about what they need? No one said you
should be able to read their minds.” Gim winces internally. No one said such a thing until recently, at least. Gim can feel Wisdom trying to project reassurance and eagerness.

She says, “Enough about me. Wisdom wants to talk to you.”

Lando says, “What is wrong? When you bring Wisdom with you, it means something is going on.”

Gim says, “She is just helping me think about my love-life. Don’t worry.” With that, she begins manifesting.

When she stabilizes, Wisdom stands and wraps her arms around seated Lando, laying her cheek along his head. Lando reaches up with one arm and pulls Wisdom even more tightly to him. She pats his arm and then withdraws, seating herself in Gim’s chair.

She says, “Dear boy, I am so happy for you. She is a mate worthy of you.”

Lando says, “Thank you. I think so. Part of me is waiting for her to realize she’s consorting with a member of a race reviled by her Chantry and flee.”

Wisdom says, “You don’t really think that about her.”

Lando looks sheepish. He says, “No, I don’t think her views are so narrow, but I do feel like things are too good to not fall apart. And she is still committed to the Chantry, and the Chantry does not love elves.” He stops and thinks for a moment, and then looks like he has realized something. He says, “Wisdom, should I ask her if she wants to have an Andrastian marriage with me? She has no family left to regret her inability to make alliances, and my heart tells me she would like the gesture, but I am not sure if being married to an elf would help her or hurt her.”

Wisdom says admonishingly, “You seem much more concerned about her race than she is about yours.”

Lando says, “Well, if we still lived with the clan, bonding with her would be grounds for exile.”

Wisdom tilts her head and says, “How fortunate that you don’t live with them anymore, then.”

Lando says, “You don’t share their opinion about preserving the people by not mating with other races?”

Wisdom says, “Why ever should I?”

Lando has a far-away look and a sweet smile when he says, “Of course, you are right. But would any Andrastians marry us?”

Wisdom says, “You are a Herald of Andraste. I am sure there are those who would perform the ceremony.” Wisdom rises and embraces Lando again. “In any case, dear boy, take care of your family and cherish your good fortune.”

“I will, Wisdom,” says Lando as Wisdom retreats and Gim’s form returns in front of him. Once Gim is back, Lando says, “It was nice to talk to her without any crisis. I envy you sometimes.”

Gim starts putting on her footwraps. She tries to look innocent as she says, “And there is no reason I should be envious of you? Not even a little?”

Lando says, “The fact that we don’t need to ask for another screen for our cabin is your choice, ma’falon.”
Gim says, “You are completely and exasperatingly correct. There are a few things I want to do before we leave again, so I will leave you and your Andraste-blessed lovenest behind. Oh, and by the way, do let me know if your Andrastian Marriage Ceremony will or will not include the traditional elf Immolation.”

Lando looks combative, but quite happy, as he says, “Very funny,” and waves her out the door.

The first place Gim wants to go is to check in on Josephine, ambassador and amasser of choice ingredients. She walks into the Chantry and is headed for the door to Josephine’s office when she sees Mother Giselle talking to yet another tranquil mage. This one apparently also works with Researcher Minaeve, and she is asking Mother Giselle about some contribution to disease treatment. Gim thinks the tranquil woman is about to leave, but then Mother Giselle asks, “Tell me, are you happy this way, with everything you feel and dream cut away?”

In a flat voice, the tranquil woman says, “I no longer talk to dragons.” Oh. This is interesting. Gim knows that dragons are intelligent beings with language and affinities for the elements, but she doesn’t know of very many other people who realize this. This reminds her of some of the stories that Cassandra has been coaxed into telling. Could this be Avexis, the child mage who was kidnapped by blood mages and who Cassandra rescued? What a tragic end for one who helped save Thedas. If this is Avexis, could Cassandra know she is here?

Gim watches the woman walk away from Mother Giselle and approaches her as she reaches the alcove near the Chantry entrance. She calls, “Avexis?”

The beautiful, delicate but blank-faced young woman turns, and says, “Yes?” in the same lifeless voice. Gim can barely hear the intonation indicating a question, but it is there.

Gim says, “Do you know who I am? Are you aware of my more unusual abilities?”

Avexis says, “I am aware that you are a spirit healer, your grace.”

Gim says, “I am no revered mother. I would prefer if you would be willing to call me by my name: Gim.”

Avexis says, “As you wish, Gim.”

Gim says, “Does Cassandra know you are here? Do you know that Cassandra is here?”

Avexis says, “I arrived with Mother Giselle, and I have not seen Cassandra. I am aware that she is one of the founders of the Inquisition, and it is likely that if you are here, Cassandra is here. Her continued well-being is of benefit to the efforts of the Inquisition and the preservation of Thedas.”

After a short pause, wherein Gim receives some encouragement from Wisdom, Gim says, “Avexis, I know some of your story from talking to Cassandra. I want you to know that if you decide you would prefer to no longer be tranquil, I can restore your connection to the Fade. I understand that would be traumatic, and I would never do such a thing without your permission. I, myself, was made briefly tranquil recently, although I would ask you not talk about that with others because news that I can thwart the rite of tranquility could be hazardous to my health.”

Avexis says, “If I were not tranquil, my abilities might resurface, and I could once again be used by miscreants, blood mages, and demons.”

Gim says, “I cannot guarantee this, Avexis, but I believe I could make it so that you could no longer talk to dragons even if you are not tranquil. As for demons, I will look into that aspect of your returned Fade connection. In the waking, you would need someone who could help you readjust to
emotional life. If I understand their natures correctly, Minaeve or Mother Giselle might be willing--perhaps even eager--to help you. You needn’t tell them that you have been offered this, but if you do, please ask them to discuss this only within the highest levels of the Inquisition.

“If I understand correctly, you would want to make a full analysis of the costs and possible benefits of becoming an emotional mage again. I will see what I can find out about ex-tranquil and their abilities to resist demons. I will be leaving for the Hinterlands tomorrow, and you will be on my mind while I travel.”

Avexis says, “I am here to serve the Inquisition, not to be a burden to it.”

Gim thinks about how to communicate the use of emotion to someone no longer able to experience it. She says, “The Inquisition is in dire need of mages right now, and if your abilities were safely returned, you could help with that. You could also continue to work as a researcher with Minaeve--or whatever other thing you wished to do to contribute. My most rational assessment of your situation is that, if we are able to minimize your trauma and exposure, you would be able to contribute more as a mage than as a tranquil woman.”

Avexis says, “I will consider this,” and with that, she leaves the Chantry.

Gim turns around and walks back towards Josephine’s door. When she gets to Mother Giselle, she smiles. Mother Giselle hails Gim with, “Greetings, Herald of Andraste. How fares the quest to seal the Breach?”

Gim says, “We are doing everything within our power.”

Mother Giselle says, “A task, such as sealing the Breach, is a heavy burden. I am happy to know that you have help with such endeavors. We remember Andraste, but Andraste did not carry the Chant of Light alone.”

Gim says, “Very true. I would quite literally be helpless without those who help me. I would in turn like to help them. May I ask you a question in confidence, Your Reverence?”

“Of course, my child,” says Mother Giselle. Gim sees her face slip into one of habitual acceptance, and she thinks even more kindly of Mother Giselle.

Gim says, “Would you be willing to perform a marriage ceremony between a Herald of Andraste and the Right Hand of the Divine? Is there any Chantry Law against such a union?”

Mother Giselle continues to look accepting, but now there is an addition that Gim might even term joyous. She says, “I would be honored to perform such a sacred ceremony between two known to serve our Maker and his Bride. I acknowledge that there are those who would object to such a union, but it is not for them to say.”

Without thinking, Gim throws her arms around Mother Giselle and hugs her close. Mother Giselle seems startled at first, but she returns the embrace with at least as much force as she is given. Gim says, “Don’t mention anything. He hasn’t asked her yet.”

Mother Giselle says, “My lips are closed.” Gim beams at her.

Gim thinks that it is very odd that so many of those closest to her in Haven are believers in a religion that she is used to seeing only as the source of pain and injustice. She starts to go into Josephine’s office, but somehow talking about cooking ingredients after the last two conversations is too banal for Gim’s taste. She turns around and exits the Chantry.
As she leaves the Chantry, she is hailed by a young man in military attire. He says, “Excuse me. I’ve got a message for the Inquisition, but I’m having a hard time getting anyone to talk to me.”

Gim says, “Who are you, Soldier?”

The soldier says, “Cremisius Aclassi, with the Bull’s Chargers Mercenary company. We mostly work out of Orlais and Nevarra. We got word of some Tevinter Mercenaries gathering out on the Storm Coast. My company commander, Iron Bull, offers the information free of charge. If you would like to see what the Bull’s Chargers can do for the Inquisition, meet us there and watch us work.”

Gim says, “What should I know about your commander?”

Cremisius Aclassi says, “Iron Bull? He’s one of those Qunari, the big guys with the horns? He leads from the front, he pays well, and he’s a lot smarter than the last bastard I worked for. You’re the first time he’s gone out of his way to pick a side.”

Gim says, “I look forward to meeting this Iron Bull.”

He preens a bit and says, “We’re the best you will find. Come to the Storm Coast and you can see us in action.”

Gim says, “Cremisius Aclassi is a mouthful. May I call you anything else besides soldier?”

He says, “Members of my company call me Krem—among other less polite things.”

“Krem. I like it,” she says. From his reaction, Gim thinks Krem has taken this as flirting, because his posture changes, and the word swagger suddenly seems an appropriate one to use to describe his movements. Oops. She continues, “As a soldier, I am sure you appreciate being in top form. I am a spirit healer, and I would like to offer you a healing before you return to your commander.”

Krem says, “Oh, I’m in fine fettle. No need for healing here.” Gim thinks Krem looks a little less flirtatious and a little more tense.

Gim says, “Oh, you look positively brimming with health, but I might be able to offer you a few optional tweaks that you might like. Depending on your taste.”

Krem says, suspiciously, “Optional? Such as?”

Gim lowers her voice so that no one else could possibly hear her and says, “Well, if you do not feel the need to preserve the ability to bear a child, I can adjust your body so that could never possibly be an issue, and I can limit your body’s production of certain kinds of feminine humors and maximize its production of masculine humors. I can also make certain cosmetic changes—only with your complete commitment. For example I can make your the firm tissue at the front of your throat more protuberant and I can subtly emphasize the prominence of the bones at the front of your skull over your eyebrows or at your jawline. As for your chest...”

Krem says, with evident disappointment, “You can tell.”

Gim says, “I can tell you are a beautiful man exactly as you are, and I just wanted to offer you some options. My ability to detect that you might be interested in these options has to do with my training and talents, which are...unusual. I promise you I can make it subtle enough that members of your company will have trouble pointing to any changes. It is completely up to you.”

Krem says, “And you have done this before?”
Gim says, “I have studied such adjustments for years and I have helped people in this way more than once. You just met me, and it may be hard to take my word, but I have performed much more difficult adjustments on people even in the last day.”

Krem paces in place for a moment in a manner that reminds Gim of what she looks like when she is preparing to spar. After a some bouncing and a heavy sigh, Krem says, “I’ve heard tell of you, and I’m only here because I--all of us--believe in you and your brother. Alright. Tell me what to do.”

Gim indicates that Krem should follow her and leads him to the room where she initially healed the Inquisition soldiers. The outer and inner rooms are empty now, but Gim wants Krem to feel safe from prying eyes, so she takes him to the inner room. She pats a table and Krem jumps up to sit on it. Gim says, “Which of the things I can do for you do you want?”

Krem says, “Fuck me sideways, and I don’t know why I’m this crazy, but I trust you enough to risk it. Use your judgment.”

Gim coaxes Krem to lie back and says, “I am going to glow. It shouldn’t hurt very much, but it might feel very odd. Afterwards, you may be tired and you will need to eat. It would help if I can look at you tomorrow and then a few days later. We are traveling to the Hinterlands tomorrow. Would you be willing to travel with us?”

Krem nods and shuts his eyes. He says, “I don’t have to look do I?”

Gim says, “You do not.” She brings up her glow and puts both hands on Krem’s neck. Starting with the easiest, Gim makes some adjustments of Krem’s voice box and adjacent tissue. Now for the hard part: she moves to a small gland in Krem’s head and four larger glands in Krem’s abdomen, and she makes some small adjustments that will eventually lead to some rather notable effects. Krem’s fat deposits on his chest are not large, but Gim causes some of the fat and underlying tissue to break down. Modifying Krem’s chest skin is more invasive than she was planning on being. Perhaps in the future. Next she coaxes a tiny amount of bone growth over Krem’s eyes and at his jaw line.

Having finished, Gim says, “You can sit up now.”

Krem, in a slightly deeper and rougher voice than before, says, “Void take me but you weren’t kidding about…” Krem stops talking and grabs his throat as his eyes fly to Gim’s face.

Gim says, “It isn’t a huge change. You might have a cold or have spent too much time near a smoking chimney.”

Krem says, “And the other? Am I tied to the moon still?”

Gim says, “Only in the way that all humans are. Some things should be simpler. But your humors will be changing for a while. I can’t tell you for sure what will happen. You could grow more hair on your body or lose some on your head. You may be more easily angered. You might get spots. Things will be slowly changing for years. If anything that worries you happens, you should contact me, which is why I think it would be best if you could travel with us for at least a few days. But don’t let me scare you: you should be fine and the changes should be good.”

Krem’s eyes are wide, and he does not look completely happy. He says, “Just like that. You take something that has shaped my whole life, affected my family, and almost got me killed and you just glow a little and poof!”

Gim says, “I can’t change some things. Depending on your private wishes, they could be very important things. But there aren’t very many people like me: Spirit healers who have studied ancient
elven techniques and know how to use them. But I assure you, I’ve several times heard the unease of someone who resents that someone like me hadn’t done such a thing earlier.”

Krem says, “Wait a minute. I do not mean to sound ungrateful. I can only imagine what the Chief would say if he thought I was giving lip to a woman he hopes to be our new employer. I thank you, sincerely.”

Gim says, “What happens between us stays between us. And I think you have been most gracious. Now, let me show you the Singing Maiden. You can eat well, drink a little, get a room, rest up, and meet us by the forge at first light.”

Krem says, “I’m ok with most of that, but I think I will be drinking more than a little.”

Gim says, “As long as you show up on time tomorrow morning.”

Gim walks Krem to the Singing Maiden and waves good bye. Krem salutes instead of waving.

Gim walks towards the village gates until she finds Varric’s tent. Varric is not outside the tent, so she ducks to check inside. Gim feels like she has been up forever, so she’s a little surprised to see Varric still in his bedroll. Varric startles and then smiles groggily as he sees who has entered his tent.

“Have you come to chase me out of bed on my one day of leisure, Beauty?” asks Varric.

Gim says, “Not at all,” as she sits down onto his bedroll and then lowers herself down alongside him, placing her head near his on his pillow. “I have something I can’t rest easy about until I tell you.”

Varric, who Gim notes is wearing a nightshirt cut just as his day tunics are to display his chest hair, turns to face her on his side, takes one arm out from under his covers, and strokes her arm. He says, “That sounds rather ominous, my Beauty.”

Gim says hastily, “No. Or, maybe it is, but it isn’t anything you can be imagining. Wisdom told me I shouldn’t talk to you about this because it could be very dangerous to me if this became known, so I must ask…”

“Then of course I will keep it to myself,” Varric says gently. His face is open and encouraging, and very patient.

“Last night, when we were kissing, I had an urge to run my magic through you as we kissed,” began Gim.

Varric says, “Was that it…? I remember your asking permission.”

“Yes,” says Gim. “But when I did, well…I didn’t realize it at first, but I began to hear your thoughts.” Varric is looking at her in a skeptical but indulgent manner, so Gim continues with, “You were thinking me lush and comparing me to honey.”

Varric says, “Why so I was, but I imagine I am not the first man to make such comparisons on kissing a beautiful woman.”

Gim places her palm into Varric’s luxuriant chest curls and brings up her glow. She carefully spreads her magic into Varric and thinks of how much she likes him and how close she wants to be to him. After a moment she hears phrases in Varric’s voice. Nothing is completely clear, but he is happy she is here and he is trying to figure out how to reassure her. She says, “Please think of someone.” After a moment, she hears his thoughts, and she pulls her hand back and sits up, moving onto her knees so she can face him.
She says, “Rather unfair to think of someone with a name you have asked me not to use. Do your thoughts go to her often?”

Varric’s voice hasn’t taken on this frustrated tone with her for many days. He says, “By Andraste’s lily-white butt cheeks! I was just groping for someone you wouldn’t guess. And no, I have had few occasions to think of her since I first kissed you. But you did hear my thoughts. Is that what you wanted--to make sure I knew?”

Gim, still off balance from hearing Varric thinking of Bianca, is still further thrown that he was more focused on having offended her than that she had heard his thoughts. She says, “Don’t you understand? When I kiss you, I have to stop myself--I have to prevent myself from falling into the lovely weight of pleasure and affection if I am to avoid hearing your thoughts. I am invading your privacy.”

Varric says, “Well, if that is all that is bothering you, let me tell you that you can’t invade someone who welcomes your presence. I have nothing to hide from you, and I am happy to have you sink into affection for me and hear whatever thought I have--unless you are upset by my thoughts.”

Gim says, “No, that isn’t it. But you can’t hear my thoughts. It isn’t fair.”

Varric says, “I am no expert, but I think anyone who worries about fairness when it comes to love is unlikely to be happy.”

Gim is frustrated. Why doesn’t he understand this? “But Varric,” she says, “this means I have a power over you that you don’t have over me.”

Varric says, “Many a man has been at the mercy of a beautiful woman. I am no different. Whatever this power is, I grant it to you of my own free will, and I wish you will make use of it again and again.”

Gim is torn. She is afraid she can do more than just hear his thoughts. She doesn’t know for sure though, and she is about at her limit now. If she were to tell him she is afraid she could control him, and he was equally unconcerned, she isn’t sure if she could handle it.

She throws herself on top of him, with the heavy bedroll fabric between them. She holds his head with both hands and kisses his face all over before bringing her mouth to his and slowing her frantic movements to a more languorous kiss. Varric brings his arms around her and runs his hands up and down her back. She very purposefully doesn’t bring up her glow.

Varric says, “I never thought I would get to the point where I would feel disappointed you didn’t use magic with me. I think this means this kiss is a ‘good bye kiss’ and not a ‘hello kiss’.”

Gim says, “It’s a ‘see you later kiss’.” With that, she jumps up and leaves the tent. She doesn’t have to figure everything out at once. Time and travel will help her feel her way. For the moment, returning to the cabin for some meditation sounds good.

She walks back along the path until she can see the cabin, and … there is a footwrap strap just visible from outside the window. Not just any footwrap: one of Lando’s footwraps. If he’s going to use signs like that, she hopes he is going to remember to take them down when she can come back.

Oh well, time to practice meditation atop one of the rocks near the lake.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks to Buttsonthebeach for some thoughtful conversation about this chapter.

Comments welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
After Gim leaves, Lando sits and contemplates the world, his relationships, and his future. That the world is in danger is a constant backdrop to all he does, but his immediate concerns are more centered on making things easy between Cassandra and Gim. He doesn’t want to prevent Gim from enjoying her own cabin, but he wants Cassandra...actually, he doesn’t need to continue that statement: he just wants Cassandra. He is the one who wanted them to live in a small space with his sister, so it is his responsibility to make Cassandra feel good about her living situation and her intimacy requirements. This kind of juggling was not an issue when they were on the road, so he finds himself looking forward to departing for the Hinterlands.

Because they will be departing tomorrow, he collects a few herbs and samples from his and Gim’s packs to deliver to Adan and Minaeve. First he stamps through the slushy snow to the apothecary, who breaks into an uncharacteristic smile on seeing him entering the cabin. As Lando rustles around in his pack to collect all his herbs, Adan says, “Herbs, eh? And welcome they are...even if I personally might rather have one of those cookies the lady Herald makes.”

Lando grins back at him and as he hands over the herbs he says, “They were good, weren’t they? I don’t think she will be able to find time to make treats this time, but perhaps when we get back. If you get your hands on anything special, such as chocolate or rare spices, save them for her. The gift of an ingredient always gets her going.”

Adan touches his own nose and then his forehead in an almost-salute in a way that Lando guesses is some sort of acknowledgement or promise. Adan says, “Sounds like a plan, your grace.”

Lando says, “I think people plotting how to acquire treats should be on a first name basis, don’t you, Adan?”

“As you wish your...Lando,” says Adan, with a brief apologetic hitch and some evident discomfort.

Lando waves cheerily at Adan and moves on towards the Chantry. The mountain air is clear, and he is content. He reflects briefly that in earlier days, he would never have imagined entering an Andrastian house of worship in such good cheer. He practically wants to whistle or sing as he walks past the icons, but he limits himself with a smile and a springy step.

As he approaches the door to where Minaeve conducts her research, he catches sight of Mother Giselle. Mother Giselle’s always kind face is showing signs of conspiratorial glee. She doesn’t move to waylay his progress, but Lando thinks she would like it very much if he stopped to talk. He decides to drop off his items for Minaeve first, which he speedily accomplishes, nodding politely at the obviously busy Josephine as he passes her. On the way out he stops and greets Mother Giselle with, “I am happy to see you Mother Giselle. I trust things are going well with you?”
Mother Giselle continues to radiate joy as she says, “Dear boy, if my day is blessed, it is to be laid at your door. Your sister has asked me—under the seal of secrecy, never fear—if I would be content to perform a wedding ceremony for you and Seeker Cassandra. I assured her that nothing would make me happier, for love is the Maker's best gift and it is infinite.”

Lando is briefly taken aback, though he is not surprised that Gim was before him in this investigation. He tries hard not to show his embarrassment, but Mother Giselle sees it and seems to think he’s cute. She says, “Herald, you have no cause to shrink. I believe the Maker moved your heart. It is good for the people to know that a faithful man is at the head of this movement. You can rely on me when the time comes.”

Lando begins to back away, stammering something incoherent that must include thanks. He almost leaves the Chantry, but then he thinks better of it and goes back into the room where he saw Josephine. When he approaches Josephine’s desk, she looks up, but she doesn’t at first stop writing on her board. Lando stands in front of her for a moment, and something on his face must communicate the delicacy of his errand, because she stops writing, rises, and leads him into a side chamber.

She says gently, “You have something to ask me?”

Lando says, “I hope that in the near future, perhaps when we return from the Hinterlands, we will have need for a very small ceremony that only our closest companions and Mother Giselle would attend. Could you, perhaps with the help of Leliana, who I know is very close to Cassandra, make sure that you have a few special things that would make such an event memorable?”

Josephine’s eyes have gone wide as saucers, and she is briefly frozen. When she moves again her face is professionally composed as she says, “But of course. So that would be the five of you, plus Leliana, Cullen, myself, and Mother Giselle.” When Lando nods she says, “And when would you be sure about such a need?”

Lando says, “With luck, by the time we leave tomorrow.”

Josephine performs a quick, aborted movement that leaves Lando with the impression she wanted to jump and clap her hands before she stopped herself. Her face is back to looking composed when she says, “Well, if you could indicate to me, I will make sure to have all in readiness.”

Lando, smiling at Josephine, says, “You want to hug me don’t you?” Josephine clasps her hands in front of her face, scrunches her eyebrows up so that she almost looks like she will cry, and nods her head quickly five or six times. Lando sweeps her into a hug, and then pulls back and says, “Would it be asking too much for you to see if you could find clothes that she would find appropriate for such an event—something soft and romantic?”

Josephine hiccups and her eyes become very wet. She says, “No, Herald”. When Lando holds her at arm's length and looks at with mock severity, she says, “No, Lando, it would not be asking too much.”

Lando says, “That’s better. Now give me another quick hug for luck.”

She does so, and then the two of them somewhat awkwardly pull apart and exit the chamber, and Lando leaves the Chantry before anyone can associate him with the odd demeanor of Mother Giselle or the Ambassador.

Lando decides he could do with some mundane chores after all this emotional exercise, so he heads back to the cabin so he can gather his gear to take to the forge for small repairs. But when he enters
the cabin, he finds Cassandra sitting at their table. Her posture is very straight except for the slight lowering of her head as her gaze and her palms are settled on the tabletop. When he opens the door and enters, she doesn’t even turn to look at him. She appears frozen. Lando can feel the effort she is putting into not moving. This control is admirable, but he would much rather she showed the anger that he is sure is underneath it.

Cassandra is not Gim, but she is closer to Gim than to Shiren, who would have run into his arms if she was upset and alone with him. He isn’t sure what she needs, but if she wants to show control now, he will not push. He gathers all of his gear out of both packs and takes the gear and his personal pack to the door, just as he had planned. He places all but one of the gear pieces in a careful pile. He gets a few tools out of his pack, and takes it and the piece of gear to the table, where he sits down quietly near Cassandra and begins working on the leather of his gauntlet. He does not touch her.

Cassandra does not react at first. She might be a statue. He keeps working on his gear and he makes it a point not to stare at her. After a while she moves her gaze to watch his gauntlet ministrations, and a while after that, some of the tension seems to leave her shoulders. After a bit more of this, he decides to risk it. While still looking intently at his work, he says, “I take it you went to see Cullen.”

Her lips must be as tense as the rest of her body, because her words come out even more carefully pronounced than usual. In clipped speech, she says, “Yes, or rather he came to me as I was practicing.” She doesn’t continue, and Lando doesn’t press. He keeps working on his gauntlets. After several minutes she says, “It is restful watching you work on your gauntlets.”

“Is it rest that you need? Perhaps you can improve my understanding here. I would have thought you would be more likely to need to rail and smash than to rest,” he says.

Her eyes move away from his gauntlets back to the table top. She says, “I am not as angry as I might be: first, because I understand too much of Cullen’s point of view to fault him for it, and second, because I do not actually believe I have done anything wrong. We must continue thwarting the efforts of those arrayed against us, and as we do, Cullen must see our worth and adapt.”

Lando says, “Are you telling me this or are you telling yourself? It can be hard work to passionately hold two opposing views.” After a few moments of silence, he asks, “Is the ‘we’ in that sentiment you and me, or is it the five of us, or is it the whole Inquisition?”

Cassandra finally looks into his eyes. He sees the ghost of a self-deprecating smile as she says, “Yes. That is, all of those, but the reason I am here now is that I have discovered a feeling in myself that I have not had since I had to break with the Seekers: I have brothers and sisters in arms who understand my challenges and my goals and will work as hard as I will to accomplish them.”

Lando puts his work aside, and turns towards Cassandra, taking her near hand in both of his. He says, “I hope I am more than a brother in arms to you, for you are much more than a sister in arms to me. I love you, Cassandra.”

Cassandra meets his gaze. She says, “You are more, as you know. I was just phrasing things to counter Cullen’s claim that I have let myself be swayed by my carnal desires. Cullen will learn the truth or he will not: the truth is more important than my reputation, and anyone willing to accuse me of weakness is welcome to try.”

Lando says gently, “Does your service as a Seeker present any reason that you may not fall in love or marry?”

Cassandra says, “No. Seekers are like Templars. We are expected to be above reproach, and because
of that, a liaison with a Templar, or…” Cassandra stops talking and drops her eyes once again to the table surface. She looks embarrassed. She finishes her thought with, “a mage would not be seen as appropriate.”

Lando says, “How fortunate that I am not a mage, then.”

Cassandra looks grave. She raises her eyes to his face. She says, “I would love you no less if you could freeze our enemies or heal my wounds. I admire your ability to heft a two-handed sword as if it weighed no more than a switch, but it is not why I love you.” She pauses here for a moment, but Lando can tell she has more to say. He waits. She says, “There are many things about the old order that failed. So much blame has been heaped on this party or that. Divine Justinia wanted to institute many reforms, and I supported her in these efforts, but now I feel in my gut that those reforms were just the beginning of what is needed. Not everyone will see things as I do. We must strive to model good behavior as we work to close the Breach.”

Lando says, “Do you think sharing a family with me and my apostate sister is modeling good behavior?”

Now for the first time, Cassandra moves her whole body to fully face Lando, and she adds her remaining hand to the other three. She says, “Yes. I am a Seeker of Truth, and I have felt the good in you…and in Gim. Though there is something uncommitted in her—something detached. I can’t trust her in the way I can trust you, but oddly, this distrust has nothing to do with the spirits she carries that I would have called demons before I had a chance to learn better. I don’t say this to speak ill of Gim, but to tell you what I feel, in complete honesty.”

Lando says sadly, “I understand what you see and I honor your willingness to tell the truth as you see it.”

Lando, still keeping hold of Cassandra’s hands, moves forward off his chair and smoothly lands on one knee before Cassandra. He uses a clear formal voice as says, “I love you. In my eyes, in the eyes of my people, we are already bonded. I say to you, I forsake all others and will travel with you on every road, both bitter and sweet, bellanaris.” Cassandra is smiling, and her eyes are wide, but tears are streaming down her face, and her chest is moving with deep breaths. Lando brings her hands to his mouth where he gently kisses them and then lowers them to his knee.

Lando looks into Cassandra’s eyes and wills her to feel the truth. He says, “Cassandra Allegra Portia Calogera Filomena Pentaghast, will you take me as your husband, before the Maker and his Bride?”

The only thing that changes about Cassandra when he asks this all-important question is that the volume of tears streaming down her face increases. Lando is one giant nerve—one moment sure that, as she has said, she loves him and the next sure he has misjudged and she is trying to figure out how to let him down. Finally she speaks in watery words.

She says, “I believe that you know me. I believe that you love me. But before I can answer you, you must assure me that you understand that my duties to the Maker and to the people of Thedas must come even before you, my light in the darkness and my joy.”

Lando feels the relief wash over him like strong liquor racing through his veins. He says, “I understand, and I swear to do all I can to help you with these duties, even unto leaving your side if that is what is required.”

“There, yes, with all my heart, I will be your wife, and you will be my husband, and I will stand proudly by your side.” Cassandra frees her hands from his and raises them to his face before leaning in to gently kiss him on the mouth. He places his arms around her and, notwithstanding his awkward
position on his knee, gently pulls her to him.

This is not enough, and he needs to press her to himself, so he relaxes his grip and stands, pulling her with them. Now he can hold her strong warrior’s body as tightly as he wishes. He feels his own eyes wet as his heart is overwhelmed. She is his, bellanaris.

They start moving towards the screen when Lando says, “One moment.” He sits on one of the chairs and quickly removes his footwraps. Then he stands, walks over to the window facing the pathway, and places one of his footwraps so it is just visible on the outside of the cabin.

When he turns back to her, she has the beloved crooked smile on her face together with a raised eyebrow. She says, “Does that mean what I think it does?” When he smiles and nods, she says, “We can’t keep her out of her own cabin the whole day.”

He says, “We can’t. But if you think she would begrudge a small celebration of our betrothal, you have not met her.”

Cassandra says, “You have an excellent point,” and begins stripping off her garments with speed and precision.

He says, “You are eager for me, my love?” as he strips off his leggings and tunic.

She says, “If I understood you earlier, I think an appropriate response would be to say, bellanaris.

Now they are both naked, and he strides to her in one step and lifts her into his arms. As he maneuvers around the screen and lays her on the bed, he says, “Aye, love. Bellanaris.”

Chapter End Notes

Bellanaris, spelled as it is, is taken from the wedding ceremony with a Dalish Inquisitor from Tresspasser. It seems clear in context that it means forever, always, eternity.

I promise more plot forwarding next chapter!

Comments welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Lando doesn’t like it that he seems to be the least comfortable of the party on horseback. Oh, Varric complains more, but he seems to stay atop his horse and headed in the right direction easily enough. Neither Lando nor Gim have had many opportunities to ride a horse before this, but despite Varric’s claim that dwarves’ legs are too short for horse riding, Gim seems quite comfortable atop her mare. Catching Gim with an unmistakable glow about her, Lando shakes his finger at her and calls her a cheater, but she just laughs. Solas looks like he and his horse are moving as one being; Cassandra is only slightly less proficient. Two things make horseback riding tolerable: the ability to ask Gim for healing every time they stop, and the utter joy it seems to give Cassandra to correct his form.

“Stop trying to hold on like a burr. Your legs should hang from the hip and your heels should be down. It is all a question of balance,” she bellows. Lando attempts to smile at his virago of a mate, but he fears it looks more like a grimace. He tries to follow her directions, and she shouts, “Get your hands out of the air. Your reins are too long. How will your horse know what you want?”

Lando suspects Cassandra’s joy in correcting him is sharpened because he did not volunteer any information about the obvious secret between the lady ambassador and him. He knew as soon as he saw that Cassandra had caught his oh-so-casual nod to Josephine that he was in for it. He will just have to continue pretending that was a normal, friendly nod. Between clenched teeth, he says, “You said I should balance!”

Cassandra says wryly, “I didn’t say you should flap like some great braided bird.” She must see that he is trying hard not to be offended, because her tone becomes more conciliatory as she says, “You are so good at so very many things. You must allow me to enjoy this brief period before your natural grace adapts to horseback. You know, I actually have taught many to become comfortable a horse. I actually am giving you good direction, even if I do have to admit to enjoying your discomfort a bit more than I usually do when giving such instruction.” He tries to be more grateful, but most of his gratitude is reserved for the fact that his backside doesn’t feel the way it did before their last stop.

Thinking of the last stop definitely improves his mood. While Gim had healed him, she had lectured him on treating his horse well. She had said, “You haven’t even named him. No wonder he doesn’t care what you want.” This is when his roan gelding acquired the name, Kell—for all the good it seemed to do.

After Gim had finished with him, Cassandra had approached her. Varric, watching this, had said, “And I thought you were accustomed to the rigors of riding, Seeker.”

Cassandra may have blushed, but she sported her crooked smile as she had said, “I have found it worthwhile to attempt various unfamiliar innovations. I can recommend the same to you, disingenuous dwarf.”
Varric had grinned back and said, “Can you now?” and then turned to smirk at Gim. Gim had punched his arm a little too hard to be termed purely good natured as they all got back onto their saddles.

Yes, Lando finds he really doesn’t mind being playfully abused by the women in his family, and it seems Varric feels the same way. Lando would never venture to guess Solas’s opinion of such things.

Riding has its uses, he admits, but all it is doing today is making him more tired than he would have been even had he marched for days. Well, that and bringing him closer to the Hinterlands. Lando would much have preferred camping in their two tents in the wilderness, but with horses, the closest Inquisition camp is within a long day’s ride of Haven. Lando has been mentally preparing himself for the rigors of staying with strangers in the established settlement: eating indifferent food and staying in tents segregated by gender and not family. He did swear to take duty first, and he knows his need to sleep nestled like spoons with his nose buried in Cassandra’s hair is not as important as the many dire things happening in the Hinterlands. He prepares to be stoic.

When they get to the camp, they find a smattering of scouts. Lando is so tired that he doesn’t know if he could recognize anyone, but they all seem to know him. He has the impression Cassandra knows a couple of them personally. The head scout gives them a short report on the changes since they were last in the Hinterlands while other scouts tend their horses and put their packs in tents. The bad news is that right outside of Redcliffe, a new rift has opened where none was before. Lando sees Gim and Solas share a significant look at that news, and he can almost see the words ‘I told you so’ floating over Solas’s head. Gim can see he is about to ask; she shakes her head in negation: anyone else would think that was an itch or an aspect of grooming, but Lando knows to hold his tongue. He will wait.

Dinner is not as indifferent as he had feared. A whole lamb encrusted in herbs and spices and turned on a spit is then sliced and served with crusty bread and a sweet, fresh, green jelly. It is way more food than the people in camp can eat, but when someone asks about it the scouts laugh and say nothing goes to waste in the Hinterlands.

As he finishes his food, he turns to Cassandra, who has clearly been waiting for him to look her way. She licks the lamb juices off her fingers, which somehow involves her placing her middle finger in her mouth to the second knuckle and then slowly removing the finger—all with her gaze locked on Lando’s; maybe he isn’t so tired after all. Suddenly, Varric’s voice rings out with, “Seeker! I never knew you to be such a messy eater. Do you need me to get you a cloth?” Cassandra follows her usual noise of disgust with, “Troublesome dwarf!” Lando thinks he is going to hurt his cheekbones if he grins any harder.

Gim, who had wandered away from where they are eating, comes back and says, “I have some interesting news. First, We have been given two tents: one with a double-pallet, and one with three single-pallets” Lando darts a glance at Cassandra, who is looking smug. Gim continues with, “Second, all the scouts have packed up the remaining food and have gone down to the Crossroads. They said they would be back in an hour. I don’t want to depend on lack of observers, so Solas, if you would be so kind…”

Solas performs a graceful hand gesture, and suddenly Lando feels as if air is being pushed into his ears. He moves his feet in some fallen leaves, and the sound is deadened to the point of his having trouble believing that the pale echo he hears is actually caused by his own actions. This, added to his exhaustion, makes him feel like he is dreaming. He looks up at Gim. Her voice is muffled, but understandable. She says, “Solas discovered word of an ancient Elvhen artifact in the Hinterlands,
and now that we are here, I can sense it too. Solas thinks it might be able to strengthen, and perhaps even record information about, the Veil. I would like to find this artifact tomorrow morning before we go to the lake to look for the Warden.”

Cassandra says, “What if the artifact is not easy to find?”

Solas says, “Gim and I can sense it now. It appears to be very near the Crossroads. If we are mistaken, and there is some obstacle or danger, we can abandon the search.” Lando looks from face to face, and it is clear no one objects. Gim nods at Solas, Solas moves his hand again, and Lando’s ears pop as sound returns to normal. He continues sitting where he is, feeling a bit dazed.

Cassandra appears in front of him and pulls him to his feet. She says, “I believe it is time that we start moving you towards your bed.” How sweet. She wants to be with him. He sways to his feet, and holding her hand, trails after her. When they get to the tent and go inside, he is very pleasantly surprised. There is a lamp lit, the double-pallet is made up, and there is a table with a bowl of sweet-smelling flowers on it. This is really very nice.

Cassandra pushes him down onto the bed and begins to remove his footwraps. He says, “You know, among the people, removing someone’s footwraps is an intimate act. And I have not even shown you how to do it.”

She says, “You will find I am rather observant, my betrothed. You keep saying we are family. Is that not intimate enough for me to deal with your attire?”

Lando says, “I didn’t say attire, I said footwraps. And I could tell you I would never presume to remove Solas’s footwraps outside of a life or death emergency. In fact, I would be rather surprised if even Gim were to be comfortable with such.”

Cassandra says, “So you are less comfortable having me put my hands on your feet than on your…”

“Oh no,” he says, “I said it was an intimacy, not that it was too intimate for you to do. You may do with me as you will.”

“I shall keep that in mind,” she says while wrestling off his over-tunic. She then stands, removes her armor, pops off her under-tunic and pulls on a soft shirt. She returns to him, coaxes him under the covers, and then sits on the side of the bed next to him.

He strokes her leg and gazes lazily up at her. “You look like a woman who is about to tell me what to do,” he says with what he hopes is an enticing grin.

She smiles her beautiful crooked smile and says, “You are very perceptive. First, you must let me rub your back,” as she coaxes him onto his belly and then sits square on his muscular ass. The feel of her straddling him is fantastic—even if he would rather turn to face her. As she begins to knead and stroke his back, his neck, and his shoulders, he moans softly in pleasure. He begins to feel guilty that he is only receiving and not giving, so he tries to turn over, but she tightens her thighs and says, “Shhh. Not yet. Relax for me.” So he sinks into the warm haze of comfort and affection…

...from which he awakens around dawn. He is so confused at first to find himself alone in the bed with the sounds of morning and a dim light coming from the door. Then Cassandra pokes her wet head through the door and says, “You have time to run to the stream to wash up if you want to.” She is gone before he can respond. Perfidious woman! But getting the last of the aroma of horse out of his life sounds good, so he takes yesterday’s clothes and a clean set to the stream and cleans both himself and his clothing. As he is leaving, he runs into Solas arriving with a bundle of cloth in his arms.
Solas says, “You should present yourself to your sister so she will stop worrying. Apparently your visible exhaustion last night was distressing to her, and she wished to interrupt you two and offer her services. Varric and I convinced her she could leave you to the care of your bond mate. I am happy to see we were right.”

Lando mutters something non-committal, and he hopes friendly, as he leaves. He hangs his wet clothes up in his tent and then returns to the central camp, where Cassandra offers him a bowl of porridge and a quick kiss on the cheek. Lando accepts the bowl and stands side to side with her. He says quietly, “You tricked me.”

Her eyes dance as she says, “Did I now? Perhaps you will explain to me how I did something so dastardly. While you are at it, perhaps you would like to tell me if you think I care more for the pleasure you bring me than for your well-being.”

Lando sputters. He says, “But what about the pleasure you bring to me?”

Cassandra looks delighted. One eyebrow is high and her smile looks like she is failing to contain it as she says, “Are you concerned you will have no more chances to experience this?”

He says, “No, but...it wouldn’t have taken very long to...”

She interrupts, “Aha! Now whose well-being are we considering?”

Lando can feel his face turning red as Varric walks up hesitantly. Varric says slowly, “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

Lando says, “No. I’m just... Women are sneaky, Varric.”

Varric nods his head in sympathy and says, “Don’t I know it. Speaking of which, Solas and Gim asked that we catch up with them in the Crossroads.” Varric immediately turns and starts heading down the trail.

“Oh no!” says Cassandra. She doesn’t look smug anymore. Lando shovels the rest of his porridge into his mouth and takes off after Varric.

It doesn’t take long to find Solas and Gim, who are predictably in the place that was formerly used for healing. They don’t look to be in the process of healing anyone, but they do have a friendly crowd. Gim finishes up a low conversation with an elderly woman, hugs her briefly, and then she and Solas come out to the main pathway and lead the party on through the settlement.

After the last sound of the Crossroads is several minutes behind, Gim and Solas start moving a little more slowly, but it isn’t long before they see a Dalish mage fighting with a shade ahead of them. Solas freezes the shade, Varric puts a bolt through it, and it explodes in a sputtering of goo.

Lando is watching the mage watch them. She has vallaslin of June, and she is clearly confused by them. Lando is about to greet her as a Dalish when he sees Gim angrily stomping up to the woman. The woman is backing up. She says, “My name is...”

“She finishes Gim in unison with the mage, although Gim spits the name. She continues with, “First of a dead clan and willing host of a demon. It left tendrils in you, you know. It can find you again, anytime it wants. You invited it in, and you are its creature now.” Lando glances over at Solas to see if he knows what is going on, but he sees Solas looking to him with the same inquiry.

Mhiris says, “Who are you?”
Gim says, “No one you know. My name is Gim, and I had a friend you have met. And the last time I was able to talk to him, you had recently tried to kill him. I haven’t heard from him in a long time.”

Lando can’t tell if Mhiris is angry or scared, but she is definitely shocked and upset. She says, “You know Michel de Chevin? He was alive when I saw him last.”

Gim laughs. It is not a nice laugh. Then she looks back at Solas briefly, and she says nothing. Lando looks over at Cassandra, whose eyes are narrowed and whose hand is on her sword, but she does not move to intervene.

Mhiris says, “Flat-ears copying the dress of the people--consorting with Chevaliers--and not just any Chevalier, but one that helped burn your kind to death in Halamshiral. There are worse things in this world than demons.”

Cassandra moves forward now. She says, “Is this woman a danger to you or to the Inquisition?”

Mhiris’s stares at Cassandra with her mouth fallen open; she sounds shocked as she says, “The Inquisition! You are the ones who can close the rifts! And you associate with Chevaliers and...Templars!” Mhiris starts backing up, clearly getting ready to flee.

Lando says, to no one in particular, “She isn’t a Templar.” He sees Cassandra spare him a quick glance, and she doesn’t look happy.

At the same time, he hears Varric say, “Should I stop her from getting away?” Lando hears the sound of Varric readying Bianca for action.

Gim says, “I don’t care, but if you are going to shoot her, kill her, because I don’t want to have to heal her.”

It looks like Varric is actually going to shoot her; at the very least he is aiming at her. Cassandra strides to Varric and pushes Bianca down. She says, “We don’t need to kill anyone that Gim says she doesn’t care about.”

Gim stands staring at the last place she could see Mhiris before she disappeared into the landscape. Solas approaches her and says quietly, “You just walked up to that woman and with incomplete information, you made her an enemy. You must be more cautious.”

Gim says, “She was already an enemy. She is Imshael’s creature.”

Solas sounds surprised as he says, “Imshael?” Solas looks troubled. “Then she was already your enemy, but you didn’t have to tell her that you were her enemy.”

Everyone in the party looks unhappy. Varric says, “Beauty, I would appreciate it if you were more clear the next time something like this happens.”

Cassandra has her back to the rest of the party. Without turning around, she says, “For once, the dwarf has a point.”

Lando doesn’t know who to approach. Cassandra and Varric seem shocked at how cold-blooded Gim has been, but if Lando understands him, Solas is disturbed because she was not even more cold-blooded. Lando finally says, “Are we near the artifact now?”

Solas and Gim break out of their trances and head towards some stone rubble. Solas raises the rubble, and Gim lights a veilfire sconce and carries it through a stone archway and down some stairs. This is Cassandra’s and Varric’s introduction to veilfire. Solas tells them what it is, but Lando is not
paying much attention.

When they get to the bottom, there are a few minor demons that are quickly dispatched. In the far end of the room, there is a mechanical sphere on a pedestal. Gim hands the torch to Cassandra, and she and Solas approach the sphere, Solas raises his hand, and the sphere begins whirling and glowing with the same green as the mark on Lando’s palm. His palm throbs in sync with the rotating orb, and Lando holds his hand to his chest.

Gim and Solas have a brief staring match. Lando looks to see if Varric and Cassandra are watching them, but Cassandra and Varric are too busy looking unhappy and investigating the room. After a while, Gim turns and sees Lando watching and she immediately comes to him. She takes his hand and brings up her glow. Soon his throbbing quiets, but Gim is still looking concerned. She looks at Solas, and Lando thinks she is asking him some unspoken question. Whether or not she was asking a question, Solas’s only response seemed to be tightly pressed lips and an otherwise blank expression.

Cassandra, who has collected a few items from the area surrounding the artifact, approaches the three of them and asks, “Did the artifact do what you expected?”

Solas says, “Yes, the wards are helping to strengthen the Veil. This area should be safer for travelers now.”

Cassandra says, “Good. Let us return to the camp before traveling to the lake.” With this, Cassandra starts walking up the stairs. She doesn’t check in with him. She doesn’t ask how he is. She is all business. Lando hasn’t seen her retreat that far into her professional demeanor in quite a while. He knows she is not upset at him; she is just unsettled and she is not ready to talk about it.

But she was right this morning: they have time; if they have world enough, they have time.

Chapter End Notes

Some of the events at the end of the chapter reference The Masked Empire by Patrick Weekes. If you have not read that book, use the wiki to look up Mhiris, and that one page should tell you enough.

Comments welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Lives in Sweetest Bud

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of meeting Mhiris and the meeting of Blackwall. Krem joins the gang.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Cassandra had quite a head start, and Gim is having trouble catching up with her. The others let Gim run ahead. Gim assumes that Lando will be acting as an apologist—though how he will when Varric and Solas were upset for such different reasons, she doesn’t know. Cassandra’s long legs are extending the lead, so Gim finally gasps, “Cass!”

Cassandra stops and waits for Gim with a studiously neutral look on her face. As soon as Gim is in range, Cassandra turns and keeps walking, though she does slow down a bit. Gim says, “Cassandra, can we please talk?”

Cassandra looks briefly at Gim and then turns her eyes straight ahead in the direction she is walking. She says, “Your brother has the good sense to not urge me to conversation in this mood.”

“Cassandra, I know I put you in this mood,” says Gim. “If you need to yell at me, yell at me. If I did something wrong, tell me. If I was too harsh, tell me.”

Cassandra stops and turns to Gim. “Harsh!” she says, “You think I am angry because you were harsh? I am angry because you didn’t act like a leader—or even a team member. You charged ahead and committed us to irreparable actions without any consultation—which is what leaders have to do sometimes, but then you didn’t then give clear indications for any of us to follow. I don’t know, even now, if we did the right thing letting that woman go. But she is gone, so we needn’t discuss it.”

Gim is a little surprised that the others have not caught up with them. That can’t be coincidental. She says, “You heard me say she was demon-ridden, right?”

Cassandra says, “So I did, which is why I would have supported killing her or imprisoning her on your say so. I am not familiar with demons relinquishing their hosts, but then, I am not familiar with those who invite demons to inhabit them: the abominations I am familiar with have been taken over against their will. But you said, during and after, that she is the demon’s creature. What risk have you subjected us to by saying ‘you don’t care’ if she gets away?”

Gim says, “Solas said I shouldn’t have tipped my hand. That I should have not been so clear to her that I was her enemy.”

Cassandra says, “That would have been an approach I could have supported. It would have given you time to consult with someone in our party and indicate how she should be dealt with. It would also have meant that if we did decide to let her go, she would leave with less information about us. I have no idea what you have communicated to her by confronting her like that, but I suspect it is more than that the Inquisition doesn’t like her.”

Gim says, “You know I couldn’t have hurt her.”
Cassandra laughs. It is not a nice laugh. She says, “Gim, we are well past the days when I believe you incapable of hurting someone: If we limit ourselves to physical harm alone: Can you harm someone with a weapon: no; can you perform actions that will cause harm to befall someone: yes. Almost anything you had said, or failed to say, about Mhiris today would have got her killed--one of the only exceptions being ‘I don’t care’. You must learn to be clear or you must learn to follow others who are clear. What if Varric had killed that woman today and then you had placed all responsibility for the action on him after charging at her in anger like that? How fair would that have been?”

Gim suddenly realizes what Cassandra is saying. She says, “You think I was selfish!”

Cassandra says, “That is one way to put it. I think your concerns were personal and were in no way connected with the organization you represent. Heretofore, your personal interests have aligned with ours. How can anyone object to healing? How can anyone object to your helping you and your brother to survive? But this situation was more nuanced, and it let me understand something about you.”

Gim says, “I am no different today than I was yesterday.”

Cassandra says, “True, but I knew there was something about my view of you that had yet to come into focus: today it is crystal clear.”

Gim says, “I’m sorry.”

Cassandra says, “That is not good enough. When you know what is good enough, you let me know.” Cassandra strides away, and Gim is completely sure that accompanied or not, Cassandra would not be communicating further.

Gim stays on the path until the others catch up. Varric gives her a curt nod and says, “Beauty,” as he walks by her, and Lando gives her a pressed lip, raised-eyebrows smile that looks like a reluctant apology, but he too keeps walking. Gim is expecting Solas to keep walking too, but he stops and faces her. Gim looks up at him, and part of her feels like falling into his arms and weeping, but she can tell he would not welcome this. She hasn’t seen him look this reserved when it was just the two of them for quite some time.

She says, “Are you angry with me too?”

Solas begins walking with his hands clasped behind his back. He says calmly, “Were you angry with Lando for not knowing how to expertly ride a horse?”

Gim follows Solas. As he turns to look back at her, she says nothing, although she does wrinkle her brow. She is perplexed at his non sequitur.

Solas continues, “You and I, we have some things in common. We each learn things in unusual ways, leaving us at once ignorant of much that others see as the natural fruit of experience while mastering rare skills. Necessity expanded my view; it will do the same for you.”

She says, “But my oaths...”

“Have been all you have had to answer to,” he finishes for her. “You were denied a fuller society in which to learn your other obligations.”

She says, “Lando...”

“Has allowed you to be a tyrant. He helped present you as a victim, but that only works for so long. I
imagine part of Cassandra’s reaction is the view you have given her of her bond mate.”

Gim trudges along after Solas and thinks. She raises objection after objection to what he has said in her mind, but none receive the blessing of her spirit and none survive the trip to her mouth. He may not be completely right, but he isn’t completely wrong. And neither is Cassandra. She will have to reach her own conclusions about things. Finally she says, “Solas?”

He stops and turns to her once more. After swallowing a few times, she says, “Have I given you a distaste for …”

“Oh, Da’ean, you are a babe in arms. I would no more fault you for being what you are than a parent would resent a beloved child for crying. But we must consider how best to help you be what you need to be in this new situation. Be gentle with us as we adjust to our realizations”

“What about me?” she pleads. “Will you be gentle with me?”

“That,” he says, “we will not do. But neither will we shun you. We are family.”

She says peevishly, “You know, you are not blameless.” Solas’s face freezes briefly and then hints of sadness are visible.

“Well I know it,” he says, “but if you are going to try to tell me you haven’t been trying to teach me things since the very moment we met, I will not be able to believe you.”

Solas seems to think he has said enough, because he walks on down the trail without waiting for her. His hands are still placidly folded behind his back, but when she hazards a glow, she can feel his aura keeping tabs on her. She purposely walks slowly behind Solas, but not so slowly that he should worry.

When she gets to the camp, she finds Krem talking to Cassandra. As she walks up, Cassandra says, “Gim, the soldier you mentioned has joined us. He says he will be traveling with us today. We should get going soon.”

Gim tries to hide the unease engendered by her morning. She says, “Good to see you Krem. May I take a quick look?”

Krem is grinning as he says, “Those scouts were awful careful of me; I almost had to learn a new way to part my hair. It’s a good thing Cassandra knew I was coming. She set them to rights quick enough.” Gim stares steadily at Krem with what she hopes is a question on her face. Eventually, Krem says, “If you are asking permission to touch me, go ahead.”

Gim reaches for Krem’s wrist and brings up her glow: nothing is unexpected, and everything seems to be going well. She says, “How do you feel?”

Krem produces a rather leering grin and says, “Rarin’ to go!”

Gim briefly considers letting Krem continue in this vein, but that would be unfair to Krem. Gim says, in what she hopes is a lighthearted tone, “Our traveling companions might take offense if you were the wrong kind of friendly.”

Krem says, just as cheerily, “Well that is a different matter. You didn’t tell me you were spoken for. Wouldn’t want to kick up a dust with the new employer.”

Gim says, “We aren’t your employers yet.” She starts heading for her tent, and Krem follows.
Krem struts with puffed chest as he says, “If you see the Chargers in action, we will be. There’s none better, and I’m not biased saying that. You can ask anyone.”

Gim smiles and says, “I will meet you at the horses,” in what she hopes is a friendly manner. Krem takes the hint and she enters the tent alone.

Inside she finds Varric. Varric walks up and rubs his hands up her arms like he is trying to warm her up. He says, “Having a rough day, Beauty?”

Gim says, trying hard not to cry, “Oh Varric. You are comforting me when I should be apologizing to you!”

Varric folds her into his arms and pats her back like he is comforting a child. He says, “Oh Beauty. Don’t take this hard. You woke up one day and you were one of the two most important people in the world, and you have no training for being at the eye of the storm. Believe me, I’ve been in a crew a bit like this before, and it was a bunch of right assholes, but we had an advantage.” Varric stops talking, but Gim just waits. He’s telling a story now, so she just needs to let him finish.

Varric pulls back so he can look Gim in the and says, “We had Hawke. I didn’t find it out for a long time, but her father taught her to lead. When she was horsing around, you wouldn’t know it, because she could be as sarcastic and irresponsible as the worst of us, but when we were under pressure, we knew she would keep us moving forward and keep our roles clear."

“You didn’t have anyone like that to teach you. You have so many strong ideas that sometimes we can forget that you have had no reason to learn to lead. And your need to heal everything with a stubbed toe makes it seem like you care about everyone, but seeing you care enough one way or another that you didn’t want to heal someone made me realize that outside of us, you don’t really care about most of the folks you heal—you just have what Anders calls bedside manner.”

Gim is thinking hard. She says, “I never really thought of it that way. All I think about is my oaths. The way you put it makes me sound like a monster.”

Varric says reassuringly, “No, you aren’t a monster. You just aren’t like most of the healers we’ve known, and I think we’ve made some pretty bad generalizations. I should have guessed before now. I know you spent decades healing a bunch of clan mates you would sooner see dead than alive. You don’t care if people are healed: you just want to heal them.”

Gim objects, “I care about some people…”

Varric says, I know you do. But before the Breach, was there ever anyone but Lando?”

Gim thinks a bit. Her voice is so quiet she doesn't think Varric will hear as she says, “His daughter…” She is back to full voice, but she isn’t sure he would take this next as a fair answer. “Spirits?”

Varric shakes his head. He says, “I know better than to say spirits aren’t people around you, but they aren’t waking people. They are beholden to you. Anyway, we should get your stuff and get to the horses. You don’t have to learn everything at once. Solas says we just need to be honest with you. He says if you see it and feel it, you will adjust.”

Gim says, “But I don’t think I want to be a leader.”

Varric produces a skeptical grunt. Then he says, “For someone who doesn’t want to be the leader, you sure like to tell people what to do.” He kisses her on the forehead, gives her another quick hug, and grabs her pack. She looks for anything she left behind and follows him out of the tent. Everyone
is treating her like a child today. Perhaps it could be worse. Perhaps it could be way worse.

She walks back to the horses, and they all mount up to head to the Upper Lake Camp. Krem is chatting to Cassandra, and Lando is talking to Varric. Gim isn’t sure what she would think of this if it were not for what Solas told her, but Cassandra and Lando are not riding near each other. Solas is riding near her, and she is sure his attention is on her, but he is trying to be casual about his interest, and he isn’t saying anything. He would have been more successful at his dissembling if she hadn’t felt his aura around her every time she brought up her glow. Lando smiles at her from time to time, but he keeps his distance.

The Hinterlands had been pacified on their last trip, and this trip to the Lake camp is uneventful. Gim has plenty of time to mull over the day’s events.

When they get to the camp, once again there are tents ready for them. Krem seems surprised but pleased to get a tent of his own. After they drop off their packs and leave the horses with the scouts, they head up to the lake.

As they reach the north end of the lake, they see an older bearded warrior lecturing several young people who look to be farmers. As they get nearer, Gim calls out, “Blackwall? Warden Blackwall?”

The bearded man turns and says, “You’re not…? How do you know my name? Who sent?” Just then an arrow flies towards Gim, and Blackwall leaps forward to intercept the arrow with his shield just as Gim surrounds both of them with a shield. Blackwall looks startled, and he yells, “That’s it. Help or get out. We’re dealing with these idiots first.”

Gim is close to Blackwall and her glow is up, so she quickly grabs his wrist and scans him before moving with the battle.

Blackwall wrenches his arm out of her grasp and then yells encouragement to the young men, calling them ‘conscripts’. It is clear someone taught him how to lead. There are several men attacking, but they are nothing difficult, and Blackwall, Krem, and the five of them have the attackers dead before the “conscripts” get a chance to do anything. When the battle is over, Blackwall appears to regret the deaths of their attackers and then he gives a rousing speech to the young farmers before sending them off to their farms. Gim takes that speech as an opportunity to approach Cassandra and whisper, “He isn’t a Warden.”

Cassandra snaps her head toward Gim. She says, equally quietly, “Are you sure?”

Gim says, “Positive. There is no faking the blood of a real Warden.”

Cassandra says, “We don’t know his reasons for impersonating a Warden. Let me see if he seems to be a threat to the stability in the Hinterlands.” Gim nods.

When Blackwall finishes sending off the farmers, he approaches Gim and says, “You’re no farmer. Why do you know my name? Who are you?”

Cassandra steps forward and says, “We know your name because we are agents of the Inquisition. We are investigating whether the disappearance of the Wardens has anything to do with the murder of the Divine.”

Blackwall says, “Maker’s balls. The Wardens and the Divine? That can’t–no, you’re asking so you don’t really know. First off, I didn’t know they disappeared. But we do that, right? No more blight, job done, Wardens are the first thing forgotten. But one thing I will tell you: no Warden killed the Divine. Our purpose isn’t political.”
Cassandra says, “Our purpose?” Gim can hear the challenge in Cassandra’s voice, and so can Blackwall.

Blackwall says, “I haven’t seen any Wardens for months. I travel alone. Recruiting.”

Cassandra says, “Yes, we saw the result of your recruiting efforts just now.” She looks around the structure, clearly a home of long duration. “It is rather unusual to use the right of conscription and then release your recruits, is it not?”

Blackwall is quite defensive. He says, “Treaties give Wardens the right to take what we need. Who we need. These idiots forced a fight so I conscripted their victims. They had to do what I said, so I told them to stand. Next time they won’t need me.”

Cassandra says, “I wasn’t aware Grey Wardens could take whatever they want.”

Blackwall says, “It is complicated.”

Cassandra says, “So I gathered. I take it you plan to remain here ‘recruiting’ for quite some time and you have no knowledge of the whereabouts of the other Wardens?”

Blackwall has his arms crossed. Gim can tell he knows he’s been detected, but Cassandra appears to be giving him an out. He says, “That’s right.”

Cassandra says, “Then we won’t bother you any further,” and turns to go.

As the party follows Cassandra, Blackwall calls out, “Inquisition?”

Cassandra turns, raises a cold eyebrow and says, “Yes, Warden?” The ridicule in his title is obvious to Gim, but no one else—other than Blackwall—seems to be reacting as if it is.

Blackwall says hesitantly, “Good travels.”

Cassandra says, “And you as well,” and turns back to walk back to the camp.

As they walk along, Gim says, “Leliana is not going to like this.”

Cassandra says, “No, she is not.” At the end of the statement, Cassandra gives Gim a wan smile. It’s not much of a smile, and it vanishes almost immediately, but it is a smile, and Gim will take it.

Cassandra hasn’t given up on her.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
When they get back to camp, the smell of roasting fish and pungent greens welcomes them in. Lando can see that Gim is still mulling everything over. On their trip, he has seen occasional resentment on her face, and he can tell she would have liked it if he had stayed with her and reassured her. He is torn about this because Solas has said that if Gim receives her usual unequivocal Lando-support, they run the risk of falling into their old patterns: she might not only fail to grow into her new position, but she might withdraw from the others. Lando doesn’t want to risk it, but he doesn’t want her to feel abandoned either.

He decides on a single act he can’t imagine would cause Solas’s censure: he scoops up a huge bunch of drenched spindleweed, runs up behind her, dumps it all down the back of her tunic, and darts away crowing triumph. Gim swears incoherently and races after him. He can outrun her, but she can outlast him if she uses her glow. Lando avoids her, dodging around the other members of the party, and lures her near the shallow waters that provided the spindleweed. He manages to trip her and she comes up drenched and weedy.

Everything goes quiet except for a gasp from Krem. Lando glances over at Cassandra, who is looking thunderous. Lando braces himself for a raging scold, but when she notices him watching for her reaction, suddenly her face changes. She starts laughing, and Gim immediately joins her. Everyone else takes their cue from the women and they laugh too. The release of tension is like an audible pop in the air. Gim, still laughing and pointing, says, “Your face! You looked like you thought she was going to take a switch to you! Here, let me comfort you with a hug!” She moves in to besmear him, but Cassandra has other ideas.

“Enough, you two,” she announces. Lando is surprised she just uses her normal voice and not her parade bellow; she sounds tired. Cassandra gestures at Lando, Solas, and Varric and continues with, “You three can tend the horses and make sure we are ready to leave tomorrow while the two of us bathe. Krem, just make sure your own gear is ready to go.”

Krem bobs his head in acknowledgment and says, “You lot are not what I expected from the saviors of Thedas. If I hadn’t seen you fight back there with surgical precision, I might be tempted to think your reputation was rubbish.” Gim gets Krem’s attention and whispers something in his ear.

Krem is having some trouble deciding who to listen to because as Gim is whispering, Varric is saying, “Stick around, Soporati, you ain’t seen nuthin’ yet.”
Krem’s head snaps towards Varric. He Looks a little less easy-going when he says, “You speak Tevene?” Lando notices that Solas’s interest is also engaged in this exchange, but Cassandra and Gim have left for the lake.

Varric says, “No, but I spent years fighting alongside a warrior who grew up in Tevinter. He taught me that term. He was contemptuous of mages and slavers and he used that term for the rare one of your countryman he didn’t want to kill on sight. If you don’t like it, I won’t use it again.”

Mercurial Krem looks friendly again as he says, “Nah, if you put it like that, I’m proud to own the moniker. I came damn close to being a slave myself; it was one of the reasons for leaving my homeland.”

Varric smiles and says over his shoulder as he moves towards the horses, “That sounds like a story I would love to hear.” Solas is also showing more interest than usual. It occurs to Lando that Solas always becomes attentive when slavery is mentioned.

Varric is too far away to hear Krem’s response, but Solas is still near, and Lando is sure he also hears Krem say, “Not tonight friend. Not tonight.” Solas looks thoughtful. Lando wanders over to his tent, and when next he looks back towards the cooking fire, Krem and Solas are gone.

Lando makes sure everything of his and Cassandra’s is packed with the top of the pack filled with any items they might like to use tonight or in the morning. He assumes Cassandra has clean clothes to change into, but he gets out her sleeping shirt and arranges it on the bed. At the head of their bedroll, he places a sprig of Crystal Grace that he picked up earlier. He tends both their armor and weapons and her shield and lays them where she will see them and know they have been dealt with.

He is about to return to the cooking fire when Cassandra comes in carrying some damp garments. Her hair is wet, her face looks bright and raw with cold bathing, and her dark eyelashes are clumped into stars. She looks happy to see him, but she also looks a little unsure. He comes over to her immediately and reaches for her as he says, “You are cold.”

She ducks under his embrace and says, “but I am clean, and you are not.”

So instead of hugging her, he takes her wet clothes and hangs them on the tent crossbars. He says, “Gim can dry these in the morning if they are still damp.” He then approaches her again. He ostentatiously stands away from her and leans in with his hands behind his back. When he touches her lips with his, she opens her warm mouth and welcomes him in. After only a moment, she moves in and wraps her arms around him. He says, “I thought I was dirty.”

She says, “I thought I cared.” She is so lovely and he is so happy to have her in his arms after this long distressing day. He kisses her and nuzzles her and joins her in making incoherent noises of happiness. After some minutes of this, she says, “So you are not mad at me for being mean to Gim?”

He says, “So you are not mad at me for enabling Gim’s belief that she is always right?”

Cassandra pulls back. “Honestly,” she says hesitantly, “I am a little disappointed, but I am fighting it. I know better than most what a traumatic childhood can do to those who survive it. I honor you for standing by her despite…” Now she looks unsure and her speech sputters out.

“Despite her trying nature? Don’t worry, beloved: I love difficult women,” he says while grinning and pressing into her.

“Do you now?” she asks, “and what do you do if they are at odds? Would you still love me if I punched Gim in the face?”
He says, “Oh, I would cheer you on, and then I would help bind up your hand after you broke it on her shield.”

Cassandra says, “That is what would happen, isn’t it? I begin to appreciate these oaths of hers.”

After a moment of awkward contemplation she continues with, “Solas told me about his suggestion that you…” She struggles for words, but continues with, “leave her time to consider how to approach our situation. I think it is a good idea, but I’m done lecturing for the night and I will leave it up to you. I want you to know: it isn’t just for her: it’s for you also.” Here she smiles self-deprecatingly and searches his face. “I will love you even if you use your strength for yourself and not just to support your difficult women.” Lando doesn’t know what to say to this--how to accommodate the realization that she sees him as less than he could be.

Cassandra shakes her head as if she is trying to dislodge an insect--or an uncomfortable thought. She slaps Lando on the ass and says, “Now go wash. I will save you a hero’s portion of fish.”

Lando already had the gear he would need for bathing set aside, so he gathers it and heads to the lake. The lake is big enough that he doesn’t see Solas, Varric, or Krem, but he does hear some splashing off in the distance. As he comes out of the water, carrying his wet clothing, Solas is waiting for him. Solas takes his garments, shakes them out, and then waves his hand negligently. Lando knows this spell. He thanks Solas for the quick dry and asks if he would mind poking his head into his tent to do the same to Cassandra’s dripping gear. Solas nods affirmatively.

As Lando struggles into his clothing, Solas says, “You,” Lando waits for the rest, and eventually Solas continues with, “…are a strong man in your own right.” Lando looks at Solas, expecting him to continue, but Solas hands him the rest of his clothing and walks back towards camp. Lando isn’t sure what to make of that.

When he gets back to the fire, none of the scouts are around, and Gim, Cassandra, and Krem appear to have been waiting to eat. Everyone is smiling, and Lando gathers that Krem has been telling a story about ‘the Chief’ and one of the Chargers, who appears to go by the rather unfortunate name of ‘Dalish’. But Gim rolls with it, so he can too. Soon after he arrives at the fire, Solas and Varric also join. Krem’s story sputters out as they all fall on the food, which rivals even some of Gim’s dishes: the fish is breaded and crispy and the green-roots are piquant and rich.

After the food is mostly gone, Krem says, “Have to pay for my keep somehow,” and walks over to what Lando will forever think of as the spindleweed pond. He takes out two previously-submerged jugs, shakes off the moisture, and brings them back.

Krem takes Varric’s cup, tosses the water out, and fills it to the brim. When Varric brings the cup to his face and inhales deeply, his eyes go wide and he salutes Krem. After drinking, Varric wipes his mouth and says, “I knew I liked you, Soparati.”

As Krem moves on to Cassandra, who gestures that she only needs a small amount, Solas says, “I believe that term is used as an insult in his homeland, Varric.”

Krem says, “Nah, I don’t take it amiss. From one soparati to another, I take it in the fellowship he means it. I’m rather lookin’ forward to the Chief’s reaction to my new name. It’s a fair sight better than ‘Krem de la crème’.”

Everyone chuckles politely at that, but Cassandra laughs hardest. While he’s glad to hear her laugh, something about the intensity reminds him how tired he thinks she is. When he looks away from Cassandra, he sees Solas looking at him. Solas gestures with his chin to Cassandra and then quirks his eye at Gim in a way that seems to indicate that Lando should take care of Cassandra and Solas
will make sure Gim is fine.

“When will we meet your chief, Krem?” asks Cassandra.

Krem looks to Gim, but Gim doesn’t volunteer anything. Krem says, “I know you are on your way
to Redcliffe now, and I understand your plans may depend on communication with Haven. If you
have time to go to the Storm Coast after, you can see the Chargers fighting a persistent group of
Tevinter mercenaries. Nasty mages in that lot, with a strong anti-Inquisition smell about ‘em and a
disturbing affinity for those rifts.”

Cassandra looks at Gim, and the two women hold each other's eyes for a bit. Cassandra takes a small
drink and says, “We shall have to keep that in mind.”

When Krem gets to him, Lando accepts the beverage and drinks deep. The ale is good, but Lando is
more interested in getting Cassandra back to their tent. He stands and says, “That was very kind of
you, Krem. I think you all will enjoy the rest of it even more after I return to my tent.” Varric salutes
him with his mug. Cassandra stands as well, and they walk back to the tent together. Lando would
have liked to thank the scouts, but they have made themselves scarce; there is always the morning.

Once inside, Cassandra walks to where her clothes are hanging. She touches them and turns to him,
her eyes and mouth open in question. Lando says, “Solas dried mine, and I asked him if he would
stop by our tent on the way to eat.”

Cassandra sighs and says, “I live so much of my life in casual acceptance of magic now.”

Lando smiles and takes her in his arms as he says, “Magic is to serve man.”

Burrowing her head into his neck, she says, “I am happy not to think about magic any more tonight--
or anything else, for that matter.”

He coaxes her beautiful head out of the crook of his neck and strokes her face from hairline to chin.
With his voice and eyes as full of warmth as he can make them, he says, “I would be honored to help
you with this, my lady,” and slowly leans in for a long and lingering kiss. When they eventually part,
Cassandra opens her mouth as if to speak. He tilts his head and arches his brow. She appears to
correctly interpret his desire to forgo words, because she closes her mouth.

He walks her to the bed and slowly undresses her, taking the time to softly kiss every piece of flesh
that becomes newly available to him. When she tries to help, he gently encourages her to relax and
accept his ministrations. Tonight it is his turn to direct the action. When he has her on her belly, he
gets up briefly to retrieve a small pot of oily cream that Gim has been making for him for years.

He uses the cream on Cassandra’s back. It is good for the skin, and it won’t leave traces if it is well
rubbed in. She sighs and goes limp. So far this night is the mirror image of the last night, but Lando
thinks perhaps Cassandra could do with a release and an invitation to sleep. He wishes he could
share her thoughts, but he is the one who disallowed words. He will have to be very attentive to the
signs of her languor or her accepting attentions because she thinks he

His hand moves down to her muscular ass and slowly moves under her body. She remains passive,
but her gasps seem to indicate more than acceptance of his attentions. He quickly removes his own
clothes and lays out next to her, once again using the oil on her. He knows by now how she likes to
be touched, and slippery fingers are best. He kisses her shoulder and presses against her. She turns
her head towards his side of the bed, and her eyes seek his. His fingers press harder and she quivers
against him. Before too long, he feels the wave rise and crest as her flexible back momentarily seems
to lack a spine. Her eyes are locked on his the whole time, and he has never felt more loved.
After as she goes limp, he tries to keep her from thinking she needs to reciprocate. He turns her away from him and spoons her while slowly stroking her side and arranging the bedroll fabric around them. Finally he laces the fingers of his right hand through hers and tucks both their hands against her breasts. She sighs, and he sighs, and he kisses her neck and shoulder.

Soon he can tell by her breathing she is asleep. He wouldn’t let her use words, but that doesn’t mean he can’t say something now. He is close to sleep himself, but there is one thing he aches to say, so he murmurs it into her back.

“Ar lath ma, vhenan.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments or criticisms welcomed here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Chapter Summary

Tevinters! Tevinters everywhere to be found on first encountering Redcliffe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It had taken most of the day to travel to Redcliffe, and the trip had been nice enough. Gim couldn’t begrudge Lando all the time he spent with Cassandra, especially since Solas and Varric had been very attentive to her. Krem had told so many stories that Gim was beginning to feel that she knew the Chargers almost as well as she knew Varric’s crew from Kirkwall. Everything had been fine until they found what looked like a safe place to leave the horses and then walked to where they could see the barricaded gates of Redcliffe…and the monster rift in front of it. It is hard to believe the day until now had been one of relatively good cheer.

Krem says, “This is the first time I’ve seen one of these and not been preparing to run the other way. How do you take them?”

Gim, glowing softly, says, “We fight the demons the same way your company would. The big difference is that once the demons are gone, if Lando and I get a chance to act, we can close the rift before the next round of spirits are pulled into this world and corrupted into becoming demons. But this rift is different from the others we have closed. Those extra ground pools are new for us, and those are big demons. Be cautious. Usually Cassandra and Lando go in close, and Varric, Solas, and I stay ranged. Expect friendly ice and crossbow bolts.” Krem looks confused or skeptical when she includes the details about spirits becoming demons, but he doesn’t ask anything.

Lando interjects, “Cassandra is our foundation with her shield and you and I will guard her back, punish, and withdraw.”

Krem says, “No set formation?”

Cassandra says, “Too many variables. But if you are hurt, expect Gim to show up, even if you think she would be insane to do so. Don’t depend on it, but you are likely to have a magic shield much of the time. If the Heralds have their hands in the air, priority is keeping them from being interrupted—even over dire circumstances involving others in the party.”

Cassandra looks calm and professional. Varric is giving Bianca one last check, and Solas looks intense and focused. Gim can see that Krem and Lando have rising battle fever and that they are relishing that edge of excitement. As soon as Varric nods at Cassandra, they go in.

The warriors try to stay away from the pools, but the pools move and the demons move, and the logistics make avoidance impossible. First Gim sees Cassandra moving in a blur and overshooting her shield slam, and then she sees a demon dodge a slow-moving crossbow bolt in a way that should have been impossible for either the demon or the bolt. Varric swears and although Gim can’t hear her, it looks like Cassandra is doing the same. Gim keeps the shields up, and even with the unexpected effects, no one is hurt. She glances over at Solas and he looks fascinated. He is throwing spells more slowly, and Gim would even venture to guess he would prefer to prolong the fight, just
to watch this new phenomenon.

Solas’s desires notwithstanding, the last demon is falling, and Gim rushes up to stand in range of Lando. He thrusts up his hand, and hers follows. Even the feel of closing the rift is different: This rift channel hurts in a way it hasn’t hurt since the Temple of Sacred Ashes. As soon as the rift is closed, she grabs Lando, and it is clear to her that it has been much worse for him than for her. Lando’s teeth are clenched and every muscle in his body seems tense. She glows and immediately damps his pain while lowering the inflammation.

Solas comes up and adds his efforts to hers. She holds his eyes for a minute. He will know what she is asking: They have to find a way to minimize the mark’s damage to Lando. Solas has been helping her in the Fade, but so far they have come up with nothing. Solas says, “You saw? That rift altered the flow of time around itself. That was...unexpected. The veil is not merely weak here but altered in a way I have not seen.”

While they are working on Lando, Gim is vaguely aware that someone has arrived to express relief that the rift is closed and to open the gate. As she starts paying attention again, she finds out that Fiona is now former Grand Enchanter Fiona and someone named Magister Alexius is in charge. Everyone looks unhappy at Alexius’s title, but Krem looks especially grim. They are to check in with the former Grand Enchanter in The Gull and Lantern tavern.

As they walk through the village, Gim is feeling worse and worse, and her spirit is uneasy. Something about this place is more than wrong. She almost feels like convincing everyone to leave, but her spirit does not encourage that feeling; She feels danger on a personal level. As they walk past a statue of the Hero of Ferelden, the feeling reaches a peak. She stops, and the others stop with her. She says, “I can’t explain it, but everything in me is screaming that I must not be noticed. If there is any chance this magister doesn’t know that I am a magic user--or even that the Heralds are two--he must not learn it.”

She is worried she will have to justify this feeling, but she sees resolution and agreement on their faces. Solas says, “I will do what I can.”

As they enter the tavern, Gim breaks out her well-worn village idiot guise. Lando looks over at her with a smile and a nod and moves to the front of the group. Gim is thinking hard as she watches Lando interact with Fiona, who has no memory of meeting them in Val Royeaux. If this is true, it could help Gim’s efforts to remain non-descript, because Fiona had said at the time that she had just learned what they were. The mages of the rebellion have pledged to Magister Alexius. When Gereon Alexius actually shows up, Gim has no doubt that he is the source of the danger she has felt. Almost immediately the magister, who is wearing the most ridiculous, floppy-eared mage hood Gim has ever seen, comes up to Lando and says with an air of creepy fascination, “You are the survivor, yes? The one from the Fade? Interesting.” Gim is under strain as she fights her instinct to throw a shield around Lando. Varric moves to her and presses close while keeping his apparent attention on Alexius. His bulk helps keep her from doing something rash. She moves her attention away from Alexius and concentrates on her breathing. While her attention is inward, she notes that her spirit is fixated on a man off to the side of the tavern: a tranquil man. Gim walks over to talk to him, and when he says Alexius does not like the tranquil and expresses a desire to leave Redcliffe, Gim gives him directions to the nearest Inquisition camp. She tells him to bring anyone with him who is willing to leave--especially the tranquil.

Looking back to her party, she sees that a new man, who has unmistakeable signs of darkspawn corruption, has joined the party, and Alexius is referring to him as his son, Felix. Soon, the son falters, leaning heavily on Lando. Alexius, Fiona, and Felix leave through a back entrance in
deference to Felix’s health, and Lando leads everyone in their party out of the tavern by the front
door.

Outside, Lando is concentrating on a scrap of paper. He reads from the paper aloud, “Come to the
Chantry. You are in danger.”

Lando looks up from the paper and immediately focuses on Cassandra. Gim hates it that it causes a
pang that he didn’t look to her. Cassandra, of course, appears skeptical. Krem says, “Those are my
countrymen, alright: lies and clandestine meetings. I will have to fight the homesickness.” Krem is
awfully cheery when he’s sarcastic.

Cassandra says, “We all know it could be a trap.” She looks around to everyone. “Anyone planning
on surprising us is welcome to try.”

It is a short walk to the Chantry. As they get to the door, Gim knows what’s on the other side of that
door. She stops and looks to Lando, who nods: he feels it too. On opening the heavy door, they do
find the expected rift, along with a strikingly-dressed Tevinter mage with the most fabulous mustache
Gim has ever seen.

The mage, upon finishing a wraith, says, “Good. You’re finally here. Now, help me close this would
you?” Such bravado! Is he always like this, or only when fighting a battle he can’t win alone?

This rift, like the last one, has pools of time-modification, but the demons are smaller, and it doesn’t
take long for the final act. Lando has his hand up, she adds hers, and the rift closes. She immediately
grabs Lando’s hand and starts soothing it. As she stands there, the Tevinter mage appears next to her.

The new mage is aggressively cheery and impeccably dressed. He says, “Fascinating. How does that
work, exactly? You don’t even know, do you? You just wiggle your fingers, and boom! Rift closes.”
His cheeriness almost seems angry. Is he angry because they can do what he can’t? Because they
didn’t say all they knew? Because he assumes they know even less than they do? Too many
possibilities. Better to let Lando handle this.

Right on cue, Lando says, “Who are you?”

Before Dorian can answer, Krem says, “That right there is a Peacock of an Altus.”

Dorian looks taken aback. He says, “One of my countrymen, I see, and in such company. Yes, I am
Dorian of House Pavus, most recently of Minrathous. How do you do?” says Dorian. Gim is sure
that Josephine would approve of the little bow Dorian gave upon self-introduction as well as his
politely inquiring furrowed brow.

Varric says, “Altus?”

Krem says, “Most definitely *not* Soparati. His dad was the Archon’s Consiliare. Dad’s Magister;
Son’s Altus. Both high society nobs.”

Cassandra has her arms crossed as she stands to Lando’s side. She says in disgust, “Another
Tevinter.”

Dorian says with great amusement, “Suspicious and well-informed friends you have here. Magister
Alexius was once my mentor, so my assistance should be valuable—as I am sure you can imagine.”

Lando, who Gim is sure cannot have followed the exchange with Krem, looks unconcerned as he
says, “Are you the one who sent that note, then?”
Dorian says, “I am. Someone had to warn you, after all.” Dorian’s voice becomes less flippant as he continues, “Look, you must know there is danger. That should be obvious even without the note. Let’s start with Alexius claiming the allegiance of the rebel mages out from under you. As if by magic, yes? Which is exactly right. To reach Redcliffe before the Inquisition, Alexius distorted time itself.”

Solas doesn’t have exactly the same look on his face as he did on first encountering the time-altering rift: now he begins to look concerned. He says, “That is fascinating, if true, and almost certainly dangerous.”

Dorian says, “The rift you closed here? You saw how it distorted time around itself, sped some things up and slowed others down? Soon, there will be more like it, and they will appear further and further away from Redcliffe. The magic Alexius is using is wildly unstable, and it is unraveling the world. I know what I am talking about: I helped develop this magic. When I was still his apprentice, it was pure theory. Alexius could never get it to work. What I don’t understand is why he is doing it—ripping time to shreds just to gain a few hundred lackeys?”

While Dorian is speaking, Felix, the man who gave Lando the note, enters the Chantry and approaches. As he walks up to Lando, he says, “He didn’t do it for them. My father’s joined a cult. Tevinter supremacists. They call themselves ‘Venatori’. And I can tell you one thing: whatever he has done for them, he’s done it to get to you.”

Lando says, “Alexius is your father. Why are you working against him?” Gim thinks that is rich given the number of times Lando went against the wishes of his own father. She supposes everything is a matter of degree, but they don’t yet know how far Felix will go to thwart Alexius.

Felix looks unhappy but resolved as he says, “For the same reason Dorian works against him. I love my father, and I love my country. But this? Cults? Time magic? What he’s doing now is madness. For his own sake, you have to stop him.”

Dorian says, “It would also be nice if he didn’t rip a hole in time. There is already a hole in the sky.”

Lando says, “Why would he rearrange time and indenture the mage rebellion just to get to me?”

Felix says, “They’re obsessed with you, but I don’t know why. Perhaps because you survived the Temple of Sacred Ashes?” Gim’s spirit makes it clear that Felix is on to something.

Dorian says, “You can close the rifts. Maybe there is a connection? Or they see you as a threat?”

Felix says, “If the Venatori are behind those rifts or the Breach in the sky, they are even worse than I thought.” Solas’s face has gone perfectly guarded and blank.

Lando says, “Dorian, how are you going to be valuable to us, as you promised?”

Dorian says, “I can’t stay in Redcliffe. Alexius doesn’t know I am here, and I want to keep it that way for now. But whenever you are ready to deal with him, I want to be there. I will be in touch.” Dorian turns to leave the Chantry, but at the last moment he turns back and says, “And Felix? Try not to die.”

Felix says, “There are worse things than dying, Dorian.” If Dorian heard that, it was through the open door of the Chantry: Dorian is gone.

Gim says, “Much worse. You do know you have been contaminated with darkspawn blood, right?”

Felix says, “I do. The same attack that took my mother infected me. My father is desperate to cure
Gim says, “I know of no way to cure this sickness, but I know a way that might allow you to survive it for years: become a Warden. Unfortunately, the Wardens of southern Thedas seem to have become scarce.” As she says this, Gim sees that Solas is looking daggers at her.

Felix seems to have noticed Solas’s reaction too. He says, “My father’s opinion of that path is about the same as your bald friend’s. For myself, I am resigned that my life will be short, and the only thing I want to accomplish before I go is to get my father out of the clutches of this cult.”

Cassandra, taking charge again, says, “Thank you for your help, Felix. From what your father said, he will be contacting the Inquisition. Perhaps we will see each other again.”

Felix says, “I hope so,” and being a perceptive man, he leaves them in the building alone.

With Felix gone, Cassandra says, “We need to get out of Redcliffe and to get access to Leliana’s people and her ravens.”

Varric says, “Leliana gave me a list of safe-houses with ravens once you suggested I handle the codes. Any Inquisition camp will work, of course, but there is a place—a farmhouse—west and then north. Once we get back to our horses, we can be there in a couple of hours.”

Cassandra looks pleased. They are soon out of the Chantry, and then out of Redcliffe. Every step further from Redcliffe Castle they get, the better Gim feels.

As they get to the horses, Varric says, “Now, Beauty: that’s better. I’ve never seen you look so uneasy, not even on the day I met you, and you wouldn’t even talk to me then.”

Gim says, “I don’t want to sound overly dramatic, but those time-twisting rifts scare me more than the Breach does. Not to mention, I don’t care for the way Magister Alexius looks at Lando.” She glances over at Solas and sees that, once again, Solas looks worried. At first, Solas had mostly kept his expression neutral, but as she got to know him and he got to know her, she had seen him happy, sad, guilty, angry, and affectionate: until today, she had not once seen him look this concerned.

Krem says, “Let me tell you, it is never good for an elf to draw the attention of a Magister.”

Varric says, “I think my friend Fenris would agree with you. That reminds me of a story…”

She knows what Varric is trying to do, and she appreciates it, but for once, Gim isn’t listening to the story. All she can think of is just how bad something has to be to scare the Dread Wolf.

Chapter End Notes

Comments or criticisms welcome here or via email at kinako.ao00@gmail.com.
Neither Honesty, Manhood, Nor Good Fellowship

Chapter Summary

The Storm Coast and the Iron Bull.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time they near the Storm Coast, Lando is finally becoming resigned to heading in the opposite direction from Haven--and that’s when the rain starts.

The whole trip, he had been lecturing himself: traveling to the Storm Coast means they can meet Krem’s Chief, Leliana will be very happy if they come across any news of Wardens rumored to be there, and they must respond to the news that Scout Harding and her company have not been heard from since shortly after they established camp by the Waking Sea. Lando knows that his impatience to get back to Haven is selfish, and he has been trying very hard to suppress his more selfish wishes.

He spent a lot of the travel reliving the time in the farmhouse: it had almost felt like a chance to have that pretend life that Josephine had concocted for their backstory--except for all those awed refugees and deferential agents that came with the farmhouse being an Inquisition hub.

So many chores had needed doing, and it had been pleasant to have such achievable goals--at least while he had thought of their stopover as a short delay before returning to Haven. Lando and Varric had hunted and repaired equipment, Gim and Solas had concentrated on healing and trauma, Krem produced an amazing flurry of garment and leather repair, and Cassandra was mostly busy dealing with Inquisition organization and communication--some of which caused her to consult with Varric.

The house itself had been packed, and the barn loft had been filled with row upon row of beds, so their group of six had put up their three tents in a field. This seemed to embarrass the farmhouse inhabitants, but it suited their party.

That night, in response to questions about the veritable magic the man performed with a needle and thread, Krem had talked about his past as a tailor’s son. Krem's father sold himself into slavery because he had lost everything, and in response, Krem had joined the military. No one had pried, but they had all listened with warmth and sympathy. And right after that, Cassandra had let them know that ravens had been sent to Haven and ravens had come in response, and Leliana wanted them to go to the Storm Coast. For excellent reasons, that news had made everyone in the party happy--except for quietly selfish Lando.

But of course he had to pretend to be happy along with them. He joined in all the conversations, some of them involving Krem’s chief. Those were interesting enough to distract him from his wallowing. Krem hadn’t been completely pleased by those conversations.

Lando was just succeeding in joining the others in good cheer when the rain started pouring down and everyone’s mood had died a soggy death. That is, everyone’s mood had died except for Lando’s. Apparently a person can be grumpy for only so long, and somehow the looks of dripping disbelief he gets as he continues to smile and laugh make it even more fun to continue in the same vein.
“Tell us the truth, Seeker,” says Varric as he brushes wet hair out of his eyes and frowns at Lando. “Is he into water sports?” Lando does enjoy aquatic keep-away, but he hasn’t had a chance to tell Cassandra about that, and why is Varric even bringing it up?

“Troublesome Dwarf,” thunders Cassandra. “If you don’t curb your tongue, I shall tell Leliana that you shot every happily cavorting baby nug that we encountered!” Lando blinks. What?

Varric smiles and says, “Oh Seeker, that you even know what that means gives me so much joy that I will die a happy man.” Realization finally hits Lando, and even if Cassandra is fuming, he just can’t help laughing along with Varric. And Krem. And Gim. And eventually, even Solas.

And this is how it happens that as they lead their horses into the Inquisition camp, they are all smiling and chuckling despite their worry for the Inquisition scouts. When a nonplussed Scout Harding appears from the nest of tents, Gim runs up to her and throws her arms around her. Gim cries, “Lace! Leliana said she had no word from you! I was so worried!”

Harding looks embarrassed but pleased as she says, “Welcome to you, too. Leliana’s heard from us now. Not that it’s all been good news. There are a group of bandits operating in the area, and they know the terrain. Our small party has had trouble going up against them. They killed our initial ravens, so we had to wait until one of Haven’s ravens found us before we could send back word.”

Cassandra says, “So you are well, after all?” Lando feels his recently conquered resentment at coming to the Storm Coast try to rekindle.

Scout Harding says, “Not exactly. Some of our soldiers went to speak with the bandits’ leader several days ago, and we haven’t heard back from them.”

Lando, feeling like a little shit, says, “We will do our best to find our people.”

Scout Harding says, “The soldiers didn’t have an exact location for the bandits, but they were starting their search farther down the beach. With all this fuss, we haven’t been able to conduct a proper search for the Wardens either.”

Krem says, “Excuse me, but would you happen to know if the band of mercenaries is still nearby?”

Scout Harding says, “Yes, when last I saw them, they were a short distance up the beach—almost directly downhill from the right of that promontory. If it weren’t for them, I probably wouldn’t be standing here. They have been keeping a check on the Tevinter marauders, which left us only the bandits to contend with. We have not actually spoken to them: we’ve just seen charred evidence of their passing.”

Krem turns to the rest of them. He says, “If you will excuse me, I should check in with the Chief.”

Gim looks at Lando with a pleading look on her face, and he knows what she wants. Lando says, “Harding, do you think you could keep our horses for us? We should go with Krem to meet his chief. We won’t be gone long.”

Harding says, “It would be our pleasure, Your Worships.”

Gim grimaces and says, “Lace, if someone is listening and you have to use our titles for show, that’s fine, but please call us by our names when you can!”

Scout Harding grins and says, “Understood, Gim.” After a pause and a glance over at Lando she finishes with, “and Lando.” Gim gives Harding another hug, and they all gather around Krem as Lace and two other scouts take their horses.
Krem says sheepishly, “I didn’t mean to commandeer you all.”

Lando says, stretching from side to side and posing with his sword, “Are you kidding? We can’t wait to meet this Iron Bull. This is just the thing to shake off the kinks of horse travel.” Everyone was listening when Lace detailed the dangers of the region so Lando is not surprised when the others all perform their standard pre-battle movements.

Soon enough, they all start down the hill Lace had pointed at, and they haven’t gone very far when they hear the sounds of battle. As they come around an abundance of dense foliage, they can see down to the beach. Krem’s company seems to be outnumbered.

The trail, such as it is, has a lot of switchbacks, and Krem immediately starts tearing straight down the slope. As soon as Gim sees this, she starts glowing and racing after him in a heedless manner that scares Lando. So of course, he runs off after her—and he isn’t even the first. They all hit the beach with all their limbs intact and one of Gim’s shields shimmering around them.

Krem is roaring “Horns up!” in full voice, and Gim sees what has to be Iron Bull snap his head towards Krem. Iron Bull starts laughing and shouting maniacally, and the Tevinters--these must be what Felix called Venatori--fall into disarray.

Soon all the Venatori are dead or incapacitated. Iron Bull yells, “Chargers! Stand down!”

Gim goes up to one of the Venatori that is gravely injured and starts healing him. Solas stands behind her keeping a close eye on Iron Bull. Iron Bull walks over to Gim. He says, “Did you want this one for something in particular?”

Without looking up or stopping what she is doing, Gim says, “No. Do you?”

Iron Bull says, “No. But he was just about to get his throat slit.”

Gim says, “I’m not stopping you.” Iron Bull nods to a dour looking blond man who grunts, stoops, and slits the Venatori’s throat. Gim says, “Good job. A lot of people don’t cut deeply enough and I have to keep healing.”

Krem, who has been watching Iron Bull watch Gim, says, “She does that, Chief. Has oaths she has to follow. Doesn’t trigger in active combat.” Gim and Solas have moved to one of the chargers with whom Gim has a whispered conversation.

Iron Bull turns his gaze from Gim to Krem. He says, “Good to know. It was a fine sight seeing you all tear down that cliff. If I had had to guess who she would have been healing, it would have been you, Krem de la crème.” Iron Bull hunches his shoulders and playfully checks Krem, who has to scramble to keep his feet under him.

Krem says, “No Charger is down, and Gim will have the injured in prime fettle in a trice.”

Iron Bull says, “Woah. She’s gonna make Stitches jealous.” Iron Bull stops talking for a moment as he looks around. Finally he breaks into a huge grin and says, “That’s gonna be fun!”

Finally Iron Bull turns to Lando, Cassandra, and Varric, who are standing in a group. He says, “So, you are with the Inquisition, hunh? Glad you could make it. Come on, have a seat. Drinks are coming.”

Lando says, “And you are the Iron Bull. We learned a lot about you and your Chargers on the way here.”
Iron Bull says, “Did you now?”

Krem says, “I traded stories with Varric here. Heard a lot about his adventures with your kind in Kirkwall. He gave me a new nickname I’m sportin’ proudly: Soparati.”

Iron Bull throws back his head and gives a full belly laugh. Despite his joviality, Lando is sure that every action of Iron Bull’s is calculated. Gim and Solas have come up while Bull was laughing, and from the look on their faces, Lando isn’t the only one who is reserving judgment on the Iron Bull.

Bull says, “So, you’ve seen us fight. We’re expensive, but we’re worth it. And I’m sure the Inquisition can afford us.”

Lando looks at Cassandra, and her face is expressionless. He says, “We have no doubt that the Chargers are an excellent company. After all, we have been fighting alongside Krem across half of Ferelden.”

Bull says, “They are, but you are not just getting the boys; you are getting me. You need a front-line bodyguard? I’m your man. Whatever it is. Demons? Dragons? The bigger the better.”

Lando says, “I’m not so sure we need a frontline bodyguard. In fact, I would say we don’t. We have a lot of cooks in this kitchen already.” Lando glances over at Cassandra and Gim, and they look like they agree.

Bull says, “Well, there is one other thing. Might be useful; might piss you off. Ever hear of the Ben-Hassrath?”

“‘We have,’ says Lando. Most of us didn’t know what it was before we met Krem, but Gim did some investigating and found out you were an agent for the Ben-Hassrath, so we looked into it. It’s nice that you brought it up.”

Iron Bull’s one eye is wide. He says, “The Ben-Hassrath are concerned about the Breach. Magic out of control like that can cause trouble everywhere. I’ve been ordered to join the Inquisition, get close to the people in charge, and send reports on what’s happening. But I also get reports from Ben-Hassrath agents all over Orlais. You sign me on, I will share them with your people.”

Cassandra says, “And what would you send home in these reports of yours?”

Iron Bull’s eyes narrow. Lando thinks he is beginning to notice the blanket skepticism. He says, “Enough to keep my superiors happy. Nothing that will compromise your operations. The Qunari want to know if they need to launch an invasion to stop the whole damn world from falling apart. You let me send word of what you are doing, it will put some minds at ease. That’s good for everyone.”

Lando says, “That does sound good. I can’t imagine anyone would benefit from a Qunari invasion. I think we can work something out. We can hire the chargers, and you join the Inquisition. Since we don’t need a front-line bodyguard and we work well with Krem, you can start becoming familiar with the people back in Haven. I know you wouldn’t be able to travel with us if we have your lieutenant. That’s good for everyone.”

Krem looks almost frantically unhappy. He says, “I work for the Chief, and he’s a better warrior than I will ever be.”

Lando says, “We don’t need a better warrior than you. And Iron Bull wants to get close to the people in charge, and most of them are in Haven. I think he will enjoy meeting Leliana.”
Iron Bull says, “Interesting. Seems someone is sweet on you, Krem. No one ever falls for Skinner.” Iron Bull paces a few steps and then walks back. The man is huge, and his muscles moving under his gray skin are mesmerizing. “It’s not a bad arrangement. How about me and the boys stay with you until you leave the Storm Coast. Depending on your next destination, we can accompany you full or part way. Safety in numbers.”

Lando looks at the others. They don’t show much emotion, but he knows what they think. Well, he knows what everyone but Krem thinks. Krem continues to look miserable. Lando says, “Deal.”

Cassandra says, “Would you like to stay in the Inquisition camp with us, or shall we meet you in the morning?”

Bull says, “Oh, we can stay in our own camp tonight, since it is all set up. It will give me a chance to check in with Krem. I imagine he has a lot of fascinating things to tell me.” Krem is stiff. At first Lando was worried Krem would shrink under Bull’s intense attention, but he stands at attention.

Lando says, “Then we will meet you here tomorrow at dawn.”

Iron Bull says, “I look forward to it, Boss.” Bull and the Chargers start walking up the beach, and Lando’s party starts heading up the hill—this time taking the trail.

On the way up, Lando decides he’s happy they came to the Storm Coast after all, but he wouldn’t trade places with Krem for anything.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Gim is enjoying getting to know Bull, but she wishes Krem was with them instead of off with half of Bull’s company patrolling other parts of the coast. “You know,” she says as she walks along beside Bull, “I’ve always been short. I am accustomed to having to look up to people in order to talk to them, but never before have I felt like looking at someone’s face while I was talking to him just wasn’t an option without pain.”

Bull’s face, far away as it is, is unmistakably grinning. He says, “I can fix that,” and he plucks her off the ground like she weighs no more than a nug. Next thing she knows, she is sitting on one of his shoulders holding on to one side of his horns. Gim is about to start yelling at him when she notices she has bigger problems than getting Bull to put her down.

While she was distracted by being outraged, Lando, Solas, and Varric have come to stand in front of Bull, blocking his path. They don’t look like they think this is a fun joke, and Gim notices the kind of twitches she associates with a need to grab a weapon. Several of the chargers are watching this interaction, and they look ready in a very disturbing way. Of course, her men are paying no attention to the Chargers: all their attention is on Bull. Lando says firmly, “She doesn’t look like you asked her permission before you did that, Serrah.”

Varric says smoothly but carefully, “Some of us made that mistake at first, too, Bull. Put her down, and it won’t be a problem, I’m sure.”

Solas says nothing, but his lip is curled in an attitude of unmistakeable disgust.

Gim says, pitched so that only Bull can hear her, “Laugh it off,” and standing on his shoulder, she leaps into the air, lands lightly with one foot on each horn cross piece, and then does a double back somersault before landing on the other side of her three men.

As Gim is finishing her acrobatics, Bull says, “And I thought you were a fun-loving group. I’m beginning to believe Krem lied to me when he told me a little tale involving spindleweed.”

Varric says, “If she had been laughing, we wouldn't have reacted like that,” and turns to continue walking as they were before.

Solas, overlapping with the end of Varric’s statement, to which he was clearly not listening, says disgustedly, “Leave it to a follower of the Qun to make decisions for other sentient beings.”

Bull, sounding like he isn’t taking offense, says, “I’ve talked to too many elven viddathari who have had their decisions made for them by other races to rise to that bait.”

Solas spits, “You represent an organization that would strip thinking beings of their individuality. The fact you do not do so now is more a matter of ability than inclination.”
Bull is about to answer, when Cassandra, who appeared some time during this confrontation says, “You three know better than this. We have accepted his contract; we have responsibilities towards him as he does towards us.” Turning towards Bull, she continues, “The Iron Bull, I would ask that you not lay hands on Gim, or any of us, again until we understand each other better.”

Gim says, “I apologize. Our banter had turned playful. He just took his response further than I expected. I should have laughed. Besides, you know he can’t hurt me.”

Cassandra says, “I know that, and your over-protective companions know that, but their manly honor causes them to forget under pressure.”

Gim shakes her head and says with evident disappointment, “Men!”

Cassandra agrees, “Men.”

Bull pulls his head back, the focus of his remaining eye moving between Cassandra and Gim. He says, in an attitude of disbelief, “I can’t hurt her? What kind of dream world are you living in? I mean, she’s my employer, so of course I wouldn’t hurt her, but what is this about couldn’t?"

Cassandra starts laughing. Varric and Lando, who are within hearing of Iron Bull laugh. Solas, who is also within hearing does not laugh, but he turns back to show he has a rather unpleasant smirk on his face.

Gim, acting like she is doing Bull a favor, says, “We are on our way to meet the Blades of Hessarian with the Mercy’s Crest, and it was a royal pain making that Crest. We have Inquisition soldiers to avenge. In short, we don’t have time for me to prove it to you until later. How about if I just scare the shit out of you instead?”

Bull, grinning, says, “Let me have it!”

Gim keeps walking as the blue seams start running across her skin and she gets taller until her eyes are on the level of Iron Bull’s. She watches Bull as Love opens her mouth and says in deep, accented, sad voice, “You are strong, and your mind is sharp. You will solve problems others cannot.”

Bull stops. He doesn’t look afraid: he looks frozen. He says, “Tama?” Ah. That makes sense: Love has taken the form of Bull’s Tamassran.

Love says, “Always too wise for your own good, Imekari. Always eager to help. It is good to see you far from Seheron in a company that respects and trusts you.”


Love says, “Na’thek. Panahedan,” and the blue seams come, and her eye-level returns to its customary height.

Cassandra says, “Was that wise? He will just report this to his superiors.”

Gim says, “Is there something you think Krem hasn’t told him? Besides, he risks his own life if he reports that. Not to mention, he is Basra Vashedan and holds to the code of the mercenary: he won’t compromise us while he is in our employ.”

Bull, too quietly to call it a roar, but too forceful to be his normal manner, says, “I said, turn it off.”

Gim’s head bobs in an abortive bow. She says, “Ma nuvenin and runs to catch up with Solas and
Solás gives her a very satisfied smile. Varric says, “You remind me that all the hurt you ever caused me was accidental. If you ever have a mind to twist a metaphorical knife in my soul, I would appreciate some advance warning.”

Behind her, Gim hears Bull say to Cassandra, “That was some creepy-ass bullshit.”

Cassandra, sounding tired, says, “I imagine you will not find this comforting, but you will get used to it.”

Bull’s only response is to growl.

Gim thinks Cassandra is trying to be helpful as she says, “You didn’t even ask her which spirit knew so much of you and your past. It can be very instructive to find out.”

Bull, clearly trying to change the subject says with an air of interest, “You are kinda mean, aren’t you? I like that in a woman.”

Cassandra laughs and says unconcernedly, “It’s never going to happen, Bull.”

Bull’s voice sounds defeated as he says, “Apologies for giving offense. I will not make invitations, Seeker.”

Cassandra smiles as she says, “I have spent most of my life around Soldiers. I was not offended. Nor did I say you should stop, so long as we are both clear it's never happening.”

Bull sounds much more chipper as he says, “Works for me.”

Up ahead, Lando is standing with two of the Chargers. They are stopped in the middle of the trail, gesturing for quiet. As Cassandra and Bull join them, Lando says, "Their camp is just ahead. It is a walled fort. We are agreed that Gim and I go ahead and you do not threaten anyone unless you hear one of us ask for you?"

Despite his words, Iron Bull sounds resigned as he says, “I don’t like it. I want to be your bodyguard, not your spectator.” He makes some motions with his hands and the Chargers who are with them disappear into the brush.

Cassandra pats Bull’s arm sympathetically. Lando watches this, but shows no sign that it bothers him. Gim and Lando walk several paces ahead of the rest of their party and they turn the corner and approach the fort.

As the guards come into view, Lando pulls the Crest of Mercy out of his tunic and holds it towards the guards as he and Gim slowly walk up. One of the guards says, “Someone’s come with a challenge? The others failed.” Gim thinks the guard who says it looks more scared than combative. The guards open the gate and Gim and Lando walk slowly in.

Inside the fort there are several ramshackle wooden buildings, some of which have crude drawings on them. At the end of a wooden path, there is a stone altar with more crude drawings and several piles of human skulls. A warrior standing in front of the altar says, “So you would Challenge the Blades of Hessarian.” He must be their leader.

Lando says, “We are the Heralds of Andraste, and you killed soldiers of the Inquisition. We cannot let this stand.”
The leader says, “You want Justice? Claim it.” With that, he takes a huge sword out and lunges at Gim. To the side, several cages containing starving mabari hounds open, and the hounds run for them.

Of course, before the leader’s blade had a chance of connecting, Gim was elsewhere—spinning and glowing. A shimmer surrounds Lando, who decapitates the leader and then turns to the hounds. Two of the hounds are down instantly. Varric puts crossbow bolts through the other two.

Lando says, “Varric!” and huffs in annoyance.

Varric says, “What? The leader was dead, which was the end of the challenge. I was just helping keep your tunic in one piece.”

Several men had come out of the buildings to watch the fight, but they did not join in. They stand motionless now, waiting for Lando to approach. Lando says, “Do you all accept the outcome?”

One of them says, “Your Worship. The Blades of Hessarian are at your service. If you want eyes on the Coast, here we are.”

Lando says, “We accept your service. We must leave for the mountains tomorrow, but this man,” Lando points to Iron Bull, “will pass on our orders. When he leaves to join me, I will send word through the Inquisition scouts. You will report all your findings through the scouts to Commander Cullen Rutherford. Is that clear?”

“Yes, your Worship,” says the same man again.

Lando says, “Now let’s talk about any evidence you might have seen of Wardens passing through.” Lando walks with the man into one of the ramshackle houses.

Bull turns to Cassandra and says with the air of a disappointed child, “That wasn’t even fun.”

Cassandra says, “Tell me about it. But it is good for the Inquisition, so I am happy.” Cassandra looks like she is thinking for a bit and then she says, “You had fun closing those two rifts, didn’t you?”

Bull says, “I grant they were good fights for a good cause, but I’m not fond of being around demons—for any reason. I have to admit you folks know what you are doing there.”

Cassandra says, “Yes, but do you know why they work so hard at closing them quickly? They want to keep more spirits from being pulled through and corrupted into becoming demons. Gim is friends with the spirits.”

Bull shudders. He says, “More creepy-ass bullshit.”

Gim smiles and says, “Oh you will learn to love me. That’s who is with me by the way—the one who took the form of your Tamassran: Love. It told me you are ripe for finding your Kadan.”

Bull stares straight at her and says, “Creepy. Ass. Bullshit.”

Gim turns and walks away from Bull while calling over her shoulder, “Na’thek. Panahedan.”
She hears Bull say to Cassandra behind her, “She always have to have the last word like that?”

Cassandra says, “Usually. She can be infuriating. She is correct though.”

Bull says, “About what?”

Cassandra says quietly, “About learning to love her.”

Gim walks out to the entrance to the fort to wait for the others to join her. She hopes they don’t come too soon: she doesn’t want them to see her cry. She’s...she’s going to have to find something really extraordinarily nice to do for Cassandra.

Chapter End Notes

I used some Qunlat from the wiki here.

*Imekari* is "child."

*Na'thek. Panahedan* is "As you wish. Goodbye."

Someone who is *Basra Vashedan* has been corrupted by ideas from those who are not of the Qun.

Thank you very much to Buttsonthebeach, who was very helpful in terms of some things I was wondering about this chapter.

Comments or criticisms welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Unstaid and Skittish

Chapter Summary

The evening before accepting Magister Alexius's invitation to Redcliffe Castle.

Much fluff.

Chapter Notes

I had a few personal things get in the way, so there was a week without updating, but I am back. I hope my regular readers are still out there!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gim is happy that today will see her party back at the Hinterlands farmhouse. She remembers the time at the farmhouse before going to the Storm Coast with great fondness--plus, it is another step closer to being back in Haven.

The travel south is relaxing. No new rifts have opened along the route, and they encounter no bandits on this trip. Game is plentiful and foraging is easy. Gim enjoys the cooking, and because of the others' enjoyment of her hobby, she never has to lift a non-culinary finger. Lando continues to spend most of his time with Cassandra--except when he goes off to forage with Varric each night.

Krem is always fun to talk to, and he is becoming comfortable enough that he spreads his sharp tongue around liberally. He teases Varric about his chest hair and his crossbow, Lando about the way he jumps to fulfill any request from either of the women, and Cassandra about her serious nature and the way she blushes around her mate; he baits Solas about his attitudes about Tevinter and Gim about the way she fulfills her oaths with meticulous exactitude while feeling free to violate what Krem says is the obvious underlying aim of the oaths. There is one glaring topic Krem never teases about: the nature of Gim’s relationships with Solas and with Varric.

On the last day of travel, Gim is walking along with Solas as their horses trail behind. No one else appears to be in earshot. This isn’t a surprise, because as soon as their discussion moves to spirits or magic, every other member of their party finds something to do far from the sound of the topics. Gim has finished talking about magic for now, though. She finally thinks she has the gumption to ask some more personal questions of Solas.

Gim says, “You know I still have not felt a willingness to pull away from either you or Varric.”

Solas smiles reassuringly and says, “I do know that. I also know that something happened to make you nervous. You have not invited me to kiss you since Haven.”

Gim says, “That is what I was hoping to talk about. I did enjoy kissing you, but being undecided, I feel a need to treat you both equally. I’m not sure how I feel about hearing Varric’s thoughts, even though he says I am welcome to them, and….” She looks up to see Solas watching her intensely, and she pushes herself to finish her thought. “...I am not sure how either of you would feel if I were to
Solas says, “You are speaking of the potential for disrupting our existing pleasant dynamics because of jealousy?” When Gim nods in embarrassment, Solas continues with, “You should talk to Varric, of course, but I believe he will say he has no jealousy, that he would like more intimacy, and that he does not begrudge me what he desires.”

Gim has to force herself to discuss this as if it was someone else’s situation and not hers. She listens to the sound of the hooves following behind them; she smells the green and pungent aroma of the hot brush on either side of their path. Everything in her tells her to make a joke and run off, but she fights it down by concentrating on the sights, sounds, and smells of her present. She says, hesitantly, “Let’s assume he says such a thing. How do you feel?”

Solas keeps smiling. Gim isn’t sure if she is imagining the sadness she sees in his eyes. He says, “Da’ean, there are realizations you will have to come to for yourself; you would not thank me were I to rush you, so I cannot give you all my reasoning. I do not begrudge you any physical acts with our storyteller. He is a good man, and if you can give him comfort, I would encourage you to do so.

“In short, I invite you to expand your relationship with Varric--to whatever extent you find comfortable. I assure you: while nothing about love and bonding is simple, I am not conflicted here. Either we will be bonded in the future, or things will hold a shape so tragic that our lost love will be of no more concern than a broken toe on a soon-to-be-amputated foot.”

Gim walks along next to Solas looking at her perfectly whole feet; she doesn’t want to think about tragedy or lost love. She asks what she can manage to wrap her mind around. “Is this because of our disparity in partner-count? Are you offering this because I know of the uncounted partners you have had in your life?”

Solas says gently and seriously, “It is true that I have more experience than you, but you are unique: no other partner I have ever touched could be to me what you could be. You will come to realize this. Your commitment to me is worth a wait. Varric is not a threat to my hopes for us, and as such, I encourage you to follow your heart--the heart I fully expect you will eventually give to me.”

Enough of large issues and grand futures. She finally manages to ask about immediate concerns. She asks, “How would we explain this to others?”

Solas shakes his proud head in evident disappointment. His back is stiff as he says, “I fail to see how this concerns anyone but ourselves.”

Gim scoffs and says, “You can’t believe they won’t talk about us.”

Solas says, “And you cannot believe that they do not talk about us already. The three of us already sleep in the same tent: How many people have asked you about your romantic life?”

Gim says, “I had some banter with Lando and Leliana, but really nothing beyond that. And regardless, until now, I could feel, within myself, that my behavior was above reproach: I could discount anything said or thought by anyone but ourselves.”

Solas stops and swivels Gim to face him. He takes the Gim’s horse’s reins out of her hands and drops both his and her reins on the ground. The horses will not stray: they know better. Solas says, “Your behavior is above reproach. What we do in our tent is our business. You know that we can make sure of our privacy: inside the tent or out.”

Solas searches her face. After a moment he says, “Knowing that you will find Varric after this and
“kiss him, will you let me kiss you, now?”

Gim looks up at Solas. He has been so forthright during this discussion. She can’t quite remember why she didn’t bring this up earlier. His blue eyes with the questioning, elevated brows are soft, and his full lips are inviting. Right now, Solas is the one who looks fearful, but Gim is aware of the underlying danger of the man. It may not be uppermost on her mind today, but fear is never far when she is close with Solas, no matter how gentle he is with her. Is it appropriate for her to fear her lover? Is that a bad thing, or just an exciting thing? Does her fear make her want to kiss him less? It does not.

She moves in and places her hands on his shoulders and rises on her toes to bring her face as close as possible to his. Instantly, her gentle Solas is clasping her to his chest and diving to meet her lips. As she opens to him, she feels his magic touch her and she responds in kind--her awareness racing through his body with pleasure and anticipation.

Everything in her feels alive: his magic brings a light vibration and a feeling of completion. If Solas were not holding her to his chest so firmly, she might have fallen. Every tension she has carried melts and she almost feels that she is losing her sense of self. The feeling is reminiscent of the start of deep meditation, but it is much more active. She is aware of everything about Solas. His skin, his strength, his tongue, his breath, his aura, his smell of parchment, herbs, and dusty ice: they are all outlined in her being with clarity and a feeling of acceptance.

He fits. He fits with her. She can tell he is experiencing something similar. After an all-too-brief moment, he pulls back, tilting his head and smiling dreamily.

Looking into Solas’s eyes, Gim cannot begin to imagine why she has avoided this. Does she want more than this with Solas? She does. Will it feel so right to kiss Varric? Should she just commit to Solas now? But she isn’t sure, and Solas and Varric both tell her she should wait until her path is solid. She smiles at him, letting the pleasure thrumming through her body show on her face.

Solas says, “Da’ean, I have lived a long life filled with mistakes and inelegant errors. If you reach a point where you need to know more about my past, ask and I will be an open book. I will also tell Wisdom that she need not protect my confidences when speaking with you. Be certain what you would ask either of us though, because once you know, you cannot un-know.”

Gim wraps her arms around Solas and presses her cheek into his chest. She says, “I will ask if I need to, but I don’t think I will. I know much; I guess more. But Wisdom is the person who I trust more than any other. If Wisdom encourages our relationship, what more is there to say?”

Solas seems to wince a little. He is not so relaxed as he says, “Wisdom and I do not always agree, but I too am encouraged by her stance. This may not make sense to you yet, but I believe she thinks I am an important part of your education. You must remember that not all that Wisdom has encouraged you to do has been easy or painless.”

Gim says fervently, “All the effort, every moment of pain I have experienced at her behest has been more than worth the investment.”

There. The sadness is back in Solas’s eyes. He says, “I know that I will hurt you. I pledge to you that I will do my utmost to make that pain something that you will find worthy of the cost.” After a moment, Solas shakes a little and grins to indicate a change in mood. He stoops to pick up their leads. He says, “Now we are getting too far behind. Why not mount up and catch up with our party. I will be behind you--do not doubt it.”

In a practiced motion that both of them enjoy, Solas picks her up and throws her high in the direction of her saddle. She twists in the air, lands, and he passes the reins over her horse’s head and hands
them to her. As she looks down into his intelligent and handsome face, she has to fight herself in order to keep from climbing down and falling into him—into his kiss—again. But she uses her self control and gives him one more smile. Before she can change her mind, she urges her horse to surge forward down the path towards the others.

She rides until she finds Varric ambling along with Krem. Both men look happy to see her as she trots up.

Varric says, “Beauty, the way you cast doubt on my claims that dwarves’ legs are too short to ride well dismays me.” In a more serious but ostensibly casual tone, he says, “Did you have a nice talk?”

Gim says, “I did. I feel much better. Later I would like to have a similar chat with you. Perhaps we could go for an evening walk?”

Varric says, “I would like that, Beauty.” Varric’s smile is warm and open. Moments ago, Gim considered pursuing only Solas, but Varric’s warm gravelly voice and his open smile remind her that she really hasn’t been moved to choose. How could she ever close the door to either man?

Gim looks over at Krem, and he looks like he would like to tease them, but he does not. She says, “You never ask, Krem. I can see you want to, but you never ask.”

Krem says, “A good soldier gives back the respect given him, and I’m no different. I don’t turn down confidences, but I can tell when folks are feeling their own way down less-traveled paths, and I know better than to get in the way.”

Krem, says Gim, “remind me to hug you when we get off these great beasts, won’t you?”

Krem laughs and says, “As long as it doesn’t cause your three men to line up and challenge me the way the chief says they did to him, I will be the better for a hug from you, Herald.”

Gim says, hastily, “It was just a misunderstanding. Things were settled and fine by the time we left.”

Krem says, “Well, I would be lying if I told you the chief doesn’t enjoy being the cause of a good dust up. He’s a man who likes to understand the boundaries of them he works with. His heart is golden, even so.”

As the three of them round a curve on approach to the farmhouse, Gim is surprised and delighted to see Leliana step out from behind a tree. Gim turns to Varric to ask him a question, but she sees that he is already taking her reins out of her hands. She hurtles off of her horse and races up to Leliana, who opens her arms and wraps Gim in an enthusiastic embrace.

As Gim begins to withdraw from the circle of Leliana’s arms, she says, “Leliana! You are here!” As she is talking excitedly, Cassandra and Lando come up behind Leliana, and turning, Gim sees Solas has joined Krem and Varric. When she turns back towards Leliana, she sees several scouts materialize from behind Leliana. The scouts head for their horses, and Leliana gestures them towards the house.

Everyone dismounts and follows Leliana to the second story of the house, where she closes the door behind them. Leliana says, “Solas, would you be so kind?” Solas, knowing immediately what she wants, makes a gesture, and the character of sound within the room changes: all of the incidental sounds from outside the room are cut off, and inside the room, sounds are hushed.

“Thank you,” says Leliana. She looks at Lando for a bare moment before she says, “I know this will disappoint some of you, but I needed to come here to intercept you before you could return to Haven. We have learned much while you were gone, and we need to visit Magister Alexius again as
soon as possible.”

Gim is sure she speaks for her entire party when she says, “That man is terrifying.”

Leliana nods, “In this we are in agreement, which is partly why you must respond to his invitation. We cannot afford to leave Redcliffe in the hands of a Magister who plays with time magic.”

Cassandra says, “Unless you are hiding even more troops nearby than we had when we last left Haven, we don’t have the manpower to take the castle. Redcliffe castle is one of the most impregnable fortresses in Ferelden.”

Leliana says, “Again we are in agreement, but there is another way into the castle. There is a secret passage: an escape route for the family. The Hero of Ferelden and I used that entrance during the Blight. It is too narrow for troops, but my agents will have no trouble infiltrating.”

Lando says, “We have been invited, and you want us to use the back entrance to respond to his invitation?”

Leliana laughs. She says, “Hardly. Your party will go in the front and make sure all of his attention is on you, but when he betrays you, as we know he will, my agents will be ready to stay his hand.”

Behind Leliana, the door to the room opens suddenly and bounces against the wall. Gim winces in anticipation of the expected crash, but she hears no sound at all. Dorian Pavus appears in the doorway. He makes several very showy gestures as he steps into the room. Gim hears Solas make an impatient sound.

Dorian says, “Do try not to exclude me from these little planning sessions. After all, I am here to help. Your spies will never get past Alexius’s magic without my help. So if you are going after him, I am going along.”

Leliana raises an eyebrow, but Gim can tell she is amused. Gim likes this flamboyant man. She says, “We will be glad of your help, Altus Pavus.” Gim turns back to Leliana and says, “When are we going in?”

Leliana says, “I suggest we knock at Redcliffe Castle tomorrow as one of Alexius’s morning callers. We will meet for breakfast at dawn.”

Cassandra says, “Leliana, did your agents learn anything at Therinfal Redoubt?” Even though she is asking, Cassandra does not look like she wants to hear the answer.

Leliana says, “I am afraid I have no good news. At great risk, we were able to infiltrate and confer with some of the Templars. However, when they sought to verify our claims that the Lord Seeker was a demon, the agents and many of their Templar allies were detected by the demon. With many of the Templars already compromised, there was a pitched battle. My agents were able to spirit out a few allies, but most of those in Therinfal have been corrupted and lost to us. This is one of the reasons we must accept Alexius’s invitation: we will never get the aid of enough of the Templars to close the Breach.”

Cassandra bows her head. Gim sees Lando reach for her arm, but she steps out of his reach and leaves the room. Gim hates the look of pain on Lando’s face, but she doesn’t think he would want to hear from her any more than Cassandra would. She watches Leliana quietly say something to Lando, and after this, Lando still looks distressed, but now he has the look of a man who will be patient even if it kills him.

Varric appears on Gim’s right and says quietly, “I believe you said something about an evening walk
It is easy for Gim to turn her eyes away from Lando, but turning her thoughts away is more difficult. Varric deserves her attention, so she tries. She isn’t sure that she should abandon the tasks that arise from arrival at the farmhouse. She looks from side to side with hesitation and what must be the look of obvious questions on her face, because Solas and Krem each start reassuring her that they will make sure everything is in order and she should go with Varric.

As they exit the farmhouse, a scout appears and hands Varric a large basket with a blanket on the top. Gim shoots Varric a wry grin as she says, “You do think of everything, don’t you?”

Varric takes Gim’s arm and starts walking purposely away from the farmhouse. He makes a whistling sound and says, “Beauty, if you think asking someone to make sure we have food and a blanket for an impromptu picnic represents planning, I would love to show you what I can prepare given the resources of a medium-sized city.”

Gim feels her cheeks burning with a blush. This seems an odd time to feel suddenly shy, but feelings don’t ask permission. She says, “You want to do things to make me happy,” and looks at him through her damp lashes.

He says, “Beauty, if you told me you needed me to fetch you something from Orzammar’s Diamond Quarter, I would do my best.”

Gim isn’t sure she likes hearing this. She says, “That doesn’t sound very healthy. They don’t even let surface dwarves into Orzammar, do they?”

Varric laughs conspiratorially, and says, “Oh they try not to let any in, but they don’t always succeed.”

Gim, with a skeptical note in her voice, says, “Do you actually know this, or is this just wishful thinking?”

Varric says, “I actually know of several theoretical paths for surface dwarves to enter Orzammar, and I know for certain that at least one of these have been used. They all involve smuggling, Wardens, or the Deep Roads, and they are not casual methods. But let us talk no further of the Deep Roads. I did not like them and I hope to never go back. To be frank, I don’t really even want to go to Orzammar--I just would if you needed me to.” Varric’s shudder when he mentions the Deep Roads is quite noticeable.

Gim says, “Well, I am fascinated by Orzammar and the Deep Roads, but my primary interest is of those places during ancient times.”

Varric says, “That really doesn’t separate you much from the average royal caste dwarf: the ancestors and the memories are of paramount importance to them.” Varric’s tone and accent change as he says that last part, and Gim can tell he is mocking an upper-caste dwarf’s nasal affectation. She laughs.

Varric has been leading them during this conversation, and ahead Gim sees a copse of trees at the base of a rocky hillside. There is a stream in the distance.

Gim says, “I don’t think those people would want much to do with a half-breed like me.”

Varric nods and says, “Oh. Before the Breach, they would have rejected you out of hand, which would have been their loss. Now, they may well develop an interest in the Heralds, their ability to mend the rents into the realm of demons, and the fact that one of the Heralds can trace her ancestry to the Smith Caste.”
Gim swallows. She says, “You said you did not want to talk about the Deep Roads. I would prefer we did not talk about my ancestry and through whom it can be traced.”

Varric stopping in front of a collection of heavy branches, says, “Deal.” He lifts the branches up and encourages Gim to duck under them.

As she raises her head after passing the branches, she hears Varric following her, and she sees a perfect little glade with a small waterfall tumbling over some large boulders at the far end of the glade. The light under the trees is dim and gentle, but the light on the water is still full and golden. The air smells fresh and clean with the nearness of the moving water. The sound of the falling water is more a burble than a roar, and the whole clearing feels private and poignantly special.

Gim turns to Varric and says, “Oh, Varric! It is beautiful. This is the kind of place the Dalish would treat as sacred. I know there are no local Dalish, or there would be statues and offerings here.”

Varric spreads out the blanket, drops the basket of food, and invites Gim to sit down. He says, “Your brother and I found this place the last time we were here. I believe he has already brought Cassandra here.”

Gim feels a pang that Lando could have found this place and not immediately brought her to see it. Things have really deteriorated between them. She looks up to see Varric examining her closely. He says, “And now I have gone and hurt you again.”

Gim blinks and swallows and says, “It is not you who hurt me. And I have to believe that Lando and I will repair things. It was my own actions that put us in this state.” She sits up on her knees and pats her thighs twice quickly. She says, brightly, “But I didn’t want to talk to you to whine about my problems. I brought you here to ask you to kiss me and to ask you how you would feel about expanding our intimacy. The catch is, that when I say ‘our’, I mean not only the intimacy between you and me, but also between Solas and me. I feel a need to treat you similarly, and I…” Embarrassment overwhelms her again and she has to force herself to finish her sentence. “…I still can’t turn away from either of you.”

Varric moves forward and grabs Gim’s hand. Gim notices it is her marked hand, but she doesn’t think Varric is aware of that. Varric says, “I will kiss you with joy, and I would love to touch you more often and, to be frank, in more places, but I am not in a rush. If you feel moved to invite more attentions from me when we kiss, please do, but I only want you doing what leaves you in perfect comfort: with me and with Solas.”

Gim says, “And you do not mind that I should explore more with Solas also?”

Varric looks away from her for a moment. When he looks back, he looks thoughtful and perhaps a bit perplexed. He says, “I don’t know why this is, but I am not jealous of you and Solas at all. In the past, with Bianca…” Gim stills, and Varric notices. He says, “Now, don’t flinch. I have to be able to talk about her. Can we pretend I never said what I did to you about not using her name? Anyway, with Bianca, the thought of her with what’s-his-name drove me to rage, but I don’t feel even a little of that with you. I don’t know why. I think it might be because I know you have reasons to be drawn to each of us, and I truly want what is best for you. Honestly, if you had asked to speak to me this evening so that you could tell me you were choosing me over Solas, I would feel terrible for him and I would worry about the stress on our traveling party. I would have trouble explaining this to anyone outside the three of us, but…”

Gim quickly interrupts to plead, “Then don’t. Varric, please don’t write any books about this!”

Varric moves to Gim’s side and draws her into his arms. He says, “Beauty, I would sooner shoot my
own brother than do anything to expose you to censure from people who have no way to understand
our situation.” He draws away a little and caresses her face, pulling her chin so that he can look into
her eyes. He makes a little self-deprecating chuckle. Their faces are so close that she can feel his
sweet breath on her face. He says, “And you have read my book, so you know the part about
shooting my brother is not theoretical.

Gim has been fighting mightily to keep her thoughts away from her own problems with her sibling.
Gim says, “Varric, we keep talking about all these painful things. Won’t you please kiss me? I don’t
want to think. I want to be held and kissed and to feel your regard for me deep in my gut.”

Varric’s eyes almost seem to glow. He says, “As my Beauty wishes.” He closes the tiny space
between them and he is kissing her. He is strong, and solid, like stone. Without thinking, she has
brought up her magic, and she can feel that the core of him is alight. She reaches for that core, and
his warmth flows into her. She thinks no words, and she hears no words from him. She is awash in
warmth, the feeling of home, and an expansive feeling of power. Later, when she thinks back on
this, the words she uses are that she was filled with the realization that all things are possible.
Nothing is beyond her power to make right. The world is whole, and it contains her and those she
loves.

Gim’s sense of time is suspended. When Gim starts hearing the beginnings of explicit thoughts from
Varric, she notices that it is now fully dark. Out loud, Varric says, “I think we should eat our food
and return to camp before someone comes looking for us.”

So they arrange themselves next to their basket, and Gim calls a soft light to hover over them. They
eat their bread and cheese and fruit, while smiling at each other and touching gently and sometimes
offering a morsel from one to the other. Soon enough they pack everything up and stroll back
towards the farmhouse.

Gim says, “I am so sorry they had no ale to send with you.”

Varric purses his lips and then speaks with heartbreaking openness as he says, “Don’t tell anyone,
but I didn’t miss it. It was enough to be drunk on you.” Gim slips under his arm and squeezes his
whole broad body. She leaps up and gives him a quick peck of a kiss on his stubbled chin.

On the way back, Gim thinks that for her, kissing keeps reminding her of various stages of
meditation, but today at least, kissing Solas was a deep leap of faith and kissing Varric was the solid
comfort of renewal and contentment. Are these fundamental characteristics of the two men, or of her
relationships with them, or was it just the way things were today?

As they walk back to the lit farmhouse, Gim smiles to herself: the journey she takes to answer these
questions will be an interesting one.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Buttsonthebeach who acted as a sounding board for this chapter.

Comments and criticisms welcomed here and via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Catch the Conscience of the King

Chapter Summary

The party enters Redcliffe Castle.

Chapter Notes

Most of the dialog in this chapter is Bioware's, but there are things that make the repetition important for this story. That is, there are things to learn that you wouldn't learn by playing the game.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gim feels it is appropriate that they are approaching Redcliffe Castle with exactly the party they were in when they first met Alexius—well, except for her spirit. Lando, who the magister had taken to be their leader, is in the front of the party. They left their horses in the town of Redcliffe, so they walk over the bridge and through the Castle’s central courtyard. The only living thing they see is the large tree to the right of the central stairs, and it looks to be in sad shape. The air is heavy and still; if anyone asked Gim to give one word to describe her feelings, it would be ‘dread’.

Inside herself, Gim says, *I’m glad you wanted to come with me today, Wisdom. I will be very grateful for any observations you have about this new and terrifying time magic.* Wisdom’s being with her does keep her from being obviously agitated, but she still has to struggle to keep her thoughts quiet. She tries not to think of Leliana’s and Dorian’s party of scouts making their progress in the bowels of the castle. Gim’s party last saw the other hours ago, at dawn; By Gim’s best understanding, they are approaching the Castle at the perfect time to allow both parties to reach the main hall at the same time.

As they near the portcullis, it rises, though they have seen no one to direct the action. When the large wooden door directly behind the portcullis also opens, the party members look at each other briefly, and Gim knows everyone is wishing to be elsewhere. They walk through the door as they hear the portcullis slamming down behind them. Someone wants to make them feel intimidated, and at least in Gim’s case, it is working. She feels Wisdom trying to reassure her.

They walk down a long entryway carpet towards two men, menacingly costumed and fully-masked. As far as Gim knows, masks are not used in Tevinter the way they are in Orlais.

Lando says curtly, “Announce us.” The two attendants do not move their hands from behind their backs, remove their black masks, or speak.

A normally-dressed man who looks like the seneschal of the castle appears behind the two men and says, “The invitation was for the Herald of Andraste alone. The rest will wait here.” Yes! Still singular. This Alexius must not be much for intelligence gathering.

Lando spreads his legs, places his hands behind his back, and mirrors the posture of the masked attendants as he says, “Where I go, they go.” The seneschal looks over each member of the party,
pausing pointedly as his eyes go over Krem, Varric, and Cassandra and their weapons. Cassandra appears to be unable to stop the curl of her lip as the seneschal’s eyes reach her face. Finally, the seneschal returns to Lando, nods briefly, and leads them into the main hall. The masked attendants follow them, and more identically-dressed men are already regularly spaced around the main hall.

At the end of the hall, on a raised dais, sitting on a large chair clearly meant to suggest a throne, is Magister Alexius. Felix stands to his side, and the former Grand Enchanter, Fiona, stands a few steps down from the dais in the posture of a reluctant supplicant. The humans are flanked by matching gigantic and gruesome statues that do not look Ferelden in the slightest: more elements of the prevalent intimidation motif.

As the seneschal nears Alexius, he says, “My Lord Magister, the agents of the Inquisition have arrived.”

Alexius stands and comes forward, saying, “My friend, it is so good to see you again. And your associates, of course. I am sure we can work out some arrangement that is equitable to all parties.” Alexius’s voice is cloying. Gim feels that she will need a bath as soon as they can get out of here.

Fiona steps forward and says acidly, “Are we mages to have no voice in deciding our fate?” Gone is the befuddled Fiona of their earlier visit. This Fiona looks ready to tear the magister’s throat out.

Alexius, pretending not to note the challenge, says, “Fiona, you would not have turned your followers over to my care if you did not trust me with their lives.” Gim doesn’t know how Fiona avoids responding with physical violence.

Lando’s voice rings out strongly as he looks at Fiona and says, “If the Grand Enchanter wants to be part of these talks, then I welcome her as a guest of the Inquisition.”

Fiona returns his gaze, nods, and says, “Thank you.” Gim thinks Fiona looks shocked at having her request fulfilled.

Alexius does not look happy. He immediately turns his back on Fiona and walks back to sit in his chair. He says, “The Inquisition needs mages to close the Breach, and I have them. So, what shall you offer in exchange?”

Lando deadpans, “Nothing at all. I am just going to take the mages and leave.”

Scoffing at them, Alexius says, “And how do you imagine you’ll accomplish such a feat?”

Felix, looking very sad, turns to Alexius and says, “He knows everything, Father.”

Still seated, Alexius says breathlessly, “Felix. What have you done?”

Lando appears to believe the attention should move away from Felix. He steps forward and says to Alexius, “You wanted me here. Why?”

Alexius, in the tone of voice used to lecture disobedient schoolboys, asks, “Do you know what you are? You walk into my stronghold with your stolen mark—a gift you don’t even understand—and think you’re in control? You’re nothing but a mistake.” In the middle of this speech, Alexius stands and approaches Lando.

Lando says, “If I’m a mistake, what exactly was the Breach supposed to accomplish?” Gim hopes some information that would distress Solas isn’t about to come out.

Alexius now sounds distraught. This is the first time Gim begins to think that Alexius isn’t just
malevolent, he is unhinged. Alexius says, “It was to be a triumphant moment for the Elder One. For this world!”

Felix comes forward. He says, “Father, listen to yourself! Do you know what you sound like?”

Dorian must not have been able to resist that line, because out of nowhere Dorian walks forward saying, “He sounds exactly like the sort of villainous cliché everyone expects us to be.”

Alexius says, “Dorian. I gave you a chance to be part of this. You turned me down. The Elder One has power you would not believe. He will raise the Imperium from its own ashes.” Dorian has a very strong theatrical presence. That man knows how to make an entrance. Gim is beyond relieved to have this evidence that Leliana and her agents are in place.

Lando, eager to grab at this information, says, “That’s who you serve? The one who killed the Divine. Is he a mage?”

Alexius says, “Soon, he will become a God. He will make the world bow to mages once more: he will rule from the Boeric Ocean to the Frozen Seas!”

Fiona says in passionate opposition, “You can’t involve my people in this!”

Dorian, who is now standing right by Lando, says, “Alexius, this is exactly what you and I talked about never wanting to happen! Why would you support this?” Alexius turns away from Dorian, shaking his head as if to refuse hearing what Dorian is saying.

It looks like Felix senses an opening. He says, “Stop it, Father. Give up the Venatori. Let the southern mages fight the Breach, and let’s go home.” Venatori! Of course! That’s who those costumed and masked buffoons now lining the main hall are.

Alexius turns to Felix and pleads, “No! It’s the only way, Felix. He can save you!”

Felix steps back and says in surprise, “Save me?”

Alexius sounds like his thoughts are elsewhere when he says, “There is a way. The Elder One promised. If I undo the mistake at the Temple…”

Felix sounds resolute as he says, “I am going to die. You need to accept that.”

Alexius turns away from his uncooperative son and says, “Seize them, Venatori! The Elder One demands this man’s life!”

The wet sound of blades in lungs or across necks echoes through the hall: Every one of the Venatori Alexius had commanded falls forward with one of Leliana’s scouts behind him.

Lando says, “Your men are dead, Alexius.”

Alexius says, “You are a mistake! You never should have existed!” He raises his hand with purpose, and now Gim notices that his hand contains a rather sinister looking amulet that rises to float above the hand that lately held it. Green sparks fly off the amulet and the green conflagration increases as Alexius gestures in Lando’s direction.

Dorian raises his staff, jumps forward, and cries, “No!” The impression of green swirling fills Gim’s mind, and a large flash leaves her temporarily blind. When she can see again, there is a singed mark on the stone where Lando and Dorian were standing, and Lando and Dorian are nowhere to be seen.
Gim is frozen in shock; she closes her eyes in grief. Lando is not here--there has been no time for him to leave the main hall. That mark on the ground is all Gim has left of her brother.

When she opens her eyes, she sees Alexius gloating at her party. Gim marches forward, ready to make this little toad of man learn the hazard of making assumptions, when Solas appears beside her and says in a quiet voice, “Now!”

Gim calls on her glow, but instead of glowing, she stumbles: Wisdom is gone. She drops to her hands and knees with her head down. Lando is gone, Wisdom has deserted her, and Solas obviously told Wisdom to leave. There are movements around her--she feels someone trying to help her up--but she doesn’t care.

Gim doesn’t even know what to call her feelings. Grief? Rage? Helplessness? What does it matter? What does any of it matter?

Chapter End Notes

Comments and criticisms welcome here and at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Out-Frown False Fortune's Frown

Chapter Summary

Lando and Dorian navigate future Redcliffe.

Chapter Notes

Bad things happen in this chapter. Bad things are learned in this chapter. If you are disturbed by bad things, you might want to only read it when you are feeling solid and prepared.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the green flash and disorientation recedes, Lando finds himself crouched on a stone floor, nearly submerged in fetid water. As the green fades, Lando struggles to understand what has happened, and more details become clear. Dorian is the only ally with him, they appear to be in dungeon in acute disrepair, and there are two helmeted Venatori racing through the floating midden towards Dorian and him.

One of the Venatori cries, “Blood of the Elder One! Where’d they come from?”

Lando draws his greatsword and moves forward. He spares one glance back to make sure Dorian is behind him. Dorian nods, and Lando engages the two. Attacking to preserve ranged line-of-sight is second nature to him now, and between his sword and Dorian’s fire, the two are quickly dealt with.

Dorian nods to Lando as they move to a platform slightly out of the water to take their bearings. Dorian says, “It is plain to see that you are accustomed to fighting alongside mages.”

Lando says, “Yes, though I have to tell you I am accustomed to having shield and healing support, so my instincts may be on the rash side. However, given our environment, I am happy that instead of the ice I am used to, you have fire.”

Looking around them at the hodgepodge of decaying furniture and half-submerged glowing red crystals, Lando asks, “Do you know where we are?”

Dorian sounds distracted as he looks around for evidence and says, “Displacement... Interesting! It’s probably not what Alexius intended. The rift must have moved us...to what? The closest confluence of arcane energy?” Dorian stoops and begins moving his hand parallel to the floor, investigating.

Lando says, “The last thing I remember, we were in the castle hall.”

Standing, Dorian, clearly thinking deeply, says, “Let’s see. If we’re still in the castle, it isn’t... Oh! Of course! It’s not simply where--it’s when! Alexius used the amulet as a focus. It moved us through time!”

Lando, fighting down panic, says, “Did we go forward in time or back, and how far?”
Dorian says, “Those are excellent questions. We’ll have to find out, won’t we? Let’s look around—see where the rift took us. Then we can figure out how to get back... if we can.”

Lando wishes Gim were here. Gim instead of Lando; Gim in addition to him: either case would be an improvement. He says, “There were others in the hall. Could they have been drawn through the rift?”

Dorian says, “I doubt it was large enough to bring the whole room through. Alexius wouldn’t risk catching himself or Felix in it. They are probably still where and when we left them—in some sense, anyway.”

Lando, not sure he wants to know the answer to this next question, asks, “And what happens if we can’t get back?”

Dorian sounds almost like he is responding to a casual question about what to have for dinner when he responds, “Then we get comfortable in our new present.” Lando tries to be grateful that he is stranded with a level-headed mage who has some idea what is going on.

Looking around them, Lando says, “Are you familiar with red lyrium? I am told it is disastrous to be contaminated by it. There was quite a lot of it at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, and Alexius has made it clear that the Elder One was involved with the explosion there just as he is involved with Alexius now. Whenever ‘now’ is.”

“I have heard tales, but I didn’t know if I should take them seriously,” says Dorian as he reaches a hand out towards the pillar of red lyrium; he stops well short of getting close enough to touch it. He continues, “Yes, I can feel the aura of seductive corruption common to things associated with demons. I shall do my best to keep my distance.”

As they are talking, they find stairs up to another level of the dungeons. This level is less damp, but no less wrecked, and no less infested with red lyrium. Dorian says, “Alexius has made a dreadful mess of this place, hasn’t he?”

Lando says, “I didn’t see this part of the castle.”

Dorian says, “It was covered in the tackiest carvings of wolves and dogs I had ever seen. This is not an improvement.”

After a few more doorways, they find an elf mage singing the Andrastian Chant. He looks familiar, and Lando thinks he saw this elf in Redcliffe when they first went there. No matter what they say to him, he is unresponsive in any way other than repeating, “Andraste blessed me, Andraste blessed me...My tears are my sins, my sins, my sins,” and so on. The pile of lead in the bottom of Lando’s stomach feels heavier. They must keep searching, so they leave the poor elf chanting to himself.

Eventually they find enough stairs and winding pathways that they come out onto what looks like a walkway with an interior drawbridge suspended over watery depths. They have seen some of the depths on the way up, but now they can see that there is much more to this place than what they have visited so far.

There are several enemies to fight on this gridded platform, and many opportunities to fall to one’s death. Because many of their opponents fight with ranged abilities, and they are in widely separated places with unblockable lines-of-sight, this fight is significantly harder than the first one they had. Lando is fighting one opponent, and he knows Dorian is fighting another at range while being pelted by a third. If Lando leaves the man he is fighting to rush the one hurting Dorian, his current opponent will keep the parity. He is trying to keep an eye on the extra opponent when a thin blond man in a
ridiculously large hat appears in a cloud of green mist behind the previously unengaged Venatori and drops the Venatori with precise and vicious bladework.

With the help of the new arrival, all of their remaining opponents are quickly dispatched. Lando and Dorian approach the new man cautiously—or is he a boy? He stands, stock-still, with his hat lowered so that Lando can see only the lower part of his face, which is sallow and slack. Something about this strange figure is familiar to Lando—not his exact appearance, but his manner. As they walk up, the boy says, “Father: far and further—finally here. She will be pleased. I want to help.” At the end of this utterance, the boy raises his hat, and Lando sees pale blue eyes partially covered in limp blond hair.

Lando asks excitedly, “She?”

The boy, in the manner of someone stating what should be obvious, says, “The Elgar’falon.”

Lando reaches to grab the boy, but he isn’t there. In a flash, he is two paces away. Lando says, “Gim? You know Gim. Are you a spirit, or you contain a spirit? Can you take me to her? Who are you?”

Dorian says, “Slow down there. Are you sure you should be trusting this uncanny creature?”

The boy tilts his head as if he is having trouble coming up with an answer. He looks at Dorian first and says, “Uncanny. Yes. I was once a ghost, but that is past.” Then he turns to Lando and says, “Yes. At times. Perhaps. Probably.” After a pregnant pause, he finally continues proudly and triumphantly with, “I’m Cole!”

As calmly as he can manage, Lando says, “I am pleased to meet you, Cole. Please take us to Gim.” Aside, to Dorian, Lando says, “This is hard to explain, but before I became a Herald, I probably spent more time talking to spirits than to shem...than to humans. I trust him. I mean, we should be on our guard in any case, but seeing him gives me hope.”

Cole says, “Hope. Yes, you are the source and so you feel it. You will not forget.”

Lando feels tears start in his eyes, but he has no idea why. Lando is moved to respond to Cole with, “I will not forget.”

Cole starts walking, and Lando follows. Dorian also follows, but he is on high alert: staying behind and to one side of Lando, Dorian’s gaze never holds still. Cole leads them through a door they have not used and down onto an intermediate level. Cole is leading them past a cell almost completely filled with red lyrium when Lando notices the cell has someone in it: it is Grand Enchanter Fiona.

He walks up to the cell, and Fiona, who has trouble facing him because she is immobilized by a huge pillar of red lyrium, croaks out in a weak and disturbingly echoed voice, “You’re...alive! How? I saw you...disappear...into the rift.” Fiona’s eyes are red, and she has what looks like red steam rising from her. Her skin is blotchy. Lando guesses she is close to death.

Horrified, Lando asks, “Is that red lyrium growing from your body? How?”

Fiona says, “The longer you’re near it...eventually...you become this. Then they mine your corpse for more.” Lando feels his throat close. Gim is here. Gim who was horrified by normal, blue lyrium. But the first elf, the one chanting, was not producing red lyrium the way Fiona clearly is. What is the difference?

Dorian asks, “Can you tell us the date? It’s very important.”
Fiona is struggling to answer, but she manages to get out, “Harvestmere...9:42 Dragon.”

Dorian says, “Nine forty-two? Then we’ve missed an entire year.”

Lando says, “We have to get out of here, go back in time.” Lando has no idea what Fiona will make of such crazy talk, but she doesn’t look surprised.

Fiona says, “Please... Stop this from happening. Alexius...serves the Elder One. More powerful...than the Maker...no one...challenges him and lives.”

Dorian says, “Our only hope is to find the amulet that Alexius used to send us here. If it still exists, I can use it to reopen the rift at the exact spot we left. Maybe.”

Lando, turning to Cole who is standing to his right, says, “Cole, we have no time to lose. We don’t want the Elder One to learn we are here.”

Fiona says, “Who... are you talking to?”

Dorian looks at Fiona and then to Cole and then back. He says, “Don’t you see him?”

Fiona says, “If you mean... the Herald...I see him.”

Lando, who is not surprised by this says, “Be grateful Cole lets us see him, Dorian. We have to go.”

Turning to Fiona, Lando says, “I hope that we can make it so this never happens, Grand Enchanter.”

Cole leads them along more passages until they stop in front of a dark cell. At first the cell seems empty, but then a skeletal vision of Gim steps out of the shadows. She has no hair, and her fragile gauntness is painful to see. She opens her cell door in a way that makes it clear that she could have left at any time. She comes out and stands in front of Lando. She looks so delicate that Lando is afraid to touch her. He can’t move his thoughts away from the appalling things that must have happened to her in the past year, and he can’t move anything from his overloaded brain to his voice. He struggles to not let his horror show on his face, but he is afraid that leaves his face wooden.

Gim starts to say something, and then stops. She shakes her head like she is trying to restart her brain and she tries again, but once again stops after the first abortive sound. Finally she says in a strained, high, whisper, “Have you forgiven me?”

Devastated, Lando gently wraps her in his arms and croons, “Oh, Durgen’falon, there was never any need for forgiveness. I did not stay away from you because you did anything wrong. I stayed away because the others convinced me you needed to work through things on your own and to do that, you should not be able to fall into old comfortable patterns. I love you. I have always loved you. I will always love you.” Gim bursts into tears. Lando pulls back, concerned that he has somehow said the wrong thing, or said the right thing at a time that causes her too much strain.

Cole says, “No, you are helping. To break the damn of tears helps. You are helping as I could not.”

Dorian says, “Touching as this is, do we not have more pressing matters to attend to than family reunions?”

Lando readies himself for a blistering retort, but Gim grabs Lando’s hand and says, “No, he is right. There is much you must know. First, don’t waste time explaining to me about how you will try to get back to the moment a year ago: I know it already. Second, you must tell the advisors that we must prevent this future at all costs. Soon after you two disappeared, Alexius called for reinforcements and overwhelmed us. We were unable to do anything. I, in particular, didn’t even have a spirit, so I was just an annoying non-combatant. I didn’t understand then, but I do now. We were all imprisoned
here with the intention of experimentation and Lyrium production.”

Lando doesn’t know what to ask first. “You said, ‘we all’: are the others here as well?”

Although Lando would have sworn it wasn’t possible, Gim’s eyes look even more hollow than before. She says, “Some are here. I will get to that. You see, time works differently for spirits, and as soon as I could get to my Thaig, I learned that you had been sent forward in time and would appear here—just didn’t know when. I also learned about events outside this dungeon. The Elder One assassinated the Empress of Orlais and then took over the rest of Thedas with an unstoppable mage and demon army. Aside from a small resistance, he is unopposed now. Alexius is here, still trying to save his son. Leliana, who spent so much time fighting the Blight, is one of his prime vehicles for experimentation. She is too far away for me to help, and if Cole tries to help her, he ends up having to erase the memory, which seems to distress her.”

“Thank you for sending Cole to us,” Lando interrupts. “I figured out that he was a spirit, but it confuses me that he is physically here and does not seem to be manifesting through anyone else.”

Gim says, “It is confusing, and not important for the moment. Varric is near, and I have been able to keep him free of Red Lyrium because he comes to my Thaig. Krem is also near, but he has been infected, though not as badly as I hear Fiona is.”

Lando knows he can’t shake his fragile and loved sister. He needs to restrain himself. He finally says, “You are scaring me.”

Knowing exactly what he means, Gim says, “She isn’t here. Neither is Solas.” Gim must see the extremity of his fear in his reactions, because she hastens to reassure him with, “Oh, she is alive,” but she clearly has worse to say. Gim’s voice becomes choked and hard to understand as she squeaks out, “But Solas is not. He was killed--mutilated and degraded--getting Cassandra out of here.”

Lando thought he was overwhelmed before. If he was, he now needs a new word to explain what he is now. He manages to croak out, “Getting her out? Why did you get Cassandra out, yet you stayed?”

Gim is talking very fast as she says, “The spirits made it clear: I had to be here to meet you, and Cassandra does not come to my Thaig, so I could not keep her free of the Lyrium for long. And…” She stops talking. She twists her head on her neck in apparent agony. Finally she moans as she says, “Oh, Lando, I don’t know if I should tell you this, but I just can’t lie to you. We had to get her out because she was pregnant. We couldn’t let her be infected by the lyrium... and your unborn daughter with her.”

Lando feels like someone punched him in the abdomen. He says breathlessly, “Daughter?”

Gim says, “You have a daughter. Cassandra and Shiren are with the resistance. She is alive, and she is beautiful.” For once, Gim does not look miserable. Her eyes shine. He thought her state degraded and pitiful, but for a moment, she is beatifically beautiful.

Lando isn’t sure even Gim will hear him as he barely whispers, “Shiren?”

Gim says, “Yes. At first she was going to name her Nehnara, but I told her you did not need two children with the same name.” Gim starts shaking him. She says, “Lando, it was so hard for Cassandra to leave us here. And I have watched from the Fade as they made their escape. She was so brave. You would have been proud. You should be proud.” As if Cassandra could ever be capable of anything but bravery. That Gim should choose that for a subject of reassurance… Has she been hurt so badly that she can no longer understand the horror of this situation to him?
Lando says, “I...Shiren...Cass. But I...I can’t see them.”

Gim says, “No! You must go back. You must go back and make it so none of this happens. You
must make it so Solas and the Empress and thousands of others do not die in agony.”

Dorian says, “Oh woman of inestimable worth, shall we put that thought into action?” After a pause,
he says, “I would, however, like to know how you seem to have acquired the services of a spirit on
this plane of existence. Many in my homeland would kill for that information.”

Cole says, “I help. I was with Envy and the Templars, but then they were all red inside and there was
no help to give. Gim is the Elgar’falon and she put out the call. Most spirits have trouble moving
even small things, but they know me, and I have hands. I help.” That last repetition of his ‘I help’
mantra is said emphatically.

Gim says sadly, with just a trace of her old humor, “And that is really all you--or your countrymen--
need to know.”

Dragging his thoughts away from his distant family, Lando says, “If you tell me why you are so thin-
-Fiona did not look so emaciated--and how you have avoided the lyrium contamination, I will be
ready to move.”

Gim starts leading Lando by the arm as she says, “We can start walking while I tell you. We have to
get the others. If you eat the food they give you here, you become infected with Red Lyrium. I made
sure Varric didn’t eat it and I give him nourishment in my Thaig, but that means I have to share with
him everything I can get out of the stone or the Fade. I should be better at this, and I think I am
getting better, but a year is a long time.” She walks along silently for a moment, but Lando can tell
she isn’t done. Finally she says, “When I have had the most trouble keeping my hope that you would
arrive in time, I had the most trouble keeping up my strength. I am so thankful that you have come.”
She looks up at him, and he knows that look. That is the look she gives when she blames herself for
everything wrong in the world. She drops her eyes to the floor and finishes with, “I can be weak
sometimes.”

Cole says, “I told her the stone is strong, but it didn’t always help. I tried to help. I can’t make her
forget when I do it wrong.”

Dorian says, “And no one ever reported to Alexius that there were two Heralds of Andraste?”

Gim says, “Funny story, that. Eventually he did learn that some people believed there were two
Heralds and that I was one. By that time I had totally hidden the mark,” She flashes her completely
unmarked hand, “and all I had to do was just not try to be especially strong when he tortured me, and
he was soon yelling at the--what did he say? I believe it was ‘worthless imbeciles’ who tried to
convince him I was special.”

Lando thinks he will vomit. Every time he thinks he has absorbed all the repellant information he
possibly can, more of it comes to weigh down what used to be a completely functioning heart. He
says in a flat voice, “Torture?”

Gim says, “Don’t think about it. I don’t. It turns out that if you are in enough mental pain, physical
pain just feels honest. I am not proud of this, but it was almost a relief. At least I knew I was alive.”
After a moment, she laughs grimly and says, “You don’t need to tell me that when you get back to
our past. For that matter, I have something I want you to tell Solas, but not me. Tell him, ‘Gim finds
she does not care for feet with broken toes’. Oh, and make sure you tell me that had Solas and
Wisdom not acted as they did that day, the world would be lost. This is important: make sure I
forgive them.”
They have been walking during all this conversation, and they are back to the interior drawbridge. This time, the room is empty. Cole and Gim lead them to the only door that they have not yet explored. Lando somehow makes his feet move one after the other so he can follow them. He can absorb all this later. He is whole and Gim is not. He must be there for her.

On the way down the first flight of stairs, Lando says gently, “You don’t want to tell me more about how Solas died to save Cassandra?”

Gim says, with a trace of her old backbone, “I would much rather describe to you how I was tortured, if it is all the same to you.”

Dorian says, “Well, do you want to tell us how to find Cole when we get back?”

Cole says matter-of-factly, “I am not lost.”

Gim says, “He is not lost. We are going to owe him so much--whether or not he ever finds us outside of these accursed dungeons. I almost hope that he does not find us, because I can’t help but fear that we will not be good for him.”

Cole smiles happily and says, “A future worthy of worry!”

Gim says, “I do, don’t I,” and hugs Cole about the waist. Cole blinks out of Gim’s hug and appears next to a cell ahead.

Lando can’t yet see who is in the cell, but he hears Varric’s voice say, “Hey, Kid. Good to see you.”

Lando leaps forward to stand next to Cole just as Cole is opening the cell door. Varric says in a voice full of wonder, “Andraste’s sacred knickers. You really did come back.” Varric doesn’t look anywhere as gaunt as Gim does: he is slim, and he is clean-shaven, but Lando can see that he still has hair on his head and his chest.

As soon as Varric is out of the cell and sees the others approaching, he walks up to Gim, taking her hands into his and saying sadly, “Oh Beauty. How could you do this to me? You should have let me go with Solas. I would rather die than be the reason for your privation.”

Gim touches his face and says, “We will need you here, beloved. I know where Bianca is, and you are going to need her.”

Varric, sounding like someone who has been asked to tell a joke to someone on their deathbed, Screws up one side of his face and lifts one shoulder saying, “You mean you don’t just need me for my sterling wit?”

Lando thinks Gim is trying to smile as she says, “That too.” They have all had to deal with so much. His mate is alive; his child--a child he didn’t even know could exist--is alive. He must stop thinking of his own losses.

On the next corridor over, they find Krem. Apart from the red eyes, the red glow, and a full beard, Krem looks very similar to how he looked when Lando last saw him. After looking at each of his companions in turn, Krem says, “Right. Let’s get this moving. I’m thinking there are a lot of Venatori between here and Alexius who could do with a little discussion on manners.”

With that, they all head back to the drawbridge room. Lando can tell that he isn’t the only one worried about how slowly Gim is moving. This means that Cole and Dorian are at the front of the party, Lando, Varric, and Gim are at the back, and Krem floats between. On the way up, Gim fiddles with a statue and a sconce, and when they reach the room, there is a new pathway to take.
On the other side of the now lowered drawbridge, there is a large chest with Bianca, bolts, a great sword, a shield and short sword, Leliana’s bow, arrows, and Solas’s staff. Krem takes the shield, the short sword, Leliana’s bow, and the quiver of arrows. Gim touches the staff, but she does not pick it up. How can she be so strong and so traumatized at the same time?

Varric starts inspecting his crossbow and smiles in satisfaction. He says, “Bianca, you minx!” and then flinches and looks towards Gim. Gim smiles her horrifying, gaunt, gap-toothed smile at him, punches him in the arm, and then keeps walking. Varric gives Lando a lip-curl of helpless apology, and they all follow after her. Immediate events are engrossing enough, and his attention is needed here. He must stop thinking about Cassandra and his little girl.

Cole is once again in the lead, and he is completely sure where to go. They find a few parties of Venatori, but with appropriate ranged support and Gim’s shields and healing, no fight even slows them down.

They reach a door, that Cole opens silently. Beyond the door, Lando sees someone who looks like Leliana’s aged and dying grandmother suspended by her arms in a clearly painful posture. A Venatori torturer is threatening the woman with a knife, saying “You will break!”

The woman says, “I will die first.” Then she looks up and sees Lando in the doorway. In that moment, the fire in her eyes shows Lando that it really is Leliana. She grabs the bar from which she was lately hanging, wraps her legs around her torturer’s neck, and snaps that neck in seconds. The party surges forward to get her down.

Leliana, looking at Lando and Dorian, says, “You are alive.”

Lando says, “I am. And we are going to kill Alexius and return Dorian and me to the past so that we can prevent this abomination of a future from ever happening. Are you in?” Krem hands Leliana her bow and the quiver.

Leliana nods and says, “We can find him in the main hall. The guards talk about how he never leaves.”

Dorian says, “So you, like the others already know how we got here? You don’t want to know more?”

Leliana says, “No.”

Lando admonishes, “Dorian…”

Dorian says, “Alright. My apologies.”

Leliana says, “I don’t need your hollow apologies. This is all some grand adventure to you, some future you hope will never exist. You mages always wonder why people fear you. I suffered. The whole world suffered. It was real.” Leliana’s rage seems to have burned itself out. Her eyes move from Dorian to Gim. She moves to Gim and opens her arms. Gim mirrors her, and the two women gingerly hold each other. After a moment, they move apart and Leliana says, “Let’s get this enfoiré.”

Gim says, “Agreed,” and they all go down the hallway.

At the end of the hallway, they find another room with a grid floor over an open drop and a drawbridge. Fortunately, this drawbridge is already down. Once they cross it and enter the large hall on the other side, they find a small rift with the expected attendant demons. The six of them quickly kill the demons, and Lando puts his arm up to close the rift. He looks over at Gim expecting her to put her arm up, but instead she arches her back and ribbon of light arcs out of her chest. Lando can’t
figure out why that disturbs him so much, but he almost recoils from her on seeing that.

After the rift is closed, Varric and Krem work a winch to open a portcullis at the end of the room, and Lando raises his eyebrows at Gim in question. She says matter-of-factly, “I had to hide it somewhere,” and follows Cole out of the room.

They go through several rooms, and some have demons and some have Venatori, but the six of them kill so quickly that whether or not a room is empty has little bearing on their traveling speed.

Eventually, they exit the castle to the courtyard. The entire sky is green and the air reeks of pestilence. Lando says, “The Breach, it’s…”

And Dorian finishes, “Everywhere.”

Varric says, “Yes, well by now you know that the Elder One and his Venatori are the ones who opened the Breach. As predicted, the Breach has grown without check.” Lando swallows and once again has to drag his mind away from a baby that has to live in a world with a roiling green sky.

They may not be able to close the gigantic Breach, but they make short work of the two rifts in the courtyard. Lando does not like seeing the ribbon of light arc out of Gim’s chest, but the rifts are closed and the demons are dead, and they follow Cole back into the castle on the other side of the courtyard. Cole leads them directly to the door to the main hall, but there is now an elaborate lock on the door with impressions where five small crystals must be placed.

Gim steps forward and says, “I think we can dispense with this nonsense.” She begins glowing while touching the door, and after a moment, the door springs open.

Striding into the room they find not only the ever-present destruction of the castle, but a defeated-looking Alexius and a groveling, imbecilic Felix.

Lando strides forward and says, “It’s over, Alexius.”

Without turning, Alexius says in an air of resignation, “There is no longer anywhere to run. I knew that you would appear again. Not that it would be now—the irony. But I knew I hadn’t destroyed you. My final failure.”

Dorian, who for the first time actually sounds choked up, says, “Was it worth it? Everything you did to the world? To yourself?”

Alexius says, “It doesn’t matter now. All we can do is wait for the end. The Elder One comes: For me, for you, for us all.”

Leliana pulls the shell of Felix up in front of her and places a dagger at his throat. Alexius cries, “Felix!”

Dorian says in dismay, “That’s Felix? Maker’s breath, Alexius, what have you done?”

Alexius says, “He would have died, Dorian! I saved him! Please, don’t hurt my son. I’ll do anything you ask.”

Lando says, “Hand over the amulet, and we let him go.”

Alexius says, “Let him go, and I swear you’ll get what you want.”

Leliana says, “I want the world back,” and she starts to drag her dagger across Felix’s throat, just as a
Lando and Krem take Felix out of Leliana’s arms, and she doesn’t even protest. Gim says sadly, “I’m very sorry, Leliana, but I can’t let you make my brother a liar.” Leliana slumps to her knees and stares at the ground.

Lando and Krem walk Felix over to Alexius, where Lando puts out his hand. Alexius drops the amulet into Lando’s hand, and Lando and Krem pass over Felix’s unresponsive body. Alexius drops to the floor and cradles Felix in his lap, rocking and crooning over him. The scene is pitiful, but Lando is fresh out of even a scrap of pity for the man.

Lando passes the amulet to Dorian. Dorian examines it and says, “This is the same amulet he used before. I think it’s the same one we made in Minrathous. That’s a relief. Give me an hour to work out the spell he used, and I should be able to reopen the time rift.”

Gim says, “An hour? I don’t think you understood what Alexius was saying earlier. You must go now.” Right on cue, the ground shakes and Lando hears the screeching of demons. Lando suddenly notices that Cole is nowhere to be seen—he can’t remember when he last saw Cole.

Leliana rises from the floor and says, “The Elder One.”

Varric says, “You have to hurry. This...is bad.”

Lando sees them all exchange glances. Gim says, “We will keep them off you, but get back there as soon as you can.”

There are things that can’t be asked of a good man. Lando pleads, “I can’t leave you here, Gim!”

Gim says, “You have to. The me of a year ago wouldn’t like this one very much. Go keep her just a bit more innocent, will you?”

Leliana says, “Some of us are already dead. The only way we live is if this day never comes.” She looks at Dorian. She says, “Cast your spell. You have as much time as the destruction of our bodies can give you.”

All of them head to the entrance while Dorian and Lando mount the dais. Lando hears Leliana reciting the Chant of Light while Varric and Krem prefer swearing creatively. Gim is further back from them, quiet and glowing brightly.

Dorian, looking up from his spell says, “Do yourself a favor and stop looking at them. If you do not stay here with me, we all die.” Lando tries hard to follow Dorian’s suggestion. Dorian makes a few more gestures, and a rift opens.

As he is about to step through, Lando looks behind him to see Varric, Krem, and Leliana broken and bleeding on the floor. Gim has turned away from the fight and is looking straight into his eyes as she drops her glow and sits on the floor in a posture he has seen her use countless times for meditation. The last he sees of her, she is once again smiling beatifically.

Lando turns and steps into the rift.
Very much thanks to Buttsonthebeach who suggested some important changes.

*Enfoiré* is a vulgar French word that means exactly what you think it means.

Comments or criticisms welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com
Compound With Mistful Eyes

Chapter Summary

Lando and Dorian return to present-day Redcliffe and bring the right people up to speed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stepping through the portal is once again disorienting, and it takes a moment for Lando’s senses to adjust. As his sight clears, Lando sees an unravaged Alexius in front of him. Dorian steps forward to address the magister, and Lando glances to the side to see that the hall is almost as he left it hours before. Well, from his point of view, it was hours before. Gim is on all fours on the floor, and she has not raised her head, but she, and Cassandra, and Solas, and all of them...all of them are alive.

Dorian says, “You’ll have to do better than that.” Alexius falls to his knees in apparent despair.

At the sound of Dorian’s voice, Gim looks up. When she sees Lando, she bursts into tears and flies into his arms, almost knocking him over. It’s hard to believe this watering pot is the same as the stoic woman who survived in the depths of this castle for a year, but Lando knows she is without a spirit, and she was shattered by her perception of his loss--a loss when she thought they were at odds. If he thinks about to whom he should be grateful for avoiding that horrific future, it isn’t Mythal or the Maker he thinks of, but Dorian, and Cole and Solas, and most importantly, Gim. Even if she will never be forced to perform those acts, she has them in her, and she is a treasure.

He murmurs reassuring sounds to her while looking over her head to find Cassandra’s eyes. Cassandra looks relieved, in control, and on alert--just as he would expect. He tries to project all his love for her across the air between them, and he mouths a voiceless, “later,” to her. She nods, with the wisp of a crooked smile that means more to him than would a whole-hearted, tooth-baring grin.

Gim’s hysteria seems to be dropping. She pulls out of his arms a little, scrunches up her freely running nose, and says, “You reek!” He doesn’t say anything to her, but he nods, fails to let her leave his stinky embrace, and turns to Alexius.

Lando says, “You failed, Alexius. How forgiving is your Elder One?”

Alexius says, “You won. There is no point in extending this charade.” Turning away from Lando, Alexius gazes up into his son’s eyes. Even after all Lando knows, the grief in Alexius’s voice as he says, “Felix…” is painful to listen to.

Felix squats down by his father and says, “It’s going to be all right, Father.”

Alexius groans out, “You’ll die.”

Lando hears not only concern for his father but resignation as Felix says, “Everyone dies.”

Alexius stands and accepts being taken into custody by two of Leliana’s scouts. The scouts take him out of the hall with Felix following--unrestrained--behind.
Dorian says, “Well, I’m glad that’s over with!” But just as Dorian finishes his sentence, a squad of military men, wearing the full armor of a Ferelden Royal escort, formally march into the grand hall. Following these men are the King and Queen of Ferelden. Dorian says, “Or not.”

King Alistair steps forward and says, “Grand Enchanter, We’d like to discuss your abuse of our hospitality.”

Fiona steps forward with downcast eyes and says, “Your majesties.” She seems as if she would say more, but she is interrupted.

Queen Anora says, “When we offered the mages sanctuary, we did not give them the right to drive our people from their homes.”

Fiona, still looking very cowed, says, “King Alistair, Queen Anora, I assure you, we never intended…”

Once again interrupting, Queen Anora says, “In light of your actions, good intentions are no longer enough.”

King Alistair says menacingly, “You and your followers have worn out your welcome. Leave Ferelden, or we’ll be forced to make you leave.” Lando’s impression of this man is not good. He is a blustering bully crowding a small elven woman.

Fiona says, “But...we have hundreds who need protection! Where will we go?”

Lando, still standing with Gim in his arms says loudly, “The Inquisition is willing to take in the mages.”

Sounding suspicious, Fiona says, “And what are the terms of this arrangement?”

Dorian says cheerily, “Hopefully, better than what Alexius gave you. The Inquisition is better than that, yes?”

Varric glances at Gim and Solas before saying, “I’ve known a lot of mages. They can be loyal friends if you let them. Friends who make bad decisions, but still: loyal.”

Fiona says, “It seems we have little choice but to accept whatever you offer.”

Lando, using his full formal voice, says, “We would be honored to have you fight as allies at the Inquisition’s side.”

Fiona says, “A generous offer, but will the rest of the Inquisition honor it?”

Out of somewhere in the large hall, Leliana materializes. She steps forward and says, “The Breach threatens all of Thedas. We cannot afford to be divided now. We can’t fight it without you. Any chance of success requires your full support.” As soon as Leliana starts speaking, Cassandra steps to stand beside her. It must be hard for Cassandra to support a full alliance with the mages, but she is strong. Lando beams at her. She, of course, is formally correct with her attention on the Ferelden Royalty.

Alistair says, “It’s a generous offer. I doubt you are going to get a better one from us.” Lando really doesn’t like this guy, although he did take his bluster down a notch once Leliana showed up. Alistair is now staring at Leliana.

Fiona bows her head for a moment and then says formally, “We accept. It would be madness not to.
I will gather my people and ready them for the journey to Haven. The Breach will be closed; you will not regret giving us this chance.” Fiona leaves the hall, and a couple of Leliana’s scouts go with her.

The King and Queen confer briefly, and the Queen leaves with all of the soldiers of the Royal Escort. If Lando had to guess, he would say the Queen was not happy to see Leliana or to leave the King in her company. The King walks over to talk to Leliana. Cassandra--and all of Lando’s other companions--come over to join him where he is still embracing Gim. As they are walking over, Lando gestures to Dorian, who comes close. Lando says quietly, “Please don’t discuss anything we have learned until and unless you are certain the person to whom you are talking is already aware of the pertinent facts. Agreed?”

In a low voice, Dorian says, “My good Ser, I reserve the right to talk about how dashing and clever I was, but apart from that, the floor is yours.”

Lando says, “Thank you. And you were very dashing and clever.” Dorian preens a little and withdraws.

After a few meaningful looks and some low voiced communication, the only people left in the hall are Gim, Solas, Varric, Cassandra, Krem, Dorian, and Lando. Lando relaxes his hold on Gim, but he is still standing right behind her with his arms crossed across her chest. Cassandra comes to stand next to him, but she does not touch him.

Lando says, “I think we should keep what I have to tell you between ourselves and the advisors. Some of what I have learned has to do with general facts, and some of it is personal. What I...what we...went through was very difficult. Please be patient as I tell you the more personal things at my own rate of comfort.” He stops, clears his throat, and says, “We were sent a year into the future to the bottom of the Redcliffe dungeons. Things were very bad--even worse than my smell.” He hopes someone will smile at him when he tries for that joke. Thankfully, at least Varric doesn’t let him down: it’s a shakier smile than normal for Varric, but it’s there.

Cassandra says in dismay, “A year?”

Lando only knows that Solas sounds equally upset because of their familiarity. Solas says, “I would have thought that impossible.”

Lando says, “Well, I would have thought so too, but it was real. The Elder One had assassinated the empress of Orlais, and then he conquered Thedas with the aid of a mage and demon army. As we climbed out of the bowels of the castle, red lyrium was everywhere: it was being harvested from the infected corpses of many of the people who you have met in Redcliffe. When we finally reached the castle courtyard, we found that the Breach filled the entire sky. We fought many opponents--human and demon--and we closed several rifts.”

Gim says, “Rifts! Then I was there.”

Lando says, hesitantly, “You were there, but the time had been very hard on you. It was...painful...to see you. People now in this room and a physically manifested spirit named Cole helped us recover the amulet from Alexius. Dorian exceeded all possible expectations by casting the spell to return the two of us here just as the Elder One arrived to stop us.” Lando notices that Dorian is very much enjoying the attention he is getting.

Varric says, “No editor on the planet would sign off on a story that improbable.”

Lando says wearily, “And with good reason. Now, I will tell each of you what I learned, personally,
but I need to talk to Gim and Cassandra first. Privately.” Everyone in the room files out, in some cases reluctantly.

Once everyone is gone, Lando sits down on the steps with Cassandra on one side and Gim sitting a step lower than him, between his feet. He says, “First, Gim, I love you. I will always love you. I would love you and support you if you went insane and tried to kill me. I left you to yourself, temporarily, because I was convinced that would be best for you given our situation, and I would never have stayed detached for very long. I wasn’t mad at you, and I don’t think anything but that we both have a lot to learn about how to be part of a group larger than two. OK?”

Gim grabs his shin and hugs it tightly while laying her head on his knee. Her eyes are shining as she says, “OK.”

Lando continues with, “Second, future-you told me to make sure I convinced you that had Solas and Wisdom not acted as they did, the world would have been lost. You told me I must make you forgive them.”

Gim looks like she wants to argue about this, but she looks at him again and slowly says, “O...K.”

“Finally,” he says,”I need your glow. Could you please take a power nap while I talk with Cassandra?” Lando has seen her do this just to change spirits. He knows she can.

Looking very young, she says, “May I stay here?”

“Of course,” he says and opens his arms again. She slings herself across his lap, with her arms around his back and her head pillowed on one of his arms. Almost immediately, she begins breathing regularly, but he will avoid the specific at first. He gestures with the arm Gim isn’t using as a pillow, and Cassandra scoots up to him. He holds her hand.

“Cass,” he says, his voice breaking up a little, “There is no way you could understand how much I needed to see you when I came back through the portal.”

She looks at him with deeply concerned and sympathetic eyes. She says hesitantly, “I might understand more than you know.” Lando blinks. She might.

He says, “You might, but I have to tell you about what I learned of your future.” Looking down, he verifies that Gim is beginning a cute little snore. He says, “Cassandra, are you aware that…”

She interrupts, “That I am with child? I only began to suspect very recently, but from your face, I gather that it is no longer a conjecture. I imagine this complicated things. But you were there a year from now, so…”

“I didn’t get to see you while I was there. Let me restate that: you were elsewhere, in safety, and I was simultaneously distraught that I couldn’t see you and our child, and happy that you were no longer in the dungeon.” Her brow furrows in confusion, and before she can ask, he says, “They got you out when they found out you were pregnant--before you and our daughter could be infected by red lyrium.”

Cassandra says breathlessly, “Our..daughter?”

“Our daughter,” Lando confirms. “Apparently you named her Shiren. You and she were with the resistance. Solas was killed getting you out. Gim wouldn’t talk about it. She said she would rather talk about her own torture. I watched Varric tell Gim she should have let him go with Solas. They...they risked everything for you. For us.”
Lando has never seen Cassandra look like this. For a moment he thinks she may faint. She says, “Killed...Tortured...Solas...Gim…” She looks at him with a face he has only seen on someone who has just lost a family member. She says, “I may be sick,” and makes a fist with her right hand and presses it hard against her mouth.

Lando strokes her face and rubs her back. He says, “Oh, beloved, this is hard. This is so hard. And I thought it would kill me when I found out in that horrible place, but it did not, and I am back, and we are forearmed with the name of our enemy and some of his plans. We will fight on.” He makes his voice more gentle now. He says, “And I am so grateful that I am here, and I can see you and take care of you, and I will see our child.”

She drops her fist and says curtly, “I do not need to be taken care of.”

He laughs gently, “Your claim is not just theoretical. You have demonstrated that you don’t need me, or anyone else, to protect your unborn child during a time of extreme strife and chaos. All of Ferelden and Orlais fell to the Elder One, and still you and your child were free and you were fighting.”

After watching her a bit longer, Lando says carefully, “Beloved...You are not...disappointed, are you?”

Cassandra’s eyes fly to Lando’s and she says, “You cannot actually think that. You. Oh, Lando. Every day I thank the Maker for you. And for the Maker to give us a child is the most unlikely, precious, wonderful thing imaginable. But... But I feel selfish worrying about my well-being--even my child’s well-being--when the survival of Thedas as we know it is in question. Please tell me you do not find me to be an unnatural mother.”

Lando, unable to reach for her and kiss her the way he would like without rousing Gim, nuzzles her shoulder and says, “Shhhhhh. Nothing about you is unnatural. We will cope. We will have help. We will have joy and pain and life.”

“She needs,” she says. “In that future I needed more than help. I am trying to wrap my head around Solas’s dying for me—for us.”

“We are family. Which is why I need to warn you. Solas deserves to learn about this. A man who would sacrifice like that for you—he deserves to be told. He will not tell anyone else. This will have to be a family secret. I know you probably wouldn’t have told even me until you were certain, but Gim might have noticed at some point when her glow was up. And I want her to scan you, now. You can wait and hear everything I say to her.” Seeing her hesitation, he says, “You didn’t see her, Cass. She suffered terribly. You cannot imagine. I hope you cannot imagine. I don’t even want her to imagine. And some of her worst pain was believing I had not forgiven her.”

Cassandra, proud and private Cassandra, slowly nods, but she is not comfortable. Now Lando feels Gim beginning to stir. Soon, Cassandra can also tell that Gim is waking up. Gim sits up and blinks and looks at the two of them.

Gim says, “I’m sorry I took a while. I had to make sure Wisdom knew that I understood that she and Solas did the right thing.”

Lando says, “Your timing is perfect. Would you please give Cassandra a quick scan?”

Gim says calculatedly, “yes, if I can scan you too.”

Lando says, “Of course. But her first.”
Gim brings up her glow and puts out her hand. Very slowly, Cassandra drops her hand, face up, in Gim’s palm. Gim shuts her eyes, but Lando can see that her eyes are moving under their lids. After a few moments, Gim makes a sudden inhalation and her eyes fly open. She looks at Cassandra, then her eyes dart to Lando, then back to Cassandra. Gim says, “And...you know?”

Lando and Cassandra talk over each other as they both respond in the affirmative.

Lando says, “All is well?”

Tears well up in Gim’s eyes. She says quietly, “Everything... is... perfect. It is hanging on for dear life.”

Lando says, “She is hanging on for dear life.”

Gim says, “She! And she was born—in the future?”

Lando says, “She was. And she was healthy because of your planning and sacrifice. You and Solas and a manifested spirit named Cole got her out. I hear Varric tried to help, but you wouldn’t let him. At the time I left, you believed Cassandra and our daughter to be well and free.”

Sounding mystified, and possibly even embarrassed, Gim says, “How was I able to do that? And why didn’t I go with them?”

Lando says, “The spirits told you I would come, but not when. They said you had to be there, so you stayed, along with Krem, Varric, and Cole. Though I must admit that I don’t understand what it means for Cole to be there or if he was also somewhere else.”

Gim says, “But Solas got out?”

Lando says gently, “No, Solas died getting Cassandra out. I don’t know how, except that you told me I had to go back and prevent people like Solas from dying in great agony. You wouldn't talk about it.”

Gim puts her hand over her mouth as her face screws up. She squeaks, “Solas!”

Lando rubbing her back says, “I know, Adhal’falon. I know. But there is more. You hid the anchor so Alexius would not believe the reports that you were a Herald. When we closed rifts, the ribbon of light came out of your chest.” Gim moves her hand from her mouth to her breast. “Also, you were painfully skinny, and you were using the Stone and the Fade to provide sustenance for both you and Varric. Apparently the food they gave you was infected with red lyrium. Krem had to eat because he could not come to your Thaig, so he was infected, but not as badly as some, such as Fiona, were.”

Gim says, “Stop. I can’t take any more.”

Lando nods a few times and says, “Believe me, I completely understand your feeling that way.”

Gim says, “I’m so sorry. Of course I can take more.”

Lando says, “Sadly, I know that you can. But there is only one more thing I feel I must tell you.” Lando gathers all his strength and pushes through. His voice is halting as he says, “The last thing I saw before stepping through the portal was Varric, Krem, and Leliana dead behind you, and you sitting waiting for death. You smiled at me in happiness as you saw me step through the portal. You knew I was going back to you here.”

At the last, Lando covers his eyes with his hands and hiccups back some tears. Cassandra and Gim
sit on either side of him and rub his back. Gim takes this opportunity to slide her hand onto his bare neck. It isn’t long before several aches and pains that he had been dimly aware of disappear.

Finally, Gim says, “Well, if you have reported all that you need to report, can we get you a bath? You smell really bad.”

Lando suffers one more hiccup and drops his eyes and says, “I feel I need to talk to Krem, Varric, Solas, and Leliana.”

Cassandra says, “We can talk on the way back to our horses and then on the way to the farmhouse. With your permission, I would like to talk to Solas. Gim can talk to Krem and Varric. I think we know what you would say. As for Leliana, I doubt she is even around to be talked to. She and Alistair probably have a lot to say to one another. If we are wrong, she can wait until after you bathe.” After a moment, Cassandra continues with, “And Gim, tell Varric to keep it to himself for the time being.”

Gim says, “Thank you, Cassandra.” After a few deep breaths, Gim stands up. She says, “I can’t take many more days like this.”

Cassandra says, “I think we have ample evidence that you will endure what you have to endure in order to defeat this Elder One.”

Gim says, “Hunh. Maybe I am stronger than I knew.”

Lando says, “Yep.”

Gim says, “And maybe you smell stronger than you know.”

Cassandra says, “Yep.”

And with that, the three of them walk out of the hall. Krem, Varric, Solas, and Dorian are waiting for them.

As they all walk back towards Redcliffe village and their horses, Dorian says, “Krem, I understand you are a mercenary. Does your commanding officer require that you remain clean shaven? If so, I think it is a pity. I thought your full beard was rather dashing.”

Krem immediately brightens, but then his face falls as he looks at his companions. Gim says, “Oh Krem, don’t feel bad. We say, ‘Even a famine fills some bellies.’ I will ask Lando to make you a tiny comb.”

Dorian is looking from Krem to Gim in confusion. Varric slaps his back and says, “Don’t worry about it. Gim says many confusing things. I assure you, when she makes one of those otherwise-cryptic statements and it is for you, you will know, and you will be happy to hear it.”

Lando says to Dorian, “My sights have narrowed to getting to our horses and back to the farmhouse. There is a great place to bathe back at the farmhouse, but I fear our companions may lose patience and throw us in Lake Calenhad.”

Dorian, raising his eyebrows and tilting his head says, “Our companions?”

Lando says, “Oh, I’m sorry. I just assumed you were coming to Haven with us.”

Solas’s head rises and he looks daggers at the two of them on hearing this. Gim approaches Solas and punches him in the arm, which causes Solas to completely forget Dorian and to look down at
Gim with a painful amount of hope on his face. Lando looks away with relief when Dorian starts talking again.

Dorian says, “In that case, I think I might be willing to gift you with my continued presence. My immediate impression is you might just be worthy of my magnificence.”

Lando, perfectly willing to indulge this clever peacock says, “I am sure you will raise our tone considerably.”

Krem says cheerfully, “Either that or we will drag you down to our level.”

Dorian, eyes wide open, says more quietly than usual, “I’m sure either option will be educational.”

Varric wryly, “Careful, Sparkler, these folk are hazardous to the preservation of Northerner assumptions.”

Dorian says indignantly, “Sparkler! I would never be so pedestrian.”

Dorian does a little hop sideways when Krem elbows him in the ribs. Krem says conspiratorially, “If you know what’s good for you, Altus, you will roll with it. He can do worse. You will do fine here.”

Krem begins ticking off points on his fingers: “If you hurt Gim, or they even think you might, those three will gut you; be careful about commenting on things you don’t understand; and don’t block Varric’s access to the ale keg. That’s all you need to know.”

Dorian says, “I am overwhelmed by your warm welcome.”

Varric says, “I hear your sarcasm, Sparkler, but you should be overwhelmed by the warm welcome they have shown you. They are jealous of their privacy. They have prevented several people from joining our party. You, apparently, are the exception.

Lando says, “Dorian has shown his mettle, but he’s also shown some appalling misconceptions. Varric, I will bet on it being Gim who will first take the wind out of his sails, but I imagine there is money to be made on it being Krem, Cassandra, or Solas.”

Varric says, “Hey! What about me. He didn’t like the nickname I gave him!”

Dorian says, “Your joy in the potential for unsettling me is almost as touching as my old mentor’s willingness to sacrifice me for the chance to save his son.”

Krem says, “Climb down off your high horse, Altus. They wouldn’t have let you come if they weren’t going to treat you like you belonged. But they are going to call you on your shit.”

Dorian’s back is straight and his head is high as he says, “What if I don’t have shit on which I need to be called?”

Varric and Krem laugh, and Solas sneers.

Krem, who seems almost manically delighted, says, “Your family was close to the Archon: They could smell your shit all the way from Tevinter.”

Gim, having finished whatever quiet conversation she was having with Solas, comes by and says with an air of finality, “Don’t let them bother you too much, Dorian.”

Lando is sure Gim will get Dorian settled in. Hopefully, his sharing Krem’s tent won’t be an issue for either of them. In any case, all he wants is to be clean and to be able to hold Cassandra in his
arms.

Through some process that did not involve Cassandra or him, Solas is walking along with the two of them, and the rest of them have dropped far back. Solas says, “Gim says I should come talk to the two of you.”

Cassandra says, “Solas. This will be odd for both of us, but I imagine with your mastery of the Fade, it will be less odd for you. I need to thank you--not for something you have done, but for something you apparently would have done had things gone for the worst in there.” Solas is listening intently. He doesn’t have any of the air of superiority he sometimes affects. She continues, “In that future Redcliffe, you gave your life for me--so that I might escape the dungeon and the corruption of the red lyrium. No, not just for me: for me and for Lando’s unborn daughter.”

Solas says, “It does not surprise me that I would wish to aid someone of your honesty and faith, Seeker, even without the added benefit of saving members of my...people. And I am heartened to hear that my sacrifice was...would have been... effective.”

Cassandra reaches out and touches Solas’s hand. Lando isn’t sure if he has ever seen them touch before. Solas does not draw back. If anything, he returns her grasp. Cassandra says, “Please tell me you will not so casually sacrifice yourself in the future, Solas. As much as I honor you for what you did, I must know that you understand that our obligation to our whole people is of even more importance than our obligation to each other.”

Solas’s face changes like the surface of a deep pool. Lando doesn’t have names for the emotions, but he knows they are strongly felt. After a moment, Solas says, “You make an excellent point, Lady Seeker. Perhaps I felt that by saving you and saving the Herald’s child, I was fulfilling both obligations.” Cassandra smiles at Solas, squeezes his hand once more, and drops it.

Lando says, “We will not be telling those outside our party about the child for a while.”

Solas says, “I am honored to be your confidant. I will discuss it with no one. Allow me to offer my felicitations.”

Lando says, "One more thing. There is something future-Gim told me to tell you, but not to her. She said to tell you that 'she has found she does not care for feet with broken toes.' Does that make any sense?"

Solas looks down. When he looks up, he isn't exactly smiling, but Lando has the impression that Solas is pleased, but also afraid. Whatever it is, Lando doesn't need to get involved. Solas says, "Yes, it does make sense. Thank you."

Soon Solas drops back to walk with the others. Lando looks at whole and healthy Cassandra walking with him in the clean air, and he is almost content.

On one hand, Lando is now even more impatient to give Cassandra the surprise waiting for her back in Haven, but on the other, some time to let the horror of future Redcliffe recede will allow him to appreciate what waits in Haven even more. Lando has been battered, but with his family by his side, he will recover.

And then it will be time to close the Breach.

Chapter End Notes
Much thanks to Buttsonthebeach, who gave most of this a readthrough and gave me a green light.

Comments or criticisms welcome here or via email at kinako.aaaa@gmail.com.
To View the Field in Safety

Chapter Summary

Gim spends time with Krem, Varric, and Solas before starting back to Haven.

Fluff.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Gim’s group gets back to the farmhouse, Lando and Cassandra have already disappeared—presumably to bathe. Since Gim thinks she knows where Lando would like to bathe, she tells the others she will meet them back at their camp, and then arranges for Dorian to have an actual tub, in solitude, in the farmhouse. This preserves Lando’s and Cassandra’s privacy, and it is also what Gim suspects the Tevinter would prefer anyway—as unthinkable as Gim finds it to prefer a lukewarm bath in a cramped tin bucket in someone’s kitchen over a pristine glade with a beautiful small waterfall.

Gim guesses that Lando will want to spend his time with Cassandra for the rest of the day. This time, she is not moved to interpret this as estrangement; After all, the man just found out he’s going to be a father. Gim wonders if Lando will tell Cassandra about what is waiting for her back in Haven. Gim appreciates the joy of surprise, but if Gim understands typical Andrastian ceremonies, the woman will want to make a decision or two on her own. Maybe Gim can help with that.

Beyond telling them that every single member of their party, excepting the two who twice entered a time portal, died in that benighted Redcliffe future, Gim has told them little. Each of the men seemed to feel that dying to provide cover for a strategic retreat was expected, engendering no stronger reaction than pride. Solas knows about the baby, but he’s the only one. Gim thinks it is time to change that.

When she rejoins the other three at the camp, they are eating a meal delivered by the Farmhouse folks. She picks up some stew for herself and sits down. She must look like she is going to say something important, because all three faces are following her closely.

After taking a bite she stirs her bowl while saying, “I have two things to share with you that you should keep to yourselves until...until it is obvious that you don’t have to. The first is that before we left, Lando arranged to have a surprise Andrastian wedding ready for Cassandra when we get back to Haven. This is even more important now, because one of the things Lando learned in future-Redcliffe is that Cassandra gave birth to a little girl after Solas and Cole got her out of the dungeon. They got her out before she--or her unborn-child--could be infected.”

Varric and Krem immediately turn to Solas, who clearly already knows. Sounding resentful, Varric says, “We would have helped too!”

Krem says, “You bet your sweet ass we would have!”

Gim says, “You realize, I know only what I have been told, but I am sure Solas’s magic allowed him to help in ways you could not. Also, some of you had to stay to help Lando and Dorian retrieve the amulet.” Varric and Krem look more resigned now. She says, “Besides, the Solas of that time died
getting her out, and I am told it was not an easy death.” She should have kept quiet before the last part, because now they are back to looking offended that they didn’t get to sacrifice for Cassandra and the baby. To his credit, Solas’s face is expressionless, and he says nothing.

Gim, becoming annoyed, says, “Can we not make this about who got to be a hero? Cassandra deserves the best wedding she can have on short notice, and I want to make sure that if you are asked to help in any way, you are ready to do so. If I understand Andrastian weddings, the couple choose people to support them and their commitment, right? If Cassandra asked you to support her commitment, you would do so, wouldn’t you, Varric?”

Varric bites back a snort before saying, “Oh, I would be very supportive. Right after I stopped laughing.” Varric is too far away for Gim to hit him, and it would be too much trouble to put down her food, rise to hit him, and then sit to keep eating, so she just glares at him. Varric, seeing her reaction, says, “Beauty, seriously, you know I would do anything for them.”

Krem sighs, shakes his head in empathetic pain and says, “I would be very supportive. It isn’t going to be easy for a committed warrior like Cassandra to deal with the restrictions on travel and battle that breeding will bring.” Krem looks more impressed by this sacrifice than he was by Solas’s giving his life. Gim hasn’t even thought of this.

Does this mean Cassandra won’t be able to travel with them? That sounds awful. If Cassandra cannot accompany them, Lando is unlikely to be happy traveling, and Gim can’t close rifts by herself. Gim realizes she has been lost in her own musings and looks up. Solas seems to be equally thoughtful.

Preferring to move to other topics, Gim shakes her head and says, “Presents too! Isn’t it normal to give presents to the two being wed? Is there some other way we could help them? I mean the decorations and clothes are being handled, but is there anything else that would make this the perfect wedding for Cassandra? It will be a very small ceremony, but I know Lando asked that everyone in our party be present.”

Varric says, “Well, dwarves are good with precious metals. I may not be enough of a smith to make armor or swords, but I assure you, I am good at the small-work: I can make a beautiful pair of rings.”

Knowing what Varric does regularly to his crossbow, Gim has no trouble believing he is good at small-work. What about the timing? Gim asks, “Before the wedding?”

Varric says, “It will only take me that long once I have access to a forge. Are they getting married the day we arrive back?”

Gim says, “No, I talked to Leliana before we went to Redcliffe castle, and the wedding, barring objection from the bride, is to take place the day after we get back.”

Krem says, “Mercenaries tend to carry their wealth with them. I have a small pair of matching emeralds you could use, Varric.”

Once Varric indicates he can incorporate the emeralds, Solas says, “Emerald’s are perfect for carrying enchantments. If you don’t mind letting me keep them until Varric needs to set them, I can add appropriate enchantments to them.”

Gim beams at them. “This is perfect!” she says. Then, after a pause, her face falls. She is afraid she might sound a little whiny as says, “But what can I give them?”

Varric says, “I just assumed you would bake their cake.”

Gim says, “Yes, cake--of course! The Dalish always try to have something to remind us of the sweetness of life for such celebrations. But I want to do something for them that will last longer than
a cake.”

Krem says, “Dalish?”

Gim says, “Lando and I grew up Dalish, but our clan doesn’t want us, and we don’t want them being blamed for us, so we are keeping that quiet.”

Krem says, with the air of incredulity, “And you think there are a lot of brother-sister pairs named Gim and Lando wandering about--with Gim having a rather recognizable body type for an elf?”

Gim lifts an eyebrow and says wryly, “Recognizable body type, eh?” Krem appears to shrink a little, so she takes pity on him and says, with apparent lack of concern, “You have a point, but that would only identify us to our old clan, who are all the way up in the Free Marches and want nothing to do with us.”

Krem says, “I think you might be about to get an education about how things change once you become famous.” Gim is mystified. Why would they be famous enough to those all the way in the Free Marches? Why would that change things, anyway? Krem is looking even more sheepish now. He says, “I didn’t mean to worry you. Let those advisors who you are always talking about handle this one.”

Solas steps in before Gim can pursue this line of thought. He says, “Da’ean, I believe you could be of great help in applying the needed enchantments to these two emeralds--particularly with the one that will go to Cassandra. It could be a gift from all four of us.”

Gim looks around at the others. Her lip quivers and she clasps her hands under her chin; her voice comes out high pitched, and she sounds delighted as she says, “I think that would be lovely.” The last word comes out in two sounds so distinct that they appear to be two words. Krem and Varric nod and look proud of being part of the gift.

Gim finishes her dinner and stands. Solas appears to be done as well. Gim, figuring that Lando has had enough time to bathe, says, “Solas, I would like to show you the glade with the pool that Varric showed me last time we were here.”

Varric says, “Yeah, I keep meaning to tell you, Beauty: Solas and I had a chat, and we thought we would try to make a few things more simple for you. Tonight is Solas’s night and tomorrow is my night.”

Gim doesn’t like this. Not one bit. She stares at her hands and tries to get her face under control. Varric, sensitive Varric, says, “Gim, we didn’t mean to fence you in. You can always make your own choices. This is more our trying to stay out of each other’s way clear into sleeping time. If we think you have other ideas, we will adjust instantly. You could spend all your nights with Leliana and you would hear no complaint from either of us.” Put that way, it doesn’t sound so bad. In fact, that sounds like each of them giving the other permission to do whatever he wants to with her--clear into sleeping time. No, this isn’t so bad.

She grabs Varric’s hand and gives him a quick kiss on the cheek before she walks over to Solas and takes his hand. Gim is confused when she notices that Varric has walked over to Solas right behind her. When she turns to look at him, he hands Solas a stack of material that includes the very blanket that Varric and Gim used at the glade last night. Gim smiles and gives Varric another quick kiss before turning to walk off with Solas.

As they start off towards the glade, she hears Krem say, “Tell me the truth, Varric: Do you bugger it up like that just so you can then show us how smooth you can be under pressure?” Gim and Solas
don’t walk slowly enough for Gim to hear the answer, but she is pretty sure it will lead to both Krem and Varric drinking a lot of ale.

When they get to the glade, Gim brings up her glow to make sure that Lando and Cassandra have moved on. Then she pops through the brush quickly so she can watch Solas as she pulls him into the center of the trees. He looks around slowly, almost dreamily, still holding her hand. After looking carefully around the glade, he says, “The veil is thin here.” It isn’t a question. He knows she will have felt the same thing.

Gim says, “Yes, I told Varric that I knew there were no local Dalish because there are no statues and no offerings. This would be a sacred place to any Dalish who found it.” Gim tries to keep from smiling too strongly as she teases Solas with the next thing she has to say. “The first time I came here, I was shocked that there was no wolf statue with offering bowl.”

Solas, quirkling one eyebrow, says, “Are you disappointed you can make no offering?”

Gim is happy he is being playful rather than falling into his usual diatribe about the Dalish. She decides to try for coy as she says, “I think you know my opinion of the Elvhen Gods, but I don’t mind following Dalish tradition every once and awhile. I’ve never heard that the Trickster God sought either virgin sacrifice or the sacrifice of virginity. Have you?”

Solas, turning to face Gim, gently pulls her close to his chest. He says, “No, I believe such an offering from a Dalish woman would be a first for him. In such a situation, he might be moved to grant his protection.” Solas runs his hand down the side of her face, tucking some of her wild curls behind her ear. He tries to raise her head so that he can look her in the eyes, but Gim has to first quiet her thoughts: she knows that in millennia past, Solas was offered many distasteful things, and it did not escape her that he limited the novelty of the offering she proposed to Dalish women. She needs to get a better hold on her intemperate tongue.

Solas stops trying to tip her chin and says gently, “On the other hand, he would be a beast if he took an offering before the supplicant was truly ready.” Now Gim’s head comes up quickly, and she searches his eyes. He says, “We need to move more slowly than that, Da’ean. I want you to be completely sure of every new thing you do. I do not think your heart is beating this quickly out of pure excitement.”

Gim is embarrassed. She says, “Solas, if you wait until I no longer have any fear of this step I thought I would never take, you could wait years.”

Solas says, “I will take my chances,” and leans down to kiss her. This is a brief kiss, but even with such short contact, Gim feels the electricity running through her core and her breasts. The reasons for her quick pulse shift and blur when she feels Solas’s pulse speed up to match hers.

Solas pulls away, she gasps, and his smile is confident. He says, “The other factor is that I was not understating how much help I will need to perform the enchantments I have in mind for the two emeralds. The enchantments are delicate and require expertise and knowledge you have and I do not. They also require techniques lost to all but the dwarves in this modern age, and I believe you will enjoy learning them.” He believes she will enjoy learning them? She believes he is right! Hey! This is the same form of courtship that he first showed her on their trip to Val Royeaux: he is going to teach her magic. She briefly wonders if tomorrow night, Varric will continue the tale of Ghinan and her trusty dwarven companion.

Solas spreads a blanket out, sets wards, and invites her to join him. Once on the blanket, he sets a few runes, and the air around Gim becomes supremely comfortable—or perhaps a bit too warm. Solas says, “They won’t mind if we sleep here. I propose that we remove our leggings and sleep in our
tunics and smalls, my beautiful bird.” Gim has felt the wards and knows their privacy will be preserved. She wants to move forward with him, and he is keeping them from moving too rapidly. She will trust him.

She shucks her footwraps and leggings, and the minute she begins, she sees him do the same. His legs are strong but sleek, and her doubts rise. Her own legs are not sleek: they more resemble the defined muscles of of a human or dwarf who does hard physical labor. No elven woman, no matter how well-fed, has ever had thighs as broad as hers--a butt as round as hers.

But Solas’s eyes show nothing but honest admiration. As she stands still, he kneels before her, which brings the top of his head to about the level of her shoulders. He leans forward, placing his hands on her feet. He slowly rubs his hands up her legs, stroking her skin and kneading her muscles: it feels very good. At the beginning, this feels like the service any clan member might give another who had worked hard, but as he reaches her round ass, his fingers slow, and the movements of his hands become more explicitly reverential than therapeutic. After just a few strokes he says wistfully, “You are so beautiful.” Gim’s glow is up and entwined with his magic, and she feels the truth of it: he really does find her beautiful. The realization almost makes her cry overwhelmed and grateful tears.

Solas says, “Shhhhh, my Da’ean. Lie close with me.” He pulls her down beside him, places her in front of him, and covers them both with a light sheet. Their legs are tangled, and she would have thought such a position would be uncomfortable, but it is not. Their skin is touching in many places along their legs, and he has an arm lightly holding her against his chest, but she does not feel confined--nor does she feel that this embrace is meant to be passionate: it is comfortable--comforting.

He continues, “We must go to your Thaig, where you will repeatedly make us pairs of emeralds, and I will show you how to add enchantments to them. You will not learn enough in one night, but we have more than one night on the way home. Are you ready to begin?”

Gim, tipping her head back towards him so she can just see his face with the edge of her vision, says, “Perhaps I will surprise you and learn more quickly than you think. I love learning new things.”

Solas leans forward and runs his nose around the entire edge of her shell of an ear, and then he slowly kisses and sucks on her neck below the point where her jaw meets her ear. Gim feels her pulse climbing again.

Much too quickly, he pulls his mouth back and settles his head down onto the blanket. He gives her arm a reassuring stroke, softly pulls her closer to him again, and says, “I’m counting on it.”

Solas clearly wants them to sleep, but Gim is almost reluctant to go to her Thaig--a very new attitude for her. Gim has never before slept in the arms of a man who would nuzzle her neck and caress her backside.

If she has anything to say about it, this won’t be the last time, either.

Chapter End Notes

Much thanks to Buttsonthebeach, who read this and told me there is nothing wrong with a bit of fluff.

Comments and criticisms welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
And In That Heart Courage

Chapter Summary

Cassandra finally finds out about the wedding.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It is the final day of travel, and as they get closer and closer to Haven, all Lando can think about is that he still hasn’t told Cassandra about the wedding. He wants to pick the perfect moment for the surprise, and while there were a few moments that he might have picked, he couldn’t quite bring himself to broach the topic at the time. Making things all the harder is the combination of the lack of true privacy while traveling and Lando’s tendency to get trapped worrying about and reviewing the things he saw when he was sent to that horrific version of the future.

Cassandra, who has seen some horrors of her own, is very understanding. She gently redirects his attention when she catches evidence of his stare into that other world, and she doesn’t ask him about anything he doesn’t volunteer. Lando wrenches his attention away from his memories every time he can, but he can tell Cassandra notes the effort. He doesn’t want her to think that his revelations about the joy of their wedding are an addendum to a silent conversation about his trauma.

It makes him feel more wound-up that everyone in the party seems to know--except, of course, Cassandra. Every time he walks into a circle, the faces hold expectantly-raised eyebrows and the air is full of the silence of collectively-held breath. The worst part is the little moues of disappointment after his exaggeratedly wide-eyed admonishment or minute headshake of negation. Gim gives away her impatience with his lack-of-revelation the least, and Dorian is the hardest to ignore--but then, Dorian is always the hardest to ignore.

Incorporating Dorian into the party has been interesting. Cassandra is polite but stiff to the new Tevinter, but Lando suspects she would be much more biting had Lando not made it clear that he is so grateful for Dorian’s help in Redcliffe. Solas does not bother to hide his contempt for Dorian. Thankfully, Dorian has not discussed Cole in front of Solas, or--worse, if possible--Gim. Lando is beginning to worry that inviting Dorian to join them was a mistake. Varric and Krem are always welcoming, but neither of them is known for rejecting anyone who will drink with them. Lando thinks both Varric and Krem are trying to push Dorian away from touchy subjects, but Lando isn’t sure how much Dorian is willing to modify his behavior.

Gim seems to have her own complications, and at any other time, Lando would have sought her out and made her talk through things with him. As it is, Gim seems to be doing fine without him--and at least whatever is going on is entertaining. Last night, Lando watched Gim lead Varric into her three-person tent while Solas stayed rooted to the seats around the fire. Dorian was watching this with a perplexed look on his face, and he opened his mouth with the clear intention to make some sort of remark. Instead of speaking, he doubled forward with an “oof” as Krem’s elbow made contact with Dorian’s upper abdomen. Dorian’s response started to be some combination of hauteur and confusion, but Krem’s quelling look was enough to snap Dorian’s mouth shut. Come to think of it, there might be hope for Dorian, after all.

Solas had certainly seemed satisfied watching that interchange between Dorian and Krem. In fact,
Lando can’t think of a single time when Solas had looked unhappy—well, except for times directly traceable to something questionable that Dorian had said. Varric is consistently cheerful also, although that is harder to separate from normal. Still, Lando thinks something is up. He must make time to talk to Gim about it.

When the frozen lake outside of Haven gates is visible, Lando can feel himself beginning to panic. When he looks up and sees Gim’s understanding face, he makes a helpless gesture with furrowed brow and both palms raised to the sky. Gim rides towards where Lando is riding behind Cassandra and says loudly, “OK, just as I promised, I will care for your animals and get your packs to our cabin while you two take a stroll.”

In response to Cassandra’s obvious befuddlement, Gim stage-whispers to Cassandra, “I think he needs a moment before he has to relive it all again for the advisors.” Cassandra, immediately supportive, smiles at Lando, dismounts, and hands her reins to Gim. Lando does likewise, and he joins Cassandra after he quickly hugs Gim.

The air is cold as he takes Cassandra’s hand, but he doesn’t think she will mind the snow and the light breeze. Besides, he would welcome the chance to warm her. He walks along slowly with her, glancing at her from time to time. She does not seem to be impatient, and it is so nice to be truly alone with her. Without thinking, he guides her to the little out-of-the-way bench where they enjoyed the macarons so many weeks ago. He wishes he had a tasty treat to give her now, but he will have to be content with offering her another type of gift. If only she will see it as a gift and not a theft of her power to choose.

She turns to him, and he can see that she is ready to follow his lead. Cassandra, who loves him, who carries his child, and who more naturally leads than follows, is waiting for him to tell her what he needs. He can’t imagine loving anyone more than he loves her, right now; he can’t imagine feeling more loved than he feels right now. He caresses her beautiful face. He kisses her lightly on her eyes, her nose, her mouth. He says, “You...” He is so overwhelmed with feeling that his tongue ties in knots and he can’t think what to say next. He finally grabs someone else’s words out his memory and says, “No peevish winter wind shall chill the roses in the rose garden which is ours and ours only.”

Her eyes sparkle, her mouth opens a touch, and he knows she remembers the poem from their first night together. Just as she is leaning in to kiss him, the sound of clanking armor and hasty steps in heavy boots breaks the moment. Both of them drop their hands, and Lando starts to his feet, just as Cullen rounds some brush and comes into view.

At first glance, Cullen looks angry, but as he approaches, his attention clearly on Cassandra, he looks more sweaty and frantic than angry. Pacing in short laps, Cullen says, “Cassandra! Please tell me you would never pick that officious popinjay over me. I know our relationship has been tense since the unfortunate incident with the Templar traitors, but we have a history you could never share with that man.” Nodding towards Lando, Cullen says, “Or did you lose faith with me because of his influence?”

Lando doesn’t know what is happening, but it doesn’t seem that Cassandra can understand either. Regardless, she rises to defend him. “Cullen Rutherford,” she says, “Lando has never said a single word to me against you. He is not the one who struck you, and despite ample reason from his past to distrust Templars, he has assured me that he would keep an open mind about you because of my assurances that you are an honorable man.”

Cullen has the appearance of a man who has had the wind knocked out of him. Cullen says, in clear perplexity, “Then why would you chose him over me?”
Cassandra, caught between anger and confusion, says, “Why would I chose my fiancé over you?”

Lando thinks Cassandra has more to say, but Cullen interrupts with, “Not Lando! Chancellor Roderick!”

Cassandra blinks twice, drops her chin, and says, “I beg your pardon?”

Lando, beginning to guess what is up, doesn’t quite manage to stop Cullen before Cullen can say, “Maker’s Breath, Cassandra. Are you willfully misinterpreting me? To walk you down the aisle!” Cassandra’s wide, wide eyes fly to Lando’s, but Cullen doesn’t notice. He bulls forward with, “We have shared a dedication and an understanding for years, and I only came to Haven at your request. If you think that unfortunate misunderstanding we had--or my upset over the news of the impersonation of the Lord Seeker--could have swayed my essential regard for you or made me less supportive of you at the crucial milestones of your life, you have grossly misjudged me.”

Cassandra, voice breathy, says, “crucial milestones…” Her eyes are still locked with Lando’s, and a crooked smile is beginning to pull up the corner of her mouth. She does not look unhappy. She does not look even a little bit unhappy.

Cullen, still working on the steam of his own indignation, says, “Well, with the ceremony set for tomorrow night, and ravens from your party to Haven a daily occurrence, you could have asked me before now if you had meant to grant me this signal honor. When Leliana said that perhaps you wanted Chancellor Roderick, I...Well, I just need to know what I could have done to make you turn to that self-righteous rabble-rouser over one who thought of you as dearer than his own sister.”

Cassandra wrenches her damp and loving eyes away from Lando. She says, “Cullen, I would never choose Chancellor Roderick over you.”

Cullen looks so relieved that Lando can’t even resent his intrusion. Cullen says, “I told Leliana you would not do such a thing, and while, as you know, I can’t wear my dress Templar rig anymore, and my outfit doesn’t quite match your long dress or Lando’s dress whites, I believe I have put together something that will not shame you.”

Cullen rubbing the back of his neck with some discomfort says, “Maker’s breath! My big mouth! You haven’t even seen your dress yet! Well, I won’t keep you. Though, why you are dawdling out here when you could be checking with Josephine and Mother Giselle to approve your final arrangements, I have no idea. And by the way, I think you are going to be impressed with the flowers they managed to get for the chapel. Just to double-check, you do want me to walk you down the aisle, don’t you?”

Lando’s eyes are for Cassandra, but he is aware of Cullen on the periphery of his vision. If Cullen thinks it is odd for Cassandra to address him while staring into Lando’s eyes, he gives no indication. Cassandra says, “Yes, Cullen, of course I do. Please accept my most sincere regrets for not telling you earlier.” Lando winces at the hidden bite in this last statement.

Cullen turns to rush off, but he stops, turns back to them, shuffles his feet a bit, and addresses Lando by saying, “Herald, please accept my apologies if I let my …”

Lando, eager for Cullen to leave, breaks in with, “Think nothing of it.” Cullen happily bounds off and Cassandra flows into his arms.
When she pulls back, there are happy tears in her eyes as she says, “Oh, you frustrating and delightful man. I am beginning to see that your behavior on the trip back was not solely attributable to your experiences in Redcliffe.”

Lando says, “I wanted to tell you, but I kept waiting for the perfect time, and it never came.”

Cassandra, still crying, laughs. She says, “I take it from Gim’s little performance that she knows?”

Lando says, “Everyone knows. They are making presents. They have made themselves available for any sort of support either of us requires. I’ve been studying Andrastian weddings, and I have had several chats with Leliana. I will have Varric and Gim as my two supporters. As you may have guessed, Mother Giselle will perform the ceremony. I know I should not see the dress--or you--the day of the ceremony. Gim is my only family, and anything you would traditionally arrange with my family you can arrange with her. She is expecting that our cabin will contain only you and her tonight; I will be in Varric’s tent.” Lando is watching Cass closely as he says all this, and he detects wonder and pleasure, but something is bothering her.

Finally, face painfully impassive, she says, “Is this so...precipitate...because of the baby?”

He enfold her in his arms and says, “Oh love. Did I not ask you to marry me before we left for the Hinterlands? I had already arranged things with Josephine and Mother Giselle before I even asked you.”

Cassandra pulls back so she can see his face again. She hiccups a time or two, but she is smiling fully. She says, “I would so like to have been able to watch Josephine’s reaction when you asked her.”

Lando says, “Well, she did squeak very prettily. Will she be one of your supporters?”

Cassandra looks thoughtful. She says, “No. She is very sweet, but I think the position of wedding-planner is enough for her. I will have Leliana, and one other. Come with me. If I have to do without you for a day, I will not part from you before bedtime.”

They walk slowly towards the town gates, swinging their interlaced hands between them. As they get near the gates, they hear Varric’s voice, and then Solas’s, near the forge. Cassandra immediately pulls them towards the voices. As they approach, they see Varric seated at a bench manipulating something very small in front of him while Solas, Gim, Dorian, and Krem watch and comment. The forge is completely empty of other workers. Gim sees them approaching first, and she nudges the others. Varric takes a rag and quickly covers something in front of him.

Gim, who is watching them walk up, claps her hands while bouncing and says, “Oh! You finally told her!”

“Actually,” says Lando, “It was Cullen who told her, but why quibble?”

Cassandra says, “Lando! He’s going to feel terrible if he finds out I didn’t know before that!”

Lando says, “They won’t tell!”

Varric and Krem immediately say they won’t tell. Solas agrees, but reluctantly. Dorian says, “The longer I stay with you people, the fewer the things I am allowed to talk about.”

Krem says, “No one ever said you couldn’t talk about yourself, Peacock.”

Dorian says, “Oh. Excellent point. Carry on. I will not tell Cullen, whoever he is, about whatever it
is I have already forgotten.”

Gim says, “Are you happy, Cassandra?”

Cassandra grasps Gim’s hands and says, “Very.” It is just one word, but Lando hears deep things in that one word. Gim throws her arms around Cassandra and hugs her. Cassandra withdraws and says, “Lando tells me that you and Varric will be the two who support him in his vow to me.” Gim grins proudly. Cassandra continues, “Cullen will escort me down the aisle, and Leliana will be one of my two.”

All eyes are on Cassandra as she turns towards Solas. She looks very vulnerable as she says, “Solas, I would like to know if you would be my other supporter.”

Nonplussed, Solas says, “I am no Andrastian.”

Cassandra says, “You have told me you honor my faith, and you have shown me what you will sacrifice for … your people.”

Solas continues to look reserved for a few seconds, and then his rare smile breaks through. He says, “I am always open to new experiences.”

Dorian says in a biting tone, “So I gather.” Or, that is clearly what he would have said, had he not received an elbow in the ribs before he could finish the final word. Dorian holds his side and says with a strained voice, “It is a good thing Gim can mend broken ribs.”

Unconcerned and cavalierly happy, Krem says, “Mind your manners, you big baby.”

Cassandra, ignoring all this boisterous behavior, says, “We are going to be following the traditional seclusion. Krem, would you be willing to be stationed outside our cabin for last minute errands?”

Krem beams and nods. Lando says, “I think that means you get to help me, Dorian.”

Dorian says, “My good man, I do not run errands.”

Varric says, “So, Sparkler. You want to be the only one with no role in the event...”

Dorian rolls his eyes. He says, “Well, I shouldn’t deprive you of my taste and wisdom. I suppose I can commit to being helpful.” Lando claps Dorian on the shoulder, and for a moment, Dorian looks almost as happy as Krem does.

Cassandra says, “Is it not appropriate for me to ask what you are working on, Varric?”

Varric looks up at Lando, so Lando nods. Varric almost looks like he is teasing as he tilts his head up at her and says, “I am making your wedding rings.”

Cassandra’s eyes begin to look damp again as she presses her right hand to her heart and chokes out, “Our wedding rings!”

Solas, standing with his hands behind his back, says, “Varric is responsible for the design and metalwork.”

Varric interrupts with, “Well, right now it is more like waxwork, but it will be metalwork.”

Solas says, “As I was saying, Varric is responsible for the metalwork, Krem contributed two matching emeralds, and Gim and I have added some rather unique enchantments to the emeralds.”
Lando wraps his arm around Cassandra’s waist, pressing her close to his side, and says, “They wouldn’t even tell me about the enchantments.”

Gim says, “To begin with, each of them will give a faint pull towards the other. They are paired. When you are moving about, it should not be noticeable, but when you are still and listening, you should be able to tell the direction of the other ring. But there is more.”

Solas says, “Lando’s ring will provide a shield that flares long enough to stop the first few volleys of any sudden ranged attacks.”

Lando is astounded. He says, “I have heard of such rings, but I never thought to have one. What does Cassandra’s ring do?”

Gim says, “Cassandra’s enchantment was much more difficult, and I will need Cassandra’s help to finish it by...attuning...it to her. But the idea came from Solas--from things he has seen in the Fade. I will let him tell you the root of the idea.”

Solas says, “In ancient times, warrior women did not want to quit the field of battle for the entire period of their confinement. They commissioned powerful enchantments to allow them to continue to fight without fear of damaging their unborn children.”

Gim says, “Cassandra, I am sure you aware that most women are told that they should not ride or participate in dangerous physical acts that could result in a blow or a fall after the first three months. This ring will be...attuned... to your womb, and it will prevent a shock or blow from hurting your child. You could still die in battle, as you always could, but you needn’t worry that your child will ever be at greater risk than you will be. You can fight and you can ride--even vigorously. You will probably eventually curtail your activities, but my guess is that will have to do with your changing balance and grace and not because particular activities are dangerous to your child. After your daughter comes, your ring’s properties will more closely resemble those of Lando’s ring.”

Dorian says, “You could make a fortune on such rings if you sold them in Tevinter.”

Gim says, “Enchanted rings exist already. This one is special, and it really wouldn’t be possible to make one for anyone I didn’t know...” Gim tosses a warm look at Cassandra and finishes her statement with, “...and love.”

Cassandra offers Gim one of her hands as she says, “Then I am very grateful that I am someone you could do this for. But is there something about this ring to which I would object, Gim?”

Gim says, “I hope not. We know you have obligations to your family and to the preservation of Thedas. You are not the only one who feels such obligations.”

Cassandra says, “Gim. Please be clear what you mean by your peculiar emphasis on the word ‘attune’.”

In answer, Gim begins to manifest, and Lando recognizes the golden pulsing light as the manifestation stabilizes. All present but Cassandra shield their eyes or avert their faces. Cassandra drops to her knees--just as she had the first time she met this manifestation of the spirit of Faith.

The ringing voice coming out of the light says, “Daughter: mighty of arm and warmest of heart, do not reject my protection for your child.”

Cassandra, still kneeling, says, “I cannot allow you to endanger yourself. I could never forgive myself if I enabled your corruption.”
Faith’s voice rings out, “Did not your maker say, ‘Within My creation, none are alone’? I will be honored to bless your union. I will not be in danger of corruption. Gim has taken this green stone and made it contain Stone. My nature will be inviolate. Your child and Thedas both need you. I will be honored to protect your child so that you may fulfill the duties dictated by your conscience and your faith.”

Cassandra says, “Solas? Is the spirit of Faith truly in no danger?”

Solas says, “One cannot ever say that any living creature is in no danger, but while there are rifts in the Veil, it should be safer in your ring than it would be in the Fade. Neither Gim nor I know what would happen if Gim were to die before you had your child, but the spirit says in the worst case, it could leave the stone before Gim’s Stone faded.

Cassandra, clearly speaking to Faith now, says, “But, why?”

Faith says, “I know you, daughter; I know your new sister. For a very few heartbeats, I will be honored to help keep you whole.” At this, the golden pulsing light dims as it is split by blue seams and Gim’s form reasserts itself. Cassandra rises to her feet. Lando happens to glance at Dorian’s face as this is happening, and Dorian looks more upset than he ever looked at Redcliffe.

As Gim’s form sets, she follows Lando’s gaze. When Dorian notes her attention he says, hesitantly, “In the North, we treat spirits as amorphous constructs of the Fade—potentially dangerous amorphous constructs of the Fade that need to be crushingly controlled.”

Solas curls his lip in revulsion and says, “They are intelligent, living creatures. Binding them against their will is reprehensible.”

Lando, in a voice of gentle and mildly shocked admonishment, says, “Dorian, Gim has spirit friends who were alive before the Tevinter Imperium even existed.” Dorian is looking like he might be sick.

Varric says, “I warned you, Sparkler. This won’t be the last time they make you feel like this. Although I think this means Lando wins the bet.”

Krem links his arm though Dorian’s and says, “Come on, Peacock. There is a maiden I need to introduce you to.”

Dorian, still sounding like his wits are scattered, says in shock, “A maiden!”

Krem says, “Yep. A Singing Maiden.” Krem and Dorian depart, leaving only the original party members at the forge.

Cassandra looks from Solas to Gim and says, “I don’t know what to say. It would be churlish to deny such an amazing gift. I am honored and grateful.”

Lando says, “As am I.” He can see on Gim’s face that she knows how much this means to him.

Gim says, “Then let us finish this so we can get out of Varric’s hair. May I have the emerald, Varric?” Varric places a small, green, faceted stone in Gim’s hand. Gim steps close to Cassandra and says, “May I?”

When Cassandra nods, Gim places the hand holding the emerald on Cassandra’s abdomen and uses her other hand to grasp Cassandra’s wrist. Gim’s glow comes up fully. Solas’s attention is on Gim, and while Solas doesn’t glow, Lando is sure some sort of magic use or perception is in play. Lando’s marked hand is tingling. He has never asked Gim if her mark tingles when she does spirit work; he wonders if her mark is reacting now. After some time, Cassandra gasps and her eyes go wide. Gim’s
glow flares gold and then dims completely. Gim stumbles, but Cassandra holds tight to her hand, and Solas steps forward to wrap his arms around Gim from behind.

Gim stabilizes herself, steps out of Solas’s arms, and then turns to embrace him—quickly following with a hug for Cassandra. Gim says, “At least I was expecting it this time.” She turns to Varric and holds out her hand with the emerald on the palm. It looks no different than it looked before the light show.

Varric says, “What if I mix them up?”

Gim says, “You couldn’t.” She puts the stone down next to it’s mate and says, “Look at them.”

Varric picks up the old emerald, puts it down, and then picks up the new emerald. His eyes widen and his Adam's apple shows a deliberate swallow. Varric says, “Is this what Stonesense is, or is this something else?”

Gim says, “This is Stonesense.”

Varric says, “Beauty, I don’t know how to tell you this, but I don’t think my Stonesense is anything special. This jewel is going to garner attention from some people who we would rather not deal with.”

Gim says, “It isn’t just Stone, it’s my Stone. When you are done with the setting, this will happen.” She reaches out and touches the gem in Varric’s hand. When Gim’s hand recedes, Varric keeps looking at the gem. He shakes his hand; then he shakes his head; then he picks up the other emerald and examines both side by side.

Varric says, “Well, now I will mix them up.” Gim reaches out and touches the emeralds in Varric’s hand again. Varric says, “Ok, then.”

Lando says, “I know you have taken my measurements before, but would you like to take Cassandra’s measurements before we go?”

Varric says, “Please. You think I would mess this up?” Cassandra raises her left hand and wiggles the fingers. Varric gestures her over, and runs his hands down both sides of her ring finger. He says, “Exactly what I thought.”

Cassandra says, “You are not going to show them to us?”

Varric says, “You will see them when they are finished, and not before. You will have to trust me.”

Cassandra says, “Troublesome dwarf. Of course I trust you.”

Varric looks up, smiles wryly and says, “As a sign of how much things have changed for me since leaving Kirkwall, I actually believe you.”

Cassandra turns to Gim and says, “Speaking of trust, I am in a quandary as to what to do about my dowry.”

Gim, who looks baffled, says, “Cassandra! You love my brother, you are my family, and you are giving me a niece. What more could I want?”

Cassandra says, “Lando says he wants to follow the Andrastian traditions, and beyond that, as someone who is seventy-eighth in line to the Nevarran throne, it would be embarrassing to the Pentaghasts for me to have no dowry. Unfortunately, I turned my back on a life of wealth and
Solas steps forward and says, “If you wish to be traditional, then it is not you who should provide
your dowry, but your family.”

Shoving down the rising worry threatening to sap his joy, Lando says, “Yes, but Lando also says he
wishes to marry Cassandra tomorrow and not wait for any shipment from Nevarra.”

Cassandra nearly doubles over from laughter. She says, “You would wait a long time, beloved.
While they will feel free to object that no one provided a dowry, there is no single person, since the
death of my Uncle Vestalus, who would step up to provide the required funds.”

Solas, tapping a finger on his chin, says abstractly, “But it would be permissible for your adoptive
family to provide a dowry, would it not? That is, if the Order of the Seekers of Truth was still in
good standing, it could provide a dowry, or the Chantry could?”

Cassandra, whose brow is knit in confusion, says, “While this is theoretically true, it is unlikely to
help us.”

Solas says, “You have named me family; you have named me your supporter. I will provide your
dowry.”

Varric says, “Way to put me to shame there, Chuckles.”

Solas says, “While we may both claim kinship, I am of the bride’s party, and I claim right to
negotiate with Gim for the terms of an acceptable dowry.”

Cassandra says, “Solas, I am touched. But as an unallied mage, it would not be fair for you to
provide a dowry.”

Solas, looking straight at Gim, says, “Gim, do you believe that I can provide you with a magical
artifact of incalculable worth?”

Gim gazes back. She puts her hand back on the emerald that will be part of Cassandra’s ring, and her
glow comes up. Gim says, “Solas, do you swear to provide me with a selection of magical artifacts
of, as you say, incalculable worth, and to allow me to take my pick of them— as fulfillment of
Cassandra Allegra Portia Calogera Filomena Pentaghast’s dowry?”

Solas places one hand over his heart and gives a short solemn bow.

He says, “I so swear.”

Gim’s glow drops, she removes her hand from the emerald, and she says, “Problem solved.”

Cassandra smiles uneasily, but she doesn’t object when Lando suggests they leave Varric alone and
go in search of dinner.

As they turn to go, Varric says, “One last thought: I suggest that this little transaction between Solas
and Gim be reported as the Inquisition providing your dowry, Seeker. It will lead to fewer
questions.” Lando isn’t sure, but he thinks Solas looks relieved at that suggestions. They can check
with Josephine, but Lando can’t imagine that Josephine would object.

As all but Varric walk up to the Singing Maiden, Lando realizes that while he should be hungry, he
seems to have lately lost his appetite. Something about what Gim said to Solas is bothering Lando.

Lando just can’t put his finger on why the oath Gim and Solas swore unsettles him so much. For the
moment, he is in a tavern with the people who mean the most to him. And now the door opens and
Josephine and Leliana come in, and the air is filled with the sound of greetings and laughter and showy feminine appreciation. Now is the time to enjoy every moment of the process of giving Cassandra the wedding of her dreams.

Lando will worry about that other thing later. Much later.

Chapter End Notes

The partial quotation referring to events that transpired in Chapter 42 is from a T.S.Eliot dedication to his wife.

Thanks again to Buttsonthebeach, who once again told me to go ahead and publish this pile of headcannon-ish fluff.

Comments and criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.
Waiting is making Lando tense, and despite the chill of the cold stone walls, he is sweating into his wool tunic. It is barely dark outside the Chantry; Varric is waiting with him in a small room near the marginally larger chapel. If Gim were here, she would know how to calm him, but she is out attending to some last minute arrangement, and Varric is filling in as best he can. Varric leads Lando through stories and musings and topics of idle curiosity. Lando listens to this aimless talk, and eventually he manages to bring himself to introduce a topic from his collection of worries.

Lando listens to this aimless talk, and eventually he manages to bring himself to introduce a topic from his collection of worries.

Lando tries to keep his voice casual as he says, “From your stories, you have spent time around people of many races, Varric. You don’t seem to be prejudiced against elves.”

Varric laughs for a moment. He says, “Well, you could probably fault me for not doing enough to better the lives of the downtrodden elves of Kirkwall, although Hawke and our crew did try. As for my attitudes, I’ve met crazy elves, and I’ve killed some of them, but I can say that for every other race as well. You’ve heard me tell stories of my Kirkwall days and how two of our crew were elves—one of whom, Merrill, you have actually met. I would say the only people I am actively prejudiced against are the dwarves.”

Lando, scoffing, says, “You do enjoy making dramatic statements.”

Varric says, “I don’t deny that, but still what I said is true. Dwarves are the only people I know well enough to see their tendencies towards hidebound tradition with a side of complete inflexibility.”

Lando says wryly, “I think the Dalish could give them a run for those labels.”

Varric says, “I don’t claim to understand the Dalish: I’ve learned more of them from you and Gim than I ever learned from Merrill, although she indicated that the Alerion clan into which she was born in Nevarra was more flexible in their attitudes than her adopted Sabrae clan.”

Lando, still trying for a casual tone, says, “Do you know much about the non-Dalish elves in Nevarra and how they are treated?”

Varric says agreeably, “Sure, Braids. You wouldn’t happen to have any particular reason for wanting to know about Nevarra attitudes about elves, now would you?”
“You know I do,” says Lando in nerve-fueled exasperation. “Will her kin look down on her for marrying me? What is she giving up by allying with an elf?”

Varric says, “I’m not sure you are asking the right questions, but I will tell you what I know of Neverra. I’m no expert, but I do have business interests there. To begin with, where in Thedas are elves treated the worst?”

Lando says, “That would be Tevinter and Orlais.”

Varric says, “Those would also be the places subject to the most hate from Nevarrans. Neverra has been claimed by Tevinter and by Orlais, and it has fought wars over territory with each since its independence. Neverra is rife with political volatility and many longstanding feuds of honor. It is also the home of the most powerful mages outside of Tevinter—including the infamous Mortalitasi. The College of Magi, where the Grand Enchanters are elected, is in Neverra. You might have noticed the most recent Grand Enchanter is an elf. A Nevarran elf who shows magical talent can become quite powerful and much more free than such an elf would be in Ferelden or Orlais. True, an elf could never be a Van Markham or a Pentaghast, and I suspect your daughter will not be in line to the Nevarran throne, but considering how many people in Neverra think the line of the Pentaghast’s has had its run, that fact could save her life: Nevarrans don’t believe in leaving loose ends.

“But all that is about Neverra, and Cassandra left there decades ago. I see no sign she plans to go back. She spends her time in Orlais and Ferelden, which have plenty of people who will think less of her for marrying an elf or producing an elf-blood child—also plenty of people who won’t think of it one way or another. Then there is the fact that you aren’t just any elf: You are one of the Heralds of Andraste. If the Inquisition succeeds, that has to be worth something.”

Lando says with detectable bitterness, “You mean the way Shartan’s loyalty to Andraste meant something?”

Varric says, “The Dales were left to the elves for three centuries. I’m willing to admit that whatever pro-elf sentiment you and Gim garner might erode over the course of a few centuries, but that won’t affect your daughter. And perhaps the rebellion and the Inquisition will combine to change things fundamentally.”

Lando tilts his head in wonder and says, “I’m not used to thinking of you as an optimist, Varric.”

Moving away from thoughts of the future, Lando says, “But right now my interest is attitudes that will affect Cassandra, not our descendants.”

Lando can’t tell if Varric’s look is of admiration or castigation. Varric says, “If there is a woman in the world who cares less about what people think about her, I would love to meet her. As for her opinion of you, I think you have some rather inescapable evidence of that.”

Lando, feeling a warm flush, says, “I do, don’t I?”

Varric says, “You do. Now, time is passing. I hope you are happy with your hair and clothing, because we are not going to have time for Gim to completely redo your braids again when she gets back here. Can you tell me why you have those two locks of hair coming down in front of your ears today?”

“In abstract, I can tell you that it’s an arrangement for special occasions. It is less practical for work or hunting, so it declares that ceremony is more important than function. In reality, this is the way Gim thought I should look, so that’s how I look.”

Varric says, “You do look rather handsome. That white sleeveless tunic is very nice; I’ve rarely seen
wool that white. I would not have guessed that a surpliced neckline with the diagonal crossing that high would look so good on you, and the heather-green sleeves and leggings are striking. I am very impressed you were willing to wear shoes.”

Lando says, “They’ve gone to a lot of trouble at my request. I think the least I can do is wear the outfit they provided. I only truly care that Cassandra get a special dress, but I am sure she will be happy to have her groom look presentable.”

Varric makes a loud scoffing noise. He says, “If you were aiming for presentable, you missed the mark and skidded all the way to ‘regal’: You look the way I imagine one of the ancient elves would look.”

Lando says, “Well, Gim has seen the ancients in the Fade. She might have influenced the advisors’ choice of garments—though I would be shocked if the ancients wore shoes. You look very dashing also, Varric. I know your attachment to your red tunic, and I appreciate your flexibility in being willing to wear something that doesn’t show off your chest hair.”

“It’s just one day, Braids,” says Varric. “Honestly, if it would make you two happy for me to paste feathers to my dwarven family jewels and dance around wearing nothing else, I would do it.”

Lando nods wisely and says, “Save that for the reception.”

Varric chuckles obligingly, waits for a moment, and then very carefully asks, “Do you think...do you think Gim would want an Andrastian ceremony?”

Lando says, “Would you want an Andrastian ceremony?”

Varric looks down, and his brow furrows lightly. He says, “I thought I would, but when I consider it further, the only thing I can find in my heart is that I want her to be happy.”

Lando is about to encourage Varric to have opinions apart from Gim’s about such things, when the door opens and the subject of their conversation pokes her head in. “It is time,” she says. “Josephine says we should place ourselves in position at the altar.”

As she swings the door wide, Lando focuses on Gim in an attempt to keep calm. This is the first time Lando has ever seen Gim in a dress in this full-skirted human style. She looks very nice in heather green, and Lando quietly congratulates himself on doing a great job on her hair, but she doesn’t really look like Gim: she looks more like someone’s carefully decorated doll. Lando finds the sight of Gim wearing shoes to cause stranger feelings than those he felt when donning the pair he was given. He suddenly wonders if he will find the sight of Cassandra in a long dress as disconcerting as he finds seeing unusual garments on Gim. He had best compose his features to reflect appreciation.

When they get outside, they meet Josephine, who looks delighted to see them. Josephine says, “Lando, you are the very picture of a handsome groom. I begin to see why some cultures say a groom on his wedding day has the power to bestow powerful blessings. I shall claim the right to embrace you for good luck!”

Lando sweeps the beaming woman into his arms and leans down to kiss her on either cheek. He says, “If I have any blessings to give, I would most happily bestow them on you. Thank you so much for setting this up. I am beyond grateful.”

Josephine smiles the smile of woman who knows many pertinent secrets and says, “Oh, but it is not just me you have to thank. There is Mother Giselle, and Leliana, and Gim, and as I understand it, each of your companions with whom you have traveled from Redcliffe. I will allow you to thank me
for only one thing just now: you are getting the short form of an Andrastian ceremony. Some held that, as a Herald of Andraste, you should have had the wedding of a head-of-state, but fortunately, that position did not win the day. I trust you know your part?”

“Yes,” says Lando, “I believe I do.”

Varric says, “Don’t worry, Ruffles: If he panics, I know when to whisper in his ear.”

Josephine does a slight double-take when Varric calls her ‘Ruffles’, but she doesn’t question him. She just keeps smiling and leads them into the chapel, where she opens the door and gestures them in.

The chapel is ablaze with light. There are candles everywhere, and somehow, even though it is too late for sunlight, there is light shining through the tall stained glass windows. There are flowers--roses and crystal grace--everywhere. Even the grim statue of Andraste has a coronet of flowers. The room is warm and it smells wonderful. He must have been a bit dazed by the unexpectedly welcoming nature of the stone room, because he startles as he feels Varric take one of his arms and Gim take the other. They slowly walk him down the aisle towards where Mother Giselle stands, smiling. He almost walks towards the left side of the altar, but Mother Giselle gestures him to stand on the right. He positions himself a step down from Mother Giselle. Before he turns to face towards the main chapel entrance, he notices Gim smiling at Varric as he takes her hand.

When Lando looks at the few others seated in the Chapel, at first he sees only the people he expects. The woman who plays music in *The Singing Maiden* is playing instrumental music, Adan and Lace Harding are seated near him, and on the other side of the room, Krem and Dorian are seated with a blond...with Cole...between them. Cole!

Lando, turning to Gim, is about to whisper excitedly when Gim interrupts with, “I know. He said to tell you not to worry because you are making her very happy. He showed up tonight. We can talk about it later. I think you have more important things to think about now.” Gim gestures at the back of the chapel, where Josephine is entering the room and signaling to the musician. The musician starts a vigorously strummed formal piece that clearly indicates momentous things are about to happen.

Gim is right. First, Solas and Leliana enter the chapel and start down the aisle side by side. Solas is dressed very similarly to Varric--complete with shoes--and Leliana’s outfit is made out of the same material as Gim’s, but it is a different and much more sleek style than the one Gim is wearing. Leliana is beaming. Lando isn’t sure that the average person could read Solas’s expression, but Lando thinks Solas is similarly happy. As soon as Solas and Leliana reach the altar, Lando sees Solas exchange a meaningful look with Gim. Lando turns back to face the entrance, and everyone in attendance stands. Cassandra and Cullen enter the room.

If anyone had asked, Lando would have been able to report that Cassandra was being escorted by Cullen--especially because he knew Cullen was going to perform that office--but for a moment, Lando is not aware of anyone in the room but his bride.

Cassandra is wearing a full-length, white, long-sleeved dress that is close to her body but flares out to flow along the floor behind her. She is wearing a green belt that is at her natural waist in the back of the dress, but the two sides drop down to meet low on her abdomen, where they are tied in an ornamental knot and then reach the floor in a fall of ribbon. Her short hair usually has the one long serviceable braid, but now her hair is slicked back, and much of it is in a set of intricate braids that only Gim can have created. In addition to the braids, Cassandra has a coronet of flowers that rivals the one placed on the statue of Andraste behind him. She carries one pink-tipped rosebud in her hands. The minute she comes into the room, her eyes lock onto his, and then he can see that she must
have been nervous, because she calms when she sees him. No woman on earth before this could ever have had that crooked smile, that regal bearing, those beautiful eyes. Lando is so happy, he begins to choke up. Gim moves closer to him and puts her hand on the small of his back. She doesn’t say anything, she just makes sure he knows she is there.

As Cassandra and Cullen near, Cullen stops, hugs Cassandra, and whispers something in her ear. Cassandra nods, clearly answering some question. Cullen takes one step toward Lando, and says, “I bring this woman to you so that your union may be blessed by Our Lady,’ and he offers Cassandra’s hand to Lando.

Lando takes Cassandra’s hand and says to Cullen, “Gladly do I accept the gift invaluable.” Cullen gives a short bow, and turns to join Josephine. As soon as Cullen is in place, all the observers sit.

Lando keeps holding Cassandra’s hand as they turn to face Mother Giselle.

Mother Giselle, addressing the room at large, says, “The Maker has told us that within his creation, none are alone. When two who serve the Maker in such uncertain times find their commitments to each other, it brings all hope. In the worst of times, the Maker brings us joy and the Lady touches our hearts.”

Mother Giselle now looks down at Lando and Cassandra and says, “Kneel before the Maker’s Bride. Will you open your heart to the Maker so that you may be judged whole?”

In unison, Cassandra and Lando say, “We will,” and they drop to their knees.

Mother Giselle turns behind her and takes an ornamental switch, which she lights in the fire from the bowl carried by the statue of Andraste. Turning back, she says, “You will be touched with fire so that your union may start clean and pure.” Cassandra and Lando put out their hands, and Mother Giselle briefly passes the fire under their hands. Neither of them flinch. Mother Giselle nods in acknowledgment and turns to place the stick into the bowl of fire. She turns back to Lando and Cassandra and gestures that they should rise.

Addressing herself to Lando, Mother Giselle says, “Lando, Herald of Andraste, what have you to say on the occasion of your union to this woman, Cassandra, Seeker of Truth and Right Hand of the Divine?”

Lando, still facing Mother Giselle, says, “As the Chant of Light says when reporting Our Lady’s Trials, ‘You have walked beside me down the paths where a thousand arrows sought my flesh. You have stood with me when all others have forsaken me.’ I swear unto the Maker and to Holy Andraste that I will keep faith with this woman, and I will always remember that she knew her Faith before she knew me. I vow to always understand when she must place her duties to the Maker and to Holy Andraste before her duties to me and to our family.”

Mother Giselle looks smugly pleased, but she continues by saying, “Cassandra, Seeker of Truth and Right Hand of the Divine, what have you to say on the occasion of your union to this man, Lando, Herald of Andraste?”

Cassandra does not remain facing Mother Giselle but turns to face Lando fully. She says, “Mythal enaste var aravel. Lama, ara las mir lath. Bellanaris.” Her Dalish is strongly accented, but clear. Once again, Lando sees Gim’s influence.

Lando feels a tear roll down his cheek as he squeezes Cassandra’s hand and whispers, “Bellanaris.” He glances at Mother Giselle expecting to see censure, but she does not seem surprised or
disapproving.

Mother Giselle says, “You have tokens to remember your bond?” Varric and Solas each step forward and hand a ring into waiting hands. After taking the rings without examining them, Cassandra and Lando turn to face each other again.

Cassandra puts out her left hand, and Lando slips the silver ring onto her finger; Cassandra looks briefly startled as the ring hits her flesh. Then he puts out his left hand, and Cassandra puts a silver ring onto his finger. Lando feels a small shock as the ring goes on his finger. The mark on his right hand flares briefly, causing gasps from the onlookers. Lando is happy that his ring does not share the hand with his mark. He holds both of Cassandra’s hands in both of his, smiles at her, and his damp eyes overflow down his cheeks. He is relieved that Cassandra’s face is similarly happy and similarly damp.

Mother Giselle says, “You have demonstrated your commitment with word, fire, and tokens. May your union be blessed and fruitful. In the sight of the Maker and Our Lady, I name you Husband and Wife.”

Lando takes a half step forward just as Cassandra does, and he wraps her in his arms and kisses her. For just a moment he forgets that anyone but Cassandra is in the room. For just a moment all he can think of is the feel of her in his arms and her ever-present smell of cookies. But then she steps back a step, as does he, and they turn to face their well-wishers.

Lando doesn’t think his directions included what to do now, but Cassandra is dragging him towards the door. As they exit, she tugs him harder, and they break into a run as he hears the murmur and laughter of amused voices behind them. She leads him through the snow to their cabin, they enter, and she slams the door shut behind them and begins kissing him again. He rubs her arms and holds her to him, but she does not seem cold, even in that thin dress.

Lando pulls his face just far enough away from Cassandra’s so that he can talk. He says, “Not that I object, but isn’t there a reception we are meant to attend?”

Cassandra’s warm and happy laugh sends a thrill up his spine. She says, “Yes, but as we are a love match, we are traditionally presumed to be unable to keep our hands off each other.”

Lando drops his left hand to the triangle formed by the ornamental belt. He says, “I think we have evidence I have already been unable to keep my hands off you.”

Cassandra, still laughing, says, “That too is traditional.” She looks down at his hand on her belly, takes it in her hand, and raises the hand to her face. Lando realizes she is examining the ring.

The ring is silver-colored and very light: it can only be made from silverite. The emerald is placed in the center of the eye from the Inquisition symbol. The eye, the sword, the sunburst: they are all there, and the working of the symbol is so expertly done that ring is smooth and close to his skin so that it will not catch on anything. He takes Cassandra’s hand so that he may see her ring: it is smaller, but identical in design.

Cassandra starts crying again. Her voice catches as she says, “That dwarf. I will never be able to stab one of his books again.”

Lando laughs and wraps his arms around Cassandra, rocking her brusquely back and forth a few times. After a moment, he says, “So what did Cullen whisper to you just before he offered me your hand?”
Cassandra says, “He told me that if you hurt me, he will kill you, and then he asked if I was sure I wanted to do this.”

Lando nods and says, “As is only proper. I am only surprised he didn’t find me last night and threaten me personally.”

Cassandra says, “I made him promise not to. I almost told him about our child, but I knew he would become very protective, and I am not sure how to explain this ring to him.”

Lando says, “I think that is a good call. I’ve been around Gim’s spirits most of my life and I wouldn’t know how to begin to explain that ring--especially not to someone with Cullen’s background.”

Lando is curious about one more thing. He says, “Tell me: how did you come to learn the traditional Elven bonding vow?”

Cassandra says, “I asked Gim to help me find something to say that would let you know the depth of my commitment.”

Lando says, “Do you know what it means?”

Cassandra, recreating the posture of their first kiss, leans in and places her forehead against his as she says, “I asked Mythal, whose vallaslin you once wore, to bless our life’s journey. I said I am yours, and that my love is yours, always.”

Lando says, “Lama, ara las mir lath. Bellanaris,” as he nuzzles her face, and as he finishes, his lips touch hers. Her mouth opens, and this kiss, like their first, is sensually and emotionally overwhelming. He could drown in this woman. Somehow a stray thought pokes through the hum in his brain, and jerks back into ram-rod straight posture.

Lando says, “I think we had best go to that reception. Cole--the one I told you about from future Redcliffe--is here. I’m not sure we should leave Cole unsupervised with that collection of people.”

Cassandra, moving towards the screen, begins undoing her belt while saying, “Just give me a moment to change, and we can go.”

Lando says, “Change? I would much rather remove that dress from you slowly and privately later.”

Cassandra stops, examines his face, reties the belt, gives him a kiss on the cheek, and says, “Whatever pleases you, my husband.”

Lando runs his hand down the silky back of her dress and briefly cups her beautiful warrior’s ass. “I will hold you to that promise,” he says.

And off to the reception at The Singing Maiden they go.

Chapter End Notes

I am excited to say that one of my friends who I have known for practically ever, terriblygenuineguy, has volunteered to be my new Beta. He is catching up with my chapters slowly, correcting commas and odd spellings as he goes. I expect by Chapter 63, he should be ready to read and improve the chapter before publication.
By the way, here is the ring that inspired their wedding rings, and here is the full post about it and another custom ring.

Comments or criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aaaa@gmail.com.
Gim stands next to Varric and watches Lando and Cassandra run out of the chapel to the accompaniment of good natured laughter. She is content. Sometime tonight she is going to have to deal with problems and plots and plans, but for the moment, all is well. As everyone in the chapel files out, Gim, Varric, and Solas walk over to where Dorian and Krem are flanking Cole. Dorian, whose eyes are just a little too wide, says, “Do you know, he reassured us that we shouldn’t worry if he disappears, because no one would notice him except those who would not be shocked.”

Gim, pleasantly surprised says, “Krem would notice? Good for you, Cole.” Her eyes are on Cole, but out of the corner of her eye, she sees Krem raise a questioning eyebrow. Solas and Varric come to stand on either side of her.

Cole, in a tone somewhere between confusion and a child’s glee, says, “Dorian knows me,”

Gim says, “Yes, as we have discussed. I don’t remember you, but Dorian and Lando do. I’m pleased you are allowing Krem to notice you. It is up to you, but I think all of us here would like to see you and talk to you.”

Cole says, “Subtle threads are easily tangled and torn. Wisdom helps. Wisdom says for Krem to know what Dorian knows is a kindness. Wisdom isn’t always kind; I like it when she is.”

Gim smiles, and she feels Wisdom’s warm sense of pleasure within her. She raises her eyebrows and says, “She?”

Cole says, “A kindness for you. And for her too, I think.” Gim recognizes the bubbling feeling inside her as happy laughter. When she joins Wisdom with a small audible chuckle, Solas also joins in. Gim turns to smile broadly at Solas before turning back to Krem.

Gim says, “I think this is an honor, Krem. But you will have to try to not be startled by things Cole says. Just remember that we owe our existence to him and he is on our side.”

Cole appears to be suffering from a case of the nerves as he says, “For the three with focus, the threads are fixed and only altered with danger. Wisdom says I should respect the others--so intertwined. I like that word, ‘respect’. I shall try for respect.” Towards the end of this speech, Cole appears to be trying to keep his composure, but his voice is getting higher and his movements are sharp and short.

Solas says, “I don’t think Cole is accustomed to dealing with attention from so many at once.”

Gim, ashamed at not having picked up on this earlier, says, “Of course, Cole. You needn’t stay with us all the time, but I do hope you will consider working with all of us together. I hope you learn to appreciate our friendship.”
Cole looks stunned. He says in a hushed voice, “Friendship. Yes. Yes, of course.”

Krem has been watching this carefully while attempting to look nonchalant. Now, he reaches for some humor as he says, “I’m not looking forward to explaining this one to the Chief!” Krem looks around him at the serious faces and switches to a more reassuring tone. “But he will know how to value an ally—just as I do. It’s just that the Chief’s people are even more suspicious about the Fade than you southerners.” Krem moves his gaze to Gim and says, “And begging your pardon, but that wasn’t idle chatter: the Chief will be at the reception. The Chargers have reported to Cullen. Tomorrow, I will drill with them.” Gim realizes that Krem’s need to project casual acceptance may not be entirely due to any unease he may feel about Cole.

Dorian sighs and says, “I fear that means I shall be left to myself. Unless, of course, Cole should wish to accompany me?”

Cole looks a bit gobsmacked, but then Cole always looks that way. He says, “You know what I am and you offer companionship?”

Dorian says, “Yes of course. My countrymen have many problems, but we know to consider it an honor to converse with a spirit.”

Solas says, “Even if many of the things your countrymen have said to spirits are lacking in honor.”

Gim elbows Solas as Dorian says, “True, but my exquisite sensibilities will prevent me from committing such gaucherie. And Cole, the others here have spent much more time in the company of spirits than I have.”

Gim takes this as her cue and begins manifesting. When the blue seams fade, Wisdom immediately leans over to wrap one arm around Solas. She looks at everyone in the room and smiles at them individually.

Cole says excitedly, “I heard you in there...like a chick in a shell. But now you are out. Are you you? Is the Avatar gone?”

Wisdom says, “Gim is just fine, Cole, but you must remember not to call her that. She would prefer you call her Gim, but many will call her ‘Herald’. I am Gim’s guest today, and she invited me to demonstrate why her companions are accustomed to dealing with spirits. Gim doesn’t show her spirits to many, but these people, together with Lando and Cassandra, are always safe to talk to about spirit concerns.”

Cole sounds somewhat uneasy as he says, “Cassandra is a seeker. She has a ring made of Faith.”

Wisdom says, “She is nothing like the Lord Seekers you have known; Faith has touched her. It went to her willingly and temporarily.”

Cole says, “So, not like Evangeline. I thought Gim was like Evangeline, or like Wynne.”

Wisdom says, “Dear one, the others are not able to follow our conversation, and I assure you, Gim and I will be happy to answer any questions. All you need to know is she helps. All these people help. And you can help them.”

Cole says, “I shall help. Probably.”

Wisdom gives Solas one last squeeze. She turns to Varric and says, “Child of the stone, I am happy to see you have grown. The rings are beautiful.” Varric looks like he wants to respond to that, but the blue seams run and soon Gim is back in control of her body.”
Varric looks a bit off balance, but he covers it by addressing Cole: “Yeah, Kid. We like Gim’s spirit friends. You are always welcome to join me in the tavern.”

Dorian says, “I can tell this spirit is of particular importance to many of you. Wisdom, I take it?”

Solas turns his back on Dorian, but Varric answers with, “Yes, Gim has been very close to Wisdom since she was a small child. Both Lando and Gim consider her family.”

Gim nods, quietly. She’s happy to have Varric, a man who once rejected her when he found out she was a spirit medium, answer Dorian’s question. Besides, something much more interesting is happening behind Dorian. Cole is focused on Solas, who has not yet turned around. Gim knows enough about Cole’s nature to know that Solas must be in need of compassion, but what is the source of his pain, and what does it have to do with Wisdom? Or perhaps Gim? Or perhaps Dorian? Gim will be on the alert.

Varric is talking to Dorian and Krem, and Cole comes close to Solas and says, “Her heart is large, and her understanding is vast.”

Solas looks up at Cole and says, “Whose?”

Cole says, “Yes,” and disappears from the Chantry.

Dorian, watching Krem’s purposely blank face, says, “He did that frequently in Redcliffe. I think we will need to accustom ourselves.” He smiles and pats his thighs in the gesture of a man resolved to look on the bright side. “It is very effective in battle,” he says.

Gim starts for the door and says, “Let’s go to the reception. I don’t want Lando to think we didn’t want to come.”

Varric laughs and says, “Don’t worry about that. Traditionally, they are to have some alone time before they join the reception. Come on. I can’t wait to try that cake you made.”

Gim wonders if her blush is showing. “Liar,” she says. “You don’t even like sweets.”

“It’s not a lie that I enjoy watching the rest of you enjoy the cake,” responds Varric.

Gim links arms with Varric as they reach the night air and says, “As long as Ruffles and the Nightingale make those sounds, it could look like dog food for all I care.”

Gim hears the musician singing even before she enters the tavern. Varric asks, “Do you know if anyone paid Maryden for all the music she played for the ceremony and the reception?” When Gim shrugs her shoulders, Varric says, “I think I will make sure she gets a little golden appreciation,” and wanders off towards the musician—who Gim now knows to call Maryden.

There are more people in the room than were at the ceremony. Iron Bull is talking to Cullen, and Mother Giselle and Josephine are talking to Chancellor Roderick. There are several clumps of people talking happily, and most people have a drink in their hands.

Gim walks over to the table with the cake on it and smiles to herself. Solas follows her and says, “You said it wasn’t as showy, but I see rather intricate patterns of the Inquisition symbol on the top in brown powder: it makes it look almost like it has been embossed. The rowan trees in white sugar
around the sides are more easily seen, but no less delicate. I think it is subtle and beautiful.”

Gim says, “Thank you. I am glad someone sees more than a large brown dome with a little white powder on the sides.”

Leliana appears by Gim’s side, hands her a cup and saucer, and says, “If some are dismissive of this cake, it leaves more for the rest of us, and if Cassandra and Lando do not come to cut it soon, I may have to go retrieve them myself. I know what went in there.”

Gim laughs and says, “Well you should, and thank you very much for the ingredients. Lando knows about the cake. He will be here. He knows better than to slight the baker.”

When the door opens again, Iron Bull leaps forward bellowing, “Krem de la crème!” He lifts Krem up over his head and says, “You seem to be in full working order. Does that mean you have failed to show them what a true Charger can do? Remember, Krem, you have to represent!” Gim is aware of Solas melting into the background, which she interprets as charity. Gim doesn’t want to think about the sorts of things Solas would say when in a conversation with not only two citizens of Tevinter, but also a follower of the Qun.

Krem makes some respectful but incoherent sounds, so Gim decides to fill in. She says, “Oh, Krem is a true professional. I assure you, our opinion of the Chargers couldn’t be higher.”

Leliana says, “Yes, and the information you brought back from the Storm Coast has been most valuable. We are all very happy that you have joined the Inquisition, Iron Bull.”

Bull, showing a full toothy grin and still holding Krem over his horns, says, “Glad to hear it, Red. If there is anything else I can do to make you happy, do let me know.”

Krem seems to have regained his composure. He says, “If you put me down, Chief, I will look into the local selection of hard liquor.” Bull starts negligently setting Krem down, but his attention has moved to Dorian, who is carefully watching Bull from a distance.

Bull says, “Hey. You must be that Vint the bosses have taken up with.”

Dorian, on his best manners, approaches saying, “Quite right. Dorian Pavus, at your service. Krem tells me that you enjoy chess and sparring against mages, and I would be very pleased to join you in either activity.”

Bull looks over to where Krem is now standing at the bar talking to Flissa. Krem may be talking with Flissa, but he is clearly concerned about the interaction between Dorian and Bull. When Bull turns back to face Dorian, Gim can see some adjustment in his manner, but she can’t quite tell what it is. Bull puts out his hand and says, “Let’s just get this out of the way: my people are at war with your people and while we don’t disavow our homelands, neither of us has anything against the other and we both support the Inquisition. Am I right?”

Dorian takes his gigantic hand and firmly shakes it, saying, “Yes, of course. I gathered from what Krem has said that you would have no problem with me. After all, if you can handle one Tevinter fleeing his homeland, you can handle two.” Gim finds Dorian’s tilted head and flamboyant manner adorable, but Bull seems to be resistant to Dorian’s charms.

Bull says, “Pretty much. We’ll see about that last part, though.” With that, Bull walks over to Flissa and starts chatting her up. Krem leaves a tankard at Bull’s elbow and rejoins Leliana, Dorian, and Gim. He hands Dorian a glass of golden wine, and he raises a mug to his own face.

Dorian’s raised theatrical eyebrows speak loudly and skeptically as he sips his wine and looks at
Bull. Krem says, “Don’t mind him. He has to get a rise out of people or he won’t know how to entertain himself.”

Dorian, watching Flissa laughing at some remark of Bull’s, says, “He looks like a man who finds a great many things entertaining and has no trouble pursuing them all at the same time.”

Krem looks a little uncomfortable, but Gim doesn’t want to butt in to whatever is going on. She raises one eyebrow at Leliana, and Leliana instantly guides her to a part of the tavern with just enough background noise to make their conversation mostly private.

Gim says, “I don’t know if you were able to see him in the chapel, but the spirit from Redcliffe who I told you about, Cole, is here. He came here from Therinfall Redoubt, and he clearly believes the corrupted Templars will be marching against us before much longer. I don’t want to panic anyone, and I know we can’t leave with the mages on the way here and the Breach still in the sky, but we must start making military preparations.”

Gim is surprised at Leliana’s smug tone as she says, “And you are telling me instead of Cullen because you know he will not appreciate the source of the information?”

Gim says, “Well, you did tell me it was always appropriate for you to know things before anyone else does. Besides, I have hope that you have intelligence sources that will not make Cullen want to perform the Litany of Adralla. Even if we can’t convince Cullen, there are still things scouts can do to make us a little more safe if the worst happens.”

Leliana says, “All true. But, Gim, we already had the corrupted Templars down as a grave threat, and your information merely adds urgency to our need for preparation. We are scrambling to come up with temporary housing for the mages, who should, incidentally, be arriving inside of two days. I can push that housing towards more portable forms. I can also investigate civilian evacuation options.”

Gim says, “Hearing those words come out of your mouth makes me feel like I can breath again.”

Gim gives Leliana a quick hug and says, “Excellent. My job is to make it so you may save your breath for those things that only you can do.”

Gim hears cheering and looks up to see Cassandra and Lando come through the door. They are both still dressed in their wedding attire. Leliana says quietly, “I am a bad woman for wanting to know if they just never disrobed, or if they took the trouble to put it all back on.” Leliana looks more like a young gossip than a dangerous assassin.

Gim says, “Hey. It’s your job to know the things no one else knows.” Leliana giggles, but she immediately covers her mouth with her hand and looks guilty. Gim says, “Well, there is nothing wrong with being a little bad.”

Leliana says, “Come by my tent tomorrow and I will ply you with café and we will be a little bad.”

Leliana says, “Come by my tent tomorrow and I will ply you with café and we will be a little bad.”

Gim walks over to Lando and Cassandra. Everyone moves out of her way as she approaches, and Lando and Cassandra wait expectantly. Lando extends his hand for her to take, and she takes it, but she also extends her other hand to Cassandra. Thus they end up in a circle, as if they planned on playing a children’s game. Gim jumps up to give a kiss to Cassandra’s cheek and then Lando’s. She says, “Leliana implied that she will not be responsible for her actions if you don’t cut that cake soon.”

Cassandra starts twisting to find the cake while Lando whispers, “Where is Cole?”
Gim says, “He’s OK. He is not comfortable in crowds. He will come if we need him.”

As they approach the cake, Flissa brings a tray with a large knife, a large spoon, and a stack of bowls. Cassandra looks at the bowls in confusion. Gim says, “Trust me: you will want bowls.”

Cassandra takes a deep breath through her nose and says, “Do I smell…”

Gim grins. She says, “I guessed that you like café, and I know that you like chocolate.”

Cassandra smiles and takes the knife from Flissa’s platter, She cuts two thin slices from the cake, removes the first piece, and puts the piece into a bowl. As the slice is removed, the dome of the cake collapses, and a dark sauce floods the cake platter. Cassandra looks to Gim in surprise, and Gim gestures at the serving spoon. Cassandra places the other piece in a bowl and spoons sauce onto both pieces. She carries the bowls to Lando. She whispers in his ear, and they both stand, bowls in hand, waiting for the rest of the room to receive their pieces of cake.

Flissa and Gim start cutting and serving the cake. Leliana is the first to accept a bowl, and Josephine is the second. It doesn’t take long for all who want cake to receive their bowls. No one eats yet: everyone is watching Cassandra and Lando. Gim can’t see Solas anywhere.

Cassandra says, “I want to thank my new sister, Gim, for making this cake to remind us all of the sweetness of life.” She looks down to fill a spoon with cake and sauce, but when she looks up, there is a filled spoon already in front of her face. Cassandra’s eyes lock with Lando’s and she opens her mouth without looking at the spoon. Lando places the spoon into Cassandra’s mouth in such a way that sauce is smeared on the corner of her mouth. As soon as Cassandra closes her mouth on the spoon, Gim hears the sounds of other spoons around the room clinking on bowls, but Gim keeps watching Cassandra.

Cassandra closes her eyes, throws her head back and softly moans. Lando steps forward, supports her back as if they were dancing, and he dips her back a little as if she were truly swooning. Then he brings her forward with a smooth curving motion that again looks like a dance move. As she returns to vertical, he brings her face close to his and leans in to place his mouth over the sauced corner of her mouth. Filled spoon still in her hand, Cassandra wraps her arms around his neck and continues moaning as he kisses her.

Gim, flushed and embarrassed, looks down at her own cake. Would such a kiss be possible for her? She takes a bite: the sweetness of the chocolate is perfectly cut by the round bitter taste of the café. It is good. It just isn’t that good. However, from the sounds of appreciation around her, she may be the only one who feels that way. No, not the only one. She finds Varric’s face. Varric raises one eyebrow and twinkles at her as if they are members of a vast conspiracy.

Soon many people are complimenting Gim on the cake. In addition to the gratitude of her usual friends, Gim even gets a nod of acknowledgment from Chancellor Roderick. She accepts all the compliments in a haze--still thinking about the kiss.

After they make a round thanking and hugging people, Cassandra and Lando slip out to hooting and laughter. Many other people also leave. After all, the members of the Inquisition have much to accomplish before the mages arrive--before they can try to close the Breach. Iron Bull is still talking to Flissa. Varric is drinking with Krem and Dorian, and it appears someone has produced a deck of cards. But where is Solas? Gim realizes she hasn’t seen Solas since before the cake was consumed. Does this mean Solas didn’t get any of the cake he praised as subtle and beautiful?

The cake is large, so there is plenty left. Gim fills a new bowl, takes her own mostly-full bowl, and approaches the door of the tavern. As she opens the door, she looks back and sees Varric give her a
dazzlingly reassuring smile as he plays a card.

Solas’s door opens before Gim can touch it. She enters, and Solas closes the door behind her. He seems a bit somber and withdrawn for someone who seemed pretty happy earlier in the evening. He is wearing his under-tunic and leggings, but he is not wearing his footwraps.

Gim says, “I didn’t want you to miss the cake.”

Solas says formally, “That was very kind of you.” He reaches for one of the bowls, but Gim holds it back from him. Solas cocks his head in inquiry. After a moment he says, “You must forgive me for slipping out. I was not feeling that I was capable of being an adequate guest.”

Gim says, “I can see you have something on your mind, and I don’t want to press you to talk about it. I came here with very selfish motivations, and if you would prefer I leave rather than explain, I will do so.”

For the first time since she entered the room, Gim sees the beginnings of a smile on Solas’s face. He says, “Do your selfish motivations involve denying me cake?”

Gim blushes and says, “No... Yes... Just temporarily.”

Solas says, “I find myself being intrigued. Go on.” He gestures towards one of the chairs and sits in the other, but Gim remains standing. She puts both bowls down on the edge of his table and comes to stand near him.

Gim blurts out, “Solas, do you think I am capable of passion?” She realizes she has placed her hands on her hips in what might look like a combative posture.

She drops her hands from her hips, but then she isn’t sure what to do with them.

Solas smiles with furrowed brow and tilted head. He almost looks like he is struggling to understand something she has said. He says, “Of course I do. How could you doubt it?”

She wrings her hands as she says, “I don’t know how to explain this politely.”

Solas interrupts with, “You needn’t try to be polite. Be honest. Be communicative.”

Gim swallows and charges forward. Wisdom is encouraging her to talk. She says, “I feel so different when I am with you than when I am with Varric. I feel comfortable and comforted with him. I feel safe. With you I am often afraid. Is that passion? The fear?” She thinks Solas is trying to avoid showing discomfort. She tries to dress up the raw words she blundered into. “I mean, I feel excitement and pleasure, too. It isn’t just fear.”

Silence hangs between them for a moment. Before he speaks again, Solas smiles and his eyes hold affection. Gim thinks he has come to some decision. He says, “Da’ean I invited you to ask me anything, and I told you I would answer. I think you have asked me something that I choose to answer in this way: There are valid reasons for you to fear me. Many of them you were aware of the moment you met me, and still you did not hide from me.” He reaches out to run his long fingers down her face. She presses her face against his palm, but she keeps her eyes on his. “I do not think that those reasons to fear me are the ones that contribute to the fear you have mentioned tonight. Am I mistaken?”

Gim starts to shake her head, but then she says, “Well, not primarily.”

Solas nods as if this is expected and continues, “I am not sure if you know that there are many valid reasons for me to fear you.” Her surprise must be evident, because he stops talking for a moment.
while continuing to caress her face. “There are also many equally-valid reasons for me to fear for you, and some of these are why I am so careful with what I do and say around you when we are alone. I believe you have felt my restraint. Perhaps my restraint is part of what led you here tonight?” When she nods at this, he says, “Do you want to tell me the rest of it? Perhaps to describe what cake has to do with passion?” At the last, his eyes dance into a full smile, even though his mouth remains solemn.

Gim haltingly explains, “Lando fed Cassandra cake, and she closed her eyes and moaned. He left sauce on her lips, and he moved the two them as if they were dancing. When the movement of the dance came to an end, he consumed the sauce on her mouth. She moaned the louder, and while I didn’t even have my glow up, I felt their passion across the open air. It made my core clench, and then it made my heart clench. I felt bereft.”

Solas, one eyebrow high on his smooth forehead, says, “So you brought me cake and questions.” Gim nods. After a long pause, Solas says, “I thank you for doing so. Now...Do you trust me?” Gim nods again.

Solas settles in his chair, and he puts out his hand in an obvious request for her own. She takes his hand and moves forward. He spreads his knees so that she my approach close to him. Their heads are similar in height in this pose, though her head is higher. Solas says, “Establish your connection to the Fade.” She brings up a full glow. Solas’s eyes look almost colorless in this light.

Solas reaches with his other hand to pick up the bowl and spoon, and he places the bowl down on the table while keeping the spoon in his hand. He says, “Nothing is denied you this night, ma lath. I am an open book. Touch me, touch my innermost self, however you want.” After examining her face closely for a moment, he says, “I will feel similar license, though I shall be on the alert for any reserve that should suggest I withdraw.” He is so welcoming--so warm--she can’t imagine wanting him to withdraw.

Solas fills the spoon with cake, makes sure it has adequate sauce, and raises the spoon to his lips. She spreads her magic through Solas, and she can feel his anticipation. He inhales deeply as the spoon reaches his face, and he closes his eyes before the spoon enters his mouth.

He does not moan. He is silent, with his tongue moving gently around his mouth, but his nerves are alight with pleasure. He takes several deep breaths, and his heart beats faster, and she is aware of every part of his body. It is fascinating watching him surrender to the sensuality of the cake and the sauce. It makes her own pulse beat faster. He opens his eyes slowly, and her eyes are on his when he does it. He says, “Show me. Show me how the sauce was on her mouth.”

Gim places a finger into the bowl, dips it into the sauce, and smears the chocolate on the lower right corner of his mouth. He says, “Taste it.”

She leans forward, expecting him to close his eyes, but he does not do so. She stops, looking from his mouth to his pale eyes to the small scar on his forehead. Finally, she moves the final inch and extends her tongue to lap at the sharp corner where his full top lip meets his full bottom lip. He opens his mouth slightly, but he remains passive. He accepts her darting tongue's attentions, but he does not fall on her the way Lando fell on Cassandra.

He is controlling his face, but not his reactions. He begins to quiver, and he breaks contact with her hand for a second as his hand travels up her arm to the nape of her neck. The place where his hand is touching her skin is on fire. She opens her mouth and begins to suck on his lower lip, laving his skin with her tongue. The sauce is so much better than it was earlier. She can feel Solas stopping himself from responding with his mouth. She feels his stomach tighten, and she knows intimately that his leggings have become much too constricting. It becomes important to her that he lose his battle to
remain passive. She runs her hands up his chest, and one of her hands travels to trace his pointed ear. She feels his magic running through her, and she does not doubt that he is aware of her aims.

She pulls back a little, juts the side of her face towards him and says, “My turn.” He takes his finger, dips it in sauce, and smears it across her lower lip. Then he places his finger into his mouth and sucks it slowly and lovingly while giving her a look of challenge. Then he leans forward and takes her whole lip into his mouth and gently manipulates it with his tongue. This time he does moan, and when she opens her mouth, he dives in. The wet warmth of him, the song of his magic in her, it is almost more than she can stand. There are no more delicate tongue flicks: this kissing is vigorous. Every time he presses into her, she presses back into him. This kissing is the most consuming thing she has ever done, and yet it is not enough. She needs to breathe in every part of him, to taste him and feel him and have him feel her. Her skin is flushed and damp and she is aware of the smell of her own arousal. She can tell Solas is just as aware.

Now she really is overwhelmed. She comes up for air, throws back her head, and says in a voice full of wonder, “Ah!” Solas stills. Clearly calling a halt to their activities.

Confused, she rights her head and searches his face. He is breathing hard and his nostrils are flaring. The pupils are wide and dark in his almost glowing eyes. He says, “Ask me again if you are capable of passion.”

She wails, “But why did you stop me?”

He says, “Because if we go further, it will not be in the haze of overwhelmed senses. It will be because you want me.”

She says, “You know, I have no place to sleep tonight.”

He says, “Oh I imagine some bed has been prepared for you.”

She pouts at him. She says, “Would you really send me out into the cold?”

He says, “Not if you did not wish to go out into the cold.” Even though the answer is a concession, he still looks very serious.

She says, “Do you think you might enjoy removing chocolate sauce from anywhere other than my lips?”

Solas is motionless. For a moment, she thinks he will say no. He will give her a speech about the necessity for caution or the lack of rush or some such. She will not push. She has offered. It is up to him.

Solas picks her up, snaps his knees together, and places her on his lap. He turns her a bit away from him so that he can access the back of her dress. He begins to undo the buttons. After the top few are open, he kisses the revealed base of her neck. He says, “I think that deserves some serious investigation.”

Solas can’t see her face, but she doesn’t think he would be surprised by the broad smile on her face. Solas is first and foremost a researcher.

Chapter End Notes
Much thanks to Buttsonthebeach, who performed her usual function of reassuring me in several ways.

If you like, watch the cake cutting that inspired Gim's cake.

Comments and criticisms welcome here or via email at kinako.oooo@gmail.com.
Like a Remorseful Pardon, Slowly Carried

Chapter Summary

Solas and Gim share a few feelings.

Chapter Notes

I thought this would be a NSFW chapter, but Gim and Solas had other ideas. I would say this is more about head cannon than smut.

If you are disappointed that there wasn't more smut, there is a very smutty alternative version that is not canon in my main story [here](#).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After he kisses the base of her neck, Solas frees the remaining long line of buttons from their buttonholes. Gim’s back begins to cool as the fabric falls away from her skin and its fine sheen of sweat. She squirms her way off Solas’s knees and begins to awkwardly remove her arms from her formal dress. Gim knows that if she were any other woman, she could do this in an alluring way. She has been completely unclothed around many, but never in this context: never with a man who looked at her with lambent eyes, who squeezed her ass, whose pulse beat quickly when her tongue touched his lips.

He wants her. She knows undeniably that he wants her. But why does he want her? He called her ‘ma lath’. Did he mean that? Many of the elders in her old clan would call half the children ma lath. Does he just find her naive? The first time she ran her magic through his flesh, he clearly relished it, and he said he had thought to never feel that again. Is he just making do with her? Could he want her because she is the only woman available to him? The only woman with magic available to him? The only person who knows what he is and does not reject him? Is she part of some plot of his? Does she have something he wants? Gim feels Wisdom railing inside her, and even without hearing the word, she knows Wisdom is trying to yell, “Stop!”

What things to think about a man who would give his life to protect her brother’s child! Why would any of that matter, anyway? They were enjoying each other, and now her cursed brain is complicating things. She looks up at Solas, and he is watching her carefully. She isn’t touching him, but she doesn’t have to be to know he is no longer aroused. He looks concerned, and why wouldn’t he? She is standing, unmoving, in front of him with an unbuttoned dress halfway down her arms. How long has she been standing like this?

She says, “I...I had a little crisis of confidence.”

Solas says calmly, “I can see that. Can I help?”

She is so ashamed. She says, “I don’t know. I...I’ve ruined it haven’t I?”

Solas doesn’t have to stand to reach her. He just extends his long arms and sweeps her back into his
embrace. He says, “Oh, Da’ean, you have ruined exactly nothing. I believe I can make you more comfortable.” He holds her close, His hands find the opening of her dress where it lies against her arms, and he says, “Does this human garment please you? Do you wish to retain it?”

“No,” she says as she shakes her head. “I wore it to please those who put so much effort into the wedding, but I don’t like the style. I could tell Lando thought the same.”

Solas says, “I say that this dress looks better on you than it would on any other woman, and yet I declare it unworthy of you.” He slides the fabric the rest of the way down her arms, and then he waits for her to step out of it. Gim doesn’t know what he wants, but whatever it is, she is willing: she trusts him. That’s something, to realize she trusts him enough that she is willing to follow absolutely any lead he gives her; if only she could make herself do it with more grace!

He tosses the dress on the far chair, and then leans down to undo her shoes. He says, “You must be eager to get out of these contraptions.” He is right: She is glad to shed the shoes, even if she does feel suddenly awkward to be wearing only smalls and a breast band while he ministers to her feet. When she steps out of the shoes, he lowers her stockings, and she steps out of those. She is acutely aware that he is still covered. He places the shoes neatly to the side while she stands stiffly staring at the ground and railing against herself for feeling the awkwardness. His caring manner is slowly lowering her anxiety.

She looks up as he places both his hands over his head to the back of his tunic and tugs it off over his head. This motion shows off his strong chest, and as his bare and sculpted flesh emerges, her earlier doubts are seeming more and more ridiculous, and her bareness feels like less of a burden. But he isn’t done; he places the soft tunic he was wearing over her head and gently helps her get the arms in place. Although it is freshly laundered, the shirt smells subtly, deliciously, of Solas. She brings one of the sides of the collar to her nose and inhales. A little bit of the fire comes back to Solas’s eyes as he sees her relishing the smell of his garment.

Solas stands, drops his leggings, and places them on top of her shoes. Something about the intimacy of his clothing landing on hers—along with his unconcern with being more bare than she is—makes her smile. He smiles back. He takes her hand, leads her to his bed, turns back the cover, and sits cross legged at the head of the bed. He pats the bed in front of him and says, “May I remove your braids and make your hair comfortable for sleeping? She nods and sits where he can access her hair. He starts taking out all the small braids and loops and running his fingers along her scalp. It feels very pleasant and very calmingly domestic.

After he has made progress on her hair, he says, “I assume you have questions.”

Gim says, “I don’t deny I got caught in a storm of questions, but being able to ask them aloud is...hard for me.”

Solas says, “Wisdom did tell me that you would not pry. That seems to have been an understatement.” He says nothing while he takes out several more braids. Gim can feel her cloud of black hair expanding behind her, but then Solas starts twisting some strands of hair and working them into a more compressed mass. As he works, he says, “My guess is that you have some uncertainty concerning feelings.” The nod is minute, but she can tell he detects it, because she can feel a small slump in his posture.

After a few more moments of hair manipulation, he asks, “What do you know of courtship in the time of Arlathan?”

Gim is relieved that he has turned the conversation towards the less personal. This she can talk about; she likes nothing more than the freedom to describe the sightseeing trips the spirits have taken her on.
She says, “Not so very much. I saw many couples, and some groupings larger than two, but I didn’t really see how the groupings formed. I did watch many gatherings. I know sexual activities were treated much more casually in Arlathan than they are in clan life. As I understand it, consensual sexual contact was used for entertainment, friendship, sealing an alliance, or even as a healthy form of exercise.”

Solas says, “This is all true. What do you know of life-bonds in those days?”

Gim says, “I know that some people were bonded, but it did not seem common, and it did not seem to be a requirement for a relationship—even a long term one.”

Solas says, “You are correct. For one to feel the pull of a life-bond was considered bittersweet: if mutual, perhaps worthy of envy, but mutual or not, it interfered with so many other forms of interaction. With lives so long, a relationship that could only be dissolved on death was a rare and serious commitment. Those pursuing a life-bond were considered to owe the community a form of public entertainment. Such courtships could take years—decades even. Every courtship was different, but there were certain expected elements: formal declaration, petition for permission to court from appropriate superiors, presentation of gifts, exchange of knowledge, formal offers of property, and performance of artistic works honoring the intended—to name a few.”

Gim says, “You said, ‘if mutual’. How often was one pursuing life-bond rejected by the intended?”

Solas, who still has her hair in his motionless hands, says, “It was considered bad form to allow a courtship to continue if the intended felt that a bond was impossible. The most common form of rejection was for the intended to choose between more than one suitor. I want you to know that if a woman made a choice, the individual who she did not bond with could still be her ally—her friend.”

What? Oh.

Gim twists, turning her body to face Solas. Her hair slips out of his hands, and after a brief attempt to keep the strands, he allows her hair to drop.

She looks him in the eyes. She is sure her concern is evident. Her voice sounds frantic in her ears as she says, “Solas, is that what you think was worrying me?”

He says, in his warmest and gentlest voice, “I would never want you to be uncomfortable; you can always tell me anything and I will accept it. It is perhaps for the best. There are...considerations.”

“Stop!” says Gim, “I promise you, I am not rejecting you—on any level. It confuses me that you would even think so.”

Solas, who looks like he isn’t sure if he believes her, says, “I could feel your physical desire for me, but when you had a moment to think clearly, you no longer held the same ardor. My conclusion was that the passion that you asked me to rouse did not survive your conscious examination—your good sense.”

Gim is overwhelmed: so many misconceptions to correct. First things first. She says, “Solas, you must forgive me, but it seems my ability to receive your unspoken communication is suspect: Are you saying you desire a life-bond with me?”

Solas’s eyebrows shoot high on his forehead, and he says, “Yes, of course. I have told you so.”

Gim says, “If you have told me so, why didn’t I know it? Why was I sitting here obsessing about your only wanting me because I was the only woman available to you?”

“What? Surely not!” says Solas. “I have spoken of my desire on many occasions. Did I not say that
no other partner that I have ever touched could be to me what you could be to me? Do you not recall our conversation about broken toes and amputated feet?"

Gim sucks her lips into her teeth and furrows her brow. She says, “When you put it like that, it makes me feel particularly stupid, but that is honestly not what I heard. While I am being blunt, I must tell you that I find it very hard to believe you could find me as appealing as the women of ancient Elvhenan: I’m short and stocky with a round face like an apple--and I am a quickling. How could you see me as an equal?”

Solas says, “Do you not realize that, with the help of your Thaig, you could look like anything you want, any time you want? I hope you do not change your appearance--for many reasons. Apart from the practical problems it would cause, I find your natural appearance honest and delightful. You have the honed body of an acrobat and a face full of your strong character.” Solas stops talking and examines her face. He does appear appreciative. Gim thinks of all the time Lando has spent telling her that her opinion of herself is twisted. Maybe he wasn’t just being an elder brother.

Solas gently touches her face. He says, “I have been remiss in singing your praises. I felt I could do no better than Varric did the night of your first kisses. I believe he said, ‘Your eyes have the fire of the darkest gems; your generous mouth is lush and ripe; your cheeks are round with health and laughter.’ His artistry lies in words, and mine does not. I did not know I had left you in doubt as to my admiration.”

“Oh, Solas,” says Gim. “I believe we each have problems in terms of our self-perception. Did this happen because you thought I was close to a choice? Do you need me to choose between you?”

“No, I do not desire you to choose now,” says Solas. “If you are truly undecided, what I want is to do a better job of courting you. I want you to bond to me not because there was a choice, but because you feel the same insoluble connection that I do. And if you feel that bond with someone else, I might even feel relieved. I might even feel that you were better off.”

Gim, sounding like she might cry, says, “I wish you would not say such things.”

Solas gives a sad shake of his head and says, “This night has convinced me that neither of us should ask the other to leave thoughts unsaid. You have called yourself a quickling. I want you to know that I have little reason to believe my life will extend past these tumultuous times: neither of us--none of us--may live long and placid lives. If I am correct, I will be to blame, and the thought of tainting you with my actions wrings my heart.”

Gim’s first thought is to cover his mouth with her hand and prevent him from saying such hurtful things, but he is right: she should listen. She waits and holds his eyes. She needs him to know she is replying with her intellect intact. She says, “I will always listen to your doubts, but I need not agree with them. I am no unthinking Dalish Keeper blaming the Dread Wolf for the state of the world. I know something of the impossible situation you were in before you went into the long sleep; I know something of the horror of the world you found yourself in upon waking. No one can know for sure, but perhaps even the human empires and religions could never have flourished without you. Maybe there would be no elves at all were it not for you. You will say no, but you do not know. The horns of your dilemmas were sharp.” Solas had dropped his gaze and his head midway through her speech, and now his eyes are tightly closed and the corners of his eyes are damp.

Gim puts her finger under Solas’s chin and tilts his face up. He doesn’t fight her, and when his head rises, his eyes open. She says, “If I promise to try to incorporate your view of me, could you promise to do the same for my view of you? Could we both try to be more gentle with ourselves?”

Gim sees millennia of entrenched sadness in Solas now. She imagines that he sees her presenting an
unjustifiably positive view of a man who is not a God, but who is undeniably the most powerful, the
most potentially culpable, member of his race in existence. What can she say to knock him out of his

“Solas,” she says, “You have said that you want to do a better job of courting me. Please tell me
more. The thought of your incorporating some of the more formal aspects of ancient courting
is...intriguing.”

This might work. He looks less sad: now he is clearly considering things. He says, “You seem to
have been in doubt as to my aims. Perhaps a more formal declaration is in order.”

Gim says, “Oh, everyone knows you and Varric are trying for my affections.”

Solas says, “This is true, and I can’t say that drawing even more attention to the three of us and our
private matters would make you happier. Perhaps I should ask Lando’s permission to court you.”

Gim smiles broadly and takes on a teasing tone. She says, “I believe he may have asked you to flirt
with me--even before you had a desire to do so.”

Solas’s eyebrows shoot up. “I was not aware that he had told you about that.”

Gim grins. She says, “I was giving him a hard time about how besotted he was with Cassandra. You
know: my obligation as a sister. He countered that I seemed pretty happy myself lately, and then he
started to tell me I owed him for my happiness. He told me you first kissed me because he asked you
to.”

Solas looks wistful, which is a tremendous improvement over the despair of moments ago. He says,
“That is not precisely true, but I will admit that he did first guide my thoughts to consider you as a
desirable woman. By the time I saw you bend and kiss Varric in your Thaig, I was already realizing
how...singular were my feelings for you.”

Gim feels a peel of joy traveling up her spine. He isn’t touching her now, but the feeling reminds her
of the overload of the pleasure of kissing him. He doesn’t just desire her: he wants her. This is too
much. Time to continue in the lighter vein.

She says, “Well, you have shared much knowledge, and you are going to give me a priceless artifact.
What about this artistic performance you mentioned? Shall I look forward to an interpretive dance in
front of the Chantry?”

His eyes are sparkling. He says, “I don’t really believe you would ask that of me, but I would love to
take you dancing in the Fade. As for performance, I intend to paint your story soon, as I have told
you.”

Gim says, “You said you were going to paint both Heralds!”

Solas says, “There will be more than one painting, and it is only fitting that Lando be included in
many of them. Until now he has been one of the most important parts of your story. But perhaps that
should not be my next step. There are other options.”

Gim watches Solas. He looks like he is reviewing possibilities. He finally says, “I have told you that
words are not my medium, but one common form of courtship performance involved poetry.
Someone would pick a poetic form, and someone else would pick a topic, and the suitor would have
to produce a poem in a very short period of time: in essence writing the poem within moments.”

Gim says, “Oh I like that idea. Can it be an Orlesian Villanelle? I read a Villanelle I liked when we
were traveling.”

Solas says, “Very well. In Orlesian, Common, or Elvhen?”

Gim says, “Common, please.”

Solas stands, walks to the table, takes a pen, ink pot, and a notebook out of his pack, and sits down to write. He scratches out several words and writes others curling out of the margins as replacements. After very few minutes, he finishes, rips the page out of his notebook, and hands it to Gim, who is still sitting on his bed. His writing is legible—even if some of the notations make it hard to follow. What she can read brings tears to her eyes. Could he have written this before their conversation? She doesn’t think so. She says, “Could you read it to me over my shoulder?”

He sits at the head of the bed again, encourages her to turn so that she can lean her back against his chest, and reads to her. The sound comes into her ears and through her back--she would swear it came through his aura too.

The fault I own. I blame none for the view
That I broke the world. Me, you should detest,
And still I have the joy of dreams. With you,

We share a realm. A land awash in blue,
Where dust was washed away and I felt new.
Alone of all, you know I must arrest
The fault. I blame none for that view

Of me unworthy. Yet you still attest
My nature whole, my aim to fix the mess.
And still I have the joy of dreams with you.

I almost overcame me that you knew.
A crime to let you love me? I confess
The fault. I own I blame none for the view

That you’re too rare--too good--for one as cruel
as Pride. You know the source of my excess,
And still I have the joy of dreams with you.

They should say: You must scorn him--get your due;
Men of good sense would doubt I could arrest
The fault I own: I blame none for the view.
And still I have the joy of dreams with you.

When his beautiful voice quiets, she doesn’t say anything. She swallows twice, clears her throat, and basks in the feel of the beautiful warm man at her back. Finally she looks up to where she can see his upside down face. She says, “You say you are not good at words, and I admit I am no judge, but what I want in a poem is that it make me feel deeply, and I have never heard a poem that touched me more.” It’s a little bit hard to tell from this vantage point, but she thinks he looks content. She continues, “The only problem I see is that you said it should be a performance, and we can’t show it to anyone else.”

Solas throws his head back and laughs. He says, “Oh it was a performance. And what did you think of it, Wisdom?”

Gim feels happiness and overwhelming approval. Gim says, “She liked it very much, and she is happy, but she doesn’t want to come out. I gather she thinks we are doing fine on our own.”
Solas says, “She is Wisdom. Will you sleep in my arms, ma lath?

“I have the joy of dreams with you,” she says as she scoots down in the bed and turns towards him. Before they have slept with him curled around her, but she wants to see him in the flickering light of the hearth. He scoots down so his face matches hers and they grasp each other’s hands between them. First she leans forward to kiss the back of one of his hands, and then he does the same to hers.

He says, “The last time we slept alone, I fell asleep first. May I watch you fall asleep this time?”

She nods at him. She begins to trust that he can see how full her heart is, but then she thinks of tonight's lessons. So she brightens her glow and gently spreads her magic through Solas, clearly inviting him to do the same to her. As his magic floods her, she doesn’t feel the passion she felt earlier, but she is filled to capacity with happiness and hope. In the glow, she can see his face. She says, “Ar lath ma, and watches closely for his reaction. His face, his whole being, opens like a crystal grace bell on a sunny morning.

She’s always fallen asleep quickly, and she can feel herself falling. The last thing she hears as she transitions to the Fade is, “Ar lath ma, Vhenan.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Buttsonthebeach, who gave me some excellent advice.

Comments or criticisms welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.

Thank you very much for every comment.
Chapter Summary

Haven prepares for the arrival of the mages and the closing of the Breach.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As she has done many times before, Gim awakes next to a still sleeping Solas. This time is different. This time, she wants to wake him by running her magic through his body and her hands over his bare skin. Instead, she carefully inches out of bed and brings up a magelight.

Solas’s eyes open immediately. He props himself up on his elbows and watches her move around his cabin. Something about his gaze makes Gim wish she had on the formal dress from last night so she could shed it with confidence. She smiles at him with what she hopes will communicate her regret for their practical limitations. Putting her hands up behind her head in an attempt to tame her hair into some sort of knot that doesn’t scream of bed, she says, “Someone is on the way to your door. May I borrow some footwraps…and this shirt? I will launder it and bring it back.”

Solas steps out of bed, moves to his pack, and starts pulling out garments. The sight of him crossing the room in only smalls proves first, that he is a man, and second, that it is morning. She’s seen him dress many times, but usually the change of night and day garments leaves more layers between Solas’s charms and her eyes. The man is gorgeous, and Gim is just beginning to believe that he might find her just as appealing. As a thrill runs up her spine, she spares a wistful thought of what might have been—although honestly, she wouldn’t trade their increased understanding for anything.

Solas moves his fingers minutely, and Gim feels some wards deactivate. He says as he hands her some strips, “Yes to the footwraps, but you may only borrow the tunic if you promise not to launder it before its return.” His smile is warm, and she stands on tiptoe to kiss him just a little too lingeringly given their time constraints; the way he kisses back while cupping her ass makes it clear that Solas also regrets the interruption. Then, even though Gim would much rather be taking garments off rather than putting more on, they each take a chair and begin donning clothing.

Gim finds that Solas has pulled on his leggings and his under and over tunics more quickly than she can affix her footwraps. He moves to her side and begins removing her hasty knot and replacing it with a more prosaic day-braid. She is still going to look singular if she doesn’t get access to her own clothing, but at least his tunic is long enough to keep all of her covered. She is rolling cuffs at the end of the long sleeves as she hears footsteps outside the door.

Solas opens the door and Varric walks in. For a second, she thinks this will be awkward, but then she realizes how normal it feels to be talking to Varric while preparing for the day. Moreover, even after everything that passed between Gim and Solas last night, her heart still flutters at the sight of Varric.

Varric says, “I know it is early, but the Nightingale has called an emergency meeting of just about everyone we know. There are too many to fit into the war room, so we will meet in the Singing Maiden.
Solas says, “Is it truly early for you, Varric?”

Varric tilts his head and gives a self-deprecating grunt before saying, “You caught me. I was still in the tavern when the Nightingale came in. She delegated us night owls to wake you larks.”

Concerned, Gim asks, “Oh, Varric. Are you going to be ok? No sleep with some sort of emergency?”

“Don’t worry, Beauty,” says Varric with a smirk. “I feel full of energy. I always am since I began spending most nights with you.” Varric flicks his eyebrows up a couple of times before saying, “Solas... also looks rather...invigorated.”

Unflappable Solas looks pleased on hearing Varric’s observation. Gim raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t take the bait. “Have you awakened the happy couple?” she asks.

Varric says, “You mean I didn’t just do that?” Gim can’t resist any longer, so she backhands his shoulder half-heartedly. Varric looks like he just won some sort of contest. He chuckles, and then he says more seriously, “I know I just have a tent, but I’m going to remedy that somehow so that I can spend a private night with our Beauty. But no, I haven't awakened Lando and his bride.”

Solas says, “I will swap residences with you tonight, Varric. If the emergency disrupts our plans, we can do it another night.” Gim finds, with surprise, that she likes this idea. Whatever. If her suitors aren’t bothered by these arrangements, there is no reason for Gim to borrow trouble.

She says, “OK, I will get Lando and Cass. See you soon!”

As she grabs her formal clothing from last night, she notices the bowls filled with mostly uneaten cake. Her eyes fly to Solas, and he says, “Some things are sweeter than cake.” As she runs off to her own cabin, she hears Varric and Solas laughing.

When she gets inside her room, she immediately empties her burdens onto her bed. Then, she goes to the screen in front of Cass’s and Lando’s bed and scratches on the wooden engraving. Immediately, Cass’s voice says, “Is there news?”

Gim says, “Leliana has called an emergency meeting in the tavern. It will be more well-attended than our usual war room meetings. I will see you there.” As she moves to her pack, she hears active rustling behind the screen. She replaces Solas’s shirt with her own leggings and tunic that she retrieves from her pack, but she keeps on his footwraps. As she exits the cabin, she waves goodbye to Cass, who has just come out from behind the screen.

When Gim enters the tavern, she finds everyone from the reception--plus Cole. Flissa is furiously handing out hot drinks and the odd glass of stronger stuff. Very soon, Lando and Cassandra come in. Everyone looks either nervous or expectant, but several people take a moment to smile indulgently at Lando and Cassandra when they come in. Gim overhears some comments about how cute their still-mussed elaborate braids are.

Leliana steps up on the stone hearth, and Cullen and Josephine stand near her, but down a step. Leliana says, “As you all know, we have scouts posted as lookouts along every route to Haven. The scouts on the Hinterlands road tell me that the Mages will arrive in Haven today.” After a small murmur of excitement, Leliana continues, “But that is not why we have asked you here this early morning: Many of the lookouts on the route towards Orzammar have gone missing. That information alone might mean little, but we know there are two other parties known to be a threat to us: the Elder One, who is said to be seeking the destruction of the Heralds, and the corrupted Templars. We fear that these two hostile forces may have combined. We cannot afford to be caught unprepared.”
Gim finds Cole suddenly standing next to her. He says, “The Red Templars went to the Elder One. He wants to hurt you. He’s very angry that you took his mages.” The only people who seem to notice Cole when he speaks are those from her traveling party.

Cullen steps onto the raised stone and says, “Haven is no fortress. For trained fighters to stay in Haven in order to finish the closing of the Breach is one thing, but it would be irresponsible for us to ask non-combatants to be here. We must make sure we prepare for survival. Accordingly, we have some emerging plans. We will want one small party, headed by one of the Heralds’ party mages, to scout the Temple of Sacred Ashes so that we will be ready to make an attempt on the Breach along the optimal route at the earliest possible time.”

Solas steps forward and says, “As a member of the original party that helped stabilize the Breach, I can lead that effort.”

Josephine says, “You are the best possible choice, Solas, and we were hoping you would volunteer.” Cullen doesn’t quite manage to control a sneer as Josephine praises Solas. At first Gim thinks that no one in the room is paying any attention to Cullen’s reaction, but then she notices Leliana looking at Cullen with disappointment. Josephine, of course, ignores all of this and continues, “You, in consultation with Gim, are also our best choice for guessing exactly how many of the Redcliffe mages we should plan on including on our attempt on the Breach. Unfortunately, you will need to gauge this number before you leave for the Temple because of the next part of our plan.”

Cullen says, “The mages have been traveling with family members and with Tranquil—people who would be helpless in battle. We don’t know to what extent our movements are under scrutiny…”

Leliana, who still looks annoyed at Cullen, interjects, “We may soon be under scrutiny, but we are not now. I would know.”

Cullen continues as if Leliana had not interrupted, “...but we don’t want it to look like an evacuation for observers that may arrive in the near future. It would be irresponsible to swell Haven further with non-combatants when we have reason to believe we may soon be dealing with an assault. Therefore, we will ask only those mages that Solas and Gim deem necessary to the attempt on the Breach to continue on to Haven. The rest of them will be met and redirected.

“All the established roads out of Haven have been mentioned and so are not appropriate routes to lead an evacuation. The group will then continue on to the only remaining choice: up into the Frostbacks mountains. Iron Bull, I was hoping your company could accompany me with my company so that we may protect the travelers and take them to the, as yet undetermined, rendezvous point.”

Gim sees Cole whispering in Chancellor Roderick’s ear. No one near Cole seems to be paying him any attention, although Chancellor Roderick’s brow is furrowed in concentration.

Iron Bull says, “You are pulling all of the Inquisition fighters out of Haven?”

Cullen says, “Not all, but most. Those remaining will be under Seeker Cassandra’s command. Leliana will also be splitting her scouts, though a few will be with us.”

Chancellor Roderick, sounding like he is correcting an errant schoolboy, says, “And what of the workers? The non-combatants of Haven: Will you leave them to the mercy of this supposedly imminent invasion?”

Cullen says, “We will be asking everyone to prepare to leave Haven, but to do this subtly, if possible. While it isn’t ideal, we think anyone who can be disguised as a member of Iron Bull’s
company or mine--or perhaps as support staff for either of our companies--should leave with us to meet the mages. We are still working on further plans.”

While Cullen is speaking, Cole is in Gim’s ear again. He says, “Chancellor Roderick knows something important. He wants to help.” When she looks at Chancellor Roderick, Gim sees he is looking back at her. She slowly nods at him in what she hopes is an encouraging manner.

Chancellor Roderick stands tall with his hands clasped behind his back. He says with great gravitas, “There is another option. With so many dead at the Conclave, I may be the only one left who knows it, but there is a hidden path into the Frostbacks known only to those who made the Summer Pilgrimage. The path starts with a hidden passage in the War Room. I can make sure you know the destination of the Summer Pilgrimage and can meet us there. In this way, we can empty Haven in a less detectable way, and even those who remain to close the Breach have an exit route at need.” Chancellor Roderick’s eyes return to Gim’s face several times during this speech. She has the impression he is either apologizing or making it clear he can still be helpful.

Josephine sounds happily flustered as she says, “Chancellor Roderick, this is welcome news. We can begin to store supplies in the war room as we prepare. Because we will be using this route, it would be best if you were able to take as many mounts and wagons as you can without rousing suspicion, Cullen.”

Cullen nods decisively and says, “Understood.”

Leliana asks, “Will you be taking Gim with you to the Temple of Sacred Ashes, Solas?”

Solas shakes his head and says, “From what you have said, she will be needed here to help make sure people are prepared for arduous travel. If the worst comes to pass, a last minute lowering of a knee inflammation, to pick one example, could save a life. I would prefer to travel with a small group with whom I am familiar. Another mage will be of help, so I would ask Dorian to accompany me, and a warrior who knows how to use a shield and is accustomed to work with mages will be a boon: with Iron Bull’s permission, I will take Krem. I will leave it up to Varric if he thinks he is more needed here than he would be with us: his experience with stealth and subterfuge is invaluable in either place.” Cassandra begins to object, so Solas continues with, “The soldiers remaining in Haven will need you here, Cassandra. We will return as soon as possible.”

Flissa, sounding fierce, says, “Not all of the workers can evacuate. You need us! Who will feed you? Who will service your gear? Who will make your potions? Besides, you said you did not want to give the appearance of an evacuation.”

Josephine says, “We celebrate your bravery, Flissa, but we value your life more. We will not force you to leave, but please make sure you are prepared and know exactly how to escape at need.” Turning from Flissa to the room at large, she continues, “Please pass the word to each of the people in your spheres. We need to avoid hysteria, but much as we hope we are being over-cautious, we need to see this threat as real. Please emphasize that each person should take only what they can carry. Perhaps we can retrieve valuables at a later date. Now, if everyone but the Heralds’ party could begin preparation, we would appreciate it.”

Everyone files out. Even Flissa seems to have things to do elsewhere. Once they are alone, Varric says, “I didn’t want to rock the boat, but just what are you going to do with these hundreds of people once you have moved them onto the rocks of the snowy mountain range? When do we decide it is safe to come back, and if it is not safe to come back, where are we going?”

Josephine, Cullen, and Leliana look at each other. Gim fancies she is seeing the after-effects of some rather fierce arguing. Glancing around, she sees concern on most faces, but Solas’s expression shows
more signs of calculation than concern. Gim has her own thoughts, and one of them is worry for Solas. Encountering the Elder One may be more than merely physically dangerous to Solas. What would the other members of the Inquisition do if they learned some of the truths about him?

Josephine says, “Of course you are right, Varric, but we feel that I it is most important that we close the Breach while minimally risking Inquisition lives than it is to have a perfect plan. I have faith in our ability to adapt to the situation.” Gim sees resignation on most faces. Solas’s face is now suspiciously impassive.

Gim approaches Solas, and he takes her to a corner table. The others begin leaving. As they file out, Leliana calls, “Gim, we will tell people to come to Mother Giselle in the Chantry. That will allow you to examine them and allow us to show them the escape route.”

Gim says, “I will be there soon. I will get my pack.” Leliana nods and exits the tavern.

Turning to Solas, Gim says, “I imagine you have rather intimate knowledge of the power that was needed to create the Breach; so how many mages do we need to close it?”

Solas is clearly bracing himself. He stiffly says, “To be honest, none.” At the incredulous look on Gim’s face, he continues, “Your work with me was effective, and I didn’t realize until we worked on the enchantments for the rings, but it is not just I who have more power available to me than I did during the initial stabilization of the Breach, but also you. Between the two of us, plus of course, Lando, we can almost certainly close the Breach with no additional help.”

Gim says, “And how would we explain that?”

Solas nods sardonically. He says, “Well, I would prefer to not use my full power in ways that strangers could detect, and I believe I can make closing the Breach less dangerous for Lando if we use an additional five mages to feed him power. He is the one who will initiate the connection to the Breach, so asking them to channel through him will be natural. I will monitor and make sure it is arranged properly. We should ask for five to ten mages with expertise in channeling, spirit work, and support, and they should be warned that they may see combat.”

Gim nods. There is really no other choice: they have to do this. She says, “I will pass this on to Josephine in the Chantry, and you should go collect your party. Please make sure I know when you are back. I...I will feel better when I know you are back.” They stand, and Solas wraps his arms around Gim. After he kisses the top of her head, they each leave by separate doors.

When Gim goes to retrieve her pack, she finds Lando sitting at their table with two bowls. She hugs him, picks up the bowl, and begins shoveling porridge into her mouth. Lando says, “Slow down, Durgen’falon, they will all wait for you.”

Gim, talking with her mouth full says, “Thank you. And they will. But should they have to?” After a moment of eying him as he calmly sits at the table, it occurs to her that Lando may not have a task. Lando is always happier with something to do. She says, “Would you like to come with me? You know how to help me heal efficiently.”

Lando stands, smiles, and takes her pack out of her hands. He says, “Would you like me to see if I can find out how we are set for potions and to top off your other supplies?”

Gim smiles, reaches in to extract the pouch with her tools in it, and gives Lando a quick hug before he rushes off. He even takes the empty bowls with him. It isn’t all make-work: he actually will be helpful to her. He could probably have been of help with whatever Cassandra is doing, but Cassandra will need to learn that for herself.
Before Gim can leave the cabin, someone knocks on the door. When she opens the door, she finds a very hesitant Chancellor Roderick standing in the snow. He clearly has something to say, but it takes her a moment to convince him to come in and sit at the table.

Eventually, he says, “She must have shown me. Andraste must have shown me so that I could tell you.” This is a proud man, and it must have taken a lot to bring him here to say this.

Gim says, “You may save a lot of lives by remembering that pilgrimage, Chancellor.”

He says, “It was whim that I walked the path. I did not mean to start—the path was so overgrown. I don’t know, Herald. If this simple memory can save lives, this could be more than mere accident. You could be more.” He has more to say. Gim takes his hand and waits. She brings up her glow, but he doesn’t seem to notice. Finally, he says, “Herald, if you were meant for this—if the Inquisition was meant for this—I pray for you.”

Gim’s scan didn’t take long, and the news isn’t good. He clearly knows. He probably knew the day she visited in his cabin, the day he said he would no longer work against them. She said she would offer him healing when they returned from Val Royeaux. Why didn’t she do so? Why didn’t she register that he had lost weight—that he was holding himself so carefully?

Gim says, “I need you to do a little more than pray for me, Chancellor; I need you to survive a little longer. We are going to need you to show us the way.” Chancellor Roderick’s face changes, and Gim knows that he has noticed her glow. He tries to withdraw his hand, but Gim holds it tight with one hand while stroking it with the other.

Gim knows she sounds distressed even though she is trying to keep her voice even. She says, “I could have helped you before this. I could have lessened your pain and made you more comfortable.”

The Chancellor stops trying to reclaim his hand. He says, “I am aware of this. Any pain I have felt is no fault of yours.” The Chancellor’s head is down, and he seems to be in some turmoil. Finally he raises his head and looks directly into Gim’s face. He says, “If there is anything you can do now that will make it easier for me to do what I need to do for the next few days, I would appreciate it. I would also appreciate it if you did not tell anyone else about my health.”

Suddenly the door opens, and Cole comes in. He comes in and kneels down in front of the Chancellor. Cole says, “You will die soon. You are helping many people to live before you go. You will die knowing you did the right thing.”

Through her tears, Gim watches the Chancellor gaze down at Cole in wonder. The Chancellor says, “What a charming boy.”

Gim says, “Cole, the Chancellor would prefer we not tell people that he is dying. If we can get a couple of restorative potions for him to keep with him, it will help him be comfortable while he helps us.”

Cole says, “I can help him.”

Gim says, “Please do.” Cole leaves the room. The Chancellor watches Cole leave, and then he turns back to watch Gim. Finally, having done what she can for the Chancellor, Gim drops his hand.

The Chancellor says, “Have you forgiven me?”

Gim’s eyes fly wide. She says, “If I had anything for which to forgive you, I am sure Andraste would wish me to do so. Did she not call out from the flames to ask the Maker to forgive those who burned her? But you have done me no wrong, Chancellor. You followed your conscience and did as
The Chancellor gives one curt nod of acceptance, sits up straight, and then slowly stands. Gim wipes her eyes upon the hem of her under tunic, Stupid old coot. She doesn’t know why his stubborn insistence on suffering alone makes her teary. There may be pitched fighting and horrific deaths she has to witness soon, and she can’t afford to over-react like this.

As she finishes removing the moisture from her face, she hears the door of her cabin shut. The Chancellor is gone. Gim stands, retrieves her tool pouch, and then slowly walks to her cabin door. When she comes out of her cabin, she does not see the Chancellor anywhere.

As she walks to the Chantry, she sees many going about their business, and while everyone is moving right along, no one looks panicked, and she sees no sights that would be unthinkable on a normal day. The members of the Inquisition are doing what is needful.

Once she reaches the Chantry, she first tells Josephine about the sorts of mages who should continue on to Haven, and then she finds Mother Giselle, who has set up a small clinic in an alcove. Gim must look pretty bad when she walks up, because Mother Giselle immediately leads her into the currently empty room where Leliana and Josephine sleep. Perhaps Mother Giselle now uses the bed vacated by Cassandra. Yes, that would make sense.

Mother Giselle says, “Herald, are you alright?”

Gim, fighting back sobs that increase the more she talks, says, “I’m going to be fine, Mother Giselle. I’m going to be strong and useful and decisive and helpful; I really am. But for just one moment, would you mind if I was very, very weak in front of you?”

Mother Giselle’s warm arms go around Gim, and Mother Giselle’s warm voice says, “Of course, dear child,” and she holds Gim’s head to her chest, rocks Gim, and rubs her back. When Gim’s sobs still, Mother Giselle holds Gim’s chin and raises Gim’s wet face. Mother Giselle must have pockets, because now she is wiping Gim’s face while murmuring reassuring nothings. Finally she says, “Grief does not make you weak. I think weak is something you have never been in your entire life. Now, shall we go help some people?”

Gim nods, and Mother Giselle takes her hand and leads her back to the clinic in the alcove.

And that’s what Gim and Mother Giselle do: they help people.

Chapter End Notes

Once again I thank Buttsonthebeach, who asks good questions.

Comments or criticisms welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.

Thank you for your lovely comments. They keep me writing.
The Breach, Dear Friends, Once More

Chapter Summary

The Breach.

Chapter Notes

This is the next-to-the-last chapter in Part 1.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Lando thinks Mother Giselle was clever to have set up the clinic right in front of the entrance to the war room. Anyone who comes to learn of the path out or to store their escape supplies is waylaid by Gim and swiftly examined. Lando knows Gim asked for his help as a kindness, but he doesn’t mind. Worrying about the day will not help, and mending small hurts can never be bad. As the people come and go, Lando keeps expecting Gim to collapse from exhaustion, but she isn’t showing any signs of slowing down. Perhaps all that time Solas spent lecturing Gim on magic was more than flirtation.

Finally there is only one last person to be tended to. Gim is lowering inflammation or increasing flexibility or something she thinks will make her patient safer on a dangerous trek. As that person prepares to leave, Cassandra and Leliana approach, looking grim. Lando’s heart rises on seeing his mate, but he knows better than do more than give a brief but warm smile when Cass is all business.

Leliana says, “I am sorry, Heralds, but the mages are here, and we have indications that an invading force is nearer than we were aware this morning. If we are to have any chance of closing the Breach, you will need to leave, now.”

Gim, who is seated next to a pallet, says, “Of course. One moment.” She turns and grasps Mother Giselle’s hand in a way that makes Lando think she is asking Mother Giselle to help her up.

Within moments, Mother Giselle’s expression of surprise is followed by a sharp inhalation, and when her face settles back into her characteristic serene calm, Lando realizes that her resting expression has changed: he never noticed her chronic pain until it was gone. Gim doesn’t even act like she has done anything—she just turns and walks out of the Chantry, with Cassandra and Leliana close behind her.

Lando turns to Mother Giselle and says, “She is just distracted.”

Mother Giselle says, “Of course, dear boy. Maker be with you.” As he walks away, Lando notices Mother Giselle touching her right hip with investigative pats. He will never tire of watching Gim do that.

Lando quickly catches up with the women, and they all walk out of the gates of Haven. As they approach the command tents, Lando sees a group of seven or so mages on horseback. Grand Enchanter Fiona is at the head, and Lando recognizes one of the new mages as the devout young man who he and Dorian found repeating the Chant of Light in the Redcliffe dungeons.
Cassandra says, “I’m afraid we have no horses. It is not too far. Even though your mounts must be
tired, would it be possible to take the Heralds and ...?”

While Cassandra is talking, Fiona raises a hand imperiously; Cassandra’s request fades into silence.
Fiona says dramatically, “You provided for us in our hour of need; we provide for you.” She
gestures, and the riders part so that Lando can see seven horses complete with tack, appearing from
the midst of the tents. With a more casual, perhaps even conspiratorial tone, Fiona smiles and says,
“You can thank Cullen for warning us.” All four of them thank Fiona, but now is not the time for
ceremony, and they are all soon ahorse and moving. Leliana waves goodbye and practically runs
back into the town.

Gim is at the head of the procession with Fiona, Cassandra has taken rearguard, and Lando is in the
midst of the mages. Lando takes a moment to marvel over how much more comfortable he is riding
an unfamiliar horse than he would have been when they first got to Haven. Lando gets no-nonsense
introductions to the surrounding mages; he ends up riding along next to Lysas, the young man who
Lando remembers from the Redcliffe future. Lysas is tense, but he also appears to be proud to have
been chosen to come.

Gim and Fiona seem to be conferring heavily. Lando hears snatches of questions about what magic
branches each mage specializes in and who is good at shields. Lando will leave all that to those with
actual, native magic. He will stick his magic-encrusted hand in the air at the right time and endure
what he must.

Lando looks up to see Lysas picking through some potions while reciting something. Among the
potions are three bottles of lyrium. Of course there is lyrium. Lando says, “Lysas, Gim has a
sensitivity to lyrium. Please don’t take any near her unless it is an emergency. Please make sure the
other mages know.” Lysas nods; he is almost painfully eager to be helpful. He immediately falls back
to talk to the mages behind them. This leaves only Fiona who doesn’t know about Gim’s lyrium
peculiarities. Lando rides up alongside Gim and Fiona.

“Fiona,” he says, “We should have thought of this before, but I just saw Lysas preparing his potions
and he had lyrium with him.” Gim blanches, and Fiona watches Gim’s reaction closely. Lando
continues, “Gim has a sensitivity to lyrium, perhaps arising from her half-dwarven ancestry. I asked
Lysas to warn the other mages to not take lyrium near Gim unless it is an emergency.”

Fiona raises a curious eyebrow, but she seems to contain her inquiries. She says, “Of course,
Herald.”

Gim says, “Solas and I have studied the Breach extensively, and we don’t think anyone will need to
replenish mana during our attempt. However, as you know, we fear there may be fighting after. Your
people should use their judgement then. I wouldn’t want my sensitivities to affect their ability to
fight.” Lando drops back as Gim and Fiona continue to talk tactics.

Lando isn’t sure if they are taking the same route they did when they first went to the Temple with
Cassandra. Everything looks so different—certainly less bloody. Finally, he is sure he recognizes the
tower and bridge where they first met Chancellor Roderick. Even more than the location, Lando
recognizes the two humans, the elf, and the dwarf striding towards them across the bridge.

As they get close, Lando calls, “You don’t seem particularly surprised to see us.”

Dorian, smiling broadly in a manner that wouldn’t be out of place in a drawing room, says, “I wish I
could say it is all due to our clever foresight, but I’m afraid you can put it down to our underlying
pessimism. We are running short of time before they get here, aren’t we?” While Dorian is talking,
Solas nods respectfully to Fiona and then Solas seems to pass some sort of unspoken message to
Gim. Whatever it is, Gim relaxes.

Gim says, “Let’s just get this over with. Everyone up! Varric, if you would rather ride with me, I am sure Solas or Krem would give you a leg up.” Krem immediately steps forward and drops to one knee, leaving his right thigh parallel to the ground, right next to Gim’s horse. Gim moves her foot on that side out of the stirrup, and Varric clambers up behind Gim. Varric has a quick low-voiced conversation with Gim while the other three also find horses. Lando has the impression that Varric has said something funny, but he doesn’t inquire.

It is not a long ride, but the tension is thick and in place of talk, each pair of eyes is constantly scanning the terrain. When they reach the stairs of the Temple, they are forced to leave their horses behind. Krem, claiming he is “useless down there” offers to stand guard at the temple entrance with the horses. Leaving the horses with Krem does allow them to address the Breach sooner, because Krem will handle all the logistics of keeping them secure. Just before he drops out of sight, Lando turns around to wave to Krem, only to find Krem’s anxious eyes lingering on the space ahead of Lando where someone has lately stood.

Solas leads everyone to the position he has chosen and positions the new mages along with Dorian on a raised platform behind those who originally stabilized the Breach. Lando stands a few paces from Gim, Solas is directly behind and equidistant between them, and Cassandra and Varric are on alert at the ends. The place is just as ugly as it was before, and the red lyrium crystals are just as oppressive, but Lando has seen no human bodies frozen in death today. Laying those poor souls to rest must have been a detail that no one thought to tell the Heralds about.

Lando supposes they are ready. He actually finds it jarring that there is no sort of preparation needed—he might even welcome the killing of a few demons. He thinks Cassandra feels similarly. She looks around the area and then reluctantly calls, “Mages!” She doesn’t look like she knows what to say after that. She looks at Solas, who takes over.

Solas says, “As soon as the Herald places his hand in the air, focus all your power past him. There is no need to focus on Gim when she completes the circuit.” Solas then turns to Gim, then both Gim and Solas turn to Lando and Solas says, “When you are ready, Lethal’lin.”

So there is nothing to do but plant his feet shoulder width apart, square his shoulders, and raise his right hand into the air; his hand erupts in the expected pain. As soon as he does so, a shield pops around him, and many threads of power hit him. Lando was expecting the pain to increase when the threads of power touch him, but the opposite happens. Lando was in more pain closing rifts in Redcliffe than he is now.

Lando spares a quick glance at Gim, and her up-thrust hand: the green ribbons of light are writhing just as expected. Lando can’t explain why he thinks this, but he thinks Solas’s attention is split between the two Heralds. Lando wonders if he is somehow failing to put enough of himself into the effort, but never before has he had to do anything but endure, and endurance is not an issue now. His confusion must show on his face, because Cassandra is looking at him with an expression filled with concern. He wishes he could spare the concentration to tell her that his confusion is only that it isn’t more difficult—that it is so much easier than their first time here. Lando guesses that the seven--no, eight because of Dorian--extra mages make a huge difference.

As he is thinking this, the ribbons show signs of finishing their dance, and the Breach winks out with a large green pop and a wave of forceful air. Lando drops to one knee and cradles his hand; he is fearful that his lack of pain was just numbness and his hand might actually be destroyed.

Soon he hears grunts and shuffling behind him and he feels someone--Cassandra--helping him up. She says, “You did it,” and his arms rise and wrap themselves around her. Glancing behind her,
Lando sees many of the others picking themselves off the ground. The mages begin cheering. Lando turns to see Gim hug Solas and then Varric. Soon she runs to him, takes his hand, and examines it. She smiles up at him and drops his hand.

Solas stands still and a look of suspended judgement holds his face. Everyone in their party turns their attention to Solas; Fiona raises her hand, and the mages quiet their cheering. After a few minutes, Solas says, “The heavens are scarred but calm. The Breach is sealed.”

Cassandra pulls out of Lando’s arms. She says, “This is a victory, but our tasks are not yet done. We must return to Haven.” Cassandra starts for the stairs first, but Lando is right behind her. When they reach the horses, Krem looks very relieved, but he doesn’t stop counting people appearing until he sees the last of their party members walk out with the mages.

Everyone is on high alert as they ride back. Cassandra, Krem, and Lando take the front this time, and Varric is the rearguard. Gim is in the middle, and she is in high glow. Lando sees several of the mages, including Fiona, stealing glances at her. Gim’s awareness is clearly ahead of—or maybe it is around--them, and she pays them no mind. The sun is falling as they ride. It should be nearly dark as they get back to Haven.

When they hit the last bridge before the frozen lake, the bells of Haven start ringing. Leliana and Cullen are at the far exit of the bridge, and they have several scouts with them. Cassandra says, “Cullen! I thought we were to meet you at the rendezvous point!”

At almost the same time, Fiona says, “Who is with my people?”

Cullen gesturing with his hands to indicate calm, says, “They are with Iron Bull and they are well protected. The hostile force is coming here, and your people are comfortable. I came back with many of our fighters to help make sure we get everyone out.” Turning to the Heralds, Cullen says, “Congratulations on closing the Breach, Heralds, now let’s get you to safety. Give your horses to these scouts, they know game trails and will try to get the horses out. We can’t take them through the underground path.”

Everyone dismounts and waits for the scouts to take the leads. Fiona appears particularly reluctant to leave her horse. She is whispering and rubbing the mare’s nose and looking distressed. One of the scouts assures her she will take good care of Fiona’s mare, and Fiona straightens her back and walks away.

Cullen impatiently gets everyone moving quickly. As they walk, Cassandra says, “Have we seen them? Under what banner do they march?”

Cullen says, “No banner; it’s a massive force, most of which is not on this side of the mountain. We are going to need to distract them while we keep evacuating.”

Cole suddenly appears next to Lando. Several people start, and there are gasps. Cole says, “The Elder One comes for the Heralds. There.” His arm extends and the outcrop overlooking the lake is lit by torches. Two figures are discernible: A Templar with a greatsword, and a gigantic figure that looks more like an undead giant than a human. He has red lyrium crystals coming out of his body, and he is even more frightening than he is disgusting. Several trails of torch-carrying opponents are progressing towards them. The enemies will reach them very soon.

Cullen says, “Sampson. I know him. He will not make this easy.”

Cole says, “The Elder One does not care who fights. If the Heralds escape into the tunnels, he will follow.”
Gim says, “Then we will not escape; we will fight.”

Cullen says, “I don’t think you understand how large this force is. Most of it is still over the mountain.”

Leliana says, “While you were gone, I had the trebuchets loaded and aimed at the snowy hills. If you wait for the right moment and use the north and south trebuchets, you may be able to cut the size of the force considerably.”

By now they are near the entrance to Haven, and many soldiers and several scouts join them near the northern trebuchet. Cassandra and Krem separate to provide more of a bulwark between the invaders and the mages; the mages and scouts move behind them. Several additional shield bearers come and arrange themselves similarly. One scout is positioned at the firing lever for the trebuchet, and while she has a bow, Lando has no doubt that she intends to stick close to the trebuchet.

The wait for battle is tense but short. Some of the opponents seem to be the Venatori that Lando saw in Redcliffe, but others range from people who look like almost normal Templars to monstrous red lyrium amalgamations that seem to be more crystal than flesh. Lando has fought everything from demons to bears to humans in his life, and there are only two things special about the red lyrium monsters: first, he really doesn’t want them, or their blood, to touch him, and second, they need to be about dead before they stop fighting.

Lando’s mindset while fighting is always very different than that of his normal, rational life. The battle ebbs and flows; he sometimes has a shield around him, and he sometimes does not; people around him fight, get hurt, and even die. He keeps constant tabs on his party members—especially Cassandra and Gim—and he fights where he instinctively thinks he can hurt them the most. As usual, Cassandra is a masterful warrior. Just for an instant, Lando thinks of the vulnerability of his tiny daughter, but he knows that is not productive; he takes out his frustration on a red lyrium-infested behemoth.

After several waves of enemies, Lando hears someone report to the trebuchet scout that the opponents are all on this side of the mountain. Next thing he knows, the trebuchet goes off, the ammunition hits the mountain side, and a distant avalanche takes out a large fraction of the Elder One’s forces. The stragglers near the trebuchet retreat or are quickly dispatched, and the Inquisition fighters do some cheering.

A new scout appears in their midst, and this one says, “Heralds! The south trebuchet is overrun. We will need help if we are to fire it!” Immediately, the entire ball of bloody rage decamps south, fighting stray combatants on the way.

The opponents are not so thick here as they were at this trebuchet, and it looks like it is going to be comparatively easy, but neither of the scouts who seemed to be concerned with the trebuchets are with them. Gim is standing near the siege engine, but Lando knows she could never set it off. He steps up, and as he always does, he acts as her hands. This one has been aimed well, and the avalanche takes out a huge fraction of the enemy forces. People who thought they were doomed are beginning to believe the Inquisition can survive this, and the cheering is wild this time.

The cheering stops and everyone runs as a massive flying dragon appears and flies right at the lately-launched trebuchet. The dragon breaths some sort of fiery projectile, and the trebuchet explodes like it was made out of dried twigs. The dragon flies away to make another pass, and Lando shouts, “Everyone to the gates!”

Most of the people surrounding Lando take off for the gate immediately, but Lando’s normal party moves more slowly, carefully checking for injured people or those who otherwise need help. As they
move, the dragon passes overhead and over Haven and it breathes fire repeatedly.

They find the first evidence of important buildings in flame when they get to the Forge. The blacksmith, trying to get into the building next to the forge, but the attack from the dragon has left the building in ruins, and the door is wedged shut. Varric, who must have spent a fair amount of time near the forge while making the rings, immediately lends a shoulder to shove things out of the way so Harritt can get in.

Cassandra says, “Harritt! Whatever is in there cannot be worth your life! Get to the gate!”

Harritt says, “Yes, Lady Seeker. I won’t be but a moment. I wouldn’t be able to ‘old up me head if I lost the family hammer. It’s just inside.” By the time he finishes talking, the door is open, he grabs the hammer, and all of them run to the gate, passing several dead fighters and mages. Among the dead is Lysas. Lando had just been talking to him earlier, and he had been so proud to be selected to fight back with the Inquisition. Lando muses briefly that Lysas actually lived longer in the horrific future in the Redcliffe dungeons than he did in this supposedly better path. This won’t be the last person he knows who dies. Please, just don’t let any of the dead be one of his particular friends...

When they get to the gate, Cullen is frantically waving people into the gate. He is calling, “Move, move!” And when it looks like everyone is in, he shuts and bars the gate. Why it matters when the dragon is just flying over the walls, Lando has no idea.

Cullen turns to Lando and says, “We need everyone back to the Chantry! It’s the only building that might hold against...that beast!” After a pause, Cullen drops his hands in a gesture of defeat and says, “At this point...just make them work for it.” Cullen seems awfully pessimistic for a man with a secret escape route, but looking around at the burning buildings and the sounds of screams on both sides, Lando understands.

After a quick conference, Lando, Cassandra, Varric, and Gim go one way, and Solas, Dorian, and Krem go the other. They want to make sure they get everyone they can to the Chantry.

The dragon isn’t the only opponent of worth still threatening them, and right inside the gates, Lando’s party finds Lysette fighting a handful of red lyrium monstrosities. They quickly dispatch the enemies, and Lysette thanks them and heads to the Chantry. As they move uphill, they hear screaming from the tavern.

They head for the tavern, finding more opponents as they go. Just as they reach the tavern door, the sound of timber crashing cuts off all other sound, and when the crashing stills, the screaming does not resume. Cassandra bashes in the burning door, and Lando almost wishes she hadn’t; nothing living is in the tavern any longer. Why had these people not evacuated earlier when they were asked? Flissa had said that she was needed, but no one will ever be able to depend on Flissa again. Lando would feel guilty if he had the time for it, but there are more opponents, more fires, and possibly more people to save.

Cassandra spots bodies down near Solas’s cabin, and they run up to drag blessedly-alive Minaeve and Adan away from some explosive pots just before the fire spread to the pots. Those two run for the Chantry, and it seems there is no one more to save on this side of Haven.

As they reach the Chantry, they reunite with the other half of their party. All three of them are looking grim, and Lando figures they weren’t able to save everyone on their pathway either. There are a few more Venatori around the Chantry, but they are quickly dispatched. When they reach the Chantry doors and begin tugging them open, Cullen ushers them all inside.

Cullen says, “Heralds, most of the townsfolk have started out, but anyone who has not made it to the
Chantry by now is unlikely to survive.”

Gim, still in high glow, says, “We made a sweep of Haven on the way in. Everyone on our side who is alive has come into the Chantry.”

Cullen looks like he might like to argue, but his eyes shift around her glow. He says, “That dragon can too easily find our townsfolk at the rendezvous point. It has stolen back all the time we saved with the preparations earlier today.”

Cole is suddenly standing next to Gim. He says, “I’ve seen an arch demon. I was in the Fade, but it looked like that.”

Cullen, sounding frustrated, says, “You were in the… I don’t care what it looks like. I only care that it can kill all the people that we have worked so hard to save.”

Cole says, “The Elder One doesn’t care about the people of Haven. He only wants the Heralds.”

Lando steps forward and says, “Then we will go out to him. The rest of you can get away.”

Cole says, “He wants to kill you, but he will crush Haven, killing everyone here anyway. I don’t like him.”

Cullen says, “You don’t like him… Herald, there are no tactics to allow you to survive that monster. The only reason he doesn’t have his full army with him is the avalanches. Leliana had one more trebuchet made ready, but it would be suicide to use it: it will bury Haven. It would take luck beyond anything believable for you to survive that.”

Lando looks at Gim, and she looks back. He knows what she chooses. He chooses the same. Cullen has been watching their interchange. He says, “Perhaps you will surprise it, find a way…” Of course Cullen, with his soldier’s sensibilities understands. He would make the same choice.

Cullen isn’t the only one who sees their resolution. Every member of the party steps forward and gets ready to go out the Chantry front door. Cullen leaves them to their preparation and walks towards the war room. Just before he exits, he turns back and says, “Heralds, if we are to have a chance, if you are to have a chance, let that thing hear you!”

Lando turns to Cassandra, his heart full. He says, “You heard what Cole said. I will not have you be crushed as an afterthought when all he wants is us.” He raises his marked hand for emphasis, and Gim, who clearly agrees, raises hers.

Cassandra says, “Lando, you swore you would allow me to do my duty!”

Lando says, “Your duty does not include throwing away your life or…” Lando looks around him and decides he does not want to say anything about his daughter. “…throwing away your life to no purpose. I’ve seen this monster’s forces, vhenan. I must go out there: you know this. Gim must go out there: you know this. None of the rest of you need to go out there, and you must give us the gift of allowing us to believe we are buying something that truly matters to us.”

Gim turns to Solas and Varric. She says, “We know that you would give your lives to save us. You’ve proved this over and over. But you can’t. We are the one’s who can sacrifice this time. Solas, Varric…swear to me you will take care of her. Swear to me!”

Krem, without rising from the collapsed heap on the floor, says, “Well, my life is always forfeit for the contract. Solas and Varric can get Cassandra to safety. I can come out with you.” Dorian opens his mouth as if he is going to say something, but before he can, Lando interrupts him.
“No,” says Lando, “None of you can come with us. There is no purpose to it. You must all go and help the evacuees. We will join you if we can. If we cannot, then,” Lando swallows and reaches for Cassandra’s hand. She snatches her hand away and turns her back towards him. “You have to do what I would have done had I been there. What we would have done.”

Cole says, “It hurts them not to come with you. Sometimes it hurts to do the right thing.”

On hearing this, Solas looks up. He says, “I swear. You know I will keep my word.”

Varric says, “Chuckles and I have fought in more hopeless situations, eh, Chuckles?”

Cassandra turns back towards Lando and says vehemently, “I will never forgive you for this.”

Lando says, “I expect you will not. But will you kiss me goodbye anyway?”

Cassandra slams into him like she is trying to knock him down. Their armor clangs, and their faces smash, and their arms are around each other tight. For just a tiny moment, Lando thinks of the time of their angry congress outside Val Royeaux, but there is no time for that now. He strokes her hair and kisses her eyes and leans his forehead against hers. He says, “You are my heart and my home, and I will claw myself back to you; I will do so.” Cassandra sobs only once, turns, and marches into the war room. Krem and Dorian follow her.

Varric says, “Now, Beauty, I believe we have settled that you were going to spend tonight with me. I expect you to do your best to keep your promise.” Gim nods, but she does not speak. Varric gives Gim a feather’s weight kiss, a stroke of the face, and turns to follow the others.

Now it is Solas’s time to say goodbye. He stoops and says something in her ear, and then he is gone. Lando wonders why he didn’t kiss her. Gim’s eyes are bright, but she isn’t crying. She looks at Lando, and she looks strong. She looks like the healthy version of the driven creature he met in Redcliffe’s future. He imagine she can see similar purpose in him.

He puts out his left, unmarked, hand and says, “Let’s do this, Durgen’falon.”

She takes his hand in her right, unmarked, hand and says, “Let’s do this, Adhal’falon.”

They walk to the Chantry door, unbar it, and walk out into the smoke and fire that is Haven. It doesn’t take long for the first opponents to find them. There are some tough fights, but no one can hurt him with Gim behind him, and she knows how to stay out of the way. Lando screams and grunts and kills both Venatori and red lyrium monsters in the most showy way possible. The first two avalanches did their work, and these are just stragglers. The dragon does not appear, and neither do Sampson or the Elder One.

They slowly hack their way past Seggrit’s old shop to the last trebuchet. They can’t set it off when they haven’t got the attention they need, so they stay near the trebuchet and fight. Finally, the dragon flies overhead breathing fire. Lando doesn’t think the dragon wants to kill them yet: that would be too easy. He stands right on the siege engine and waits. The dragon paints the ground with fire, and a wood pile near them explodes, knocking them down. Lando begins to believe he was wrong about how the Elder One wants them to die.

As he is getting back on his feet and helping Gim up, the Elder One strides dramatically through the fire towards them. Lando has never seen a more menacing creature. He looks the other way to check for avenues of escape, and the dragon lands and rushes forward threateningly. Low voiced, Gim says, “That is no normal dragon.” Lando supposes it isn’t. It is decaying and there are holes in its wings. Perhaps it is somehow a reanimated dead dragon. It crowds them until they are wedged
between the Elder One and its beast.

The Elder One shouts, “Enough!” and then it gestures, and magic flows forth, knocking them onto the ground again.

When they get to their feet again, the Elder One begins declaiming. Something about his manner reminds Lando unpleasantly of Solas before he started to treat the rest of the party like people. The Elder One is skeletal and about twice as tall as Lando. He smells like the decay that dots his limbs. His voice, however, is rich and beautiful: the voice of a charismatic ruler. He says, “Pretenders! You toy with forces beyond your ken no more.”

Lando catches Gim’s look, and he knows she expects him to answer the questions. He shakes his head minutely and flicks his eyes towards the trebuchet trigger mechanism. Gim’s eyes flare for a moment and she takes a deep breath before saving, “What are you? Why are you doing this?”

The Elder One says, “Mortals beg for truth they cannot have. It is beyond what you are—what I was. Know me; know what you have pretended to be. Exalt the Elder One—the will that is Corypheus.” After a pause calculated to awe them, he continues with, “You will kneel.”

Gim, who Lando thinks is stalling says, “That doesn’t make sense. Let me understand!”

Corypheus says, “Your understanding is not required. If you gain it, consider yourself blessed.” Now Lando sees the red orb of power balanced in Corypheus’s giant left palm. He says, “I am here for the anchors. The process of removing them begins now.”

The red orb glows in Corypheus’s hand, and a matching color glows in his right hand as he thrusts it out to the two of them. Lando’s palm explodes in pain worse than any rift has ever caused. He drops to his knees and tries to hide his need to whimper. Gim drops near him, but just as on their first day, she drops too late for it to have been anything other than a desire to hide her lesser pain. She manages to touch his bare lowered neck, and Lando’s pain drops a little. Lando realizes the dragon is circling them and Corypheus has been talking; Lando has not been able to follow what Corypheus has said so far, but he finishes with, “…the gall.”

Gim still on her knees beside him, raises her marked hand and says, “What are these things meant to do?”

Corypheus says, “They are meant to bring certainty where there is none. For you, the certainty that I would always come for them.” Corypheus walks forward and grabs Lando by his marked hand and jerks him high in the air. Gim can no longer touch him and the pain explodes in his entire being again. Corypheus is lecturing to them—to him—but he can’t follow. Something about the throne of the gods being empty. All that Lando can perceive is pain; even Corypheus’s horrifying and putrid visage inches from his face can’t make a dent in Lando’s focus on his own agony. Finally Corypheus throws him against the trebuchet, and Gim runs after him. Once again, she gets her hand on his neck, and he starts to track what is going on.

Corypheus is saying, “The anchors are permanent. You have spoiled and divided a thing of beauty with your stumbling.” Lando begins to try to stand, but Gim holds him down. Corypheus and his dragon stride forward. Corypheus says, “So be it. I will begin again—find another way to give this world the nation and God it requires. And you. I will not suffer even an unknowing rival. You must die.”

Gim’s attention was over the trebuchet for a moment. She must have seen something. The skin of his neck where she is touching tingles and he feels clarity and well being flowing into his battered body. She says in a low voice to Lando, “Now!” and loudly to Corypheus she says, “Not today!” A shield
pops around Lando, and he leaps to his feet and activates the mechanism to launch the trebuchet.

For a moment, all of them, orb-carrier, dragon, Lando and Gim watch the siege ammunition fly through the air and hit a nearby snow-covered slope. The avalanche starts near and it is roaring towards them. Gim grabs his arm and starts pulling Lando away from the Elder One. They both break into a flat run. Lando feels a the air of a wingbeat and looks up to see the dragon flying away, and it looks like it is carrying Corypheus in its claws.

As the tons of snow roar toward them, a splintered-wood lined hole yawns before them. Lando stops and looks back to Gim, who is just behind him. She sees it, and she doesn’t stop. She jumps first, and he jumps after her. Soon he is flailing as he falls down and down and lands in cold and pain. He struggles to keep his wits, but he is failing. As he falls unconscious, all he can think of is Gim. And Cassandra. And Cassandra.

And his sweet Cassandra.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies to any who find my chapter title too obvious!

Comments and criticism welcome here or via email at kinako.aooo@gmail.com.

Thank you for all the comments.
Woe, Destruction, Ruin, and Decay

Chapter Summary

After the avalanche, Lando has to try to get the two of them back to the Inquisition.

Chapter Notes

There is a lot of Bioware dialog in here. Some differences, and some different stances.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Lando’s mind begins to touch bits and pieces of consciousness, he does not become fully sensible. Lando knows he is cold—he knows he is afraid—but where he is and how he got here... these things he does not know.

After a while of listening to an annoying noise, he realizes he recognizes the sound: groaning. After a greater while, he realizes that he is the one groaning. Now he knows one more thing: he is in pain. He tries to sit up, and the groaning tries very hard to mutate into a scream. Every breath is a stab and everything along his left side is similarly painful. The light is dim, but he is having trouble focusing even so. He wonders if Gim will be able to…Gim! Where is she?

The pain doesn’t recede, but its importance does. His head is swimming, and his impressions of sound and light are blurred and overwhelming. He swipes at his face to clear his vision and his confusion, and his hand hits broken wood before it hits his flesh, and when he tries to wipe his eyes, his hand becomes wet and sticky. He appears to be bleeding. From the feel of it, he hit his head hard when he landed. He feels around more and finds many broken boards or sticks. He forces himself to still and then to move slowly. He doesn’t fully remember or understand, but he is hurt and he needs to find Gim. That’s all he needs to understand.

He forces his brain to take stock of what is observable. The clatter of his own pulse, the roar of his own pain, the sound of creaking wood: these are all thundering through his awareness, but there is more to perceive. There is a thin blue light, there is an uneven surface under him, and there is the sound of dripping water.

He finds out quickly that his left arm is not obeying him, but he persists in commanding the rest of his body. He is in less pain when he holds his breath, but that only works for so long. Inch by inch he manages to roll and squirm past the pain until he slides off of the broken, shifting mass that he seems to have landed on. When he finishes, he is more or less sitting on his right haunch on solid ground. As he moves, the pain doesn’t disappear, but he manages to relegate it to background misery. Once he is upright, the patches of dim and darker across the paler ground make more sense. The green light of the mark on his right hand flairs, and while this is just one more pain, the nausea it brings may overcome him. The nausea fades as he realizes that there is another green light flaring in the room, and that one is attached to a dark pile that is just the right size to be a small person.

Lando tries to dig in his right boot and propel himself towards his goal, but his boot slips and he gets nowhere. He tries again--adding some scrabbling with his right gauntlet--and he makes a little
progress. After many excruciating minutes of this, he manages to get close enough to be sure it is Gim. A burst of activity, and he can touch her foot.

She isn’t moving, but just to put his hand on her leggings brings him hope. He shakes her ankle back and forth and says hoarsely, “Gim! Gim! Please, Durgen’falon, wake!” but she doesn’t move. He pulls himself further towards her head. Terrified, he awkwardly rolls her onto her back. He is dreading the unseeing stare of death, but her eyes are closed and her face is blank. She is limp, but she is not stone-cold. He collapses down, brings his face directly to hers, places his ear over her mouth, and holds his own breath while waiting...Yes, she breathes! He croons to her, pats her face, and shakes her, but there is no indication that she is waking—or even that she is wakeable. If she were able to wake, she would do so.

She is too cold. He drags himself back into a semi-sitting position and pulls; they move towards each other on the slippery surface. He gets some of her into his lap and he holds her close. Gim may be too insensate to feel warmth, but he feels better. “I’ve got you,” he croaks in a broken voice. “Don’t you worry.” He rocks a little and strokes her hair. Unfortunately, his affection leaves dark and bloody smears on her passive face.

Looking around, Lando sees signs that this is not a cave but a constructed tunnel. His wits are coming back: the only such tunnel Lando has ever heard of this close to Haven is the one that was used as an escape route for the villagers. If they are in the tunnel that the whole village used, does that mean they have a chance of rescue? If he makes Gim comfortable—if he can keep them warm—will someone come for them? Cassandra has the twin to his ring. She will feel the a pull to here, so she will know where he is! “Gim,” he says, “Your rings might save us.” He concentrates on the ring, and he does feel a faint pull to the east—the rings do work.

But, no. Cass will feel the pull to Haven, and they all probably heard the final avalanche. No one will have any reason to believe anything but that he and Gim are crushed under the avalanche—perhaps even killed by the dragon before the avalanche fell. Waiting for rescue would only turn their supposition into reality. For that matter, it is possible that the avalanche has covered whatever the exit is, and there may be no way for anyone to get in or anyone to get out. Lando’s sense of doom increases.

He looks down at Gim. “What would you tell me?” he says. “You would tell me to calm down. You would tell me to breathe.” Lando closes his eyes; He takes a few deep breaths. He doesn’t ignore the increased pain on expanding his chest, but he tries to breathe through it—to incorporate that feeling into his awareness without letting it control him or make him panic.

As he concentrates on his breathing, he finds himself thinking of Varric. He remembers talking to Varric about winning at tavern games. He hears Varric’s voice say, “Braids, there are times when you must assume the cards have the most favorable placement, because you can’t win any other way.” Lando must assume they can get both of them out, because otherwise they are already dead. Lando isn’t going to let Gim die without trying every possible alternative. Lando’s gut clenches: he isn’t going to let Cassandra raise their little girl alone without trying every possible alternative over and over and over again.

“So, Durgen’falon, what is the first thing to do?” he asks. Gim is silent, but he knows what she would say: Figure out which direction is out. Cassandra is to the east, but this hallway is north-south. His first guess would be to go north, but does that mean the tunnel goes under the lake—or perhaps it skirts around it? Are there other clues? Lando looks around again, squinting in the aqueous light. The light! Lando, like all elves, has excellent night vision, but even the the best night vision won’t allow for seeing in the complete absence of light. The hole they fell through is covered with snow. Why can he see? Why is the entire tunnel as visible as a night with only Satina in the sky?
Lando looks up, and he sees three glowing blue spots on the ceiling: two disks and a triangle. Someone left them a hint as to what direction to go. He kisses the top of Gim’s head and says, “Do you think that was Solas, Durgen’falon? Or perhaps Dorian? Do you think they really thought we would go this way, or they were just taking a chance?” Did they leave anything else? He sees nothing unexpected near him, but up a ramp near the exit to this chamber, there might be a mark on the doorway. Perhaps it is wishful thinking, but he thinks the arch of the far doorway has a blue glow to the right of center. “Gim,” he says, “do you see it too?” Time to find out.

He can’t move either of them if Gim stays in his lap. He kisses her head again and says, “I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to put you down for a moment.” He gently places her back on the ground. For a moment, he considers getting one of the broken pieces of wood to put under her head, but he decides he is just delaying the inevitable. He must try to get up.

His first thought is to start by getting on all fours, but his left arm still isn’t listening to him. His left leg hurts more than his right, but it is moving when asked. He scrambles and grunts and cries out in pain until he manages to get onto his knees, his boot toes, his right elbow, and his head. He pushes hard, and he manages to get one boot sole onto the ground. After some time to pant and recover, he pushes again, and he is in a precarious, supported squat. He gathers his strength and then makes it up. He is standing. He takes a couple of half steps, assuring himself he can walk. He can’t walk smoothly, or quickly, but he can walk.

What he can’t do is pick Gim up with one arm. His walk to the ramp at the end of the room starts like a lurch and ends in a shuffle, but he makes it there, and the ramp is really no harder than flat ground. When he gets to the top of the ramp, he finds a pristine, full, pack. He mutters thanks and moves to open the pack, but doing so with one hand is very awkward.

He suddenly finds himself thinking of Krem. Krem is always teasing, but when it comes to difficult things, Krem never shies away. He can hear Krem’s voice saying, “A soldier knows when he has to do distasteful things.” This is when Lando realizes that he knows why his left arm won’t move, and he knows he can’t wait for anyone else to deal with it. He’s seen Gim help people with such problems even when she couldn’t risk a glow. There is no reason he can’t try to improve his mobility before he starts doing things that need two hands.

So he clears his mind, and he summons every mental power he has in the service of relaxing his shoulder. His left arm is hanging with only gravity controlling it. He hunches forward, and then he begins smoothly rotating his body towards his left side, curling up until at the apex of the curl, he brings up his right hand and snaps his shoulder back into the socket. A brief grunting scream through clenched teeth, and he gingerly bends his left arm and opens and shuts his left hand. This might not have worked, and he would not have done this without a trained healer in any other situation, but he’s lucky, and this is an improvement.

Now he can open the pack. There is food, a water flask, a bedroll, furs, two daggers in sheaths he can attach to his belt, potions, two bunches of strong cording, and—at the very bottom—Solas’s odd bone-pendant on a cord. After once again sending silent thanks to his people, he shoves the pack back together, picks it up with his right hand, and returns to Gim.

First he tries to get her to take some water, but anything he puts in her mouth just slides out. When he can hear dampness in her breathing, he gets scared. He can’t make her swallow. What if he drowns her out of ignorance? He contents himself with using a bit of the water to clean her face.

He quickly throws back a healing potion and then pulls Gim into his lap again. He sits quietly and monitors himself. The pain is a little less, and he can move more easily. He eats some of the food and drinks some of the water. He puts one of the furs down on the ground and places Gim, curled on her
side, onto it. Because he can’t think of anything else to do with it, he puts Solas’s pendant around Gim’s neck.

It’s time to prepare to move. He has to decide how to carry Gim. He could carry her in his arms, with the pack on his back, or he could sling her over his shoulder, with the pack strapped to his front. He doesn’t like the thought of her bouncing against his back. What will he do if he encounters an enemy? He had his sword when he fell. Can he find it? Can he use it? Can he carry it, the pack, and Gim safely? He decides against even looking for it. He decides that carrying Gim as he would carry a child in his arms will allow him to monitor her, and it will be less likely to make whatever injuries she has worse.

He makes sure the pack is secured to his back and the daggers are at his side, and then he picks up Gim, still nestled in the fur. She isn’t very heavy, and the very familiarity of carrying her soothes his soul. He says, “I’ve got you. I still owe you some carting about from the time you made me the macarons. It’s time for me to earn my keep.” He starts to walk into the next chamber.

The healing potion and the regular movement are helping with his discomfort. He knows Gim would tell him he is just happier because now he has a plan and is acting on it. For a moment, he imagines Dorian saying, “That’s it, old chap; pull yourself together. You have expectations to uphold.” That thought almost makes him smile.

When he gets to the next chamber and looks up, he is momentarily dismayed because the arrow on the ceiling is now pointing back the way he came. Fortunately, this room is damp, and the passing of so many feet has left signs; he now realizes the arrows were to help him to find the pack. He keeps going the way he started.

The going is slow, and each bit of progress is hard won. Each room has three blue marks on the ceiling, but there are no more packs. He has to stop briefly to recover in almost every room. Time moves slowly as he makes minute progress through each chamber, and yet all progress in the past blurs together. When he finds the ice chamber with the shades and a couple of demons in it, he has no idea if he has traversed two chambers or twenty.

The shades don’t seem to have seen him, but he and Gim can’t get by undetected. He puts Gim down on her fur, removes his pack, and puts both daggers in his hands. When he moves forward, they all rush him, and there are too many. He has no backup this time—no friendly bolts, no taunting shield, and no healing. For some reason he pictures his first rift, and the time Solas grabbed his hand and thrust it into the air. There is no rift here, but then there is nothing to lose either. He sheathes his right-hand dagger and thrusts his marked hand high. The mark flares, he is temporarily blinded, and silence falls. In his mind, he sees Solas nod and say, “You are becoming quite proficient at this.”

As he squints into the dim light, he still sees no opponent, but he might see a more golden light at the exit to this chamber. He checks on Gim, and then he moves forward to investigate the change.

The light was from wan fires outside the tunnel, for he has made it to the open air. There is a burning wagon right at the exit, and he goes to look at it. The wagon obviously foundered in the snow, but why is it on fire? Was it sacrificed for warmth? If so, why did they leave it? It’s burning so slowly that it can’t have been very satisfyingly warm. The shafts and the harness are still intact: such a waste to leave behind. His frugal Dalish heart is offended. Oh, how much he would give for a halla!

Thinking of halla gives him an idea. He removes the intact shafts, rings, and harness from the burning wagon. He takes them back to the tunnel entrance, retrieves the pack, and sets about using the daggers and the cording to turn the shafts, harness, rings, bedroll, and furs into a travois with a secure nest for Gim lashed between the shafts. He carries her to the travois, secures her in place with
the furs around her, and then drops the modified harness over his shoulders. Cassandra is east, and many, many villagers have gone east. He will brave the wind and the snow and follow them.

Progress is slow, but even with the wind and the cold, this is easier than the beginning of his journey. He sees signs of the villagers’ passing: an abandoned pot, an old fire, a lost shoe. He trudges--falling into a trance. He may do this forever, and he will do so if he has to. Every once and a while he stops to check on Gim, but the only change is the growth of a hard bump behind her ear.

Eventually their path goes through many trees, and while he appreciates the minor windbreak, he knows better than to walk or rest under one of the big snow-covered trees. He does eat the last of the food here, and he finishes the water, fills the flask with snow, and puts it on the travois next to Gim. He kisses her forehead again, and it is so cold. He can tell she is still breathing, and if he places his hand under her tunic, she is warm. He says, “We will get there, Durgen’falon. Don’t you worry.”

Lando resumes his role as Gim’s halla and trudges forwards. It is still dark, but it won’t be for long. Still dark? Lando isn’t even sure it is the same day that Corypheus attacked. In fact, thinking about it, it probably isn’t. They must be sure that he and Gim perished. Oh, Cassandra, hang on! What is he thinking of? As if Cassandra would ever give up on anything without proof! He can almost see her walking towards him through the gale.

Lando walks with renewed purpose, but the slogging is slow, and food or not, he is flagging. The new snow has covered most of the signs of passage, but the ring still pulls him east.

Slow movement turns into slower movement, and when Lando looks up and sees they are no longer in trees, he is surprised: he halfway believed he had stopped making progress sometime soon after he ate. Now there are large rocks peeking out of the snow on either side, and it looks like the fire pit ahead may actually still have embers.

Lando is so tired. He isn’t really in pain anymore. Somehow the desire to sleep is more of a challenge to his continued progress than the pain was. He considers rearranging the travois and taking a nap next to Gim, but something is really wrong with her. He has to keep going. He angles away from the rock ahead of him so he can pass it, and he stumbles, falling to his knees.

Just as he falls, he hears Varric’s voice yell, “There they are!” but he is sure it isn’t real.

Next he hears Cassandra’s familiar “Thank the Maker!” and he is even more sure that despite his determination to keep walking, he has slipped into a dream. If he is dreaming, he has failed. Then there are arms around him, pulling him up. Are they real? When he raises his head, he sees Cassandra, and she looks so horrified--could he dream of a Cass who looked so distressed? She says, “Oh, my love! You are hurt!” She hugs him close, and he remembers his pain. Maybe it isn’t a dream.

Lando should be happy to see her. He probably is, but he is strangely numb and stretched. He has nothing left but attention for the most immediate concern: Gim is hurt. He croaks, “Solas...”

Lando hears Solas’s voice behind him. He says, “I am here. I have her.”

Lando says, “She can’t wake up. She...She’s hurt.” Cassandra is lifting the modified harness off of Lando’s shoulders. She looks very worried. Varric is here. Varric also looks very worried; Varric’s eyes move between Lando and the lump on the travois that is Gim. Solas, eyes closed, is squatting down next to Gim, touching her head.

When Solas opens his eyes, he reaches into a bag. Lando recognizes it as Gim’s instrument bag, though he isn’t sure how Solas got it. Varric says, “Are you sure you want to do that here, Chuckles?
We could go back to camp.”

Solas gestures, and half of Gim’s hair falls away to the ground. Solas without looking up from Gim says, “I would prefer to take a living Gim back to camp.” He gestures again, and the air warms, and several floating lights appear around Gim. Cassandra tries to pull Lando away, and Lando is going to coherently explain that he needs to stay to see what Solas is doing, but all that comes out is a whimper. She seems to understand, because she does not pull him anymore.

Solas uses one of Gim’s tools. It is a small drill she uses to do bone work. Solas begins to drill into Gim’s now hairless skull. The numbness he feels helps here. It makes perfect sense to him that Solas would want to do that. He’s not sure why it seems so natural to him for Solas to do that, but good for Solas. Lando hears a little pop, and some watery red fluid comes out of the hole that Solas has drilled behind her ear. Solas gestures again, and the hole behind her ear closes. Within minutes, Lando sees Gim’s eyes flutter for the first time since they fell.

Solas strokes her forehead and says, “No, do not wake, ma’lath. You need to go to your Thaig. All is well. Lando is safe. You are safe. We are safe.”

Lando looks at Solas. Solas who says Gim is safe—that he is safe. He looks back at Cassandra and Varric. Lando’s numbness might be going, because he is beginning to feel some intense emotion. He isn’t quite sure what it is, but it is overwhelming.

Varric says, “Braids, I think you might need to blink every once and a while.”

Lando hoarsely whispers, “I’m quite tired.” Then he begins to fall. He could fight it, but he doesn’t need to. He’s safe. Gim is safe. It’s ok to fall now. So for the second time in recent memory, he falls into darkness.

This time he does it without panic—with a faint smile on his face.

When Lando wakes again, he is warm, he is in a bedroll, and he is in an actual tent. He takes a deep breath, and it doesn’t hurt. He wonders if he owes that to Solas, Gim, or some other healer. He rolls onto his back, and instantly there is a warm woman nuzzling his neck. He slips his arm around her back and presses her to him. He says, “Have you forgiven me?”

Cassandra laughs her low, throaty laugh and says, “Do you want the real answer or the flippant answer?” He isn’t worried. No matter what she says, her voice tells him there is no wedge between them.

He says, “Give me the flippant one later. I find I...hunger..for truth just now.”

She says, “I have been unfair to you. I have treated you as if I was the only one with obligations beyond our relationship. I made you swear that you would allow me to do my duty to the Maker and to Thedas before my duty to you, and I made you no such promise. It shamed me when I realized this. I assure you, I have paid adequate penance while waiting for you.”

Lando pulls her close and revels in being next to her. He slides his hand down her breastplate to her abdomen. He can’t really feel the shape of her body through her armor, but he just wants to feel nearer to his little family. Her eyes sparkle and her crooked smile looks indulgent. But there are things he needs to know, so he says, “I have so many questions. I imagine you do also. How far from camp were we when you found us? How did you get us back here?”

Cassandra says, “Solas picked up Gim, and Varric and I took turns pulling you on that contraption you created. It took us hours to return. Gim woke up on the trip back and insisted on healing you. I
thought Solas was going to refuse to put her down, but you can imagine what Gim thought of that. She appeared to feel quite guilty at having been unable to help you for the inconsequential reason that she was almost dead.” The last words are said with humor. Lando is happy he has a woman who can laugh through the staples of their grim world. All the humor drops out of Cassandra’s voice, as she says, “She said your injuries must have been excruciating and that you were so exhausted that it was remarkable that you got so far. She told us—and eventually the advisors—all about Corypheus, so don’t feel you need to explain that. It sounds terrifying.”

Lando, who doesn’t want to think about that undead monster, says, “Did you know about the pack that was left for us? Do you know who left the blue marks for us?”

Cassandra’s crooked smile now looks bitter. She says, “Oh yes, I know about the pack. It caused quite an uproar. Solas was accused of killing innocent people by leaving crucial supplies behind like that. Solas said he promised to do without and to replace anything he left behind. We supported him, but honestly, I think we all thought he was throwing those supplies away too. One pack in the middle of vast tunnels that you were not even trying to find? As for the marks, Solas made the first set, and then Dorian really got into doing them after that.”

Lando says, “The pack was right under the trebuchet and the hole that we fell down. I don’t think it was so very crazy to leave it there. I don’t think we would be here if he hadn’t done that. I also don’t think we would be here if you hadn’t come looking for us. The ring? I was afraid you would just feel the pull to where you would believe I was buried. As far as I could tell, I was just traveling between you and Haven.”

Cassandra says, “I couldn’t use it at first. I seem to require a certain mental quiet to use it, and the travel, while easy compared to your trip, was chaotic and divisive. Right now, I don’t think Cullen, Leliana, Josephine, and I are capable of agreeing on a single thing. Once we got here, I took a moment to collect my thoughts and concentrate, and I had the impression you were moving. This possibility left me in high emotion. Was it just wishful thinking? Were you in need and we abandoned you?”

“I was about to try to find Solas and Varric, when they found me. Solas asked me if I was well, and I exploded with my belief that you were alive and moving. Varric, being Varric, could not resist a comment. He said, ‘Then I take it that you are in favor of actually telling the others, before we leave to go get Lando and Gim. We’ve been split about that and just sneaking off while they weren’t looking.’ I hugged him, we got our packs, and we left.”

Lando, amazed, says, “So you didn’t tell the others you were leaving?”

Cassandra, with a bitter light to her eye, says, “As if I could sneak away from Leliana’s people! Oh I told them. I got a lecture from Cullen about how he expected someone in my position to behave more rationally and to be an example. Apparently I have let my carnal desires cloud my thinking. Leliana looked sad, but she told us to take supplies, and Josephine was clearly pretending to believe we could find you. I admit I might have been insufferable towards them when we finally returned to camp with you.”

“Why did Solas and Varric want to come back for us?” he asks.

Cassandra says, “Did you find Solas’s pendant in the pack?” When Lando nods, Cassandra says, “Something about that pendant allowed him to know Gim was alive but needed help. I think he would have turned back earlier, and alone, but his oath to you concerning my well-being stopped him.”

Lando’s voice breaks as says, “We were in trouble. It was hard.” He looks at her. He can see her
understanding of his understatement. She sees him. He says, “I feel ridiculously selfish for being so happy when the entire Inquisition is camped in the middle of the Frostbacks with no home, but all I want is in my arms.” He looks into her beautiful eyes, breathes in her scent, and gently kisses her. She kisses him back, but then she pulls away.

Looking mischievous, she pokes him in the chest as she says, “Liar. I have a bet with Varric about how long it will take before you demand to see Gim.”

Lando props himself up on his elbows and says, “Where is she?”

Cassandra says, “She is fine. She is in the healing tent.”

“Healing tent!” he exclaims, and he starts getting up and pulling on his boots.

Cassandra sits and puts a hand on his arm. She says, “We can go see her, but she is not a patient: she is healing others.”

Cassandra knows better than to stop him, so soon they both exit the tent and walk through the camp. The camp looks well-established, with several fires, a paddock, and more tents than Lando would have believed possible. There are people walking here and there with purpose, and there are others just sitting and watching a disturbance. As they get closer, Lando can hear and see that the disturbance is the advisors arguing. Cassandra leads him up to an tent with the side panels rolled all the way up, squeezes his arm briefly, and then she walks off to join the argument.

Lando ducks under the tent flaps and finds Gim, with hair, lounging on a cot. Lando says, “And I was told you were healing people.”

Gim leaps off the cot, wraps her arms around him and cries, “Oh, Lando! I’m so sorry for all you had to go through! And I was healing, but I seem to have run out of patients.” Lando looks at the rest of the tent and sees Chancellor Roderick sleeping on one of the cots. At first he is concerned for the Chancellor, but if Gim is resting, she has already tended to him. Cole is sitting at the Chancellor's head--whispering into the Chancellor’s ear. No doubt Cole will tell Gim if she is needed. Mother Giselle is sitting on a chair near Gim.

He looks back at Gim and reaches up to touch her hair in unspoken question. Gim places her hand over his and says, “I didn’t want to shock anyone. I fixed it in my Thaig before I woke on the way back. Remember how I got rid of the sunburst brand on my forehead? Like that.”

Lando says, "And now you are OK? Are you sure you shouldn't be resting?"

Gim pokes him and says, "Are you sure you shouldn't be in the mess tent rather than coming to find me?"

Mother Giselle says, “I was just counseling her to take a moment to relax while she could. Here, dear boy.” She hands him some hard tack and a hunk of cheese. Lando had not realized before he had food in his hand how hungry he is.

In between bites, Lando says, “It can’t be very relaxing to have to listen to that lot argue.”

Gim says, “They’ve been at it for hours.”

Mother Giselle says, “They have that luxury thanks to you two. The enemy could not follow and in time of doubt, we turn to blame. Infighting may threaten as much as this Corypheus.” Gim is looking at Mother Giselle sadly. Lando supposes his expression must be similar. Mother Giselle continues, “Our leaders struggle because of what we survivors witnessed. We saw our defenders stand...and
fall. And now we have seen them return. The more the enemy is beyond us, the more miraculous your actions appear. And the more our trials seem ordained. That is hard to accept, no? What ‘we’ have been called to endure? What ‘we,’ perhaps, must come to believe?”

Gim says, “We did almost die, Mother Giselle, and we would have were it not for some extraordinary people.” Gim grabs his hand and beams up at him.

Mother Giselle says, “Of course, but the people know what they saw. Or perhaps what they needed to see. The Maker works both in the moment, and in how it is remembered.”

Gim says, “Mother Giselle, I never tried to say the Heavens were not with us. We would never say that. But some of his most important help may have been to assemble a remarkable collection of people.”

Mother Giselle says, “I am pleased that you do not deny that Andraste is with you.”

Lando says, “Does not Benedictions say ‘Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadow. In their blood the Maker's will is written’? We think the Inquisition has some pretty fine specimens of ‘righteous’.” Mother Giselle smiles at him with great serenity, and it seems their conversation is over. Gim, who still holds his hand, pulls him out into the camp so they can stand at one of the many bonfires. The advisors have stopped arguing, and each is standing around dejectedly. Even Cassandra is staring disconsolately at a map.

Behind him, he hears gentle footsteps. He turns, and Mother Giselle is approaching in what Lando can only call a ceremonial manner. She opens her mouth and begins to sing. In the manner of the professional--a cleric--her voice is low and sweet, but it carries well. Heads pop up all around as she sings:

Shadows fall
And hope has fled.
Steel your heart
The dawn will come.

The night is long
And the path is dark
Look to the sky
For one day soon
The dawn will come.

People have begun moving towards the singer and the song, and as she begins the next verse, Leliana’s piercingly beautiful soprano joins in.

The shepherd's lost
And his home is far
Keep to the stars
The dawn will come

Others join in on the last line of this stanza. This is no longer one Mother of the Chantry singing; this has become an Andrastian service. On the next stanza, Cullen’s beautiful rich baritone stands out.

The night is long
And the path is dark
Look to the sky
For one day soon
The dawn will come.

Now is when Lando is sure that they are not just gathering to sing--they are gathering to sing at Gim and Lando. He almost feels like he should be holding a bowl full of flame. The first who walked toward the fire are now dropping to their knees as they sing. Lando looks at Gim. She has her determinedly passive face on. She would find it offensive to make light of such a display.

Now they are all singing:

Bare your blade  
And raise it high  
Stand your ground  
The dawn will come

The night is long  
And the path is dark  
Look to the sky  
For one day soon  
The dawn will come.

Almost everyone sings at least the last two verses. Lando is glad that Cassandra did not sing, but now that it is over, she steps back a bit so her face is in shadow. Next to him, Mother Giselle says, “Faith is made stronger by facing doubt. Untested, it is nothing.” Mother Giselle turns and walks away.

As Mother Giselle re-enters the healing tent, Lando looks past her and sees Cole shutting Chancellor Roderick’s eyes and folding the Chancellor’s hands on his chest. Lando should be respectful, but part of him thinks Roderick expired from the sheer indignation of having to see what those he wished to ring in rusty chains have become. Gim also sees the newly-dead man, and she looks honestly sad. Now Lando feels bad about his cynical comments, even if he didn’t share them.

Slowly, the people who have gathered return to their tasks. Solas walks up with his serious face on and says, “A word?” before purposefully stalking away up a hill. Gim and Lando exchange glances and follow Solas.

He leads them up a path to where he has placed a metal torch holder that does not contain a torch. As they walk up, with a casual, graceful gesture, Solas adds veillfire to the holder. Once they are all circling the torch, Solas takes his lecturing posture and says, “The humans have not raised any of our kind so high for ages beyond counting. Her faith is hard-won, lethal'len, worthy of pride...save one detail. The threat Corypheus wields? The orb he carried? It is ours.” Lando glances at Gim. She clearly already knows this. He’s seen this face before. This is the face she uses when someone speaks openly of something she has been forced to keep uncomfortably quiet.

Solas continues, “Corypheus used this orb to open the Breach. Unlocking it must have caused the explosion that destroyed the Conclave. We must find out how he survived...and we must prepare for their reaction, when they learn the orb is of our people.”

Lando needs to ask questions, because he can’t rely on Gim telling him later. Gim will only talk about what Solas has brought out of the shadows. He says, “All right. What is it and how do you know about it?”

Solas, who still hasn’t looked Lando in the eye, says, “Such things were foci, said to channel power from our Gods. Some were said to be dedicated to specific members of our Pantheon. All that remains are faint references in ruins, and faint visions of memory in the fade: echos of a dead empire.
But however Corypheus came to have this, the focus is elven, and with it, he threatens the heart of human faith.”

Lando knows how bad this is. By their faces, so do the other two. He says, “Even if we defeat Corypheus, eventually they will find a way to blame elves.”

Solas says, “I suspect you are correct. It is unfortunate, but we must be above suspicion to be seen as valued allies. Faith in you two is shaping this moment, but it needs room to grow.” Solas turns away for a moment, and when he turns back, Lando swears his eyes are glowing.

Solas says, “By attacking the Inquisition, Corypheus has changed it—changed you. Scout to the north—be their guide. There is a place that waits for a force to hold it.” Lando looks at Gim. She didn’t know this part. Solas continues, “There is a place where the Inquisition can build—grow.” Lando is looking at Solas closely. Gim is doing the same. Solas’s thoughts are inward. Lando almost thinks Solas will say no more, but finally Solas comes to a decision. His eyes move to Lando and then to Gim. Solas looks as if he is offering a gift to Gim. Solas says, “Skyhold.” With that, Solas almost looks defeated. He walks back to the camp leaving Gim and Lando behind.

Lando holds Gim’s gaze. She is clearly squirming a little. She knows he made a lot of assumptions about Solas on the day they both met him; she knows he has ignored or minimized many odd things about Solas; she also knows he isn’t stupid. He says, “Be careful what you say to me, Durgen falon. Please don’t lie to me, and please don’t make me lie to my mate. We need a plausible explanation for our trip north to this...Skyhold. From what you have said, it would be very helpful if Solas and you were to do some exploration of the Fade around the Frostbacks and ‘find’ it.”

Gim is looking down. She looks embarrassed. She says, “I will mention that to him.”

Lando says, “Well, go catch up with him. The sooner you can say that, the better. I think even if you had to take a power nap to say it, that would be helpful.”

Gim says, “Thank you!” and runs off down the hill.

Lando watches her go. The day started so much better than this. When he woke, he was healthy and surrounded by the people he loves. Now he has to think about a new home of dubious provenance, and he has to deal with a mate who has to decide how she feels about the members of her religion beatifying her husband.

Lando sighs and then thinks there is probably something he can do to feel better. He squares his shoulders and goes off to borrow a bow and find Varric. The two of them can go hunting so they can help feed this mass of cold and hungry people.

“There has to be something around here we can kill,” he mutters to himself as he stomps away from the still-burning veilfire.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last real chapter in As Any She Belied by False Compare (Part 1). Part 2 begins here. I hope many of you will follow Gim and Lando—and the Inquisition—to Skyhold.

I must thank Buttsonthebeach again for giving me feedback on the first part.
Comments very much welcome here or via email to kinako.aooo@gmail.com.

Thank you so much for the hundreds of comments. I would never have finished this book without all the lovely comments.
Chapter Summary

Guidance on how to continue reading this story

If you have been following this story, and you have enjoyed it, you might like to read Part 2, which you can reach by hitting the “Next Work” button above.

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